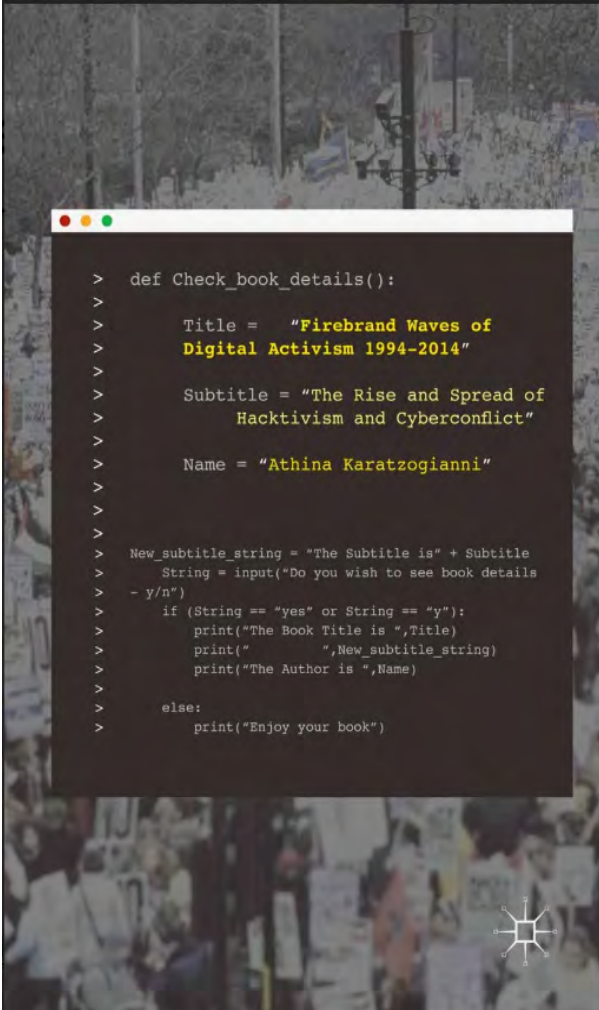


# Firebrand Waves and Fractal Leadership in Digital Activism: A Review of Karatzogianni's Monographs

## Dijital Aktivismde Ateşli Dalgalar ve Fraktal Liderlik: Karatzogianni'nin Monografileri Üzerine Bir İnceleme

Ömer Faruk Zararsız 

Kitap İncelemesi | Research Book Review



Athina Karatzogianni's *Firebrand Waves of Digital Activism 1994–2014* is a comprehensive study that analyses the rise and dynamics of political participation, digital activism, cyberconflict and hacktivism in the digital age through four distinct waves over a twenty-year historical period. Karatzogianni (2015) proposes a theoretical framework to examine digital activism, categorising it into four distinct “waves” or “phases”. The author's primary argument is that digital activism has entered a phase of “mainstreaming,” which signifies a shift from its symbolic and mobilising origins, becoming instead “a part of routine politics.” As Karatzogianni (2015) contends, this mainstreaming process carries the risk of rendering activism ineffective and insignificant in the long term. Concurrently, the author anticipates that cyberconflict will evolve into a manifestation of high-level information warfare targeting critical infrastructures. In other words, the digital actions that began as radical, spark-producing phenomena have, by the 2010s, taken on an institutional and system-conforming form. Within this framework, the libertarian network ideals rooted in hacker ethics have been repositioned within the information wars conducted by states and corporations. This transformation can be regarded as an original contribution by Karatzogianni to both media studies and political communication literature.

### Part I: The Historical Waves of Digital Activism and the Thesis of Mainstreaming

**Title of the Book:** *Firebrand Waves of Digital Activism 1994–2014: The Rise and Spread of Hacktivism and Cyberconflict*

**Author:** Athina Karatzogianni

**Publisher:** Palgrave Macmillan

In Karatzogianni's analysis, three main theoretical strands are identified as being of particular significance: network society and communication theory, complexity and systems theory, and poststructuralist theories of resistance. In this context, the author reworks the intellectual lineage extending from Castells's concept of the network society to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory in order to explain the dynamics of hacktivism.

Consequently, the author conceptualises digital activism not solely as a technological innovation but as a distinct organisational form. These movements, occurring at the interface between hierarchies and networks, are described as complex systems that “self-organise at the edge of chaos,” much like open-source software communities. Karatzogianni positions the FLOSS (Free/Libre Open Source Software) movement as the first instance of digital activism, relating the horizontal governance structures within these communities to the democratic knowledge-sharing practices of Ancient Athens and, strikingly, juxtaposing ancient democracy with contemporary cyber-publicness. This historical parallel is thus one of the book's original features. The author discusses the ethical, organisational and political boundaries of “network governance” through concepts such as “cryptohierarchies,” “group polarization,” and “self-organisation through conflict.” In doing so, the study reveals the otherwise obscured power dynamics embedded within digital communities. Moreover, the rhetoric of “horizontality” in open-source projects is shown to conceal a profoundly asymmetric distribution of power.

The book is structured across four main chapters, which collectively encompass a twenty-year history. Karatzogianni's conceptualisation of digital activism encompasses the realm of political participation, encompassing activities and protests that are organised within digital networks and extend beyond the scope of representative politics. In contrast, the concept of cyberconflict is understood as encompassing any form of conflict taking place within computer-mediated environments. This encompasses the struggles of non-state actors, as well as the confrontations among governments and corporations.

**First Phase (1994–2001):** The author employs a methodological approach that is worthy of note, situating the genesis of digital activism not within the context of political protest but rather within the milieu of free/libre/open-source software (FLOSS) and knowledge communities. Furthermore, the author traces the logic of peer production back to the innovative knowledge networks of

Ancient Athens. This phase is characterised by a series of symbolic events, including the invention of the World Wide Web (www), the Zapatista movement's shift from guerrilla warfare to digital engagement, and the emergence of IndyMedia during the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle. Consequently, during this period, the internet is representative of an escape from hierarchies and the rise of participatory citizenship. Karatzogianni provides a critical evaluation of the “global village” optimism that characterised the 1990s. It is contended that, despite the democratic principles espoused by the FLOSS movement, the dissemination of information is in reality governed by select groups, thereby establishing covert hierarchies characterised by mechanisms of “soft control”.

**Second Phase (2001–2007):** The author posits that this phase was initiated by the events of September 11, 2001. The present moment is characterised by the War on Terror, restrictions on civil liberties, and the mass protests against the 2003 Iraq War. Karatzogianni characterises the Iraq War as the first “internet war”, on the grounds that independent voices and new media actors were able to challenge the official narrative. During this period, a distinct cyberconflict theory was developed by the author, aiming to differentiate between ethno-religious (hierarchical, reactive) and socio-political (network-based, active) forms of cyberconflict. Consequently, the subsequent phase signifies a period in which the internet was redefined within the context of war and terrorism following the events of 9/11.

**Third Phase (2007–2010):** This phase encompasses the period in which cyberconflict became more organised and increasingly state-related. Examples of this phenomenon include the South Ossetia conflict, Obama's 2008 social media campaign, and the Green Movement in Iran. The author focuses on two major case studies: The first strand of research focuses on Russian-related ethno-national digital activism, with specific case studies including the events in Estonia and Georgia, and the Climategate incident. The second strand examines Chinese cyberconflicts involving

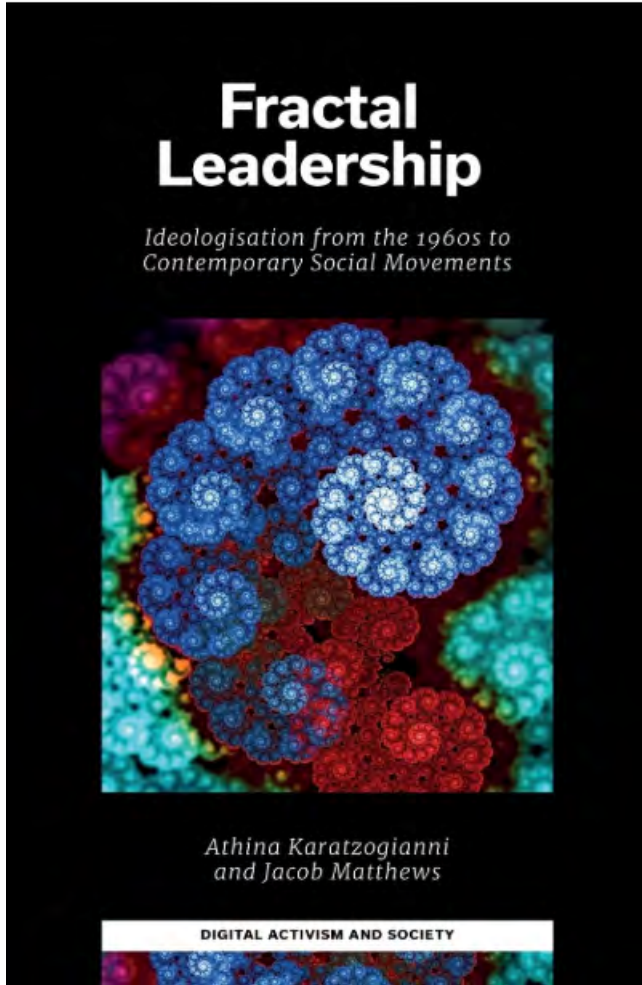
dissidents, civil society, and nationalist hackers. Karatzogianni observes that the digital sphere has evolved into a stage not only for social movements but also a geopolitical arena in which nation-states compete. Within this framework, the signs of digital activism's "institutionalisation" become increasingly evident.

Fourth Phase (2010–2014): According to Karatzogianni, this phase commences with the disclosures made by WikiLeaks in 2010 and culminates with the Arab Spring, the Occupy movements, and Edward Snowden's revelations. This is the period in which digital activism directly "invades" mainstream politics. Karatzogianni posits that states and technology companies have engaged in the reconfiguration of digital activism through the utilisation of surveillance, data mining, and the dissemination of disinformation. Consequently, the networks of the control society have superseded radical digital publicness.

The fourth and final chapter of the study synthesises the theoretical implications of the preceding historical analyses and presents a comprehensive discussion concerning the future of digital activism. In this study, Karatzogianni explores the intricacies of agency, structure, and affect, examining their interplay and the resulting implications. The author posits that, in the digital age, the capacity for action (agency) of the subject has become technologically integrated and affectively driven. However, the author argues that the structural conditions within which this new subject operates are preconfigured by the capitalist code. In this context, the author updates Baudrillard's model of "orders of dissent" to explain why digital protests and cyberactivism so often prove ineffective. In accordance with this model, such movements characteristically manifest at a tier beneath that of the system's operational level, signifying an order that is logically lower. Consequently, these movements are assimilated by the system itself. Consequently, Karatzogianni proposes a poststructuralist evaluation of digital activism, contending that resistance ought to be re-evaluated not solely on a political level, but also on affective, technological, and ontological planes.

The methodology employed by Karatzogianni deviates from the conventional empirical data analysis rather, it is a case-based, historical-sociological form of analysis. Consequently, each wave is characterised by events and movements that are highly representational. In this sense, the study provides the reader with a comprehensive overview of the past twenty years, examining the social movement history of the digital age through the lens of political communication. Moreover, Karatzogianni proposes an original approach termed cyberconflict theory. This theory integrates social movement theories, digital media network effects approaches, and international conflict analysis in order to analyse digital activism as both an organisational form (network logic) and a communicative practice (framing, resource mobilisation). In this respect, the study establishes an interdisciplinary bridge among media studies, international relations, and political science.

Karatzogianni's work is a critical historiography that deconstructs the romantic "myth of freedom" surrounding digital activism. The author reveals the contradictions of the digital age by addressing both the idealism of hacker culture and the surveillance practices of states within the same analytical framework. Digital networks have evolved from mere instruments of resistance to mechanisms of control. In this respect, *Firebrand Waves of Digital Activism 1994–2014* is an essential reference for researchers seeking to understand both the potential and the limits of digital publicness. As demonstrated in Karatzogianni's historical analysis, digitalisation does not necessarily guarantee democratisation. Indeed, it has the potential to engender novel forms of inequality. Consequently, the author's thesis of mainstreaming and its subsequent ineffectiveness serves as a compelling cautionary argument against cyber-optimistic narratives, thereby establishing a critical framework for future research. This work is widely regarded as a seminal text in its field, and is considered an essential resource in the libraries of communication studies, sociology and political science.



## Part II: Fractal Leadership and the Crisis of Horizontality

**Title of the Book:** *Fractal Leadership: Ideologisation from 1960s to Contemporary Social Movements*

**Author:** Athina Karatzogianni and Jacob Matthews

**Publisher:** Emerald Publishing

*Fractal Leadership* by Athina Karatzogianni and Jacob Matthews is one of the most comprehensive and uncompromising critiques of the myths of 'horizontalism' and 'leaderlessness' in the literature on digital activism to date. Expanding upon the concept of 'ineffectiveness' introduced in Karatzogianni's previous work, the book redefines this issue within a more intricate theoretical framework that highlights digital infrastructures, processes of ideologisation, algorithmic temporality, and the fractalisation of leadership.

Rather than merely describing contemporary movements, the authors provide a critical analysis of the historical transformation, refunctioning and domestication of radical politics within the logics of platform capitalism.

One of the book's central ambitions is to situate contemporary movements such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Black Lives Matter (BLM) within a broader historical context stretching back to the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. The authors contend that these movements are not a rupture, but rather a continuation of a trajectory initiated by organisations such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Weather Underground Organization (WUO). Through a critical reading of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, the book demonstrates how these earlier movements gradually severed their ties with the organised working class, drifting into forms of marginality characterised by "false praxis" expressed through violence, sexual politics, and countercultural experimentation rather than class struggle grounded in structure.

This genealogy forms the basis of what the authors describe as the contemporary 'retreat from politics'. The idea of escaping antagonistic political struggle by retreating into communes, experimenting with lifestyles and achieving personal liberation during the 1970s is shown to align with the libertarian-utopian ideology of Silicon Valley. In this interpretation, activism does not emerge as a disruption of neoliberalism but rather as one of its recycled and modernised cultural products. Rather than being defeated radical politics is shown to have been absorbed by neoliberalism and re-emerged in the form of the 'consumer-user-activist' subject.

The book's most significant theoretical contribution is to rework the concept of ideologisation. Ideology is not regarded as a static belief system or a straightforward instrument of domination rather, it is conceptualised as a dynamic process of inhabiting the world through which political consciousness is actualised and

embodied. The authors argue that this process has been structurally transformed by digital platforms and algorithmic environments.

Digital capitalism is analysed through the concept of biolabour, in which the classical distinctions between labour and life, production and reproduction, body and mind become increasingly blurred. The act of political engagement itself can be considered a form of labour. The act of posting, sharing, reacting, organising and mobilising on digital platforms is not interpreted as an external political act but rather as the expenditure of life energies that are captured, quantified and valorised by platform capitalism. In this sense, activism ceases to be external to the system and becomes one of its primary fuels.

The temporal dimension of this transformation is pivotal to the book's argument. The authors introduce a critique of algorithmic time, in which the acceleration and fragmentation of temporality through platform infrastructures inhibit the dialectical development of political consciousness. Individuals are subjected to a rapid succession of micro-temporal events which renders reflection, negation and synthesis structurally unfeasible. This engenders the conditions for a renewed form of false consciousness, which is not imposed from above, but rather generated through infrastructural design. The temporal limitations imposed on political subjects preclude the development of a coherent critique.

The title concept of fractal leadership encapsulates the book's most original organisational insight. The authors posit that leadership, far from being extinguished in the context of digital horizontality, has undergone a process of evolution. The organisation's operations are now characterised by the utilisation of algorithmic flows, viral affect, and media amplification, eschewing the conventional practice of stable organisational hierarchies.

The concept of fractal leadership is distinguished by its volatility, sudden acceleration, and capacity to transition from local, intimate settings to global

mass visibility. The phenomenon under scrutiny in this study is characterised by the swift transition of figures from the domain of interpersonal activism to that of global celebrity. However, this transition is devoid of the strategic coherence that is typically associated with conventional political leadership. In contrast to the generation of long-term political direction, fractal leadership produces a dynamic interplay of attention, mobilisation, and dissipation as articulated by the authors.

Internally, the book provides a thorough critique of organisational models such as holacracy, which are embraced by movements like Extinction Rebellion. These models promise to bring about decentralisation, distributed authority and decision-making by consent. However, empirical material drawn from movement practices reveals that such structures slow down responses in moments of crisis and inhibit strategic coordination. The act of rejecting leadership does not manifest as a radical gesture rather, it is perceived as a structural weakness. As the authors observe, certain proponents of movement have come to characterise horizontalism itself as a "plague of the Left" and as a profoundly internalised manifestation of neoliberal conceptions of freedom and autonomy.

Externally, the book introduces the concept of negative mediation to describe how these movements relate to mass media and public visibility. Drawing parallels with the Weather Underground Organization (WUO) of the late 1960s and 1970s, the authors argue that movements such as XR increasingly depend on shock, spectacle and disruption to maintain visibility. However, this relationship is not one of autonomy. Movements become shaped by the media's appetite for theatricality and scandal, adjusting their tactics to fit the rhythms of outrage and attention. Radicalism thus becomes aesthetics, militancy becomes performance.

Chapter 6 of the book offers a detailed comparative framework, tracing three key historical moments: The 1960s/70s (New Left), the intermediate

neoliberal period (1980s–2000s), and the post-pandemic 2020s.

- The evolution of leadership is mapped across these periods:
- from charismatic and hierarchical leadership in the New Left,
- to rhizomatic and leaderless structures in the neoliberal period,
- to fractal and distributed leadership in contemporary movements.

Nevertheless, the authors contend that this evolution has not resulted in a corresponding enhancement of political capacity. The result has been a tactical freeze, whereby movements are highly visible but strategically incoherent.

Communication infrastructures exhibit a parallel trajectory. The printed materials and face-to-face communication of the 1960s have been superseded by a near-total reliance on commercial platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Zoom. The authors of the study describe these platforms as “enterprise associations” driven by profit and surveillance. It is contended by the authors that a revolutionary movement cannot be sustained on infrastructures whose economic and computational logic is fundamentally antagonistic to emancipation.

Finally, the transformation of political subjectivity is traced. The class-based and internationalist struggles of the 1960s have been superseded by identity politics and single-issue movements. Whilst these movements are not disregarded, the authors contend that they encounter inherent challenges in terms of mobilising working-class and rural populations. The social base of contemporary digital activism has been shown to be disproportionately middle-class, urban and culturally privileged.

When considered as a whole, *Fractal Leadership*

presents a pessimistic yet meticulously analytical, perspective on the contemporary state of digital politics. The book does not merely posit the notion that activism has become ineffectual rather, it offers a comprehensive analysis of how the very conditions that give rise to political consciousness, leadership, and dissent have been restructured by platform capitalism.

The concept of leadership has not disappeared rather, it has become more unstable and elusive. Ideology has not disappeared; rather, it has been compressed and fragmented by algorithmic time. Dissent continues to prevail yet its structural configuration remains incongruent with the contemporary operational dynamics of power. For scholars of communication, political sociology and critical digital studies, *Fractal Leadership* represents not only a critique of contemporary movements, but also a challenge to rethink the relationship between infrastructure, subjectivity and political possibility in the digital age.

### **Part III: Comparative Conclusion and Synthesis: A Ten-Year Appraisal**

When reading Athina Karatzogianni's 2015 work *Firebrand Waves of Digital Activism* alongside her 2024 *Fractal Leadership* (co-authored with Jacob Matthews), it becomes evident that there has been no rupture in her intellectual trajectory. Instead, it is characterised by conceptual deepening and theoretical maturation. The relationship between the two works is not one of mere revision but rather of evolution: What is posited in the earlier book as diagnosis and anticipation is developed in the later work as structural theory.

In *Firebrand Waves*, Karatzogianni identified a foundational tension within digital activism: the very process of mainstreaming that promised greater visibility and influence simultaneously weakened its disruptive political capacity. At the time, this argument functioned as a critical warning against dominant cyber-optimistic narratives that celebrated horizontality, connectivity and participation as inherently emancipatory. She argued that digital activism risked becoming

absorbed into the routines of institutional politics and losing the symbolic intensity that had originally animated it.

Almost a decade later, *Fractal Leadership* revisits this same problematic issue but from a significantly transformed theoretical vantage point. The phenomenon under scrutiny was initially regarded as a risk in 2015 but by 2024 it had become a well-established condition. In contrast to the question of whether movements can circumvent ineffectiveness, the latest book examines how ineffectiveness is systematically engendered within digitally mediated environments.

A salient discrepancy between the two books pertains to their respective handling of ideology. In the preceding study, ideology was predominantly observed at the level of discourse, framing and symbolic representation. In *Fractal Leadership*, ideology is reconceptualised as a lived, processual condition, particularly in the section on 'Ideologisation and Leadership on Digital Networks'. Ideologisation is no longer primarily concerned with beliefs or narratives. But it becomes a means of inhabiting time, attention and affect. Digital networks have been demonstrated to exert a direct influence on the formation of political consciousness by shaping the extent to which subjects are able to engage with particular temporalities, the rate at which experiences become intertwined, and the extent to which reflection can occur before being disrupted by algorithmic rhythms.

This development signifies a significant progression in the argument's progression. In *Firebrand Waves* time functions primarily as a historical structure, manifesting in waves, phases and geopolitical moments. In *Fractal Leadership*, time becomes infrastructural. Algorithmic temporality fragments lived experience into micro-events thereby producing a compression of attention that undermines the dialectical development of political thought. In this sense, false consciousness is no longer imposed by propaganda but it is generated by algorithmic governmentality. The platforms in question do not

merely facilitate the dissemination of ideology. Rather they are instrumental in the establishment of temporal conditions that render sustained critique structurally challenging.

A comparable evolution is evident in the conceptualisation of leadership. In the 2015 study Karatzogianni approached horizontal organisational forms emerging from FLOSS and hacker cultures with analytical ambivalence. The concept of horizontalism was not idealised or disregarded. Rather it was regarded as a historically specific tension between hierarchy and network.

By 2024 this ambivalence had crystallised into a more precise theoretical formulation. The fractal leadership paradigm does not posit the notion that leadership has become extinct. Preferably it demonstrates how leadership has undergone a process of mutation. The phenomenon of leadership becomes recursive self-repeating and scale-traversing. It has been observed to manifest concurrently at the intimate, organisational and global levels a phenomenon facilitated by the logics of virality, visibility and algorithmic amplification. It is therefore proposed that leadership should be regarded as exhibiting a fractal quality, with structurally similar patterns repeating across different scales of social life.

It is important to note that this transformation is not described as a simple degeneration. The concept is regarded as a multifaceted and contradictory restructuring of political structure. The book's comparative historical analysis particularly evident in the juxtaposition of the New Left, the neoliberal-globalisation period and the post-pandemic present demonstrates that leadership has always undergone mutation. The leadership style of the 1960s, characterised by charisma and hierarchy, evolves into a rhizomatic and leaderless paradigm in the late twentieth century, which subsequently transforms into fractal and distributed structures in the 2020s. The changes observed are not merely superficial, as they pertain to the fundamental infrastructural conditions that shape the concept of leadership.

A further profound continuity between the two works is evident in their shared sensitivity to the issue of co-optation, which is now reframed through the concept of "orders of dissent." The earlier book employed the concepts of institutional absorption and mainstreaming, whereas the later book offers a more sophisticated multi-level diagnosis. Local and identity-based struggles as well as national democratic claims are structurally misaligned with the global scope of platform capitalism. This is not presented as a moral failure of movements but as an ontological asymmetry between the level at which dissent is articulated and the level at which power is operationalised.

When considered as a pair, these two books do not appear to contradict one another. Instead, *Fractal Leadership* can be interpreted as a theoretical exposition of the questions previously posed by *Firebrand Waves*. The earlier work involves the mapping of the terrain and the anticipation of potential dangers. The subsequent work involves the reconstruction of the architectural nature of these dangers at the level of time, labour, infrastructure and leadership.

The result is a rare sense of continuity within critical digital studies: a trajectory that moves from events to conditions, from movements to milieus, and from practices of activism to the very production of political subjectivity itself. Rather than relinquishing her earlier concerns, Karatzogianni explores them in greater depth, presenting not a negation of her 2015 work, but rather its theoretical evolution.

## References

Karatzogianni, A. (2015). *Firebrand waves of digital activism 1994-2014: The rise and spread of hacktivism and cyberconflict*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Karatzogianni, A., & Matthews, J. (2023). *Fractal leadership: Ideologisation from the 1960s to contemporary social movements*. Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781837971084>

## Yazar Bilgileri

### Author details

1-(**Sorumlu Yazar Corresponding Author**) Dr. Öğretim Üyesi, ,  
Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi, omer.  
zararsiz@hbv.edu.tr

## Kaynak Göstermek İçin

### To Cite This Article

Zararsız, Ö.F. (2025). Firebrand waves and fractal leadership in digital activism: A review of Karatzogianni's monographs. (Book Review). *Yeni Medya* (19), 512-519.