

# Chapter 59

## The Wisconsin Spring

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### ABSTRACT

*As a relatively new form of communication and information dissemination, the effect of social media on public awareness and public participation in political events is relatively unknown. Using the events that unfolded surrounding the election of Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin and the removal of collective bargaining rights of public employees as its main example, this chapter explores the relationship between social media, information dissemination, and collective action.*

### THE WISCONSIN SPRING

In the spring of 2011 Wisconsin entered into uncharted political waters, involving political action that had not occurred since the state earned its statehood in 1848, over 163 years earlier. Hundreds of thousands of protesters gathered at the state capitol, and at many other venues in Wisconsin, to protest the governmental action of removing most of the collective bargaining rights of public workers and the lack of transparency in the state government.

While the world was captivated by the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, newly-elected Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker quietly began his initial steps in eliminating the rights of public sector unions in the state. Under

the pretense of a “Budget Repair Bill,” forces were unleashed that dramatically polarized the state. Soon, the news spotlight was directly focused on Wisconsin, and more precisely on Madison. The clash of big business and organized labor appeared on the front pages of newspapers, blogs, and websites throughout the country and the world.

Protests, like the ones in Wisconsin and Egypt, are now recognized as collective action examples. In these cases, collective action among dissatisfied constituents is enlarged because individuals are able to benefit from the protesting of others without having to protest themselves. Further complicating the matter, electronic media creates new forums for individuals to air the grievances and debate preferred outcomes. Just as the case of Egypt began with the action of an individual,

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Wael Ghomin, who created a Facebook (FB) page dedicated to the Egyptian businessman Khaled Saeed beaten to death by police so did this create an online space for protestors and those discontented with the Egyptian government to “gather,” vent their frustrations and organize the protest which led to the downfall of the government. As shown by this case, social media became a major player in disseminating information. In Wisconsin specifically, the highly-charged political environment provided an opportunity for the media to explain the issues, but more dramatically, provided a platform to potentially polarize, misinform, or reinforce people’s perceptions and opinions. While the media continued to shape and reinforce opinions, people turned to social media to express their support or opposition of the measures taken by Governor Walker, further shaping the state’s political climate.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In the fall of 2011, the Associated Press reported that eight of every 10 members of Congress are on Facebook and Twitter. In fact, the story noted that Republicans, by a slight majority, tweeted contentious times and how did it affect the political environment?

A variety of social media tools including Twitter, blogs, YouTube, and Facebook were used to disseminate information and political opinion surrounding these events. In addition, one of the writers of this chapter authored a series of CNN iReports focusing on Wisconsin politics. After the iReports were written they were vetted, posted, and tracked to analyze how people would react in Wisconsin, the U.S. and the world. Over 300,000 people viewed these reports with over 1,000 readers placing comments on-line. Once the stories were uploaded, CNN iReport producers in Atlanta would contact the writer to “vet” the story to ensure its accuracy. After a few months, rather than an iReport producer intern calling to

vet the story, the CNN news desk followed up to “check in with Wisconsin,” and to ensure the accuracy of the report. Once the story was vetted, it was not unusual to see the iReport placed on-line within hours in Forbes, NPR, and other news outlets worldwide.

During this time it became increasingly clear that not only was Wisconsin becoming polarized, but so was the entire nation. When posting stories about worker’s rights or the removal of collective bargaining for public employees, comments quickly appeared saying:

*Unions are a pox on the land.*

*Public unions are blood suckers.*

*Wisconsin unionists are just like the Democratic party. They believe in tax and spend as long as it’s spent on them.*

On the other end of the spectrum, people commented:

*The working class needs to stand up all over this country to show these Elitists who does the work and who makes the money for these corporations.*

*I hope the people of Wisconsin are successful in taking their state back from the pirates who are now controlling the government.*

*(I) am in awe of these people; this is what the American People should be doing right now, after the devastation they have just been handed by the Republicans in Congress.*

Comments from political groups could be found from the conservative far right, independents, and left wing progressives. The environment in the state became supercharged. On March 12, 2011 an historic protest was held at the Madison state capitol with crowds swelling to nearly 200,000 protesters. Even the Vietnam War protests

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