New trends in agenda-setting research

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Interview with Professor Maxwell McCombs — one of the two founding fathers of empirical research on the agenda-setting function of the press

Agenda-setting theory and research belong to the most established communication concepts, by many regarded as a paradigm within the mass communication area. Since the 1970s numerous new streams and directions of agenda-setting studies were established. Recently, the research devoted to the third level of agenda-setting heralded a new phase of comprehensive agenda-setting studies. The emergence of the Internet and social media has generated renewed attention to the agenda-setting idea. New queries about the power of new and traditional media over public opinion and their complex and dynamic interaction need to be answered. The questions about the present state of these studies and the prospect for their future development, especially outside USA and Europe, have been asked to the founding father of the theory, Maxwell McCombs.

The concepts of the first and second level agenda-setting are well established. Both yours and Lei Guo's research introduces network agenda setting as the third level of media effect. What is the date of the beginning of the research and why have you decided call it the third level?

One of the best questions that I ever posed to a graduate student was directed to Lei Guo: "Lei, Would you like to learn network analysis?" Of course, she asked why, and I replied that I thought network analysis held promise for a new phase of agenda-setting research. Lei quickly gained proficiency in network analysis, and we initiated a series of exploratory studies of this new perspective in 2010.

Theoretically and analytically, first and second-level agenda-setting treat objects and their attributes as separate and distinct disaggregated message elements. In the research design dating from the Chapel Hill study, each of these sets of elements — objects and attributes — are rank-ordered according to their frequency of occurrence. The hypothesis for both the first and second levels is that the salience of a set of elements on the media agenda influences the salience of these elements on the public agenda. At the first level, the rank-orders of objects are compared. At the second level, the rank-orders of attributes are compared. Of course, in reality ob-

jects and their attributes are bundled together in media messages and in public thought and conversation.

Rather than testing a hypothesis about the transfer of the salience of discrete elements from the media to the public, network agenda setting tests a more powerful hypothesis — the salience of related, networked elements on the media agenda influences the salience of these related, networked elements on the public agenda. This new network perspective extends agenda setting theory beyond the longstanding first and second level perspectives on agendas, and we call this new broader view the third level of agenda setting, network agenda setting.

The initial third-level agenda setting paper prepared by Lei and me, which was presented at the International Communication Association convention in 2011, explored the extent to which the news media can transfer the salience of the relationships among a set of attributes in the media to the public. To afford a comparison with traditional attribute agenda-setting, this paper used network analysis to reanalyze data initially collected by Kim and McCombs' (2007) study of the images of candidates for Texas governor and U.S. Senator. Kim and McCombs reported strong attribute agenda-setting effects, and the reanalysis of these data found significant network agenda-setting effects consistent with the original study. For example, the overall correlation between the media and public attribute agendas in Kim and McCombs (+0.65) corresponds with the correlation (+0.67) between the media and public network agendas. This ICA paper, Guo & McCombs (2011a) launched a promising new theoretical perspective.

Using a new set of data specifically collected to test network agenda setting, Guo & McCombs (2011b) compared the media and public network agendas regarding the two major political party candidates' qualifications and character in the 2010 Texas gubernatorial election. The content analysis procedures for this new study were identical to those used for the network analysis of the Kim and McCombs data. However, a new data collection technique, mind-mapping, was used to measure the public's attribute agenda at the third level.

Widely used in the advertising industry for brainstorming (Buzan & Buzan, 1996), this new network agenda setting study designed a survey sheet which asked respondents to fill in up to five assertions describing each of the two political candidates' qualifications and character. They were also instructed to draw connections among each pair of attributes that they thought were connected (see Figure 1).

A network analysis of the public agenda data obtained through this mind-mapping technique was compared with the network analysis of the content analysis of the media agenda. Again there were strong network agenda setting effects. Presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) conference just three months after the ICA paper's reanalysis of Kim and Mcombs, Guo and McCombs (2011a) reported a substantial and significant correlation of +0.71 between the media's network attribute agenda and the public's network attribute agenda.

Both of these initial network agenda setting studies focused on the relationships between the media network of attributes and the public network of attributes. However, the Network Agenda Setting Model tested in those two studies theoretically can be applied to networks that consist of attributes, objects, or combinations of objects and attributes. In addition, both of these studies were conducted in a local setting (the state of Texas in the southwest United States). Both of these limitations were addressed in our third project, which tested the model in terms of object-based networks on a nationwide scale.

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     │  Made claims about recession│  │ Didn't participate in gubernatorial│
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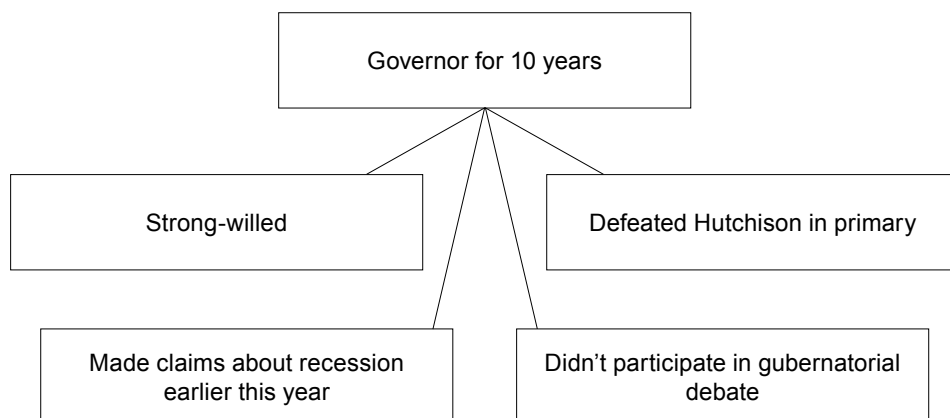
Figure 1. Example of a mind-mapping survey sheet

This project focused on the U.S. national issue agenda. The media agenda was based on the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), which prepares a weekly report on the most covered topics in four dozen news outlets including newspapers, online news sites, network television, cable television, and radio. The public agenda was based on the widely used "most important problem" question, used by many polling organizations and in numerous agenda setting studies.

Although network agenda setting is a new aspect of the theory, it is at the same time an extension of a gestalt perspective that has its roots in the earliest days of agenda setting. By gestalt, we mean the collective mix of major public issues and news topics presented by the news media to the public. This gestalt perspective also describes what members of the public experience and absorb as they are exposed to the media agenda. The resulting gestalt for members of the public is described by Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion* (1922) as "the pictures in our heads." Merging these two gestalts, Vu, Guo and McCombs (2014) noted:

> As individuals turn the pages of a newspaper, scroll or click their way through an online site, or watch the news on television, they are presented with a jumble of information that is, at best, only partially organized. What makes this gestalt comprehensible to the public as they organize their picture of the world is the high degree of redundancy in the media agenda for major issues across media platforms over time and the public's exposure to multiple over-lapping platforms.

> For agenda-setting effects, Stromback and Kiousis (2010) found that the total amount of attention to political news — attention to the gestalt presented by the media — predicted the salience of the issues most important to voters in deciding upon their vote, not their attention to specific news media.

The initial paper in this project, Vu, Lei and McCombs (2012), which was presented at the AEJMC conference, examined the network relationships between the media and public agendas for three years: 2009, 2010, and 2011. The expanded version of this paper covering five years, 2007–2011, was published last year in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (Vu, Guo and McCombs, 2014). There were strong correlations between the media and public network issue agendas in all five years, ranging from +0.65 to +0.87. To determine the direction of causality between the two agendas, the data were divided into six-month sets and cross-lagged correlations were calculated comparing each six-month period with the subsequent six-months. Two-thirds of the cross-lagged analyses supported the hypothesis that across time, the network relationships among issues on the media agenda influenced the network relationships of these issues among the public.

These three studies were the opening gambit of our research program on the third level of agenda setting, network agenda setting. A number of other network agenda setting studies also now have been published. In the 2012 U.S. presidential election, Kiousis et al. (forthcoming) found significant links between the information subsidies of the two major candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, and national news coverage. In the same election, Vargo et al. (2014) found strong links between the tweets of Obama and Romney supporters and tweets by journalists at mainstream media as well as partisan media. Turning to the international arena, Guo et al. (2015) found interesting comparisons of attribute network connections in the coverage of the opening two years of the Iraq War in the newspapers of the U.S., China, Taiwan, and Poland. Bringing it up to date, *The Power of Information Networks: New Directions for Agenda Setting,* to be published at the end of this year, will present 11 new empirical studies of network agenda setting from the U.S., Europe and Asia.

In conclusion, to quote the famous detective Sherlock Holmes, "Come, Watson, come. The game is afoot!"

A rapid development of social media is observed in recent years. Is it possible to equate a public agenda with a public network agenda of social media? Did social media change the directions of agenda-setting research?

The question of whether it is possible to equate the public agenda as we have known it in the decades since Chapel Hill with the contemporary public agenda of social media can be approached from two perspectives, a technological perspective and a behavioral/ psychological perspective.

From a technological perspective, the contemporary public is stratified into three groups. The social media public is only one of these three publics, the outcome of a "double" digital divide. In its most common use, the digital divide identifies two strata of the public — those persons with access to the internet and social media and those without access. But among those with access to the internet and social media, many choose not to use some or any of these technologies. Twitter, for example, is best thought of as a channel for active civic and political participation. Facebook, on the other hand, is a more widely used channel of communication, but frequently devoid of any civic and political content. In other words, the civic and political content of some social media is a public agenda, but only of an active segment of the public. Strictly speaking, content analyses of this public agenda tell us nothing about the public agenda of two other segments of society, those without any access at all and those with access who choose not to participate. From this technological perspective, the agenda of the social media is the agenda of only one segment of a stratified public.

Advocates of the behavioral/psychological perspective of the social media agenda typically are willing to equate the social media agenda with the broader public agenda as we have talked about it for decades. The key assumption here is that the public agenda of the social media reflects to a considerable degree the more traditional outcroppings of the public agenda that we have relied upon in the past, for example, the widely used Gallup Poll question, "What is the most important problem facing this country today?" This assumption rests on a substantial body of evidence dating from the Chapel Hill study about the homogeneity of media agendas across a wide variety of media in tandem with evidence that members of the public are widely exposed to this homogeneous media agenda and reflect that agenda in measures of the public agenda ranging from the Gallup MIP question to search queries online to tweets posted about current issues and topics. From this behavioral/psychological perspective, careful measurement of the social media agenda is a valid representation of the public agenda, and with the advantage of "big data," namely large numbers of public responses that enable nuanced tracking of trends in the public agenda on a day by day basis.

In that social media typically generate large volumes of data, social media have changed the methodology of agenda setting research for the good — far more detail than in the past. But social media have not changed the direction of agenda-setting research, rather they have enlarged the scope and depth of agenda setting. The core proposition of agenda setting is the transfer of salience from one agenda to another, primarily from the media agenda to the public agenda. The preponderance of the research to date indicates that the legacy media remain a primary sources of influence. At times the social media do influence the media agenda or the public agenda directly, but these appear to be exceptions and special situations. Collectively, the media and the social media are a vast public affairs communication chorus that ensures a high degree of consensus in society.

One of the new research trends is the media — real world factors agenda relationship. How do you expect these studies will develop and what impact can they have on the agenda-setting domain?

In the early days of journalism and communication research, "mirror theory" held that the news media were a mirror presenting an undistorted image of what is happening in society. Of course, this metaphor of a mirror reflecting the events of the day soon became regarded by many as a fun house mirror that has numerous distortions in the reflection presented to viewers. The task of scholars was to identify the contours of that mirror.

The dominant contours in the mirror arise from the news values of journalism. Thousands and thousands of events occur each day, and it would be impossible for any news organization — or set of organizations — to cover them. As Walter Lippmann (1922) noted many years ago, there are not that many journalists, so news organizations concentrate on key institutions and certain kinds of events. The result is — to put it in the language of social science methodology — a stratified sample of reality. Even that small stratified sample does not have an isomorphic one-to-one relationship with the underlying reality.

This was a key finding in Ray Funkhouser's (1973) classic analysis of the issues of the 1960s in the United States. Early critics of agenda setting had said that, of course, there was a substantial correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda because both just reflected reality — a modern version of mirror theory. In statistical terms, the critics said that the high correlations found in the Chapel Hill study were spurious.

Funkhouser totally refuted that argument. His macro-level study covering a 10-year period found a substantial correlation (+0.78) between the issue agenda of the media and the issue agenda of the public. Most importantly, it found no significant link between either of these issue agendas and the reality of those issues measured by a variety of statistical indicators. The public's perception of the most important issues of the day was influenced by the news coverage of those issues.

Of course, the news is not fabricated from whole cloth. The news does represent reality, but an edited version of reality. Put in terms of Lasswell's (1948) surveillance function of the media, the news media are sophisticated professional organizations that filter and evaluate the events of the day to present a concise report of the most important events occurring in society. Of course, these organizations are not omnipotent. There are limitations in the performance of their surveillance role. Over the years, situations have arisen where undue emphasis in the media on an issue or situation resulted in major public concern. This was true, for example, of the 1973 presumed oil crisis in Germany and concern in the US about drugs in the 1980s and about crime in the 1990s (McCombs, 2014). These were issues where the public had little direct knowledge of the underlying social reality. In terms of the media's

agenda-setting role, we learned early on that the media have little influence on the perceived salience of issues where members of the public have extensive personal experience. This important contingent condition regarding the media agenda setting is described by Zucker's (1978) concept of obtrusive issues and unobtrusive issues.

These examples of over-wrought public concern resulting from patterns of news coverage heavily influenced by news values and traditions underscore the importance of continuing research in the tradition of Funkhouser that includes measures of social reality as a check on the media and public agendas. Over the years, this type of study — such as the examples just cited from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s — seems to attract scholarly attention about once a decade. In short, this is an understudied area.

The concept of attention threshold was developed in agenda-setting studies. Do you think it is feasible for researchers to establish some general threshold, in the meaning of, for instance, number of news per week to evoke political scandal?

At the core of the agenda setting process is redundancy. As I noted in *Setting the Agenda* (2014, p. 91):

> The mass media are teachers whose principal strategy of communication is redundancy. With the proliferation of new communication channels in recent decades, the level of redundancy arguably is even higher than ever before.

How much redundancy before the effects are readily observable? This varies considerably from individual to individual and from topic to topic. Ultimately, observable agenda setting effects are the aggregation of individual differences in people's responses to the media agenda.

For a major public issue, Winter and Eyal (1981) found that the public's response primarily reflected the news coverage of the past four to six weeks. But an issue can generate a high level of response, at least among some individuals, in a single day. Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo (2002) found that traditional news media had an agenda-setting impact on internet discussions of three issues — immigration, health care, and taxes — with time lags of one to seven days. Only for the issue of abortion did the media have no apparent agenda-setting effect. Arguably, these agenda setting effects occurred among a niche audience, persons with a high interest in public issues and a high level of civic participation.

In regard to a general threshold of attention, key variables are the general public versus more specialized publics, the level of that public's interest in the topic, their need for orientation in regard to that topic (Weaver, 1977) and the degree to which the topic is widespread across the media. As noted, Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo

(2002) is an example of a restricted rather than general public. Eaton's (1989) analysis of 11 individual issues across a 41-month period found agenda-setting effects ranging from +0.87 to −0.44 among the general public. While the media agenda, at least for major issues, is highly homogeneous, there are certainly specialized topics that receive more restricted coverage.

In sum, as is frequently the case for social phenomena, it depends.

What is your vision of agenda-setting research development in the future?

Predicting the future directions of agenda-setting research is impossible, but anticipating the future directions of agenda-setting research is exciting. Particularly exciting is the anticipation of the continuing theoretical explication of agenda-setting theory.

In some cases, this explication will be the introduction of new concepts that open new vistas. A key example is the introduction of the concept of need for orientation (NFO) in the 1972 Charlotte presidential election study (Weaver, 1977). NFO provided a psychological explanation for why people turned to the news media and subsequently reflected its agenda. Fast forwarding to the present, the concept of network agenda setting, which is just gaining traction, offers a new perspective on agenda-setting effects. This concept adds a new theoretical layer to the theory, and is referred to as the third level of agenda setting. Of course, attribute agenda setting, the second level of agenda setting that took the theory beyond the basic effects found in Chapel Hill (now referred to as first level agenda setting), also was a new concept in the latter decades of the 20th century.

New theoretical concepts are always exciting, but so is the research that returns to long-standing research areas and further explicates them. As just mentioned, the concept of a need for orientation was introduced in the 1970s, and for the next 30 years there was little additional attention to the psychological underpinnings of agenda-setting. However, over the last 10 years a series of creative journal articles have explicated a theoretical map of dual psychological paths to agenda setting outcomes. Collated by McCombs and Stroud (2014), the mapping of these dual paths began with a theoretical critique by Takeshita (2006) and continued with experiments in Germany (Bulkow, Urban & Schweiger, 2013) and the United States (Pingree & Storycheff, 2013). The latter named these paths agenda cueing and agenda reasoning, a casual path and a deliberative path. Most recently, Camaj (2014) further advanced this psychological line of agenda setting research with a new interpretation of earlier conceptualization of NFO by Weaver (1980). This has been an exciting theoretical journey into new aspects of agenda setting.

Another example is the return to Ghanem's (1997) concept of compelling arguments, the idea that not just the total news coverage of an issue drives its salience, but that certain attributes of the issue in the news coverage have a particular resonance with the public and drive the salience of the issue. She found that the salience

of certain aspects of crime coverage, especially crimes whose psychological distance from a typical member of the public was small, yielded agenda setting effects equal to the effects of the total coverage. There have been only a few compelling argument studies in the years since, but in recent years there has been renewed attention to and expansion of the concept. In a series of recent papers, Magdalena Saldana and her associates (Saldana et al., 2014; Saldana & Ardevol Abreu, 2015) have linked the original concept of compelling arguments and network agenda setting to create a new concept, compelling associations.

These expansions of agenda setting, although built to varying degrees on existing theoretical foundations, are themselves new concepts that stand shoulder to shoulder with the theory's "basic" concepts introduced many years ago. My vision for the future is the continuation of this process that includes both new theoretical structures, such as network agenda setting, and expanded structures, such as compelling arguments and associations. Agenda setting theory, as we know it today, is the product of hundreds of studies conducted by an international cast of scholars. I believe this broad array of researchers guarantees the continuing productivity of agenda-setting theory. To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, the game will be afoot for decades to come.

What is your opinion about the progress of agenda-setting studies outside the USA and Europe?

It has been both exciting and gratifying to observe the diffusion of agenda-setting research beyond the United States and Europe. These areas were the centers of the work in the early decades of agenda setting, but by the 1990s large numbers of studies also were being done in East Asia. Takeshita's (1993) and King's (1997) studies of local elections in Japan and Taiwan, respectively, are early examples, and because numerous Korean scholars studied for their PhDs in the U.S., South Korea has been the source of a very large number of agenda-setting studies for more than two decades now, many published in Korean journals. More recently, China has joined Taiwan as a source of new agenda setting research, much of it by Chinese graduate students studying in the United States. On the other side of Eurasia, central Europe has spawned a vast array of agenda setting studies — and this journal.

Collectively, this international cast of scholars is the invisible college of agenda setting. An excellent example of this international convergence is McCombs and Stroud's (2014) review of the recent research on the psychology of agenda setting that was discussed above. As noted in their review, the converging work of a Japanese scholar, three Germans, and four Americans (one of whom is from Kosovo, but earned her PhD in the U.S. and now holds an academic position in the U.S.) has explicated dual agenda-setting paths, a peripheral path and a deliberative path.

The geography of agenda setting continues to expand. Poland has been a major source of agenda setting research for many years now, and there are Polish and Czech translations of *Setting the Agenda* (McCombs, 2004, 2014) as well as Swedish, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese translations. It also must be noted that the "European" community of agenda setting scholars includes extensive research in Israel for several decades and more recently, Turkey. Beyond the northern hemisphere, South America has become an active source of agenda setting research in this century, particularly Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Colombia.

Coming up to the present moment, the program for the 2015 International Communication Association convention listed more than two dozen agenda setting papers from a wide number of countries in Asia, Europe, and North America. Agenda setting research is very much an international discipline.

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of the press. The second edition of his book, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*, was published in 2014 by Polity Press in Cambridge, England. The first edition has been translated into Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Portuguese, Polish, Swedish, and Czech. Currently, McCombs and Lei Guo's (Boston University) new book *The Power of Information Networks* will be published in late 2015. This book presents an array of international research on a new aspect of agenda-setting theory, network agenda-setting as third-level effects. He published also an article "Extending our theoretical maps: Psychology of agenda-setting" in the *Central European Journal of Communication* (Volume 3, no 2 (5), Fall 2010).

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Prof. M. McCombs was interviewed online by Bartłomiej Łódzki and Ewa Nowak in May 2015.