The Issue of Relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory to the Online Community

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Abstract

The Agenda-Setting theory of mass media has played a crucial role in determining how the media affects consumers since the theory's conception. While studies and discussions have continued to demonstrate the relationship between traditional media and consumers, little has been done in the discussion of Agenda-Setting and the realm of "new" media. The importance of this discourse cannot be more critical, as the entire media landscape continually moves into an online realm. Older "vertical" media have set roles with limited access to general information, so Agenda-Setting can be applied; but how does the application change when dealing with new "horizontal" media in which access to information is opened and traditional roles are challenged? This discussion does not hold back in raising critical questions about the shortcomings of Agenda-Setting Theory in new media and attempts to answer the question of whether or not Agenda-Setting theory is still applicable in the said new, "un-massed" media landscape.

Introduction

In years past, Agenda-Setting has held that the media agenda--those items the media deem important--is identical to the public agenda, or what the public deems important. This effect is represented by issue salience, which is the concept that claims that the public views as important what the media views as important. Essentially, the stories that the media covers most often are the items at the top of both the media and public agendas. The media's ability to transfer attributes of news "objects" has also been proven, where an "object" can be anything from a candidate to an issue.

With the emergence of online media, however, the relevance of Agenda-Setting is being challenged. As the media becomes personalized, the agenda is diluted or not uniform and is therefore claimed to be no longer transferrable. However, there are other aspects of Agenda-Setting that are also called into question by the realm of new media. Components that one would deem necessary for issue salience to occur may or may not exist in the online realm. Furthermore, new media is fragmented because of the plethora of sources available to anyone who seeks information. In the days of old media (e.g. television, radio), the consumer absorbed the news presented to them; Walter Cronkite's level of influence in society is a strong example of old media and issue salience. But again, the audience is now fragmented.

The audience is also beginning to be viewed differently in relation to how people are persuaded as members of a group, taking into account a lessened degree of homogeneity. Also, the audience is no longer viewed only as passive consumers, which raises important issues to the relevance of Agenda-Setting. Furthermore, there is a continual blurring of the line between media gatekeepers and media consumers in the unmediated online world, which calls into

question the concept of issue salience; there must be a distinct line between gatekeepers and consumers for it to apply, as stated by the Agenda-Setting theory itself.

Agenda-Setting also needs a given amount of time for the media agenda to be absorbed and accepted as the public agenda. But in an online community of instantaneous communication, this also is open to discussion and may not exist. Scholars who hold that Agenda-Setting is still potent in the realm of new media introduce new concepts like "Agenda-Melding," which deals with how people respond to the media vis-à-vis association groups, but even this does not clearly answer the above questions at hand and still purports a transfer of salience.

All of these contentions weaken the ability of the media to propose and transfer a clear media agenda to the public agenda. When this transfer does not occur, the theory of Agenda-Setting is no longer functional. Through the synthesized thoughts of the scholarly community and through critical discussion, this work will show that, indeed, the theory at hand is no longer functional in relation to new media.

Literature Review

In 1922 Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion* set the stage for the theory of agenda setting by arguing that "the news media construct our view of the world" (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009, p.147). However, the term "Agenda-Setting" would not be coined until 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. In McCombs's and Shaw's original work published on Agenda-Setting--"The agenda setting function of mass media"--the media is the most prominent (and arguably, the only) linkage institution between the government and the people. Therefore, McCombs and Shaw argue that it is the only contact many have with politics (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In this groundbreaking study by these scholars, it is proposed that "[The voters]

apparently learn...in direct proportion to the emphasis placed on the campaign issues by the mass media" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p.177). This conclusion lies in stark contrast to previous scholarly work about media effects, which basically stated that media had little influence on the topics about which voters thought. They go on to describe issue salience--the process where the public deem important what the media deem important. In their Charlotte, North Carolina study in the early 1970s, a high correlation was proven between the items on the media agenda and those on the public agenda.

One argument (among many) that the discussion section of McCombs's and Shaw's work rejected was the idea that the high correlation was spurious; rather, that both the media and the individual respond independently to an event. Yet since the media is the primary means by which an individual learns about an event, this suggestion is deemed highly illogical. This study determined that the media does determine the public agenda, and that the key factor in transmitting the agenda from the media is the salience of the issues as the media present them.

Another argument presented was the idea of "inter-media agenda-setting", where a "high degree of correspondence among different media outlets" demonstrated elite news organizations' ability to make certain issues more important than others, and therefore directed the coverage of news media among the varying news outlets (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p.148). In the book *Framing Terrorism* by Pipa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion Just, the "contagion effect" that takes place among news organizations, where certain news stories are shared across all news media outlets, explains the idea of framing presented by McCombs and Shaw. In looking at the post 9/11 era of news media agenda and public agenda, news frames show persistent patterns in the selection of a news story, which parts of the story are emphasized, and which stories are left out in order to create an interpretation of the news that feeds the inter-

media agenda-setting process, and ultimately the public agenda (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003).

An additional aspect of Agenda-Setting proven by McCombs and Shaw is that of object-attributes, wherein it is possible for the media to transfer articulated characteristics of a news "object" to the public as well. This concept gives the media an even greater lease on power in the setting of the public agenda. Because they not only delineate about what the public thinks but also arguably about how the public thinks of news objects, the power of the media is increased exponentially.

An aspect of the theory crucial to explaining what issues are deemed valuable and important to the public is the idea of a "time lag". The time lag is a quintessential component of Agenda-Setting because there must be a given length of time for the agenda to be transferred from the media (who are its' creators) to the public (who are its' consumers). An operational definition of the time lag as it relates to Agenda-Setting theory is, "The optimal time that an issue must be covered in the media before the public considers it as important," Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2009, p.155). Through this definition, it is shown that there must be a time lag for a given agenda to be properly absorbed.

However, a time lag is a component that is arguably nonexistent in new media. This is because "...the emergence of 'Web 2.0' technologies...enable the production and mass circulation of *user-generated content*..." (Gane & Beer, 2008, p.98). They go on to state that, "This development is accompanied by a new form of interactive culture in which users act at the same time as producers, for they participate in the construction of online spaces while at the same time consuming the content generated by others" (Gane & Beer, 2008, p.98). This idea demonstrates that in a world increasingly dominated by new media, the essential time lag needed for Agenda-Setting to be operational no longer exists.

Also, for the theory to be functional there needs to be a clear distinction between media gatekeepers and media consumers. This is a tenet of the theory. However, in the online community, Brynin (2002) reflects that

>"The internet has continued this turn toward living in networks...In such networked societies, boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch between multiple networks...work and community networks are diffuse and sparsely knit, with vague, overlapping, social and spatial boundaries" (p.33).

This statement calls into question whether or not we can determine who are new media consumers and who are new media gatekeepers, suggesting that this may be an area of Agenda-Setting theory's vulnerability.

The idea of active audience theory is also related to this discussion. According to the basics of this lens of analysis, an audience cannot be seen as homogeneous because it is comprised of different users with different backgrounds, perceptions, and even uses for the media. Active audience theory challenges the idea that what the media say is vital to understanding what people think. Individuals are not simply wired to accept the media's dominant message; they have the ability to interpret and reject and challenge the media (Williams, 2003). Active audience theory has shown the counterpoint to an audience as singular because it questions the assumption that people automatically accept the media's message (Williams, 2003). In relation to Agenda-Setting, this theory raises the point that even if the media does succeed in creating and imparting a unified agenda, it is not necessarily going to be accepted as fact by the audience. This calls into question whether or not a media effect has truly taken place.

Overall, the theory of Agenda-Setting provided an attractiveness not found before in the

field of mass communication research when it was first presented. Mass communication

researchers were delighted to have a new idea presented that strayed from the data that the

effects of mass communication were nonexistent (Severin &Tankard, 1979).

Theoretical Territory Revisited

More recently, McCombs gave an update on the body of knowledge now surrounding

Agenda-setting in a piece entitled, "A Look at Agenda-setting: past, present, and future." In this

article, McCombs gives a review of the body of Agenda-Setting research from his initial work in

the 1970s to the year 2005.

First, he describes the evolution of Agenda-Setting Theory. It has evolved into what is an

increasingly Internet based media landscape. Thus, it is predicted that there will be an end to

Agenda-Setting as audiences splinter off into highly individualized composites based on the

ever-expanding online arena (McCombs, 2005). However, this may or may not prove to be the

case. McCombs describes two hypotheses that need to be tested in light of the online world.

First, it would need to be proven that the Internet has a large, fragmented audience. Second,

online news agendas would need to be greatly opposing rather than greatly redundant agendas

typically found in more traditional news media (McCombs, 2005). However, McCombs also

points out the fact that many online news sources are simply subsidiaries of mainstream news

sources, which would lead to a conclusion that online news is redundant. He argues through

discussion of both of these hypotheses that Agenda-Setting will still be influential even through

this change in media context.

An important question in the Agenda-setting realm is: "Who sets the media's agenda?" As

previously discussed, "inter-media agenda-setting" is the concept that some media use other

media to set the agenda, essentially looking for approval of one's peers, especially amongst "elite members of the press" (McCombs, 2005). Also, the idea that blogs inform the media agenda is based on evidence that most of the public do not know what a blog is, but members of the media seek out blogs often. Overall, the media sets the media's agenda. Agenda-Setting also has consequences for people's attitudes and opinions. There are three effects outlined by McCombs (2005): "forming an opinion, priming opinions about public figures through an emphasis on particular issues and shaping an opinion through an emphasis on particular attributes."

McCombs goes through a recap of some basics of Agenda-Setting. First, he redefines the measurement of issue salience in a modern context. In the year 2000, two dimensions of salience were defined: visibility and valence. It has also been split into personal importance of an issue and societal importance of an issue. Even with this split, the correlation between media agenda and personal/societal agenda is a staggering +0.76. Hence, even with modern contexts and advanced hypotheses, agenda-setting still holds true according to its founder.

In his book *Setting the Agenda*, McCombs makes note of a new addition to Agenda-Setting Theory, that of "agenda-melding". Agenda-melding, McCombs says, expounds on the concept of need for orientation (McCombs ,2004). The addition of "agenda-melding" to the functions of "agenda setting" proves to be parsimonious among the theoretical vocabulary where the idea of the transfer of salience from one issue to another issue is seen in a single agenda or multiple agendas. McCombs demonstrates his belief that Agenda-Setting is still relevant, even in new media platforms where group agenda built from the agendas of multiple individuals is present.

History of Agenda-Setting Research

In the article entitled "Maxwell McCombs: Agenda-setting explorer," by Davie and Maher, Agenda-Setting is established as one of the most influential and powerful theories in the field of communication studies. Before Agenda-Setting, scholarly wisdom was that the media "exerted little influence" (Davie & Maher, 2006) on the public agenda, and that the public agenda was formed by social processes rather than media messages. However, McCombs and Shaw pursued media influence at the cognitive level, which gave no bearing to the behavioral and affective levels (Davie & Maher, 2006).

In 1992, McCombs described four phases of Agenda-Setting research: (a) original hypothesis, transfer of issue salience from the media to the public; (b) contingent conditions; (c) agenda of attributes, such as candidate images; and (d) investigations of who sets the media agenda (Davie & Maher, 2006). In acknowledging this fourth phase, he broadened the focus of Agenda-Setting to include why the media covers what they cover--essentially where that agenda originated-- which the lack thereof had been a reverberating scholarly criticism of the theory up until that time. Also, with the fourth phase, McCombs described how Agenda-Setting is about more than issue or object salience. The news not only tells us what to think about; it also tells us how to think about it. "Both the selection of topics for the news agenda and the selection of frames for stories about those topics are powerful agenda setting roles and awesome ethical responsibilities" (Davie & Maher, 2006, pp. 820-821). With this assertion, the framing of news stories is basically the second level of Agenda-Setting.

These four phases determined the need for a fifth phase--one focused on the consequences of Agenda-Setting. The theory in its entirety has expanded throughout the entire mass media realm, and although there is no overarching paradigm in mass media studies, Agenda-Setting has become one area of scholarship that has a relationship with almost any area

of mass media studies.

Understanding the Complexities

Kosicki helps in the understanding of the complex nature of Agenda-Setting by dividing the topic into three areas: the public agenda, the policy agenda, and the media agenda. Also, he notes that it is important to have a view of all three of these areas in order to see what a contemporary model of media influence should be (Kosicki, 1993).

First, Kosicki covers media effects. Contrary to popular opinion, when Agenda-Setting first came about, many assumed that traditional persuasion was the primary player in determining the public's agenda. However, with Agenda-Setting, the concept of persuasion would be rejected because the theory is almost more of a lack of a persuasive mechanism rather than traditional persuasion. The model accepted in terms of media effects before Agenda-Setting was researched was the "limited effects paradigm," which basically affirmed the traditional view of persuasion through media. The development of Agenda-Setting moved away from persuasion to look at other cognitive factors that created an agenda of issues (Kosicki, 1993).

An important issue tackled is that of the "ambiguity" of public agenda setting. This deals with both the level at which to measure the public's agenda (e.g. macro versus micro), as well as the scale at which to measure the public's agenda (e.g direct measurement versus conditional measurement). The latter of these asserts that different preexisting factors in individuals might condition them to absorb the agenda differently. Also, behavioral and attitudinal measurements are discussed, as well as alteration measurement versus stabilization. Essentially, the latter of these deals with the issue of the fluctuation of the media's agenda contrasted to the constancy of its influence. An additional primary problem discussed is that of long-term versus short term measurement. Discussion of time lags give no real answer as to how one is really determined.

A conceptual, definitional issue with Agenda-Setting is this question: is it Agenda-Setting or agenda reflection? In other words, does the media set the public's agenda, or vice versa? Kosicki uses a case study to show a plausible train of thought: if media starts to cover the story, but coverage is hard to get, public interest would remain low. But as more in the public become interested, the media will begin to add coverage. This begs the question: which came first, the public's interest or the media's coverage? Another argument presented that would imply "holes" in the research is Kosicki's argument that it is not sufficient to only establish that media set the public agenda; researchers need to identify any affecting variables. Examples of variables that should be controlled for include simple quantifiable concepts like party identification, as well as more abstract ideas like need for orientation. This is arguably the future of agenda setting work.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) discuss agenda setting as a separate method of political communication from framing, where traditionally the latter would be a subset of the former. Priming is also discussed as a primary means of political communication in this article, where, "...an examination of whether and how framing, agenda setting, and priming are related and what these relationships tell theorists and researchers about the effects of mass media" is offered (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p.11).

The development of these theories began in the 1920s. Early 20th-century work relied on the hypodermic needle and magic-bullet models, but was replaced with the work of Lazarusfeld in the '40s which stated that, media effects were more complex in nature than was previously thought (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Everything changed in the 1970s, as both Agenda-Setting and Cultivation Theory were developed. While Cultivation fits better into the entertainment realm, Agenda-Setting finds itself more suited toward news and politics.

Moving beyond history, the authors describe the actual process of political

communication. First, news production is discussed as the arena in which framing and "agenda building" occur. News processing is how those agendas and frames are digested by an audience. In this step, important distinctions are made between framing and Agenda-Setting, where attention to messages may be more of a necessity for a framing effect than an agenda setting effect (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), as the evaluation of an individual's personal frame involves a significant deal of cognition beyond simple attention.

However, it is with the distinction between framing and Agenda-Setting that more definitions are drawn out. Agenda-Setting, the authors argue, takes place based on the availability and accessibility of the issues. Framing under this definition would become the "second level" or more sophisticated step in the agenda setting process. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) explain that priming and agenda setting are "accessibility effects," meaning they are memory based, whereas framing is an applicability effect. Thus, these important distinctions are defined.

The authors argue that, while their work creates more questions than it answers, their discipline needs to move in a direction that would answer their newly-posed inquiries. They assert that researchers need to focus on clarifying terminological definitions before understanding how the interplay of concepts actually happens in the real world. The field of Communication studies had confused many concepts and terminology written by so many scholars (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). According to these scholars, future research should slow down and go back to basics to get a community of agreement on actual conceptual definitions before attempting to solve the equation of media effects.

Discussion

The questions implied in the above review come into their own when discussed in the context of the critiques of Agenda-Setting.

Relevancy of Agenda-Setting Theory

No longer does the mass media frame the story, but rather the consumer takes the role of a gatekeeper because the Internet allows for anyone to be the author and reporter of information. This ties in with the American belief of skepticism of the news due to both multiplicity of sources and perceived ability to "find the truth," even though the answer they find might not really be true. This stated phenomenon is the concept of selective perception, in which one has the ability to find a "truth" that is tailored to what one already believes, thus lowering the influence of the mass media in relation to individual media. Also, there are decidedly more critical media sources in existence because of the online world, therefore opening the marketplace of ideas to include information from almost any viewpoint on almost any subject. This clearly lessens the impact of the media in its ability to transfer an agenda, resulting in issue salience.

We are continually living in a group-dominated society. However, it is logical that the rise in identification with groups is superficial. It would be plausible that, although there is a high rate of group identification, there is an increasingly low group commitment. An example of such a lack of commitment is the "Rock the Vote" online movement. This is a created new media brand that is a sort of hybrid format with traditional media, in this case MTV. Voter registration is certainly up, but apart from the 2008 election (please note, "Rock the Vote" was in existence before the 2008 cycle), voter turnout is still down. Therefore, people are identifying with a group, but are not following through on group commitment.

Groups are exceedingly important units of analysis when dealing with new media because virtual brand communities help to bridge the gap between horizontal and vertical media (Ragas & Robets, 2009). These communities are located on the web, where information is globally accessible. The information is free-flowing, but is also specialized similarly to traditional media. These communities allow members of groups to engage in dialogues, not monologues, and a degree of information creation certainly occurs.

However, we are more interconnected than ever. Yet, it may be that we are only superficially interconnected. Many media products are becoming customized, and the consumer is actually becoming isolated in this type of market. There is an obvious emphasis on being "unique" and not necessarily looking for the ties that bind members of society, even though group identification is, as previously mentioned, high. This group mentality has morphed into how to find superficial popularity while distinguishing one's self. Clearly, the community of new media is increasingly individual, thus fragmenting the all-essential audience needed for Agenda-Setting to occur.

Furthermore, new media means different things to different people. The concept of Facebook, for example, serves a dual purpose of both a brand and a new media channel. This is also an example of the fragmentation of groups in the online community because the message can be taken differently depending upon the use of the medium.

Yet it is a truth, also, that even traditional media is fragmented, both in uses and personal preferences. Users most certainly have favorite television channels and websites. The only common thread is that almost every user is now using new media. An example of the fragmentation of media is the iPhone. It has thousands of different "apps" that allow individual users to use the phone for different purposes. However, everyone is using the same piece of

technology, and that is the common thread. Indeed, new media mean different things to different people.

The above factors have all led scholars to the creation of the Agenda-Melding hypothesis, which is a recent addition to the discourse of Agenda-Setting. It focuses on the personal agendas of individuals vis á vis their communities and group affiliations (McCombs, 2004). As posited by this hypothesis, when individuals join groups, they meld their agendas with the agendas of the group. In other words, one joins a group by adopting the said group's agenda. However, in this hypothesis, there is still a transfer of salience. This new, individualized view of Agenda-Setting allows for a "media of connections" to satisfy the need for orientation.

Within these virtual groups, individuals are producing new content while being the consumers of said content. In Agenda-Setting, there also must be a clear delineation between producers and consumers of the agenda, for one must influence the other and impart the agenda. Yet as stated by Gane and Beer (2008) and previously referenced, the very reason the time lag does not exist in new media is not only because the consumer is acting simultaneously with the producer, but the consumer is in fact also a producer of content, and therefore, of an agenda. This notion then begs the question: Is Agenda-Setting theory then no longer applicable ? In order for agenda setting to be applicable, the public agenda must follow the media agenda. However, with new media, the distinction between the producer and the consumer of the agenda is blurred. Anyone can produce the agenda, thus disfiguring the cause and effect ordering of media agenda and then public agenda. Is this occurrence of new media groups where producers are consumers or consumers are producers in fact pointing out the need for an entirely new theory? Without a time lag, and without clear delineation between producers of the agenda and consumers of the agenda, it seems that there is no room for Agenda-Setting to be the theory that is explanatory of

the phenomenon that occurs within the online world.

In looking at the merger of media and the public agenda, traditional media have always had "letters to the editor," but there was a marked time lag between production of media agenda and reaction of the public. Now, many traditional media have interactive features such as "tweeting" on online social media platforms, like Twitter. These consumer comments to the various instantaneous online media sites make it impossible to determine if the comments or "tweets" (in the case of the platform Twitter) are actually dictating what the media agenda will be based on. Without constant viewership by consumers of what elite news organizations are posting online, it can be said that the public could stray from keeping up with the agenda set forth by these organizations, and only receive pieces of current issues when they choose to consume the information these organizations disseminate.

An argument against the notion stated above and for the idea that Agenda-Setting theory still exists within an online media landscape can be found in a study conducted by Coleman and McCombs (2007), where the authors look at the effects of Agenda-Setting on three groups of individuals, those ages 18 to 34 and two older generations. The study concluded that:

"despite evidence that the youngest generation is not exposed to traditional media as frequently as the older generations, and does use the Internet significantly more, there is little support for the intuitive idea that diversity of media will lead to the end of a common public agenda as we have known it. Rather, different media use among the young did not seem to influence the Agenda-Setting effect much at all" (Coleman and McCombs, 2007, p.503).

However, the fault in this assertion lies in the research conducted. They showed that the younger generation as viewers of old media forms such as television, and therefore were seeing the same content as the older generations. Of course there would still be issue salience occurring for the younger generation on the same issues as those of the older generations simply because they are being exposed to the forms of media. The only difference is in the amount of time each group spent consuming information from each media form. It can be concluded on our part then that the study did not actually look at whether there was relevancy for Agenda-Setting in online media as the younger generation group tested could have easily taken the issues consumed through old media forms, and found related material to those issues using online media. There needs to be additional studies conducted on how younger generations deem which issues are important to know if there is truly still room for the Agenda-Setting model amongst digital natives (Coleman and McCombs, 2007).

Within the theory of Agenda-Setting, a time lag is a key component for an agenda to be set, as it proposes that it takes time for the public to take note of an issue. However, with so much information coming from so many outlets in our new media landscape, there is no longer a common agenda. An example of this notion is the media giant Fox's news feed on Twitter. Their feed is updated so often that the expectation for instantaneous news leaves no time to perpetuate an agenda. To compete with new media forms such as Twitter that allow the public instant access to information, even old media forms are becoming increasingly interaction by urging viewers to go online and link up to sites with information about what was seen, heard, or reach on television, the radio, or newspaper. The expectation for a 24-hour news cycle only supports the notion of no time lag, and therefore the irrelevancy of Agenda-Setting to online media forms. Additionally, with information overload, online communities are expected. There is only so

much that a human being can take in before there is an overwhelming amount of information that it all just becomes noise. Individuals creating new agendas within these groups, on focused sets of information, show a clear direction away from Agenda-Setting.

Conclusion

The emergence and continued expansion of online media is clearly challenging the idea that the theory of Agenda-Setting is relevant to new horizontal media forms. Although many questions were inherent through the body of research conducted prior to the discussion and Agenda-Setting theory' s relevancy to online media, and many ideas were proposed within the discussion following said research, it remains certain that in order to answer the ultimate question of Agenda-Setting's relevancy to online media forms, more studies need to be conducted. These studies should focus on the questions and assertions made here about the absence of a time lag in online media forms, and its necessity for Agenda-Setting to exist. Additionally, studies should look at how the theory of Agenda-Melding has led to a gathering of already similar and compatible individual identities, which form hybrid identities for each online group that is neither individual nor collective. Without a specific issue taking hold of these groups, and a singular interpretation of an issue, Agenda-Setting theory's relevancy is once again brought into question.

Agenda-Setting is clearly still prevalent and applicable to vertical media forms. However, further discussion of the questions raised on its role in online media need to be had, and further research conducted.

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