



The Agenda-Setting Theory

La teoría *Agenda-Setting*

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Abstract | Forty years ago in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the first agenda-setting study showed that the issue priorities of the news become the issue priorities of the public in the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign. Since then, the agenda-setting model has been replicated in more than 400 studies that include both election and non-election settings, covering a wide variety of issues, and extending beyond the U.S. to a broad range of countries in the five continents. This article examines the progress of this research to date, reviewing its principal variations, how now encompasses five different theoretical stages, and what are the possible new areas of application and development.

Keywords: agenda-setting theory, framing, news media, public opinion.

Resumen | Hace cuarenta años, en Chapel Hill, Carolina del Norte, el primer estudio de agenda-setting mostró que los temas priorizados por las noticias correspondían a los temas priorizados por el público. Desde entonces, este modelo de análisis ha sido replicado en más de 400 estudios en los cinco continentes, incluyendo una gran variedad de temas, en escenarios electorales y no-electorales. Este artículo examina el progreso de este tipo de investigaciones, revisando sus variaciones principales, las cinco diferentes etapas teóricas que muestra en la actualidad y cuáles son las posibles nuevas áreas de aplicación y desarrollo.

Palabras clave: teoría agenda-setting, framing, medios noticiosos, opinión pública.

In 2002, the Chilean investigative television newsmagazine “Contacto” aired a story on a major international network of child pornography called Paidós. The program found that one of the leaders of Paidós was a Chilean man who worked for the Municipality of La Florida, a major suburb of Santiago. In his spare time, Rafael Humberto Maureira, a.k.a. Zacarach, drove kids to school in his minivan. The story led to the arrest of Zacarach and several other child molesters. After the story was aired by Canal 13, several parent teacher associations (PTAs) urged local authorities to run background checks on school drivers. Congress, on the other hand, focused its attention on child pornography legislation. In 2004, it enacted a law against child pornography and other sex crimes. In the meantime, the Chilean public opinion got used to watch and read news stories about other cases of pedophilia, including one that involved a former senator. In short, “Contacto” successfully managed to focus the attention of authorities, law enforcement agencies, Congress and public opinion on the issue of child pornography.

This example points to a significant effect of the mass media on society, that of setting the agenda of issue priorities. When connecting to the world outside our family, neighborhood and workplace, we deal with a second-hand reality created by journalists and media organizations. However, due to time and space constraints, the mass media focus their attention on a few topics that are deemed newsworthy. Over time, those aspects of public affairs that are prominent in the media usually become prominent in public opinion. This ability to influence which issues, persons and topics are perceived as the most important of the day is called the agenda-setting role of the mass media (McCombs, 2004).

Although the idea of an agenda-setting role of the press has its origins in Walter Lippmann’s 1922 book *Public Opinion*, which begins with a chapter titled “The world outside and the pictures in our heads,” it was only in 1968 when this idea that the press constitutes the bridge between the “world outside and the pictures in our heads” was put to empirical test. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), young professors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, used the 1968 U.S. presidential election as a case study to find out if

there was a relationship between the priority issues of the mass media and the priority issues of the public.

To measure the public agenda, McCombs and Shaw relied on survey research and asked an open-ended question about the most important issues in the election. The percentage of Chapel Hill voters who nominated each issue provided a succinct summary of the public agenda because the issues could be ranked according to these percentages. The media agenda was measured by a systematic content analysis of the issues covered in nine major news sources used by Chapel Hill voters. These sources included network television news, elite and local newspapers, and news magazines. Just as the public agenda of issues had been rank-ordered according to the percentage of voters naming an issue, these same issues were rank-ordered on the news agenda according to the percentage of news coverage on each issue. The Chapel Hill study found a nearly perfect correspondence between the two agendas. The degree of importance accorded the issues by voters closely paralleled their degree of prominence in the news during the previous month.

Although insightful, the Chapel Hill study provided only limited evidence of causality between the media agenda and the public agenda, so panel studies were organized for the next two U.S. presidential elections. Both the Charlotte study in 1972 (Shaw & McCombs, 1977) and the 1976 study (Weaver, 1981) in three very different communities –Lebanon, New Hampshire, a small town in the state where the first presidential primary to select the Democrat and Republican candidate for president is held each election year; Indianapolis, Indiana, a typical mid-sized U.S. city; and Evanston, Illinois, a largely upscale suburb of Chicago– supported the idea of an agenda-setting role of the news media.

Since these initial election studies, the agenda-setting role of the mass media has been widely documented in more than 400 published empirical investigations, both in election and non-election settings, for a broad range of public issues, and beyond the United States, across Asia, Latin America, Europe, and Oceania. This vast array of evidence documents a strong media effect on an initial step in the formation

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of public opinion: the focus of public attention. It is not a direct influence on attitudes and opinions, which was the main focus of media-effects research in the 1940s and 1950s. However, as we shall see, the core idea in agenda-setting has significant implications for attitudes and opinions.

UNDERSTANDING HOW AGENDA-SETTING WORKS

The repetition of messages about public issues in the news day after day, along with the pervasiveness of the mass media in our daily lives, constitute a major source of journalism's influence on the audience. The incidental nature of this learning, in turn, helps issues to move rather quickly from the media agenda to the public agenda. Although the benchmark for the appearance of agenda-setting effects is one to two months, there are, of course, variations among individuals and across issues. Under conditions of high personal involvement, the timeframe for measurable effects may be very short. During the 1996 U.S. presidential election, Marilyn Roberts and colleagues (Roberts, Wanta & Tzong-Houng, 2002) found that the salience of immigration, health care, and taxes on electronic bulletin boards reflected the press coverage of these issues within one to seven days.

However, the spectacular failure of the U.S. media in setting the agenda and causing a sway in public opinion during the Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal, despite intensive news coverage that has been described as "all Monica, all the time," speaks in a loud voice about the limits of media influence. This should not come as a surprise because agenda-setting does not overturn or nullify the basic assumption of democracy that the people at large have sufficient wisdom to determine the course of their nation, their state, and their local communities.

Individual differences in responses to the media agenda are grounded in the psychological concept of need for orientation, the idea that we have an innate curiosity about the world around us. For a wide variety of public affairs, such as evaluating a new presidential candidate or judging different public policy outcomes, the news media provide us with this orientation. The higher our need for orientation, the more we tend to search for information, rely on the media and are predisposed to agenda-setting effects. An individual's need for orientation in regard to public affairs is defined by two components: relevance and uncertainty (Weaver, 1980). In general, the greater the relevance of a topic to an individual and the greater is the uncertainty about the topic, the higher the need for orientation. Individuals with a low need for orientation in regard to public affairs pay little or no attention to news reports and, at most, demonstrate weak agenda-setting effects. At the other end of the continuum, among individuals for whom both relevance and their uncertainty about a situation are high, their need for orientation is high. These individuals typically are avid consumers of the news, and strong agenda-setting effects are found among them.

The media, of course, are not our only source of orientation to public affairs. Personal experience, which includes communication with our family, friends, and co-workers, also informs us about many issues. For instance, we do not need the media to alert us about significant inflation in the economy; routine purchases reveal its presence. However, to learn about abstract economic topics such as budget deficits, our main source of information, if not the only one, is the news media. In this case, personal experience is greatly limited and, most probably, non-existent. In theoretical terms, some

issues are obtrusive, that is, they obtrude into our daily lives and are directly experienced, while other issues are unobtrusive, and we encounter them only in the news (Zucker, 1978). Consequently, the less obtrusive an issue is, the more individuals will rely on the news media for information about it and the stronger the agenda-setting effects can be.

ATTRIBUTE AGENDA-SETTING EFFECTS

The agenda-setting role of the news media is not limited to focusing public attention on a particular set of issues, but also influences our understanding and perspective on the topics in the news. This becomes clear when we think about the concept of an agenda in abstract terms. Theoretically, the items that define an agenda are “objects.” In most agenda-setting research, these objects are public issues, but they also could be public figures, organizations, countries or anything else that is the focus of attention. In turn, each of these objects has numerous “attributes,” those characteristics and traits that describe and define the object. While some attributes are emphasized, others receive less attention, and many receive no attention at all. Just as objects vary in salience, so do the attributes of each object. Thus, for each object there also is an agenda of attributes, which constitutes an important part of what journalists and, subsequently, members of the public have in mind when they think and talk about news objects. The influence of the news agenda of attributes on the public is the second level of agenda setting. The first level, of course, is the transmission of object salience. The second level is the transmission of attribute salience.

During an election, campaign managers seek to build the salience, the prominence, of their candidates among voters (first-level agenda-setting). They also strive to build an image of their candidates in which specific attributes become particularly salient (second-level agenda-setting). For example, during the 1996 general election in Spain, McCombs and his colleagues (McCombs, López-Escobar & Llamas, 2000) compared the descriptions by voters in Pamplona of the three major party leaders after the elections with the presentation of these men before the election in seven major news sources, including local newspapers, national dailies,

national television networks and televised political advertising. This comparison of the public agenda with the media agenda of attributes revealed a strong second-level agenda-setting influence.

Second-level effects also exist for public issues, the traditional domain of agenda-setting research. Which aspects of an issue are covered in the news, and the relative emphasis on these various aspects of an issue, makes a considerable difference in how people view that issue. Evidence of attribute agenda-setting was found by Sebastián Valenzuela and Teresa Correa (2006) in the last presidential election in Chile. Voters' descriptions of Michelle Bachelet, Sebastián Piñera and Joaquín Lavín corresponded very closely to the previous pattern of descriptions for these three candidates in the main metropolitan newspapers. Among the attributes that were similar on the media and public agendas were leadership, charisma, compassion, competency and honesty.

AGENDA-SETTING AND FRAMING

The agenda-setting role of the mass media converges with many other paradigms in the communication field, including framing, priming, gatekeeping, cultivation and the spiral of silence. The similarities and differences between agenda setting and framing are currently one of the most discussed of these theoretical connections. However, the existence of multiple definitions of framing and the lack of consensus among scholars of what aspects of perceived reality are properly designated as frames makes any comparison between agenda setting and framing a rather difficult task. Moreover, theoretical efforts to demarcate the boundary between agenda-setting and framing (Price & Tewksbury, 1997) on the basis of the two aspects of knowledge activation (Higgins, 1996) —accessibility (linked to agenda setting) and applicability (linked to framing)— have found limited success.

A frequently cited definition of framing states that a media frame is a “central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” (Tankard et al., 1991, p. 3). This definition of framing converges with attribute agenda-setting because in both cases the focus is on the salient characte-

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istics and traits in which a topic or other news object is portrayed in the mass media. The difference, in this case, resides in the “excluded” content, which agenda setting does not examine because it relies solely on the manifest content of news stories.

Another approach to framing looks at the creation of media frames and how the public uses these frames to interpret social reality: “Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, 2001, p. 11). This approach considers the power conflicts that lead journalists to use certain frames over other frames and to the factors associated with the audience's active interpretation of the texts that embody frames. This version of framing involves a broader range of processes than the previous approach and diverges widely from agenda setting. In sum, attribute agenda-setting converges with framing when the latter is defined in terms of how an object is portrayed in the media or by the public, but the two concepts diverge when framing involves more abstract, all-encompassing processes.

WHO SETS THE MEDIA AGENDA?

Until the 1970s, the traditional question in agenda-setting research was “who sets the public agenda?” In the 1980s, the new question was “who sets the press agenda?” The pattern of news coverage that defines the media's agenda results from exchanges with sources that provide information for news stories, daily interactions among news organizations themselves, and journalism's norms and traditions. The latter is at the core of these factors of influence because the press itself is the final arbiter of what goes on the news agenda, of which events and issues will be reported

and how they will be reported. The influence of these norms is increased as journalists monitor what other journalists and news organizations are doing and frequently follow suit.

Prominent among the external sources of the media agenda are public officials. Exploring the link between public officials and the press converges with another area of agenda-setting research, that of policy agenda-setting, the process by which governments make decisions about which social issues will be the focus of attention and action (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

Another key influence on the news agenda is the vast network of public relations practitioners, both in the private and public sector, who provide substantial amounts of organized information, frequently in the form of press and video news releases, news conferences, planned events and background briefings.

CONSEQUENCES FOR ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

Three distinct consequences of agenda-setting effects have been identified: forming opinions, priming opinions through an emphasis on particular issues, and shaping an opinion through an emphasis on particular attributes.

There is a fundamental link between media attention to a news object and the existence of an opinion about it. During an election, for instance, the media focus their attention on the major candidates, which, in turn, leads to more people forming opinions about these candidates (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004).

Also at the first level of agenda-setting, the influence of the media on the prominence of issues can influence the standards by which individuals evaluate governments and public figures, a process called priming. When asked their opinions about political topics such

as performance of the president, most citizens do not engage in comprehensive analysis of their total store of information. Rather, individuals use information shortcuts and draw upon those considerations that are particularly salient. In other words, audience members rely upon their agenda of salient objects, an agenda that is set to a considerable degree by the mass media. This agenda determines the criteria, sometimes the single criterion, on which an opinion is based.

Attribute agenda-setting leads to a third consequence of agenda-setting effects, the relationship between the prominence of an object's attributes in the public mind and opinions about that object. It is obvious that the pictures in people's minds, which include both substantive attributes and the affective tone of these attributes, are related to people's opinions. Two recent investigations found striking evidence that the affective tone of the attributes highly salient among the public for major presidential candidates influenced the standing of these candidates in the polls across the months of the election campaign. Young Jung Son and David Weaver (2006) investigated the 2000 U.S. presidential election, and Valenzuela and McCombs (2007) replicated their findings in the 2006 Mexican presidential election. Our opinions reflect the pictures in our heads.

Behavioral consequences of agenda-setting go beyond the political arena. The pessimistic tone of "Abreast of the Market," a column published by the *Wall Street Journal* that describes the prior day's stock market activity, foreshadows an average fall of 0.081 percentage points in the Dow Jones index on the next trading day (Tetlock, currently in press).

From the pattern of news coverage, the public learns what journalists consider the important issues and the prominent public figures of the day to be. From the details of this coverage—the agenda of attributes presented by the news media—the public forms its images and perspective about these issues and public figures. Influencing the focus of public attention is a powerful role, but, arguably, the apogee of media effects is influencing the agenda of attributes, opinions and attitudes, even observable behavior, regarding issues and political figures.

NEW ARENAS FOR RESEARCH

Although the vast majority of studies have examined issue agendas, this is only one possible operational definition of the agenda. The basic proposition of agenda-setting theory can be stated broadly as elements that are prominent on the media agenda over time frequently become prominent on the public agenda. And the discussion of attribute agenda-setting explicitly introduced the conceptual language of objects and attributes, which can be operationalized in many ways other than public issues.

There are many agendas in contemporary society, and in recent years, innovative scholars have applied the core idea of agenda-setting theory, the transfer of salience from one agenda to another, to a wide variety of new arenas as diverse as professional sports (Fortunato, 2001) and classroom teaching (Rodríguez Díaz, 2004). One rapidly expanding area is the business news agenda and its impact on corporate reputations and economic outcomes ranging from profits to stock prices (Carroll & McCombs, 2003).

Across both the traditional and new domains of agenda-setting, the internet is a major research frontier. For some observers, the availability of many channels and the opportunity for users to seek their own personal agendas challenges a basic tenet of agenda-setting that the media tend to share the same set of news priorities. Consequently, the argument goes, the power of the mass media to set the public agenda may be on the wane. However, the evidence to date shows that attention to news on the web tends to be even more highly concentrated than in the print world. Nevertheless, researchers must continue to map the evolving agendas in this new media environment.

Agenda-setting theory continues to expand our understanding of the connections between the world outside and the pictures in our heads. Since the seminal Chapel Hill study of 1968, this connection has expanded into five different facets. Looking to the future, creative scholars will refine the core ideas of agenda-setting, expand the theory in new arenas, and produce new knowledge regarding the media's role in society.

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