

"Footfall" -- Are we all manipulated when we engage in politics?

By Sarah Spiekermann, Ph.D., Vienna, July 2020

I am very concerned about what is happening on the streets of our cities. Flashmobs every day. As if out of nowhere suddenly 500 people in an otherwise peaceful mid-size city, or 20,000 people at a protest where "normally" only 200 people show up. Yellow vests, anti-refugee protests, Extinction Rebellion protests, Black-Lives-Matter protests. And now also anti-corona measure protests?

Some protests I sympathize with more than others. But one thing is for sure: never before have such gigantic, well organized groups been able to mobilize so rapidly on our streets.

Are we more political than ever or are we just organized "footfall"?

I first noticed the term "footfall" this spring in a very good documentary on surveillance capitalism, where Shoshana Zuboff used it. You could define "footfall" as follows: Did a person X show the behavior into which he or she was psychologically manipulated?

In its original context of the advertising world footfall looks something like this: Did Mr. X buy the shampoo that he was being told to buy? He would be shown an emotive video, an advertisement or an influencer message, to which he was predicted to respond positively given his detailed psychological profile. And if Mr. X then goes to the store to buy the shampoo, he generates "footfall". Footfall is an advanced form of "conversion" (as marketing experts call it) that measures whether the customer behaves in the real world as the advertising message wants him or her to.

Now take a world where political forces want something from Mr. or Mrs. X; not that s(he) should buy a shampoo. No, s(he) should go to a protest. Therefore, s(he) would be shown an emotive video, an advertisement or an influencer message, to which (s)he is predicted to respond positively given their detailed psychological profile. So when Mr. X then goes to the protest to protest for the respective issue, he generates "footfall".

The information to incite and manipulate people is available in digital form

The digitalization of the advertising industry has created huge pools of personal data over the last 20 years (keyword "data management platforms"), which allow us to analyze everyone online in a truly "depth psychological" way. The Viennese activist Wolfie Christl found out that Data Management Platforms can easily possess upwards of 30,000 data points about each of us. Just last week, such a data pool from the Oracle company BlueKai was hacked, and there was talk of "billions of data" which were leaked about all of us. Such a slew of data provides a veritable playground for forces that want to

manipulate us, because each of us has passions for one thing or another, be it our leanings toward particular political messages, our sexual preferences etc.

What happens exactly?

Without knowing the business secrets of the "shadow economy" at work here, I suspect that there is currently an interplay of these digitally available psychosocial profiles (e.g. "Who is an anti-state type?" "Who is an Extinction Rebellion type?" Who is a 'Black Lives Matter type? Who is an anti-refugee type, etc.). And with the help of purposefully created material (partly fake news), carefully crafted messages reach these "interest types" at the respective location where the protest is to be organized. The honest organizers of the protests are always surprised that so many folks show up at the last minute. But do they know that their event might be abused in the background in reality? In the background, because it is not about an honest shared concern, but because there are forces that only want one thing: to get us all out on the street, no matter what for.

Who can wish for protests without having a real political concern?

In the context of the Brexit vote and Trump's election it has often been discussed that there are a number of massively disintegrating political forces that participate in the shadows in the mobilization of the streets. The Cambridge Analytica case has shown how personal data markets and social media can be abused for manipulative purposes. If you look at the "players behind the scenes," you will encounter figures such as Steve Bannon, traditionalists or political forces who want an end to democracy. Documentaries such as "The Great Hack", the book "The Invisible War" by Yvonne Hofstetter or the new book by Benjamin Teitelbaum on "War for Eternity" (featuring the views of Steve Bannon) grant impressive insights into this matter.

What would be one of the most effective ways to shake our democracies and bring our world economy to a final collapse? Sending as many "footfalls" to as many demonstrations as possible and letting them get infected with corona, precipitating a second wave that can finally wreck the economy? Or letting them turn on each other or on the state and security forces?

Shouldn't you be going to protests now?

One thing is for sure: we live in a highly political time and many people want change. Demonstrations are an important part of democratic discourse. But anyone who uses social media should, in my opinion, ask themselves two questions before attending a protest:

1. Do I personally know the person who has informed me about the demonstration? (don't go for influencers whom you have never met in person and who are sometimes paid for messages)

2. Does the message (video message, etc.) that motivates me to go along seem serious to me? Or does it seem to contain subtle manipulation? (such as giving you a bad feeling if you do not participate...)

Also, before engagement one should have a good night's sleep!

If you want to know more about the sober, academic details behind footfall, you might want to watch my tutorial video with background:

<https://www.wu.ac.at/ec/projects/surveillance-capitalism>