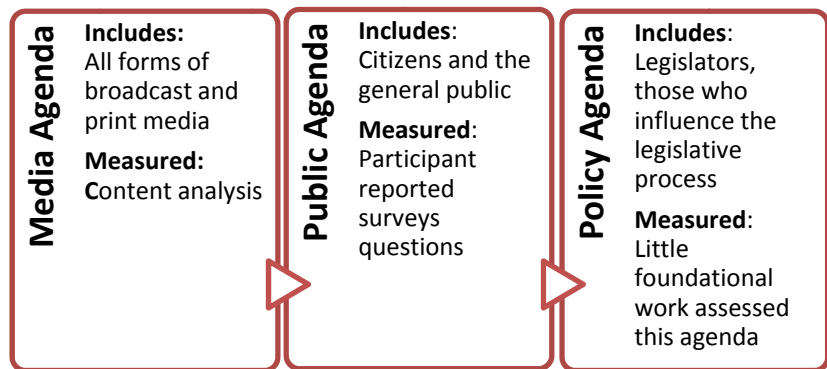


AGENDA SETTING THEORY

DEFINITION

“Put simply, media agenda-setting is the process whereby the news media lead the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues.” (Zhu & Blood, 1997)

This theory is oriented around the agendas of the three groups shown on the right. Included is a definition the means by which they are measured.



HISTORY

Agenda Setting Theory emerged from a 1972 article in *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Chapel Hill journalism professors, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw demonstrated that the mass media could affect public opinion in ways only previously speculated. This and would later become known as “the Chapel Hill study.”

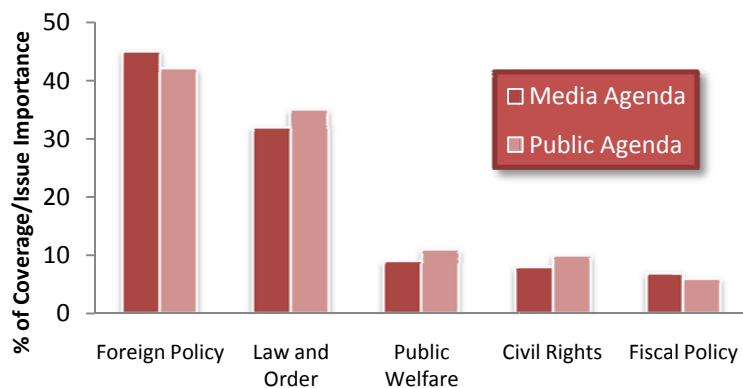


Figure 1: Rank-Order Comparison of Media and Public Agendas

Source: based on McCombs and Shaw (1972).

McCombs and Shaw analyzed content from newspapers and television during the 1968 presidential election to determine what topics the media focused on, and then surveyed 100 undecided voters in the Chapel Hill area to determine what issues were important to them.

They performed a rank order comparison, and found some stunning effects – correlations as high as .97. To McCombs and Shaw, it appeared as if public opinion was being shaped by the mass media. They labeled this phenomena “agenda-setting.”

EMPIRICAL SUPPORT

“These multiple methods [used to test agenda-setting] have demonstrated a clear casual influence of the media agenda upon the public agenda. It is likely that no other theoretical hypothesis in human communication research has received as much empiric attention by so many scholars and with such diverse methods as has agenda setting.” (Zhu & Blood, 1997)

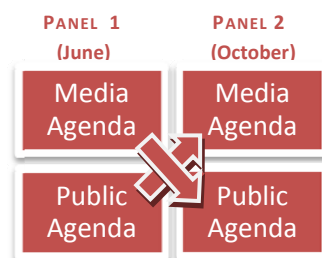


Figure 2: Correlations were calculated across panels. For example, to show a media influence on the public, a correlation between the Media Agenda of Panel 1 was correlated with the public agenda of Panel 2.

PROVING THE CAUSAL LINK

To establish a causal link, Shaw and McCombs (1977) performed a panel design study (see Figure 2) that included two samples at two different times, and calculated correlations between the media and the public across time.

This technique and others have been used to prove a directional influence of the media on the public. Some researcher, however, have found that the public also influences the media.

AGENDA SETTING IN PSYCHOLOGY

A number of researchers, especially in psychology, have abandoned the larger media/public focus and are now researching agenda-setting’s usefulness when considering how individuals cognitively decide what topics are important.

WHICH MEDIA IS BEST?

Research attempting to determine which media forms are most effective has provided mixed results. Some work, however, suggests that broadcast media has a quick impact, while print media may have a more enduring effect.

EXTENDING THE THEORY

In their bibliographic review, Rogers & Dearing (1993) found over 200 articles attempting to use agenda-setting theory. Since 1973, however, researchers in a number of studies and theoretical proposals have attempted to extend the original theory. Below are a few of the most important developments as highlighted by Miller (2004).

CONTINGENCY FACTORS

While there is a strong relationship between media and public agenda, it is far from perfect. Several contingencies have been made to explain the variable relationship.

NEED FOR ORIENTATION

Individuals actively seek information on specific topics. This need is composed of a high level of interest in addition to uncertainty about the topic (Weaver, 1977).

ISSUE OBTRUSIVENESS

What makes an issue more prone to the agenda setting effect? Zucker (1978) suggested that an issue is more “obtrusive” if the majority of the public has contact with the issue.

FURTHER READING

Entman, R. M. (2007).

Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 163-173.

This theoretical article takes a direct look at political power and media bias. Integrating framing and priming into a larger conceptualization of agenda-setting, Entman proposes that insufficient attention has been paid to the topic of bias, and provides recommendations on improved measures. This article concludes with a discussion of political power and the non-empirical uses of the term ‘bias’ in today’s media. Entman shares his personal point of view stating, “I do think it reasonable to suggest that when news clearly slants, those officials favored by the slant become more powerful, freer to do what they want without the anticipation that voters might punish them” (p. 170).

Tremayne, M., & Schmitz Weiss, A. (2005).

Issue Salience and Web Page Design: An Agenda Setting Experiment. *International Communication Association*, 1-21.

Presented as a conference paper, this research compared two different internet newspaper headline templates on the Washington Post website in order to determine which headline format was more effective in agenda-setting. The first format included the title and a brief explanation of the story. The second format only included the title. Overall, no difference between the formats were found, but on a topic level analysis, the short format proved more effective on headlines related to the war on terror and the war in Iraq.

SELECT REFERENCES

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176-185.

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Zhu, J., & Blood, D. (1997). Media Agenda-Setting Theory: Telling the Public What to Think About. In G. Kovacic (Ed.), *Emerging Theories of Human Communication* (pp. 88-114). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.