

Agenda-setting Theory

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Agenda-setting theory states that the news media have a large influence on audiences. In terms of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them. Agenda-setting theory's main postulate is salience transfer. Salience transfer is the ability of the news media to transfer issues of importance from their news media agendas to public agendas. "Through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. 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."

History

Foundation

The media agenda is the set of issues addressed by media sources and the public agenda which are issues the public consider important. Agenda-setting theory was introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their ground breaking study of the role of the media in 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The theory explains the correlation between the rate at which media cover a story and the extent that people think that this story is important. This correlation has been shown to occur repeatedly.

In the dissatisfaction of the magic bullet theory, McCombs and Shaw introduced agenda setting theory in the Public Opinion Quarterly. The theory derived from their study that took place in Chapel Hill, NC. The researchers, surveyed 100 undecided voters during the 1968 presidential elections on what they thought were key issues and measured that against the actual media content. The ranking of issues was almost identical with a correlation of .97, and the conclusions matched their hypothesis that the mass media positioned the agenda for public opinion by emphasizing specific topics. Subsequent research on agenda-setting theory provided evidence for the cause-and-effect chain of influence being debated by critics in the field.

One particular study made leaps to prove a cause-effect relationship. The study was conducted by Yale researchers, Shanto Iyengar, Mark Peters, and Donald Kinder. The researchers had three groups of subjects fill out questionnaires about their own concerns and then each group watched different evening news programs, each of which emphasized a different issue. After watching the news for four days, the subjects again filled out questionnaires and the issues that they rated as most important matched the issues they viewed on the evening news. The study demonstrated a cause-and-effect relationship between media agenda and public agenda. As of 2004, there were over 400 empirical studies examining the effects of Agenda Setting. The theory has evolved beyond the media's influence on the public's perceptions of issue salience to political candidates and corporate reputation.

Functions

The agenda-setting function has multiple components:

Media agenda are issues discussed in the media, such as newspapers, television, and radio.

Public agenda are issues discussed among members of the public.

Policy agenda are issues that policy makers consider important, such as legislators.

Corporate agenda are issues that big corporations consider important.

These four agendas are interrelated. The two basic assumptions that underlie most research on agenda-setting are that the press and the media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it, and the media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.

Diffusion

The media uses diffusion to spread ideas and aid in its agenda setting. Opinion Leaders and boundary spanners are very important to the media at using their networks to pass on the flow of information.

An opinion leader is often someone who is thought of by others to know a significant amount of information on a topic or is an "expert". This could be anyone from a specialist in a certain field, a politician who is the head of a specific congressional committee, or a mom who is very active in the PTA. They are often at the center of a social network, more attentive to outside information and capable of influence. Since the opinion leaders are those in a social network who are most likely to watch the news or pay attention to the news media, they are an extremely important tool at spreading information to the masses.

Boundary Spanners are those in a social network who can span across various social networks. They can be essential to the flow of novel information. Boundary spanners can be used by the news media in setting its agenda by getting information and ideas to a variety of social networks, rather than just one.

A study showing the effects of diffusion was Project Revere. Sociologists at the University of Washington from 1951 to 1953 would drop leaflets from an airplane onto a town. They then would see how long it would take for the information to pass by word of mouth to those who did not get a leaflet. Their findings showed that children are very effective in the diffusion process, thus proving how easy it is for a child to be affected by the news media.

The Accessibility Bias

S. Iyengar's article titled "The accessibility bias in politics: television news and public opinion" looks at just this theory.

He states, "In general, 'accessibility bias' argument stipulates that information that can be more easily retrieved from memory tends to dominate judgments, opinions and decisions, and that in the area of public affairs, more accessible information is information that is more frequently or more recently conveyed by the media."

The Accessibility Bias is effective because people are cognitive misers. We have limited resources (such as time) and cannot learn about every single subject there is. We also like to use heuristics or "shortcuts" when it comes to learning about topics that we may not have an interest in or are not particularly educated in. This is why we turn to the news media to gain this information. So if the news media decides to show a certain topic more often than another it shapes the agenda and shapes what people remember and call back to at a later time.

Cognitive Effects Model

Early media effects studies done by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee showed that political campaigns have very little effect on voters, but instead that those closest to them (family and friends) as well as cognitions.

Cognition is a term referring to the mental processes involved in gaining knowledge and comprehension, including thinking, knowing, remembering, judging and problem-solving. These are higher-level functions of the brain and encompass language, imagination, perception and planning. (Defined by Psychology at about.com).

The Cognitive effects model found that the media has an indirect influence on an audiences' attitude. A viewer already has set ideas and opinions, the media cannot do much to change those. However by showing certain stories more often than others and shaping the agenda they can shape what an audience puts importance on. For example, if the media reports more on the economy than on international news, then people will have more information on the economy and think that the issue is more important than other things that are going on around the world.

Characteristics/Tenets

Research has focused on characteristics of audience, the issues, and the media that might predict variations in the agenda setting effect.

Humans are curious by nature, we as a species have an innate drive to understand the environment around us. This disconnect of not knowing our surroundings or dissonance, as Leon Festinger would put it, means we either need to change our way of thinking or change our behavior

to come back into a state of consonance or connection. Orientation is a term to describe the need for individuals to orient themselves to their surroundings/environment. In the case of agenda setting theory, we know that news media provide this orientation.

Mccombs states that, "need for orientation is a psychological concept, which means that it describes individual differences in the desire for orienting cues and background information." Two concepts: relevance and uncertainty, define an individual's need for orientation. Relevancy is the first and of primary importance as an individual will feel less dissonant if a situation or issue is not personally relevant. Hence, if relevancy is low, people will feel the need for less orientation. There are many issues in our country that are just not relevant to people, because they do not affect us. Many news organizations attempt to frame issues in a way that attempts to make them relevant to its viewers/readers. This is their way of keeping their viewership/readership high "Level of uncertainty is the second and subsequent defining condition of need for orientation. Frequently, individuals already have all the information that they desire about a topic. Their degree of uncertainty is low." When issues are of high personal relevance and uncertainty low, the need to monitor any changes in those issues will be present and moderate the need for orientation. If at any point in time viewers/readers have high relevance and high uncertainty about any type of issue/event/election campaign there was a high need for orientation.

Research done by Weaver in 1977 suggested that individuals vary on their need for orientation. Need for orientation is a combination of the individual's interest in the topic and uncertainty about the issue. The higher levels of interest and uncertainty produce higher levels of need for orientation. So the individual would be considerably likely to be influenced by the media stories (psychological aspect of theory).

Research performed by Zucker in 1978 suggested that an issue is obtrusive if most members of the public have had direct contact with it, and less obtrusive if audience members have not had direct experience. This means that agenda setting results should be strongest for unobtrusive issues because audience members must rely on media for information on these topics.

Media salience: a key independent variable in agenda setting theory is mostly recognized as a single construct. Theoretical explications of media salience scholarship varies throughout the agenda setting literature. Spiro Kiouisis perused the relevant literature and discovered that 3 dimensions of media salience emerged: attention, prominence, and valence. Thus developing his multi-construct model of media salience.

Attention: based on the amount of coverage/exposure the news media give an object.

Prominence: A framing technique used to highlight or position an attribute/object in a context that communicates its importance. Kiouisis also refers to just the presence of news stories covered by prestigious news organizations(e.g. Washington Post, New York Times, etc...) as a signaling factor to the public in giving news stories prominence. And,

Valence: Refers to the affective (emotional) elements of the media content. "Attribute coverage also transmits cues that shape the overall affective salience of issues, candidates, and other objects (e.g., how interesting or appealing they are). Therefore, affective elements in news can also enhance or reduce the overall salience of objects."

Quote on agenda setting- "The media doesn't tell us what to think; it tells us what to think about"- Bernard C. Cohen (1963)

Levels of agenda setting

The first-level agenda setting is most traditionally studied by researchers. Simply put, the focus is/was on major issues/objects and the transfer of the salience of those objects/issues. From these broad issues, agenda setting evolved to look not only at the major issues/objects, but to attributes of those issues.

In second-level agenda setting, the news media focuses on the characteristics of the objects or issues. This transfer of attribute salience is considered second-level effects or attribute agenda-setting. "The second dimension refers to the transmission of attribute salience to the minds of the public. More specifically, each object has numerous attributes, or characteristics and properties that fill out the picture of that particular object. As certain perspectives and frames are employed in news coverage, they can draw public attention to certain attributes and away from others." In this level the media suggest how the people should think about the issue. There are two types of attributes: cognitive (substantive, or topics) and affective (evaluative, or positive, negative, neutral).

Additionally, there are several theoretical concepts that fall under the umbrella of attribute agenda setting. Some of these include: status conferral, stereotyping, priming, gatekeeping(which happens in both levels), compelling arguments, and of primary importance, the concept of framing.

Status Conferral: Status conferral refers to the amount of attention given to specific individuals. "The news media bestow prestige and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status. Recognition by the press or radio or magazines or newsreels testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one's behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice."

Stereotyping: Stereotyping is best defined by Taylor; Consensus among members of one group regarding the attributes of another." Furthermore, a cognitive orientation view of stereotyping helps illustrate why this helps attribute salience transfer. "The cognitive orientation view assumes that humans are limited in the amount of incoming information that they can process, and hence form stereotypes as one way to reduce the cognitive burden of dealing with a complex world." Which reaffirms the previous notions of our brains being cognitive misers.

Priming: There are perspectives as to what priming actually is, but the primary concept is such: "According to the priming theory, news media exposure presumably causes the activation of related knowledge, which is more likely to be retrieved and used in later judgments because it is more accessible in memory and comes to mind spontaneously and effortlessly.", it's the actual act of linking two different elements in order to generate a general known idea. The concept of priming is supported by the accessibility bias argument as well as the principle of resonance as some attributes may resonate longer with individuals than others. Iyengar and Kinder, define priming as "changes in standards that people use to make political evaluations." This definition is primarily focused on the political realm as Scheufele and Tewksbury go on to say that "priming occurs when news content suggest to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and government." As individuals make their choices in supporting/voting for a (n) candidate/issue, they are more likely to add this evaluative dimension to their decisions. This still follows the accessibility bias argument (memory based models) and Iyengar and Kinder take it a step further by arguing that "priming is a temporal extension of agenda setting" and that just making issues/candidates salient, can affect people's decisions/judgments when making choices about political candidates/issues.

Gatekeeping: The concept of gatekeeping attempts to answer the question of who sets the news media agenda? McCombs, states that we need to look at "three key elements: major sources who provide information for news stories, other news organizations, and journalism's norms and traditions." Major sources include: elected leaders(national/local leaders), political campaigns, organizations, interest groups, public information officers, and public relations professionals. Other news organizations refers to how news organizations feed off of each other, borrowing stories from one another or at times paying for them. It is widely known that the New York Times is considered the intermedia-agenda setter for most news organizations (i.e., most new organizations take their lead from the times). McCombs notes that "journalists validate their sense of news by observing and the work of their colleagues. Local newspapers and television stations note the news agenda offered each day by their direct competitors for local attention. Local outlets also note the agenda advanced by new organizations with higher status. In the US these are the major regional newspapers, the Associated Press, the national television networks, and the elite newspapers in New York and Washington." Many times the executive editor/producer in news organizations have to make the final decision with regard to what gets printed/televised and what doesn't. Finding stories that are newsworthy can be difficult, but most journalists look for these characteristics throughout the information they collect. These generally are: impact, proximity, timeliness, prominence, importance, conflict, contradiction, contrast, novelty, and human interest. Scanning the environment and looking for these characteristics to ensure a story is newsworthy, is a major part of the norms and traditions followed by journalism.

Framing: Although many scholars have differing opinions of what exactly framing is, McCombs defines it as, "the selection of - and emphasis upon - particular attributes for the news media agenda when talking about an object (the fact of cutting and trimming news stories in order to filter

it and shape it as the sender wish) . In turn, as we know from attribute agenda setting, people who frame objects, placing various degrees of emphasis on the attributes of persons, public issues or other objects when they think or talk about them." In other words, it is not just what is said in news reports, but how subjects are characterized and presented. It is through this unique characterization/portrayal of issues/objects that communicates certain meanings to audiences apart from just stating facts and figures; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Entman, 1993 not only defines frames as "involving selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." But also goes on to describe these four functions: "1) defining problems-determining what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; 2) diagnosing causes-identifying the forces creating the problem; 3) making moral judgments-evaluate causal agents and their effects; and 4) suggesting remedies-offering and justifying treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects." It is through these four functions that the news media can highlight/characterize certain issues/candidates/problems/attributes and/or choose to ignore others. Furthermore, Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, and Ghanem" defined news media framing as "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration." When the news media supply the context, select what to emphasize or exclude information, they show us how to think about an object/issue/candidate. In order for this to be effective the audience must be able to internalize the information and "individual's therefore apply interpretive schemas or "primary frameworks" (Goffman, 1974, p. 24) to classify it meaningfully." Journalists, political campaigns, and the news media use these primary frameworks as a baseline to make the understanding of issues easier for audiences, thus making them less complex.

Clearly, trying to operationalize a definition for news framing can be very tedious as subjective definitions vary from scholar to scholar. Matthes states in his meta-analysis of framing literature that, "translation of framing definitions to concrete, operational steps is not transparent in a huge part of the literature. Some definitions are general, giving little information about how to operationalize frames."

Usage

The theory is used in political advertising, political campaigns and debates, business news and corporate reputation, business influence on federal policy, legal systems, trials, role of groups, audience control, public opinion, and public relations.

Strengths and weaknesses of theory

It has an explanatory power because it explains why most people prioritize the same issues as important. It also has predictive power because it predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will feel the same issues are important. Its meta-theoretical assumptions are balanced on the scientific side and it lays groundwork for further research. Furthermore, it has organizing power because it helps organize existing knowledge of media effects.

There are also limitations, such as news media users may not be as ideal as the theory assumes. People may not be well-informed, deeply engaged in public affairs, thoughtful and skeptical. Instead, they may pay only casual and intermittent attention to public affairs and remain ignorant of the details. For people who have made up their minds, the effect is weakened. News media cannot create or conceal problems, they can only alter the awareness, priorities and salience people attach to a set of problems. Research has largely been inconclusive in establishing a causal relationship between public salience and media coverage.

Another limitation is that there is limited research in the realm of non-traditional forms of news media (i.e. Social Media, Blogs, etc...) and its Agenda Setting Role. Although blogs and other forms of Computer Mediated Communication appear to be quickly gaining ground against traditional news media outlets, more research still needs to be done. What is plainly visible is that, "In an effort to survive, traditional newsrooms have embraced newsroom blogs as an alternative vehicle for news delivery." Yet, there still continues to be a socio-economic gap (although likely a small one) between those who use non-traditional forms of news media and those who don't.