



Encyclopedia of Communication Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory

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Agenda-setting theory, as originally formulated in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, explains the relationships between the emphasis that the mass media place on issues and the importance that media audiences attribute to those issues. While agenda-setting theory started out as an explanation of media impact on political behavior and attitudes during election years—specifically, the ways that news media coverage can prioritize issues, or *set the agenda*, for the public—in the decades since McCombs and Shaw's initial study was published, the theory has inspired hundreds of subsequent explorations into the ways that media and other institutions prime and frame issues and events for their audiences and therefore influence and shape public opinion, either intentionally or unintentionally. As a result, agenda-setting theory has had a profound influence, not only on mass communication and political communication research, but also on the development of various organizational communication, persuasion, and diffusion-of-innovations theories. At the same time, the original theory has been revised by Maxwell McCombs, one of its codevelopers, in ways that expand and even contradict one of its key tenets.

Early Days of Agenda-Setting Research

Although McCombs and Shaw were the first scholars to speak of an *agenda-setting function* of the mass media, the idea that media contribute to audience perceptions, values, and priorities predates their study. Indeed, McCombs and Shaw used a famous quotation by political scientist Bernard Cohen as a way of encapsulating their own early conception of agenda setting. As Cohen had observed in 1963, 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*.” In other words, the idea behind McCombs and Shaw's original notion of agenda-setting theory is that while the media do not tell us what attitudes or opinions we should have (what to think) and do not set out to deliberately or purposely engineer public opinion, they do tell us which issues we should be focusing on (what to think about)—that is, which issues are most important and therefore most worthy of inclusion on our mental agendas.

What was groundbreaking about their 1972 article, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” was that McCombs and Shaw provided empirical support for the claim that the news media priorities become public priorities. Their article detailed the results of a study they conducted during the 1968 presidential campaign in which they asked 100 registered yet uncommitted voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a set of fairly simple questions: “What are you *most* concerned about these days? That is, regardless of what politicians say, what are the two or three main things which you think the government *should* concentrate on doing something about?” At the same time, McCombs and Shaw analyzed the political news contents of the mass media used by Chapel Hill voters during the campaign (four local newspapers, *The New York Times*, the newsmagazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, and the NBC and CBS evening news broadcasts). McCombs and Shaw found an almost perfect correlation between the issues listed by the voters as most important and the topics that were given the most space, time, and prominence in the news media. Additionally, the priority order given by voters to the issues almost perfectly matched the relative amounts of time or space given by the media to coverage of those issues.

McCombs and Shaw concluded that there is a strong relationship between the emphasis placed on issues by the media (that is, the *media agenda*) and voters' own judgments about the salience and importance of campaign issues (that is, the *public agenda*). The researchers suggested that this was a straightforward, one-way, causal relationship, meaning that we learn from the media not only about an issue but also how much importance to attach to it. More broadly, by seeing an issue covered in the news media—and seeing it covered repeatedly and with great emphasis—we come to share with the media the view that the issue has legitimacy and thus place it on our own agendas.

Evolutions and Revolutions

The original McCombs and Shaw study inspired a variety of questions and challenges by other communication researchers (and ultimately, even by McCombs himself). The studies in which these questions and challenges were investigated resulted in numerous revisions and extensions to the theory's initial formulation. Among the more important issues raised in the years since the first agenda-setting research was published are the following:

Who Sets the Media's Agenda?

Many researchers raised what might appear to be an obvious question: If the news media set the agenda for the public, then who (or what) sets the media agenda? Indeed, several scholars have suggested that the public agenda has an effect on the media agenda: audiences make clear to the media (through ratings, audience studies, market research, and consumption patterns) what they want to watch and read about, and the media simply respond. In other words, the media are market driven and thus give their audiences what they know will sell. Other scholars have argued that politicians and public relations practitioners contribute to the setting of the media agenda. In any case, news organization executives do not construct the media agenda in a vacuum.

How Many Agendas?

Everett Rogers and James Dearing believed that agenda-setting theory should acknowledge the coexistence and interrelationships among three agendas: In addition to the *public agenda* and the *media agenda*, Rogers and Dearing argued, scholars should also attend to the *policy agenda*—the hierarchy of issues that governments and other policy makers act on. In some cases, no one group sets the agendas for the others; rather, the real-world importance of an issue or event (e.g., a major earthquake or an act of war) will equally affect all three, and therefore all three groups will agree on its importance without one group's influencing the others.

Agenda building was offered by Rogers and Dearing as a more appropriate term than *agenda setting* to characterize this collective, reciprocal process.

Do the Media (Also) Tell Us What to Think?

The most important challenges to the original claims of agenda-setting research directly rebut Bernard Cohen's claim that the media tell us only what to think about but not what to think. Indeed, since the mid-1980s, communication scholars have published hundreds of studies showing that the media do tell us both what to think about (which issues to focus on) and what to think (which attitudes and judgments to have about them). Moreover, these scholars argue, there is a connection between the two: The perceived *salience* of an issue (the relative prominence given to an issue by the media and, presumably, agreed on by audiences) is related to the *evaluations* that audience members have about the political actors associated with the issue. Thus, agenda-setting scholarship—and agenda-setting theory—has expanded to encompass both the cognitive aspects of the agenda-setting function (the setting or structuring of the agenda by the mass media) and its affective or emotional aspects (influences on how audiences feel about the items on the agenda).

Central to this expansion have been the concepts of *priming* and *framing*, which McCombs and other theorists now claim to be natural extensions of agenda setting. Just as priming a pump prepares the device to work quickly and readily, the repetition and prominence given to a media message about a topic is said to prime our thoughts about that topic: The topic is brought to the forefront of our active cognition, becomes more immediately available to memory, and is thus made more salient (more quickly and readily remembered). As certain issues are primed, so are our attitudes about those issues and their attributes—attitudes that are formed in

part by their media framing.

When applied to news coverage, the term *framing* describes the process of organizing, defining, and structuring a story. Many media theorists argue that even when journalists intend to be objective or balanced in their coverage, they necessarily report on issues in ways that give audiences cues as to how to understand the issues, including which aspects of the issues to focus on and which to ignore. Indeed, the core task of all media gatekeepers—to determine which stories to include or exclude from a given day's newspaper or broadcast and what to emphasize within those stories that are included—*itself* frames the issues covered in their publications and programs. Beyond inclusion-exclusion decisions, news producers present or represent issues and political actors in specific ways; how a story is told contributes to its framing and therefore to the communication of how the issues and actors comprising the story should be evaluated by the audience. (Even a seemingly straightforward headline about an election result inevitably involves a framing choice: An editor must decide whether the result should be framed as “Smith beats Jones” or, alternatively, as “Jones loses to Smith.”)

Limitations to Agenda Setting's Power

Although agenda-setting theory and research now encompass both the what-to-think-about and the what-to-think components of Cohen's formulation, debate still swirls around the core questions of media influence, namely, how directly and to what degree the media set the public agenda. Recent studies suggest that personal variables can mitigate the effects of media agenda setting on individual audience members. Those viewers who do not find the media (or a particular media outlet or source) credible are less likely to have their agendas set by the media. Similarly, viewers who actively disagree with the news values of the sources they use (“How could CNN possibly consider *that* to be an important story?”) will be less susceptible to the agenda-setting function of the media. Still, the findings of nearly four decades of agenda-setting, -priming, and -framing research provide a great deal of support for the claims first made in the 1960s and 1970s by Cohen and by McCombs and Shaw.

- agenda setting
- agenda-setting theory
- agendas
- set theory
- media
- news media
- Maxwell McCombs

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See also

- [Diffusion of Innovations](#)
- [Framing Theory](#)
- [Media and Mass Communication Theories](#)
- [Media Effects Theories](#)
- [Political Communication Theories](#)
- [Public Opinion Theories](#)

Further Readings

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