

If a Protest Falls in the Forest: Facebook Protests and the Public Sphere in the Context of Attention Scarcity

Master Thesis

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Abstract

The adoption of Facebook as a platform for grassroots protests seemed to be the panacea for their long dependence on media coverage. Facebook allows protests to bypass the traditional media gatekeepers in their way to the public, and its advantages are many: free, open, worldwide spread, and outside direct governmental control. But, ironically, successful Facebook protests break into the public agenda only when picked by traditional media, while the big majority of the protests remain outside of the public attention. Moreover, even the most successful Facebook protests fall into oblivion after the traditional media coverage is over.

The explanation advanced in this thesis is a mixture of attention economics, media reputation and the way they interact with the special characteristics of the Facebook platform. It is hypothesized that, due to those factors, protests launched in Facebook are still dependent on interaction with traditional media to reach the public agenda and to produce sustained attention, which are critical preconditions for collective action. Moreover, because of Facebook's platform limitations, even successful protests are expected to decay upon their expulsion from the mass media agenda.

A model for the prediction of Facebook protests' activity level is proposed and empirically tested on three recent Israeli protests, two of which were covered by traditional media and one that was not. The results confirm the hypothesis that media coverage, when present, is highly correlated with Facebook protests' activity level, and that in the absence of media coverage the general tendency of the protest's activity level is decay. The implications of the results are that grassroots Facebook protests may still be dependent on media coverage in order to bring to policy change.