

AGENDA-SETTING RESEARCH: WHERE HAS IT BEEN, WHERE IS IT GOING?

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Editor's Note

In this selection, Everett M. Rogers and James W. Dearing explore research on media power in three different yet related realms. First, what have researchers learned about setting the media agenda? Who decides what is important enough for mass media to publish? Second, what influence do published media messages have on the public's agenda of perceptions and attitudes? And third, how does the public's agenda of policy concerns affect the issues public officials choose to address? In short, what can agenda-setting research tell us about who sets the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda? The excerpts presented here concentrate on the conceptual schemes used for analyzing agenda-setting issues and on the main findings.

When this essay was written, Dearing was a doctoral student, and Rogers was the Walter H. Annenberg Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. A prolific writer on communication topics, such as the diffusion of innovations and organizational communication, Rogers was then collaborating with Dearing on a major study of agenda-setting.

Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes and pronounces decisions.
U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, quoted in Rivers, 1970, p. 53

Appreciation for the power of public opinion and the influence wielded by the press has continued since Lincoln's comment. Such concerns address the processes of influence by which American democracy functions. As Lincoln's

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comment shows, in the mid-1800s the earlier notion of classical democracy, whereby a government responds directly to the wishes of its public, with the mass media serving as a go-between, was being questioned. Later, political analysts like Key and Lippmann provided a new view of the democratic process: Elected political elites decide upon policies for the public, and the public can make itself heard through political parties, which serve to link policymakers with their constituents.

Many scholars now see omnipotent mass media systems as the mechanism linking the public with political policymakers. The media have usurped the linking function of political parties in the United States, creating what can now be thought of as a "media democracy" (Linsky, 1986). One method for understanding modern democracy is to concentrate upon mass media, public, and policy *agendas*, defined as issues or events that are viewed at a point in time as ranked in a hierarchy of importance. Agenda research, concerned with investigating and explaining societal influence, has two main research traditions that have often been referred to as (1) *agenda-setting*, a process through which the mass media communicate the relative importance of various issues and events to the public (an approach mainly pursued by mass communication researchers), and (2) *agenda-building*, a process through which the policy agendas of political elites are influenced by a variety of factors, including media agendas and public agendas. The agenda-setting tradition is concerned with how the media agenda influences the public agenda, while the agenda-building tradition studies how the public agenda and other factors, and occasionally the media agenda, influence the policy agenda.

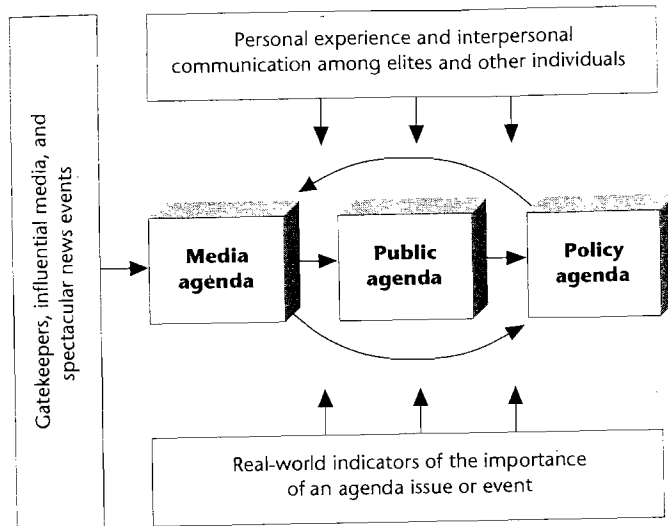
An Overview

... [W]e prefer to utilize the terminology of *media agenda-setting*, *public agenda-setting*, and *policy agenda-setting*. We refer to the entire process that includes these three components as the *agenda-setting process* (Figure 7-1). We call the first research tradition *media agenda-setting* because its main dependent variable is the mass media news agenda. We call the second research tradition *public agenda-setting* because its main dependent variable is the content and order of topics in the public agenda. We call the third research tradition *policy agenda-setting* because the distinctive aspect of this tradition is its concern with policy as, in part, a response to both the media agenda and the public agenda. . . .

Media Agenda-Setting

The issue of the homogenization of the news into a set of topics addressed by all members of the news media was raised early by the Hutchins Report (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). This set of topics was

Figure 7-1 Three Main Components of the Agenda-Setting Process: Media Agenda, Public Agenda, Policy Agenda



recognized as the media agenda. The question of who sets the media agenda and the implications of that influence for society were initially explored by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948). Lazarsfeld and Merton conceived of the media issue agenda as a result of the influence that powerful groups, notably organized business, exerted as a subtle form of social control. "Big business finances the production and distribution of mass media. And, all intent aside, he who pays the piper generally calls the tune" (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948, reprinted in Schramm, 1975, p. 503). Similarly, Qualter (1985) argued that a commercially sponsored mass media system is operated by those in the ruling class of society; therefore, the media cannot be expected to question the socioeconomic structure of that society seriously. Ball-Rokeach (1985) suggested analyzing the structural dependency organizing the relationship between the political system and the media, which she describes as "cooperation based on mutuality of central dependencies" (pp. 491-492).

The mass media softly but firmly present the perspective of the ruling class to their audiences. The result is consent and support (Schudson, 1986). This result is not a conscious objective of the media. Qualter (1985) stated:

The media are far from being the sinister manipulators of the popular mind suggested by some conspiracy theories. Their major functions seem to be to

support the system, to uphold conformity, to provide reassurance, and to protect the members of society from excessively disturbing, distracting, or dysfunctional information. (pp. x-xi)

These media functions are perpetuated through recruitment and the socialization of media elites, editors, and journalists. In this way, the traditions, practices, and values of media professionals shape the news agenda.

The Public Agenda

Understanding how public opinion is influenced by the content of the mass media has been an important concern of communication scholars tracing back to the writings of Robert E. Park, founder of the 1915-1935 Chicago School of Sociology (Rogers, 1986, pp. 76-80). Park, who has been termed "the first theorist of mass communication" (Frazier & Gaziano, 1979), expanded upon William James's (1896) notion of how people form an "acquaintance" with information by studying the role of newspapers in forming public opinion. Another seminal thinker on this relationship, and one more commonly credited, was Walter Lippmann, who wrote in response to Wallas's (1914) claim concerning the public's increasing dependence on the mass media. Early empirical research results, however, cast doubt on the mass media's power to bring about audience affects. Lazarsfeld and Stanton, in a series of studies on the effectiveness of radio campaigns, concluded that any effects of the mass media were considerably mediated by interpersonal relationships and by personal experience (Klapper, 1960). Social scientists interpreted Lazarsfeld's results as proof that the mass media had only weak effects.

Scholarly research on the agenda-setting process of the mass media stems most directly from the writings of Bernard Cohen (1963), who observed that the press

may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think*, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about*. . . . The world will look different to different people, depending . . . on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read. (p. 13; emphasis added)

Cohen thus expressed the metaphor that stimulated both traditions of agenda-setting research described later in this chapter.

The Policy Agenda

Of direct importance to assumptions about democratic societies is the relationship of public opinion to policy elites' decisions and actions. Agenda-setting researchers who conceptualize policy information as a dependent

variable want to know whether the agenda items that are salient to individuals in the public also become salient to policymakers. Occasionally, policy agenda-setting researchers investigate the extent to which the media agenda influences the policy agenda.

David Hume (1739/1896) was one of the first to propose a theory of government grounded upon, and responsible to, widespread opinion. Hume extended the work of John Locke, who had posited several laws of human nature. The contribution of Hume was his theoretical development of the democratic society, the idea that widespread, supportive opinion alone was the justification by which a government is in power.

Early assessments reflecting on Hume's principle were optimistic (Dewey, 1927). Gradually, however, such optimism was replaced by skepticism, as empirical researchers began looking for evidence of a responsive government. Gabriel Almond (1950) was one of the first scholars of politics to attempt to understand the growing body of survey data and the course of foreign policy. Almond's pioneering emphasis, however, did little to explain how a transfer of opinion from public to policymakers (if indeed there was a transfer) happened. An explanatory mechanism of a policy-to-public transfer suggested by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) was a "two-step flow" of communication, whereby opinions in a society are first circulated by the media and then passed on via opinion leaders by interpersonal communication. This concept was expanded to a "four-step flow" by James Rosenau (1961) in his book *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*. Rosenau played an important role in orienting policy research toward issue salience and agenda-setting: "We know practically nothing about why it is that some situations abroad never become the subject of public discussion, whereas others take hold and soon acquire the status of national issues" (Rosenau, 1961, pp. 4-5). Rosenau served another important function for later policy agenda-setting research by concentrating on the mass media and their relationships with policymakers.

Cohen's reviews (1973/1983) of the evidence supporting the hypothesis that foreign policymakers are responsive to public opinion concluded, "Our knowledge is partial, unsystematic, disconnected and discontinuous" (p. 4). "We are left with the unsatisfactory conclusion that public opinion is important in the policy-making process, although we cannot say with confidence how, why or when" (p. 7). . . .

Why are scholars so fascinated by agenda-setting? The main reason for interest by mass communication scholars is because agenda-setting research appeared to offer an alternative approach to the scholarly search for direct media effects, which had seldom been found in early mass communication research. Many of the agenda-setting publications by mass communication researchers stated or implied their main justification as an attempt to overcome the limited-effects findings of past communication research. . . .

Analysis of the Public Agenda-Setting Literature

"The basic conception of agenda-setting was a theoretical idea without much basis in empirical research until the study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) of the media's role in the 1968 presidential campaign. A sample of 100 undecided voters, as "presumably those most open or susceptible to campaign information," were identified and personally interviewed during a three-week period in September-October 1968. These voters' public agenda of campaign issues was measured by aggregating their responses to a survey question: "What are you *most* concerned about these days? That is, regardless of what politicians say, what are the two or three *main* things that you think the government *should* concentrate on doing something about?" (p. 178n). The number of mentions of each of five main campaign issues was utilized to index the public agenda.

McCombs and Shaw concluded from their analyses that the mass media set the campaign agenda for the public, or in other words, that the media agenda influenced the public agenda. Presumably the public agenda was important in a presidential election because it would determine who one voted for, although McCombs and Shaw did not investigate this consequence of the public agenda. . . .

Distinguishing Issues from Events

What is an *agenda*? It is a list of issues and events that are viewed at a point in time as ranked in a hierarchy of importance. The items on agendas of past study included (1) such *issues* as the war in Vietnam, Watergate, an auto safety law, unemployment, abortion, and drug abuse and (2) such *events* as the Sahel drought, earthquakes, and other natural disasters.

What is an issue? As Lang and Lang (1981) noted: "Without a clear definition, the concept of agenda-setting becomes so all-embracing as to be rendered practically meaningless" (p. 450). A rather wide range of issues have been studied in past agenda-setting research, and little care has been given to defining exactly what an issue is. Most typically, however, public agenda-setting scholars (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972) have investigated general issues like inflation and the war in Vietnam rather than specific news events or media events like a hurricane or a nuclear power plant disaster.

An important step toward pruning the conceptual thicket of what constitutes an agenda item was taken by Shaw (1977), who distinguished between (1) *events*, defined as discrete happenings that are limited by space and time, and (2) *issues*, defined as involving cumulative news coverage of a series of related events that fit together in a broad category. Thus the drug-related deaths of Len Bias and Don Rogers, two young athletes, in 1986 were news events that helped put the issue of drug abuse higher on the national agenda,

even though such "real-world" indicators of the drug problem as the total number of drug users in the U.S. population had remained fairly constant for several years. Our perspective is that events are specific components of issues. Both have been investigated in public agenda-setting research (McCombs, 1976), although we conclude that issues have been more often studied than events. The distinction is often difficult to make due to the conceptual confusion in the past regarding just what an issue and an event are. Further, the mass media often fit a news event into a broad category of a larger issue, as they seek to give the event meaning for their audience. For example, a news event like the 1986 *Challenger* explosion was interpreted by the U.S. media into the more general issue of NASA incompetence and the need for higher funding for the U.S. space program (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1986; Miller, 1987). Similarly, a news event like the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant [explosion] was interpreted by the U.S. media into the issue of the closed nature of Soviet society (and, yet more broadly, into the issue of U.S./Soviet international conflict).

Is it necessary for an issue to involve contention? Political science scholars in the policy agenda-setting tradition generally think so. For example, Eye-stone (1974) stated: "An issue arises when a public with a problem seeks or demands governmental action, and there is public disagreement over the best solution to the problem" (p. 3). Similarly, Cobb and Elder (1971) stated: "An issue is a conflict between two or more identifiable groups over procedural or substantive matters relating to the distribution of positions or resources" (p. 82).

Further scholarly effort should be given to classifying the issues and events that are studied in agenda-setting research. Certainly, a rapid-onset news event like the 1986 U.S. bombing of Libya is markedly different from a slow-onset natural disaster issue like the 1984 Ethiopian drought. A high-salience, short-duration issue like the 1985 TWA hijacking is different from such low-salience issues as the ups and downs of U.S. unemployment or from such long-duration issues as Japanese-U.S. trade conflict in that an agenda item (such as in the case of an election issue) may influence the agenda-setting process, as Auh (1977) demonstrated.

Finally, agenda-setting research should recognize more clearly that each agenda item influences other items on the media agenda and on the public agenda. Today's top news story crowds out yesterday's. The salience of an item on the agenda is "not just an absolute but to some extent a relative matter" (Lang & Lang, 1981, p. 453). Issues compete for attention. Unfortunately, agenda-setting researchers have tended to treat each issue on an agenda as if it were *not* dependent on the other items, which is a serious oversimplification. "Some issues . . . very rarely share space on the same agenda, while others quite regularly travel together" (Crenson, 1971, p. 163). One

can appreciate the measurement and conceptual difficulties resulting from such interrelationships of agenda items.

Adding the Public Attitudes Link

Several studies raise the possibility that the mass media may be doing more than just setting the public agenda. Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981), in a study of the 1976 presidential election, concluded that the mass media affected *voter evaluations*, as well as cognitive images of candidates. Davidson and Parker (1972) found a positive correlation between mass media exposure and public support for members of the U.S. Congress. Mazur (1981) found negative correlations between amount of mass media coverage and U.S. public support for fluoridation and for nuclear power:

Detailed studies of a few technical controversies suggest that there is at least one simple effect of media coverage on attitudes which works in a reliable manner. When media coverage of a controversy increases, public opposition to the technology in question (as measured by opinion polls) increases; when media coverage wanes, public opposition falls off. (p. 109)

Can we then say that the mass media can change public attitudes, as well as public cognitions (like the public agenda)? Becker and McLeod (1976) proposed a model that suggested that public cognitions (the public agenda) could be a direct effect of the mass media agenda, or an indirect effect of mass media semantic content, mediated by public attitudes. Public attitudes, they suggested, could result either directly from mass media semantic content or indirectly from the media agenda, mediated by public cognitions.

A recent analysis of 12 field experiments on television news concluded that public judgments as well as cognitions may result from mass media agenda-setting. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) concluded that television coverage of U.S. presidential performance not only heightened viewer cognizance of the issues, but also set the standards (by highlighting some issues at the expense of others) by which presidential performance was then judged. The concept employed by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) to explain this power of the media is *priming*, defined by Fiske and Taylor (1984, p. 231) as the effects of prior context on the interpretation and retrieval of information. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) use the concept of priming to mean the changes in the standards that underlie the public's political evaluations. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) see priming as "a possibility at once more subtle and consequential than agenda-setting." They found considerable support for both public agenda-setting and priming hypotheses in their field experiments.

Priming, especially in its broader definition by Fiske and Taylor (1984), addresses the importance of both the mass media agenda and mass media

semantic content in affecting public attitudes. If the mass media agenda "primes" readers and viewers by giving salience to certain events, these events are not merely made more salient to the audience. The mass media prime focuses on specific issues raised by a news event in the journalistic search for explanation. This selectivity forces these issues, not just the event, to the forefront of mass media coverage and of, perhaps, personal consideration. Moreover, these "event-issues" are prominently publicized by the media, not in an impartial way, but rather with positive or negative valences. Mass communicators may be "telling it like it is," but issues raised by the event retain their media intensity through positive or negative semantic content. An issue will not move through the priming sequence if it has not aroused public interest. As Downs (1972) observed, "A problem must be dramatic and exciting to maintain public interest because news is 'consumed' by much of the American public (and by publics everywhere) largely as a form of entertainment" (p. 42). Thus priming acts upon public attitude formation both through heavy media coverage (media agenda-setting), by showing people that the issue is important, and, in "successful" event-issues, by demonstrating a kind of entertainment value (semantic content).

Other Influences on the Public Agenda

The mass media are not the only influences on the public agenda, which is one reason the correlation of the mass media with the public's agenda of items is less than perfect. "Social processes other than mass communication also affect the public's judgment of an issue or person as important. For one thing, people talk to one another about social issues, and these conversations may play an important part in their judgments" (Wright, 1986, p. 155). In fact, McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974) found that mass media content had a greater effect in forming the news agendas of individuals who participated in conversations about the topics on the media agenda, than for individuals who did not have such interpersonal communication. This finding is entirely consistent with the conclusions from research on the diffusion of innovations, where an individual's exposure to mass media channels often creates awareness of new ideas, but then interpersonal channels are necessary to persuade the individual to adopt the innovation.

Most scholars of agenda-setting seem to take a contingent view of the process: Agenda-setting does not cooperate *everywhere*, on *everyone*, and *always* (McCombs, 1976). Why might an individual's agenda *not* be influenced by the mass media agenda?

Low media credibility. A particular individual may regard the media in general, or the particular medium to which the individual is exposed, as low in *credibility* (defined as the degree to which a communication source or

channel is perceived by an individual as trustworthy and competent). For instance, a Wall Street lawyer may regard the *National Enquirer* as less credible regarding international news than the *New York Times*; so when the lawyer reads a headline in the *Enquirer* about a new Soviet disarmament proposal, the medium's salience for this news item likely will not be accepted. The individual is informed about the news item by the media, but is not convinced that the item is important.

Conflicting evidence from personal experience or other communication channels about the salience of the issue or news event. Perhaps an individual hears the president of the United States pronounce in a televised address that America is experiencing a drug crisis, but this individual has recently heard CBS News's Dan Rather state that the number of U.S. drug users has remained constant for several years. Such conflicting statements in the media represent content about the drug issue, but are unlikely to raise that issue on the public agenda.

The individual holds different news values than those reflected by the mass medium or media. The individual's reaction to a newspaper headline might be to think, "How could they regard *that* as important news?"

An important step toward understanding why individuals have different issue agendas was taken by McCombs and Weaver (1973) by introducing the notion of a *need or orientation*. Any individual, when issue relevance is high and uncertainty is high, has a high need for orientation. This need leads to greater media exposure, which in turn leads to greater agenda-setting effects. Nevertheless, as McCombs and Weaver (1985) noted, "Such a limited three-part model is far from the full picture of the mass communication process" (p. 102). Future research should seek to understand more clearly the individual cognitive processes that are involved in the agenda-setting process at the individual level.

Assessing Causality

Agenda-setting research has generally found a positive association between the amount of mass media content devoted to an item and the development of a place on the public agenda for the item. The next step in establishing a causal relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda was to seek evidence for the expected time order; if the public agenda preceded media content, the latter could hardly cause the former. The expected time order of the two conceptual variables has been found in several post hoc studies. Funkhouser (1973a, 1973b) advanced the field of agenda-setting research by investigating a longer time period than in other studies; he utilized years as units of analysis for eight issues that emerged on the public agenda

in the United States during the 1960s. The rank-order of these issues on the public agenda corresponded to their degree of mass media coverage.

Such media coverage did not correspond to the "real-world" severity of the agenda item; for example, in the case of drug abuse, mass media coverage began its decline well before the social problem began to become less serious, as indicated by "objective" indicators obtained from extramedia sources. When the mass media coverage of the issue and the real-world severity of the agenda item differed, the public agenda followed the degree of media coverage more closely. Overall, Funkhouser's analysis supported the media agenda moving toward public agenda relationship, although this support was limited to the particular era and issues that he studied (MacKuen and Coombs, 1981, p. 24).

Real-world indicators are possible confounders of the media agenda moving toward public agenda relationships. A few studies support this view; for example, MacKuen and Coombs (1981) found a direct influence of real-world indicators on the public agenda, without this relationship going through the media agenda. In contrast, Funkhouser (1973) generally found strong associations between the media agenda and the public agenda, and weaker associations between real-world indicators and either the media agenda or the public agenda. Unfortunately, relatively few agenda-setting scholars have included real-world indicators in their analysis. . . .

In only a few agenda-setting investigations were the researchers able to control the independent variable of the media agenda as it influenced the public agenda (the dependent variable). An example is a field experiment conducted by Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982), in which families were paid to watch only special television news programs created by the investigators. When national defense was stressed in the television news programs constructed by the investigators, this issue became more salient to the families in the field experiment. A similar agenda-setting "effect" was achieved for the topic of pollution in a second field experiment, and for inflation in a third. . . .

. . . [T]here is undoubtedly a two-way, mutually dependent relationship between the public agenda and the media agenda in the agenda-setting process. Media gatekeepers have a general idea of the news interests of their audience, and this perceived priority of news interests is directly reflected in the news values with which media personnel decide the media agenda. A few studies, for example, Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980), have found a two-way relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. This influencing of the media agenda by the public agenda is a gradual, long-term process through which generalized news values are created. In contrast, the influence of the media agenda on the public agenda for a specific news item is a more direct, immediate cause-effect relationship, especially when the public lacks alternatives (such as personal experience) that might influence

their agenda. However, for general agenda issues like inflation, Watergate, and unemployment, where their priority on the public agenda is built up in a slow, accretionary process over many months or years, the nature of the media agenda moving toward public agenda relationship may be very gradual and indirect. Certainly there must be differences from agenda item to agenda item as to how rapidly they climb the public agenda.

If our present reasoning is correct, it is inappropriate to expect a one-way causal relationship of the media agenda on the public agenda. . . . More realistically, both the media agenda and the public agenda are probably mutual causes of each other. . . . Since there is a great deal of variance in the agenda items studied, some items probably can be expected to demonstrate linear, rather than circular, causality. . . .

The relative influence of the mass media in setting the public agenda for an agenda item depends greatly on whether the event is (1) of major importance or not and (2) a rapid-onset type versus a gradual, slowly developing topic. In a major, quick-onset news event, the importance of the news event is immediately apparent. Almost at once the news event jumps to the top of the media agenda and remains there for some time. The public usually has no other communication channels (such as personal experience) through which to learn of these news events. So the mass media would be expected to place the news event high on the public agenda quickly.

In the case of a relatively slow-onset news issue like a drought, the media often play an important role in "creating" the issue. Typically, the mass media discover the slowly developing news event through a particularly spectacular message about it, which serves as a "triggering device" (Cobb & Elder, 1983, p. 85) in setting the media agenda. In the case of the Ethiopian drought, a film report of a refugee camp at Korem by Mohamed Amin was shown by the BBC and then by NBC in October 1984. Immediately, other U.S. mass media began to feature this disaster as a major news issue, and rather quickly the public considered the Ethiopia drought an important issue. Relief activities by the U.S. government and by rock musicians (who attracted massive financial support from the public) soon followed. In this case, the mass media helped to "create" the news event, set the public agenda, and facilitate amelioration of suffering in Ethiopia through fund raising.

Much public agenda-setting research, especially the studies reported in the 1970s, involved a rather narrow range of political issues. This primary emphasis on political issues is understandable, in the sense that a great many media news events *are* political in nature. But much other news content is not directly political in nature, and these news events should also be included in agenda-setting research, in order to determine the generalizability of public agenda-setting across various types of media content. . . .

For some agenda items, advertising must be very important. For example, the tremendous advertising campaigns for microcomputers in the 1980s by Apple, IBM, and other manufacturers certainly must have raised the American public's consciousness of computers. In recent years, microcomputers represented one of the most advertised products on U.S. television. Despite the obviously important role of advertising as an agenda-setter for certain issues, advertising's role in the agenda-setting process has received very little attention by communication scholars other than that given to political campaign spots. Exceptions are Sutherland and Galloway (1981) and Hauser (1986), who investigated how a consumer's agenda of products is affected by advertising.

In a sense, one of the strongest pieces of evidence of the media's agenda-setting influence may consist of the fact that issues and events that are completely ignored by the mass media do not register on the public agendas. As McCombs (1976) noted: "This basic, primitive notion of agenda-setting is a truism. If the media tell us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases it simply will not exist on our personal agenda or in our life space" (p. 3). Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult or impossible for scholars to investigate such a "non-agenda-setting" process because of the problem of identifying news events or issues that are not reported by the mass media, which by definition cannot be measured by a content analysis of the media. . . . Perhaps public agenda-setting by the mass media only occurs in the case of transfixing issues and blockbuster events that receive very heavy media attention over an extended period of time. In any event, it is certainly dangerous to extrapolate intuitively from the present findings about agenda-setting for high-salience issues and events to those of much less salience. . . .

Critique of the Policy Agenda Literature

. . . Concomitant with interest in the public opinion-policy relationship has been interest in the influence that the mass media agenda has on U.S. foreign policy. As Cohen (1965) stated:

The press functions in the political process like the bloodstream in the human body, enabling the [foreign policy] process that we are familiar with today to continue on, by linking up all the widely-scattered parts, putting them in touch with one another, and supplying them with political and intellectual nourishment. (p. 196)

In recent years, scholars often incorporate the media agenda, along with other variables, in research on policy agenda-setting. For example, Lang and Lang (1983, pp. 58-59) found that Watergate was an issue that required months of news coverage before it got onto the public agenda. Then, finally,

Watergate became an agenda issue for action by U.S. governmental officials. In this particular case of policy agenda-setting, public agenda-setting by the mass media led to government action, and then policy formation.

Further exploitation of both the public opinion moving toward policymaker and mass media moving toward policymaker relationships was advanced by Cohen (1963), who concentrated on the agendas of elites responsible for foreign policy. Yet public opinion as a meaningful determinant of elite agendas was not clearly established in the way that communication scholars were able to replicate the media agenda moving toward public agenda link (e.g., stricter federal laws regulating campaign financing). So there may be various longer-range consequences of the mass media agenda than just forming the public agenda. But the main point of the Lang and Lang analysis of the agenda-building process for Watergate is that the mass media were only one element, along with government and the public, involved in a process through which the elements reciprocally influenced each other. Such multiple agenda-setting for an issue, with complex feedback and two-way interaction of the main components in the agenda-setting process, probably occurs in many cases. The media's influence upon policymakers might be expected to be greater for quick-onset issues when the media have priority access to information; alternatively, when policy elites control the information sources, they might be expected to set the media agenda.

An example of policy agenda-setting research that illustrates the impact of policy elite agendas upon media agendas is Walker's (1977) study of setting the agenda in the U.S. Senate. He commented:

Once a new problem begins to attract attention and is debated seriously by other senators, it takes on a heightened significance in the mass media, and its sponsors, beyond the satisfaction of advancing the public interest as they see it, also receive important political rewards that come from greatly increased national exposure. (p. 426)

. . . In a recent study of mass media impact upon federal policymaking, Linsky (1986) concluded that the media are far more important than had previously been suggested. Out of 500 former government officials surveyed and 20 federal policymakers interviewed, 96 said that the media had an impact on federal policy. A majority considered the impact to be substantial. Linsky (1986) concluded that the media can speed up the decision-making process by positive issue coverage, as well as slow down the process by negative coverage. . . .

We conclude our review of policy agenda-setting research with three generalizations: (1) The public agenda, once set by, or reflected by, the media agenda, influences the policy agenda of elite decision makers, and, in some

cases, policy implementation; (2) the media agenda seems to have direct, sometimes strong, influence upon the policy agenda of elite decision makers, and, in some cases, policy implementation; and (3) for some issues, the policy agenda seems to have a direct, sometimes strong, influence upon the media agenda.

Discussion and Conclusions

... What are the main theoretical and methodological lessons learned from the past 15 years of research on the agenda-setting process?

1. The mass media influence the public agenda. This proposition, implied by the Cohen (1963) metaphor, has been generally supported by evidence from most public agenda-setting investigations, which cover a very wide range of agenda items, types of publics, and points in time.
2. An understanding of media agenda-setting is a necessary prerequisite to comprehending how the mass media agenda influences the public agenda.
3. The public agenda, once set by, or reflected by, the media agenda, influences the policy agenda of elite decision makers, and, in some cases, policy implementation.
4. The media agenda seems to have direct, sometimes strong, influence upon the policy agenda of elite decision makers, and, in some cases, policy implementation.
5. For some issues the policy agenda seems to have a direct, sometimes strong, influence upon the media agenda.
6. The methodological progression in agenda-setting research has been from one-shot, cross-sectional studies to more sophisticated research designs that allow more precise exploration of agenda-setting as a process.
7. A general trend in agenda-setting studies across the more than 15 years of their history is toward disaggregation of the units of analysis, so as to allow (1) a wider range of research approaches to be utilized and (2) a more precise understanding of the process of agenda-setting.
8. Scholars in the two main research traditions on the agenda-setting process, especially those studying public agenda-setting, need to become more fully aware of each others' research and theory, so that agenda-setting research can become more of an integrated whole (our analysis of the citations by the two research traditions shows there is little intellectual interchange in this direction). . . .

As pointed out elsewhere in this chapter, initial interest in research on the public agenda-setting process was stimulated by scholars who were questioning the limited direct effects of the mass media, and who thus searched for indirect effects. This expectation now seems to have been fulfilled: The

media do indeed have important indirect effects in setting the public agenda. But how could the mass media have relatively few direct effects, and at the same time have strong indirect effects in setting the public's agenda? McQuail and Windahl (1981) stated:

This hypothesis [agenda-setting] would seem to have escaped the doubts which early empirical research cast on almost any notion of powerful mass media effects, mainly because it deals primarily with learning and not with attitude change or directly with opinion change. (p. 62)

In other words, individuals learn information from the mass media about which agenda items are more important than others; this task is accomplished by the mass media, even though research shows these media are much less capable of directly changing attitudes and opinions. These general research results from agenda-setting research make sense in an intuitive way. Therefore, the theory of McCombs and Shaw (1972) that proposes the media agenda would influence the public agenda, drawn from the Cohen (1963) metaphor, has been largely supported by some 102 studies in the public agenda-setting tradition.

Here we see the main intellectual significance of agenda-setting research. No scholarly issue has been so important to the field of mass communications research as that of the research for media effects. The actual issue driving the mass communication field for the past 30 years or so has been this one: Why can't we find evidence for mass media effects? Agenda-setting research is viewed as important by many mass communication scholars because it has established that the media *do* have an indirect effect, public agenda-setting. This conclusion contains the germ of a lead for future research: Mass communication scholars should investigate indirect media effects on individual knowledge, rather than direct media effects on attitude and behavior change. Obviously, there are many other potential types of indirect media effects on knowledge than just agenda-setting. . . .

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