

HOW THE NEWS SHAPES OUR CIVIC AGENDA

Maxwell McCombs

University of Texas at Austin

Amy Reynolds

Indiana University at Bloomington

The war in Iraq dwarfed all other topics reported in the U.S. news media during the first three months of 2007. And public opinion polls during the same time showed that Americans thought the Iraq War was the most important issue as they began to think about electing a new president in 2008. Through their day-to-day selection and display of the news, journalists focus our attention and influence our perceptions of the most important issues facing the country, and in early 2007 the focus was on the Iraq war. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda-setting role of the news media.

Establishing this salience among the public so that an issue becomes the focus of public attention, thought, and perhaps even action is the initial stage in the formation of public opinion. While many issues compete for public attention, only a few are successful in capturing public attention. The news media exert significant influence on our perceptions of what are the most salient issues of the day.

Because people use the media to help them sort through important political issues before they vote, scholars have spent nearly 70 years studying the effect of mass communication on voters. In the 1940 U.S. presidential election, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University collaborated with pollster Elmo Roper to conduct seven rounds of interviews with voters in Erie County, Ohio (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). Those surveys and many subsequent investigations in other settings over the next 20 years found little evidence of major mass communication effects on attitudes and opinions. Many scholars have argued that little evidence of effects was found because these early studies focused on the mass media's ability to persuade voters and change their attitudes. However, traditional journalism norms emphasize that the media are trying to inform, not persuade. These early studies did support that idea, demonstrating that people acquired information from the mass media, even if they didn't change their opinions. In an ironic turn of history for communication research, recent elaborations of agenda-setting theory discussed later in this chapter are investigating the relationship between the effects of agenda setting and public opinions and attitudes (Kim & McCombs, 2007).

But, as a result of the early election studies, a limited-effects model for mass

communication emerged. Summarized in the law of minimal consequences (Klapper, 1960), this notion ran counter to the ideas that Walter Lippmann, the intellectual father of agenda setting, proposed back in the early 1920s. Lippmann's opening chapter in his 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, which is titled "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads," summarizes the agenda-setting idea even though he did not use that phrase. His thesis is that the news media, our windows to the vast world beyond our direct experience, determine our cognitive maps of that world. Public opinion, argued Lippmann, responds not to the environment, but to the pseudo-environment, the world constructed by the news media (Lippmann, 1922).

This scientific shift of perspective away from the law of minimal consequences took hold in the 1960s, and during the 1968 presidential election McCombs and Shaw (1972) launched a seminal study that would support Lippmann's notion that the information provided by the news media plays a key role in the construction of our pictures of reality. Their central hypothesis was that the mass media set the agenda of issues for a political campaign by influencing the salience of issues among voters. Those issues emphasized in the news come to be regarded over time as important by members of the public. McCombs and Shaw called this hypothesized influence agenda setting.

To test this hypothesis that the media agenda can set the public agenda, McCombs and Shaw conducted a survey among a sample of randomly selected undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. These undecided voters were asked to name what they thought were the key issues of the day, regardless of what the candidates were saying. The issues named in the survey were ranked according to the percentage of voters naming each one to yield a description of the public agenda.

Concurrent with this survey of voters, the nine major news sources used by these voters—five local and national newspapers, two television networks, and two news magazines—were collected and content analyzed. The rank-order of issues on the media agenda was determined by the number of news stories devoted to each issue. 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.

If this correlation between the voters' agenda and the total news agenda was the highest, it would be evidence of agenda setting. If the correlation with the voters' preferred party's agenda in the news coverage was higher, it would be evidence of selective perception. The concept of selective perception, which is often cited as an explanation for minimal media effects, locates central influence within the individual and stratifies media content according to its compatibility with an individual's existing attitudes and opinions. From this perspective, it is assumed that individuals minimize their exposure to non-supportive information and maximize their exposure to supportive information. The vast majority of the Chapel Hill evidence favored an agenda-setting effect.

ACCUMULATED EVIDENCE

Since the Chapel Hill study, researchers have conducted more than 425 empirical studies on the agenda-setting influence of the news media. This vast accumulated evidence comes from many different geographic and historical settings worldwide and covers numerous types of news media and a wide variety of public issues. The evidence also provides greater detail about the time-order and causal links between the media and public agendas.

Shaw and McCombs' (1977) follow-up to the Chapel Hill study examined a representative sample of all voters in Charlotte, North Carolina during the summer and fall of the 1972 presidential election and found that the salience of all seven issues on the public agenda was influenced by the pattern of news coverage in the *Charlotte Observer* and network television news. During the 1976 presidential election, voters in three very different settings—Lebanon, New Hampshire; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Evanston, Illinois—were interviewed nine times between February and December (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). Simultaneously, election coverage by the three national networks and local newspapers in the three cities was content analyzed. In all three communities the agenda-setting influence of both television and newspapers was greatest during the spring primaries.

Although election settings provide a strong natural laboratory in which to study agenda-setting effects, the evidence that supports the theory is not limited to elections. Winter and Eyal (1981) took a historical look at the civil rights issue between 1954 and 1976 using 27 Gallup polls. Comparison of the trends in public opinion with a content analysis of the *New York Times* yielded a correlation of $+0.71$. Similar findings about the impact of news coverage on trends in public opinion come from an analysis of 11 different issues during a 41-month period in the 1980s (Eaton, 1989). In each of these analyses, the media agenda is based on a mix of television, newspapers, and news magazines, while the public agenda is based on 13 Gallup polls. All but one of the correlations (the issue of morality) were positive, although a pattern of considerable variability in the strength of the correlations was visible.

More recently, Holbrook and Hill (2005) explored the agenda-setting effect of entertainment media. They used data from two controlled lab experiments and the 1995 National Election Study Pilot Study to show that the viewing of crime dramas significantly increased concerns about crime and that those concerns affected viewers' opinions of the president. Gross and Aday (2003) compared the effects of watching local television news with direct experience measures of crime on fear of victimization and issue salience. They found that local news exposure did account for an agenda-setting effect. They did not, however, find that television viewing cultivated fear of becoming a victim of crime. Hester and Gibson (2003) combined data from four years of print and broadcast news about the economy in time series analyses with two indicators of consumer economic evaluations and three measures of real economic conditions. They concluded that the media's emphasis on negative economic news may have serious consequences for both economic performance and expectations.

Agenda-setting effects also have also been found outside of the U.S. In Pamplona, Spain during the spring of 1995, comparisons of six major concerns on the public agenda with local news coverage showed a high degree of correspondence (Canel, Llamas, & Rey, 1996). In Germany, a look at national public opinion patterns during 1986 through weekly comparisons of the public and media agendas showed that television news coverage had a significant impact on public concern about five issues, including the country's energy supply (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990). Early in 1986 the energy supply issue had little salience on either the news agenda or the public agenda. But a rapid rise in May on the news agenda was followed within a week by a similar rise on the public agenda. When news coverage subsequently declined, so did the size of the constituency expressing concern about Germany's energy supply.

Again at the local level, agenda setting occurred in the October 1997 legislative elections in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area (Lennon, 1998). In September, the public agenda and the combined issue agenda of five major Buenos Aires newspapers only

modestly agreed overall, but as election day approached in October, the correspondence between the agendas soared, an increase that suggests considerable learning from the news media in the closing weeks of the election campaign.

Using a cross-national comparative perspective that involved 14 European Union (EU) member states, Peter (2003) explored whether the amount of television coverage of the EU affected the extent to which EU citizens perceived European integration to be important. He found that the more EU stories people watched in countries in which the political elites disagreed about integration the more important they considered integration. But in countries in which elite opinion about integration was consensual this pattern did not repeat.

These real-world examples of agenda-setting effects are compelling but are not the best evidence for the core, causal proposition of agenda setting. The best evidence that the news media are the cause of these kinds of effects comes from controlled laboratory experiments, a setting where the theorized cause can be systematically manipulated, subjects are randomly assigned to various versions of the manipulation, and systematic comparisons are made among the outcomes. Evidence from laboratory experiments provides the final link in agenda setting's causal chain.

Changes in the salience of defense preparedness, pollution, arms control, civil rights, unemployment, and a number of other issues were produced in the laboratory among subjects who viewed TV news programs edited to emphasize a particular issue (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). A variety of controls were used to show that changes in the salience of the manipulated issue were actually due to exposure to the news agenda. For example, in one experiment, control subjects viewed TV news programs that did not include the issue of defense preparedness. The change in salience of this issue was significantly higher for the test subjects who viewed stories on defense preparedness than for the subjects in the control group. There were no significant differences between the two groups from before to after viewing the newscasts for seven other issues. And a recent experiment documented the agenda-setting effects of an online newspaper. The salience of racism as a public issue was significantly higher among all three groups of subjects exposed to various versions of an online newspaper that discussed racism than among those subjects whose online newspaper did not contain a news report on racism (Wang, 2000).

These studies are far from all of the accumulated evidence that supports the theory of agenda setting. A meta-analysis of 90 empirical agenda-setting studies found a mean correlation of $+.53$, with most about six points above or below the mean (Wanta & Ghanem, 2000). There are, of course, a number of significant influences that shape individual attitudes and public opinion, including a person's personal experience as well as their exposure to the mass media. But the general proposition supported by this accumulation of evidence on agenda setting is that journalists do significantly influence their audience's picture of the world.

Many events and stories compete for journalists' attention. Because journalists have neither the capacity to gather all information nor the capacity to inform the audience about every single occurrence, they rely on a traditional set of professional norms to guide their daily sampling of the environment. The result is a limited view of the larger environment, something like the highly limited view of the outside world available through a small window.

Four portraits of public opinion—the major issues of the 1960s, the drug issue in the 1980s, crime in the 1990s, and the economy in the 2000s—tell us a great deal about the discretion of journalists and the discrepancies that are sometimes found in mass media portrayals of reality. In Funkhouser's (1973) study of public opinion trends

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during the 1960s, there was no correlation at all between the trends in news coverage of major issues and the reality of these issues. But there was a substantial correlation (+.78) between the patterns of news coverage and the public's perception of what were the most important issues. In the 1980s, there was an increasing trend in news coverage of drugs at a time when there was no change at all in the reality of the drug problem (Reese & Danielian, 1989). In the 1990s, there was an increase in the news coverage of crime at a time when there was a decreasing trend in the reality of crime (Ghanem, 1996). And, at the turn of the 21st century, Hester and Gibson (2003) noted that media coverage of the economy may have serious consequences for economic expectations and performance, particularly when the coverage is negative.

THE ACAPULCO TYPOLOGY

Explorations of agenda-setting effects have observed this mass communication phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. A four-part typology describing these perspectives is frequently referred to as the Acapulco typology because McCombs initially presented it in Acapulco, Mexico at the invitation of International Communication Association president Everett Rogers. The Acapulco typology contains two dichotomous dimensions. The first dimension distinguishes between two ways of looking at agendas. The focus of attention can be on the entire set of items that define the agenda, or the focus of attention can be narrowed to a single, particular item on the agenda. The second dimension distinguishes between two ways of measuring the salience of items on the agenda, either aggregate measures describing an entire population or measures that describe individual responses.

Perspective I includes the entire agenda and uses aggregate measures of the population to establish the salience of these items. The original Chapel Hill study took this perspective. For the media agenda, the salience of the issues was determined by the total percentage of news articles on each issue, while the public agenda was determined by the percentage of voters who thought the government should do something about each issue. This perspective is named "competition" because it examines an array of issues competing for positions on the agenda.

Perspective II is similar to the early agenda-setting studies with their focus on the entire agenda of items, but it shifts the focus to the agenda of each individual. When individuals are asked to rank-order a series of issues, there is little evidence of any correspondence at all between those individual rankings and the rank-order of those same issues in the news media. This perspective is labeled "automaton" because of its unflattering view of human behavior. An individual seldom reproduces to any significant degree the entire agenda of the media.

Perspective III narrows the focus to a single item on the agenda but like perspective I uses aggregate measures to establish salience. Commonly, the measures are the total number of news stories about the item and the percentage of the public citing an issue as the most important problem facing the country. This perspective is named "natural history" because the focus typically is on the degree of correspondence between the media agenda and the public agenda in the rise and fall of a single item over time. An example of this perspective is Winter and Eyal's (1981) study of the issue of civil rights over a 23-year period.

Perspective IV, like perspective II, focuses on the individual, but it narrows its observations to the salience of a single agenda item. This perspective, named "cognitive

portrait,” is illustrated by the experimental studies of agenda setting in which the salience of a single issue for an individual is measured before and after exposure to news programs where the amount of exposure to various issues is controlled.

The existence of these varied perspectives on the agenda-setting phenomenon, especially an abundance of evidence based on perspectives I and III, strengthens the degree of confidence about this media effect. Perspective I provides useful, comprehensive descriptions of the rich, ever-changing mix of mass media content and public opinion at particular points in time. This perspective strives to describe the world as it is. Perspective III provides useful descriptions of the natural history of a single issue but at the expense of the larger social context. Despite this, knowledge about the dynamics of a single issue over an extended time period is useful for understanding how the process of agenda setting works. Perspective IV also makes a valuable contribution to understanding the dynamics of agenda setting. From a scholarly viewpoint, evidence generated by perspectives III and IV is absolutely necessary for a detailed “how” and “why” explanation of agenda setting. But the ultimate goal of agenda-setting theory returns us to perspective I, which provides a comprehensive view of mass communication and public opinion in communities and nations.

ATTRIBUTE AGENDA SETTING

In most discussions of the agenda-setting role of the mass media, the unit of analysis on each agenda is an *object*, usually a public issue. But public issues are not the only objects that can be analyzed from the agenda-setting perspective. In party primaries, the objects of interest are the candidates vying for the nomination of their political party. Communication is a process that can be about any object or set of objects competing for attention. In all these instances, the term *object* is used in the same sense that social psychologists use the term *attitude object*.

Beyond the agenda of objects, there is another level of agenda setting. Each of the objects on an agenda has numerous attributes—characteristics and properties that describe the object. Just as objects vary in salience, so do their attributes. Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of attributes for picturing those objects are powerful agenda-setting roles. An important part of the news agenda is the attributes that journalists and, subsequently, members of the public have in mind when they think about and talk about each object. These attributes have two dimensions, a cognitive component regarding information about substantive characteristics that describe the object and an affective component regarding the positive, negative, or neutral tone of these characteristics on the media agenda or the public agenda. The influence of attribute agendas in the news on the public’s attribute agenda is the second level of agenda setting.

In an election setting, the theoretical distinction between the agenda of objects (the candidates) and the agendas of attributes (their images) is especially clear. Voters’ images of the Democrat candidates during the 1976 presidential primaries illustrate this second level of agenda-setting effects. Eleven candidates were vying to be the Democrat challenger to incumbent Republican president Gerald Ford. Comparisons of New York voters’ descriptions of these candidates with *Newsweek’s* attribute agenda in its candidate sketches showed significant evidence of media influence (Becker & McCombs, 1978). Similar media effects on voters’ images of political candidates have been found in such diverse cultural settings as the 1996 Spanish general election

(McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000), the 1994 mayoral election in Taipei, Taiwan (King, 1997), and the 2002 Texas elections for governor and U.S. senator (Kim & McCombs, 2007).

Salience, which has been a central focus of agenda-setting theory, also can be examined at a second level. Public issues, like all other objects, have attributes. Different aspects of issues—their attributes—are emphasized to varying degrees in the news and in how people think and talk about issues. Again demonstrating the validity of agenda-setting theory across cultures, analysis of the 1993 Japanese general election found effects at both the first and second levels for the issue of political reform (Takeshita & Mikami, 1995). The more people used the news media, the greater the overall salience of the issue of political reform and, in particular, the greater the salience of system-related aspects of political reform, the aspect of the issue emphasized in the news.

Beyond election settings, in Minneapolis the correspondence between the local newspaper's reporting on the state of the economy and the salience of specific economic problems, causes, and proposed solutions among the public was a robust +.81 (Benton & Frazier, 1976). For an environmental issue in Indiana, the degree of correspondence was +.71 between the local newspaper's coverage of various aspects of this issue and the public's perspective on the development of a large lake (Cohen, 1975). In Japan, the correspondence between the coverage in two major dailies of the aspects of global environmental problems and Tokyo residents' concerns about these problems reached a peak of +.78 just prior to the United Nations' 1992 Rio de Janeiro environmental conference (Mikami, Takeshita, Nakada, & Kawabata, 1994).

Explication of attribute agenda setting also links the theory with the concept of framing. Both framing and attribute agenda setting call attention to the perspectives used by communicators and their audiences to picture topics in the daily news. However, because of the large number of definitions for framing, comparisons of the two approaches range from substantial overlap to total dissimilarity. Recent research has identified two types of frames, aspects and central themes, that do greatly resemble attribute agendas (McCombs, 2004).

An example of the aspects perspective, Ashley and Olson's (1998) catalog of the frames in news coverage of the women's movement ranges from feminists' appearance, used in more than a fourth of stories, to the seldom cited goals of the movement. Illustrating the convergence of the aspects framing perspective with attribute agenda setting, Miller, Andsager, and Riechert (1998) identified 28 frames describing four major candidates seeking the 1996 Republican presidential nomination. Although the study focused exclusively on identification of the frames in the campaign press releases and in news stories, subsequent analysis documented substantial attribute agenda-setting effects of the press releases on the news stories (McCombs, 2004).

In other framing research, the focus is on the dominant attribute defining the central theme of the news stories. Significant differences in the audience's responses were found in Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley's (1997) experiment comparing the effects of two contrasting themes, free speech versus public order, in news stories about a KKK rally and in McLeod and Detenber's (1999) experiment with news stories whose central theme varied in their level of support for civil protest. The idea that certain attributes of an object are *compelling arguments* for their salience (Ghanem, 1996) further links framing and agenda setting. Ghanem found that crime stories with low psychological distance—the crimes occurred locally or easily could happen to the audience member—drove the salience of crime as a public issue in Texas. Sheafer (2007) found that the negative valence of news stories was a compelling argument for the

salience of the economy as the most important problem during five Israeli national elections.

Although Price and Tewksbury (1997) and Scheufele (2000) theorized a distinct difference between agenda setting and framing on the basis of the two aspects of knowledge activation (Higgins, 1996)—accessibility, which they linked to agenda setting, and applicability, linked to framing—these theories have found limited support. Focusing specifically on the accessibility of issue attributes, Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) found that accessibility increased with greater newspaper use, but the resulting attribute agendas among the public bore no resemblance to the attribute agenda presented in the news and did not replicate attribute agenda-setting effects found over past decades. What emerged was a different version of media effects in which the *relative* amount of increased salience for the attributes among newspaper readers in comparison to persons unaware of the issue paralleled the media agenda. More recently, “Challenging the assumption that accessibility is responsible for shifts in importance judgments,” Miller (2007) reported two experiments demonstrating that “the *content* of news stories is a primary determinant of agenda setting. Rather than solely relying on what is accessible in memory, people pay attention to the content of news stories . . .” (p. 689).

NEED FOR ORIENTATION

As already noted, the news media are not the only source of information or orientation to issues of public concern. Issues can be arrayed along a continuum ranging from obtrusive to unobtrusive. Obtrusive issues are those that we experience personally. For example, most people do not need the mass media to alert them to many aspects of the economy. Personal experience usually informs people about spending patterns during holidays or about the impact of rising gas prices. These are obtrusive issues. Some economic issues, however, are hard to understand personally. Typically, the mass media inform us about national trade deficits or balancing the national budget. These are unobtrusive issues, issues that we encounter only in the news and not in our daily lives. Some issues can be both obtrusive and unobtrusive, depending on individual circumstances. Unemployment is a good example. People who have never faced unemployment as a reality would see the issue as unobtrusive. But for workers who have been laid off or for anyone who has filed an unemployment claim, the issue is obtrusive. Their understanding of unemployment is first-hand.

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

The concept of need for orientation provides a richer psychological explanation for variability in agenda-setting effects than simply classifying issues along the obtrusive/unobtrusive continuum. The concept of need for orientation is based on psychologist Edward Tolman’s general theory of cognitive mapping. Tolman (1932, 1948) suggests that we form maps in our minds to help us navigate our external environment. His notion is similar to Lippmann’s concept of the pseudoenvironment. The need for orientation concept suggests that there are individual differences in the need for orienting cues to an issue and in the need for background information about an issue.

Conceptually, an individual’s need for orientation has been defined in terms of two lower order concepts, relevance and uncertainty, whose roles occur sequentially

(Weaver, 1977). Relevance is the initial defining condition. Most of us feel no discomfort or need for orientation to issues in a number of situations, especially in the realm of public affairs, because we don't see these issues as personally relevant. In the 2000 presidential election, most citizens showed little interest in the issue of U.S. and Russian relations, for example. People were much more concerned with Social Security and the growth of the American economy. In situations when the relevance of the issue to the individual is low, the need for orientation is low.

Among individuals who perceive a topic to be highly relevant, level of uncertainty must also be considered. This is the second and subsequent defining condition of need for orientation. If a person already possesses all the information he or she needs about an issue, uncertainty is low. Under conditions of high relevance and low uncertainty, the need for orientation is moderate. When relevance and uncertainty are high, however, need for orientation is high. This is often the situation during primary elections, when many unfamiliar candidates clutter the political landscape. As one might guess, the greater a person's need for orientation, the more likely he or she will attend to the mass media agenda, and the more likely he or she is to reflect the salience of the objects and attributes on the media agenda.

Need for orientation provides an explanation for the near-perfect match between the media agenda and the public agenda in the original Chapel Hill study. Although need for orientation was not initially provided as an explanation for that early study, it seems clear in retrospect that the original Chapel Hill findings regarding undecided voters were evidence of agenda-setting effects based exclusively on people with a high need for orientation.

On occasion, personal experience with an issue, rather than satisfying a need for orientation, triggers an increased need for more information and the validation that comes from the mass media (Noelle-Neumann, 1985). Sensitized to an issue, these individuals may become particularly adept at studying the media agenda.

Matthes (2006) noted that when taken together, agenda-setting studies that incorporate the need for orientation as a predictor of effects largely have been successful. But he notes that some studies with a focus on individual level analyses showed the strongest agenda-setting effects at moderate levels of need for orientation. For example, Schonbach and Weaver (1985) found that people with low interest and high uncertainty (a moderate need for orientation) showed the strongest agenda-setting effects. Matthes (2006) used these variable findings about the need for orientation to argue for a different theoretical and methodological approach. He suggested that three dimensions for need for orientation should be included in analyses—the need for orientation toward issues, the need for orientation toward facts, and the need for orientation toward journalistic evaluations. Although relevance and uncertainty could lead to need for orientation, the two lower order concepts do not allow for a direct measure of the need for orientation construct. This is why he argued for more direct indicators that express the motivation of respondents to turn to the news media. Matthes' scale continues to treat relevance and uncertainty as lower order constructs that allow a prediction for need for orientation. However, his need for orientation scale specifies three additional aspects. First is the need to orient to the issue itself; next is the need to orient to specific aspects or themes related to an issue (this dimension concerns the selection of background and factual information); and, finally, there is the need to orient to the journalist's evaluation, including the journalist's opinion and commentary about an issue.

Matthes (2007) tested his scale using a panel survey on the issue of unemployment combined with a content analysis of television and newspaper coverage of unemployment.

He found that the need for orientation did lead to increased issue salience and that a second level agenda-setting effect did occur. But need for orientation was not related to the perceived salience of issue attributes. He concluded that the need for orientation concept did explain the act of information seeking, but it did not influence the affective tone of the information that people sought.

CONSEQUENCES OF AGENDA-SETTING EFFECTS

The distinction between the first and second levels of agenda setting, object salience and attribute salience, also is related to consequences of agenda-setting effects for opinions about public figures or other elements in the news. There is a fundamental link between media attention to an object and the existence of opinions about it. During an election, for instance, the media focus their attention on the major candidates, which results in more people forming opinions about these candidates (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004). Other consequences for attitudes and opinions are *priming*, which is a consequence of first level agenda-setting effects, and *attribute priming*, a consequence of second level agenda-setting effects. The psychological basis of priming is the selective attention of the public. Rather than engaging in a comprehensive analysis based on their total store of information, citizens routinely draw upon those bits of information that are particularly salient at the time they make a judgment.

In their benchmark research on priming, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) noted, "By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news [as well as other news media] influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged" (p. 63). Much of the research demonstrating priming has examined the impact of news coverage on presidential approval ratings, particularly news coverage that makes certain public issues salient among the public, issues that in turn become significant criteria for assessments of presidential performance.

Strong evidence of priming was found during the 1986 Iran-Contra scandal (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). On November 25, 1986, the U.S. Attorney General announced that funds obtained by the U.S. government from the secret sale of weapons to Iran had been improperly diverted to the Contras, a group attempting to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The story received major news coverage. By coincidence, the National Election Study's post-1986 presidential survey was in the field at the time of these announcements, creating a natural before-and-after comparison of the elements of public opinion that influenced Americans' assessment of President Reagan. Public opinion about the importance of providing assistance to the Contras and about U.S. intervention in Central America substantially increased from before to after the Attorney General's announcement.

At the second level of agenda setting, the salience of attributes in the mass media is related to the opinions held by the audience. Focusing on the tone of the news about a wide variety of political and non-political attitude objects, research documenting significant links between the general affective tone of news coverage and public opinion includes German public opinion regarding Helmut Kohl across a decade (Kepplinger, Donsbach, Brosius, & Staab, 1989), voters' presidential candidate preferences during recent U.S. presidential campaigns (Shaw, 1999), and the negative tone of news stories and consumers' expectations about the economy (Blood & Phillips, 1997; Hester & Gibson, 2003). Kim and McCombs (2007) found that the affective tone of individual attributes was related to voters' opinions about the candidates for governor and U.S.

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senator in the 2002 Texas elections. Moreover, the attributes most emphasized in news reports about these candidates were stronger predictors of opinions among heavy newspaper readers than among light newspaper readers. Combining both the first and second levels of agenda setting in an analysis of the 2000 U.S. presidential election, Son and Weaver (2006) found that the salience of both the candidates and their attributes predicted changes in the public opinion polls about voters' candidate preferences.

Attribute agenda setting in tandem with priming and attribute priming demonstrate that attention to the specific content of the news can provide a detailed understanding of the pictures in our heads and of our opinions grounded in those pictures. These effects of the news on our perspectives and opinions are not the result of any efforts at deliberate persuasion by the media but rather the inadvertent byproducts of the limited capacity of media agendas that must focus on a small number of topics and their attributes and, in turn, the limited amount of time and attention that the public devotes to public affairs.

WHO SETS THE MEDIA AGENDA?

As evidence accumulated about the agenda-setting influence of the mass media on the public, scholars in the early 1980s began to ask who set the media's agenda. In this new line of inquiry, researchers began to explore the various factors that shape the media agenda. Here the media agenda is the dependent variable whereas in traditional agenda-setting research the media agenda was the independent variable, the key causal factor in shaping the public agenda.

The metaphor of "peeling an onion" is useful for understanding the origins of the agenda of the mass media. The concentric layers of the onion represent the numerous influences that shape the media agenda, which is at the core of the onion. And the influence of an outer layer is, in turn, affected by layers closer to the core of the onion. A highly detailed elaboration of this metaphoric onion contains many layers, ranging from the prevailing social ideology to the beliefs and psychology of an individual journalist (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991).

At the surface of our theoretical onion are key external news sources. These include politicians, public officials, public relations practitioners, and any individual, like the president of the United States, who influences media content. For example, a study of Richard Nixon's State of the Union address in 1970 showed that the agenda of 15 issues in that address did influence the subsequent month's news coverage in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and two of the three national television networks (McCombs, Gilbert, & Eyal, 1982). No evidence was found in that study to suggest the media had an influence on the president. Examination of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* across a 20-year period found that nearly half of their news stories were based substantially on press releases and other direct information subsidies. About 17.5% of the total number of news stories was based, at least in part, on press releases and press conferences, and background briefings accounted for another 32% (Sigal, 1973).

Inside the onion are the interactions and influence of various mass media on each other, a phenomenon called intermedia agenda setting. To a considerable degree, these interactions reinforce and validate the social norms and traditions of journalism. Those values and practices are the layer of the onion surrounding the core that defines the ground rules for the ultimate shaping of the media agenda.

The *New York Times* frequently plays the role of intermedia agenda-setter because appearance on the front page of the *Times* can legitimize a topic as newsworthy. The contamination of Love Canal in upstate New York and the radon threat in Pennsylvania did not gain national prominence, despite intensive local media coverage, until these issues appeared on the *Times*' agenda (Mazur, 1987; Ploughman, 1984). The previous mention of the *Times*' coverage of the drug problem in the 1980s also demonstrates intermedia agenda setting. When the *New York Times* "discovered" the country's drug problem in late 1985, network news coverage and major newspaper coverage of the issue soon followed (Reese & Danielian, 1989).

In a laboratory experiment that examined the agenda-setting function of the Associated Press, researchers found a high degree of correspondence across topics between the proportion of news stories in a large wire file and the small sample selected by the subjects. The subjects were experienced newspaper and television wire editors (Whitney & Becker, 1982).

Recent intermedia agenda-setting studies have investigated the impact of web sites and other forms of new media on more traditional media content. Ku, Kaid, and Pfau (2003) found that web site campaigning during the 2000 presidential election had an impact on the agendas of the traditional news media much in the same way that a candidate's political advertising on television has historically influenced the media agenda. This supports the findings of studies like Boyle's (2001), which explored the impact that 116 political advertisements had on 818 newspaper and 101 network television news stories during the 1996 presidential election. Ku et al. (2003) also found that the candidate web sites' agendas were more likely to be associated with the public's agenda during the 2000 election.

In an extension of intermedia agenda setting to online news services, Lim (2006) found that some intermedia agenda setting did occur between the web sites of two major South Korean newspapers, the *Chosun Ilbo* and the *Joong Ang Ilbo*, and the web site of the South Korean wire service, the Yonhap News Agency. Lim found that while the wire service did not influence the issue agendas of the two newspapers, the leading online newspaper did influence the issue agendas of both the wire service and the other newspaper.

Finally, in an effort to explore the impact of blogs on the traditional media agenda, Schiffer's (2006) case study of the Downing Street Memo controversy in 2005 found that coverage of the controversy on the news pages of large papers and on television relied on Bush administration statements and official sources, while the op-ed pages of major newspapers showed coverage that was influenced by blog-based activism.

SUMMING UP

Many years ago, Harold Lasswell (1948) told us that mass communication had three broad social roles—surveillance of the larger environment, achieving consensus among segments of society, and transmission of the culture. Agenda setting is a significant part of the surveillance role because it contributes substantial portions of our pictures about the larger environment. And recent research on the consequences of both first-level and second-level agenda-setting effects outlines significant influence on attitudes and opinions.

The agenda-setting process also has implications for social consensus and transmission of the social culture. Evidence linking agenda setting and social consensus was

found in Shaw and Martin's (1992) comparison of demographic groups in the North Carolina Poll. Although demographics typically are used to demonstrate differences among social groups, their analysis found increased similarities between demographic groups with increased levels of media use. The correlation between the issue agendas for men and women who infrequently read a daily newspaper was +.55. But for men and women who read a newspaper occasionally, the degree of correspondence rose to +.80. And, among men and women who read a newspaper regularly, the issue agendas were identical (+1.0). Similar patterns of increased consensus about the most important issues facing the country as a result of greater media exposure also were found in comparisons of young and old and black and white and was true for both newspaper and television use. These patterns of increased social consensus as a result of media exposure also have been found in Taiwan and Spain (Chiang, 1995; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998).

The transmission of culture is also linked to the agenda-setting process. Beyond the specifics of politics and election campaigns, the larger political culture is defined by a basic civic agenda of beliefs about politics and elections. Exploration of yet other cultural agendas is moving agenda-setting theory far beyond its traditional realm of public affairs. These new lines of cultural inquiry extend from the historical agenda defining a society's collective memory of the past to the contemporary agenda of attributes defining the ideal physical appearance of young women and men. The imprint of the mass media that begins with its basic agenda-setting influence on the focus of attention is found on many aspects of public opinion and behavior.

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