

Editor's introduction: Development of agenda-setting theory and research. Between West and East



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ABSTRACT: Much has changed in the area of agenda-setting research since the initial study by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 U.S. Presidential election. The complexities of today's world have led to several new challenges for agenda-setting research, both methodologically and theoretically. New technologies also have impacted the theoretical framework of agenda-setting effects. Despite the extensive previous research – recent estimates claim that there are between 400 and 500 agenda-setting studies – agenda-setting remains a timely (and timeless) theory with researchers continuing to examine new and important topics. Many of these new topics can be found in the accompanying studies. In this volume, studies have applied the agenda-setting theory in Spain, Poland, Turkey and Kosovo. Central Europe appears to be an ideal location for agenda-setting research, given the wide range of press freedom now being practiced in the former Communist countries. Some former Communist countries have granted the press a great deal of freedom.

KEYWORDS: agenda-setting research, first level, second level, theory and research, Central Europe



INTRODUCTION

Much has changed in the area of agenda-setting research since the initial study by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 U.S. Presidential election. Research has moved far beyond a simple message transferal model of media effects, in which the amount of coverage an issue receives in the news media influences the perceived importance of that issue among members of the public. There are vast amounts of research examining, for example, sources influencing the media agenda and factors affecting the magnitude of media influences. The second-level of agenda-setting effects, which deal with an agenda of attributes linked to objects in the news, has opened up new lines of inquiry that go well beyond the original cognitive effects proposed

in the first level of agenda-setting. And perhaps most importantly, agenda-setting has been applied to many different countries and cultures outside the United States. Clearly, agenda-setting is a global theory with a long and rich tradition.

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FUTURE CHALLENGES

The complexities of today's world have led to several new challenges for agenda-setting research, both methodologically and theoretically.

Research was so much simpler in the early days of agenda-setting research, when everyone had one telephone per household, and televisions received only three network newscasts. Phone surveys, once the staple of agenda-setting research, are now problematic. Most people with landline phones have caller ID. Many screen calls and refuse to answer if the phone number is not recognizable. Many potential respondents filter calls through answering machines. And of course, cellphone use has made it even more difficult to contact a representative sample of the population. In the U.S., cellphone users are charged for their time on the phone regardless of whether or not they initiated the call. This has led to restrictions on who can call whom.

New technologies also have impacted the theoretical framework of agenda-setting effects. Newspaper circulation and television news viewing have declined sharply. On the other hand, Internet use is growing in popularity. But since the Internet has such a wide range of information on endless topics, Internet users can selectively expose themselves to only topics that they agree with, perhaps leading to a spiral of polarization. There is some evidence to support this notion.

Also causing methodological and theoretical angst is the second-level of agenda-setting. Methodologically, attributes are much more difficult to identify than issues. First-level agenda-setting researchers often could determine the issue in a story from a headline. Attributes linked to objects in the news, however, demand a closer reading of the content. An individual story can have many objects: sources of quotes, the issue, a country, etc. And an individual object can have many attributes: cognitive attributes, for instance, such as leadership, compassion or extreme for a presidential candidate; affective attributes such as positive, neutral or negative. To complicate matters further, a cognitive attribute such as "determination" might be considered positive (strong leadership) by one respondent but negative (inflexible) by another.

PAST TRENDS

Nonetheless, research continues to expand – some might say it has exploded. At the core, several aspects of agenda-setting appear to be consistent.

First, research suggests that members of the public are active processors of media content. High educated individuals show the strongest agenda-setting effects – perhaps because they are best able to understand the significance of news reports or because they tend to utilize more mass media content. Regardless, the agenda-setting effect is not related to the earlier notion of a hypodermic need model, in which the media inject their messages into a passive body.

Second, the medium matters. The magnitude and duration of agenda-setting effects varies across the different mass media. Television news has a powerful, almost immediate effect that decays relatively quickly. Newspaper use has a slower but longer-term effect. Internet use logically provides more options for news information, though many users use online versions of traditional news media. Radio use is more complex. Many members of the public cannot differentiate between news journalists and news commentators (such as Rush Limbaugh in the U.S.). Thus, the slanted information transmitted by commentators interferes with traditional news media.

Third, not all media content has the same influence on all individuals. Individuals, as active processors of the news, employ selective exposure, perception and retention. As David Weaver noted in his concept of “Need for Orientation,” individuals expose themselves to issues that help alleviate this need for information about the news of the day. Messages dealing with issues that are relevant to an individual and help clear up uncertainty about an issue lead to the strongest agenda-setting effect.

Finally, while agenda-setting has been supported by the vast majority of findings in hundreds of studies, it remains a theory and not a law. Predicting how all individuals would react to media coverage is not possible. Each individual brings a unique background and previously held attitudes. Thus, while agenda-setting demonstrates a strong societal influence, it is at the individual level that many interesting differences are found.

Indeed, were agenda-setting effects uniform across all individuals and in all cases, we would have a law, leaving little room for thought-provoking research. Thus, our field needs continued research to determine the trends enhancing or inhibiting the agenda-setting effect.

AGENDA-SETTING IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

In this volume, studies have applied the agenda-setting theory in Spain, Poland, Turkey and Kosovo. Central Europe appears to be an ideal location for agenda-setting research, given the wide range of press freedom now being practiced in the former Communist countries. Some former Communist countries have granted the press a great deal of freedom (Estonia ranks 15 in press freedom, for example, according to Freedom House). Other nations maintain strong control of the nation’s media (Belarus ranks 188, with only seven countries below it). Logically, agenda-setting effects could differ across the different media systems.

In this special issue of *Central European Journal of Communication* entitled “Development of Agenda-Setting Theory and Research. Between West and East” we are interested in the new aspects of agenda-setting theory and results of research from Europe. We open the issue with an article by Maxwell McCombs. The co-founder of the agenda-setting research tradition discusses two aspects of the psychology of agenda-setting, the social psychology of academic research and contemporary research extending our theoretical knowledge about the psychology of the agenda-setting process. His research includes the impact of incidental learning and the visual content in TV news on first and second level agenda-setting effects, an expanded set of measures for the concept of need for orientation, and the consequences of agenda-setting effects for the formation of opinions and both issue priming and attribute priming of the affective dimension of opinions.

A powerful influence of mass media on the public agenda is described by Donald Shaw, Sherine El-Toukhy and Tom Terry. The authors explain the changing position of mass media in different decades. The researchers address the question of how we mix media message agendas to create compatible communities.

Agenda-setting research has a long tradition of research in many regions of the world. Wayne Wanta and Simona Mikusova show how the media depicted the world within a former Communist country. The study utilized an agenda-setting framework in a case study that examined the amount, type and tone of coverage that individual nations received in two Slovakian newspapers. The study demonstrates the usefulness of applying an agenda-setting framework in international news coverage, even when the source of the content involves news media in a relatively small country such as Slovakia. The content analysis demonstrates the portrait of individual countries that the news media painted. This media agenda in turn painted “pictures in the heads” of readers in Slovakia.

“Agenda setting, priming, framing – TV news in Poland during election campaigns 2005 and 2007. Comparative analysis” by Ewa Nowak and Rafał Riedel is one of the first studies in agenda-setting area in Poland. The goal of the study is to verify, based on empirical data, the agenda setting, framing and priming theoretical conclusions and to utilize them as interpretative narratives on the pre-election period of media discourse on Polish TV.

In addition to the national elections in Poland, the European Parliament election of 2009 also was analyzed. Wojciech Walczak presents the results of automated research conducted on the most popular Polish Internet news portals in the week of the 2009 European Parliament election as well as during four weeks prior to this event. Detailed analyses of the exposure levels of the main political parties are included and compared with the election results. This paper describes the quantitative analysis of the data gathered. The main similarities and differences in covering the election between portals are also discussed. Moreover, this article aims at introducing basic concepts of research tools, which allow automating the procedure of gathering data from the Internet and processing it.

The issue of the Journal includes also some results of Lindita Camaj's research. Her study suggests that during the 2007 campaign in Kosovo, political parties and mass media set the election agenda while disregarding the priorities of the public. However, neither media nor parties were able to set the public agenda independently. The results presented here empirically confirm recent claims that media and politics have achieved some balance in Eastern Europe, though mass media in this region still fail to represent society as a whole, reflecting the agendas of political elites alone. The present study stresses the symbiotic interrelation between media and party agendas during elections and that their influence on public agenda is at the highest when operating interactively.

Mass media portrayals are key factors for a candidate running for local and regional elections. Rocío Zamora's paper focuses on the role of local media in setting the "political brand" of each candidate, underlining either emotional aspects for a more "human" candidate or even professional aspects for a smart or qualified candidate managing political power. For that purpose she analyses two main candidates' images (Ramón Luis Valcarcel – PP, Pedro Saura – PSOE) during the regional election in Murcia, Spain, in May 2007.

The next two papers present another look at agenda-setting research. These are not typical political communication studies. Raquel Rodríguez shows the role of the university lecturer as a source of information and the influence of that information upon students and their agendas. The empirical study featured a panel of 248 Spanish university students, and the results highlight the importance of the role of the university lecturer in channelling information to students even though findings demonstrate that the issues which are important for students (their agenda) may be less relevant for lecturers.

The study by Gulen Oncel & Ergen Karagoz investigates Pope Benedict's visit to Turkey as a global media event. The paper includes the interaction between the global and the local in mass communication studies. They show that this visit made visible some contradictions such as: East/West, EU/Turkey, Christian/Muslim, Catholic/Orthodox. Before this trip, it was presupposed that these contradictions and stereotypes reinforced by the media were to set the agenda. However, it did not happen to be the case. Instead, the existing frames had been replaced by the new ones – a frame shift in news reporting. The discourse method is used to support this hypothesis. The aim is to observe the handling of this media event by Western press. Within this perspective, the sample had been formed by pioneering newspapers from Europe and USA.

We close the issue of CEJC with study by Erkan Yüksel. The study describes agenda-setting studies in Turkey. Focusing on the doctoral dissertations and master theses, academic articles and papers and the books on agenda-setting theory, the author compares and evaluates the studies according to their format, methodology and main findings. In Erkan Yüksel's opinion, the studies on agenda-setting in Turkey mostly use different research methods and examine different variables, and

most of them are media agenda studies, which deal with the findings of content analysis on the newspapers.

Overall, the articles in this special issue highlight the dynamic nature of the agenda-setting theory. The theory continues to move into new and creative areas – both geographically and theoretically. Much as society itself, the theory constantly evolves, building upon a rich past. As is evidenced by the accompanying articles, the future of agenda-setting theory remains bright.