

Conclusions

We have reviewed the history of agenda-setting research to show how this scientific specialty has moved from preparadigm, to the establishment of the dominant paradigm for agenda-setting, to the stage of normal science. In recent years, the paradigm has been dramatically expanded by means of disaggregation, by adding concepts and broader conceptualizations, and by the use of different methodologies and statistical models. The original research question guiding the paradigmatic Chapel Hill study has been broadened to include the following questions:

How is the media agenda set?

What are the contributions of theories of social movements and resource mobilization, in which publics are issue centered and very active, to the agenda-setting paradigm?

Why do real-world indicators play a minor role in the agenda-setting process compared to human tragedies and other triggering events?

What role do priming and framing play in the myriad of human decisions that constitute the agenda-setting process?

29 The News Media and the Pictures in Our Heads

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Walter Lippmann began his seminal 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, with a chapter titled "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." Lippmann's eloquently argued thesis is that the news media are a primary source of the pictures in our heads, giving us impressions of the vast external world of public affairs that is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (1922, p. 29). Lippmann's intellectual offspring, agenda setting, is a detailed social science theory about the contribution of mass communication to those pictures in our heads. Specifically, it is a theory about the transfer of salience—how the mass media's hierarchy of concerns affects the public's.

The core theoretical idea underlying agenda setting is that elements prominent in the media picture become prominent in the audience's picture. The assertion is that the priorities of the media agenda influence the priorities of the public agenda. Over time, elements emphasized on the media agenda come to be regarded as important on the public agenda. Theoretically, these agendas could be composed of any set of elements. In practice, virtually all of the 200-plus studies to date have examined an agenda composed of public issues. For these studies, the core hypothesis is that the degree of emphasis placed on issues in the news influences the priority accorded these issues by the public.

Although agenda setting is concerned with the salience of issues rather than the distribution of pro and con opinions, which has been the traditional focus of public opinion research, the core domain is the same—the public issues of the moment. Walter Lippmann's (1922) quest

in *Public Opinion* to link the world outside to the pictures in our heads via the news media was brought to quantitative, empirical fruition by agenda-setting research (McCombs, 1992, p. 815).

Evidence of Agenda-Setting Effects

Agenda-setting research has taken a variety of interesting shapes and forms in the years since the seminal 1968 study (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), with the predominant method being a coupling of media content analysis and data from public opinion polls. The theory has proven to be a highly accommodating master framework for media effects research. A clear message has emerged from the studies that have followed—there is clear and strong support for this notion that the priorities of the media agenda influence the priority of issues on the public agenda.

The original study of agenda setting by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) during the 1968 presidential election found a nearly perfect rank order correlation (.97) between the issues considered most important by voters and the coverage of those issues in the news media used by those voters. Four years later during the 1972 U.S. presidential election, the findings of this inaugural study were replicated in a middle-sized city, Charlotte, North Carolina (Shaw & McCombs, 1977).

Complementing these two studies of local communities during a presidential election, Ray Funkhouser (1973) conducted a national study that examined an entire decade—the turbulent 1960s. He found considerable correspondence (.78) between the media agenda and the public agenda.

The natural history of a single issue—civil rights—in the media and public agendas was examined by James Winter and Chaim Eyal (1981). Overlapping the decade of the 1960s studied by Funkhouser (1973), Winter and Eyal discovered that the ebb and flow of national concern about civil rights from 1954 to 1976 mirrored (.71) the rise and fall of news coverage in the *New York Times* during those years.

Howard Eaton (1989) traced the salience of 11 different individual issues over a period of 42 months during the 1980s. Among the issues studied were unemployment, crime, fear of war, poverty, and inflation. The shifting salience of 10 of these 11 issues on the public agenda was

positively correlated with the news coverage of those issues. The median correlation from the 11 separate analyses was .45. The only issue with a negative correlation (−.44) was morality in society.

Working in the experimental laboratory, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder (1987) produced agenda-setting effects through the manipulation of the topics covered in television newscasts. Among the issues demonstrating agenda-setting effects in this rigorously controlled setting were civil rights, arms control, defense preparedness, pollution, and unemployment.

A year-long study in Germany by Hans-Bernd Brosius and Hans Mathias Kepplinger (1990) provides the ultimate comparison of the media agenda and public agenda across time. The newscasts of four major German television stations for the entire year of 1986 were compared with 53 weekly national opinion polls. Brosius and Kepplinger found significant agenda-setting effects for five issues: an adequate energy supply, East-West relations, European politics, environmental protection, and defense.

Of course, what all six of the examples have in common—and share with hundreds of others—is a focus on issue salience.

Attributes: The Second Dimension

When we consider the key term of this theoretical metaphor—the agenda—in totally abstract terms, the potential for expanding beyond an agenda of issues becomes clear. In the majority of studies to date, the unit of analysis on each agenda is an object, a public issue.

Beyond the agenda of objects, there is also another dimension to consider. Each of these objects has numerous attributes—those characteristics and properties that fill in and animate the picture of each object. Just as objects vary in salience, so do the attributes of each object.

It might be useful here to draw on an analogy from sports. A baseball team (the object) has a roster of players (attributes), some of whom have emerged as stars both in the media's and the public's eyes. It is abundantly clear that the media help set levels of player status in the fan agenda. The team's status benefits from this focus on its stars. This is an example of agenda setting's second-dimension effect.

One of the best known and most discussed sports teams of all time is the New York Yankees. Some of the great individual players in Yankees' history—Babe Ruth, Joe Dimaggio, and Mickey Mantle—can be viewed here as attributes, each symbolic of a particular era in New York Yankees' history. Baseball fans debating the relative greatness of, for example, the 1927 and 1961 Yankees' teams (the objects), are drawn inevitably to a discussion of the relative merits of Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle (the attributes). These discussions would be fueled, at least in part, by what fans had read or seen in the mass media over their lifetimes about Ruth and Mantle. Clearly, the theory's second dimension comes into play in determining which team emerges atop the all-time Yankee fan agenda.

Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of attributes for thinking about these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles. An important part of the news agenda and its set of objects are the perspectives and frames that journalists and, subsequently, members of the public, employ to think about and talk about each object. These perspectives and frames—called semantic devices—draw attention to certain attributes and away from others.

How news frames effect public opinion is the emerging second dimension of agenda setting. The first dimension is, of course, the transmission of object salience. The second dimension is the transmission of attribute salience. As this new research frontier broadens our perspective on the agenda-setting role of the news media, Bernard Cohen's famous dictum must be revised. In a succinct summary statement that separated agenda setting from earlier research on the effects of mass communication, Cohen (1963) noted that although the media may not tell us what to think, the media are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about. Explicit attention to the second dimension of agenda setting further suggests that the media also tell us how to think about some objects. Could the consequences of this be that the media do tell us what to think?

Revisiting Our Research Legacy

The emergence of this second theoretical dimension was prompted by a new look at some scattered fragments in the literature, including key studies from the earliest years of agenda-setting research.

Candidate Images

Two studies from the 1976 U.S. presidential election concisely illustrate the second dimension of agenda setting. The first is an ambitious nine-wave panel study that searched both traditional and new domains of agenda setting (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). Reported in *Media Agenda Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images and Interest* (Weaver et al., 1981), the title of the book is a succinct summary.

The second word in the subtitle, images, is central to our discussion of the second dimension of agenda setting. A striking degree of correspondence was found between the agenda of attributes in the *Chicago Tribune* and the agenda of attributes in Illinois voters' descriptions of presidential candidates Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. The median value of the cross-lagged correlations between the 14-trait media agenda and the subsequent public agenda was .70.

A separate look at the 1976 presidential primaries (Becker & McCombs, 1978) also found considerable correspondence between the agenda of attributes in *Newsweek* and the agenda of attributes in New York Democrats' descriptions of the contenders for their party's presidential nomination. Especially compelling in this evidence is that the correspondence between the two agendas increased from .64 to .83 from mid-February to late March among their panel of Democrats.

Neither of these studies of candidate images during the 1976 presidential election were originally thought of in terms of a second dimension of agenda setting. They do fit that conceptualization, however, and they do offer significant evidence that the news media can set the agenda of attributes that define the pictures of candidates in voters' minds.

Facets of Issues

Two other studies extended issue salience—the central focus of agenda setting—into the second dimension. Marc Benton and Jean Frazier (1976) presented a detailed analysis of a recurring major concern—the economy. Agenda-setting effects were found for newspapers, but not for TV news, for two sets of attributes: the specific problems, causes, and proposed solutions associated with the general topic of the economy (.81); and the pro and con rationales for economic solutions (.68). Benton and Frazier

called these facets of the economic issue "levels of information holding." These facets also can be labeled as sets of attributes or frames.

At almost the same time as the Benton and Frazier (1976) study of the economy, David Cohen (1975) studied another complex issue in-depth, examining six facets of a local environmental issue in Indiana. He found a strong level of correspondence (.71) between the picture in people's minds and local newspaper coverage about the development of a large, man-made lake.

Both of these in-depth probes of a single public issue used the classic design of the original Chapel Hill study—comparison of the media agenda measured by content analysis with a public agenda measured through survey research. In both studies, however, there is a shift in focus from an agenda of objects to an agenda of attributes.

Another early foray into new domains explored some pictures in people's heads that were very different from anything done before—people's pictures of the future (Atwood, Sohn, & Sohn, 1978). Residents of a southern Illinois town were asked what changes they anticipated from the opening of two new coal mines in the area. Pertinent to the second dimension of agenda setting, these public perceptions about the expected impact of the new coal mines in the area closely matched (.75) the agenda of the local newspaper coverage on the mines.

All five of these studies offer compelling evidence for significant agenda-setting effects on an agenda of attributes. None of these studies, however, were conceptualized as second-dimension research. Researchers simply set out to explore some interesting variations of the agenda-setting idea.

Exploring the Second Dimension

Explicit theoretical recognition of a second dimension of the agenda-setting role of mass communication surfaced in a series of lectures and writings during the past 3 years (see, for example, McCombs, 1994; McCombs & Bell, in press; McCombs & Evatt, 1995). Empirical research has followed closely on the heels of these theoretical discussions. Appropriate to the history of agenda-setting research, which began with a series of U.S. presidential election studies, much of the new research has focused on elections. Also appropriate to the history of agenda-setting

research is that the geographic scope of these studies is global, embracing East Asia, North America, and Western Europe.

Japanese General Election

Toshio Takeshita and Shunji Mikami's (1995) study of the 1993 general election in Japan begins with a traditional agenda-setting look at general issue salience: Did the media's emphasis on certain campaign issues affect the perceived importance (salience) of those same issues by the voters?

Because the issue of political reform so thoroughly dominated the media agenda, Takeshita and Mikami (1995) used a more stringent test that takes into account a key corollary of agenda setting. Grounded in a long-standing assumption of media effects research, their corollary hypothesis asserts that the salience of the political reform issue among members of the public is directly proportional to their level of exposure to the news media.

The exposure measure was further strengthened by the addition of a measure of each respondent's level of political interest. This combination of an exposure measure and a political interest measure yields a measure of attentiveness to political news. Now, the hypothesis to be tested asserts that the salience of the political reform issue among members of the public is positively correlated with their level of attentiveness to political news.

Analysis based on 650 Tokyo voters supports this hypothesis. For attentiveness to TV news, the correlation with the salience of political reform is .24. For attentiveness to newspapers, the correlation is .27. The partial correlations controlling for party identification, education, age, and sex are identical.

With evidence in hand that exposure to the news media influenced the salience of the political reform issue on the public agenda, Takeshita and Mikami (1995) moved on to the second dimension. Factor analysis of survey respondents' ratings of the personal importance of seven different facets of political reform revealed two distinct factors: (a) an "ethics-related factor," which emphasizes such proposals as "imposing legal controls on politicians' behavior" and "tightening discipline among politicians," and (b) a "system-related factor," which calls for change or reform of the electoral system.

Both TV news and the newspapers mentioned system-related aspects of reform twice as often as ethics-related aspects. Did this distinct media agenda influence the pictures of political reform in the minds of Japanese voters?

Answering this question about the second dimension of agenda setting involves testing two elegantly counterbalanced hypotheses that are stated in terms similar to Takeshita and Mikami's (1995) analysis of the first dimension. The first hypothesis asserts that the salience of system-related reform on the public agenda will be positively correlated with attentiveness to political news. In contrast, the second hypothesis anticipates the lack of any correlation between the salience of the ethics-related aspects of reform on the public agenda and attentiveness to political news. Both hypotheses are supported. This benchmark study, with its simultaneous examination of first- and second-dimension agenda-setting effects, finds robust evidence for both kinds of influence on the pictures in our heads.

Spanish Local Elections

Both the first and second dimensions of agenda setting were also studied in Spain during the May 28, 1995, elections for provincial parliaments and mayors of larger cities. Professor Esteban Lopez-Escobar, at the University of Navarra, and McCombs, at the University of Texas, worked with 20 students in a special 3-week seminar on agenda setting to research the parliamentary elections for the province of Navarra in northern Spain and the election of a mayor in its capital city, Pamplona.

The first-dimension hypothesis asserted the presence of agenda setting's main effect. We wanted to see if this effect would replicate in the context of a Spanish local election. Unlike the Japanese election study, which focused on one key national issue, we examined the full agenda of local issues.

The second-dimension hypothesis also sought the replication of agenda-setting effects found in other countries. Rather than studying issues, however, we cast our exploratory net wide and shifted our attention to the images of the candidates for mayor and parliament. Because five different political parties had candidates competing for both offices, this was a rich opportunity to match the media's picture of these candidates with the public's picture.

Preliminary examination of the data is encouraging. These data suggest that this study will be an important complement to the Japanese election study and a key opening gambit in the exploration of the second dimension of agenda setting. Together, these two initial studies, one in Asia and one in Europe, suggest significant mass communication influence on the pictures in our heads of both public issues and political candidates—an influence that replicates across vastly different cultures.

Texas Public Opinion

Outside the election tradition of agenda setting, the rapid rise of public concern about crime in the United States during 1993 and 1994 offers an intriguing opportunity for examining the agenda-setting influence of mass communication (Ghanem & Evatt, 1995). In 1992, when the Texas Poll asked what was the most important problem facing the country, only 2% named crime. In the fall of 1993, however, this jumped to 15%, and in two polls during the first 6 months of 1994 more than one third of the Texas Poll respondents named crime. This is an unusually high level of concern. Concern has abated somewhat during the past year, but about 20% to 25% of Texans still name crime as the most important problem.

Ironically, during this same time period, 1993 to the present, although public concern over crime has risen to unusually high levels, the best measures of the reality of crime indicate that the rate of crime is declining. It is an obvious setting for agenda-setting research. Salma Ghanem and Dixie Evatt (1995) are comparing public opinion trends in Texas with news coverage about crime in both local and national news media using a first- and second-dimension agenda-setting schema.

The first dimension is the influence of news coverage on the salience of crime on the public agenda. Here, the evidence is very clear. News coverage of crime in local newspapers and on local TV news, but not on national TV news, is strongly linked to subsequent levels of public concern about crime. Across an 18-month period, the match between the trend in public opinion and the pattern of crime coverage is .83 for newspapers and 1.0 for local television news. The rise and fall of crime news is mirrored in subsequent public opinion.

Ghanem and Evatt's exploration of the second dimension of agenda setting focuses on three attributes of news stories about crime that link the news event to the audience: (a) social distance, (b) connectedness of

victim and perpetrator, and (c) sense of protection. Preliminary analysis of the Texas data reveals some agenda-setting effects for all three of these frames.

New Theoretical Frontiers

One of the strengths of agenda-setting theory that has prompted its continuing growth has been its compatibility and complementarity with a variety of other social science concepts and theories. At various points, the theory of agenda setting has incorporated or converged with other communication subfields. Incorporated concepts include gatekeeping and status conferral. Conceptual complements include the spiral of silence and cultivation analysis. Discussion of a second dimension of agenda setting introduces a key contemporary concept—framing.

Specifically in terms of salience, Entman (1993) stated,

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

To paraphrase Entman in the language of the second dimension of agenda setting, framing is the selection of a small number of attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed.

There are consequences of framing for subsequent attitudes and behavior. How a topic is framed does more than influence the pictures in our heads. As Lippmann (1922) pointed out, our behavior is a response not to the actual environment but rather to the pseudoenvironment that is pictured in our heads.

Conclusion

News coverage can influence the salience of objects on the public agenda. This is the first dimension of agenda setting. The framing of those objects on the media agenda can also influence the pictures of those

objects in our heads. This is the second dimension of agenda setting. There are also feedback effects from framing. In the best cumulative tradition of science, knowledge of the agenda-setting role of mass communication continues to grow. To rephrase Cohen's (1963) classic remark, the media may not only tell us what to think about, they also may tell us how and what to think about it, and even what to do about it.