Media Agenda-Setting Theory

Telling the Public What to Think About

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EMERGENCE OF A RESEARCH TRADITION

In 1972, two journalism professors at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, published an article in Public Opinion Quarterly that proved to be the genesis of a new research tradition in mass communications. Known as the Chapel Hill study, McCombs and Shaw demonstrated that the mass media could influence audiences in ways only previously speculated. Using a simple but innovative methodology, they first conducted a content analysis of both the press and television newscasts in order to identify what issues the media were emphasizing during the 1968 presidential election, and then surveyed 100 undecided voters in the Chapel Hill area to find out what issues they felt to be the most important. By performing a simple rank-order correlation, the authors found some stunning results: an almost perfect correlation (as high as .97) between the two sets of issue salience (figure 5.1). It appeared that issue salience, or what the public considered to be the most important issues of the day, was being shaped by the mass media. McCombs and Shaw labeled this phenomenon “agenda-setting,” observing that “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (1972, p. 177).

While the term “agenda-setting” and its branch of research can be traced to the McCombs and Shaw article of 1972, the notion of a media capable of determining what the public deems important is much older. Lippman (1922) argued that the mass media create images of events in people’s minds, and warned of the serious responsibility of the press as purveyors and interpreters of events in society. In identifying the functions of the press, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) recognized its ability to confer status upon topics it emphasizes. Long (1958) and Lang and Lang (1959) also wrote of the tendency for the media to force attention on certain issues. And in his study of foreign policy, Cohen wrote the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read” (1963, p. 13, italics added). From this intellectual heritage, McCombs and Shaw provided the first systematic study of “agenda-setting” and established a straightforward methodology for testing it, the simple comparison of a media content analysis with a survey of the public agenda.

Key Concepts

Put simply, media agenda-setting is the process whereby the news media lead the public in assigning relative importance to
various public issues. The media accomplish this agenda-setting function not by directly telling the public that one issue is more important than another, which has proven to be ineffective; instead, the media signal the importance of certain issues by giving these issues preferential treatment, such as more frequent coverage and more prominent positions. In short, the agenda-setting hypothesis involves two concepts (media agenda and public agenda) and postulates a causal relationship between them (the media agenda influences the public agenda).

**Media Agenda.** Media agenda refers to a list of issues or events that receive news coverage. An issue refers to a long-term problem or series of events that involves continual coverage, such as the war in Vietnam, Watergate, AIDS, or the recession. In contrast, an event is characterized by a quick-onset happening over a discrete period of time, attracting intense but short-term media attention. The Los Angeles riots of 1992 and the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York are examples of events. A sequence of events may evolve into an issue, although the process of such evolution itself is an interesting but understudied topic in agenda-setting research. For conceptual clarity, Rogers and Dearing (1988) pointed out that it is important to differentiate issues from events when conducting agenda-setting research as they may differ in terms of timing and salience or importance.

The media agenda is often measured by how frequently and how prominently an issue is covered in the news, weighting factors such as column inches for press stories, or amount of air time for television, or position in newspaper or program (Gormley, 1975; Williams & Semlak, 1978). How broadly an issue is defined is important when measuring issue salience (Roberts & Maccoby, 1985). A very broad definition such as “economic conditions” may not provide sufficient variance for an agenda-setting effect to be detected.

**Public Agenda.** Public agenda refers to the list of issues that are on the minds of the public. Typically, the public agenda is gauged by a survey of peoples' responses to the open-ended question, “What is the most important problem facing our nation today?” McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974) identified three operational versions of public agenda: an intrapersonal agenda (i.e., how important an issue is to the person him/herself); an interpersonal agenda (how important an issue is to others); and a community agenda (how important an issue is to the community/nation). While these different-level agendas interact with each other to some extent, research has shown that the media agenda-setting effect is most noticeable in shaping the community agenda.

Some researchers have gone beyond simple measures of issue salience, exploring instead the extent of people's knowledge about the issues. For example, Benton and Frazier (1976) measured people's awareness of certain issues, and the causes of and possible solutions to these issues. Tichenor and Wackman (1973) used open-ended survey items to measure people's knowledge concerning a local sewage dumping controversy, and showed that what people believed about the issue was a function of which papers they read.

**Underlying Assumptions**

Despite its apparent simplicity, the agenda-setting hypothesis draws on several assumptions, many of which have not been explicitly stated. For example, in their 1972 article, McCombs and Shaw noted that media agenda-setting is a content-specific effect (by matching what the media report on certain issues with what the public think about these issues) and an aggregate-level effect (by using an overall statistic to summarize individuals' issues concerns). An implicit assumption here is that a content-specific effect is superior to a content-free effect because the former has more face validity than the latter.

A second assumption, perhaps somewhat controversial, is that the aggregate-level effect by its own is as important, if not more important, than an individual-level effect. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) showed, the media are capable of creating an agenda for the community as a whole, even though each individual member of the community may have his/her own agenda that could be different from the community agenda. This aggregate-level analysis has drawn some criticism (e.g., McLeod et al., 1974). But as Fan (1988) and Noelle-Neumann (1974) have argued, the totality of public opinion, or the perception of an aggregate public opinion, can be a very powerful institution in the political process, capable of turning, for example, a silent majority into a real minority through a spiral of silence process.

Beyond the level of analysis, more central is the assumption concerning the ultimate effects of agenda-setting. As described above, agenda-setting research has established that the media are capable of telling the public “what to think about.” What is so remarkable about this seemingly modest and indirect form of media effect? As several lines of research have illustrated, agenda-setting
can have far-reaching consequences. For example, public concerns about certain issues, triggered by news coverage, can affect the policy-making process (Page & Shapiro, 1992). Often media agenda setting plays a critical role in the emergence and subsequent political force of a social movement (e.g., anti-technologies, Mazur, 1981; or antiwar movements, Mueller, 1973). And, by drawing attention to some issues over others, the media provide cues for the public to judge, for instance, political candidates on the basis of the themes the media emphasize, a mechanism known as priming (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). The priming effect has been shown to transfer into actual voting decisions during election times (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). As evidence of media effects accumulates, we may once again need to revise our view of the power of the media beyond Cohen's assertion that the press is successful only in telling its readers what to think about.

Organizing Power

The publication of McCombs and Shaw (1972) unleashed an unexpected flood of replications and extensions. As counted by Rogers, Dearing, and Bregman (1993), nearly 200 agenda-setting studies have been published since that date, 56 percent of which explicitly cite McCombs and Shaw (1972). The prominence of agenda-setting can be also seen in a recent survey of core communication scholars (138 most cited authors and 96 International Communication Association, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and Speech Communication Association officers, deans/chairs, and major journal editors), who were asked to name the most important concepts/theories in their field (So & Chan, 1991). The result is expectedly diverse since the survey involves every subfield of communication. However, agenda-setting still receives the most votes (by 31 respondents), followed by uncertainty reduction (21) and diffusion of innovation (16).

McCombs and Shaw (1993) once described academic research as a laissez-faire market in which scholars freely pursue research topics at will. The question is, then, what is the "invisible hand" that has held so many scholars fast to the pursuit of agenda-setting research? We believe that the following three properties of agenda-setting, its organizing power, its cognitive orientation, and its new methodological paradigm, are responsible for the creation and sustenance of this ever-growing family.

The scholarly significance of agenda-setting extends beyond the voluminous research it has generated. The key concepts underlying agenda-setting are quite simple, and their generality has enabled this conceptualization to be applied, as a metaphor, to investigations of personal agendas, election candidate agendas, stereotyping, status conferral, and to a variety of contexts such as health care, social marketing, political advertising, and organizational communication. Given that agenda-setting addresses the way in which the mass media may influence people's beliefs concerning what is important in their society, such studies are particularly important given that these beliefs are frequently at odds with what is actually happening in society.

As a theory, agenda-setting favorably meets many of the criteria generally applied when evaluating theory (see Chaffee & Berger, 1987). The simplicity of matching two constructs, media content and public opinion, makes agenda-setting a parsimonious theory. It is internally consistent (involving the comparison of the rank orders of two sets of issues), heuristically provocative (as evidenced by the volume of research it has generated), appears to have fairly strong predictive power, and is falsifiable.

The organizing power of agenda-setting is evidenced by studies within the field of mass communication relating agenda-setting with other communication concepts such as the spiral of silence, the uses and gratifications approach, bandwagon research, and media-system dependency. It has also integrated various subfields of research (see McCombs & Shaw, 1993) such as the sociology of news literature (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991), news diffusion (Breed, 1955), and gatekeeping research in journalism (Becker, McCombs, & McLeod, 1975). While it should be noted that conceptualizing agenda-setting as a theory has its critics (for example, see Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) due to its relative naivety and methodological primitiveness, agenda-setting clearly appears to satisfy many of the requirements of a good theory.

Cognitive Orientation

Agenda-setting research was eagerly accepted by the field because it emerged at a time when communication scholars began searching for more powerful mass media effects. After the apparent success of political propaganda during the First World War, and the subsequent rise of charismatic political leaders such as Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill (who were adept at using mass communications), many
people came to view the mass media as capable of wielding enormous influence upon its audience, and were fearful of its potential consequences. This early perspective became known later as the magic bullet theory, a metaphor that captures the swift, sure, and dangerous power that people invested in the media.

Later researchers in the forties and fifties, such as Paul Lazarsfeld, were unable to detect much support for powerful media effects using the more sophisticated survey methods being developed at the time. Neither were those conducting their communication experiments in laboratories, such as Carl Hovland. The absence of powerful-effects findings led contemporary researchers to conclude that the media after all had extremely limited powers of persuasion. This "limited effects" view was best articulated by Joseph Mapper in his book *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960); he argued that research had demonstrated mass media to be "ordinarily" not a necessary or sufficient cause of audience effects. Instead, it operated as a reinforcer of existing values and attitudes, and media effects were generally seen as mediated by interpersonal relationships and personal experience. While a more careful reading of Klapper's book reveals his belief that there were some conditions under which mass communication could greatly influence society, most contemporary scholars were content to hold a limited-effects perspective, perhaps in response to the more extravagant claims of a powerful and dangerous mass media made earlier.

Since that time there have been developments in other fields which have led to a paradigm shift in communication research and a renewal of the view that the media may have powerful effects (see Roberts & Maccoby, 1985). For instance, the emergence of cognitive psychology during the 1960s (Neisser, 1967) heralded a new school of thought which reconceptualized people as active information seekers. In communication research this led to a search for media effects in the form of cognitive change rather than attitude change in audiences. Meanwhile, in voting studies, researchers were forced to explain voting behavior which was no longer determined by traditional variables such as socioeconomic status, causing them to look again at the media as a source of influence. Finally, the field of communication itself was changing due to a growing number of scholars with actual communication qualifications and experienced media practitioners joining its ranks, all of whom were more inclined to hold powerful effects views (see figure 5.2). It is not surprising then that the first agenda-setting study was received with such interest and enthusiasm.

![Figure 5.2. Evolution of Media Effects Theory](Source: Modified from W. J. Severin & J. W. Tankard Jr. (1992, p. 261.)

A New Methodological Paradigm

The value of linking media content with public opinion which is the methodology of agenda-setting had been recognized by earlier scholars. Neuman (1989) points out that as early as 1910 Weber called for a joint systematic study of the press and public opinion. Yet communication research has tended to move along two separate lines: media content research which concentrates only on the content of the media and ignores audience effects, and audience effects research which focuses on surveys of audience responses and accepts media content as given. Each strategy on its own has limitations. In survey research, it is often impossible to determine with complete certainty to what media content respondents are actually exposed. Researchers often have to assume exposure to the tested message based on audience self-reports. On the other hand, content analysis of media programming on its own is merely descriptive, and problems of inference (i.e., assuming the message has reached the targeted audience) arise. The gap between the two fields and their limitations has been widely noted and new directions of research called for to address the gap, notably parallel content analysis proposed by Neuman and defined as "the systematic and simultaneous measurement of media content and audience response" (1989, p. 212). By comparing media content analysis
with survey research, agenda-setting clearly follows this strategy and overcomes the limitations of media content and audience effects style research.

**RELEVANT EXTENSIONS**

Over the last two decades, agenda-setting has grown from a simple proposition involving only two variables (i.e., media agenda and public agenda) to a complex theoretical framework encompassing various auxiliary concepts and hypotheses. Numerous new concepts have been added to the original hypothesis as controlling, intervening, or moderating variables. Of the various extensions, research on the causal direction, the contingent conditions, and the substantive context of agenda-setting are among the most important.

**Causality of Agenda-Setting**

The original study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) reported only a match between media agenda and public agenda, but conveyed an assumption that the media agenda precedes and causes the public agenda. Scholars quickly pointed out three competing hypotheses to explain the correspondence between media agenda and public agenda: the media indeed set the agenda for the public; the media merely reflect the public's sentiment; or the media and the public reinforce each other's issue salience. Much of the agenda-setting research since 1972 has been devoted to resolving this intriguing causal question, with a variety of methodological approaches from the social sciences arsenal.

The first technique employed was the **panel design with cross-lagged correlation**, adopted by McCombs and Shaw in their second study, known as the Charlotte study. This analytic strategy compares the correlation between the media agenda at time one and the public agenda at time two with the correlation between the public agenda at time one and the media agenda at time two in order to determine whether the media influences public opinion at a later date, or vice versa (figure 5.3). The Charlotte study (Shaw & McCombs, 1977) was conducted in Charlotte, North Carolina during the 1972 presidential election, using a panel sample of respondents interviewed at several points throughout the campaign to measure their issue salience, and then matching it with the issue emphasis by the Charlotte newspaper and two broadcast news programs during the same period. Cross-lagged correlation results showed that the correlation between the newspaper agenda at time period 1 and the public agenda at time period 2 was much larger than the correlation the other way around, although this pattern was not detected for the television data. Because this cross-lagged design provides a straightforward means of establishing causality, it has been widely used in many later studies of agenda-setting (e.g., Tipton, Haney, & Baseheart, 1975; Weaver et al., 1981).

Where the panel design with cross-lagged correlation continued the convention of an aggregate unit of analysis, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) adopted the **laboratory experiment** to study the agenda-setting effect at the individual level. In a series of controlled experiments subjects watched television news dealing with several issues such as inflation, unemployment, and defense. Then investigators compared the viewers' perceived importance of these issues with the responses of nonviewers. The results were unequivocal; even a week after their exposure to the news programs, viewers still attached much higher importance to these issues than did nonviewers.

Given the problem of external validity usually associated with laboratory experimentation, other scholars have chosen the **field experiment** to test the causal process between the media agenda and the public agenda in a more realistic setting. For example, with help from local television stations, Protess and his colleagues at Northwestern University (Protess et al., 1991) conducted a series of field experiments in which they interviewed a random sample of Chicago residents a few weeks before and after the airing of several
investigative newscasts. Such a design permits the researchers to trace any change in public opinion between the two surveys to the content of the television newscasts. Given the various types of noise inevitably introduced into field experiments, Protess and his colleagues found agenda-setting effects to be weaker than those in Iyengar and Kinder's laboratory experiment. However, the more realistic setting of their studies may provide a greater degree of confidence in the validity of effects found.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques have also been used to establish the direction of causality in the agenda-setting process (e.g., Hugel, Degenhardt, & Weiss, 1989). SEM is a versatile analytical tool, allowing for measurement error, decomposition of direct and indirect effects, and comparison of alternative causal paths. In this study (Hugel et al., 1989), SEM enabled the researchers to detect an agenda-setting effect after controlling for interpersonal communication, issue obtrusiveness, and other intervening variables. Both Iyengar (1988) and Kosicki (1993) believe that SEM has considerable potential in advancing agenda-setting research.

Finally, a number of scholars (e.g., Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Beniger, 1978; Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990; Funkhouser, 1973; MacKuen, 1981; Neuman, 1990; Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991; Smith, 1980; Zhu, 1992; Zhu et al., 1993) have employed time series analysis (TSA) to study agenda-setting. Operating at the aggregate level of analysis by using public opinion data, TSA has several advantages over the methods mentioned above, as noted elsewhere (Zhu, 1992). For example, TSA usually involves many more time points than other methods and is therefore a more appropriate means of studying agenda-setting as a process, and further, is more sensitive to longer-term agenda-setting effects. TSA enables one to examine time lags of various lengths in order to determine the optimum time window for agenda-setting effects to take place, and to detect cycles of media coverage and public attention (Downs, 1972). TSA can also incorporate "real world" indicators into the analysis (e.g., inflation, unemployment, and energy consumption, see Behr & Iyengar, 1985; or casualties in Vietnam, MacKuen, 1981), by which a spurious relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda can be eliminated. As will be discussed in more detail later, TSA also enables investigators to treat agenda-setting as a competitive, nonlinear, or other more complicated or realistic process.

Despite variations in design and analysis from study to study, these multiple methods have demonstrated a clear causal influence of the media agenda upon the public agenda. It is likely that no other theoretical hypothesis in human communication research has received as much empirical attention by so many scholars and with such diverse methods as has agenda-setting. It should be noted that some studies have reported a so-called "reversed agenda-setting effect" in which public issue concerns lead to media coverage, and others a "reciprocal agenda-setting effect" where the media agenda and public agenda mutually reinforce each other. Rogers and Dearing (1988) point out that short-term studies on specific events tend to reveal a one-way direction of influence, but longer-term studies may reveal a two-way relationship between the media agenda and public agenda over time that seems more realistic given the drive by media personnel to present news of interest to their audiences. For breaking news events where there is no previous public concern, one can expect a one-way influence of the media upon the public agenda. But for more persistent issues for which people are likely to have some personal experience and prior public opinion (i.e., an obtrusive issue like inflation), public concern may well lead to agenda-setting effects upon the media. This pattern appears to have held in a German study on the agenda-setting function of television news (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990), which showed that for some issues characterized by a sudden onset of media interest, the media influenced public opinion. However, in the case of other issues where there was long-term public awareness with little variation, the public agenda appeared to drive the news.

Contingent Conditions

Another enduring question that has attracted the attention of agenda-setting researchers is whether agenda-setting is a universal effect or only happens to certain people under certain conditions. Almost everyone, including McCombs and Shaw, believes the latter because the former sounds uncomfortably reminiscent of the magic bullet theory. In their seminal article, McCombs and Shaw (1972) compared agenda-setting effects across voter groups (Democrats, Republicans, and Independents), across issues (receiving high or low prominence from the media) and across media outlets (newspapers, newsmagazines, and television). They explicitly stated that the purpose of the between-group analyses was to examine the "individual differences" that might be lost in the overall design of "lumping all the voters together in an analysis" (p. 181). Other
scholars have since joined in the search for what Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980) called a "contingent theory" of agenda-setting. In particular, the search has focused on three sets of contingent conditions: audience characteristics, issue characteristics, and media characteristics (Winter, 1981).

**Audience Characteristics**

While most of the conventional demographic and socioeconomic variables have demonstrated a very limited role in qualifying the agenda-setting effect, scholars have found various dimensions of audience involvement to be an important contingent condition. Audience involvement has been measured by such variables as political partisanship (Lyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McLeod et al., 1974), campaign interest (McLeod et al., 1974; Weaver et al., 1981), and media preference (Benton & Frazier, 1976) or media dependency (Salwen, 1987). These variables are either used as controlling variables to eliminate a possible spurious effect of the media agenda on public agenda, or as a moderator variable to detect differential effects of the media agenda on various audience groups. The general findings are that the more involved an audience is, the more susceptible the audience is to media agenda-setting, with some exceptions (most notably Lyengar & Kinder, 1987, where the more involved audiences were less subject to the agenda-setting effect, a finding we attribute to their laboratory setting).

Why are more involved audiences more likely to be influenced by agenda-setting? There are at least two plausible explanations. The first concerns the notion of "Need for Orientation" (NFO, see Weaver, 1977). An individual is said to have a high NFO when he/she is highly interested in (or strongly believes in the relevance of) a public issue, but is also highly uncertain about the issue. A high level of NFO will lead to active use of the mass media, which opens the door for an agenda-setting influence. Empirical investigations (e.g., McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Schoenbach & Weaver, 1985; Weaver, 1977; Weaver et al., 1981) have found support for the role of NFO in the agenda-setting process, although the results are not always consistent across studies in terms of the magnitude of its influence.

MacKuen (1981) proposed another, perhaps more elaborate, theorization of audience involvement. He posited two competing models—audience attentiveness versus cognitive framework. The attentiveness model suggests that the audiences' susceptibility to media agenda-setting is a function of their attentiveness toward incoming information and their cognitive ability to process the information. There appear to be some parallels between the attentiveness model and Weaver's need for orientation construct (NFO). Operationally, MacKuen measured attentiveness by interest in politics, as rated by respondents on a scale ranging from low to high. Cognitive ability was operationalized as years of education. The higher the political interest and/or educational level a person has, the more susceptible the person should be to media agenda-setting, according to the attentiveness model. The cognitive framework model suggests a rival hypothesis where those with more education and higher political interest should have more effective self-defense mechanisms against the influence of media agenda-setting. In a series of empirical tests, MacKuen found evidence supporting the attentiveness model, findings, that are also consistent with the research on NFO.

While the consensus has been that there are likely to be variations in individuals' susceptibility to agenda-setting, we probably should not overstate the differences too much. As DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1982) have argued in their media dependency theory, there are broad strata of people in our society with sufficient similarities that cause them to share the same problems and concerns, regardless of their differences. A longitudinal study currently being conducted by Zhu and his associates will attempt to show that various sectors of the public may appear to be heterogeneous at any given point in terms of their concerns about social problems; however, the sectors become more homogenous when one traces their issue concerns over a long period of time.

**Issue Characteristics**

The most important theorization concerning issue characteristics is the notion of issue obtrusiveness (Zucker, 1978). According to Zucker, an issue is obtrusive if the public has direct experience with it, or unobtrusive if the public has no direct contact with it. Domestic economic issues such as inflation and unemployment are often cited as examples of obtrusive issues, whereas foreign affairs is considered an unobtrusive issue. The distinction between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues has been empirically verified. For example, through a factor analysis procedure, Eyal (1979) identified two distinctive groups among eleven issues. The obtrusive issue group included inflation, unemployment, the economy, and so on, while the unobtrusive issue group included welfare, the environment,
and foreign affairs. Blood (1981) reported that respondents in a survey rated inflation as the most obtrusive issue, and the Iran hostage issue as the least obtrusive, with recession roughly in the middle.

Media agenda-setting effects are stronger for unobtrusive issues, Zucker argued, because audiences have to rely on the media for information about these issues. On the other hand, audiences are less susceptible to agenda-setting effects on obtrusive issues because they learn about these issues from their own experience, or personal networks, rather than from the media. A number of authors have found evidence supporting these arguments. For example, Eyal (1979), Hugel and colleagues (1989), and Zucker (1978) found a stronger media agenda-setting effect for unobtrusive issues, and Hugel and colleagues (1989), lyengar (1979), Palmgreen and Clarke (1977), and Winter (1980) found a weaker or even null agenda-setting effect for obtrusive issues. These patterns generally hold up after controlling for real world indicators in the analysis. For instance, MacKuen (1981) found that for obtrusive economic issues the public were more likely to be influenced by the "real world" than by the media. On the other hand, some findings have shown that the extent of media coverage on certain issues is out of proportion with respect to objective indicators and that public perception tends to be more influenced by media portrayals rather than "objective" reality (Funkhouser, 1973; Blood, 1994).

There are also other formulations of issue characteristics. For example, a more recent study by Yagade and Dozier (1990) distinguishes issues into "concreteness" versus "abstractness." The authors reported that media agenda-setting power is enhanced for concrete issues but diminished for abstract issues. As the authors acknowledged, however, the role of issue concreteness may have been confounded with audiences' cognitive ability. Further research is needed to shed light on this and other dimensions of issue characteristics.

**Media Characteristics**

The debate over which media outlet—newspapers or television—is a better agenda-setter has attracted intense research interest. Of course, this is based on the assumption that newspapers and television have different issue agendas. In McCombs and Shaw's (1972) classic study, four types of media were examined: local newspapers, national newspapers, newsmagazines, and television networks. The results showed that there was a high degree of similarity in issue agenda within each medium and only a modest similarity between media; national newspapers demonstrated the strongest agenda-setting effects, followed by television. Hugel and colleagues (1989) presented a more elaborate study involving individual-level data to test the differential roles of print and broadcasting media in agenda-setting. In their study, investigators matched the content of national television programming and thirteen daily newspapers to measures of national voters' media exposure. A path analysis based on structural equation modeling found that voters were influenced by the newspaper agenda but not by the television agenda on an unobtrusive issue (foreign affairs); however, voters did not respond to either newspaper or television agendas on an obtrusive issue (social security). Several other studies also report that newspapers have a stronger agenda-setting effect than does television (Benton & Frazier, 1976; Eyal, 1979; McCombs, 1977; Patterson & McClure, 1976; Weaver, 1977).

More recent scholars have criticized earlier studies for paying too much attention to newspapers and too little to television (e.g., Brosius & Keppinger, 1990). The case for studying television is best articulated by lyengar and Kinder (1987, pp. 1-2) in their opening statement: "Our purpose here is to establish that television news is in fact an educator virtually without peer, that it shapes the American public's conception of political life in pervasive ways; that television news is news that matters." The view on the primacy of television may be well grounded, since the public spends more time watching television than reading newspapers (Robinson & Levy, 1986), and has more confidence in television than newspapers (Roper Organization, 1984). However, the advocates of television research have focused exclusively on television newscasts in their empirical investigations. By using a single-media design, it is impossible to compare the impact of television and newspapers.

It is evident that, in spite of the impressive effort devoted to exploring contingent conditions, our understanding of the qualifying effects of audience, issue, and media characteristics upon agenda-setting is far from conclusive. The cumulative evidence has been mixed, sometimes even discrepant. Some studies find no significant contingent effects on the agenda-setting process where others detect some contingent effects, but with the magnitude and direction of the effect varying from one study to another. Despite the inconsistencies, however, it is this very search for a better understanding of the contingent conditions that has kept agenda-setting research alive and well over the last two decades, and that will continue attracting scholars to this research domain.
Context of Agenda-Setting

As described above, agenda-setting research was originally conducted in the context of national and local political elections. Once researchers had established that news could influence what readers thought to be the most important election campaign issues, it was not long before they extended this notion to other types of issues in other contexts. In the last twenty years, many applications of agenda-setting have been made to topics as diverse as advertising, organizational management, criminal justice, semiotics, peace activism, and sports medicine. A brief review of some of these applications illustrates the significant insights gained from applying this metaphor, originating from the communication sciences, to problems pertaining to other fields.

One context that has gained in importance has been the impact of economic news on consumer confidence (Fan, 1993). Given the fact that individual consumer spending accounts for two-thirds of the U.S. national expenditure, it is therefore pertinent to ask, "What causes consumer confidence to rise and fall?" Contrary to conventional "pocket-book determinism" (i.e., consumer confidence is based on the well-being of the economy), agenda-setting scholars have shown that news coverage of the economy may play a greater role than economic reality. For example, Stevenson, Gonzenbach, and David (1991) examined the interrelationship between economic news coverage, consumer confidence, and the actual state of the economy, and found that consumer confidence influenced media coverage over the economy when controlling for reality, but the media in turn picked up on public concern and influenced public perception at a later date. Using a set of new techniques that has been developed to handle nonstationary data, Blood (1994) found strong evidence that newspaper headlines concerning the U.S. recession lowered consumer confidence in the U.S. economy over and above the direct effects of a poor economy upon public sentiment.

Sutherland and Galloway (1981) were the first to use the agenda-setting concept to cast the role of commercial advertising in a new light. Now, instead of seeing advertising's purpose as persuading the audience to buy its touted product, the more achievable goal of advertising is to focus the consumer's attention on what values, brands, and attributes to think about when considering purchasing a product. This has been established as an important and necessary first step in the marketing process, ultimately ending in sales. Agenda-setting research techniques have also been applied to assessing the effectiveness of political advertising. In a state senate campaign, newspaper advertisements were shown to be fairly effective in communicating information about issues to voters (Kaid, 1976).

Other functions within business organizations have benefited from applying an agenda-setting framework, such as public relations, personnel management, organizational management, consulting, and strategic planning. Managerial writers have noted that across businesses and industries, effective managers display similarities in their focus on agenda-setting for their business, and creating networks to accomplish them (e.g., Kotter, 1983). Yet others have argued that businesses are very slow at becoming involved in the agenda-setting arena of politics. Nolan (1985) even suggested that there is a need for "issue analysts" in business, who can identify and promote issues in the company's interests, and foster effective relations with the media.

The emergence of public policy issues such as consumer protection in the United States and abroad has been explained within the framework of agenda-setting. Mayer (1991) described the process of how consumer problems are transformed into consumer issues by moving through three stages: consumer problems attract media attention, which in turn arouses public opinion, and finally are addressed by policymakers. Harrison and Hoberg (1991) investigated why the government is attentive to certain environmental problems but not others. By comparing the U.S. and Canadian governments' handling of indoor radon and dioxin, they found that media coverage of these problems set the issue priority for their governments.

Other sorts of policy issues have achieved their status from the early use of agenda-setting, such as school finance reform, collective bargaining, comparable worth, and social security. Sustained media coverage on child abuse succeeded in making it a public policy issue (Nelson, 1984). A dramatic example of how the press affects federal policy making through agenda-setting concerned President Carter's decision not to deploy the neutron bomb, a weapon which was described to the public as capable of killing people yet leaving buildings standing. After Washington Post reporter Walter Pincus revealed that the neutron bomb was being developed through obscure Pentagon funding, the ensuing public and congressional outcry ultimately forced the decision not to deploy the bomb (Linsky et al., 1986).

The agenda-setting metaphor has been applied to issues concerning public health. Researchers have reevaluated media educational
programs such as those directed at AIDS, sexually transmitted disease, drug abuse in professional sports, abortion, and the use of seat belts. Using an agenda-setting framework that focuses on issue salience, they have been more likely to find the campaigns to be effective than when looking for direct effects upon behavior. Some unintended agenda-setting effects on health have also been considered. For example, Atkin (1989) looked at the agenda-setting effects of television programs on risky driving behaviors by teenagers.

There have also been a number of investigations into the agenda-setting effects of crime stories on topics as diverse as homicides, rape, and police brutality. David Pritchard has conducted a series of studies on how news coverage of crimes has affected the number of police officers subsequently allocated to cities (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993), or public prosecutors’ decisions on pre-bargains in homicide cases (Pritchard, 1984). The latter study showed that the more publicity a homicide case receives, which presumably creates more public attention to the case, the less likely the prosecutor in charge of the case is willing to make a pre-bargain deal with the defendant.

The successes and failures of civil rights movements have been illuminated by using an agenda-setting approach in their analysis. Case studies documenting successful minority rights passage invariably reveal active agenda-setting on the part of groups these legislations are intended to protect. On the other hand, a case study of the failure of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 revealed that the Hispanic perspective was not represented in the early agenda-setting phases (Arp, 1990). And a close comparison of the issues relating to the claims made by Alaskan natives showed that there were significant differences in understanding of the problem on the part of testifying Alaskan natives and the senators who received their testimony (Korsmo, 1990).

NEW FRONTIERS

Recently, Maxwell McCombs organized a series of activities, including a panel discussion at the joint conference of the World Association for Public Opinion Research and the American Association for Public Opinion Research and a special collection of articles each for the *Journalism Quarterly* and the *Journal of Communication* (see McCombs, 1992; McCombs & Shaw, 1993), to review the last two decades of agenda-setting research and to envision the future. We take the opportunity here to join in this exercise and offer our thoughts and anticipations concerning the future of agenda-setting. While important work continues on the major extensions to agenda-setting, as described above, several new frontiers have emerged in recent years. The following is a brief account of what we believe will be the most exciting prospects for agenda-setting research in the years to come.

Issue Competition

Passing reference has already been made to one of the central but implicit assumptions underlying the original formulation of the agenda-setting hypothesis: the notion of issue competition. Though never explicitly stated, when using rank-order correlation to compare a list of issues on the media agenda with a list of issues on the public agenda, McCombs and Shaw (1972) assumed that each list reflected the relative importance the media and the audience assigned to each issue. Many follow-up studies have used this rank-order design, and the implications of issue competition have not been fully recognized or addressed. Thus, some scholars (e.g., Winter & Eyal, 1981) have criticized the rank-order comparison for ignoring the idiosyncratic characteristics of these issues by aggregating them into a single analysis. These criticisms make methodological sense, but the single-issue analysis does not permit the researcher to test issue competition as the rank-order comparison design can.

Zhu (1992) takes a fresh look at the pros and cons of rank-order comparison. Drawing on research from the fields of human cognitive processing, media organization, policymaking, and interest groups, he uses a “zero-sum game” metaphor to explicate the implicit assumption of issue competition underlying the agenda-setting process. The zero-sum perspective argues that agenda-setting is a process whereby various social groups compete to attract the attention of the media, the public, and the policymakers to their issues. Because the media, the public, and the policymaking body all have a limited carrying capacity (e.g., limited space or time on the part of the media, limited attention span by the public, and limited resources of the system), the rise of one issue in the “public arenas” (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) is at the expense of another. While the notion of issue competition in agenda-setting research has been assumed since its inception, all the conventional methodologies as
reviewed earlier have not been able to provide a ready way to test this dynamic process. Zhu (1992) develops a mathematical model to make this test possible. The model incorporates both multiple issues (as required by the zero-sum principle) and time series technique into one analysis. A test of the model with data on three major issues in 1990–91, the federal budget deficit, the Persian Gulf War, and the recession, lends support to the zero-sum notion.

Recognizing that this "promises to be one of the most exciting venues of research" (McCombs, 1992, p. 823), McCombs and Zhu (1995) moved on to explore if the zero-sum perspective provides a reasonable explanation for the often-observed volatility in the public issue agenda (e.g., the issue of the federal deficit or crime can rise to and fall from the top of public concerns within a matter of weeks). The volatility may result, they hypothesized, from a growing gap between the rising standard of education in the population, which leads to an expansion of issue interest, and the relative constant size of the public agenda which has a limited carrying capacity. They examined the change in the American public's issue agenda from 1954 to 1994, as registered by Gallup Poll's question "What is most important problem facing this country?" The results show that there has been an increase in the number of smaller issues (as measured by the size of their constituencies) crowding on the public agenda, and probably as a consequence, the duration of issues on the public agenda has decreased.

Thus, the public agenda has become more volatile. While these are only preliminary results of work in progress, it is clear that this line of approach to understanding the dynamic nature of public agenda, an often-criticized weakness of past agenda-setting research (e.g., Swanson, 1988), shows promise.

Nonlinear Models

Traditionally, agenda-setting has been treated as a linear model in which the public's concern about an issue is a linear function of news coverage on the issue; this amounts to no coverage, no concern; more coverage, higher concerns. One can readily see problems with this linear perspective. For example, under the linear model, issue concerns will increase infinitely as long as they receive news coverage, whereas in reality there is always an upper-ceiling (saturation point) for any issue salience. Also, the linear model treats the agenda-setting effect as a constant over time, whereas, in real life, media impact is often time-varying. Several recent studies (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992; Neuman, 1990; Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993; Zhu et al., 1993) have begun to develop nonlinear models of the agenda-setting process. Among these, Neuman (1990) is particularly appealing.

In search of an answer to the question "Would a nonlinear response function make more sense?" Neuman proposed a logistic curve (i.e., S-curve, see figure 5.4) to model how the public responds to the media coverage of an issue. Essentially, the public's attention follows a three-stage path: it remains low when an issue is initially covered by the media; it rises rapidly once the coverage accumulates to a take-off threshold; and eventually it levels off after a saturation point. Neuman's empirical test of the logistic model produced some very interesting findings. For example, he found that the threshold of public attention for an issue is within the range of 5–20 percent (i.e., the proportion of the public being concerned about that particular issue). Based on the maximum and the slope of the logistic curve, Neuman developed an issue typology. He termed those issues with a maximum of around 50 percent of public concern and a steep slope (.7 or above) as "crises" (e.g., Vietnam war, racial unrest, and energy crisis). "Symbolic crises" are those issues with a lower maximum of public concern (about 20 percent) and a slower slope (.3–.5), such as Watergate, drug abuse, pollution, and poverty. There are certain issues with a high maximum of public concern (60 percent or higher) but with an almost flat slope, such as inflation and unemployment; he labeled these simple "problems" or "nonproblems."

While nonlinear modeling is a promising approach, as demonstrated by Neuman and others, two notes of caution are in order. First, while more conceptually appealing, nonlinear modeling is inferior to linear models at the present time on a number of technical grounds. When assumptions are met, linear regression models yield unbiased, normally distributed, and minimum variance estimators whereas nonlinear models achieve these properties only asymptotically, that is, as the sample sizes approach infinity (Ratkowsky, 1990). Further, mathematical theory is complete for linear models but mostly incomplete for nonlinear models. For example, linear models, if specified correctly, always have a unique solution, whereas solutions for many nonlinear models have not been developed.

Second, nonlinear modeling should be more theory-driven than data-driven, because there is only one functional form in any linear model whereas there are an infinite number of nonlinear
Psychological Mechanism

One of the criticisms that has been leveled against agenda-setting is a lack of theorization (e.g., Iyengar, 1988; Swanson, 1988). What is meant by "theory" here is a psychological account of how the agenda-setting effect takes place within the individual. While agenda-setting was originally conceptualized as a sociological (i.e., aggregate) process, many investigators are also interested in unearthing the psychological mechanisms behind the phenomenon. Here two lines of research focusing on the psychological process of agenda-setting are worth noting.

Iyengar and his colleagues have investigated the role of three psychological concepts, including counterargument, source credibility, and emotional arousal, in mediating the agenda-setting effect upon individuals. They argued that individuals are not passive recipients of incoming media agenda; instead, audiences contrast the issue agenda presented by the media against counterarguments available to them at the time, and will also take into account the source's credibility. While these responses to media messages represent active cognitive processing, there is the alternative possibility that audiences will respond primarily to the affective appeal of the media.

In a series of laboratory experiments in which these cognitive and emotional processes were manipulated (Iyengar, Peters & Kinder, 1982; Iyengar & Kinder, 1985), the authors found emotional arousal to be the most significant mediator of the agenda-setting effect, followed by perceived source credibility. There was little support for the impact of counterargument.

Watt et al. (1993) investigated the role of memory, another key element of the psychological process underlying the agenda-setting effect. They reconceptualized the media agenda-setting effect on the audiences as a memory forgetting process, which decays exponentially over time. To sustain an issue on the public agenda, the media need to keep feeding stories on the same issue to the public in order to compensate for the forgetting curve. The authors developed a nonlinear model to represent this process, and tested it with data involving aggregate issue salience and television coverage on a daily basis. The results, though needing to be verified with individual-level data, appear to be consistent with memory decay theory and the agenda-setting literature.

While there are probably many other psychological concepts that could be applied productively to agenda-setting, these two lines of inquiry certainly shed new light on our understanding of...
the agenda-setting process and may provide answers to some of its most puzzling aspects. For example, how are the media, especially television, capable of mobilizing, seemingly overnight, intense public concern about certain issues (e.g., nuclear waste) that may not have any real consequences for the individuals they alarm? The media's ability to trigger affective responses, as demonstrated by Lyengar and his colleagues, seems a plausible explanation. Also, why do some issues linger on the public agenda longer than others? In addition to the way issues are handled by the media, factors such as the audience's familiarity with the issues, which counterbalances memory decay, may determine how long issues remain on the public's mind. Continuing work on these and other psychological processes will surely be an important part of agenda-setting research in the future.

Integrating Mass and Interpersonal Communication

The role of interpersonal communication in agenda-setting has long been acknowledged. However, empirical investigations have produced a mixed picture: interpersonal communication appears to enhance media agenda-setting in some cases, inhibit media agenda-setting in other cases, and have no impact at all in still others. More recent studies have made some progress in providing more consistent and better theorized results. For example, Wanta and Wu (1992) made a distinction between two types of issues depending on how much media coverage each receives. For those receiving extensive media attention, interpersonal communication reinforces the media agenda-setting effect, while for those issues ignored by the media, interpersonal communication becomes the main source of influence and thus competes with the media agenda-setting effect.

Drawing on a model initially proposed by Diana Mutz (1991), Weaver, Zhu, and Willnat (1992) proposed that people learn about issues from three sources, including their direct experience, conversations with others, and exposure to the media; and each of these information sources plays a different role in shaping people's issue perception. An audience's direct experience with an issue often leads the individual to perceive it as a personal problem, while media-relayed information makes the individual look upon the issue as a societal problem, and interpersonal communication bridges these two levels of issue perception. For example, through conversations, the individual may generalize a personal problem to a social problem (as found in both Mutz, 1991 and Weaver et al., 1992), or localize a social problem to a personal problem (which is theoretically plausible but has not been empirically confirmed).

In the study by Hugel and colleagues (1989), interpersonal communication was conceptualized as a moderator variable producing differential effects of media agenda-setting. For an unobtrusive issue (e.g., foreign affairs), the authors demonstrated through structural equation modeling that interpersonal communication enhances newspapers' agenda-setting effect (which is consistent with Wanta and Wu, 1992) but suppresses television's effect, which is a new finding. Interpersonal communication, however, does not appear to operate as a moderator variable in agenda-setting for obtrusive issues.

Finally, Zhu and colleagues (1993) developed a mathematical model to incorporate both media and interpersonal communication into an integrated model of agenda-setting. As the two-step flow of information theory suggests, interpersonal communication about a public issue often follows media coverage, but its influence can exceed the media's, depending on the nature of the issue under discussion. The empirical test of their model shows that the media component plays a central role in three unobtrusive issues (e.g., relations with the Soviet Union, the American hostages in Iran, and the Persian Gulf War), whereas the interpersonal communication component is more important in setting the public agenda for three, more obtrusive issues (inflation, recession, and the deficit).

Beyond the Public Agenda

Although many mysteries remain concerning the processes and effects of media agenda-setting, a number of scholars have made the call to look beyond agenda-setting. Two lines of inquiry have dutifully emerged: the antecedents of media agenda-setting (also known as "media agenda-building"), and the consequences of media-setting ("policy agenda-setting"). While both are important extensions of media agenda-setting, we believe the former to be more exciting from a communications research perspective, because it provides a framework for integrating several important domains of research, including media organizational behavior (e.g., Semetko et al., 1991; Reese, 1991), news content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1990) and framing (Koszicki, 1993).

We propose an additional line of inquiry, that of placing
agenda-setting into the broader context of the democratic process. In figure 5.5, four major players (interest groups, the media, the public, and the government) are connected through various routes in terms of their respective roles in the social issue process, and agenda-setting now becomes only one piece of the big picture. We consider three routes as central, including media agenda-building, public agenda-setting, and policy agenda-setting, and the remaining routes as peripheral, such as direct lobbying, grass roots mobilization, and media direct intervention. While there may be little disagreement about the inclusion of these players in the political process, there certainly are different perspectives about the causal direction and the relative importance of these routes. For example, Graber (1993) offered alternative ways to look at the same process. Despite the different emphases, each route has been studied separately in its own domain of research, spanning mass communication, political science, sociology, and public administration. Agenda-setting appears to be well placed to pull this diverse body of literature together, by using the life and times of a social issue as the connecting thread. This is a truly interdisciplinary endeavor on a fascinating and boundless frontier for scholars to explore.

The study of communication in the Western tradition dates to the early Sophists, who were practicing their craft in Asia Minor during the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. Their speculations on argumentation, stylistics, and the psychology of logos were codified under the rubric of rhetoric during the fifth century B.C., and from that time forward became a part of Western culture through its inclusion in the curriculum. As taught in the schools of Greek and Roman rhetoricians, and later in the Church academies and secular universities until this century, rhetoric was the study of how to use language to influence the judgment and actions of others. There were exceptions, of course, such as the speculations of DeQuincy in the last century, but for the most part rhetoric was theorized and learned as a practical art concerned with the production of messages designed to achieve an intended effect. The residue of more than two millennia of association with instrumental considerations remains in common usage and lay perception, where “rhetoric” is almost always synonymous with the study of persuasion.

One would be hard pressed to imagine a serious discussion of rhetorical communication in which instrumental considerations were not tacitly present. And in the case of some schools and traditions, where rhetoric is theorized as a design art, they remain the central concern. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, rhetoric’s conceptual topography changed with a formulation that expanded its frontiers to include more profound questions about the nature of language, discourse, and the formation of social reality. That discussion, which still continues, shifted the intellectual
5. MEDIA AGENDA-SETTING THEORY


6. NEW RHETORIC AND NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS


