

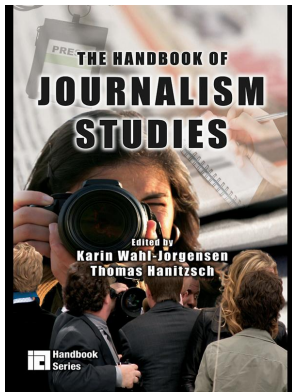
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### **Agenda Setting**

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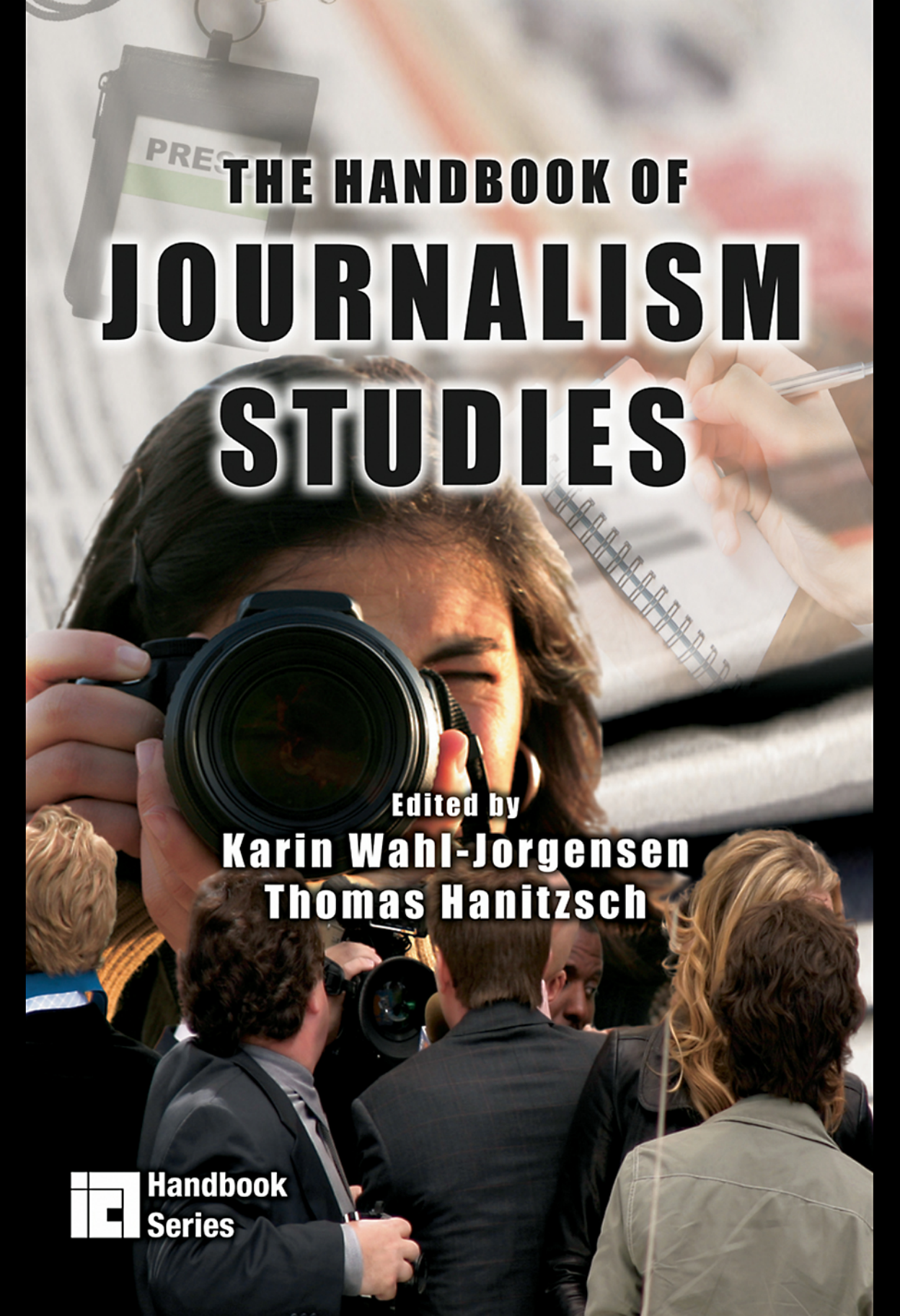
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Thomas Hanitzsch**

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## Agenda Setting

Renita Coleman, Maxwell McCombs, Donald Shaw, and  
David Weaver

### INTRODUCTION

Agenda setting is the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others. Simply put, the more coverage an issue receives, the more important it is to people. Since this first simple definition of the phenomenon, agenda setting has expanded from a theory describing the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public to a broader theory that includes a “second-level” describing the transfer of attribute salience for those issues and many other “objects” such as political figures. Also, inter-media agenda setting explains how elite media transmit their agenda of important issues to other media. Agenda-setting research has stimulated debates about priming and framing; explications of obtrusiveness and the “need for orientation” that defines the conditions under which agenda-setting effects are enhanced or diminished; and, most recently, explorations of the implications of agenda-setting effects for attitudes and opinions and observable behavior. Agenda setting has proved to be a theory that is both deep and wide, applicable for more than the 30-year lifespan that is the mark of a useful theory. It has been called the theory “most worth pursuing” of mass communication theories (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 225).

Agenda setting is one of the few theories created by mass communication scholars and adopted subsequently by many other disciplines, including health communication, political communication, business, and more. The intellectual roots of this mass communication theory have been credited to journalist Walter Lippmann, whose book, *Public Opinion*, argued that the news media construct our view of the world. That was in 1922, but it was 50 years later that Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw gave the now-familiar name to the phenomena Lippmann described, and since then agenda setting has become one of the major research themes in our field.

No dip into agenda-setting waters would be complete without reading the seminal 1972 *Public Opinion Quarterly* piece by McCombs and Shaw, “The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media,” which reported how undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, used media in the 1968 presidential election. For a contemporary introduction to agenda setting, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion* (McCombs, 2004) has been described as the *Gray’s Anatomy* of the theory by John Pavlik (McCombs, 2004, p. xii). An important point in the book is that agenda setting is not the result of any diabolical plan by journalists to control the minds of



the public, but “an inadvertent by-product of the necessity to focus” the news (McCombs, 2004, p. 19). Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television have a limited amount of space and time, so only a fraction of the day’s news can be included. It is this necessary editing process, guided by agreed-upon professional news values, that results in the public’s attention being directed to a few issues and other topics as the most important of the day. Since McCombs and Shaw set the game afoot with the Chapel Hill study, many scholars across the world have joined in the effort. The references here—and in McCombs’ *Setting the Agenda*—provide a comprehensive bibliography of this research over the past 40 years. Additional important sources include James Dearing and Everett Rogers’ (1996) history of the early decades, *Agenda Setting*; the book-length reports of the 1972 and 1976 US presidential elections, respectively, *The Emergence of American Political Issues* (Shaw & McCombs, 1977), and *Media Agenda Setting in a Presidential Election* (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981); Wayne Wanta’s (1997) creative studies in *The Public and the National Agenda*; and Stuart Soroka’s (2002), *Agenda Setting Dynamics in Canada*.

### HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

Agenda setting owes its original insight to Lippmann (1922), who discussed how media messages influence the “pictures in our heads,” but contemporary scholars have greatly expanded on that idea. Ironically, Lippmann was not optimistic about journalism’s ability to convey the information that citizens needed to govern themselves effectively. Twenty years later, research into the effects of mass communication also painted a dismal picture. Study after study showed that mass media had little to no effect on people (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). This was the era of the “limited media effects” paradigm, a major shift from earlier belief in the power of the press, a time when propaganda was thought to work like a “magic bullet” to change people’s attitudes, beliefs, and even behavior. The later emergence of evidence for an agenda-setting role of the media was one important link in a chain of research that would signal a paradigm shift in the way we look at the effects of mass media.

The initial studies of agenda setting took place during three consecutive US presidential elections, a useful place to begin because of their “natural laboratory” setting—campaigns feature a continuous set of political messages that stop on Election Day. The original study, which found a nearly perfect correlation between the media’s agenda of issues and the public’s agenda of issues, was conducted among undecided voters during the 1968 presidential election (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This study has been called one of the 15 milestones in mass communication research (Lowery & Defleur, 1995). With high correlations between the media and public agendas established, the next step was to show a causal connection and the time sequence. Were the media setting the public agenda, or the public setting the media agenda?

The second major project was a panel study conducted in Charlotte, North Carolina, during the 1972 presidential election that found a +.51 correlation over time from the media to the public, but only a +.19 correlation from the public to the media (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). The third study in the opening triumvirate was an exhaustive look at the entire 1976 election year in three cities (Weaver et al., 1981). Nine waves of panel interviews explored how people learned about issues in tandem with content analyses of the media messages.

Among the intriguing findings in the Chapel Hill study was the high degree of correspondence among different media outlets. Newspapers, TV, and magazines all gave similar coverage to the same issues, a situation that initiated research on inter-media agenda setting and demonstrated the importance of elite news organizations, particularly the *New York Times*, in setting the media agenda. The proliferation of media outlets on cable and the Internet encourages continu-

ing research on inter-media agenda setting. The 1972 Charlotte study also was a harbinger of research on the differences among media in influencing the public agenda. In Charlotte, TV news had greater short-term effects on voters than newspapers. But this effect is far from consistent. Over the years, the evidence shows that about half of the time, there is no difference in impact between TV and newspapers; the other half of the time, newspapers tend to be more powerful.

Another important insight generated by the early studies was the limited number of issues the public considered important at any point in time. From dozens of issues competing for public attention, only a few rise to importance due to the limits on the public's attention, time, and ability to focus on more than five to seven issues at a time. Nevertheless, the agenda-setting role of the news media plays an important part in focusing people's attention on the problems that government and public institutions *can* work to resolve. Without agreement on what is important, societies would struggle to accomplish public good.

### Beyond the Election Studies

Moving beyond elections, Eaton (1989) examined 11 issues, including unemployment, nuclear disaster, poverty, and crime, over 41 months in the late 1980s and found similar agenda-setting effects. Among the earliest of the non-election topics studied was the civil rights movement (Winter & Eyal, 1981). Twenty-three years of the ebb-and-flow of news coverage and the corresponding changes in public opinion provided powerful evidence that agenda setting occurred in arenas other than elections. Other issues that reflect media agenda setting include the federal budget deficit (Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber, & Fan, 1998); the economy (Hester & Gibson, 2003); environmental issues (Salwen, 1988; Chan, 1999); and health issues, including HIV/AIDS (Pratt, Ha, & Pratt, 2002) and smoking (Sato, 2003). Agenda setting also has been documented for local issues (Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977; Smith, 1987), not just national ones.

Is agenda setting a uniquely American phenomena? Not at all. Agenda setting has been confirmed across the world at national and local levels, in elections and non-elections, with newspapers and television. This research includes Spain (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998), Japan (Takeshita, 1993), Argentina (Lennon, 1998), Israel (Sheafer & Weimann, 2005), and Germany (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990). The appearance of agenda-setting effects does require reasonably open political and media systems, however. In countries where the media are controlled by the government and one political party dominates, agenda setting by the media does not occur. In Taiwan in 1994, this happened with the broadcast media; all three TV stations were government-controlled. This was not the case, however, for the two independent daily newspapers in the same election (King, 1997). This comparison of media systems, with other factors remaining constant, is a powerful endorsement of the public's ability to sort out what news is real and what is not.

### A Second Level of Agenda-Setting Effects: Attribute Agenda Setting

The original concept of agenda setting, the idea that the issues emphasized by the media become the issues that the public thinks are important, is now referred to as the "first level" of agenda setting. Whereas first-level agenda setting focuses on the amount of media coverage an issue or other topic receives, the "second-level" of agenda setting looks at how the media discuss those issues or other objects of attention, such as public figures. Here the focus is on the attributes or characteristics that describe issues, people or other topics in the news and the tone of those attributes. The general effect is the same: the attributes and tone that the media use in their descriptions are the attributes and tone foremost in the public mind.

The first level of agenda setting is concerned with the influence of the media on which objects are at the center of public attention. The second level focuses on how people understand the things that have captured their attention. Using Lippmann's phrase "the pictures in our heads," first-level agenda setting is concerned with what the pictures are about. The second level is literally about the pictures. The two dimensions of the second level are the substantive and affective elements in these pictures. The substantive dimension of attributes helps people discern the various aspects of topics. For example, in news coverage of political candidates, the types of substantive attributes include the candidates' ideology, qualifications, and personality.

Particular characteristics often arise in specific campaigns; for example, corruption was important in the 1996 Spanish election (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000); ability to get things done and cutting taxes were key issues in the 2000 US presidential election primaries (Golan & Wanta, 2001). Even non-election issues can show differences in attributes at different times. In the case of issues, on the topic of the economy, for example, inflation is important some times, while unemployment or budget deficits may be more salient at others.

Within these substantive characteristics, each can take on an emotional quality, an affective tone that can be positive, negative, or neutral. It is important to know whether a particular candidate is described positively, negatively, or neutrally on substantive attributes such as morality and leadership ability, not just how often those substantive elements are mentioned in connection with a candidate.

Much support has been found for these second-level attribute agenda-setting effects. McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas (2000) found second-level agenda-setting effects regarding the qualities of the candidates in the 1996 Spanish national election. In a laboratory experiment in the United States, Kioussis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban (1999) found that the public's perceptions of candidates' personalities and qualifications mirrored the manipulated media portrayals used in the study. Support for second-level effects also has been found for a variety of public issues, such as economic issues (Hester & Gibson, 2003; Jaspersen, Shah, Watts, Faber, & Fan, 1998) and the environment (Mikami, Takeshita, Nakada, & Kawabata, 1994).

### Comparison with Framing

There is considerable debate in scholarly circles about the differences between attribute agenda setting and framing. Some say they are different; others say they are not. Framing has been defined as "the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences" (Reese, 2001, p. 7). To frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient [...] to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Both framing and attribute agenda setting call attention to the perspectives of communicators and their audiences, how they picture topics in the news and, in particular, to the special status that certain attributes or frames can have in the content of a message. If a frame is defined as a dominant perspective on the object—a pervasive description and characterization of the object—then a frame is usefully delimited as a very special case of attributes.

In another approach based on a hierarchical conceptualization in which frames are macro-categories that serve as bundling devices for lower-order attributes, Takeshita (2002) found a close correspondence between media coverage and public perceptions of Japan's economic difficulties at both levels of analysis. Yet other approaches to framing examine the origins and use of broad cultural and social perspectives found in news stories and among members of the public, approaches that have little relationship to agenda-setting theory.

Theoretical efforts to demarcate the boundary between agenda setting and framing (Price &

Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele, 2000) on the basis of the two aspects of knowledge activation—the concepts of accessibility (linked theoretically to agenda setting) and applicability (linked theoretically to framing)—have found only limited success. Focusing specifically on the accessibility of issue attributes, Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) found that accessibility did increase with greater newspaper use, but that the resulting attribute agenda among the public bore no resemblance to the attribute agenda presented in the news and did not replicate attribute agenda-setting effects found across four decades by previous studies. What emerged was a different version of media effects in which the relative amount of increased salience for the attributes among newspaper readers, when compared to persons unaware of the issue, largely paralleled the media agenda.

### Consequences of Agenda Setting

Other studies have looked at the consequences of agenda setting for the public's opinions, attitudes, and behavior—the “so what” question. As part of this effort, scholars have linked agenda-setting research with studies of “priming” that examine the effects of media agendas on the public's opinions as well as the public's concerns. This focus on the consequences of agenda setting for public opinion can be traced back at least to Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman (1975, p. 471), who speculated in their 1972–73 panel study of the effects of Watergate news coverage that the media do more than teach which issues are most important—they also may provide “the issues and topics to use in evaluating certain candidates and parties, not just during political campaigns, but also in the longer periods between campaigns.”

Their speculation was supported a decade later when Iyengar and Kinder (1987), in controlled experiments, linked television agenda-setting effects to evaluations of the US president in a demonstration of what some cognitive psychologists have called “priming”—making certain issues or attributes more salient and more likely to be accessed in forming opinions. Weaver (1991) also found that increased concern over the federal budget deficit was linked to increased knowledge of the possible causes and solutions of this problem, stronger and more polarized opinions about it, and more likelihood of engaging in some form of political behavior regarding the issue, even after controlling for various demographic and media use measures.

Willnat (1997, p. 53) argued that the theoretical explanations for these correlations, especially between agenda setting and behavior, have not been well developed, but the alliance of priming and agenda setting has strengthened the theoretical base of agenda-setting effects by providing “a better understanding of how the mass media not only tell us ‘what to think about’ but also ‘what to think’” (Cohen, 1963).

Not all scholars agree that priming is a consequence of agenda setting. Some have argued that both agenda setting and priming rely on the same basic processes of information storage and retrieval where more recent and prominent information is more accessible. Regardless of these debates, it seems likely that an increase in the salience of certain issues, and certain attributes of these issues, does have an effect, perhaps indirect, on public opinion. Son and Weaver (2006) confirm that media attention to a particular candidate, and selected attributes of a candidate, influences his standing in the polls cumulatively rather than immediately. This finding has been replicated with data from Mexico and Canada by Valenzuela and McCombs (2007).

Media emphasis of some issues also can affect public behavior. Extensive news coverage of crime and violence, including a murder and rapes, on the University of Pennsylvania campus contributed to a significant drop in applications by potential first-year students, predominantly women, according to the university's dean of admissions (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1996). This decline occurred when other comparable universities experienced an increase in applications during the same period.



Roberts (1992) found further evidence of a link between agenda setting and behavior in the 1990 election for governor of Texas. Issue salience was a significant predictor of actual votes in this election, with 70 percent of the respondents' actual reported votes for governor correctly predicted by the level of issue concern over time, controlling for demographics and media reliance and attention.

In one of the most dramatic revelations of the behavioral influence of news media emphasis, Blood and Phillips (1997) carried out a time series analysis of *New York Times* headlines from June 1980 to December 1993 and found that rising numbers of unfavorable economic headlines had an adverse effect on subsequent leading economic indicators (average weekly hours for manufacturing, average weekly initial claims for unemployment, new orders of consumer goods and materials, vendor performance, contracts and orders for plant and equipment, building permits, etc.) rather than vice-versa. Blood and Phillips (1997, p. 107) wrote that their findings "suggest that the amount and tone of economic news exerted a powerful influence on the economic environment and further, that the economic news agenda was generally not being set by prevailing economic conditions."

## STATE OF THE ART

Once the basic relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda was established, a second phase of research began—the exploration of factors that weaken or strengthen agenda-setting effects. The search for these contingent conditions that modify agenda-setting effects is broadly divided into two groups: audience characteristics and media characteristics, such as the differences between TV and newspapers discussed previously. Here we emphasize the individual differences found among audience members.

### Need for Orientation

"Need for orientation," a psychological concept that describes individual differences among people in their desire to understand a new environment or situation by turning to the media, was introduced in the 1972 Charlotte presidential election study. Need for orientation is defined in terms of two lower-order concepts, relevance and uncertainty. Relevance means that an issue is personally or socially important. Uncertainty exists when people do not feel they have all the information they need about a topic. Under conditions of high uncertainty and high relevance, need for orientation is high and media agenda-setting effects tend to be very strong. The more people feel that something is important, and they do not know enough about it, the more attention they pay to news stories. Conversely, when the relevance of a topic is low, and people feel little desire for additional information, need for orientation is low and media agenda-setting effects typically are weak (Takeshita, 1993). Recently, the concept of need for orientation has been expanded by Matthes (2006) to explicitly measure both orientation toward topics, the first level of agenda setting, and orientation toward aspects (or attributes) of those topics, the second level of agenda setting.

One situation where agenda setting might have occurred but did not because people felt the issue was not important or relevant was the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal. When President Clinton was revealed to have had a sexual relationship with a White House intern—in fact, when it was merely rumored—press coverage was incessant. Some described it as "all Monica, all the time." Given the amount of coverage of this issue and how high it was on the *media's* agenda, it might have been expected to have major *public* agenda-setting effects. While the scan-

dal was fascinating, even shocking and reprehensible, it did not generate heavy public outrage (Yioutas & Segvic, 2003). Members of the public are not slaves to the media agenda.

Need for orientation is related to another individual difference—education. Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to experience greater need for orientation. From the many demographic characteristics studied, formal education consistently emerges as related to agenda setting. Higher education typically increases interest in public issues, and those with more education are more likely to mirror the media's agenda.

### Obtrusive Issues

The media, of course, are not the only source of information people have about public affairs. Personal experience and conversations with other people are two other important sources. For most of the issues discussed so far, people have no direct experience. Unless you have been a soldier in Iraq, you have to depend on the media for your information about conflict in that country. But not all issues are this out-of-reach. Anyone who has ever been laid off from a job does not need the media to know something about unemployment. When people have direct, personal experience with an issue, that issue is said to be “obtrusive” for them, and they usually do not need more information from the media (Zucker, 1978). Unobtrusive issues, those with which people have little to no personal experience, are the ones most likely to become important to people if they are high on the media's agenda.

The same issue can be obtrusive for some people and unobtrusive for others; the unemployment issue, for example. For obtrusive issues that people experience in their daily lives, media coverage does not have much power to set an agenda, but for issues with which people do not have direct personal experience media coverage is much more influential in determining how important the issues are to those people. Some issues are mostly obtrusive or unobtrusive for everyone. Foreign affairs, the environment, energy, government spending, drug abuse, and pollution are unobtrusive for most people, for example, whereas local road maintenance, the cost of living, and taxes are largely obtrusive. Other issues, such as unemployment, are somewhere in the middle, and the strength of agenda setting depends on whether a person has ever been unemployed or known someone who has. These middle-range issues underscore the importance of measuring obtrusiveness on a continuum rather than as a dichotomous variable.

### New Arenas

While elections and political campaigns are prominent settings for agenda-setting studies, there is considerable evidence for agenda-setting effects in many other settings. These range from business news (Carroll & McCombs, 2003), religion (Harris & McCombs, 1972), foreign relations, (Inoue & Patterson, 2007), and healthcare (Ogata Jones, Denham, & Springston, 2006). Some studies have extrapolated an agenda-setting effect from news to entertainment media (Holbrook & Hill, 2005). Almost any topic you can think of can be studied from an agenda-setting perspective.

Most agenda-setting studies examine the content of the media as defined by words. However a few have included visuals, such as photographs or television video, and found evidence for visual agenda-setting effects. In Wanta's (1988) first-level analysis, the size of a photograph was found to influence readers' perceptions of importance. Coleman and Banning (2006) examined the second-level effects of television images of the candidates and found significant correlations between television's visual framing of George W. Bush and Al Gore and the public's affective impressions of them in the 2000 election. This study was replicated and extended in the 2004 election (Coleman & Wu, 2006). Furthermore, the presence or absence of pictures can have profound

implications. Famines, starvation, and drought in 1984 in Ethiopia and Brazil were roughly comparable, but compelling photographs and video were widely available only for Ethiopia, which then benefited from massive coverage and international relief efforts (Boot, 1985).

### Agenda Melding

There is growing evidence that audiences mix agendas from various media—meld them—and so are influenced by a mixture of agendas. Agenda setting establishes a connection between medium and audience but scholars recently have moved to incorporate audiences and the media choices they make within the general hypothesis of agenda setting. Audiences have choices and those choices rise from their own established values and attitudes and, as we have seen, their need for orientation. Audiences use general news media, and they also use a variety of specialized media that fit their personal lifestyles and views, such as talk radio or television shows. Agenda-setting research has established that journalists and editors have great power to shape the main topics of importance to audiences, along with many details of those topics. But we also know that many people use Web sites or other news sources to supplement that initial picture and to find views on events that fit their own expectations. This effort, from the point of view of the audience, is called agenda melding.

How does agenda melding work? Recently Ericson and colleagues (2007) sorted the descriptive vocabulary used by the *Charlotte Observer* and the *New York Times* to describe the 21-year career of NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt, Sr., who died in a crash in 2001. The descriptive language used in the early, middle, and end of his career were different, with only a few descriptions constant throughout his career. Examples of early descriptions were “the boy,” “Jaws II,” “aggressor,” and “youngster.” Middle-of-career descriptions were “The Intimidator,” “ironhead,” and “dominator,” and toward the end of the career, “the man in black,” “carburetor cowboy,” and “the big E.” A follow-up experimental study to this content analysis discovered that subjects were quite responsive to the variations in this vocabulary, especially regarding the affective dimension of the attribute agenda. This suggests the importance of audience involvement to complete the message. The audience melds personal feelings associated with certain language elements with the message itself. The media set the agenda, but the audience also melds with the agenda in conformance with their established values and attributes. Agenda-melding suggests the important role of audiences in blending, adapting, and absorbing messages.

## METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

### Public Opinion Polls Plus Content Analysis

Often overlooked are the methodological contributions of the first agenda-setting study in Chapel Hill. This 1968 study combined two methods, a content analysis and a survey of public opinion, and it established the idea of a time-lag. Agenda-setting studies today still routinely measure and rank-order the number of stories on specific issues in the media using content analysis, then survey the public to ascertain their views on what are the “Most Important Problems” of the day—the MIP question—which also are rank-ordered. Using Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficient, the media’s agendas of most important issues are correlated with the public’s agendas of important issues. Time and again, in countries around the world, the rankings are highly significant and strong—typically around  $+0.55$  or greater (Wanta & Ghanem, 2000).

### Establishing Causality

One of the frequent criticisms of the content analysis plus survey method of studying agenda setting is that a one-time correlational study cannot definitively show causality. Even though the early studies were careful to measure the media content before the public opinion surveys, questions still remain about which came first, public opinion that influenced what the media covered, or media coverage that influenced public opinion. Thus, agenda setting has looked to two other methods to supplement its basic research by establishing a cause-and-effect sequence. Both longitudinal studies and experiments satisfy the necessary condition for demonstrating time-order.

Longitudinal studies consist of several waves of public opinion surveys and content analyses. For example, the 1976 election panel study involved nine waves of interviewing (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). The civil rights study involved 27 replications over a 23-year period (Winter & Eyal, 1981). This type of evidence is grounded in “real world” data using the general public’s opinions about actual issues in the news, but it still suffers from a myriad of uncontrollable factors. To definitively say that media coverage can set the public’s agenda, researchers turned to controlled experiments.

While laboratory experiments lack the external validity of field studies grounded in survey research and content analysis, they are seen as necessary complements to traditional agenda-setting studies, even those that use longitudinal designs. Only laboratory experiments can document a causal relationship unaffected by extraneous factors between the media agenda and public agenda. Evidence of causality exists for both first- and second-level agenda setting. A classic set of first-level agenda-setting experiments by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) systematically manipulated the frequency of topics in TV news programs. A second-level agenda-setting experiment by Kioussis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban (1999) systematically manipulated the characteristics of a fictitious political candidate. Usually, even brief exposure to news articles in a laboratory setting results in significant agenda-setting effects.

### Lag Time

Additional methodological research investigates the time lag—that is, the optimal time that an issue must be covered in the media before the public considers it as important. Research has identified a variety of lag times for different issues—one month was the optimal time for the civil rights issue (Winter & Eyal, 1981), but Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) used a 9-1/2-month time lag for their study of international news because stories about foreign countries are found less frequently than stories of domestic issues. Differences in individual issues are important, of course, but the optimum range of time for the media agenda to influence the public agenda is one to eight weeks, with a median of three weeks. Longer is not always better when it comes to the amount of time required for the media agenda to influence the public agenda, however. Agenda-setting effects, of course, also decay, taking anywhere from eight to 26 weeks to disappear entirely (Wanta & Hu, 1994).

### Measuring Object and Attribute Salience

The now-classic agenda-setting question, the “Most Important Problem,” was born in the 1930s when the Gallup organization began asking Americans to name the most important problem facing the country. This open-ended question provides a convenient way for scholars to assess the salience of the problems on the public agenda. Typically, no more than five to seven issues, those

with the greatest number of people saying they were the most important, end up being used in agenda-setting studies; issue categories ranked lower tend to have too few people for any meaningful analysis. One frequently used threshold for an issue's inclusion is that 10 percent or more of the public surveyed identify it as a "most important problem."

Min, Ghanem, and Evatt (2007) compared the traditional MIP question with one designed to measure *personal* salience rather than *social* salience, asking, "What is the most important problem that is personally relevant to you?" No differences were found in the issues named. Even though question wording sometimes can strongly affect the outcome of a survey, the assessment of issue salience appears very robust, and the use of creative alternatives for measuring the public's most important issues have not been discouraged. Rather, using different questions to measure the same construct is seen as expanding our knowledge about agenda setting through replication and diversity of measures.

Recognition and recall are two other prominent alternatives to the MIP (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). Closed-ended questions also are popular. Some survey respondents have been asked to select the most important issues from a list; others have been asked sets of questions using 5-point scales on the importance of an issue, extent of discussion with friends, and need for more government action (Wang, 2000). Similarly, sets of bipolar semantic scales have been used in experiments (Evatt & Ghanem, 2001).

Attribute agendas also have been measured with both closed- and open-ended questions. A widely used open-ended question for attribute agenda-setting studies is, "Suppose you had some friends who had been away for a long time and were unfamiliar with the presidential candidates [or other public figures]. What would you tell them about [person X]?" Closed-ended questions also abound, such as rating how honest, sincere, and trustworthy a candidate is, typically with 5- or 7-point rating scales. One of the most unusual measures used non-response as an inverse measure of salience (Kiousis, 2000). That is, the smaller the number of people who hold no opinion, the greater the salience of a candidate or issue.

### Historical Analysis

Surveys that asked people about the most important problems facing the country only date back to the 1930s, yet there is evidence of historical agenda-setting effects dating as far back as the founding of the British colonies (Merritt, 1966) and the Spanish-American War (Hamilton, Coleman, Grable, & Cole, 2006). Given the strong evidence from the 1960s on, even historians feel comfortable extrapolating to the past.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The rise in popularity of the Internet is the most obvious and important new frontier for agenda-setting research. Little is known so far about the effect of Web sites, blogs, and social networking sites on the public agenda of important issues. Some speculate that with the Internet come more diverse sources of news with little consensus on issues, a situation that could alter agenda setting as we know it. Couple that with the explosion of cable TV and radio channels via satellite, and the predictions seem dire.

There is, quite simply, not much original journalism being conducted in the online environment. Bloggers and blogging have been receiving considerable publicity. But are they reporting or repeating? Murley and Smith (2004) found that about one-half of bloggers scavenge their news



from newspapers, and another fifth purloin it from other bloggers, who may have lifted it from newspapers.

Yu and Aikat (2005) looked at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as representatives of online newspapers, *CNN* and *MSNBC* for online TV, and *Yahoo News* and *Google News* as online news services. They examined two weeks in 2004 and found a remarkable correlation of +.51 to +.94 of all the news on the opening or home pages of those online publications. The media correlation was +.77. They also looked at just the top three news stories and found a range of +.53 to +.99 with a +.82 median correlation. This power over the wider media agenda may explain why the agendas of leading newspapers at least, despite slipping readership, are still so strongly correlated to the national agenda.

Other studies, however, reveal less agreement. Song's (2007) study of a particular news event in Korea revealed stark differences in coverage by online news sites and traditional newspapers. But another study, also in Korea, found that online newspapers influenced the agendas of the online wire services (Lim, 2006).

In an early study of electronic bulletin boards during the 1996 US election, three issues correlated significantly with traditional media coverage; only one, abortion, showed no agenda-setting effects (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). The authors surmise that traditional media provide people with information they use in their online discussions. In more recent studies of blogs and traditional media, both liberal and conservative blogs covered the 2004 US election issues in the same way as the mainstream media. Liberal blogs issues agendas correlated +.84 with the mainstream media agenda, and conservative blogs correlated +.77 (Lee, 2006). Using state-wide surveys in Louisiana and North Carolina to investigate variations in agenda-setting effects by Internet use and age, Coleman and McCombs (2007) found that while agenda-setting effects were somewhat weaker for both heavy Internet users and younger people, they still were significant. The issue agendas in traditional news media correlated +.80 for young adults in one state and +.90 for young people in the other; for the heaviest Internet users their issue agenda correlated with the media's at +.70. They conclude that use of the Internet did not eliminate the agenda-setting influence.

With an expanding media landscape as well as new theoretical domains to explore, the theory of agenda setting can look forward to at least another 30 years of fruitful exploration in cyberspace.

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