

Making Meaning from Disorder: Public Understandings of Riots as Discursive-Mediated Events

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ABSTRACT Introduction: Riots are a recurring element of social and political resistance, yet their communicative dimensions are often underexplored in social theory. This study addresses this shortcoming by introducing the concept of riots as *discursive-mediated events*. We present a new theoretical and analytical framework to explore how different groups and social institutions negotiate the interpretation and meaning of riots. **Materials and methods:** Our theory of riots draws on media and discourse studies to examine how public understanding and institutional representations are constructed. The theoretical model, which includes seven analytical categories, treats riots as discursive-mediated events and explores how meaning is created and contested across different levels of communication. We apply this model to the 2021 Capitol riots in Washington, D.C., as a preliminary case study. **Results:** Our analysis highlights the discursive aspects of the 2021 Capitol riots, showing how protesters, the public, and institutional elites negotiate meanings influenced by ideologies, media, and symbols. It also demonstrates how riots generate sociopolitical capital through communication, shaping public discourse and challenging power by creating and contesting meanings in the public sphere. **Discussion:** Our theoretical and analytical framework contributes to a more thorough understanding of riots as discursively mediated phenomena. This is particularly relevant given the growing prevalence of riots as a form of political and civic expression on a global scale.

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I. Introduction - riots, protests and mediated understandings

Acts of civil disobedience play a key role in the political process. However, within the typology of civil disorder, it is crucial to distinguish between protests and riots. Protests are organised, predominantly non-violent demonstrations aimed at publicly expressing dissent and demanding change, whereas riots are typically violent outbursts of collective anger and frustration that can be chaotic or disorganised and often involve greater ‘spontaneity’ (cf. Snow & Moss, 2014). While protests can evolve into riots - often due to a lack of response or harsh containment by state apparatuses - the key differences between the two lie in their intentions, inceptions, and mechanisms. Despite these differences, the media plays a significant role in the public’s frequent conflation of these two sub-types of civil disorder. As research on the ‘protest paradigm’ highlights, news media outlets often represent protests in ways that defend elite interests, position protesters against law enforcement and the general public, emphasise episodic coverage over thematic engagement with protesters’ grievances and delegitimise and demonise protesters, often focusing on the actions of unrepresentative samples of the wider population of protesters (McLeod, 1995). In many cases, the media imbue their coverage of protests with characteristics of riots, resulting in a problematic conflation of both in public cognition. This obscures the unique characteristics and motivations behind riots, which cannot be fully understood

through the protest paradigm. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a more comprehensive understanding of how public understandings of riots are discursively negotiated through their mediation, particularly as riots are becoming an increasingly prominent form of political and civic action worldwide (Haig et al., 2020).

We define riots as extra-institutional forms of civil disorder, often uncoordinated, that create spaces for spontaneity, involve violence, proprietary damage and lawless disorder. They have no main cause and are varyingly enacted as a means of circumventing political disempowerment, airing collective grievances, lashing out at perceived injustices and highlighting issues to stimulate public deliberation. As a historically recurrent phenomenon, riots have garnered longstanding scholarly attention across diverse fields, including criminology (Le Bon, 1897), sociology (Lieberson & Silverman, 1965), political science (Wilkinson, 2009), ethics (Havercroft, 2021) and crisis and terrorism studies (Rosenthal et al., 1989). Scholars in these fields have examined riots to understand their causes, contributing factors, rationales, justifying bases, and measures to prevent, deter and mitigate them. However, scholarly contributions that approach riots as acts of public communication (which express, reproduce or challenge communicative power) remain notably underexplored and underrepresented in the existing literature.

We start from the idea that riots exert socio-political capital inasmuch as they are effectively communicative enterprises. This is not to suggest that riots lack immediate, physical significance; rather, in an age of mass mediation and digital media convergence, riots are significant because of the meanings they produce, and the interpretations ascribed to them in mass communication, whether immediate, socially mediated or mass-mediated. However, as extra-institutional actions, riots have an uneasy relationship with mass media institutions and can variably capitalise on or be imperilled by social media. While some research has already addressed the (social) mediation of riots (Pond & Lewis, 2019) and their importance and significance (Badiou, 2012), the broader literature lacks a cogent theoretical and analytical framework to address the complex and multifaceted ways in which public understandings of specific riots are shaped and negotiated.

In the following, we seek to address this gap by outlining a theoretical and analytical framework for exploring riots as *discursive-mediated events*. This conceptualisation is largely informed by critical approaches to concepts from media studies and discourse studies. Its aim is to provide a foundation for analysing case study riots as discursive events that challenge power dynamics and ideological discourses and their impact on social cognition. To achieve this, the proposed framework accounts for the dialogic mediation and negotiation of the meaning and significance of riots by analysing their ‘discursive’ features and how these are iteratively represented throughout different stages of mediation. After a review of existing research on riots, we present our conceptualisation of riots as discursive-mediated events. We then address methodological considerations before applying our analytical framework to a preliminary example of the 2021 Capitol Hill riot in Washington, D.C. in the United States (U.S.), to demonstrate its theoretical and practical application.

II. Riot research

Research on riots can be traced through a number of historical paradigms. Early studies in sociology and criminology (Le Bon, 1897; Sighele, 1891)

viewed rioting as a deviation from a systematised social order, driven by irrationality and mental abnormality or criminality, originating at the sinister fringes of society. The dominant characterisation of riots as criminal was confirmed outside of the academy by a spate of tribunal reports on rioting from (predominantly colonial) societies like India, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, all of which invariably painted riots as criminal behavior (see the [Belfast Riots Commission, 1887](#)). Although these initial views predominated for decades, mid-20th-century research began to emphasise the psychological and social factors behind riots ([Ram, 1955](#)). Driven by the social upheaval of the 1960s, historians and political scientists began arguing that riots were highly patterned, selectively enacted and represented a calculated form of social protest that has repeatedly occurred through history, often emerging more frequently in urban areas ([Spilerman, 1970](#)). This wave of research identified recurrent patterns in the causations and enactment of riots, revealing commonalities while emphasising that riots do not originate from a single root cause or follow a uniform logic ([Wilkinson, 2009](#)).

From our perspective, two important contributions are mentioned here for how they inform our own conceptualisation of riots. One significant contribution is [Rudé's \(1964\) *The crowd in history*](#), a seminal work from this era that highlighted the intentional aspects of riots and the (vague, implicit or immanent) goals or grievances which they sought to realise or protest. Another important work is [Rummel's \(1976\) *Understanding conflict and war: vol 2: the conflict helix*](#), which provided a framework that ties the psycho-social, *latent* (yet to be acted upon) conflict that exists between social groups - rooted in differing values, interests or status - to the *manifest* (when the latent becomes overt) conflict that is enacted materially between social groups, which can change the balance of power. However, while these works recognise the political potency of riots, they are somewhat dated and do not explicitly account for the discursive nature of riots, or the role of media in negotiating how riots are understood in social cognition.

In what remains of this section, we survey distinct lines of studies that have broached the discursive negotiation of riots and their reliance on mediation. The meaning and significance of riots have been the focus of several notable works in the late 20th and early 21st century. For instance, [Badiou \(2012\)](#) draws attention to the recurring capacity of riots to serve as 'events' that break from the existing social order and intimate the potential of new types of politics, categorising riots as immediate (occurring unpredictably), latent (reflecting underlying social tensions) and historic (changing the nature of society). Similarly, [Mendonça et al.](#) note that focusing on protests and civil disorder from the perspective of an 'event' offers a valuable lens to understand the discursive contestations in and around 'protests... [as events that] create ruptures that disturb the logic of continuity and open up new way [sic] of thinking and talking about the past and the future' (2019, p. 1). Our aim below is to emulate this by illuminating the political potency of how riots as 'events' are understood, and the meanings ascribed to them through their mediation.

From the perspective of drama and theatre studies, [Taylor \(2003\)](#) considered riots on the same level as theatrical performance. By reorienting the ways in which 'cultural memory and identity... have traditionally been studied' toward their realisation in 'performed, embodied behaviors' ([Taylor, 2003](#), p. 18), her approach documented how the latent culture of groups conditions their performance of riots. Expanding on this, [Schechner \(2003\)](#) draws parallels between the street and the stage as performative spaces, classifying riotous behavior in the same conceptual genus as dramatic performance. He regards both as '[b]ehavior heightened, if ever so slightly, publicly displayed; twice-

behaved behavior' (Schechner, 2003, p. 1). The main contribution of this performative paradigm is its argument that under-explored dimensions of riots can be better understood by analysing their surface form realisations within different socio-historical contexts. However, the paradigm overlooks how the mediation of riot performances influences their broader interpretation, meaning and significance.

As early as the 1940s, scholars acknowledged the capacity of the media to sustain rumours that could foment reactionary rioting by distorting information (Allport & Postman, 1946; Weckler & Hall, 1944). More recent research, however, has highlighted the tendency of mainstream media representations of civil disorder to focus primarily on the negative consequences of these actions, rather than providing a justificatory basis for their enactment (Boykoff, 2006; McLeod, 1995). While much of this literature focuses on social protests, rather than riots per se, some studies suggest that these findings are applicable to riots, arguing that 'the media...typically adhere to a discourse of deviance' (Hart & Kelsey, 2019, p. 1) around riots and other forms of extra-institutional action. For instance, Campbell et al. examined the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of riots, specifically by 'framing [and interpreting] images of reality' in a delegitimising way (2004, p. 164). Similarly, Ahmed examined how the media's representation of events can 'alleviate or aggravate' communal riots (2010, p. 109). More recently, Benrazek (2022) highlighted the way public opinion on specific riots can be informed, influenced and changed by mediated communication, especially social media commentary.

In terms of discursive and communicative approaches to riots, Chrisman and Hubbs (2021) view rioting as a speech act, focusing on its illocutionary meaning to interrogate the moral justification of specific riots. However, the authors stop short of using this theoretical vantage point to analyse how the meaning - locutionary, illocutionary, or perlocutionary - of a riot is constructed and negotiated. Pond and Lewis (2019) notably argue that riots are discursive political acts. They posit that riots are discursive political acts, shaping meaning through dialogue among multiple actors while expressing identity, influencing cognition, and challenging power dynamics. Despite their limited number, discursive approaches to riots (and their mediation) have been fruitful, as shown in Hart and Kelsey's (2019) edited collection, which provides a useful survey of how the media shapes discourses of riots and other types of civil disorder around the globe. Also important is the research that highlights the generativity of 'collective action frames' (cf. Benford & Snow, 2000) in the study of collective action events, such as riots and social movements. Interpretive framing theory, therefore, as suggested below, offers a strong theoretical and analytical foundation for understanding the processes of interaction, meaning-making, and action by individual or collective actors in specific contexts. This framework allows researchers to address interpretative processes in social movements (Silva et al., 2017), for example, how the meanings of riots are interpreted and negotiated. It also ensures 'conceptual accuracy and methodological rigour' in examining media framing of collective action (Fernandes & Teixeira, 2018, p. 915).

While existing research acknowledges riots as performances that are broadcast by the mass media, there is a clear lack of research that conceptualises them as discursive acts, shaped by challenging socio-political contexts and power dynamics. There is also a lack of a comprehensive framework that links the latent and manifest aspects of riots to their mediation and discursive negotiation through surface analysis at the level of texts. This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of riots as discourse-mediated events.

II.1. Riots as discursive-mediated events

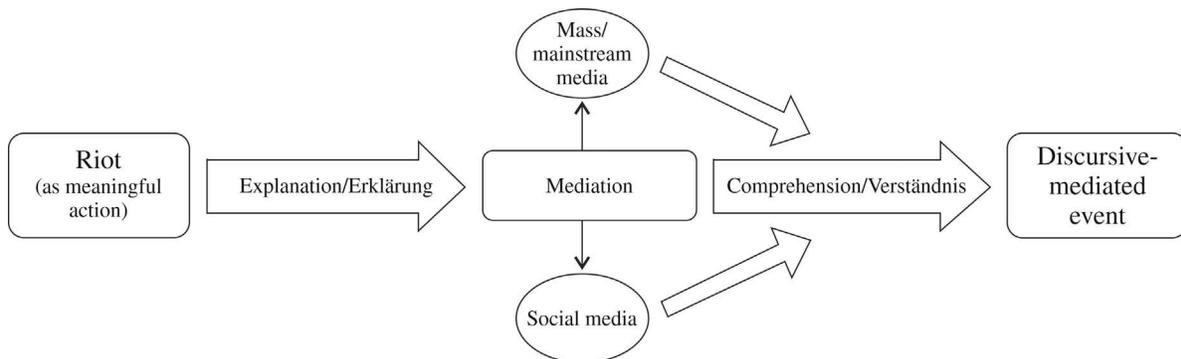
As public spectacles, riots derive their significance from their recontextualisation in broader public discourse and their comprehension by actors beyond direct participants. As acts of communication, riots are perhaps most affective and ideological in terms of how they engage with and condition politico-media discourse. They both challenge and reproduce existing power dynamics, conditioned by social institutions, through the meanings assigned to them in social cognition. To highlight this perspective, we created a theoretical framework that integrates two key concepts from media studies and discourse studies - *mediated events* and *discursive events* - arguing that riots function as discursive-mediated events. Their explanation, justification, and interpretation emerge through a discursive process negotiated among the riotous group, socio-political institutions, such as mass media and public commentary.

Following Ricoeur (1973), we analyse riots as forms of ‘meaningful action’, similar to how texts are interpreted. This framework emphasises the dialectical relationship between the explanation (Erklärung) of a riot - typically furnished by those who undertake rioting - and its subsequent understanding and comprehension (Verständnis) in public discourse. This process is negotiated by information gatekeepers, the mass media, and parallel spaces of commentary, such as social media. Our framework, visualised below in Figure 1, tracks the progression of a riot from its Erklärung to its Verständnis¹, accounting for the various levels of mediation between these two epistemological perspectives constituting the broader discursive event (cf. Foucault, 1977).

¹ We allow for the potential that a riot may have more than one explanation and understanding, as shown in our application below.

We further conceptualise individual acts of rioting as discrete ‘texts’ that collectively form a broader ‘discursive event’ (cf. Foucault, 1977). As Reisigl and Wodak (2016) explain, discursive events are constructed or performed events which play out ‘on the discourse planes of politics and mass media’ (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). Individual misdeeds or material acts which add up to a riot do not constitute events in and of themselves; rather, they coalesce to become ‘a discursive event if [and only if] it influences further discourse’ (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). Discursive events do not merely ‘occur in a discourse, in a text’; rather, they are constructed in public discourse (and, by extension, cognition) through ‘institutions, laws, political victories and defeats, demands, behaviours, revolts, reactions’ (Foucault, 2013, p. 194). Thus, discursive events themselves are ‘neither substance, nor accident, nor quality nor process; [they] are not corporeal’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 231). It does

Figure 1 - Discursive-mediation of riots



Source: prepared by authors, 2024.

not mean, however, that such events are exclusively immaterial and ideational. As Foucault (1972, p. 231) notes, a discursive event ‘takes effect, becomes effect always on the level of materiality.’ As such, ‘treating discourse as an event implies awareness not only of the material context in which discourse arises, but also of the material context that discourse creates’ (Cooper, 1988, p. 7). Recognising this interplay, Cooper argues that ‘each material aspect of a discursive event should imply an incorporeal meaningfulness’ (Cooper, 1988, p. 6).

Consequently, we theorise that micro-level acts - viz., the textual, meaningful, individual actions of rioters - and their representation and re-contextualisation in public discourse negotiate the broader discursive event of a riot. This process imbues these events with emotive and affective significance to broader audiences than those immediately involved or who witnessed them, and which, as representations in the public sphere, often serve as a means of reproducing or conditioning opinion, ideologies and cognitive imageries. Although riots, as discursive events, begin with the symbolic and emotive actions of a riotous community, their interpretation and meaning(s) are largely constructed through media transmission and public deliberation.

This view parallels Dayan and Katz's (1992) seminal concept of *media events* insofar as ‘the paradigmatic media event is one organized outside the media, but which may well be transformed in the process of transmission.... The element of high drama or high ritual is essential: the process must be laden with emotion or symbolism, and the outcome is fraught with consequence’ (Katz, 1980, p. 84). Although initially applied to account for the ability of broadcast media to garner global audiences around globally significant events like space shuttle launches or international conflict, this concept also applies to riots as localised media events that dominate the news agenda. Riots disrupt social order and draw public attention because of their ‘electrifying element[s] which attract[s] [an]... audience to something especially moving’ (Katz, 1980, p. 84). Indeed the ‘emotionality of the ...event is probably its central effect’ in the sense that ‘the channelling of aroused emotions and changed opinions may well have political effects’ (Katz, 1980, p. 88).

Additionally, the proliferation of social media has also institutionalised a practice of ‘dual screening’ - the simultaneous consumption of and commentary on media events across mainstream and social media platforms (Vaccari et al., 2015, p. 1041). This dynamic amplifies and fragments how riots are framed and understood, reinforcing their role as discursive- mediated events.

Thus, as mediated events, riots are constructed through a dialogic, meaning-making process enacted by the rioters and their representatives, the mass media and the broader public who actively engage in commentary surrounding the event. Considering the importance of the process of mediation in shaping the reception, recontextualisation and reproduction of riots in discourse, we adopt the term ‘discursive-mediated event’ to highlight this centrality and to define our conceptualisation of riots.

To provide a conceptual basis for this theorisation, we return to Rudé's notion of vague goals and motivations underlying riots and Rummel's conflict helix. From these, and other theoretical insights, we produce a list of seven discursive features of riots that serve as analytical categories for undertaking a discursive analysis of the negotiation of a riot's meanings and significance. These discursive foci are not exhaustive but are intended to help analysts clarify the ‘family resemblance’ (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953) of riots as events. In other words, riots are not defined by a uniform set of core features; however,

our foci, drawn from the longstanding research on riots, can identify the broad, overlapping similarities that typically characterise riots as social phenomena.

Following Rummel (1976), we conceptualise riots as having both (1) latent and (2) manifest dimensions. The latent dimension refers to the previously smouldering, quiescent ideational and immaterial structures and tensions that conditioned the riot's conduction, as well as how these are represented through mediation. The manifest dimension pertains to the material realisations through which the discursive-mediated event is enacted by its actors, and their re-contextualisation beyond the event itself. As in Rummel's (1976) original helical model, these two levels are symbiotic and are best conceptualised as a recursive loop (visualised below), simultaneously constituting and conditioning one another. We link this to a more general conceptualisation of discourse as a form of social action that is simultaneously reflective of and constitutive of social realities.

At the latent level of riots, where the aim is to identify the antecedent immaterial and ideational structures that beget riots, a discursive-mediated framework should account for the concepts of group identity, ideology, and the historical context of tension or oppression that gives riots their significance (Rummel, 1976). Furthermore, the (vague or nebulously articulated) aims and motivations of the riot must also be incorporated into the analysis (Rudé, 1964). Thus, at the latent level we propose the analytical category of *Group Structure*, which examines the riotous group's relational composition, power dynamics and identification processes. As Rummel notes, the balance of power for the pre-riotous group is ordinarily 'congruent with mutual interests, capabilities, and wills' (Rummel, 1976), but this balance is upended due to conflicts emerging from power dynamics. Thus, when analysing a riot, the researcher must account for the internal group structure, and the position of the riotous social group(s) in broader society. Furthermore, while rioters, as a crowd, are often diverse and unorganised, they are typically bound by 'reservoirs of shared attitudes', which become activated through some acknowledgement of shared needs, demands or claims. Thus, at the latent level, we also must account for *Ideology*, which incorporates the beliefs, claims and ideological assumptions that drive riots, as well as how these are perceived and interpreted in its aftermath. These ideologies are often incoherent and comprise immanent contradictions, being amalgams of longstanding ideological grand narratives and more immediate demands. As Rudé (1964) describes, they form a mixture of often disparate, beliefs, among which it is hard to tell the truly inherent element from that more recently derived. The affinitive structural experiences of riots are supplied activating energy by these ideological assertions, which causes latent dimensions to manifest as riotous action. Furthermore, following Cooper (1988), as texts, the actions of rioters that constitute the discursive event must be seen as drawing a link between materiality and symbolism, the corporeal and the ideational. Thus, we also consider the *Latent Process* of a riot, which denotes the symbolic significance and historical contextualisation of rioting. This includes exploring the potential 'intertextuality' (cf. Kristeva, 1986) of riots within the 'repertoire' (cf. Taylor, 2003) of social groups, focusing on how the riot, and its constituent actions, draw meaning from historical instantiations of riots in the group's history.

At the manifest level, as discursive-mediated events, riots engender both illocutionary (the intended command/ demand of the rioters) and perlocutionary (how the broader public received this and what resulted from this) forces. We must therefore consider how these functions and purposes of riots are discursively negotiated and mediated, alongside examining how the material manifestations of riots are understood and how they influence public percep-

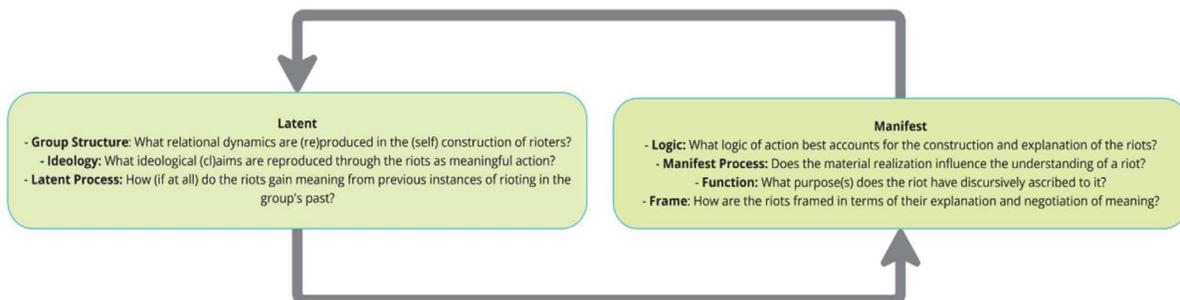
tion through their representations. Additionally, as noted above, riots do not follow a uniform logic of enactment. Moreover, how this logic is represented in mediation can (de)legitimise the event (Wilkinson, 2009). For instance, riots, like other forms of collective action, can varyingly be planned and calculated, or exhibit a 'spontaneous' character under the right conditions (Snow & Moss, 2014). Finally, the manifestation and recontextualisation of these dimensions of riots converge to shape the dominant frameworks for organising and interpreting information about the event.

Considering these, we propose the following four discursive foci as analytical categories at the manifest level. First, *Logic*, which signifies the (representation and mediation of) the mechanisms and patterns through which riots manifest (cf. Rummel, 1976). Riots can varyingly be conceived of as 'spontaneous' reactions to triggers (cf. Snow & Moss, 2014), as spreading diffusively, as copying other riots, or as being pre-organised. The underlying 'logic' of a riot and how this is represented is often key to its (de)legitimation in public discourse and conditions its understanding. Second, equiposing the latent process, we also consider the *Manifest Process*, which refers to the nuances and dimensions of the material realisation of the riots, and how these influence the explanation and understanding of the riot (cf. Taylor, 2003). As discursively enacted events, with underlying ideological motivations, riots are linked (by the rioters and the public) to specific purposes. As noted in the literature, riots do not solely fulfil an exclusively homeostatic, cathartic function and often are enacted with specific or vague reasons in mind (Rudé, 1964).

Third, as discursively enacted events with underlying ideological (explicit, implicit or vague) goals, aims or motivations, riots are linked (by the rioters and the public) to specific purposes. Thus, we also examine the *Function(s)* of riots to elucidate the purposes attributed to them across different levels of mediation (Cooper, 1988). Fourth, as products of discursive negotiation and mediation, riots are transmitted and recontextualised through habitual modes of information presentation that frame the event and condition its overall interpretation and understanding. Accordingly, we examine the *Frame* of the riot, which analyses the dominant characterisation of riots as constructed through their representation at different levels of mediation (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Taken together, these seven foci can help answer the following questions, visualised below in Figure 2: i) Who is rioting? (Group Structure); ii) What is happening? (Manifest Process); iii) When is the riot happening? (Manifest/Latent Process); iv) Where is the riot happening? (Manifest/Latent Process); v) Why is the riot happening? (Ideology/ Function/ Frame/ Latent Process); and vi) How is the riot unfolding? (Logic, Manifest Process).

Figure 2 - Visualisation of the framework



Source: prepared by authors, 2024.

these analytical categories offers an expedient framework based on the ‘family resemblance’ of riots as social phenomena. This framework can be used to undertake a discursive analysis of a case study riot that accounts for how its explanation (Erklärung) cascades through different levels of mediation, negotiating its public understanding (Verständnis).

Below, we further explicate this framework by applying it to a preliminary example of the 2021 Capitol Riot in Washington, D.C. Before this, we discuss issues pertaining to methodological operationalisation and data collection for undertaking a discursive analysis.

III. Methodological notes

This section outlines key considerations for using this framework to undertake a discursive-mediated analysis of a case study riot. Conceiving of riots as discursive-mediated events suggests that their public understanding as an event is negotiated through a dialogic process of meaning-making, cascading from the rioters and their social group(s) to alternative and mainstream media institutions and ultimately to, often socially-mediated, public deliberation. To account for these multiple layers, we propose collecting three forms of data for discursive analysis.

Primary data includes statements, press releases, or other communicative acts produced directly from the riotous group. While these data are often re-contextualised through social or mainstream media, the defining characteristic of primary data is that it originates or is authored by the group itself, providing insight into the subjective rationale behind the riotous actions and the ideological aims as articulated by the group (Rudé, 1964). In this example, we utilised data from Trump's speeches, as well as statements from organisations involved in the Capitol rioting, which were sourced from various media outlets and social media sources.

Secondary data includes representations of the riot as presented by mainstream media outlets and institutional actors. These sources play a key role in forming public opinion and determining how (or if) the rioters' intended meaning percolates into the public sphere. How groups (or their actions) are represented in media affects their broader perception in the public sphere. The goal of analysing secondary data is to understand the extent to which riots receive or are deprived of ideological support, are framed positively or negatively, and the impact/significance of how they are constructed in the media for public consumption. In our example, we gathered news articles, commentary from a variety of (inter)national news outlets, and video content from YouTube and other multimedia platforms that focused on the Capitol riot.

Tertiary data includes data from user-generated, bottom-up platforms of discussion - primarily, social media and social networking sites - where citizen discourse participants dual-screen the riots and re-contextualise primary and secondary data. While mainstream media flows have been theorised to have power *behind* them, bottom-up, discursive spheres have been theorised to have power vested *within* them. Therefore, one goal of analysing data from these spaces is to assess how primary or secondary data is either reproduced or resisted. Furthermore, research has shown that social media can serve as a platform for organising or planning riots, as well as providing ongoing commentary about the event/s. By examining tertiary spaces, we can gain insight into the underlying logic of riotous activity and how these ideas are inter-

nalised in group cognition. In our example, we identified key X/Twitter hashtags linked to the riots, using social media monitoring sites, media outlets and academic sources. We also looked at discussions on social media platforms like Parler.com, Reddit.com and 4chan.com, all of which hosted significant conversations about the Capitol riot.

When collecting data, researchers should take into account the diachronic nature of riots as events, particularly when the aim is to explore how the explanation of a riot permeates public understanding(s). Discursive analysis must consider the temporal progression of mediation, as well as the sourcing and organisation of the data. Researchers should gather information from a range of communication channels, including political communication, social media, and mainstream media. We encourage researchers to adopt creative and flexible methods for data collection. One possibility is to utilise tools such as web scrapers and crawlers to gather extensive datasets from various communication levels, which can enhance the generalisability of the results.

However, like us, researchers may also take a qualitative approach, relying on their understanding of the riot and their ability to identify key ‘enunciations’ (cf. Foucault, 1977) that reflect the broader discourse at different levels of mediation. This could involve (virtual) ethnographic observation or detailed analysis of specific texts. While this approach allows for a more in-depth approach, it carries the risk of bias, especially in relation to cherry-picking data. To minimise bias, scholars could combine qualitative methods with random sampling strategies. Once researchers have gathered a sufficiently diverse dataset from each level, ordered chronologically, they can begin analysing the case study riot using the framework described above.

Finally, rioting can hold varying levels of socio-political capital within specific socio-political and territorial contexts. In certain spaces and cultural settings, it is unheard of, whereas in others, it is regarded as a common feature of social life or even a rite of passage for particular groups. Consequently, in addition to collecting relevant data based on the three forms of data for discursive analysis outlined above, researchers applying this framework should also familiarise themselves with the diachronic history of rioting within their case study context and comprehend its broader significance within these socio-political environments.

IV. Application of framework: the 2021 Capitol riot as a preliminary example

We developed specific prompt questions for the three forms of data in each of the seven categories, which can be used to guide the analytical focus toward the relevant discursive features. As a preliminary example, we apply the seven analytical categories to a case study of the Capitol Riot in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021. On that day, 2,000 supporters of the outgoing Republican president, Donald J Trump, gathered at a ‘Save America’ rally, where he contended that the election result was fraudulent and urged his supporters to ‘fight like hell’ to resist the incoming Democratic president Joe Biden, who was framed as an ‘illegitimate president’ (Cabral, 2021). Following his speech, the crowd stormed and attacked the U.S. Capitol building for many hours. The riot led to 5 deaths and 138 injuries to police officers.

IV.1. Latent

IV.1.1. Group structure: what relational dynamics are (re)produced in the (self) construction of rioters?

Riots are carried out by individuals whose collective relational power dynamics (in terms of centrality, status, and resources) underpin the internal processes of group identity formation (Wilkinson, 2009). This is further shaped by their societal positioning and their relationship with out-groups, as well as domains of opinion formation and political contestation within society. To gain a comprehensive understanding of these factors, it is essential to examine how power dynamics influence the production of knowledge surrounding riots as discursive-mediated events.

At the primary data level, therefore, our goal is to explore how the rioting group constructs its identity. At the secondary data level, we focus on how this self-conceptualisation is reproduced, distorted or amplified by key drivers of public opinion, particularly elite political representatives and the mass media. Finally, at the tertiary data level, we examine how/if these identity constructions are reflected in bottom-up discussions and commentary on social media and other platforms and deliberation on the riots and how the group's collective identity is framed in these loci of discussion. Key analytical foci at all levels include the semiotic strategies used to label the rioters and their actions, to categorise the rioting group or ascribe legitimacy (or lack thereof) to the group as a collective.

IV.1.1.1. Primary: how do the rioters construct their relational dynamics as a group?

The riotous crowd included members of several anti-government organisations (like Oathkeepers and Proud Boys) (Rubin et al., 2021), as well as individuals with no prior criminal intent. This raises the question: How did they coalesce into a unified force? Previous research (Paulus & Kenworthy, 2022, p. 199) suggests that the Capitol riot demonstrated the effects of 'social influence processes, deindividuation, poor decision making, emotional contagion, and leadership'. These factors indicate that their allegiance to Trump and their antipathy to the incoming Democratic government served as the locus for the crystallisation of their group identity.

The protesters constructed their identity by aligning themselves with Trumpian ideology and by viewing themselves as revolutionaries and defenders of justice. They represented themselves as victims, united in their opposition to alleged illegality and the putative 'theft' of the election by the Biden administration (Cabral, 2021).

IV.1.1.2. Secondary: how did media and institutional elites represent the group and its actions?

The highly partisan nature of the U.S. news media significantly influenced the secondary level of mediation in terms of all our analytical foci. Regarding group structure, there were notable differences in how liberal (left-leaning) and conservative (right-leaning) media outlets represented the rioters and their action. For instance, left-leaning outlets like CNN labelled the crowd as "insurrectionists" and "domestic terrorists," highlighting their connection to extremist ideologies (Stetler, 2021). In contrast, some right-wing media commentators ascribed democratic credentials to the rioters, representing them as anguished 'patriots' who, rather than acting as 'terrorists, were more like 'tourists' (Carlson, 2021).

IV.1.1.3. Tertiary: how are the rioters constructed in bottom-up discourse online?

Virtual commentary surrounding the Capitol riot was highly sectarian and hostile, with many platforms like Reddit.com, Parler, TikTok, and X/Twitter serving as loci for the intense debate over the categorisation of the rioters and the interpretation of the riots (Harel, 2022). On X/Twitter, users were more inclined to label the rioters negatively, frequently consolidating their commentary around hashtags such as #removetrumpnow or #capitolriots (Prabhu et al., 2021). In contrast, Parler was used by many who defended the democratic legitimacy of the rioters, viewing them as a patriotic collective. These users often congregated around hashtags such as #stopthesteal, #maga and #stillyourpresident (Prabhu et al., 2021).

IV.1.2. Ideology: what ideological (cl)aims are reproduced through the riots as meaningful action?

Riots, when conceptualised as discursive-mediated events, express group ideology. They are underpinned by discursive formations and (cl)aims, which reflect the group's perception of the social world. We argue that the group's codified behaviours and dispositions are best understood through Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus', as these behaviours are strategically oriented toward (implicit) ideological (cl)aims. These actions are strategic in that they are 'objectively oriented towards goals that may not be the goals [that are] subjectively pursued' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 90). In addition to pursuing these core aims, which are the 'substance' of their ideology, acts of disorder may also serve more exigent, immediate concerns, which align with the group's adjacent ideological concepts.

IV.1.2.1. Primary: how do the riots reproduce the group's core/ adjacent ideological (cl)aims?

The ideological aims of the Capitol riot are encapsulated in the slogan #stopthesteal and the associated narratives that first emerged on Facebook on November 4, 2020, after Trump refused to accept the presidential election outcome, claiming that the Democrats had 'rigged' the election through mass voter fraud (Ng et al., 2022). The riot involved a 'hodgepodge of [white, far-right, mainly male] extremists' with various motivations, including Proud Boys (key instigators), QAnon believers, Oath Keepers, and militiamen, many of whom believed they had been deputised by Trump.

Their expressed goal was to halt the constitutional certification of Biden's election victory at the U.S. Capitol, calling on Congress to 'stop the steal' (Timberg et al., 2021). The group were unified by their shared ideology as extreme Trump supporters, driven by a desire to keep Trump in power and prevent what they believed were 'dire consequences' for America's democracy should Biden assume the presidency (Kydd, 2021).

IV.1.2.2. Secondary: how have these claims been preserved or transmuted in the institutional mediation of the group's actions?

During the riot, President-elect Biden called for President Trump go on national television and 'demand an end to [the] 'siege,' which Biden believed 'border[ed] on sedition' (Sullivan & Bradner, 2021). This statement served to delegitimise the rioter's expressed aims. The criminalisation of their intent continued after the riot, as the U.S. Department of Justice began identifying, arresting and prosecuting hundreds of rioters (Gramlich, 2022) for federal crimes, such as seditious conspiracy.

In contrast, some Republican-leaning media outlets focused on the legitimacy of the riot's goals, framing it as a 'protest', or, less sympathetically, 'an unfortunate event' (Ostafiński, 2022, p. 33). This challenged the Liberal-leaning news media, whose frequent use of emotionally charged terms like 'insurrection', 'terrorism' or 'coup' (Yang, 2022, p. 2; Zulli et al., 2023, p. 711), was aimed at delegitimising the rioters' actions. Consequently, media on the left consistently reported the riot as a concerted attempt to "overthrow American democracy" (Ostafiński, 2022, p. 27, 32, 33), while some right-leaning media outlets gave a degree of political legitimacy to the rioters' ideological claims.

IV.1.2.3. Tertiary: how are these (cl)aims reproduced/ delegitimized in online commentary on the actions?

During the riot, social media functioned as a 'command and control centre' for the rioters who were 'wired and ready for insurrection,' by the time they arrived in D.C. (Donovan, 2024). However, many social media users legitimised the rioters' aims, including several leading Republicans, who continue to believe that the election was stolen, and needed to be resisted (Donovan, 2024).

More notably, globally popular social media trends contributed to delegitimation of the aims of the riot, portraying them as undemocratic and criminal. For example, the hugely viral #RemoveTrumpNow and #CapitolRiots aggregated critical commentary, which largely outweighed pro-Trump commentary (Prabhu et al., 2021).

IV.1.3. Latent process: how (if at all) do the riots gain meaning from previous instances of rioting in the group's past?

Interpreting riots as discursive-mediated events requires considering the diachronic significance of how rioting holds particular meanings within a group's 'activist repertoire' (Taylor, 2003). More broadly, understanding how contemporary acts of rioting draw from, diverge from, or legitimise previous riots is essential for assessing their symbolic significance and the material forms through which they are manifested. Beyond the group's history, it is also important to assess the broader public's disposition towards rioting to understand how this influences the negotiation of a riot's meaning, particularly in contexts with a longstanding history of rioting or, alternatively, in places where rioting is incongruous.

IV.1.3.1. Primary: how do riots gain meaning from/ draw on previous riots which were enacted by the group? What tactics from the group's repertoire have been invoked?

Although President Biden referred to the riot as an unprecedented attack, it is not entirely unprecedented when considering claims of electoral fraud and instances of American civil unrest. In fact, there have been four previous occasions in which the U.S. Capitol was attacked in American history - specifically in 1814, 1915, 1954, and 1983. However, while these attacks share a discursive history of fraud claims, the 2021 riot marked the first mass action to occur without a primary reliance on weapons.

Nevertheless, some rioters discursively framed the assault on the Capitol as a 'combat zone', drawing on militarised discourse. They referenced the use of tear gas, flash bang grenades, small arms fire, breaching the doors, hunting the enemy, and a willingness to use force against members of Congress (Hodges, 2021).

IV.1.3.2. Secondary: how is the contextual significance of rioting utilized in the mediation of the riotous actions?

Echoing past discursive events, particularly the War of 1812, left-leaning mainstream media emphasised the severity of the riot, often describing it as an “assault” or “attack” on democracy. This framing drew on a historic precedent in the U.S. of representing riots as criminal and deviant. In contrast, right-leaning mainstream media deviated from their traditional treatment of riots by downplaying its severity, instead arguing that the rioters had no choice but to protest a ‘rigged’ election (Fischer, 2021), thus diverging from the historical discourse surrounding attacks on the Capitol.

IV.1.3.3. Tertiary: how is online commentary on the case study riot indebted to/ conditioned by references to previous instances of rioting that have beset the specific socio-political context?

The riot was preceded by several polarising public eruptions, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Antifa protests in major U.S. cities. Left-leaning social media commentators emphasised the differences between the ‘legitimate’ BLM protests, which sought to ‘undermine white supremacy,’ and the ‘illegitimate’ Capitol riot, which they argued was aimed at ‘buttress[ing] white supremacy’ (Brantley-Jones, 2021). This framing connected the riot to historical discourses of racial tension and division in the U.S. Conversely, right-leaning social media users echoed the contentions of some mainstream media commentators that the Capitol riot was “nothing compared to the [BLM] racial-justice protests in the summer” (Fischer, 2021). They also legitimised the riot by referencing historical battles against anti-democratic forces, such as the War of Independence.

IV.2. Manifest

IV.2.1. Representation of logic: what logic of action best accounts for the construction and explanation of the riots?

Riots, as discursive-mediated events, are represented as being sustained and spread by different types of logical action, which often confer or rescind legitimacy to these actions. We propose that riots are constructed through four archetypal ‘logics of action’, which draw from the literature on types of collective action within communicative publics (see Habermas, 1989; Bruns & Burgess, 2011). These logics include: (1) Collective logic, referring to action resulting from a centralised process of consultation; (2) Connective logic, signifying the rationale behind ‘reactive’ or ‘spontaneous’ rioting, where one actor follows another into riotous activity (cf. Snow & Moss 2014); (3) Synoptic logic, where the masses watch the masses, with rioting unfolding en masse in response to mass-mediated events rather than through memetic uptake; and, (4) Instrumental logic, where rioting within groups can be instrumentally orchestrated by elites for various purposes and functions.

While these categories are not rigid, and overlap can occur, they offer a practical framework to analyse how riots are represented as unfolding and the (de)legitimatory effects that these representations induce in public cognition. These logics are often reproduced in discourse through metaphors and temporal (re)ordering, which either elide or attribute agency.

IV.2.1.1. Primary: which logic of action best accounts for the explanation of the riots furnished by the participant group?

Many Capitol rioters were reportedly motivated by a ‘false’ sense of patriotism, which was fuelled by the belief that the election had been rigged (Hsu, 2021). Additionally, Trump's inflammatory statements before and during the rally were interpreted by rioters as an encouraging call to arms (Transcript of Trump's speech..., 2021). It suggests that the rioters represented their activity through a connective logic, which justified their actions as ‘spontaneous’ (cf. Snow & Moss 2014) reactions to perceived anti-American actions, such as the election rigging, while simultaneously characterising their actions as instrumental responses to Trump's rallying cry.

IV.2.1.2. Secondary: how did the mass media's representation of the underlying logic attribute/negate agency, responsibility or causality?

In the aftermath of the riot, Democrats and left-leaning media focused on the instrumental dimensions of the riot, asserting that Trump deputised his supporters to ‘violently usurp the democratic process’, thus delegitimising the riot (Ostafiński, 2022, p. 27). In contrast, right-leaning media focused heavily on framing it as a reactive act of political violence (Hendrix, 2024), highlighting its connective character, and offering a justificatory basis for it by portraying Biden and other liberal politicians as hysterical and obstructive to the freedoms of speech and assembly guaranteed to all Americans (Ostafiński, 2022).

IV.2.1.3. Tertiary: how has the representation of logic translated into deliberative commentary?

A minority of users on X/Twitter and Parler echoed the rioters' characterisation of the riot as driven by a just, connective logic, largely organising their voices around hashtags like #stopthesteal (Prabhu et al., 2021). This rhetoric accentuated the act of ‘stealing’ the election, positioning it as a moral wrong that justified the response of rioting.

However, most of the online deliberation, which centred around hashtags, such as #removetrumpnow, reproduced the idea that Trump had instrumentalised the riot as a means of vying for power. This view rescinded any justification for the riots and portrayed their logic as incompatible with democratic values.

IV.2.2. Manifest process: does the material realization influence the understanding of a riot?

Individual, meaningful actions, and the resources employed in enacting them, serve as the point of origin for riots. The way these actions are mediated and interpreted influences how riots are understood. Therefore, the material and symbolic resources employed by rioters, and how these are subsequently represented by media and commentators, shape the public's overall understanding and interpretation of the event.

IV.2.2.1. Primary: can the material realization of the riots be linked to the group's repertoire in terms of materialism of symbolism?

Rioters displayed various symbols, such as flags, clothing, and banners, associated with white supremacy groups, including Nazism, and extremist right-wing militias (Zaru, 2021). Some Proud Boys were identified by their bright orange hats and all-black attire and the OK hand gesture, which connotes ‘white power’ (represented by the W and P formed by the hand). Some

QAnon believers wore t-shirts emblazoned with the 'Q' symbol and the phrase 'Trust the Plan' (Zaru, 2021). Others, like members of militias, wore law enforcement or pseudo military gear and carried altered or unaltered historical flags, such as the Confederate flag, the 13-star Betsy Ross flag, and the Gadsden flag, the latter two originating during the 1778 American Revolution.

In addition, a noose was constructed across the street from the Capitol, overlooking the riot - a symbol with deep racist connotations, referencing the history of lynching in the U.S. and allegedly signalling the desired fate for those perceived as betraying Trump (Zaru, 2021). As material resources and signifiers, these symbols reminded the public of the underlying cause of the unrest: the rioters' desire to ensure Trump retained the presidency.

IV.2.2.2. Secondary: how does the mass mediation of the event construct the materiality and symbolism of the actions?

Some right-leaning media downplayed the meaning of the symbols, focusing instead on how they helped experts identify the different extremist groups involved in the riot and their apparent goals (Talley & Levy, 2021).

In contrast, left-leaning media emphasized the striking symbols, describing them as 'chilling messages of tyranny, white supremacy, anarchy, racism, anti-Semitism and hatred (Simon & Sidner, 2021), or as a 'dizzying array of symbols' that revealed 'an alternate political universe' inhabited by violent extremists, outright racists and conspiracy theorists, who, notably, stood alongside more peaceful Trump supporters (Rosenberg & Tiefenthäler, 2021).

IV.2.2.3. Tertiary: how did this materiality and symbolism influence online deliberation around the actions?

Many rioters live-streamed or posted about their actions on social media, broadcasting far-right symbols, while 'swaths of online agitators' urged them to breach the Capitol building (Ghaffary & Heilweil, 2021). The riot created a celebratory atmosphere online within extremist social media circles, where people felt 'emboldened and empowered by the visuals of the rioting (Ghaffary & Heilweil, 2021), suggesting that the symbolism of the riot had viral currency.

In response, many of those who criticised the rioters centred their critiques on material-symbolic aspects of the riot. For instance, late-night show host Jimmy Kimmel mocked the event, calling it the 'treason finale of the Donald Trump era', and describing the Capitol as overrun with 'MAGA-hatters in all manner of crazy costumes' (Pallotta, 2021). Similarly, corporate employees at Amazon pressured the company via social media to remove merchandise featuring far-right logos or products associated with groups like the Oath Keepers or QAnon (Del Rey, 2021).

IV.2.3. Function: what purpose(s) does the riot have discursively ascribed to it?

When regarded as discursive and mediated phenomena, riots (aim to) realise specific purposes, often only implicitly understood by the perpetrators of individual misdeeds. These purposes are then either legitimised or delegitimised by institutions and through public deliberation. Thus, the 'function' of a riot refers to its 'social role', its capacity to serve certain demands of the community that creates the 'text' of the riot (Lotman et al., 1978, p. 233), and how these demands have been recontextualised beyond the group itself. In demystifying the function of the riots, the analytical goal is to link its comprehension in public discourse to the latent ideological context of the riotous group, and to

examine how these connections have been altered or maintained in the event's mediation.

IV.2.3.1. Primary: what purpose is the riot represented as fulfilling by the perpetrating group?

Many rioters viewed the purpose of their actions as that of a volunteer army (Donovan, 2024), deputised by Trump to prevent an alleged illegitimate government from taking power following a fraudulent election. Their self-ascribed 'function' was, therefore, to patriotically defend the integrity of the U.S. election system and restore Trump to his status as president.

IV.2.3.2. Secondary: how has this function been transmuted/ reproduced in institutional discourse?

The riot was documented through a significant amount of CCTV and social media video footage from various sources and vantage points. This provided the news media with an opportunity to reconstruct the event (Gates, 2024) according to their own narratives. Left-leaning media, such as the *New York Times*, used this footage to represent the function of the riot as an attack on democracy with criminal intent. Conversely, various right-leaning media and political elites underscored the function of the riot as defending the integrity of the electoral process and challenging alleged election fraud.

IV.2.3.3. Tertiary: how, if at all, has this functionality filtrated into virtual spaces of deliberation?

Like the mainstream media coverage, public deliberation on the legitimacy of the function of the riot was sharply divided along partisan lines. Although both sides agreed that the protest went too far, left-leaning Americans viewed it as an illegitimate attempt to 'overthrow the government' to keep Trump in power, whereas many right-leaning Americans saw it as a defence of US freedom or a patriotic act (Salvanto, 2024).

IV.2.4. Frame: how are the riots framed in terms of their explanation and negotiation of meaning?

Negotiating the understanding of riots in discourse involves a (strategically motivated) process of (re)ordering information into narrative explanations conditioned by communicative elites. The cumulative effect of this negotiation process results in salient 'frames' (cf. Benford & Snow, 2000) of interpretation, which are reproduced in public discourse and influenced by systemic/institutional factors. These frames may evolve over time, as the meaning of the event is negotiated. Analytically, the aim is to identify how the highlighting or omission of specific information influences the frames of understanding that are consolidated in the public memory and interpretation of the event.

IV.2.4.1. Primary: what framing does the unruly group use to represent their disorder?

Those involved in the Capitol riot framed their actions primarily as morally justified reactions to the alleged electoral fraud, a view that persists for many to this day. In doing so, they framed the riot mainly in moralistic terms or as a conflict against anti-Trump elements (Kydd, 2021).

IV.2.4.2. Secondary: "how were these pieces of information structured to shape the explanation of the riots in public deliberation by the mass media?"

Although polarised, both left-leaning and right-leaning media outlets largely reproduced similar frameworks in their reports, although they used them for different purposes. Left-leaning media outlets framed the acts as criminal, deviant and immoral. They also reproduced a frame of conflict between good and evil or just and unjust actors. In contrast, right-wing media outlets were

less inclined to frame the event in moralistic terms and usually used a conflict frame in their reports, shifting the blame onto antagonistic actors who supposedly provoked the attack on the Capitol.

IV.2.4.3. Tertiary: how has public deliberation altered/reproduced the dominant framing of the riots?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the frames instigated by the media were widely amplified on social media with pro-Biden echo chambers framing the riot as extremist and criminal, while pro-Trump forums tended to frame the riot as legitimate resistance activity (Salvanto, 2024).

V. Concluding remarks

Our analysis highlights the potential of the proposed framework to illuminate the discursive negotiation of riots as mediated events at several different levels of communication and mediation in contemporary society. By conceptualising riots as discursive-mediated events, we offer a robust framework for tracing how meanings evolve from the immediate actions of rioters to their representation in media and public deliberation. The triadic structure of the framework allows researchers to systematically analyse the cascading process of meaning-making across primary, secondary and tertiary levels of communication. Moreover, the seven analytical categories - specifically, group structure, ideology, latent process, logic, manifest process, function, and frame - provide tools for elucidating the related characteristics of 'family resemblance' that riots share as discursive-mediated events.

Our preliminary exemplification of the Capitol riot in 2021 demonstrates how this framework can unravel the multifaceted discourses surrounding a riot. It highlights how different actors, from rioters to institutional elites and public commentators, construct and contest meanings through varying lenses of power, ideology, and historical context. This analysis not only reveals the role of the riot in shaping socio-political discourse, but also highlights the importance of critically examining media and public narratives to avoid inadequate or reductive interpretations of such events.

Theoretically, this framework addresses significant gaps in riot research by emphasising the complex, dialogic process underlying the negotiation of meanings of riots. It also addresses the failure of adjacent research, such as the protest paradigm, to consider the nuances of riots as forms of civil disorder. Given the increasing frequency of riots around the world, this important contribution to the literature on riots has critical implications for understanding how mediated representations influence public cognition and political responses to civil disorder.

In practice, the analytical framework offers a comprehensive tool for analysing future case studies, whether they are localised or global acts of civil disorder. Researchers can rely on the framework to analyse a variety of contexts, and it can help inform policymakers, media experts and educators by providing a broader view of the socio-political aspects of riots and their representations in social and mass media.

Finally, our framework lays the foundation for a more critical understanding of riots as discursive and mediated phenomena. We invite academics to refine and expand upon this approach by applying it to unexamined case studies or emerging acts of civil disobedience. In doing so, we can advance academic conversations about how riots, and similar acts of civil disobedience

shape our understanding of the social and political dimensions of contemporary society; and, how these events create politically salient meanings in public cognition and mass communication.

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Atribuindo significado à desordem: compreensões públicas dos tumultos como eventos mediados pelo discurso

Palavras-chave: distúrbios, eventos discursivos, desobediência civil, mídia de massa, mídias sociais.

RESUMO Introdução: Distúrbios são uma constante na contestação e resistência social e política, mas suas dimensões comunicativas são frequentemente pouco teorizadas. Este estudo preenche essa lacuna ao apresentar o conceito de distúrbios como *eventos mediados discursivamente*. Propomos uma nova abordagem teórica e analítica para esclarecer como diferentes grupos e instituições sociais negociam a interpretação e o significado dos distúrbios. **Materiais e métodos:** Nossa teoria sobre distúrbios baseia-se nos estudos de mídia e discurso para analisar como o entendimento público e as representações institucionais são construídas. O modelo teórico, com sete categorias analíticas, interpreta os distúrbios como eventos mediados discursivamente, mostrando como o significado é formado e disputado em diferentes níveis de comunicação. Aplicamos esse modelo ao distúrbio no Capitólio dos EUA em 2021, em Washington, D.C., como exemplo preliminar. **Resultados:** A análise destaca as características discursivas do distúrbio no Capitólio em 2021, mostrando como manifestantes, público e elites institucionais negociam significados influenciados por ideologias, mídia e símbolos. Também demonstra que os distúrbios geram capital sociopolítico por meio da comunicação, moldando o discurso público e desafiando o poder ao criar e contestar significados na esfera pública. **Discussão:** Nosso arcabouço teórico e analítico contribui para uma compreensão mais aprofundada dos distúrbios como fenômenos mediados pelo discurso. Isso se torna especialmente relevante diante do crescimento dos distúrbios como uma forma expressiva de ação política e cívica em escala global.



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