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Making their Mark? How protest sparks, surfs, and sustains media issue attention

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ABSTRACT

Media attention is both an important outcome and a resource for protest groups. This paper examines media-movement dynamics using television news coverage of 1,277 protests in Belgium (2003–2019). We situate protest coverage in media issue attention cycles and scrutinize whether features of protest or rather media issue attention fluctuations are key for protest's agenda-setting effect. Our results show that while most protests fail to alter the attention cycle, a considerable share of protests is followed by a significant increase in media issue attention, especially when surfing issue attention already on the rise. Overall, media issue attention cycles rather than protest features affect protest's agenda-setting effect, suggesting that protest agenda-setting is more a matter of exploiting discursive opportunities than of forcing one's issue on the media agenda by signaling newsworthiness. These findings have serious implications for our understanding of protest group agency in news making and agenda-setting.

Introduction

Media attention is an important outcome as well as a key resource for protest groups (Gamson, 2004). As an *outcome*, media coverage indicates that a group deserves to be on the radar of a wider public (Ferree et al., 2002). Activists therefore consider media coverage as a thumb rule measure of success. Media attention is also an important *resource*, however. By generating media attention, protesters hope to socialize a conflict and spur those in power to act (Lipsky, 1968). As put by Alinsky (1971: xi): "*No politician can sit on a hot issue if you make it hot enough.*" By staging protest and drawing media attention, we argue, protest groups seek "to turn the heat on."

Acknowledging the importance of media for movements, scholars have primarily studied media *selection* and *description* of protest (Earl et al., 2004; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; Wouters, 2013, 2015). We know far less, however, about the effect of protest on the media agenda *beyond* "simple" selection (see Jennings & Sanders, 2019). Can protest, once singled out for coverage, significantly increase media's attention to the issue it cares about in the subsequent days and weeks? And, if so, what factors drive this media agenda-setting effect of protest? Does protest set

the media agenda by its own means (*features of protest*) or is it rather at the mercy of issue attention cycles (*features of media attention*) to make its mark?

These questions speak to the agency and clout of protest, and doing so, go to the heart of the media-movements relationship. If protest would be able to spark media attention by signaling newsworthiness through its features (e.g. turnout), then media would act as a level playing field and one could ascribe agency to protest as an instrument of democratic linkage. If, on the other hand, the impact of protest on subsequent issue coverage is primarily driven by the ebbs and flows of issue attention itself, then the clout of protest is much more indirect, and protesters' agency more a matter of strategic timing and grabbing momentum.

To answer the above research questions, we proceed in two steps. First, and descriptively, we situate coverage of protest events in media issue attention cycles. Doing so provides the necessary context to meaningfully assess temporal variation in media issue attention surrounding protest (Gaby & Caren, 2016; Seguin, 2016). Additionally, it allows us to distinguish different "signatures" of protest in media coverage over time, and to explore the relationship between such signatures and features of protest. Second, and explanatory, we unravel whether features of protest or rather features of previous media attention are most decisive in explaining evolutions of media attention following protest (Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2012; Vliegenthart et al., 2016; Jennings & Sanders, 2019). Both approaches stress temporality and the importance of media issue attention fluctuations in thinking about media and movements.

The contributions of our paper are fourfold. First, we go beyond "simple" news selection. More than securing coverage, we hold, activists want their protest and issue to resonate in the media over time. Second, we combine two distinct approaches dealing with protest coverage and temporality: a descriptive, "signature" approach and an explanatory, "agenda-setting" approach. Rather than chiefly focusing on attention fluctuations *after* protest (like agenda-setting studies do) we take an in-depth interest in attention fluctuations *before* protest as well (like signature studies do). Combining the strengths of both approaches (before-after; descriptive-explanatory) allows for a far better assessment of the complex relationship between media and movements. Third, we improve methodologically. Typically, agenda-setting scholars compare fixed time periods (e.g. calendar weeks or months) in time series models as comparative and longitudinal datasets typically provide measures of media issue attention at the level of calendar weeks or months (Baumgartner et al., 2019). We work with rolling rather than fixed time periods based on the day of the protest, ensuring that post-protest coverage is truly situated in the days following the protest. Moreover, we track media attention using much tighter issue definitions (Guinaudeau & Perisco, 2014). This more stringent issue categorization minimizes the risk of false positives and allows for more confident causal inference drawing.[1] Finally, much of our contributions are a consequence of rich variation in the data we leverage. Our data tracks media attention to *all* protests staged in Brussels and covered by television news in Belgium between 2003 and 2019 ($N = 1{,}277$) and we leverage information on the *full* media agenda ($N = 242{,}871$) to address our questions.

We proceed as follows. First, we sketch the dynamics of media and movements vis-à-vis each other. Next, we place protest in the waxing and waning of media issue attention and forward a typology of protest "signatures." Finally, we theorize about features of protest and features of media attention as components of protests' agenda-setting effect. Our results show that while much protest does flat nothing beyond being covered, a considerable share of covered protests is followed by a significant increase in issue attention, especially when surfing issue attention already on the rise. Overall, previous media attention rather than protest

features affect protest's agenda setting effect, suggesting that protest agenda-setting is more a matter of exploiting discursive opportunities than of single-handedly forcing one's issue on the media agenda. Our findings have implications for our understanding of the political clout and agency of protest, as well as dynamics of media agenda-setting more broadly.

Movements and Media: Interacting Systems

For social movements, media are key for signaling grievances and reaching out to targets and reference publics (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). By staging protest, movements seek to secure media coverage (selection) and hope to shift media's issue focus (agenda-setting). Movements have only modest abilities to do so (McCarthy et al., 1996; Oliver & Maney, 2000) and are in a comparatively weak position compared to journalists (Sobieraj, 2010; Shultziner & Shoshan, 2018) and other news sources such as politicians (e.g. Shehata, 2010). The main reason for social movements' underdog position is that they generally are resource-poor minority actors (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Thrall, 2006). Their uphill struggle, however, is also exacerbated by media dynamics.

Three generic traits of media attention are particularly consequential for weaker players in the attention game. First, media attention is scarce. The carrying capacity of mass media is limited; competition is fierce (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Koopmans, 2004). Second, attention is volatile: media's attention for an issue ebbs and flows (Downs, 1972). Issue attention is irregular, with long periods of stability alternating with brief bursts of attention (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Third, media attention is self-reinforcing. That is, attention effects are partly endogenous (Hellmeier et al, 2018). Driven by positive feedback processes, prior attention commands future attention, in extreme forms leading to media "storms" and "hypes" (Hardy, 2016; Wolfsfeld & Schaefer, 2006).

Together, these features cause the well-known skew in media attention: many issues and actors receive only modest attention (if at all), whereas other issues and actors feature prominently and recurrently in the news (Grömping, 2019). This principle of cumulative inequality is not absolute, however: despite resource obstacles and a tilted media playing field, protest groups do compete for attention (Wolfsfeld, 2003). Their ability to do so depends both on *creating* and *exploiting* "discursive opportunities" (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). That is, it depends on staging newsworthy events that spark (create) attention and on strategically surfing waves of increased attention (exploit). In this paper, we better account for both temporal dynamics. We do so in two steps. First, and descriptively, we situate protest in media attention cycles. Second, and explanatory, we explore to what extent features of protest or rather features of (previous) media attention, contribute to attention fluctuations following protest.

Where is protest situated in media issue-attention cycles?

While theoretically frequently entertained – weak movements need to surf discursive opportunities – few studies have sought to place protest in media attention cycles. McCarthy et al. (1996), in a pioneering selection study, find "*being in the right time at the right place in a media attention cycle*" to be critical for protest to secure coverage (1996, p.494). More recently, Hellmeier et al. (2018) show widely covered protests to temporarily lower the selection threshold for subsequent events. Also the work of Seguin (2016) on the Black Panthers and Gaby and Caren (2016) on Occupy Wall Street shows news coverage of movements to be history-dependent. No research to date, however, has systematically

situated protest coverage within ebbs and flows of issue attention, unpacking the "signature" or "footprint" of protest. We ask:

RQ1a: *where is protest coverage typically situated in media issue-attention cycles?*

Not all protests are alike, however, and it is easy to imagine variation in issue attention "signatures" surrounding protest. Table 1 presents – to the best of our knowledge – the first systematic classification of protest in relation to surrounding issue attention fluctuations. Much like Jennings and Saunders (2019),[2] we conceptualize protest as a potential shock to the media agenda at point t. Significant differences in the rise of average issue-attention at point t-1, t + 1 and t + 2 determine our quintuple "S"-typology.

First, protests can do flat nothing. All protests not managing a significant rise in media issue attention in the week following the protest (t + 1) are *Stagnants*. Apart from making the news themselves, Stagnants fail to move the needle.[3] Second, protest can spark attention. *Sparks* manage to increase media attention, but only in the week after the protest: they can neither sustain the increased media attention in the weeks after, nor do they enjoy a significant ramping up of attention in the week before the protest. Also *Sustainers* do not enjoy a prior ramping up of attention, yet they are able to sustain an increase in media attention for multiple weeks after the protest.[4] *Surfers*, next, see a significant increase in media issue attention in the week before the protest and after the protest, thereby both surfing a pre-protest wave of attention and extending it beyond the protest event itself. *Surfstainers*, finally, manage to both surf a prior wave of media attention and sustain this attention for multiple weeks beyond the protest itself.

Importantly, these five protest signatures can be linked to movement success and agency, connecting the descriptive signature question to the more explanatory agenda-setting question of the subsequent section. Clearly, *Stagnants* are least successful in making their mark, achieving nothing beyond selection. *Sparks* and *Sustainers* testify of movement agency: they can be considered "first movers" as they did not enjoy a rise in attention as a window of opportunity.[5] Protest with a *Surf* element, finally, indicates that the issue already resonated prior to the protest and that protest's achievement might be related to grabbing momentum. To better understand protest group's news making agency, we explore the relative occurrence of each of these "signatures" and the features of protest that tend to characterize each. We ask:

RQ1b: What is the relative frequency of each of the protest signatures?

RQ1c: To what extent do features of protest vary across protest signatures?

Table 1. Signatures of issue attention fluctuations surrounding protest.

		t-1	t + 1	t + 2	Signature
1.	Stagnants	0	0	0	
2.	Sparks	0	1	0	
3.	Sustainers	0	1	1	
4.	Surfers	1	1	0	
5.	Surfstainers	1	1	1	

Protest Shock (t)

What Drives the Media Agenda-Setting Effect of Protest?

Further honing in on protest agency and news making, we now turn to the more explanatory approach of agenda-setting. Whereas the above "signature" approach allows describing the extent to which protests "spark" or "surf" media attention, an agenda-setting approach allows testing the extent to which features of protest or features of media attention "explain" variation in issue attention following protest. Together, both questions address movement agency in news making from a complementary hook.

First, *features of protest* can affect protests' media agenda-setting effect. Many studies have tackled the related question of media selection, so we limit ourself to explaining the underlying mechanisms here (for a review: Earl et al., 2004). In brief, features of protest determine the weight of a protest shock to the media agenda. The size, organizer, or disruptiveness of a protest indicates the importance of the event to observers. *For journalists*, such features correspond to news factors – like negativity, deviance or unexpectedness (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2020). These determine the news value of an event, and, as such, its impact on the news agenda. *For targets and third parties*, features of protest inform them about the threat or opportunity the protest presents (Gillion, 2013; Wouters & Walgrave, 2017). As such, features of protest affect the likelihood of actors to "go public" in response to the protest, which in turn further drives media attention. We leverage eight protest features – from an event's turnout to it being organized on an (inter) national day of action – that all fit these two attention generating mechanisms: they increase an event's news value (*mechanism via journalists*) and the odds of other actors responding (*mechanism via targets and third parties*).

Second, also *media features* can affect protest's agenda-setting effect. We consider both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Quantitatively, positive feedback processes cause larger issue attention increases when issue attention is already ramping up. Again, the behavior of journalists and that of other actors further propels media attention already on the rise. From the media's side, the essence of positive feedback processes lies in the lowering of newsworthiness criteria after an initial attention increase. As media keep a close eye on each other, mimic their competitors and loathe to drop coverage first, a spiral of "the more the merrier" is put in place (Boydstun et al., 2014). From the perspective of political actors, the fact that an issue enjoys momentum and that a contentious protest signal is added to the mix, presents them with both an opportunity and an incentive to take position and jump the bandwagon. Obviously, such positive feedback processes cannot continue indefinitely; they are not an equilibrium (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Biggs, 2003). Eventually, saturation kicks in and new issues arise.

Qualitatively, the origin for rising media issue attention might vary and such variation can matter for protest agenda-setting too. We distinguish three types of attention "triggers" (Molotch & Lester, 1974): focusing events, routine events, and ongoing crises. Birkland (1997) considers focusing events as sudden, uncommon and often harmful events, concentrated on a geographical area or community of interest, that are known to the public and policymakers quasi simultaneously. Focusing events spark intense media and public attention (Birkland, 2007; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). Examples include terrorist attacks (9/11), natural disasters (Hurricane Katrina), or government scandals (Watergate). According to Wolfe et al. (2013) focusing events provide an excellent window of opportunity for issue advocates to strategically use mass media.

Second, in contrast to sudden and unexpected events, attention can also be triggered by the very opposite: routine events. Political summits, visits of foreign leaders, the organization of (foreign) elections or standard political negotiations: these events are routinized, planned, predictable, and most often institutional. Just like focusing events, such events present protesters with a window of opportunity they can grab. Finally, some attention triggers fall in between focusing and routine events. We label these "ongoing crises." They are not sudden or unexpected (like focusing events) but not ordinary politics either (like routine events). Rather, they are particularly salient and noteworthy periods of increased attention to a specific related string of events, and they are recognized as such. The financial and economic crisis and the austerity debates that followed are an example of an ongoing crisis, as is the refugee crisis that hit Europe starting 2015.

Whereas the impact of protest features suggests protest group agency in setting the agenda, the impact of previous media attention and its origins plays up the importance of strategic timing in the media-movements relationship. That is, it suggests that rather than forcing one's issue on the media agenda by signaling newsworthiness from scratch, protest is more at the mercy of media's issue tides. We ask:

RQ2: To what extent are features of protest or features of media attention chief in explaining protest's media agenda-setting effect?

Data & Methods

We leverage two datasets to address the above research questions: a protest event dataset and an issue-attention dataset. The *protest event dataset* contains all protest events in Brussels that aired on the flagship newscasts of the main public (Eén) or commercial (VTM) broadcaster in Belgium (Flanders) between January 2003 and June 2019. Brussels is the political epicenter of Belgium and Europe and is a demonstration hotspot: it hosts many (inter)national institutions which makes it attractive for a wide array of protests. In total, we identified 1,277 news reports dealing with protest in Brussels, corresponding to 931 unique protest events – some demonstrations were covered by both stations. All news reports were subjected to a manual content analysis by five trained student coders and the first author. In addition to traditional information related to the event (organizer, turnout, disruption) also more subtle protest and media features were coded (diversity of the crowd; type of triggering event). Intercoder reliability (Krippendorff's alpha) was calculated on a sample of 50 double coded protest reports, with scores ranging between 0.67 and 0.97, and an average of 0.81. We elaborate on all variables, their operationalization and intercoder reliability in Appendix A. Table D1 in appendix shows descriptive statistics.

The *Issue-attention dataset* contains information on the attention measures. The Electronic News Archive (ENA) is a population dataset that codes all 19 o'clock newscasts of the main public (Eén) and commercial (VTM) television station since January 2003 (N_{items} = 242,871) (De Smedt et al., 2013). We generated rolling issue attention measures for four weeks before and four weeks following each protest, a week being seven consecutive days. In total, we identified 177 unique and specific protest issues for which we track media issue attention.

Our issue attention measures of interest – the ebb and flow of media attention surrounding protest for RQ1 and the main dependent and a key independent variable for RQ2—

contain the mean centered attention to the protest issue in the eight weeks surrounding the protest (4 weeks before, 4 weeks after). For example, if an asylum seeker protest took place on April 15th, 2017, we created weekly attention measures that track the percent of items on the asylum issue in the four weeks before April 15th (t-x) and the four weeks after and including April 15th (t+y). Importantly, as some issues attract systematically more media attention, we mean centered all issue attention measures. We did so by using the mean percent of items covering the issue in the year prior to our 8 week period of interest as a baseline. So, if in the week after the protest 8% of the news items deal with asylum, and the asylum issue received on average 2% attention in the year prior, our measure marks week t + 1 as 6% media attention. To ease interpretation of the regression coefficients, we multiply the values of the dependent variable with a factor of 100, so the percentages range from 0 to 100. Otherwise, the regression coefficients would be quite small, hampering interpretation.Our models control for issues (11 category nominal issue typology), news item duration of the protest report (in seconds) and broadcaster (public broadcaster). We fully detail issue measure construction, show descriptive statistics and share syntax in Appendix B and C.

Results

Where is Protest Typically Situated in Issue Attention Cycles?

Figure 1 shows media attention to a protest's issue in the eight weeks surrounding a protest event. The zero percent line indicates the average weekly attention to the protest issue in the year prior.

Three take-aways follow from Figure 1. First, attention peaks in the week after protest, suggesting that on average, protest succeeds in setting the agenda. Second, the largest week-to-week increase in attention, however, occurs in the week *before* protest. This suggests that protest typically surfs an attention increase as well. Third and finally, the overall signature looks very similar to the "punctuated equilibrium" footprint that agenda scholars are well familiar with. Attention rapidly ramps up and quickly tapers off; the tails of the figure swiftly gravitate to (long term) mean attention. In addition to eyeballing, we tested whether, for each week, issue attention was significantly higher ($p < .05$) than mean protest issue attention in the year prior. Confirming the pattern of a brief window of opportunity, significant attention increases are more frequently situated closely around the protest, with the week before (35%) and after (61%) protest harboring the highest shares of significant attention increases. In sum, the average protest surfs a rise in attention, media issue attention peaks in the week following the protest, and subsequently rapidly tapers off.

We expected substantial variation underneath this general signature (RQ1b). Figure 2 shows the footprints of the five protest signatures we distinguished. Most protest appears to do flat nothing: 39% of all protests falls in the "Stagnants" category. These protests were not followed by a significant rise in attention, and the flat line suggests that these protests made the news detached from issue dynamics.

29% of protests have surf elements: they either only surf (11%) or surf and sustain attention (18%). That covered protest is more likely to surfstain than to surf seems counter-intuitive at first. If protest is more likely to be covered when media gates are wide open and in overdrive, however, surfstaining logically becomes the more frequent signature. The
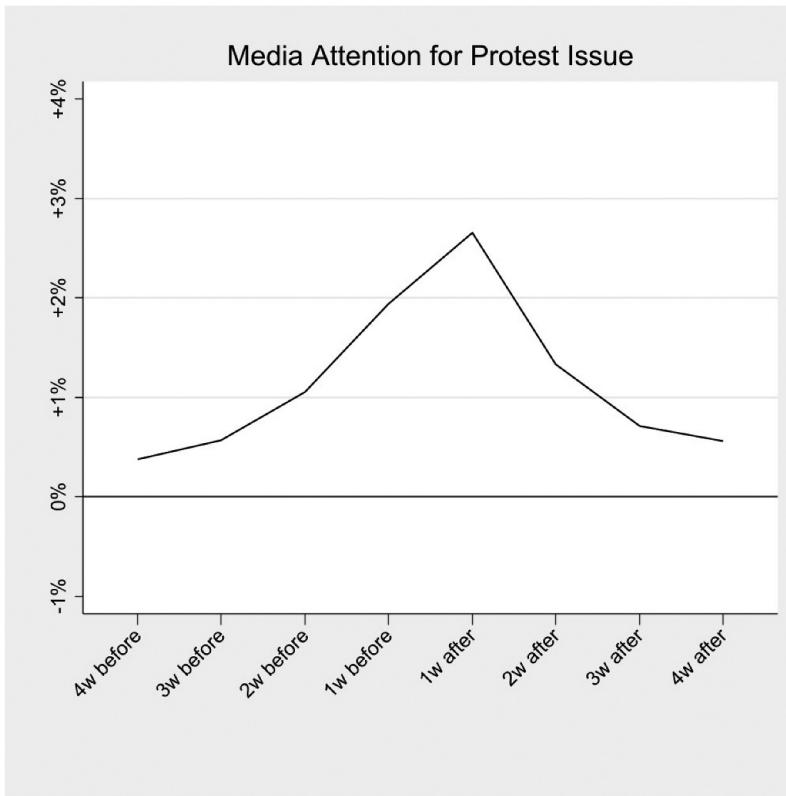
Figure 1. Average mean-adjusted media issue attention.

steep difference in attention altitude between surf (4%) and surfstain (10%) protest provides empirical evidence for such a dynamic.

While the above especially points at a protest's dependence on previous issue attention to make its mark, our data simultaneously show that 25% of the covered protests "can do it on its own" and *Sparks* an attention increase allegedly "out of nowhere." There is agency in protest news making, but the resulting spike is the most modest one (<2%). *Sustainers*, finally, comprise only 7% of all covered protests. They spark and sustain a rise in attention, with attention peaking at about 4% above mean attention.[6] In sum, our signatures show that protest both creates and exploits discursive opportunities.

A closer look at the *features of protest* helps us to better understand to what extent these different signatures also harbor distinctive protests (RQ1c), and allows us to make a further assessment of movement agency in news making. Table 2 shows average protest, media and issue features across the five signatures. Numbers highlighted in bold signal significant differences from the overall mean, shown in the first column (two-sided t-test, $p < .05$).

The overall pattern in Table 2 testifies of both movement agency in the media issue arena and of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between issue attention and protest features. First, the Spark column in Table 2 confirms the position of unions as exceptional power players in neo-corporatist Belgium. Union protests and those on the issue of work are significantly
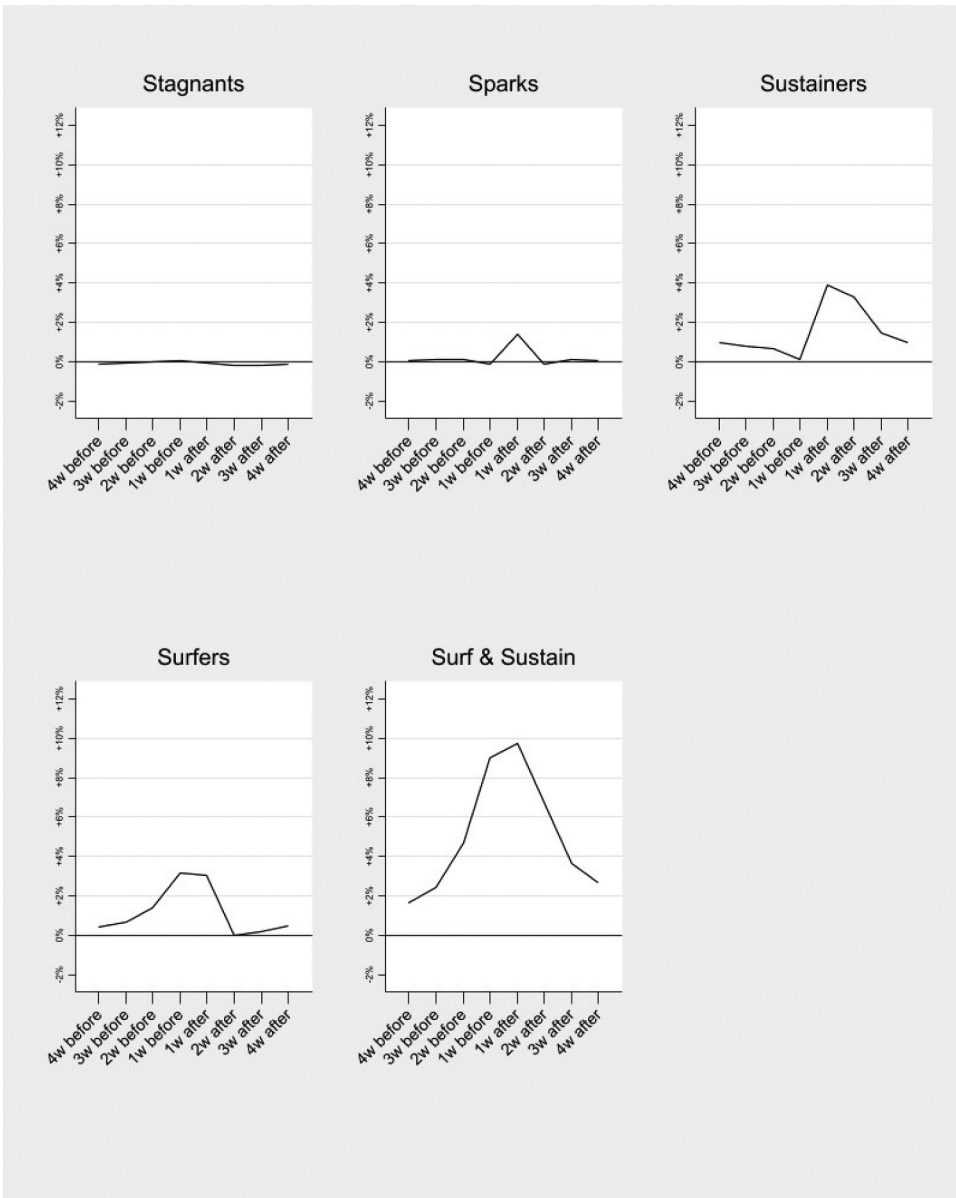
Figure 2. Average media issue attention pattern per protest signature.

more likely to *spark* media issue attention, even when these protest are unrelated to a protest cycle (fewer past or future events planned), focusing events or ongoing crises. *Stagnants*, secondly, testify of little news value: they are smaller, less disruptive, less unified and less coordinated than average protest.

Sustainer and *Surfer* protest, thirdly, are hardly distinguishable in terms of protest features, neither from the average protest nor between each other. Part of the explanation is the lower number of protests in these categories, but more generally their features do not seem very different from the average protest. This is remarkable: it suggests that what it

Table 2. Protest characteristics split by protest category.

Protest features	All	Stagnants	Sparks	Sustainers	Surfers	Surfstainers
Mean protest size in this category	4000	**2246**	4058	3813	3801	**7982**
% of protests in this category . . .						
with attention/debate on turnout	9%	**3%**	10%	9%	8%	**19%**
. . . organized by unions	26%	25%	**31%**	23%	26%	**20%**
. . . that were described as diverse	19%	17%	18%	19%	18%	**25%**
. . . that were depicted as unified	8%	**5%**	6%	11%	8%	**15%**
. . . that are described as disruptive	21%	**15%**	19%	29%	27%	**28%**
. . . mention of other protests on the same issue & day	15%	**11%**	12%	12%	15%	**29%**
. . . with mention of past protests on the same issue	15%	**12%**	**10%**	18%	14%	**28%**
. . . with mention of future protests on the same issue	12%	8%	**9%**	13%	15%	20%
Media features						
% of protests in this category . . .						
. . . that are linked to a focusing event	8%	**4%**	**4%**	10%	**4%**	**26%**
. . . that are linked to a routine event	36%	36%	40%	43%	43%	**23%**
. . . that are linked to an ongoing crisis	15%	13%	**8%**	15%	12%	**29%**
Controls						
Mean length of the protest report (in seconds)	135	**86**	**118**	156	**196**	**221**
% of protests in this category aired on public broadcaster	58%	59%	59%	52%	59%	56%
% of protests in this category on the issue of . . .						
. . . Economic crisis, austerity and taxes	8%	7%	**5%**	12%	6%	12%
. . . Work	30%	29%	**40%**	24%	32%	**17%**
. . . Climate, environment and energy	11%	12%	11%	11%	7%	12%
. . . Civil rights	8%	9%	8%	12%	6%	**3%**
. . . Human rights	9%	8%	8%	9%	12%	12%
. . . Crime and safety	3%	**1%**	4%	3%	3%	4%
. . . Migration, racism and Islam	13%	16%	**7%**	11%	**22%**	10%
. . . Terrorism	3%	**2%**	2%	5%	0%	**9%**
. . . War and peace	7%	6%	**4%**	5%	4%	**17%**
. . . Nationalism & regionalism	3%	5%	**1%**	4%	3%	3%
N	1,277	495	319	93	145	225

Note: bold entries indicate that category mean is significantly different from overall mean ($p < .05$) (two-sided t-test).

takes for issue attention to peak for two consecutive weeks is not out-of-the ordinary, and that the placement of protest coverage in relation to an enduring attention rise does not matter either. Their similarity suggests that the surfer and sustainer "game" appears to be open for all; and that protest features are not central determinants of these signatures. *Surfstain* protests, finally, attest of a reinforcing dynamic between media attention and protest. Demonstrations that surf a rise in media attention and sustain it over time are those that are reported as large, disruptive, diverse, unified and coordinated. A prior increase in media attention appears to feed protests' signaling power, which subsequently attracts further media attention. Evidence in the Surfstain column clearly testifies of a reciprocal relationship between media attention and protest features, and of the importance of prior attention for protest to signal strength and make its mark. Simultaneously, Table 2 suggests that this rather *happens* to protest than that it is truly *enforced* by protester agency. That is, Surfstain protests are more frequently the consequence of focusing events, ongoing crises, acts of war and terror – all circumstances that protest groups might strategically make use of yet are unlikely to generate themselves.

What Drives the Media Agenda-Setting Effect of Protest?

Table 3 answers RQ2 and presents the results of five linear regressions predicting mean centered media issue attention in the week following protest.[7] We present our analysis in

blocks, with Model 1 highlighting protest features, Model 2 media features, Model 3 combining both blocks, Model 4 adding controls and Model 5 including interaction terms.

The results of Model 1 show that protest features matter. Protest characterized by a higher turnout, protest that is disruptive, and protest organized as part of an (inter)national day of action, generates significantly higher media issue attention in the subsequent week. Also protest reports that mention the unity of the crowd or pay specific attention to a demonstration's turnout, present a more potent shock to the media agenda. Protest organized by unions, in contrast, is generally less capable of increasing media issue attention. Somewhat counterintuitively, we believe this result attests of union strength: union protests more easily make it into the news. While most of these (many) union protests fail to further make their mark, some of them do, and these are the protests that dominate the "Spark" signature (see

Table 3. Linear regressions predicting media issue attention the week following the protest.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
Protest features	Coef	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Turnout	0.38*	(0.17)			0.22	(0.15)	0.21	(0.14)	0.21	(0.14)
Attention to turnout	1.71*	(0.75)			0.80	(0.68)	0.64	(0.62)	0.38	(0.61)
Union	−1.59***	(0.44)			−0.74	(0.41)	−0.22	(0.44)	−0.01	(0.43)
Diversity	0.49	(0.50)			0.21	(0.45)	−0.71	(0.41)	−0.66	(0.40)
Unity	1.99**	(0.74)			1.57*	(0.66)	1.52*	(0.59)	1.44*	(0.58)
Disruption	0.95*	(0.47)			0.52	(0.42)	0.42	(0.40)	0.57	(0.39)
(Inter)National day of action	2.94***	(0.53)			2.02***	(0.49)	1.53***	(0.45)	1.31**	(0.44)
Past protest	0.08	(0.56)			−0.34	(0.50)	−0.24	(0.45)	−0.35	(0.45)
Future protest	0.32	(0.62)			−0.38	(0.56)	−0.26	(0.51)	−0.37	(0.50)
Media features										
Surfing attention			3.62***	(0.36)	3.35***	(0.36)	3.08***	(0.34)	1.69**	(0.52)
Focusing event			8.48***	(0.65)	8.23***	(0.65)	3.73***	(0.71)	−0.58	(1.03)
Routine event			0.24	(0.38)	0.45	(0.40)	0.51	(0.39)	0.52	(0.44)
Ongoing crisis			3.29***	(0.52)	2.65***	(0.55)	3.29***	(0.61)	1.32	(0.75)
Surfing attention * Focusing event									7.11***	(1.22)
Surfing attention * Routine event									0.14	(0.74)
Surfing attention * Ongoing crisis									4.69***	(0.94)
Controls										
Duration protest report							0.00***	(0.00)	0.00**	(0.00)
Public broadcaster							0.07	(0.30)	0.06	(0.30)
Issue (reference: Work)										
− Other							0.20	(0.77)	0.14	(0.76)
− Economic crisis, austerity and taxes							−2.16**	(0.77)	−1.84*	(0.76)
− Climate, environment and energy							−0.41	(0.62)	−0.19	(0.61)
− Civil rights							−0.38	(0.68)	−0.27	(0.66)
− Human rights							0.97	(0.65)	1.09+	(0.64)
− Crime and safety							−0.41	(1.04)	0.84	(1.04)
− Migration, racism, islam							−0.20	(0.55)	−0.10	(0.54)
− Terrorism							16.36***	(1.07)	16.73***	(1.05)
− War and peace							2.44***	(0.74)	2.03**	(0.73)
− Nationalism & regionalism							−1.50	(0.96)	−1.21	(0.95)
Intercept	1.84***	(0.27)	0.09	(0.28)	−0.22	(0.30)	−0.77	(0.50)	−0.43	(0.50)
Adj R^2	0.07		0.24		0.26		0.41		0.43	
N	1,277		1,277		1,277		1,277		1,277	

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 2). Together, however, this wealth of protest feature information explains only 7% of all variance.

Model 2 zooms in on media features. It shows that protest surfing an increase in prior media issue attention – a dichotomous variable capturing attention increase at t-1—has a larger agenda-setting effect compared to protest that does not, on average carving out 4% more media attention in the subsequent week. The same holds for protest that is linked to focusing events (an eight percent increase) and ongoing crises (a three percent increase). Model 2 accounts for 24% of explained variance, much more than Model 1.

Model 3, next, integrates protest and media measures and further crystallizes the findings reported above. Compared to Model 2, explained variance only modestly rises to 26%. Whereas all media features remain significant, most protest features lose significance. Only protest that is part of an (inter)national day of action and protest that is described as unified continues to set the agenda on top of media features. In sum, ongoing media dynamics and focusing events decisively "rule the waves." It is chiefly in response to other events and increases in issue-attention, that protest is followed by significant increases in attention.

Models 4 and 5 finetune the results. Model 4 adds controls, strongly improving explained variance to 40% without affecting Model 3 results. The duration variable shows that protest that succeeds in carving out more attention on the day of action is a more potent agenda-setter.[8] Of far more explanatory power, however, are issue controls. It seems that issues that can easily be tied to focusing events and ongoing crises – terrorism, war and peace, economic crises – strongly shape protest's agenda-setting capacity, adding additional evidence to the importance of grabbing momentum. The large differences we find across issue domains indicate the importance of incorporating a wide variety of issues in the analysis: different issues clearly are subject to different dynamics and confront movements active on different domains with different challenges.

Model 5, finally, adds interaction terms between the triggers – focusing events, routine events, ongoing crisis – and surfing attention. We find significant interaction terms for both focusing events and ongoing crises. Figure 3 shows the marginal effects. Only when protest linked to a focusing event or an ongoing crisis also surfs a rise in issue attention, does it lead
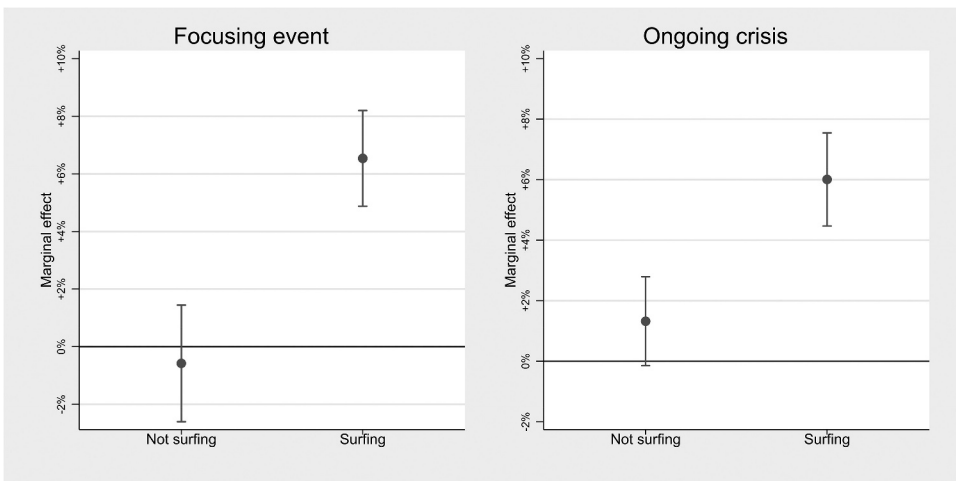

Figure 3. Marginal effect of focusing event / ongoing crisis on media issue attention, for protests surfing prior media attention or not.

to significant increases in issue attention in the week after the protest. Triggering events help protest if – and only if – they open up a window of opportunity in the media agenda prior to the protest itself. In sum, Model 5 adds further weight to the importance of issue-attention fluctuations *prior* to a protest for attention increases *after* protest, and more firmly establishes that what matters most for protest to make "its" mark is what happens in mass media rather than what protest performs itself. These results are robust: in Appendix E, we report regression results using different attention measures and perform analyses for both broadcasters separately.

Conclusion and Discussion

Can protest function as a potent shock to the media agenda and shift attention toward the issue it cares about? And, if so, are it especially features of protest – that signal news-worthiness – that do the trick, or is protest primarily at the mercy of media issue attention fluctuations to make its mark? To answer these questions on the agency of protest news making, we proceeded in two steps. First, we situated protest coverage in media issue attention cycles. Subsequently, we scrutinized the factors that shape the agenda-setting effect of protest coverage.

Descriptively, our results show that of those protests that get covered by mass media, many fail to make their mark on the media agenda (*Stagnants*, 39%). One protest in four (*Sparks*, 25%), however, sparks attention seemingly out of nowhere – that is, in a context where media attention for the issue was not on the rise in the previous week. Seven percent sustains an attention spark in the subsequent week (*Sustainers*, 7%). Protest also frequently surfs (*Surfers*, 11%) or surfs and sustains (*Surfstainers*, 18%) a previous rise in media issue attention. Importantly, these different signatures strongly vary in the *size* of their impact: the rise in media issue attention caused by *Surfstainers* is much higher compared to the more modest attention increases of other signatures. Additionally, different signatures harbor different protests. *Sparks* are more likely organized by unions, the civil society power houses in Belgium. Conversely, we find that *Surfstain* protests – those who surf a prior attention increase and are able to sustain it over multiple weeks – are characterized by extraordinary signaling power: they are large, disruptive, coordinated and united. Previous media attention clearly feeds protest signaling power. Simultaneously, protests that sustain attention after a spark, or that simply surf attention, are indistinguishable from average protest. The weak connection between protest features and these signatures high-lights the limited leverage of protest over issue-attention fluctuations, and the unpredict-ability protest faces in the media arena.

Explanatory, multivariate analyses further add to this picture of relative impotent protest, showing that protest features have only a modest effect on issue attention in the week following protest. Rather, it are features of media attention itself – whether attention is on the rise or not and the origins of this increase – that decisively shape the agenda-setting effect of protest. Media coverage of protest staged when media attention is already on the rise, especially when on topic of a focusing event or an ongoing crisis, is followed by particularly potent attention increases.

Together, the two complementary approaches we leveraged show the shock of protest coverage to the media agenda to be multifaceted and complex. Protest frequently fails to make its mark yet is also regularly followed by attention increases; protest is sometimes central and

sometimes at the mercy of issue attention fluctuations; media attention both feeds and is affected by protest features. Amidst this multi-faceted take on protest and issue attention fluctuations, our evidence nevertheless overwhelmingly points out that protest making its mark is chiefly a matter of strategically surfing the currents of attention and of exploiting discursive opportunities. The agency and clout of protest in setting the media agenda clearly lies less in forcing one's issue on the agenda by signaling newsworthiness. Rather, the agenda-setting capacity of protest is a matter of strategic timing and capitalizing on opportunities in ongoing media issue attention cycles. This is not to say that the features of a protest do not matter: they do affect the calculations of journalists, targets and third parties (see for instance Wouters & Walgrave, 2017; Cristancho & Wouters, 2022). Yet, our results overwhelmingly show that potent protest signaling is followed by wide variations in media issue attention, and that being in tune with the media agenda is what matters most for protest to make its mark.

A key disclaimer to our results is that our study scrutinized the agenda-setting effect of protests that *made it into the new*s. Like most protest event analyses, we only took covered protests into account, not all protests that were staged (see Earl et al., 2004 for a review on the (dis)advantages of such an approach). If we would include all protests, our descriptive results would without doubt be bleaker: most protests do not even make it into the news, let alone succeed in making their mark on the media agenda. We doubt whether including non-covered protests would alter our conclusion. In contrast, we believe that such an inclusion would add additional weight to our conclusion that media dynamics (for that matter, media selection or not) are key for the agenda-setting effect of protest.

Our study has several limitations that future research might address. First, we focused on television news and one should be careful in generalizing results to other media types, especially given the fact that the current media environment is much more hybrid. Future research should investigate how social media activity of journalists, politicians, and third parties affect protests' media agenda-setting capacity (Bailo & Vromen, 2017). Second, we studied protest in Belgium, a true "demonstration democracy" characterized by routinized protest, a free press, and low levels of polarization and media-political parallelism. These systemic features likely condition the findings reported here. In systems where mass media are a mouthpiece of those who rule authoritatively, media most likely act as a muffler of resistance, and protest has only a faint chance of "making its mark." Also in more polarized democratic contexts with partisan media outlets, the agenda-setting effect of protest might play out differently: whether or not the claim of protest is in line with the ideology of the partisan outlet likely conditions protest's agenda-setting effect. Finally, future research would do good at teasing out the *mechanisms* that drive issue attention fluctuations. Other research designs, that place the news producing actors and not so much the news content itself center stage, are definitely better suited for that matter. Experiments exposing, or case studies interrogating, protest group leaders, journalists, political targets and interested third parties might unbox the mechanisms we forwarded, and, as such, might lay bare the actions, agency and powerplay underlying the signatures of protest we observed here. Such work would greatly contribute to our understanding of media and movements as interacting systems.

Notes

1. Specific issue operationalization strongly lowers the odds of "false positives" generated by other policy issues within the same issue domain. For example, protest by European fishermen

followed by attention to European milk farmer subsidies, while both related to European agricultural policy, is not the kind of agenda effect we are after. Fishermen protest leading to fish quota attention is the link we seek to investigate. Similarly, by working with 52 "fixed" weeks a year, one ignores the placement of protest within such a fixed week and the impact it can have. Our data is much more noise-free compared to standard agenda work.

2. Contrary to the highly inspirational study of Jennings and Saunders, who also forward an issue attention typology, we take issue fluctuations before as well as after protest into account (not only after).

3. Note that for stagnants only point t + 1 matters and must be 0; *t*-1 and/or t + 2 might have a value of 1.

4. Defined as having at least two subsequent weeks of significantly higher media issue attention after the protest.

5. Some critical reflection is warranted: Note that a rise in attention before the protest can – somewhat paradoxically – also be a consequence of the protest. The announcement of a protest might already create buzz. As such, also surfing attention might be a movement consequence and thus testify of agency. Similarly, it might seem as if protest sparks attention, when it for instance is staged *before* a meeting of an international political body. Essentially, it is the meeting then that determines the staging of the protest and that likely generates at least part of the attention surrounding the protest. The only way to unpack such dynamics is by a news production process analysis (of a limited set of protests), not by means of a content analysis on a large set of protests, the approach we leverage here. However, in the Supplemental Material, Figure and Table E1 show that when we exclude news items explicitly referring to protest from the issue attention measures, results are unaffected. This adds additional evidence that our linking of movement agency and success to attention-fluctuations surrounding protest not only makes theoretical sense, but is also robust.

6. The relative occurrence of protest signatures is strongly influenced by two operational decisions – although the overall conclusion remains. First, when we single out the distribution of signatures per station, the share of "stagnant" protests increases (48% on the Public broadcaster; 53% on the commercial) and the share of surfers and surfstainers decreases. This makes sense: protests that surf or surfstain are more likely to be covered by both stations as they tie in to broader issue dynamics. Second, the share of stagnant protests further increases (69%) when we filter all protest related coverage from the surrounding weeks. This makes sense too – and shows why working with such a measure is suboptimal: if one filters out all coverage that refers to protest in the surrounding weeks, there is not much of a protest shock occurring, rather, in many more instances (30%) media attention remains flat. As research shows that Belgian television news coverage of protest is highly issue focused (Wouters, 2015) ignoring all news items mentioning protest, especially when studying the agenda-setting function of protest, would reduce the validity of the issue attention measure.

7. Looking at a one-week window logically follows from the empirical punctuated equilibrium signature above. Moreover, affecting issue attention in the week immediately following the protest makes sense theoretically as well: the brief time interval is a clearer indication of protest's own ability to steer the agenda.

8. The duration of the protest report is a particularly sharp control, as the news items that constitute the protest report are part of the dependent variable as well. By controlling for protest report duration, we thus basically achieve the net effect of protest features and media dynamics on the media agenda, accounting for the media airplay of the protest shock itself. Interestingly, additional analyses show that protest features are important in explaining protest report duration. If we add only protest report duration to Model 1; all protest features except for union, unity and (inter)national day of action lose significance, suggesting that turnout and disruption influence protest report duration, and via protest report duration, affect attention in the week following protest. They do not affect the media agenda beyond protest report duration, however. Again, this points to media dynamics (the length of a protest report) as key in protest's capacity to set the agenda.

Disclosure statement

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