



**The Cottage Cheese Boycott:
The Conjunction between News
Construction and Social Protest
on Facebook**

David Levin

*Media School, College of Management, and
the Open University of Israel*

Email: ddnsle@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article deals with a petition distributed to Israelis via the social network Facebook, in the spring of 2011. The 'cottage cheese protest' called for a boycott of food products until their price would be reduced, the first target being cottage cheese. The petition, which had over 100,000 signatories and the boycott in its wake, received intense media coverage in Israel, and resulted in dairies cutting the price of cottage cheese (an Israeli staple) by around 25% on a permanent basis. The petition also led to a broader public debate about the high cost of living in Israel. Two fascinating aspects of these events are worthy of study. First is the (mostly constructed) identity of the protestors as a random group of people lacking in political and financial connections or influence, who used the internet as a means of controlling the public agenda. The second is the encounter between 'media logic' and 'internet logic', between a message originating in the internet and its translation to the language of news items in the mass media. As I hope to demonstrate, the shift of their message to the traditional media and its emphasis on the identity of the demonstrators themselves as a disparate group, was necessary to render the protest visible to the general public. At the same time, it handicapped the protesters, shortened their life in the public eye and ultimately led to a reinforcement of the existing social order. Ultimately, I conclude that while the protest seems to have failed in the short term, the power of Facebook to conscript people to socially conscious activity can fire the imagination, and may well continue to be a driver of social protest in the long term.

Contributor Note

Dr. David Levin is a communication researcher interested in cultural studies. He teaches Media Studies at the Media School of the College of Management and at the Open University of Israel. He focuses on the conjunctions between the possibilities and limitations of various media, cultural models and the implications of special usage contexts. His publications include "Because it's not really me": Student Films and Their Potential as Alternative Media' *International Perspectives on Youth Media: Cultures of Production and Education* (2011) and 'Breaking the Spell: How the cell phone transforms time out', in *The International Journal of Cultural Studies* (forthcoming).

Introduction

The question of the political role and influence of the internet in general and as a vehicle for social networking in particular has been widely discussed during the last three years (Cottle 2011; Goldberg 2010; Harlow 2010; Hassanpour 2011; Hussain, and Howard 2011). There is significant evidence, however, that protesters still fight for exposure in the traditional media. They seek to gain visibility for their claims, to reach the widest possible audience and to wield power over opponents and decision makers by controlling the news cycle. An extensive study by Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg in 2009 (quoted in Wolfsfeld 2011) found that most news stories originate in the mainstream media and are only later distributed in blogs. When the transition is in the opposite direction, from the internet to the mainstream media, questions arise concerning the significance of that transition.

Media Logic (Althide and Snow, 1991) includes several insights about the impact of the media's rules of production in different genres on content. With regard to news, media logic derives from a combination of cultural, technological and economic factors that direct the ways in which news media professionals interpret social reality. News value is assessed according to a list of components involved in the process of screening raw news material by journalists and editors (Galtung and Ruge, 1964; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). These parameters (the importance of the event, its correspondence with past events, its complexity, predictability and

human interest) determine first the likelihood of a particular event to become a news item and also the locus of the coverage.

If we look at the relative strength of news sources (Moloch and Lester 1974; Bannet *et al*/ 2004; Wolfsfeld and Sheaffer 2006), the core of the discussion shifts from technical description of the working process to more complicated institutional analysis. Such studies see news coverage as an outcome of competition for the public's time, that part in the life of a public in which the significance of past, present and future events is determined (Moloch and Lester 1974: 102). In this process, events promoters negotiate with media professionals according to certain 'rules' that allow different patterns of accessibility to elites and formal agencies ('habitual accessibility') on the one hand, and to demonstrators ('disrupters of routine') on the other. There is also a special pattern attached to media professionals who seek to advance their own stories ('direct accessibility') (Moloch and Lester 1974). Unlike elites, 'trouble makers' have to remain inventive, unexpected, disturbing and uncontrolled in order to remain the focus of media coverage.

This imbalance in the competition for public time between protestors and elites was demonstrated by Bannet *et al.* (2004), who analyzed media coverage of the World Economy Forum (WEF) in the years 2001-2003. They focused on three mechanisms restricting protestors' presence in the news: 'Access' – who gets into news discourse; 'Recognition' – who is formally recognized and identified by name, status or social membership

and 'Responsiveness' – whether there is a dialogue between sources with different claims (2004: 437). Bannet et al.'s institutional framework corresponds well with a Marxist perspective which claims that the professional mechanism of news gathering contributes, even if unintentionally, to preservation of the social order.

'Internet logic' is conceptually different from 'media logic'. The procedures involved in the construction of an argument by anyone from anywhere and its distribution to a vast audience are fairly simple. The hierarchies are fluid (Goldberg 2010), meaning that accessibility of ordinary people to a public platform with an unlimited audience is unrestricted. For this reason, it is assumed that the internet will be able to solve well known problems in the public sphere and may be a harbinger of hope for change in our world order (Foster 1997). The aggregation of opinions expressed on the internet by people unconnected with each other can grow to become a political force, similar to that attributed to public opinion polls.

Media and academic discourse have both created a profile of a new kind of leader in these protests: middle class citizens not previously involved in politics, who exploit the internet to organize this kind of poll and who also translate it into off-line events in order to influence politics (Kirkpatrick 2010; Hussain and Howard 2011; Shirky 2011). The new definitions of internet logic inspire questions formulated in terms of a technology dystopia: 'Does it really work? Can technology be used as a tool for a new kind of leader to move crowds onto the streets? Can what has been

called 'slactivism' (Morozov 2009) – being content to talk instead of act – be overcome? There is in fact evidence that in several cases the internet can indeed help to organize spontaneous protest activities that can be maintained for short periods of time. The second question, which is at the core of the present study, is about the effect of the dominance of old media coverage of protests originating on the internet over their original message and over public debate resulting from the protest.

The case study

This study investigates the case of the 'cottage cheese protest', which began as a petition distributed on Facebook in Israel in the spring of 2011, calling for a boycott of expensive products, starting with cottage cheese. Cottage cheese is generally agreed to be a staple in Israel. It was first introduced to Israel in 1962 and is extremely popular: 91% of Israeli households regularly consume cottage cheese (*Ynet* 16 June, 2011). In order to examine, first the outcome of the encounter between 'internet logic' and 'media logic' and then the place of people lacking political or financial influence, the analysis focuses on the coverage of two internet news sites: the highly popular *Ynet* and the internet edition of *TheMarker*, one of three leading economic magazines in Israel. The analysis includes 144 news items (74 in *TheMarker* and 66 on *Ynet*) appearing over a period of one month from the first exposure of an intent to boycott cottage cheese on 14th June, till two weeks after the dairies announced permanent price reductions on 14th July,

2011. Online news sites were preferred over television news because this format provides more space for information, so that more, different voices can be heard. Besides their popularity these sites were chosen because both expressed sympathy with the protest, so that they served as convenient platforms for the protesters. *Ynet* was the first to report on the protest and to promote it, publishing a news item less than 24 hours from its inception and adding a link to the petition. *TheMarker's* editor, Guy Rolnic, repeatedly stated that he supported an anti-monopolies line in the site's coverage of the protest.

The analysis refers only to news items because of the 'rhetorical force' of the genre which is perceived by the public as providing a credible representation of reality (Schudson 1989). The study assesses news value and patterns of accessibility quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Quantitative analysis enables one to observe the relative share of coverage given to different actors: the protesters, the general public, dairy farmers, manufacturers of dairy products, supermarket chains, unions, politicians, government ministers and economic regulators.

Methodology

1. The number of citations of the different actors was counted as an indicator of apparent legitimacy. Journalists allowed external voices to speak their minds much more loudly than the journalists themselves, thus conveying their views is through the choice of the sources included in

their reports, and the information they choose to include or exclude (see Julian 2011).

2. The number of times various actors related to one another's words or actions was counted as an indication of their legitimacy or illegitimacy.
3. Qualitative measures were needed to supply more detailed information about the interrelation between different texts and their correspondence with cultural myths, the power of social networks and the nature of marginal social groups.

The case study

When the protest began, in the third week of June 2011, it was seen as just another in a series of virtual consumer protests which had become commonplace in Israel that year. The cottage cheese boycott was preceded by a protest against increased gasoline prices and against the premature curtailing of summer time. Nevertheless, within 24 hours, it became a media phenomenon: After its first appearance on *Ynet*, the rest of the media became interested in the story and began to follow it up. As the numbers of people signing the petition grew, the media intensified its coverage which continued for three weeks. The cottage cheese boycott became the opening item on television and radio news programs and according to 'Google trends', Israeli

public interest in the word 'cheese' on the 17 June exploded.¹

The analysis is divided into three periods: (1) Framing the issue and tying the virtual protestors' hands (14-19 June 2011); (2) The second stage (20-29 June 2011): the discussion continues but the protestors are stuck in their image; (3) The third stage: from Pyrrhic victory to disappearance.

(1) Framing the issue and tying the virtual protestors' hands (14-19 June 2011)

The image of the cottage cheese protest and of the protestors themselves was created during the first five days. Several elements translated as 'news value': an ongoing reference to the phenomenon of Tahrir Square, in which people previously unconnected with each other suddenly, in a Cinderella-like story, take their place at the center of society and become a clear target for the public relations experts of the political and financial elites finding themselves under attack. Coverage in which protestors' personality became the center of their own story and resulted in their being quoted in 8 items out of a total of 26 mentions of the protest during the first five days.

Ever since January 2011, the Israeli media and public opinion had been preoccupied with the 'Arab Spring', and especially with Egypt and the active role of Facebook in disseminating the protestors' message there. Israelis felt

that they were next in line for a similar protest. Although political revolution is very far from most Israeli's minds, proud as they are of their democracy, many middle and working class Israelis are frustrated by monopolistic control of the market by a very few business tycoons. Three elements were adopted from the Egyptian story: the apolitical, previously anonymous leadership, the power of social networks in conscripting the masses and the Egyptian protestors' success in getting people to join protests on the streets. Israelis learned from the media about apolitical middle class people who had exploited the power of the internet to organize the masses and to implement regime change. Following a report from Cairo made by the highly respected Israeli investigative journalist Itai Engel, Maher Gnam became an Israeli hero. Given all this, it was no surprise that *TheMarker* published a report headed 'The Tahrir Square of the Israeli Consumer' (*TheMarker*, 15 June, 2011). All of the media alluded to Maher Gnam's story by mentioning the apolitical background of the protestors and by stating that they first met only at the beginning of the week in which the petition was published, via the social networks. (e.g. *Ynet*, 16 June, 2011).

According to the media, the internet empowered those individuals, who were able to conscript massive crowds and implement historic changes simply by typing on a keyboard. Thus one of the protestors, Yaakov Tuvee was quoted as saying: 'we won't stop with cottage cheese. We will take on unjust taxes, VAT. Most of all we do not want to be exploited anymore. We will not allow our hard earned money to be stolen'

¹ <http://www.google.com/trends?q=cheeseandc&tab=0andgeo=ilandgeor=allanddate=2011-6>

(*TheMarker* and *Ynet* 16 June, 2011). Unlike the Gnaim group that moved from their keyboards onto the streets of Cairo, however, Tuvee and his friends say they believe that Facebook can substitute for the city square as a site of debate and decision making. Off line demonstrations can be held later, on an issue by issue basis: 'we call from here to everyone to stand with a placard in front of their local supermarket and say "we have had enough"' (*Ynet*, 16 June, 2011). The media helped them to advance this approach by reporting on what could be called 'virtual chaos'; *Ynet* published an item about attacks against the web pages of dairy manufacturers while another related to amateur video clips protesting the cost of cottage cheese. *Ynet* also focused on other virtual protests, some of longer standing than the cottage cheese boycott, such as that against gasoline prices. The media brought this previously ineffective virtual petition back to life by announcing that its initiator promised to contribute his ten thousand virtual supporters to help the cottage cheese cause. Other protests are more recent, such as a petition against the price of popcorn in film theatres (*Ynet* 26 June, 2011).

The third element adopted as a result of the success of the Egyptian protests was the enormous number of participants. In general, large numbers are usually conceptualized as generating a sense of truth and scientific accuracy (Roeh and Feldman 1984). Ever growing numbers which make protests newsworthy also contribute to the unruliness of actions by the protestors causing disruption. In this sense, the tens of thousands who signed up to the cottage cheese boycott may be

viewed as equivalent to the crowds who filled Tahrir Square to bursting point.

The ease with which people could sign the virtual petition was a key factor, resulting in huge numbers of people joining the protest, and hence influencing public discourse offline. Within 24 hours of the first reports of the petition, there were nearly 24,000 signatories (*Ynet*, 15 June, 2011) and as the reporting intensified, the number reached 106,000. It was more difficult for the media to use another huge number, of cartons of cottage cheese left on the supermarket shelves. According to a survey published in *TheMarker* on 20 June, five days after the boycott began most responders said that they had in fact stopped buying cottage cheese.² However, other data indicate that temporary price reductions announced by supermarket chains undermined the power of the boycott and encouraged sales (*Ynet*, 16 June, 2011; *TheMarker* 29 June, 2011).

Locked in the image of people lacking any political or financial clout

While the general idea of the cottage cheese protest followed the Egyptian model of non-political, non-affiliated people joining together in protest initiated via social networks, the demographic representation of the Israeli protest was quite different. The boycott was initiated by a group including high tech programmers and

² <http://www.themarker.com/consumer/prices/1.658189> 62% of responders said that they had stopped buying cottage cheese while only 15% reported that they were still buying it.

marketing experts, but was later identified with unaffiliated, lower middle class, relatively uneducated protestors. The primary focus was on Yizchak Alrov who was introduced as the main leader. He belonged to the ultra-orthodox faction of Israeli society which is generally seen as poorly educated and underprivileged. He works as a clerk in an insurance company and from time to time as a cantor on the side as well. He was later joined by Yaakov Tuvee, who is also ultra-orthodox. Alrov and Tuvee are both residents of towns having a poor press in the Israeli media as being plagued with poverty and religious fundamentalism. Media emphasis on the religiousness of the protestors' leadership was not incidental. Over the years secular Israelis have looked on with envy at the ability of the ultra-orthodox community to organize, with local Rabbis able to recruit thousands of protestors in order to promote their own community interests. In this context it seems that the cottage cheese protest was a unique event combining outsider experience and advanced technology in the service of the collective. Alrov himself describes this encounter well:

As an ultra orthodox person I know how to manage a boycott and I told myself this is the way that the general public should behave. Nevertheless while the ultra-orthodox public is loyal to its Rabbis and obeys their edicts against buying certain products or boycotting a particular company, the general public has no fixed authority that can unify them. Facebook stepped into this gap as the 2011 master of revolution. (Ynet 15/6)

The idea of a protest conducted by ordinary people, lacking any political or financial influence, was exemplified by the humble apartment in Tel Aviv in which the protestors held their press conferences (*Ynet*, 16 June, 2011), as well as by their links to other underprivileged populations. Journalists would search out consumers willing to state that the 40% rise in the price of cottage cheese over the last two years had made the product too expensive for them. A reporter was sent to an Arab village to see how far another disenfranchised group were complying with the boycott, adding a touch of Orientalism and epistemic violence in a process of 'othering' the protestors. The headline in *Ynet* declared that 'even Arabs are giving up cottage cheese, preferring home-made goat's cheese' (*Ynet*, 16 June, 2011). This 'othering' process in fact neglected some of the information given by responders who said they eat goat's cheese because they find it tastier than cottage cheese. This framing of the cottage cheese protest as initiated by marginal factions of society rendered it more emotive, and hence newsworthy. *Ynet* reported for example that 'customers of supermarket chains are calling for aggressive steps' and quoted 'a father of three who yelled "We must demonstrate outside a cabinet meeting"' (*Ynet*, 15 June, 2011).

As I will demonstrate below, however, the image of the protestors as a group of poor and emotional people would eventually become a handicap which worked against them.

Locked on to the target: cottage cheese only

Focusing on cottage cheese was a brilliant idea for three major reasons. First is the central place of cottage cheese on the average Israeli family table. The National Milk Board reports that from 2001 to 2010 consumption of cottage cheese increased from 21,392 kg to 31,027 kg.³ Secondly, the price of cottage cheese exemplified the protestors' claims about the inflated cost of living in Israel relative to the rest of the developed world. A 250g tub of cottage cheese cost just under two dollars in the summer of 2011, compared with the equivalent of around one dollar in the UK (*Ynet* 16 June, 2011). A third, more obvious reason for the protest's effectiveness was that the product has a limited shelf life. Besides, boycotting cottage cheese would not disrupt the daily lives of its regular consumers: unlike gasoline there are many alternatives to cottage cheese, and unlike attempts to ignore the official end of summer time, none of the boycotters were liable to suffer sanctions. Besides all this, cottage cheese is a clear target carrying news value, unlike earlier, less specific ideas for product boycotts.

Media coverage was focused on the product, either visually – a carton of cottage cheese or shelves full of the boycotted cartons – or verbally with headlines such as 'the cottage cheese furor' (*Ynet*) or 'the cottage cheese protest' (*TheMarker*).

³ http://www.halavi.org.il/info/idb/idb_year/board-w2010.pdf

On one hand, this clear target made it easy for anyone interested to join in the protest, including some trying to use the protest to advance their own economic and political interests. Within hours, the 'cottage cheese furor' section of the press was filled with announcements of price cuts by the big supermarket chains. Despite or perhaps because they themselves were in fact one of the targets of the boycott, the supermarkets cased their special offers in terms of their sensitivity to their customers' financial difficulties and their sales figures did in fact increase after a few days of this type of marketing. In effect, they were transforming news items into advertising, winning seven direct citations in both news sites – almost as many as the protestors themselves.⁴ Grocery stores trying to ignore the boycott (or those too small to be able to cut prices like the large supermarket chains) simply lost custom.

Some of the cottage cheese furor's media coverage was shared by other businesses happy to enjoy free publicity. Eti Levi, the general manager of a hotel chain and head of the Israeli Hotel Association managed to hit the headlines in both news sites with her announcement that her hotel chain would boycott cottage cheese. She called on other chains to follow her lead. Politicians also exploited this area of media coverage to make some political capital for themselves, with 8 direct quotations in both *Ynet* and *TheMarker*.

⁴ Two of the major supermarket chains, Sufersal and Rami Levi reported a rise of 15% and 33% respectively in their daily sales of cottage cheese following their temporary price cuts.

online. Opposition MK Ronit Tirosh of the Kadima party, for instance made headlines when she set a carton of cottage cheese on the prime minister's desk in the Knesset during a debate. She was ordered to leave the plenum by the speaker of the Knesset.

(2) The second stage (20-29 June 2011): the discussion continues but the protestors are stuck in their image

During the first week of the boycott, the protestors enjoyed massive exposure in the mainstream media. Besides the two online news sites analyzed in this paper, the major commercial television channel (Channel 2, enjoying ratings of 17% relative to its rival Channel 10 with 10%) opened its prime-time evening news edition with items about the cottage cheese protest on 14th and also on 16th of June, 2011. Both left and right wing national newspapers carried front page headlines about the protest. *Yisrael Hayom*, identified with the political right, reported the cottage cheese protest on its front page on both 14th and 15th June, 2011, while the left wing *Ha'aretz* newspaper carried 25 items about the protest between the 14th and 16th of June, 2011. The protestors' original message, that cottage cheese was not their final target, as well as their control over the timing of the public debate, together with their image as ordinary citizens, was somehow lost, however, in the process of transferring the protest from the internet to the print and broadcast media.

During the second and third weeks of the protest, the issue of monopolies and inflated prices in the dairy industry

continued to be discussed in the Israeli media but now for the most part without contributions from the protestors. There was great excitement regarding a government proposal to cut prices in the dairy industry by cutting import duties and hence opening the market to imported milk products, which would encourage competitive pricing. Such a neo-liberal move would benefit the government who would be viewed as the champions of the poor as well as benefitting the larger supermarket chains. For the dairy farmers and domestic dairy industries, however, such a move could be disastrous. The voice of the protestors – who argued that the problem lay in inflated profit margins creamed off by the three largest dairy conglomerates which corner the market, together with the supermarket chains' coordinated and inflated pricing – was heard less stridently. During this period, there was a dramatic decrease in number of direct quotations from the protesters, from 8 out of a total of 26 items about the protest, to 11 out of 89 items. While their patron *Ynet* still quoted them from time to time (8 quotations over 10 days) the protestors' voice disappeared almost entirely from *TheMarker* (only 3 quotations over those same ten days). Media coverage of the cottage cheese protest was now almost totally controlled by more powerful actors, who exploited it to advance their own agenda or to answer accusations made against them by other powerful actors. 'Power' in this context refers to degree of habitual access to media (Moloch and Lester 1974), either because of their prominent status, or because of the prominent status of events at which they were invited to speak.

Spokesmen for the dairy industry conglomerates were quoted in 17 items, compared to three in the first period and seven in the third. Politicians were quoted on *Ynet* and in *TheMarker* 16 times on the subject, compared with 8 during the first period and spokesmen for the supermarket chains 13 times, compared with 7. These figures beg the question, why did the protestors disappear from media coverage?

Firstly, the powerful actors discussed above were able to convene high profile events carrying greater news value, not limited by internet activity. One such event was a meeting of representatives of the food industries lobbying the major dairies. Others included were the national convention of dairy farmers and an emergency meeting held by the agriculturalists lobby, both of which supported the dairy farmers. Others were invited to speak at prestigious events such as the annual Caesarea Business Convention. The protestors for their part were invited to speak in only one meeting of a parliamentary committee. Besides all this, the powerful actors' public relations advisors⁵ arranged planned media events: televised interviews, tours, or press conferences. The protestors did not have such facilities at their disposal.

Secondly, as a result of collusion between the media, the powerful actors and the protestors themselves, the latter remained stuck in their original under privileged, not well connected, man-in-

⁵ Strauss Dairies even hired the services of a public relations agency (Rimon-Cohen) especially to handle the cottage cheese crisis (*Ynet* 1 July, 2011).

the-street image, whose only weapon was their ability to disrupt everyday routines. Besides not inviting the protestors to their events, the powerful actors did not relate to specific insights or suggestions proposed by them but preferred to express their apparent sensitivity to the protestors' claims by speaking more generally about 'the Israeli consumer'.

Ofra Strauss, the CEO of the Strauss dairy conglomerate, for example, took the line of expressing empathy for the suffering consumers, when she said at the Caesarea Business Convention: 'It is important to me that people know that I know what they, there outside, are feeling at heart and that I'm listening' (quoted in both *Ynet* and *TheMarker*, 20 June, 2011).⁶ Her competitor Zehavit Levi, the CEO of the rival dairy conglomerate Tnuva (who has since been fired), spoke in similar terms in a televised interview, saying that she herself had grown up in a poor family and could therefore view the world through her poor mother's eyes. Such statements were intended to position these powerful actors in the role of 'responsible adult' entrusted to take care of a sensitive child: authentic, but yet unable to rationalize his feelings. Such an image would naturally preclude actors like Strauss and Levi from the off-line public sphere. They projected their role and that of government, as lending an ear to the chanting crowd and translating their protest into rational, economic discourse. These powerful actors fell into a kind of paternalistic, colonial discourse of involuntary rule

⁶ <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4084795,00.html>

(Hartley 1988). Analogous to arguments made in the context of 19th Century colonialism, overruling the protesters' point of view was justified in terms of their being unsuitable, weak actors, incapable of conducting their own affairs.

When the media adopted this framework, the protestors had to play the game in order to maintain media attention, continuing to use the internet as a vehicle of disruptive protest. But now, their new call via the internet to boycott hard cheese and yoghurt was ineffective and was virtually ignored by supermarket chains, politicians and the general public alike. None of the powerful actors mentioned above responded to Alrov's speech in which he presented himself as a moderate standing between the angry crowd who 'want blood' and the 'powerful actors' and as a focus of virtual pilgrimage: 'Thousands of people are joining [our petitions] everyday, the public have woken up' (*Ynet*, 28 June, 2011).

The media viewed these new boycotts as simply more of the same. The supermarket chains and dairy conglomerates ignored them and maintained their high prices. The image of the protesters as emotional and marginal now projected impotence and the internet was no longer able to revitalize their support.

(3) The third stage: from Pyrrhic victory to disappearance

On 29 June, the dairy conglomerates announced that they had decided jointly

to reduce the price of cottage cheese on a permanent basis. The online media declared that the protest had ended with a victory in 'the biggest and most and impressive consumer struggle in history', adding that 'it all started with exposure on *Ynet*. The Treasury Minister, Yuval Steinitz added his own take, announcing his agenda of opening up the market to imports of dairy products: 'it really is a glorious victory. We will continue to examine the monopolies in the dairy market' (*Ynet*; *TheMarker*, 28 June, 2011).

Nevertheless, from the protestors' point of view, this was a Pyrrhic victory. Reading between the lines, it is apparent that Alrov and his colleagues were far from satisfied for three reasons. First, the new price set for cottage cheese was still higher than that which they had demanded at the start of the protest. Second, they saw their protest as necessary until such time as there would be price cuts across the board of grocery products. Third, they believe that the profit margins earned by the supermarket chains and dairy conglomerates should be under government control, and that the alternative approach of opening the market to imported milk products would be damaging for struggling dairy farmers.

In order to express their dissatisfaction, they have attempted to maintain protest activities, this time offline. They called for public demonstrations to be held on July 5th in front of supermarkets and several weeks later they demonstrated near the private homes of the owners of supermarket chains and food manufacturers. Although their announcements and protests achieved a degree of media coverage (7 citations,

compared to 37 items concerning the cottage cheese protest), these were not followed by price reductions or increased government regulation.

In mid July 2011, one month after Alrov and his associates had initiated their protest, the media and politicians moved on to focus on other protagonists: young, middle class students and academics leading a new protest about the inflated cost of living, manifested by an encampment of tents along a boulevard in the heart of Tel Aviv. The press again mentioned the role of Facebook in the early stages of this new 'Social Protest', but in fact this hugely successful protest that managed repeatedly to bring hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets, was actually led offline by well connected activists backed up by the support of civilian institutions such as the National Union of Students and the New Israel Fund. Whereas the press did point out a connection between the cottage cheese protest and this new 'Social Protest', Alrov and his friends were pushed aside and were not invited to speak in the new movement's massive demonstrations.

Discussion

The cottage cheese protest constitutes a useful case with which to examine the outcomes of using Facebook as a major instrument of social change: Facebook allows an aggregation of opinions to be channeled into a social process, initiated by people unconnected with each other or with institutional organizations. The analysis reported above reveals four major insights:

1. A protest may mobilize support via the internet but in order to affect public discourse it still requires legitimization by the traditional news media. In the right social climate, a successful gimmick and a huge number of virtual supporters may attract the attention of the media and also of politicians. The Israeli desire for a protest of their own centered on people unconnected with each other or with the establishment, and a clearly defined target, encouraged extensive media coverage in the early days of the cottage cheese protest. The huge number of people signing the online petition then fuelled continued media coverage.

2. Moving out from the internet, with its 'internet logic', the protesters had to suit themselves to 'media logic' with its news values and patterns of accessibility. This transition resulted in distortions of the original message created on the internet. The pluralist nature of the original group was blurred in light of the timing of the beginning and the end of the protest, the focus on cottage cheese and the persistent image of the protesters as emotional and marginal. For 21st Century protesters as for their pre-digital predecessors, this image excluded them from rational discussion, since they were labeled as disruptive and peculiar. Moreover, they discovered that the internet could not substitute for offline organized protest activities: the aggregation of opinion did not, by itself, lead to change. On the contrary, the internet petition seemed to legitimize actions that essentially opposed the original idea, such as temporary special offers in the supermarkets or opening the dairy market to imported products.

The intrinsic apathy of a public happy to support the protest virtually, but unwilling to do anything more, prevented this virtual vote from becoming a mechanism for social change. There is no hard data about the outcome of the cottage cheese boycott, but it seems clear that cottage and other cheeses continued to be sold and that only a few dozen members of the public joined demonstrations in front of manufacturer's homes.

3. An online protest initiated by people unconnected with each other can provoke public discussion but not control its development or direction. Thus items which became the focus of media coverage such as special offers in the supermarkets, or the government's intention to facilitate imports of dairy products, countered the protestors' original intentions. This last implication may be analyzed from three different theoretical perspectives:

1. The institutional perspective (around which this article centers). The events again exemplify the limited ability of people devoid of influential connections to exploit the traditional print and electronic media effectively in order to reach the public. According to this approach, their difficulty derives from 'media logic' which has not changed even in today's age of exchange of information and social networking via the internet.
2. From a Marxist, determinist point of view (such as that prominent in the Frankfurt School and theories of political economy), the inability to control the direction of the protest

and the involvement of the ruling powers in it, results in domestication of the protest, its incorporation into the existing social order while fostering a false consciousness of 'consumer power'. Indeed, in January 2012, six months after the declaration of the protestors' victory in the media, the supermarket chains announced a 2.7% increase profits for the third quarter of 2011. This happened, among other things, because Israelis did not stop buying all cheeses. The Milk Marketing board reports that sales for July, 2011 fell in comparison with the previous year (7,983,064 kg compared with 8,006,734 kg in July, 2011),⁷ but from August on, sales were up compared with the previous year.

3. By contrast with the above two approaches, neo-Gramscian theorists such as those of the Birmingham School, believe one should view processes in their broader context, resulting in a much more optimistic outlook.

The cottage cheese protest, like the housing protest which followed it, did indeed fail to change the social order in Israel, but the general idea of power to change reality through ritual behavior (Hall and Jefferson 1976) penetrated public awareness, so that during the rest of 2011 and early in 2012, there have been further attempts to change the balance of economic power through protests originating on the internet. According to this third theoretical tradition, even if reality is not changed at

⁷ <http://www.halavi.org.il/info/idb/data/5-milkmarket.xls>

all, such behaviors do result in a broadened range of possibilities.⁸

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