

8. týden - Konstrukce (nastolování) mediální agendy (agenda setting)

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News Influence on Our Pictures of the World

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News impacts many facets of our daily lives! How we dress for work, sometimes the route we take to work, what we plan to do this weekend, our general feelings of well-being or insecurity, the focus of our attention toward the world beyond immediate experience, and our concerns about the issues of the day all are influenced by the daily news.

Occasionally, our total behavior is instantly and completely dictated by the news. Everyone old enough to remember at all remembers where they first heard the news of John F. Kennedy's assassination and how so much of the next 3 or 4 days was spent absorbing and discussing the news. Even on less traumatic occasions, millions of Americans follow the national political conventions, watch the presidential candidates debate, or follow the tabulation and projection of the nation's vote on election night. And daily, millions of citizens dutifully glean their knowledge of politics and public affairs from the pages of their local newspaper.

For the vast majority of Americans, this use of the mass media, coupled with brief visits to the voting booth on election day, represents their total participation in politics. This is one of the reasons why the most enduring and sustained line of scholarly research on mass communication traces the influence of the news media on voter behavior. Beginning with the classic study of Erie County, Ohio, by Columbia

University sociologists Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) during the 1940 U.S. presidential election, there has been an ever-widening array of studies exploring the impact of news media on voter behavior. But as sociologists Lang and Lang (1959) noted, the influence of the news media extends far beyond the political campaigns:

All news that bears on political activity and beliefs—and not only campaign speeches and campaign propaganda—is somehow relevant to the vote. Not only during the campaign, *but also in the periods between*, the mass media provide perspectives, shape images of candidates and parties, help highlight issues around which a campaign will develop, and define the unique atmosphere and areas of sensitivity which mark any particular campaign. (p. 226)

Over a half century ago, Lippmann (1922) also noted this role of the news media in defining our world, not just the world of politics during and between elections, but almost all of our world beyond immediate personal and family concerns. The issues, personalities, and situations toward which we hold feelings of endorsement or rejection, those points of attention about which pollsters seek the public pulse, are things about which we depend on the media to inform us.

Lippmann made an important distinction between the *environment* (i.e., the world that is really out there) and the *pseudo-environment* (i.e., our private perceptions of that world.) Recall that the opening chapter of his book, *Public Opinion*, is entitled "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." And, as Lippmann eloquently argued, it is the news media that sketch so many of those pictures in our heads. This view of the impact of news was congruent with both scholarly and popular assessment in Lippmann's day of the power of mass communication, views that grew out of experiences with mass communication and propaganda during World War I. But subsequent scholarly investigations, such as the Erie County study, led scholars down another path in later decades.

Focused squarely on the ability of the news media and mass communication to persuade and change voters' attitudes, early empirical studies of mass communication instead discovered the strength of the individual, secure in his or her personal values and social setting and inured from change. The result was the law of minimal consequences, a scientific statement of a limited-effects model for mass communication. Although this law may have been the proper palliative for the sometimes near-hysterical ascription of super persuasive powers to mass communication, such a constrained view of mass communication overlooks many effects that are plausibly ascribed to the mass media, especially to the news media.

After all, it is not the goal of professional journalists to persuade anybody about anything. The canons of objectivity, which have dominated professional journalistic practice and thought for generations, explicitly disavow any effort at persuasion. This is not to say that the news stories of the day are not exactly that, news stories. They are indeed! And like all stories, they structure experience for us, filtering out many of the complexities of the environment and offering a polished, perhaps even literary, version in which a few objects and selected attributes are highlighted. Many scholars have shifted their attention to the audience's experience with these stories.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Explorations of audience attention and awareness signal a shift to research on the cognitive, long-term implications of daily journalism, research that begins to test empirically the ideas put forward by Lippmann in the 1920s. Rather than addressing mass communication from the perspective of a model of limited effects, research in the 1960s began to consider a variety of limited models of effects.

As the history of science repeatedly demonstrates, just changing the perspective—or dominant paradigm, as Kuhn (1970) termed it—changes the picture sketched by the empirical evidence. Consider, for example, the large body of evidence on knowledge of public affairs. From the perspective of a model of limited effects, Hyman and Sheatsley's (1947) portrait of low levels of knowledge about public affairs and the existence of a sizable group of "chronic know-nothings" is hardly surprising.

But shifting the perspective to limited models of media effects focuses attention on those situations in which the transfer of functional information of some sort from the mass media to individuals in the audience does take place. Part of the scientific puzzle, of course, is to identify exactly what is transferred—the denotative message and its "facts," the cultural and individual connotations associated with those facts and the style of their presentation, or some other attribute of the message.

Part of this new look at mass communication has been the discovery that the audience not only learns some facts from exposure to the news media, but that it also learns about the importance of topics in the news from the emphasis placed on them by the news media. Considerable evidence has accumulated that journalists play a key role in shaping our pictures of the world as they go about their daily task of selecting and reporting the news.

Here may lie the most important effect of the mass media: their ability to structure and organize our world for us. As Cohen (1963) remarked,

the press may not be very successful in telling us what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about! This ability of the mass media to structure audience cognitions and to effect change among existing cognitions has been labeled the agenda-setting function of mass communication.

AGENDA-SETTING ROLE OF NEWS

Initially studied in the traditional context of mass communication and voter behavior, the concept of agenda setting took its metaphorical name from the idea that the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda. Through their routine structuring of social and political reality, the news media influence the agenda of public issues around which political campaigns and voter decisions are organized.

Each day journalists deal with the news in several important ways. First, they decide which news to cover and report and which to ignore. Next, all these available reports must be assessed. On the typical daily newspaper, over 75% of the potential news of the day is rejected out of hand and never transmitted to the audience. There is not enough space in the newspapers to print everything that is available. Choices must be made. These are the first steps in the gatekeeping routine. But the items that pass through the gate do not receive equal treatment when presented to the audience. Some are used at length and prominently displayed. Others receive only brief attention. Newspapers, for example, clearly state the journalistic salience of an item through its page placement, headline, and length.

Agenda setting asserts that audiences acquire these saliences from the news media, incorporating similar sets of weights into their own agendas. Even though the communication of these saliences is an incidental and inevitable byproduct of journalistic practice and tradition, these saliences are one of the attributes of the messages transmitted to the audience. Agenda setting singles out the transmission of these saliences as one of the most important aspects of mass communication. Not only do the news media largely determine our awareness of the world at large, supplying the major elements for our pictures of the world, they also influence the prominence of those elements in the picture!

The basic idea of an agenda-setting role of the news media can be traced at least as far back as Lippmann, and a variety of empirical evidence about mass communication influence on voting can be interpreted—post hoc, of course—in agenda-setting terms. But the concept of

an agenda-setting role for the news media was put to direct empirical test in the 1968 presidential election when McCombs and Shaw (1972) simultaneously collected data on the agenda of the news media and the agenda of the public. Reasoning that any impact of the news media was most likely to be measurable among undecided voters, their study surveyed undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and content analyzed the local and national news media, both print and broadcasting, regularly used by these voters. The high degree of correspondence between these two agendas of political and social issues established a central link in what has become a substantial chain of evidence for an agenda-setting role of the press.

This early study also firmly established the viability of the concept of agenda setting, a limited model of media effects, vis-à-vis the concept of selective perception, a key explanatory element in the then-prevailing model of limited effects. Although still undecided about their presidential ballot, some of these Chapel Hill voters were leaning toward the Republican or Democratic candidate. Using this preference, comparisons were made between these voters' agendas and two different press agendas (viz., the total agenda of issues reported in the news or only the agenda of issues attributed to the preferred party and its candidates). If the correlation between voters' agenda and the total news agenda is the highest, this is evidence of agenda setting. If the correlation with the preferred party's agenda is higher, there is evidence of selective perception. Out of 24 comparisons, 18 favored an agenda-setting interpretation.

Correlations alone do not establish the causal assertion that the news media influence the public agenda. These correlations might even be spurious, an artifact resulting from a common source for both the news and public agendas. However, the rebuttal to this argument as well as new evidence buttressing the concept of an agenda-setting role for the news media was reported by Funkhouser (1973) from an intensive study of public opinion trends in the 1960s. His creative secondary analysis brought together three key elements: (a) public opinion, assessed by the Gallup Poll's question about the most important problem facing the nation; (b) news coverage, determined by a content analysis of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*; and (c) statistical indicators of "reality" for these key concerns of the 1960s. Replicating the findings from the Chapel Hill voter study, Funkhouser found substantial correspondence between public opinion and news coverage. But most important, he found little correspondence between either of these and his statistical indicators of reality. For example, press coverage and public concern about Vietnam, campus unrest, and urban riots during the 1960s peaked considerably before the actual trends measured by

such indicators as the number of troops committed to Vietnam, number of campus demonstrations, and number of civil disturbances.

More recently, the agenda-setting power of the news media has been established experimentally in the laboratory. In a series of controlled experiments conducted by Iyengar and Kinder (1987), participants viewed television news programs that had been edited to highlight certain issues, such as national defense or pollution of the environment. When the participants' ratings of the importance of these experimentally manipulated issues were compared to the salience for them of other issues of the day, clear agenda-setting effects emerged. The issues emphasized in the experimental versions of the newscasts were perceived as more important. In some experiments, exposure to a single television news program created agenda-setting effects. Usually, agenda-setting effects were found only after viewing a number of newscasts.

In what may be the ultimate field study of the agenda-setting influence of the news media, Brosius and Kepplinger (1990) replicated the design of the original McCombs and Shaw study by comparing a content analysis of the major West German television news programs for an entire year with weekly public opinion polls on the issues considered most important by West Germans. Strong agenda-setting effects were found for five issues: energy, East-West relations, defense, the environment, and European Community politics. For other issues, news coverage trailed public opinion, or there simply was no correlation between the two. This pattern of findings makes the important point that the news media are not a monolithic "Big Brother" totally dictating public attention.

Agenda setting is a theory of limited media effects. One goal of contemporary research is to identify the conditions under which this agenda-setting influence of the news media does and does not occur. But the existence of an agenda-setting phenomenon is clear. Findings generated by two kinds of fieldwork methodologies, content analysis and survey research, provide evidence of its external validity, and experiments provide evidence of its internal validity. Additionally, the fact that much of this recent evidence, for example, the Iyengar and Kinder experiments and the Brosius and Kepplinger fieldwork, is based on television news further strengthens support for the basic hypothesis because other evidence in the literature (e.g., Shaw & McCombs, 1977) suggests that television news has weaker agenda-setting effects than newspapers.

Other major support for the basic idea of agenda-setting is found in Mackuen's (1981) comparison of national public opinion on eight issues from 1960 to 1977 with coverage in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*; Smith's (1987) examination of 19 local issues and *Louisville*

Times coverage over a period of 8 years; and Eaton's (1989) comparison of national concern about 11 major issues between 1983 and 1986 with news coverage of these issues on network television, in news magazines, and five major newspapers.

CONTINGENT CONDITIONS

Because the agenda-setting perspective is a model of limited media effects—unlike earlier views of powerful mass communication effects—Shaw and McCombs (1977) turned their attention in 1972 to simultaneous examination of the basic hypothesis and the contingent conditions that limited that hypothesis. Unlike the small-scale Chapel Hill study, which sought agenda-setting effects among undecided voters during the 1968 presidential election, their study during the next presidential election was a three-wave longitudinal study among the general population of voters in Charlotte, North Carolina. Its search for the contingent conditions limiting agenda setting established a theoretical goal that has prompted researchers to venture in many directions. Some scholars sought to identify the personal characteristics of voters or the content characteristics of news stories that limited or enhanced their influence (Winter, 1981). But the most fruitful examinations have examined not isolated properties of people, issues, or news content, but rather the interaction of issues and individual situations. Whereas broad descriptors, such as the income or level of education for an individual or the emotional content of an issue, are surrogates for this interaction, more explicit conceptualizations of this interaction have been the most valuable. Two examples are considered here in some detail.

Issues can be arrayed along a continuum ranging from obtrusive to unobtrusive. As the term implies, some issues literally obtrude in our daily lives. In 1990, the rapidly rising price of gasoline following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was such an obtrusive issue. No one depended on television or newspapers to inform them about the existence of this inflation. Daily experience put this issue in conversations and on the national agenda. In contrast, our knowledge of other issues, as Lippmann pointed out in *Public Opinion*, is virtually dependent on the news media. What most Americans knew about the situation in the Middle East and U.S. foreign and military policy came entirely from the news media.

For a great many issues there is considerable similarity in where they fall on the obtrusive/unobtrusive continuum for most Americans. This is true for the two examples just presented, inflated gasoline prices and the Middle East crisis. But there are issues where considerable variation

exists among individuals. Unemployment is a good example. For tenured college professors and even for most college students, employment is an unobtrusive issue. The salience of unemployment in our minds is essentially the product of our exposure to the issue in the news media (Shaw & Slater, 1988). But for many industrial workers in declining or cyclical industries, such as steel and automobiles, unemployment is a highly obtrusive issue. Even if it has not been experienced firsthand, these workers are aware of the trends in their industry and most likely have friends or family members who have been unemployed in recent years.

Broad brush portraits of the agenda-setting role of the media reveal strong effects for unobtrusive issues and no effects at all on obtrusive issues (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981; Winter & Eyal, 1981; Zucker, 1978). More finely etched portraits, which require knowing where an issue falls on the continuum for each individual, show similar results (Blood, 1981).

The concept of need for orientation is the psychological equivalent of the physical axiom that nature abhors a vacuum. Based on the idea of cognitive mapping, this concept recognizes that individuals who are in an unfamiliar setting will strive to orient themselves. For the voter confronted with the issues of a political campaign, there are two important criteria defining his or her level of need for orientation: the individual's level of interest in the election and the degree of uncertainty in that individual's mind about what the important issues are. Voters characterized by high interest in the election and a high degree of uncertainty about the issues, that is, those voters with a high need for orientation, are open to considerable agenda-setting influence. These individuals are exposed to more news about the campaign and its issues and—in line with the basic agenda-setting hypothesis—have personal agendas that more closely reflect the agenda of the news media. In contrast, voters with a low need for orientation are exposed less to news of the political campaign and show less agreement with the agenda of issues advanced by the news media. For example, among Charlotte voters with a high need for orientation, the correlation between their agenda and the coverage of issues in the local newspapers was +.68 in October of 1972; among voters with a low need for orientation, the correlation was +.29 in October of 1972.

The concept of need for orientation provides a general psychological explanation for the agenda-setting process and subsumes a number of lower order variables and more limited explanations. For example, research findings based on the distinction between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues can be explained in the more general terms of need for orientation. In most cases, persons should have less uncertainty

about obtrusive issues and, hence, a lower need for orientation. Of course, it might be counterargued that individuals sometimes have less interest in more distant, unobtrusive issues, thus lowering their need for orientation. In most cases, persons should have less uncertainty about obtrusive issues and hence, a lower need for orientation. But remember that the role of the news media as defined by its professional traditions and values is, at least in part, to stimulate our interest and involvement in such issues. In any event, the concept of need for orientation provides more specific descriptions and predictions than does the concept of obtrusive/unobtrusive issues.

SHAPING THE NEWS AGENDA

Initially, the focus in agenda setting was on the influence of the news agenda on the public agenda. For many persons, the term *agenda setting* is synonymous with the role of mass communication in shaping public opinion and public perceptions of what the most important issues of the day are. But in recent years there has been a broader look at the public opinion process. Early agenda-setting scholars asked who set the public agenda. The empirical answer was that to a considerable degree the news media set the public agenda. More recently, scholars have asked who sets the news agenda. The empirical answer to this question is not quite as parsimonious. In part, as common sense would dictate, the news agenda is set by external sources and events not under the control of journalists. But the news agenda also is set, in part, by the traditions, practices, and values of journalism as a profession. Whereas this newer facet of agenda setting may lack the parsimony of the original hypothesis, it has integrated a substantial sociology of news literature with the agenda-setting literature.

Looking first at external influences on the news agenda, the president of the United States is the nation's number one news maker. Even a president's dog can become better known than most government officials. Who are Feller, Checkers, and Millie? Many people can identify each of these dogs with a president. Can you name a secretary of state for each of those same presidents? Presidents enjoy tremendous access to the mass media. Teddy Roosevelt essentially invented the presidential press conference as the operational definition of the presidency's bully pulpit. Woodrow Wilson turned a dull report mandated by the Constitution, the State of the Union report, into a major public event (Juergens, 1981). Does this central role played by the president on the media stage allow the president to be the nation's number one agenda-setter?

Like so many questions about contemporary history, the answer is "Yes, sometimes" (Gilberg, Eyal, McCombs, & Nicholas, 1980; Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, & McCombs, 1989). The State of the Union address provides a particularly useful vantage point for observing the president's agenda-setting influence because it is the sole occasion when the president's agenda is laid out in a single document. Richard Nixon's 1970 State of the Union address did influence the subsequent coverage of NBC, *The New York Times*, and, ironically, the *Washington Post*. There also is weak evidence of similar effects following Ronald Reagan's 1982 State of the Union address. Furthermore, these correlations between the president's agenda and subsequent news coverage are not spurious relationships resulting from the influence of earlier news coverage on both the president and the press. But in contrast, comparisons of the president's agenda and news coverage reveal that the news media influenced both President Carter's 1978 State of the Union and Reagan's 1985 State of the Union address.

A broader look at the president's role as an agenda-setter is provided by Wanta's (1989) detailed examination of four recent administrations. Of course, as just noted, the news media can influence the president's agenda rather than the converse; or, the overall relationship between the president's agenda and the news agenda can be reciprocal. Across the administrations of Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan, there are numerous examples of all three relationships. On balance, the relationships are reciprocal. Of course, the comparisons here are between the overall presidential agenda, eight or more issues, and the news coverage of this entire set of issues. The president may well prevail as the agenda-setter on individual issues. Wanta provided specific evidence, for example, that President Carter was an agenda-setter for the energy issue and President Reagan for foreign affairs during their administrations.

SOURCES OF NEWS

In any event, because the president is the nation's number one news maker, the media spend considerable energy, time, and money on this coverage. In contrast, much of the daily news report is prepared from materials not just provided, but initiated, by the public information officers and public relations staffs of government agencies, corporations, and interest groups. At the beginning of this century, the president read all his own mail, the Washington press corps literally could gather around his desk to find out what the entire federal establishment was up to, and Ivy Lee was just inventing public relations. In today's corporate

and government world, public relations is a key component. Despite professional myths to the contrary, public relations also is necessary to today's news media. As Lippmann (1922) observed, all the reporters in the world could not keep an eye on all the events in the world because there are not that many reporters. Even the largest and best national newspapers with their huge staffs of reporters and editors, newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, obtain over half their daily material from press releases, press conferences, and other routine channels created by government agencies, corporations, and interest groups. Only a small proportion of the daily news results from the initiative and innovation of the news organizations (Sigal, 1973).

But to contradict another myth, this one especially popular along one stretch of the political continuum, public relations pronouncements on behalf of the establishment do not control the news agenda. Judy Turk (1985, 1986) examined the success of public information officers in six Louisiana state government agencies in placing their press releases in the major newspapers of the state. Their batting average was about .500. What the readers of Louisiana's major dailies knew about their state government was not limited to what the government passed out in press releases nor to those issues emphasized in those press releases.

Because the daily news obviously is rooted in the events and trends of the day, it is hardly surprising that those who are major players in these events and those who can enhance access to many of these events have some impact on the news agenda. But news media are not mirrors that simply reflect the deeds of the president or the pronouncements of public information offices. Journalism is a long-established profession with its own entrenched traditions, practices, and values. These are the filters through which the day's happenings are filtered and refracted for presentation in the newspaper or on television. The news is not a reflection of the day; it is a set of stories constructed by journalists about the events of the day.

Like Moliere's gentleman who learned that he had been speaking prose all his life, it sometimes is difficult to assess a situation in which we are immersed as producers and consumers of the news. To better highlight the situation here in the United States, two studies based on European observations are cited as examples of the power that these journalistic traditions, practices, and values have on the daily set of news stories. The first example comes from Sweden, where political parties often have direct connections with, including outright ownership of, daily newspapers. But as journalism increasingly has become professionalized, there is little benefit to the political parties from these affiliations. Although one might regard a party newspaper as a captive mouthpiece for the party line, Asp (1983) found this hardly to be the

case when he compared party agendas, as reflected in the acceptance speeches of party leaders, with the news coverage of the major campaign issues. Party leaders fared little better in their own newspaper's coverage than in the coverage afforded by the commercial newspapers and newspapers of other parties. The dominant filters on the political news of the day were journalistic values, not partisan values.

The strength of news values over partisan values also is reflected in *The Formation of Campaign Agendas*, a comparative study of American and British press coverage of national elections (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991). Whereas there obviously is variation among the behavior of each nation's news corps, the modal pattern among British journalists during the 1983 general election was to follow the lead of the parties. Television, especially, placed heavy emphasis on the substantive daily events of the campaign trail, reporting more of the material directly provided by the politicians in their morning press conferences, afternoon walkabouts, and evening rallies. The result is a substantial correlation between the party agendas and the agendas of the news media. In contrast, American journalists covering the 1984 U.S. presidential election followed the lead of the parties far less in determining the issue emphasis in their coverage. The correlations between the two agendas are very weak. In comparison to British journalists, U.S. journalists exercised considerably more professional discretion in the framing of the campaign agenda in the news. This discretionary power of the professional journalist seems to lie largely in the freedom to go beyond the issues and to report other aspects of the campaign, especially its strategic and tactical machinations.

Whereas this freedom is exercised more frequently by American journalists than by British journalists, one might ask just how well served the public is by this discretionary power. Numerous critics have decried the excessive reporting of campaign trail hoopla in recent U.S. elections (Buchanan, 1991). Be that as it may, both of these European examples underscore the strength of news values and ideology—whatever they may be—on the shaping of the daily news.

Detailed examination of how these values, traditions, and practices of journalists shape the news agenda has produced a vast library of books and articles over the past 25 years (e.g., Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1979; Golding & Elliot, 1979). This literature, collectively called the sociology of news, recently has been integrated by Shoemaker and Reese (1991) in *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*.

The strength of these internal professional influences on the shape of the news agenda is further revealed by the gatekeeping tradition in journalism research. Usually, such studies focused on the wire editors of daily newspapers and their decisions about which stories to select and

which to reject for the daily news report. A reanalysis of the classic Mr. Gates studies by Don Shaw revealed substantial correlations between the agendas of the wire services and Mr. Gates (McCombs & Shaw, 1976). An early study of news selection patterns among Iowa dailies also revealed that the pattern of topics reported by those newspapers closely resembled the pattern of topics offered by the Associated Press even though each newspaper used only a tiny proportion of the available wire report (Gold & Simmons, 1965).

In another facet of gatekeeping, the substantial agenda-setting role of *The New York Times* is also well known. Going beyond the usual anecdotal evidence of this influence, Reese and Danielian (1989) documented the agenda-setting role of *The Times* for the drug issue during 1986. Once *The Times* had assigned a reporter full time to drugs and led off with a front page story on crack, other major media quickly followed suit. Extensive coverage of the drug issue began to appear in the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*. One Sunday in May of 1986, all three New York City newspapers had extensive articles on drugs. It also is particularly obvious, according to Reese and Danielian, that *The New York Times* set the agenda on this issue for the television networks in 1986.

In summary, the question of who sets the news agenda is best pursued through that venerable metaphor of peeling the onion. The core of the onion, the daily news report, is surrounded and shaped by several layers of influence. At the outer layer are the news makers and events, including the pseudo-events arranged for news coverage, that provide much of the grist for the daily news. But all of this is shaped in turn by the values, practices, and traditions of journalism as a profession. And these professional decisions are reaffirmed by the behavior of the news leaders, especially *The New York Times*, who on occasion can set the agenda as firmly as any president or dictator.

SUMMING UP

Fifty million or more persons read a newspaper each day of the week. About the same number watch the news on television each day. Many Americans do both. One significant result of the audience's experience with these news stories is that over time the public comes to perceive that the important issues of the day are those emphasized in the news. Grounded in ideas first put forward by Lippman in the 1920s, this phenomenon has come to be called the agenda-setting role of the news media. Contrasting this view with earlier expectations of massive media effects on attitudes and opinions, Cohen (1963) noted that the press may

not be very successful in telling us what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about!

Initial empirical investigations of this agenda-setting influence of the news media were field studies employing survey research and content analysis to ascertain the degree of correspondence between the news agenda and the public agenda. This approach to observing the agenda-setting phenomenon may well have reached its apex in Brosius and Kepplinger's (1990) extensive investigation of agenda setting in West Germany, a study based on a year-long content analysis of television news and weekly public opinion polls indentifying the most important problem facing the country. Other tests of the basic hypothesis have taken agenda setting into the laboratory and verified this phenomenon experimentally (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Almost simultaneously with the initial empirical tests of the agenda-setting hypothesis, scholars began to explore the contingent conditions for this phenomenon. No one contends that the news media influence the salience of all issues for all people. Whereas many different characteristics of people and many characteristics of the news have been identified as contingent conditions affecting the strength of the agenda-setting relationship, two conceptualizations of the interaction between issues and individual situations have proved especially valuable. These are the concepts of need for orientation and obtrusiveness/unobtrusiveness.

Need for orientation is based on the psychological assumption that individuals who are in an unfamiliar situation will be uncomfortable until they orient themselves. Elections, with their previously unknown or only vaguely known candidates or with their complex issues and the uncertainties of how to resolve them, frequently create situations where many voters feel a need for orientation. Under these circumstances they may turn to the news media for orientation and adopt its agenda. The agenda-setting influence of the news media increases with the degree of need for orientation among the audience. But this influence is largely limited to unobtrusive issues, those issues remote from personal ken. Some issues, such as inflation in general or the price of gasoline, obtrude into our daily lives. We experience them directly and do not depend on the news media for our knowledge of their significance. Both personal experience and a need for orientation are contingent conditions that provide important explanations for how the agenda-setting process works.

Consonant with the effects tradition in mass communication research, the early agenda-setting studies explored the impact of the news agenda on the public agenda. More recently, the news agenda has shifted from being an independent variable to a dependent variable. The

central research question has changed from who sets the public agenda to who sets the news agenda. Answers to this new question are best presented in terms of that venerable metaphor, peeling the layers of an onion.

At the outer layer, of course, are those events and activities that make up the stuff of the daily news. But only a small proportion of the day's events and activities ever make the news, and even fewer are directly observed by journalists. The observations of news sources, especially those organized in the form of press conferences and press releases, are key elements in the construction of the news agenda each day. But even the most powerful of these news sources, the president of the United States, plays a very limited part in setting the news agenda. Journalists' professional values, traditions, and practices shape their judgments about the use of this material. The strength of these internal professional influences is underscored by the concept of gatekeeping. Wire services influence the play of stories in local news media, and national newspapers, especially *The New York Times*, influence all the news media.

Who sets the public agenda? For many issues, it is the news media who exert considerable, albeit far from complete, influence on the public agenda. Who sets the news agenda? Of necessity, this is a shared responsibility, but the news media themselves are the dominant influence on the shape of the news agenda for most public issues.

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2

Growing Up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective

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Television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history. It is the mainstream of the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives. Its mass ritual shows no signs of weakening and its consequences are increasingly felt around the globe. For most viewers, new types of delivery systems such as cable, satellite, and VCRs signal even deeper penetration and integration of the dominant patterns of images and messages into everyday life.

Our research project, Cultural Indicators, has tracked the central streams of television's dramatic content since 1967 and has explored the consequences of growing up and living with television since 1974. The project has accumulated a large database that we have used to develop and refine the theoretical approach and the research strategy we call cultivation analysis (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980a; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990). In this chapter we summarize and illustrate our theory of the dynamics of the cultivation process, both in the United States and around the world. This chapter updates and expands the one prepared for *Perspectives on Media Effects* (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986).

opinion about a broad array of public policies. They examine changes in policy preferences expressed in successive public opinion polls in light of the intervening television news stories. Their sample of polls, covering eighty issues over fifteen years, demonstrates convincingly that television news stories affect policy preferences. Like other scholars, the authors point out that various contextual factors determine the degree and direction of news impact. The Page-Shapiro-Dempsey study illustrates how a major research venture, simultaneously involving many different issues over an extended time, can bring results when other, less ambitious studies fail to attain conclusive findings.

Most agenda-setting studies have combined content analysis of news media and interviews of media audiences to assess how well media priorities and audience priorities coincide. Shanto Iyengar's approach has been different. To make certain that audiences actually have been exposed to the particular news stories whose influence is under investigation, and to eliminate extraneous influences on their thinking as much as possible, Iyengar designed a series of laboratory tests. Subjects were exposed to stories with carefully controlled content and subsequently were tested in the laboratory for various types of agenda-setting effects. The experiment reported in Iyengar's essay demonstrates that news stories can guide the way audiences think about the causes of various social problems. It remains an intriguing but unanswered question, however, to what extent the artificial laboratory setting influences the results.

The last selection answers some questions—and raises several more—about the ultimate effects of television news and entertainment programs on public thinking and the democratic process. George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli discuss how popular entertainment programs affect the political thinking of people who spend four hours or more each day watching television. They also describe how television reality, although grossly distorted compared with the real world, becomes embedded in people's images of society.

2.1

The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press

Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw

Editor's Note. A major factor in reviving the pace of media effects research, after it had been throttled by the minimal effects findings of the 1960s, was a seminal article by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw. It appeared in 1972 in *Public Opinion Quarterly* and focused on the agenda-setting capacity of the news media in the 1968 presidential election. McCombs and Shaw concentrated on information transmission. This change away from attitudinal effects to an examination of what people actually learn from news stories sparked a spate of empirical research that demonstrated the media's importance as transmitters of political information.

Agenda-setting research continues to be productive in demonstrating and defining the relation between media coverage and the public's thinking. Like much research on political communication, it first was used to study the media's influence on public perceptions of presidential candidates, but it has moved beyond that narrow realm. In recent years, researchers have looked at a wider array of elections as well as at the influence of agenda setting in other political domains, such as public policy formation and perceptions about foreign affairs.

At the time of writing, both authors were associate professors in the School of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. McCombs and Shaw are widely viewed as the intellectual godfathers of the agenda-setting research approach. Although there are a few other claimants to that title, none have contributed as much to the continued vigor and development of current agenda-setting research. The selection is from *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1977).

The Popular View

Certainly in the popular view mass communication exerts tremendous influence over human affairs. The ability of television, newspapers,

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magazines, movies, radio, and a whole host of new communications technologies to mold the public mind and significantly influence the flow of history is a widely ascribed power. In the political arena, candidates spend substantial sums for the services of image-makers—a new kind of mass communication artist and technocrat who presumably works magic on the voters via the mass media.

Early social scientists shared with historians, politicians, and the general public a belief in the ability of mass communication to achieve significant, perhaps staggering, social and political effects. But beginning with the benchmark Erie County survey conducted during the 1940 presidential campaign,¹ precise, quantitative research on the effects of mass communication in election campaigns, public information campaigns, and on numerous public attitudes soon gave the academic world a jaundiced view of the power of mass communication.⁷ . . .

We moved from an all-powerful 1984 view to the *law of minimal consequences*, a notion that the media had almost no effect, in two decades! But despite the "law," interest in mass communication has proliferated during the past 15 years. Political practitioners, especially, continue to emphasize the use of mass communication in election campaigns.² Surely all this is not due simply to cultural lag in spreading the word about the law of minimal consequences. Rather it is because *mass communication does in fact play a significant political role*. This is not to say that the early research was wrong. It simply was limited. To gain precision, science must probe carefully circumscribed areas. Unfortunately, the early research on mass communication concentrated on attitude change. Given the popular assumption of mass media effects, it was not a surprising choice. But the chain of effects that result from exposure to mass communication has a number of links preceding attitude and opinion change. In sequence, the effects of exposure to communication are generally catalogued as:

Awareness —> Information —> Attitudes —> Behavior

Early research chose as its strategy a broad flanking movement striking far along this chain of events. But as the evidence showed, the direct effects of mass communication on attitudes and behavior are minimal. . . . So in recent years scholars interested in mass communication have concentrated on earlier points in the communication process: awareness and information. Here the research has been most fruitful in documenting significant social effects resulting from exposure to mass communication. People do learn from mass communication.

Not only do they learn factual information about public affairs and what is happening in the world, they also learn how much importance to

media. Considerable evidence has accumulated that editors and broadcasters play an important part in shaping our social reality as they go about their day-to-day task of choosing and displaying news. In reports both prior to and during political campaigns, the news media to a considerable degree determine the important issues. In other words, the media set the "agenda" for the campaign.

This impact of the mass media—the ability to effect cognitive change among individuals, to structure their thinking—has been labeled the *agenda-setting function of mass communication*. Here may lie the most important effect of mass communication, its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us. In short, the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think *about*.³

Assertions of Agenda-Setting

The general notion of agenda-setting—the ability of the media to influence the salience of events in the public mind—has been part of our political culture for at least half a century. Recall that the opening chapter of Walter Lippmann's 1922 book *Public Opinion* is titled: "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." As Lippmann pointed out, it is, of course, the mass media which dominate in the creation of these pictures of public affairs.⁴

More recently this assumption of media power has been asserted by presidential observer Theodore White in *The Making of the President, 1972*.

The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about—an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins.⁵

The press does more than bring these issues to a level of political awareness among the public. The idea of agenda-setting asserts that the priorities of the press to some degree become the priorities of the public. What the press emphasizes is in turn emphasized privately and publicly by the audiences of the press. . . .

Cognitive Effects of Mass Communication

This concept of an agenda-setting function of the press redirects our attention to the cognitive aspects of mass communication, to attention, awareness, and information. . . . [T]he history of mass communication research from the 1940 Erie County study to the present decade can be viewed as a movement away from short-range effects on attitudes and

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toward long-range effects on cognitions.⁶

Attitudes concern our feelings of being for or against a political position or figure. *Cognition* concerns our knowledge and beliefs about political objects. The agenda-setting function of mass communication clearly falls in this new tradition of cognitive outcomes of mass communication. Perhaps more than any other aspect of our environment, the political arena—all those issues and persons about whom we hold opinions and knowledge—is a secondhand reality. Especially in national politics, we have little personal or direct contact. Our knowledge comes primarily from the mass media. For the most part, we know only those aspects of national politics considered newsworthy enough for transmission through the mass media.]

Even television's technological ability to make us spectators for significant political events does not eliminate the secondhand nature of our political cognitions. Television news is edited reality just as print news is an edited version of reality. And even on those rare occasions when events are presented in their entirety, the television experience is not the same as the eyewitness experience.⁷

[Our knowledge of political affairs is based on a tiny sample of the real political world. That real world shrinks as the news media decide what to cover and which aspects to transmit in their reports, and as audiences decide to which news messages they will attend.]

[Yet, as Lippmann pointed out, our political responses are made to that tiny replica of the real world, the *pseudoenvironment*, which we have fabricated and assembled almost wholly from mass media materials.] The concept of agenda-setting emphasizes one very important aspect of this pseudoenvironment, the *salience* or amount of emphasis accorded to various political elements and issues vying for public attention.

Many commentators have observed that there is an agenda-setting function of the press and Lippmann long ago eloquently described the necessary connection between mass communication and individual political cognitions. But like much of our folk wisdom about politics and human behavior, it was not put to empirical test by researchers for over half a century.

Empirical Evidence of Agenda-Setting

[The first empirical attempt at verification of the agenda-setting function of the mass media was carried out by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 U.S. presidential election.⁸ Among undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina there were substantial correlations between the political issues emphasized in the news media and what the voters considered as the key issues in that election. The voters' beliefs about what

press coverage, even though the three presidential contenders in 1968 placed widely divergent emphasis on the issues. This suggests that voters—at least undecided voters—pay some attention to all the political news in the press regardless of whether it is about or originated with a favored candidate. This contradicts the concepts of selective exposure and selective perception, ideas which are central to the law of minimal consequences. Selective exposure and selective perception suggest that persons attend most closely to information which they find congenial and supportive.

In fact, further analysis of the 1968 Chapel Hill survey showed that among those undecided voters with leanings toward one of the three candidates, there was less agreement with the news agenda based on their preferred candidate's statements than with the news agenda based on all three candidates.

While the 1968 Chapel Hill study was the first empirical investigation based specifically on agenda-setting, there is other scholarly evidence in the mass communication/political behavior literature which can be interpreted in agenda-setting terms. Let's briefly consider several examples.

The first example comes from the 1948 Elmira study. . . . For an optimum view of the agenda-setting influence of the press, one should examine those Elmira voters with minimal interpersonal contact. . . . [F]or those voters the political agenda suggested by the media is not mediated, interpreted, or confronted by interpersonal sources of influence. These voters would seem especially open to the agenda-setting influence of the press.

And the influence was there. These Elmira voters moved with the trend of the times more than did the other voters. Like the national Democratic trend that mounted during the 1948 campaign, these Elmira voters moved rapidly into the Democratic column. The cues were there in the media for all. But persons without the conservative brake of interpersonal contacts moved most rapidly with the national trend reported in the media.

[The second example of agenda-setting comes from a study of county voting patterns in an Iowa referendum.] In this example it is easy to see the agenda-setting effects of both mass media and interpersonal news sources.

The question before the voters was calling a constitutional convention to reapportion legislative districts. Since large counties stood to gain and small counties to lose from reapportionment, the study anticipated a strong correlation between county population and proportion of votes in favor of the convention. In short, it was hypothesized that counties would vote their self-interest. And, overall, this was strikingly the case. Across all

But now let us consider whether this pattern is facilitated by the presence of agenda-setting institutions. Two sources of heightened awareness were considered: a citizens' committee in favor of the convention and a daily newspaper in the county.

In the 41 counties where the citizens' committee was active, the correlation was $+ .92$ between vote and population. In the 58 counties without such a group, the correlation was only $+ .59$. Similar findings are reported for the presence or absence of a local daily newspaper. In the 38 counties with a local daily, the correlation was $+ .92$. In the 61 counties without a daily, the correlation was only $+ .56$.

Each agenda-setting source made a considerable difference in the outcome. What about their combined impact? In 28 counties with both a local daily and a citizens' committee the correlation was $+ .92$. Where only one of these sources was present, the correlation declined to $+ .40$; and when neither agenda-setter was present, the correlation declined to $+ .21$.

[Self-interest may have motivated many voters. But unless the issue was high on the agenda—placed there via the newspaper and local citizens' committee—this motivation simply did not come into play.]

A similar "necessary condition" role for agenda-setting is found in a study of the distribution of knowledge among populations.¹⁰ Generally, there is a knowledge gap between social classes concerning topics of public affairs, typically documented by a rather substantial correlation between level of education and knowledge of public affairs. That is to say, as level of education increases, so does the amount of knowledge about public affairs. [But as communication scientist Phillip Tichenor and his colleagues discovered, the strength of this correlation, at least for some topics, is a direct function of the amount of media coverage. [They found a monotonic relationship between media coverage and the strength of the education/knowledge correlation. The more the press covers a topic, the more an audience—especially audience members with more education—learn.]

The Concept of Agenda-Setting

Agenda-setting not only asserts a positive relationship between what various communication media emphasize and what voters come to regard as important, it also considers this influence as an inevitable by-product of the normal flow of news.

[Each day editors and news directors—the gate-keepers in news media systems—must decide which items to pass and which to reject.] Furthermore, the items passed through the gate are not treated equally when presented to the audience. Some are used at length, others severely [Some are lead-off items on a newscast. Others follow much later.]

Newspapers clearly state the value they place on the salience of an item through headline size and placement within the newspaper—anywhere from the lead item on page one to placement at the bottom of a column on page 66.]

Agenda-setting asserts that audiences learn these saliences from the news media, incorporating a similar set of weights into their personal agendas. Even though these saliences are largely a by-product of journalism practice and tradition, they nevertheless are attributes of the messages transmitted to the audience. And as the idea of agenda-setting asserts, they are among the most important message attributes transmitted to the audience.

This notion of the agenda-setting function of the mass media is a relational concept specifying a strong positive relationship between the emphases of mass communication and the salience of these topics to the individuals in the audience. This concept is stated in causal terms: increased salience of a topic or issue in the mass media influences (causes) the salience of that topic or issue among the public.

Agenda-setting as a concept is not limited to the correspondence between salience of topics for the media and the audience. We can also consider the saliency of various attributes of these objects (topics, issues, persons, or whatever) reported in the media. To what extent is our view of an object shaped or influenced by the picture sketched in the media, especially by those attributes which the media deem newsworthy? Some have argued, for example, that our views of city councils as institutions are directly influenced by press reporting with the result that these local governing groups are perceived to have more expertise and authority than they actually possess.¹¹

Consideration of agenda-setting in terms of the salience of both topics and their attributes allows the concept of agenda-setting to subsume many similar ideas presented in the past. The concepts of status-conferral, stereotyping, and image-making all deal with the salience of objects or attributes. And research on all three have linked these manipulations of salience to the mass media.

Status-conferral, the basic notion of press agency in the Hollywood sense, describes the ability of the media to influence the prominence of an individual (object) in the public eye.

On the other hand, the concept of stereotyping concerns the prominence of attributes: All Scots are thrifty! All Frenchmen are romantic! Stereotyping has been criticized as invalid characterization of objects because of its overemphasis on a few selected traits. [And the media repeatedly have been criticized for their perpetuation of stereotypes, most recently of female roles in our society.]

The concept of image-making, now part of our political campaign jargon, covers the manipulation of the salience of both objects and

attributes. A political image-maker is concerned with increasing public familiarity with his candidate (status-conferral) and/or increasing the perceived prominence of certain candidate attributes.

In all cases, we are dealing with the basic question of agenda-setting research: How does press coverage influence our perception of objects and their attributes?

Issue Salience and Voting

Political issues have become salient as a factor in voter behavior in recent years. The importance of party identification, long the dominant variable in analysis of voter decisions, has been reduced. This stems both from a conceptual rethinking of voter behavior and from an empirical trend. . . .

. . . In 1960 the Michigan Survey Research Center, whose earlier work has provided much of the evidence for the key role of party identification, added a new set of open-ended questions to its interview schedule seeking information about the voter's own issue concerns—that is, those issues which were salient to the individual voter—and the perceived link between those issues and the parties.

Analysis of these questions reveals a major role for issue salience in the presidential vote decision. For example, in predicting voting choice in 1964 the weights were .39 for candidate image, .27 for party identification, and .23 for issues. (Each weight controls for the influence of the two other factors.) . . .

In 1972 issues took center stage. Summing up its analysis of that election, the Survey Research Center concluded: "Ideology and issue voting in that election provide a means for better explaining the unique elements of the contest than do social characteristics, the candidates, the events of the campaign, political alienation, cultural orientations, or partisan identification."¹²

Voters do respond to the issues. The new evidence on the impact of issues appearing in the late 1960s and early 1970s provided empirical vindication for V. O. Key, Jr.'s view that "voters are not fools." Key had long contended that voters in fact responded to the issues and to the events creating and surrounding those issues.¹³ Again, anticipating the concept of an agenda-setting function of the press operating across time to define political reality, Key argued that the "impact of events from the inauguration of an administration to the onset of the next presidential campaign may affect far more voters than the fireworks of the campaign itself."¹⁴ Even the benchmark Erie County survey found that events between 1936 and 1940 changed more than twice as many votes as did the 1940 presidential campaign itself.

It is, of course, the press that largely structures voters' perceptions of

political reality. As we shall see, the press can exert considerable influence on which issues make up the agenda for any particular election. Not only can the press influence the nature of the political arena in which a campaign is conducted but, on occasion, it can define (albeit inadvertently) an agenda which accrues to the benefit of one party. To a considerable degree the art of politics in a democracy is the art of determining which issue dimensions are of major interest to the public or can be made salient in order to win public support.

In 1952 the Republicans, led by Dwight Eisenhower, successfully exploited the three "K's"—Korea, Corruption, and Communism—in order to regain the White House after a hiatus of twenty years. The prominence of those three issues, cultivated by press reports extending over many months and accented by partisan campaign advertising, worked against the incumbent Democratic party. Nor is 1952 an isolated example. One of the major campaign techniques discussed by political analyst Stanley Kelley in *Professional Public Relations and Political Power* is nothing more than increasing the salience of an issue that works to an incumbent's disadvantage.¹⁵

These are what social scientist Angus Campbell and his colleagues¹⁶ call *valence issues* in contrast to our usual consideration of *position issues* on which voters take various pro or con stances. A valence issue is simply a proposition, condition, or belief that is positively or negatively valued by all the voters. At least two, if not all three, of the 1952 K's were valence issues. . . . To the extent that the press (via its agenda-setting function) has a direct impact on the outcome of a particular election, it is likely to be through the medium of valence issues which directly accrue to the advantage or disadvantage of one political party. . . .

Notes

1. Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).
2. Ray Hiebert, Robert Jones, John Lorenz, and Ernest Lotito (eds.), *The Political Image Merchants: Strategies in the New Politics* (Washington: Acropolis Books, 1971).
3. See Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 13; also Lee Becker, Maxwell McCombs, and Jack McLeod, "The Development of Political Cognitions," in Steven H. Chaffee (ed.), *Political Communication*, Vol. 4, Sage Annual Reviews of Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1975), pp. 21-63.
4. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).
5. Theodore White, *The Making of the President, 1972* (New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 327.
6. Maxwell McCombs, "Mass Communication in Political Campaigns: Informa-

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