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Article

When economic pressure meets digital provocation

Chris Parker

Are businesses ready for social unrest?

When the economy falters, civil unrest can follow close behind. And digitally generated misinformation, encrypted messaging, and algorithm-driven outrage have made it easier than ever to spread falsehoods, stir anger, and organise the kind of disruption that can bring severe and immediate consequences for businesses.

Buildings smashed, staff at risk, operations stalled and much more. This isn't a distant problem or a political debate. It's a direct cost. And if a business isn't factoring in social tension as part of its risk planning, it's exposed. Reputational damage, operational paralysis, and systemic exposure can all unfold faster than traditional risk models account for.

Austerity and anger

Economic pressure is a reliable spark. Inflation, unemployment and austerity measures strain wallets and fray tempers. When people can't afford food, housing, or energy, frustration turns outward. Protests follow. Sometimes peaceful. Sometimes not.

When compounded by social media disinformation, we've seen situations escalate to the point where shops, community centres, and public buildings have been looted and vandalised.

Generational drift

Younger generations are angry. Not just at policies, but at the institutions behind them. Gen Z, in particular, is more disillusioned and socially polarised than any cohort in recent memory. Their activism is fast, digital, and often unpredictable. Traditional institutions and mainstream parties hold less sway, and social media, amplified by AI, is fuelling the divide.

Again, what starts as frustration online can quickly spill into the streets.

Youth-led protests are surging worldwide: from the US and UK to Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, millions of young people have taken to the streets in recent years, driven by frustration, with the risk being that this could be amplified by anxieties over AI and job opportunities. Many of these movements began on social media and escalated rapidly. This is where a cultural shift becomes a risk landscape, and combined with economic precarity, this generational shift adds volatility to an already unstable mix.

Technology's double edge

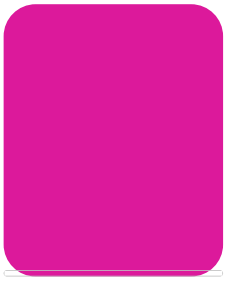
What used to take weeks now happens in hours. Many believe what they see online, even when it's manipulated. Social media platforms that allow mass coordination with zero oversight. And with deepfakes and synthetic media blurring the line between truth and fiction, trust is collapsing.

And on the horizon, a deeper economic threat emerges threatening to exacerbate tensions. Our 2025 report on tech transformation and cyber risk uncovered the concerns of business leaders, with **66%** saying AI will displace roles within their companies over the proceeding 18 months. This moves beyond a workplace issue and into a potential social flashpoint.

As unrest moves faster, risk planning must catch up

Unrest doesn't need a majority. It needs momentum. And in a world where economic strain meets digital coordination, that momentum is easier to build than ever before.

Businesses need to start planning for fast-moving, tech-fuelled disruption. That means factoring in social tension, misinformation, and contingent exposure, in addition to physical damage. Businesses should be working closely with brokers and insurers to assess the impact of fast-evolving digital threats amid rising unrest, and ensure they have robust SRCC cover in place to protect against strikes, riots, and civil commotion.



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