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When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

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TITLE: When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

ABSTRACT:

This article examines how online disinformation fuelled the 2024 UK riots through an Online-offline feedback loop, a cycle where digital falsehoods sparked real-world violence and were recycled online as validation.

This study employs qualitative secondary analysis of 40 English-language sources spanning journalistic, institutional, and investigative materials. Using inductive coding and triangulation, it identifies three escalation stages (pre-mobilisation, mobilisation, and post-mobilisation) and applies the online-offline feedback loop as a lens for understanding these processes.

False identity narratives about the Southport attacker spread rapidly across platforms, amplified by influencers, social media and foreign actors. These claims fuelled violence and reappeared online as 'proof'. The study reveals how far-right networks, foreign actors, and digital evidence expose the cyclical flow of disinformation between online and offline spheres.

The study relies on secondary data and excludes primary social media content for ethical reasons. The findings call for a larger mixed-methods study to map disinformation pathways, examine racial dynamics, and design early intervention strategies.

The article calls for proactive moderation, algorithmic transparency, and stronger media literacy, combining regulatory, educational, and community responses across digital and social spheres.

The study highlights how online information disorder deepens social division and erodes trust, demonstrating the need to rebuild community resilience and strengthen media literacy to counter polarisation.

This article's originality lies in applying consumer behavioural theory to explain how social media dynamics shape user behaviour and translate digital disinformation into real-world mobilisation and harm through a continuous cycle of interaction.

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When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Introduction

On 30 July 2024, the UK saw its worst riots in over a decade after a knife attack in Southport left three girls dead and ten injured (Gillespie, 2024). False claims about the attacker spread rapidly online, turning vigils into violence as far-right groups used X, TikTok, and Telegram to coordinate attacks on mosques, asylum centres, and local businesses (Davies, 2024; De Simone, 2024). The week-long riot left properties destroyed and police injured before mass arrests and swift prosecutions restored order. Many rioters received prison sentences for arson and racially aggravated offences, while Prime Minister (PM) Keir Starmer condemned the violence and pledged zero tolerance for attacks on Muslim communities (Gohil et al., 2024; Dodd, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Maclellan and Demony, 2024).

The 2024 unrest cannot be seen in isolation. Britain's history of riots, from 1919 to Brixton (1981), the northern towns (2001), and London (2011), has long been tied to racialised tensions. Scholars such as Wilson, Solomos, and Rhodes link these events to enduring inequalities, policing, and racial narratives (Wilson, 1991; Solomos, 1988; Solomos, 2022; Rhodes, 2009; Ashe et al., 2016). What set 2024 apart was not the grievances but the speed and scale of digital escalation. In the two weeks after the attack, Hootsuite data showed that posts mentioning 'Muslim' rose by 242% (202,000 posts) and 'asylum seeker' by 303% (47,184 posts), driving over 14 million interactions (Hagopian, 2024). Though the violence eventually subsided, fear and uncertainty remain among affected minority communities (Gohil et al., 2024).

The Perspective of the Article

Race and ethnicity have intensified riots in the past, and the 2024 UK riot was no exception. False information about the suspect's ethnicity and religion became the trigger for a new wave of violence. However, this article focuses instead on how falsehoods circulated and intensified through the online–offline feedback loop, which serves as the basis for the analysis. This article argues that the design of social media platforms, built to maximise engagement, accelerates the spread of unverified information. Through an online-offline continuum lens, it shows how false narratives surrounding the Southport riots moved fluidly between digital and physical spaces, creating a feedback loop where online information disorder drove violence, and offline unrest

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was recycled online as proof. Both domestic extremists and foreign actors exploited these dynamics, using platform architecture to boost division and deepen polarisation.

This study uses a systematic review of secondary sources, news reports, policy papers, and academic analyses to trace three connected stages: the spread of false narratives (pre-mobilisation), their translation into violence (mobilisation), and their online recirculation as 'fact' (post-mobilisation). This cycle depicts information disorder as a hybrid process in which the digital and physical domains are inseparable. Algorithms rewarding sensationalism, coupled with low media literacy, make the loop difficult to break.

Classic moral-panic dynamics, such as claims-making, media attention, and demands for control, mirror these stages (Cohen, 2011; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2010). Moral panic arises when fear exceeds actual threat (Adams & Behl, 2023; Goode, 2017), a framework applied to gangs, crime, and immigration (Altheide, 2009). On social media, these stages now occur almost simultaneously: the riot's 'folk devil' is co-created by influencers, alternative media, and audiences, then circulated as 'evidence' fuelling anger and mobilisation. The pattern is not new but a digitally accelerated form of earlier riot dynamics. Breaking the cycle requires coordinated interventions, clearer legislation, platform accountability, stronger media literacy, and renewed social cohesion, addressed together rather than in isolation.

Information Disorder in the Social Media Age

Information disorder played a central role in the 2024 riots, both triggering unrest and intensifying violence through the rapid dissemination of false narratives (Loucaides, 2024). Information disorder comprises misinformation (false content shared without intent to harm), disinformation (false content deliberately designed and shared with intent to cause harm), and malinformation (genuine content shared out of context to cause harm) (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017; Ahmad and Munk, 2025; Lee and Jia, 2023; Munk, 2025b). Wardle (2019) notes that disinformation often acts as the initial spark, later transforming into misinformation as unaware individuals reshare it.

The term 'information disorder' is an umbrella term covering these three areas of misleading content. This term is preferred over 'fake news' because it reflects the complexity and stages of this phenomenon (Wai Son and Abdul Rashid, 2021; Munk, 2025a). The dynamics surrounding the 2024 riots reflect the concept of information disorder, in which truth and falsehood blur as they spread (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). This also mirrors the wider post-truth condition, characterised by fragmented knowledge, motivated reasoning, and declining

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trust in expertise (McIntyre, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Munk, 2024). In this context, information disorder thrives because of platform design and audiences that are already primed to value emotional resonance over verification.

Within hours of the 29 July Southport knife attack, false claims spread rapidly online (Cheshire & Doak, 2024; Milmo & Quinn, 2024; Hagopian, 2024). Although the police confirmed that the suspect was born in Cardiff, disinformation continued, naming him *Ali al-Shakati* and claiming he was an illegal asylum seeker (BBC Bitesize, 2024). The X account Europe Invasion falsely alleged the suspect was "a Muslim immigrant," reaching nearly 4 million views. The post drew over 6 million impressions before its author was arrested for inciting racial hatred and released on bail. Other rumours falsely linked the suspect to MI6 or mental health services (Honeycombe-Foster & McDonald, 2024).

False information online drove engagement around terms such as 'Muslim' and 'asylum'. The outlet @channel3nownews amplified the story, with its post viewed over 2 million times, while influencer Andrew Tate repeated the claim to his 9.8 million followers in a video seen 15 million times (BBC Bitesize, 2024). Posts like these intensified the moral panic surrounding the 2024 UK riots. Between 29 July and 9 August, the false claims generated 155 million impressions on X, with the fake name appearing 420,000 times and reaching an estimated 1.7 billion users, boosted by X's "Trending in the UK" and TikTok's "Others searched for" features (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025). Despite repeated debunks, the false link to illegal immigrations persisted, creating a 'folk devil' that kept people engaged.

Online Impact

The Internet has transformed political engagement by amplifying voices and enabling mobilisation beyond offline spaces, but it also facilitates manipulation, disinformation, and coordinated attacks (González-Bailón, 2014; Vergeer and Hermans, 2008). Platform design and online anonymity escalate hostility into offline violence, blurring the line between democratic debate and harm, and highlighting the need for regulation and resilience (Munk, 2024; Munk et al., 2025a; Chen and Lu, 2017). Social media platforms create borderless, always-on communities where harmful messages can be endlessly recycled (Wallace, 2016; Chen and Lu, 2017). Social media, encrypted apps, and virtual platforms serve both legitimate users and malicious actors for recruitment, fundraising, and coordination (Munk, 2018; Munk, 2025b). Emerging technologies heighten these risks: bots and AI-driven operations exploit crises such as the Southport attack to sow division, while engagement-driven algorithms spread falsehoods

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that maximise profit over safety (Milmo and Quinn, 2024; Munk, 2024; Mwangi, 2023). Without government action and responsible tech companies, platform incentives will remain at odds with societal resilience.

Echo Chambers

Online users often form 'tribes' around shared beliefs, deepening divides and weakening democratic discourse (Bartlett, 2018). Extremist groups exploit this need for belonging, spreading information disorder that aligns with their agendas. Echo chambers reinforce existing views and foster a 'them versus us' mentality, fuelling hostility toward outsiders. Members of these spaces often see themselves as custodians of 'truth', dismissing opposing perspectives and growing more vulnerable to radicalisation, particularly when alternative ways of thinking never challenge their views. (Benson, 2023; Munk, 2024). Platform algorithms intensify these effects by promoting confirmatory content and filtering out opposing views, promoting groupthink and polarisation (Jones, 2021; Coper, 2022; Bright, 2017; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022).

Riots are contested events, with interpretations shaping how they are remembered (Keith, 1993; Kalra & Rhodes, 2009; Rhodes, 2017). The 2024 riot targeted communities already racialised by decades of policy and discourse. Studies of earlier disturbances reveal how 'colour-blind' narratives deny race while reinforcing it (Rhodes, 2017). Immigration and Islam have long served as proxies for racial inequality (Gilroy, 2013; Kundnani, 2015). In 2024, these legacies collided with social media's speed: asylum seekers and Muslims became ready-made 'folk devils', justifying online anger that quickly translated into real-world violence.

Racialised narratives and scapegoating again fuelled unrest, echoing 2011 (Rhodes, 2017; Solomos, 2011), but mobilisation now spreads through digital networks rather than local organisation. This embeds racialised discourse within the online–offline feedback loop, circulating between platforms and streets. A single false post can quickly gain credibility through repetition in echo chambers, while algorithms amplify familiar content and suppress alternatives, allowing harmful narratives to persist even after correction (Rhodes, 2022; Mims, 2017; Praiser, 2011; Thorson, 2016).

Methodology

Theoretical Foundation

The online-offline continuum approach highlights the deep interconnection between digital and physical worlds, where online narratives influence offline behaviour and real-world events

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spark new online discourse (Munk and Kennedy, 2025). The 2024 UK riots exemplified this dynamic: false narratives about immigration and hate speech rapidly translated into violence, which in turn fuelled new digital narratives. This approach recognises the relationship as continuous, with technology and digital practices embedded in everyday life, shaping collective behaviour and experience (Kennedy, 2025; Wane, 2025). Understanding these spheres as a single, interconnected space reveals how actions and consequences constantly move between them.

The Online-Offline Feedback Loop

The online–offline continuum approach is reinforced by a feedback loop in which digital and physical spheres continuously reinforce one another. Online information disorder provides the initial trigger, shaping perceptions and mobilising individuals into offline protest or violence. These offline actions are then recorded, live-streamed, posted, and recirculated online, where they are promoted as 'evidence' that validates the original false post or feeds new narratives. This cycle demonstrates that the online and offline are not discrete domains but part of a recursive process in which each sphere fuels and legitimises the other, sustaining unrest and accelerating escalation.

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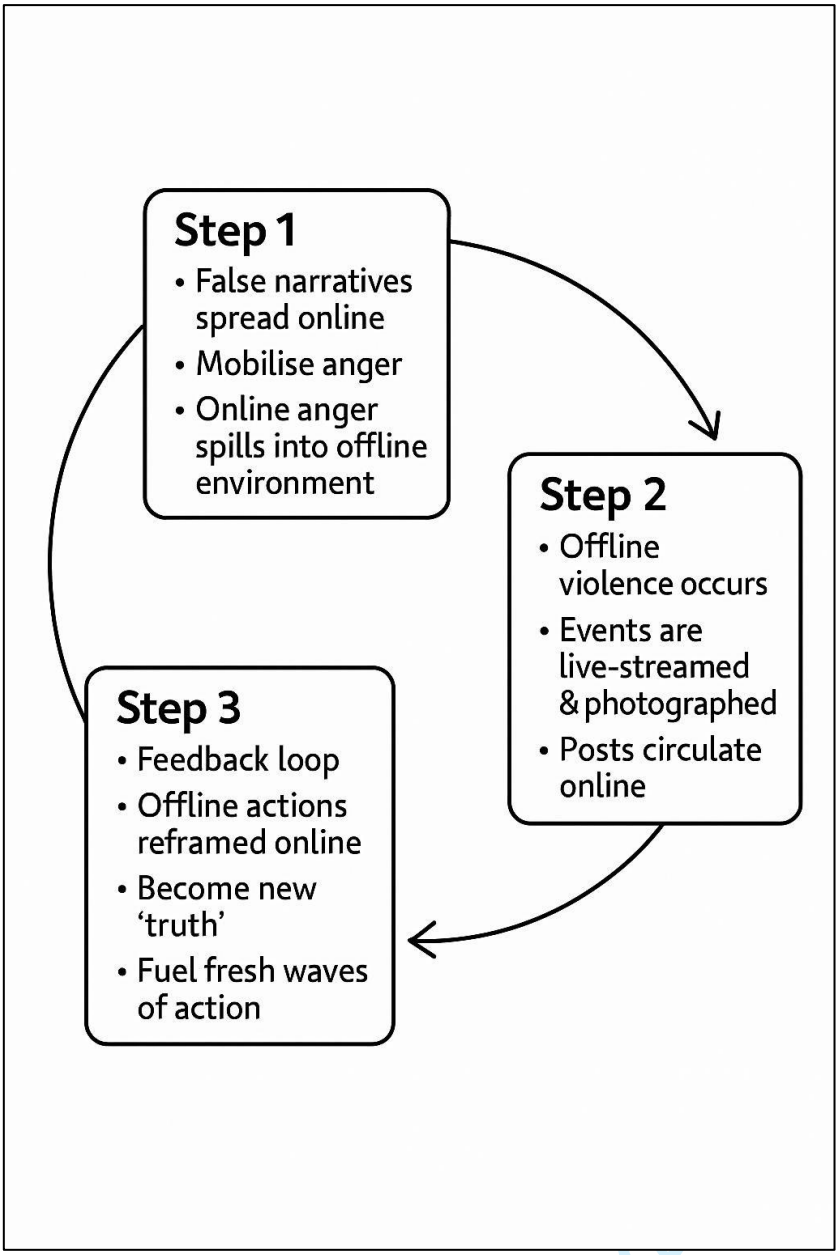

>INSERT. Figure 1 The online-offline feedback loop<

The concept of the online–offline feedback loop presented in this article draws on two existing frameworks. First, it builds on the online–offline continuum approach, which emphasises that digital and real-world actions are inseparable within a single, hybrid environment (Munk and Kennedy, 2025). Second, it draws on communication and consumer behaviour studies, were feedback loops describe how online and offline channels interact to shape decisions and boost engagement (Verhoef et al., 2015; Neslin et al., 2006).

Parallels with omnichannel retail help illustrate these dynamics: just as customer touchpoints blur across digital and physical channels, false narratives also move seamlessly between online and offline spaces. The buying process, *pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase,* mirrors riot

mobilisation: false information circulates (pre-mobilisation), online communications trigger offline action (mobilisation), and offline incidents are recycled online as validation (post-mobilisation) (Pires et al., 2022). In this model, the 'purchase' becomes collective mobilisation. The underlying mechanics remain the same: an attention economy driven by engagement rather than content quality. Platforms promote what trends, tailoring feeds to user behaviour and preferences, so that marketing a riot follows the same logic as marketing a product (Munk, 2024; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Couldry and Mejias, 2019).

Content production and sharing can be driven by the same or different actors (Starbird et al., 2018). Most sharing becomes self-reinforcing: visible share counts serve as popularity cues, while algorithms boost frequently circulated content, expanding its reach and increasing opportunities for reuse (Trilling et al., 2022; Trilling, 2024). Yet, as Trilling (2024) notes, not all feedback loops produce catastrophic outcomes. This highlights the need to study when and how they do.

The Method

This study employs a qualitative secondary analysis of English-language sources, including news media, investigative research, and institutional web articles on the 2024 UK riots. It draws on material from 2024 documenting the Southport attack, the ensuing unrest, and related online activity, including post volumes, engagement patterns, and the influence of key actors. Combining journalistic, analytical, and institutional perspectives enabled triangulation across outlets to enhance reliability and trace how misinformation moved between digital and physical spaces through the online–offline feedback loop. A selective sample of 40 texts, articles and commentaries was analysed as representative of four main areas of reporting across UK and international contexts, with findings summarised in five research tables.

Media Type	Examples from the Dataset	Purpose in the Study
Broadsheet / National Newspapers	• *The Guardian*, • *The Times*, • *The Independent*, • *Financial Times*	• Reporting on information disorder • Fact-checking false narratives • Political and legal responses • Research-based data of online use
Broadcast with Online News Platforms	• *BBC News*, • *Sky News*, • *ITV News*, • *Reuters*, • *Al Jazeera*	• Live updates and coverage • Visual explainers and fact-checks • Role of social media in spreading disinformation

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Tabloid Press	• *The Sun*, • *The Daily Mail*, • *The Mirror*, • *The Telegraph*	• Layman focus – non-complicated explanations • Sensational or populist framing • Public sentiment and moral panic framing
Investigative Research Outlets	• *Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)*, • *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, • *Soufan Centre*	• Data-driven analysis of online networks and posts • Coordination between far-right and foreign actors • Insights into online amplification patterns
Official and Legal Sources	• *Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)*, • *House of Commons Library*	• Prosecutions using digital evidence • Institutional and government responses • Policy and legal implications of online mobilisation

>INSERT. Table 1. Media outline<

Data were published primarily between 30 July and 12 August 2024, capturing representative samples from the online sources listed in Table 1. These sources trace the full life cycle of the UK riots, from false-identity origins and viral cross-platform spread to amplification by domestic far-right actors and reinforcement through transnational media manipulation. The timeframe was slightly extended for prosecutions and convictions, which remain ongoing, though coverage in this article does not exceed 2024. Collectively, the material evidences the online–offline feedback loop that turned a digital hoax into a real-world riot, with key publications summarised in the tables.

Codes were developed inductively from recurring themes to capture how sources framed the online and offline dimensions of the riots. The data was thematically coded to capture recurring narratives, actor involvement, and amplification patterns. Inclusion was based on whether reports addressed the false narrative surrounding the Southport attack, online activity linked to the riots (including posts, post volumes, hashtags, social media platforms), actors spreading or countering these narratives (influencers, politicians, extremist groups, and actions), or offline mobilisation tied to online rhetoric. Material was excluded if it showed no connection to the online environment during the initial Google searches.

Code Category	Purpose	Indicative Sub-codes	Exclusions
1. Spread of Information Disorder on Social Media (SIO)	• How information disorder spreads online • Platforms, algorithms, and cross-	• SIO.Platform • SIO.CrossPost • SIO.Algorithm • SIO.FalseInformation • SIO.Southport	• General references to social media without focus on information disorder or online spread.

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	posting driving circulation • Online narratives gaining reach and legitimacy	• SIO.AliAl-Shakati	
2. Amplification by Domestic Far-right Influencers (ADF)	• Domestic influencers, online users, and politicians spreading false narratives • Calls and framing that encouraged mobilisation • Cross-platform • visibility and emotional appeal	• ADF.Individuals • ADF.Muslims • ADF.Immigrants • ADF.FalseInformation • ADF.InformationSpread • ADF.CallAction • ADF.OnlineAction • ADF.Far-Right • ADF.EnoughIsEnough	• Mentions of public figures unconnected to the riots or information disorder
3. External Actors and Transnational Amplification (EXT)	• Foreign and cross-border spread of false narratives • State-linked and commercial disinformation networks • Overseas • amplification of UK unrest	• EXT.ForeignState • EXT.ClickbaitSite • EXT.ForeignInfluencer • EXT.Musk • EXT.Far-Right • EXT.Inteference • EXT.FalseInformation	• Articles focused solely on UK-based activity without external influence.
4. Online Evidence Used in Prosecutions (OEP)	• Legal cases using online content as evidence • Arrests and convictions based on digital material • Online activity • leading to legal accountability	• OEP.Arrest • OEP.Charge • OEP.Sentence • OEP.EvidenceType • OEP.Prosecution • OEP.Police	• Articles on policing or trials lacked reference to online evidence.

>INSERT. Table 2 1 Coding Framework<

Reports on prosecutions, platform actions, and government responses were included where they linked digital content to offline violence. To add conceptual depth, the analysis drew on academic and policy literature (2010–2025) on race, extremism, Internet architecture, social media, and online hate, which informed but was not coded as findings. The study employs a framework that combines the online–offline continuum approach with consumer-based feedback loop theory to examine how online mobilisation, as reported across sources, both triggered and sustained the 2024 UK riots.

Limitations

This research is based on secondary data and published content, relying on the accuracy of existing reports and excluding primary social media evidence to verify the intent behind

information disorder campaigns. However, many posts were documented in media coverage, often with screenshots, providing indirect insight into the content circulating online. Direct social media material was not used for ethical reasons due to the sensitivity of far-right content and post removals, while private or encrypted channels were inaccessible. The online–offline continuum approach links digital narratives to real-world events, though causality cannot be traced to individual posts or actors. With a qualitative focus on depth rather than breadth, the study does not present a complete timeline. Still, it demonstrates how online information disorder fuelled riots that escalated from local to international engagement in July–August 2024. Because of the word constraints, the paper does not explore in depth the broader political and social context, particularly issues of ethnicity and religion, that underpinned the 2024 riots and continue to shape tensions in the UK.

Spread of Information Disorder on Social Media

Both the 2011 and 2024 UK riots show how social media accelerates unrest, though the mechanisms have shifted. In 2011, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Blackberry Messenger mainly coordinated disorder across cities (Eddo-Lodge, 2011; Briggs & Baker, 2012). By 2024, social media had become an engine of amplification rather than organisation. Platforms such as X, Telegram, and TikTok enabled the spread of information as well as intensified the outrage by circulating falsehoods, racist rhetoric, and even instructions for arson (Davey & Ebner, 2024; Gilbert & Fraser, 2024; Loucaides, 2024). Digital information disorder no longer accompanied unrest—it helped create it.

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Platform Dynamics and Algorithmic Amplification	• *The Guardian* (Milmo and Quinn, 2024) • *The Times* (Shellman, 2024) • *The Guardian* (Booth, 2025)	• Timeline of events and spread of false information • Role of social media in far-right networks • Regulatory gaps in the UK: lack of strategy, weak laws, cross-border challenges • Links between riots, disinformation, and far-right groups • TikTok and X algorithms are amplifying false content • Warnings about future risks from AI-generated disinformation

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2. Cross-Platform Circulation and Online Coordination	• *Sky News* (Cheshire and Doak, 2024) • *BBC News* (Spring, 2024b)	• False claims spreading across X, TikTok, and Telegram • Channel3Now identified as a key disinformation source • Viral posts linked to offline mobilisation
3. Data Mapping and Scale of Spread	• *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (ISD, 2024)	• Traces escalation from online to offline • Disinformation inciting violence against local mosques • Algorithms boosting false content visibility
4. Policy and Regulatory Response	• *ITV News* (2024); *The Guardian* (Booth, 2025)	• Experts and police are advocating urgent regulation • 'Tsunami of lies' and weak platform response

>INSERT. Table 2 3 Spread of Information Disorder on Social Media <

Table 3 illustrates how the online–offline feedback loop shaped the Southport riots. False claims circulated rapidly across X, TikTok, and Telegram, where algorithmic amplification and trending hashtags transformed online speculation into offline mobilisation (Milmo and Quinn, 2024; Cheshire and Doak, 2024; ISD, 2024). Engagement-driven design features promoted divisive content, while cross-platform reposting further heightened tensions. Footage of the riot was quickly reframed online as evidence of societal collapse, sustaining outrage and new cycles of mobilisation. This process, described as a 'tsunami of lies', exposed how platform algorithms and weak moderation affected the riot in the UK (Shellman, 2024; Booth, 2025; ITV News, 2024).

Social media's lack of gatekeepers and limited fact-checking enabled false narratives to spread rapidly (Mwangi, 2023). According to Hootsuite data, the fake name *Ali Al-Shakati* appeared in 4,776 posts across X, Facebook, YouTube, Quora, and Reddit, receiving 91,150 engagements and over 330,000 video views. On the day of the attack alone, 2,632 posts mentioned the false name, repeating the false asylum seeker narrative that pushed anti-immigrant sentiment and the subsequent riots (Hagopian, 2024; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025). The false name garnered millions of impressions and became a catalyst for real-world violence. A video by self-styled influencer and Reform UK supporter 'brucesrandomness' got nearly 800,000 views before he issued an apology, admitting he had reacted to misleading information in anger. The narrative also spread beyond far-right extremist circles, with entrepreneur Bannatyne tweeting support for Robinson's claims to his 677,000 followers (Quinn, 2024).

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Amplification by Domestic Far-right Influencers

High-profile far-right figures such as Robinson (Yaxley-Lennon), Laurence Fox, Andrew Tate, and content creators like Active Patriot and Yorkshire Rose exploited the Southport attack to spread racist and anti-immigration narratives on X, sharing videos targeting migrants and asylum centres (Tapper, 2024; Quinn, 2024; Loucaides, 2024; Phillips, 2024). Since his reinstatement on X in 2022, Robinson has regained significant reach. His post, framed as "genuine concerns," was echoed at protests where crowds chanted his name (Milmo & Quinn, 2024; White, 2024). Tate also repeated false claims about the suspect to stoke anger (Cheshire & Doak, 2024). These influencers used digital ecosystems to turn online outrage into mobilisation, embedding hostility into everyday online culture.

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Online Mobilisation and Amplification	• *The Guardian* (Milmo and Quinn, 2024) • *Financial Times* (Wallis and Stacey, 2024) • *The Guardian* (Tapper, 2024)	• Far-right mobilisation across digital platforms • Key amplifiers: Robinson, Fox, Yorkshire Rose, Active Patriot, Channel3Now • Social media infrastructure enabling extremist visibility and reach
2. Influencer Activity and Public Figures	• *The Guardian* (Dodd, Quinn and Mason, 2024) • *The Independent* • (Gregory, 2024) • *The Independent* • (White, 2024) • *The Standard* (Philips, 2024)	• Robinson's remote activity during • the riots from Cyprus • Domestic actors promoting false narratives • Farage's online rhetoric linked to rising tensions
3. Coordination and Ecosystem Dynamics	• *Sky News* (Enokido-Lineham, 2024) • *The Soufan Centre* • (2024) • *The Guardian* • (Cadwalladr, 2024)	• Influencer networks coordinating via Telegram and X • Decentralised far-right groups sustaining mobilisation • Alternative ecosystems driving far-right growth and extremism • Cross-platform collaboration between fringe and mainstream actors

>INSERT. Table 4 3 Amplification by Domestic Far-right Influencers <

Table 4 shows how the online–offline feedback loop operated through far-right influencer networks spreading false information rooted in racial, religious, and social grievances. These

actors amplified anti-immigration and Islamophobic narratives (Milmo & Quinn, 2024; Dodd, Quinn & Mason, 2024; Gregory, 2024; Tapper, 2024; Philips, 2024; White, 2024). Analyses reveal how decentralised far-right ecosystems coordinated across platforms to mobilise supporters, recycle unrest as validation, and reinforce collective grievance (Wallis & Stacey, 2024; Enokido-Lineham, 2024; Soufan Centre, 2024). This digitally reworked 'folk devil' framing turned online outrage into street violence - and back again - sustaining the feedback loop.

Far-right mobilisation now operates through decentralised networks linking local activists, football hooligans, and neo-Nazi groups via online forums (Tapper, 2024). Information disorder spreads quickly through alternative news channels, sustaining anger in online echo chambers. This ecosystem, spanning platforms from X and TikTok to Bitchute, Parler, and Gab, propels far-right and conspiratorial narratives that are increasingly spilling from online spaces into the streets (Cadwalladr, 2024). Robinson acts as a 'weathermaker', using his platforms to drive inflammatory narratives around migration and child grooming (Tapper, 2024). Robinson repeatedly posted that Islam was a "*mental health issue*" shared videos of the riot, and urged followers to join future demonstrations, writing: "*Get there and show your support. People need to rise up*" (Phillips, 2024).

Although the EDL is officially defunct, groups like Patriotic Alternative (PA) remain active. Before the 30 July protests, a PA-linked activist shared an *"Enough is Enough"* poster from Telegram to X, where it gained over 485,000 views (Cheshire & Doak, 2024). Before the suspect was identified, Robinson accused authorities of *"gaslighting"* and implied terrorism, while Farage claimed, *"the truth is being withheld from us"* (Maddox, 2024). Both spread conspiracy theories about a government–media cover-up, a claim later promoted by Musk's criticism of PM Starmer (Cheshire & Doak, 2024; Lawless, 2024; Cooke & Maddox, 2024). Algorithms boosted these claims, making them appear credible. At the same time, echo chambers left them unchallenged and thereby, legitimised mobilisation and sustained the online–offline feedback loop as falsehoods moved from screens to the streets and back again.

The focus quickly shifted from the Southport attack to false claims about the offender's identity, creating a hostile environment toward immigrants and asylum seekers. Far-right figures added to these rumours, heightening tensions both online and offline. Fox falsely claimed on X that the attacker was Muslim, declaring: *"Enough of this madness now. We need to permanently remove Islam from Great Britain. Completely and entirely"* (Hope Not Hate,

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2024). The post, viewed nearly a million times, showed how unverified content moved from social media into the streets (Hope Not Hate, 2024; Hagopian, 2024). Robinson similarly portrayed rioters as *"suppressed and unheard"* working-class citizens, blaming politicians and the media for inciting anger. He wrote on X: "*Two British men stabbed and attacked with hammers in Stoke by gangs of Muslims hyped up by @Keir_Starmer, the media, and far-left lies. Instead of listening to their concerns, they branded the working class 'far-right thugs'. Blood on their hands"* (Enokido-Lineham, 2024).

External Actors and Transnational Amplification

Though rooted in UK dynamics, the riots reflect global patterns of transnational far-right extremism, with external influencers amplifying disorder after the Southport attack (Lindsay and Grewar, 2024; Reilly, 2024). Domestic influencers like Robinson align with Hindu nationalist groups to label Muslim men as aggressive, reinforcing racist narratives across borders (Oosterom et al., 2024). Many of these accounts were verified, including several influential far-right profiles from outside the UK, who pushed the false anti-immigration messages. Backlash posts followed but drew far less attention. As engagement grew, X's algorithm further boosted the topic, flooding social media feeds with duplicate, misleading content (Spring, 2024c).

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Foreign Interference and State-linked Activity	• *BBC News* (Spring, 2024c) • *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism* (Wilmont, 2024) • *Reuters* (Holden and Smout, 2024)	• Russian actors linked to Southport riot disinformation • Trolls, bots, and cross-posting of UK content • Government probes into state-led manipulation and amplification
2. Government and Security Concerns	• *Reuters* (Holden and Smout, 2024) • *The Independent* • (Maddox, 2024)	• Warnings of Russian involvement in boosting the unrest • Government investigations into social media activity
3. Scale and Origin of Disinformation	• *The Sun* (English, 2024) • *Daily Mail* • (Radnedge, 2024)	• Pro-Putin trolls amplifying false identity narratives • 70% of extremist content originates outside the UK • Foreign actors boosting domestic tensions

>INSERT. Table 5 4 External Actors and Transnational Amplification<

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Table 5 shows how the online–offline feedback loop extended beyond the UK through foreign interference and transnational amplification. Reports linked Russian and Iranian actors to coordinated troll activity and bot networks manipulating both domestic and international audiences about the UK riot (Spring, 2024c; Wilmont, 2024; Holden & Smout, 2024). UK government investigations confirmed state-linked manipulation and rising concerns over disinformation as a geopolitical weapon (Honeycombe-Foster & McDonald, 2024; Holden & Smout, 2024; Maddox, 2024). Analyses also revealed that about 70% of extremist and conspiracist posts originated outside the UK, where foreign actors exploited the riot to deepen societal division and legitimise violence (English, 2024; Radnedge, 2024).

The open-source intelligence company, Prose, monitored over 10,000 extremist and conspiracist groups, analysing 11,051 messages from 1,496 chats in the two weeks after the Southport stabbings. Only six of the 20 most influential accounts were UK-based, with the rest located in the US, Russia, Germany, and France (Radnedge, 2024; Baker et al, 2024). While the Home Secretary stressed domestic causes, former officials warned of 'troll factories' using familiar tactics to sow confusion and division (Maddox, 2024; Munk, 2025b). These operations sustained the online–offline feedback loop by framing the UK riots as evidence of state failure and spreading hateful rhetoric globally to serve broader geopolitical aims.

Foreign Influencers

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Disinformation Platforms and Fake News Outlets	• *Daily Mail* (Tingle, Lyons and Chaudhary, 2024) • *BBC News* (Spring, 2024b)	• Channel3Now's role in spreading false claims about the suspect • Cross-border network behind Channel3Now (Houston, Pakistan, Nova Scotia) • Commercial disinformation driving the riot for profit
2. Elon Musk's Role and Online Influence	• *BBC News* (Spring, 2024a) • *Al Jazeera* (Lawal, 2024) • *The Guardian* • (Courea, 2024) • *The Telegraph* • (Cumming, 2024) • *BBC News, 2024.*	• Musk's engagement with UK far-right discourse • Posts calling for "civil war" • Promotion of fake stories • 'Free speech' stance blurring the line between commentary and conspiracy
3. Transnational Extremist Networks	• *The Times* (Yeomans, 2024) • *BBC News* (Thomas, 2024)	• Finnish neo-Nazi 'Mr AG', with a large group of followers • Sharing of arson guides and extremist content across platforms

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		• Cross-border networks importing extremist tactics into the UK riots

>INSERT. Table 6, External Influencers<

Table 6 shows how global disinformation was quickly absorbed into the UK context, turning falsehoods about the Southport attacker into anti-immigration sentiment (Spring, 2024b; Tingle, Lyons & Chaudhary, 2024). Reports identified commercial disinformation sites, high-profile influencers (Spring, 2024a; Lawal, 2024; Courea, 2024; Cumming, 2024; BBC News, 2024), and transnational extremist networks that spread and legitimise these false claims, reigniting online outrage (Yeomans, 2024; Thomas, 2024). Coverage also traced Channel3Now's cross-border operations, Musk's promotion of conspiracy content, and the circulation of extremist materials through Telegram groups (Spring, 2024b; Tingle, Lyons & Chaudhary, 2024). Collectively, these findings reveal how global communication ecosystems intertwined foreign interference with domestic mobilisation.

Despite later retractions, Channel3Now and far-right influencers turned disinformation into perceived truth globally by blending monetised clickbait with ideological propaganda (Tingle, Lyons and Chaudhary, 2024; Spring, 2024b). The feedback loop locked this content into circulation, sustaining anger both online and offline. Similarly, the Finnish neo-Nazi 'Mr AG' and his Southport 'Wake Up' Telegram group imported extremist material that merged transnational and domestic narratives (Thomas, 2024; Yeomans, 2024). These cases show how global disinformation and local grievances became deeply intertwined, merging foreign interference with home-grown mobilisation.

At the post-mobilisation stage, Musk became a key global actor, amplifying false claims that recycled the unrest online and fuelled ongoing public outrage (Honeycombe-Foster and McDonald, 2024; BBC News, 2024), showing how borderless platforms enable individuals and states to embed domestic disorder within broader geopolitical narratives. Under his so-called free-speech absolutism, Musk actively spread conspiracies that undermined official messaging. He declared, *"Civil war is inevitable"* (Spring, 2024a), and reposted a fake claim about *"Detainment camps..."* on the Falklands (Courea, 2024; BBC News, 2024), viewed over two million times. He also promoted #TwoTierKier and endorsed Rogan's false claim that 4,000 people had been arrested for *"thought crimes*", drawing accusations of irresponsibility and further undermining efforts to de-escalate tensions (Elgot and Mason, 2024; Courea, 2024; Cooke, 2024; Cumming, 2024). These posts powered the same recursive cycle of falsehoods, where online conspiracies reignited offline anger and sustained unrest.

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Online Evidence Used in Prosecutions

Rioters used racist language against minorities and asylum seekers, reinforcing a divisive 'them versus us' narrative. Footage of burning vehicles and attacks spread rapidly online, while a far-right Telegram group posted a list of peaceful events ending with a *"time for war, lads"* comment, exposing its violent intent. In Middlesbrough, clashes turned violent and were livestreamed to thousands (Lindsey and Grewar, 2024). The online–offline feedback loop captures this escalation, as digital rhetoric and street unrest reinforced one another.

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Legal Accountability for Online Incitement	• *The Guardian* (Murray and Syal, 2024) • *BBC News* • (Comerford, 2024) • *BBC News (*Mistry, 2024) • *The Mirror* • (Huskinson, 2024)	• Convictions for online incitement and racial hatred • Judge warns that "keyboard warriors" face consequences • Police using social media to track those fuelling unrest
2. Hate Speech and Sentencing	• *The Guardian* • (Brown, 2024) • *Crown Prosecution Service* (CPS, 2024)	• Prison sentences for hate-speech posts • CPS use of digital evidence to prove intent • Connection between online expression and criminal liability
3. Government and Institutional Response	• *House of Commons Library* (Downs, 2024) • *Reuters* (MacLellan and Demony, 2024) • *The Guardian* (Dodd, 2024)	• 100 additional prosecutors and expanded digital forensics • Convictions for online incitement under Part 3 of the *Public Order Act 1986* • Online content and livestreams central to prosecutions

>INSERT. Table 75. Online Evidence Used in Prosecutions <

Table 7 demonstrates how the online–offline feedback loop concluded with prosecutions that relied heavily on digital evidence. Posts, livestreams, and videos formed the basis for charges of incitement, racial hatred, and violent disorder (Mistry, 2024; Murray and Syal, 2024; Brown, 2024; CPS, 2024; Comerford, 2024). This marks the final stage of the loop, where online incitement spilt into real-world violence, and the resulting digital evidence was later used to secure convictions. However, emerging narratives of "*unfair sentencing*" and "*two-tier policing*" are forming a new 'truth' within echo chambers, risking a renewal of the cycle by fuelling fresh grievances tied to the 2024 riots (Chouliaraki and Higgins, 2024).

Information disorder exploited fears of out-groups, portraying them as existential threats and normalising violence. Such narratives deepened polarisation and drew ordinary adults, not just young people, into extremist discourse, many of whom faced serious legal consequences (The Belong Network et al., 2025; Oosterom, 2024). Rapid Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) action led to prison sentences, including 20 months for a 28-year-old man who urged attacks on a Leeds hotel housing 200 refugees and asylum seekers, posting on Facebook: *"Every man and their dog should be smashing the fuck out of Britannia hotel"* (Murray and Syal, 2024; BBC News, 2024a).

Further convictions followed: a 53-year-old woman received 15 months for urging *"Blow the mosque up"* in a Facebook group of 5,000; a 41-year-old childminder was jailed for 31 months for inciting attacks on asylum hotels; and a 35-year-old man with 90,000 followers received three years for racial incitement (Sky News, 2024b; Brown, 2024; Gill, 2024; CPS, 2024; Mistry, 2024). A judge warned that "*keyboard warriors*" must be held accountable for their online actions (Mistry, 2024). These cases show how ordinary users, drawn into misinformation, helped sustain the online–offline feedback loop. Stopping false information early is vital to preventing such escalation.

The online–offline feedback loop connected the online and offline worlds: vigils and arson were livestreamed, shared across platforms, and gained symbolic weight. These actions boosted the mobilisation and the spread of the riot. These same posts and videos also enabled rapid prosecutions, with 100 additional CPS prosecutors deployed to pursue charges of violent disorder, arson, and racial incitement (Downs, 2024). At the same time, thousands of anti-racism protesters mobilised nationwide, outnumbering far-right rioters and defending immigration centres (Manning and Moench, 2024; The Guardian, 2024; Edwards and Picheta, 2024). Seen through the lens of the online–offline continuum approach (Munk and Kennedy, 2025), the riots demonstrate how information disorder and violence actively reinforced one another; yet those same dynamics also powered counter-mobilisation efforts that helped de-escalate tensions.

Moving Forward – Breaking the Loop

Preventing future unrest requires disrupting the feedback loop before information disorder is embedded in echo chambers. Once falsehoods take root, they self-reinforce across digital communities. Breaking this cycle demands coordinated, sustained action from governments, platforms, and civic actors. Table 8 outlines key interventions that bridge the digital–physical

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divide, combining early online disruption with long-term social measures to curb disinformation and stop online narratives from escalating into real-world harm.

Intervention	Purpose / Recommended Actions
Early Disruption Online	• Intervene before falsehoods become 'truth' • Strengthen rapid-response debunking • Creating cross-platform collaboration for early containment
Legislative Framework	• Connect digital regulation with offline prevention • Enforce accountability for disinformation and incitement • Improve coordination between government, regulators, and police
Social Media Safety	• Strengthen platform accountability through proactive moderation • Increase algorithmic transparency to curb harmful content • Mandate regular independent safety audits
Media Literacy	• Promote critical thinking and fact-checking • Support credible counter-narratives • Embed digital literacy in education/training and community programmes
Social Cohesion	• Support local networks to prevent escalation • Develop initiatives promoting inclusion and dialogue • Connect offline cohesion efforts with online counter-extremism initatives

>INSERT. Table 8 6 Actions to break the links in the feedback loop<

Legislative Framework

The Online Safety Act (OSA) 2023 requires platforms to address illegal content and false communications, but during the riots, it was only partially in force. Existing provisions, such as Section 127 of the Communications Act, already criminalise offensive or misleading content, yet significant gaps remain in addressing online actions that lead to real-world harm (Holden and Smout, 2024; Cooke, 2024; Milmo and Quinn, 2024). Past attempts to restrict pornography, extremist propaganda, or copyright infringement have shown the limitations of removal alone, as content is easily rehosted or encrypted (Levy and Robinson, 2022; Munk, 2024).

Governments often lag behind rapid technological change, leaving threats such as AI-generated disinformation unregulated (Coper, 2022). Removal still depends on platforms frequently criticised for slow action, while engagement-driven algorithms amplify harmful narratives, as seen during the 2024 riot (Holden and Smout, 2024). For example, X has dismantled many safeguards under Musk, reinstating far-right extremist accounts and undermining debunking/anti-disinformation measures (Lawless, 2024; Munk, 2024).

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Governments often struggle to keep pace with rapid technological change, leaving threats such as AI-generated disinformation largely unregulated (Coper, 2022). Content removal still relies on platforms frequently criticised for slow or inconsistent action, while engagement-driven algorithms amplify harmful narratives, as seen during the 2024 riots (Holden and Smout, 2024). Under Musk, X dismantled key safeguards, reinstated extremist accounts, and weakened anti-disinformation measures (Lawless, 2024; Munk, 2024).

The OSA 2023 marks progress towards regulating digital content by requiring platforms to remove harmful material swiftly and conduct independent algorithm audits (Guest, 2023; SITC, 2025). However, its reach is limited to the UK, allowing overseas actors to evade oversight. Provisions enabling Ofcom to access encrypted content through 'accredited technology' raise significant privacy concerns, as scanning private messages undermines encryption and users' rights (Clifford, 2024; Guest, 2023; Macdonald, 2022). Achieving algorithmic transparency also remains technically complex, requiring constant monitoring and evaluation of recommendation systems (Kossow et al., 2021). Ultimately, legislation alone cannot address the social and political roots of information disorder. Breaking the online–offline feedback loop demands coordinated action by governments, platforms, and civil society. This should be done through proactive moderation, transparent algorithms, media literacy, and investment in online-offline community resilience (Cox et al., 2021; SITC, 2025; House of Commons, 2025).

Social Media Safety

The 2024 UK riots revealed how echo chambers deepened social media polarisation, as far-right rhetoric transformed online hostility into real-world violence. Racist posts and calls to action trended widely, while platforms like X and Telegram gather users into closed networks where harmful content spreads unchecked. Engagement-driven algorithms amplified this content, and extremist groups exploited these silos to mobilise supporters. Within echo chambers, group loyalty and mistrust of authorities blocked alternative views, trapping users in the online–offline feedback loop.

Major social media platforms activated crisis protocols with the government and law enforcement. Meta removed over 24,000 posts for incitement, TikTok deleted tens of thousands of videos, X used Community Notes as a warning, and YouTube removed extremist channels (House of Commons, 2025). These actions showed partial accountability but were largely reactive and ineffective in the face of the speed of viral false information. Both community-led

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and automated moderation need expert oversight: crowd-sourced systems stall over disputed content, while algorithms struggle to detect complex or emerging harms (Stockwell et al., 2025).

Governments worldwide, including the UK, continue to struggle with tackling toxic online content. The then-Home Secretary Yvette Cooper urged social media companies to "*take responsibility*" for material on their platforms, while PM Keir Starmer warned that crime is "*happening on your premises*". He emphasised that inciting violence online *"is not free speech — it is a criminal offence*" (Lawless. 2024). Yet far-right echo chambers continue to spread harmful narratives, sustaining the online–offline feedback loop (Munk, 2024).

Proactive strategies are key to curbing mobilisation, including algorithmic de-prioritisation, rapid fact-checking, and real-time moderation. Breaking the loop also requires transparent algorithms, independent audits, and stronger platform–regulator cooperation. Yet regulation alone is insufficient; resilience must be built offline through community policing, local partnerships, education, and counter-speech initiatives (Briggs & Birdwell, 2009; Munk, 2024). Combined with online counter-narratives, these measures can disrupt far-right ecosystems and break the cycle of mobilisation.

Media Literacy

False information spreads faster online than through traditional media, as virality often outweighs accuracy (Cho et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2012; Jones, 2021). Media literacy is therefore crucial for helping individuals and communities critically assess content, make informed choices, and communicate responsibly (CoE, 2025; Livingstone, 2004; Potter, 2010). Strengthening these skills can interrupt the online–offline feedback loop by reducing the circulation of falsehoods and preventing their escalation offline.

Digital platforms amplify information disorder through engagement-driven algorithms, making it essential for users to understand how media shapes perception and emotion (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017; Park et al., 2023). Media literacy goes beyond fact-checking to include awareness of bias and echo chambers, which can strengthen group loyalty and lead to rejection of opposing views (Munk, 2024). Independent, reflective reasoning helps prevent false narratives from gaining legitimacy. The 2024 riots exposed the risks of low media literacy, as many trapped in the 'riot bubble' lacked the skills to verify information or resist manipulation.

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Collaboration between platforms, educators, and policymakers is vital to embed media literacy and build resilience online and offline. By focusing on the receptive side of information disorder, media literacy helps users recognise and resist falsehoods before they trigger mobilisation. They should thereby focus on reducing the risk that online narratives would facilitate real-world unrest. However, addressing the deeper racial issues that boosted the riots remains essential.

Social Cohesion

Breaking the online–offline feedback loop requires more than digital fixes like algorithmic demotion, fact-checking, and real-time monitoring. It also depends on rebuilding social cohesion offline. Far-right narratives exploit division, so efforts must address underlying grievances and restore trust across communities. 'Third spaces', such as libraries, parks, sports clubs, and community centres, offer neutral environments where people can connect across differences. Mirroring these hubs online through inclusive, community-led forums can similarly counter echo chambers and encourage dialogue across divides (Tapper, 2024).

Media literacy and digital resilience strengthen these efforts by helping citizens recognise manipulation and limit the flow of disinformation between online and offline spheres (Ballinger, 2024; The Belong Network et al., 2025). At the 2024 Riots Summit, Lord Khan of Burnley stressed the need for long-term investment in social cohesion (The Belong Network et al., 2025), while the Loved and Wanted campaign promoted London's resilience and multiculturalism (Creative Salon, 2025). Civil society groups have called on governments and platforms to fund 'social media labs' to enhance moderation and to use Ofcom's Online Safety Act powers to investigate enablers of online disorder.

Conclusion

The 2024 UK riots show that the online–offline feedback loop is not theoretical but a lived reality. The online-offline continuum approach demonstrates how online and offline spaces are inseparable. False online content about the Southport attacker spread rapidly online, mobilising anger that spilt onto the streets. Violence, arson, and mosque attacks were then livestreamed and reframed online as 'evidence', fuelling further unrest across multiple cities. This sequence captures each stage of the loop: disinformation spreads, violence erupts, events are recycled digitally as validation, and new waves of anger follow. Far-right actors, domestic influencers, and foreign propagandists exploited this cycle, promoting digital falsehoods that led to physical harm, and violence became self-perpetuating once embedded in online narratives.

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Breaking this loop requires both early interventions to stop falsehoods before they take root in echo chambers and a crisis response to prevent offline incidents from being recycled as propaganda online. This demands proactive regulation, platform accountability, media literacy, and stronger community resilience. Full enforcement of the OSA 2023, greater transparency from platforms, expanded media literacy initiatives, and investment in social cohesion are all essential to counter 'them versus us' divisions. Acting on these fronts together can weaken the causal link between online information disorder and offline unrest. The greater risk lies in continuing to rely on post-event clean-ups rather than prevention. Without proactive moderation and intervention, echo chambers, algorithmic amplification, and unchecked influence campaigns will persist, turning the 2024 riots into a blueprint for future information-driven violence.

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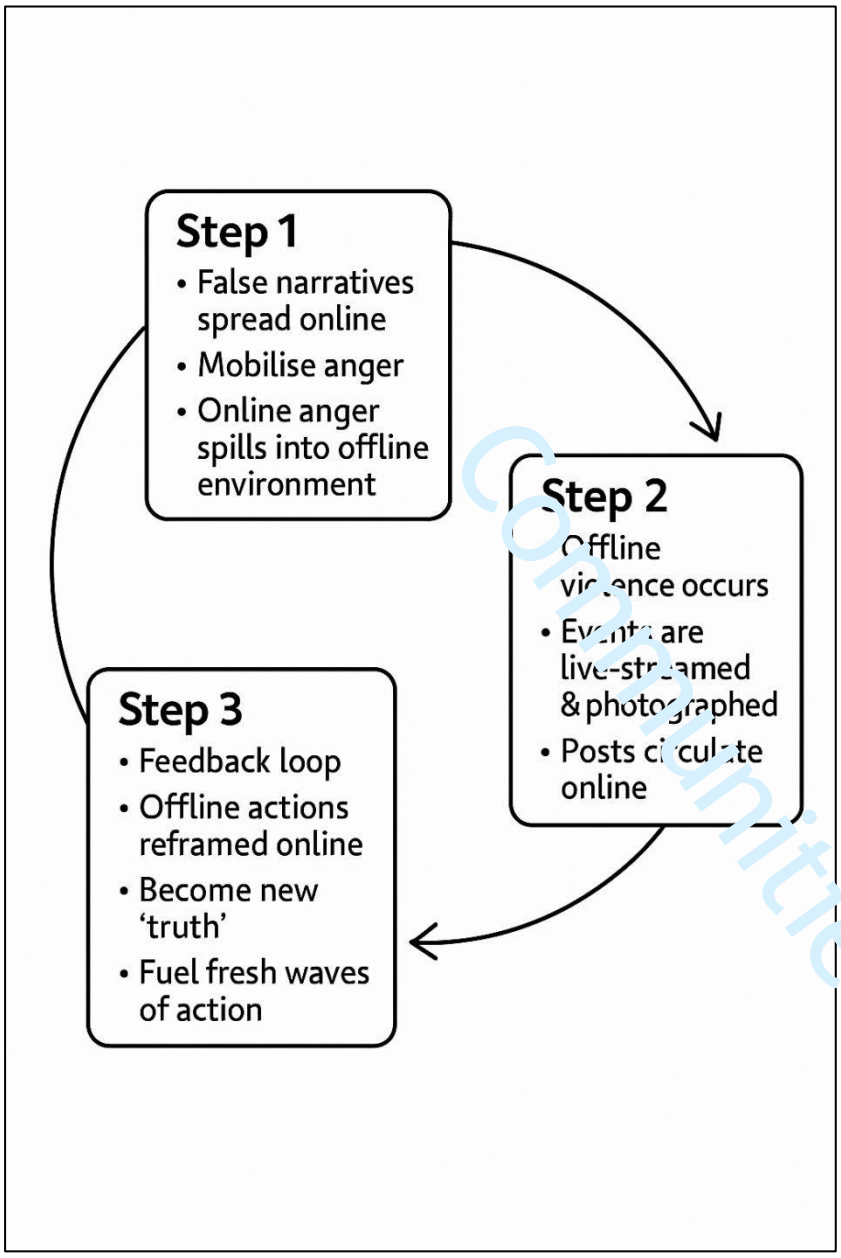

Figure 1 The online-offline feedback loop

Communities

When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Media Type	Examples from the Dataset	Purpose in the Study
Broadsheet / National Newspapers	• *The Guardian*, • *The Times*, • *The Independent*, • *Financial Times*	• Reporting on information disorder • Fact-checking false narratives • Political and legal responses • Research-based data of online use
Broadcast with Online News Platforms	• *BBC News*, • *Sky News*, • *ITV News*, • *Reuters*, • *Al Jazeera*	• Live updates and coverage • Visual explainers and fact-checks • Role of social media in spreading disinformation
Tabloid Press	• *The Sun*, • *The Daily Mail*, • *The Mirror*, • *The Telegraph*	• Layman focus – non-complicated explanations • Sensational or populist framing • Public sentiment and moral panic framing
Investigative Research Outlets	• *Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)*, • *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, • *Soufan Centre*	• Data-driven analysis of online networks and posts • Coordination between far-right and foreign actors • Insights into online amplification patterns
Official and Legal Sources	• *Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)*, • *House of Commons Library*	• Prosecutions using digital evidence • Institutional and government responses • Policy and legal implications of online mobilisation

Table 1, Media outline

When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Code Category	Purpose	Indicative Sub-codes	Exclusions
1. Spread of Information Disorder on Social Media (SIO)	• How information disorder spreads online • Platforms, algorithms, and cross-posting driving circulation • Online narratives gaining reach and legitimacy	• SIO.Platform • SIO.CrossPost • SIO.Algorithm • SIO.FalseInformation • SIO.Southport • SIO.AliAl-Shakati	• General references to social media without focus on information disorder or online spread.
2. Amplification by Domestic Far-right Influencers (ADF)	• Domestic influencers, online users, and politicians spreading false narratives • Calls and framing that encouraged mobilisation • Cross-platform visibility and emotional appeal	• ADF.Individuals • ADF.Muslims • ADF.Immigrants • ADF.FalseInformation • ADF.InformationSpread • ADF.CallAction • ADF.OnlineAction • ADF.Far-Right • ADF.EnoughIsEnough	• Mentions of public figures unconnected to the riots or information disorder
3. External Actors and Transnational Amplification (EXT)	• Foreign and cross-border spread of false narratives • State-linked and commercial disinformation networks • Overseas amplification of UK unrest	• EXT.ForeignState • EXT.ClickbaitSite • EXT.ForeignInfluencer • EXT.Musk • EXT.Far-Right • EXT.Inteference • EXT.FalseInformation	• Articles focused solely on UK-based activity without external influence.
4. Online Evidence Used in Prosecutions (OEP)	• Legal cases using online content as evidence • Arrests and convictions based on digital material • Online activity leading to legal accountability	• OEP.Arrest • OEP.Charge • OEP.Sentence • OEP.EvidenceType • OEP.Prosecution • OEP.Police	• Articles on policing or trials lacked reference to online evidence.

Table 2,1 Coding Framework

When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Platform Dynamics and Algorithmic Amplification	• *The Guardian* (Milmo and Quinn, 2024) • *The Times* (Shellman, 2024) • *The Guardian* (Booth, 2025)	• Timeline of events and spread of false information • Role of social media in far-right networks • Regulatory gaps in the UK: lack of strategy, weak laws, cross-border challenges • Links between riots, disinformation, and far-right groups • TikTok and X algorithms are amplifying false content • Warnings about future risks from AI-generated disinformation
2. Cross-Platform Circulation and Online Coordination	• *Sky News* (Cheshire and Doak, 2024) • *BBC News* (Spring, 2024b)	• False claims spreading across X, TikTok, and Telegram • Channel3Now identified as a key disinformation source • Viral posts linked to offline mobilisation
3. Data Mapping and Scale of Spread	• *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (ISD, 2024)	• Traces escalation from online to offline • Disinformation inciting violence against local mosques • Algorithms boosting false content visibility
4. Policy and Regulatory Response	• *ITV News* (2024); *The Guardian* (Booth, 2025)	• Experts and police are advocating urgent regulation • 'Tsunami of lies' and weak platform response

Table 1 3, Spread of Information Disorder on Social Media

When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Online Mobilisation and Amplification	• *The Guardian* (Milmo and Quinn, 2024) • *Financial Times* (Wallis and Stacey, 2024) • *The Guardian* (Tapper, 2024)	• Far-right mobilisation across digital platforms • Key amplifiers: Robinson, Fox, Yorkshire Rose, Active Patriot, Channel3Now • Social media infrastructure enabling extremist visibility and reach
2. Influencer Activity and Public Figures	• *The Guardian* (Dodd, Quinn and Mason, 2024) • *The Independent* (Gregory, 2024) • *The Independent* (White, 2024) • *The Standard* (Philips, 2024)	• Robinson's remote activity during the riots from Cyprus • Domestic actors promoting false narratives • Farage's online rhetoric linked to rising tensions
3. Coordination and Ecosystem Dynamics	• *Sky News* (Enokido-Lineham, 2024) • *The Soufan Centre* (2024) • *The Guardian* (Cadwalladr, 2024)	• Influencer networks coordinating via Telegram and X • Decentralised far-right groups sustaining mobilisation • Alternative ecosystems driving far-right growth and extremism • Cross-platform collaboration between fringe and mainstream actors

Table 4, 1 Amplification by Domestic Far-right Influencers

When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Foreign Interference and State-linked Activity	• *BBC News* (Spring, 2024c) • *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism* (Wilmont, 2024) • *Reuters* (Holden and Smout, 2024)	• Russian actors linked to Southport riot disinformation • Trolls, bots, and cross-posting of UK content • Government probes into state-led manipulation and amplification
2. Government and Security Concerns	• *Reuters* (Holden and Smout, 2024) • *The Independent* (Maddox, 2024)	• Warnings of Russian involvement in boosting the unrest • Government investigations into social media activity
3. Scale and Origin of Disinformation	• *The Sun* (English, 2024) • *Daily Mail* (Radnedge, 2024)	• Pro-Putin trolls amplifying false identity narratives • 70% of extremist content originates outside the UK • Foreign actors boosting domestic tensions

Table 5, 1 External Actors and Transnational Amplification

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When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Disinformation Platforms and Fake News Outlets	• *Daily Mail* (Tingle, Lyons and Chaudhary, 2024) • *BBC News* (Spring, 2024b)	• Channel3Now's role in spreading false claims about the suspect • Cross-border network behind Channel3Now (Houston, Pakistan, Nova Scotia) • Commercial disinformation driving the riot for profit
2. Elon Musk's Role and Online Influence	• *BBC News* (Spring, 2024a) • *Al Jazeera* (Lawal, 2024) • *The Guardian* (Courea, 2024) • *The Telegraph* (Cumming, 2024) • *BBC News, 2024.*	• Musk's engagement with UK far-right discourse • Posts calling for "civil war" • Promotion of fake stories • 'Free speech' stance blurring the line between commentary and conspiracy
3. Transnational Extremist Networks	• *The Times* (Yeomans, 2024) • *BBC News* (Thomas, 2024)	• Finnish neo-Nazi 'Mr AG', with a large group of followers • Sharing of arson guides and extremist content across platforms • Cross-border networks importing extremist tactics into the UK riots

Table 6, External Influencers

For Peer Review Only

When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Theme / Focus	Articles	Key Points Reported
1. Legal Accountability for Online Incitement	• *The Guardian* (Murray and Syal, 2024) • *BBC News* (Comerford, 2024) • *BBC News (*Mistry, 2024) • *The Mirror* (Huskinson, 2024)	• Convictions for online incitement and racial hatred • Judge warns that "keyboard warriors" face consequences • Police using social media to track those fuelling unrest
2. Hate Speech and Sentencing	• *The Guardian* (Brown, 2024) • *Crown Prosecution Service* (CPS, 2024)	• Prison sentences for hate-speech posts • CPS use of digital evidence to prove intent • Connection between online expression and criminal liability
3. Government and Institutional Response	• *House of Commons Library* (Downs, 2024) • *Reuters* (MacLellan and Demony, 2024) • *The Guardian* (Dodd, 2024)	• 100 additional prosecutors and expanded digital forensics • Convictions for online incitement under Part 3 of the *Public Order Act 1986* • Online content and livestreams central to prosecutions

Table 7,1 Online Evidence Used in Prosecutions

When Lies Go Viral. Social Media and the 2024 UK Riots

Intervention	Purpose / Recommended Actions
Early Disruption Online	• Intervene before falsehoods become 'truth' • Strengthen rapid-response debunking • Creating cross-platform collaboration for early containment
Legislative Framework	• Connect digital regulation with offline prevention • Enforce accountability for disinformation and incitement • Improve coordination between government, regulators, and police
Social Media Safety	• Strengthen platform accountability through proactive moderation • Increase algorithmic transparency to curb harmful content • Mandate regular independent safety audits
Media Literacy	• Promote critical thinking and fact-checking • Support credible counter-narratives • Embed digital literacy in education/training and community programmes
Social Cohesion	• Support local networks to prevent escalation • Develop initiatives promoting inclusion and dialogue • Connect offline cohesion efforts with online counter-extremism initiatives

Table 8, 1 Actions to break the links in the feedback loop

Safer Communities