Agenda Setting Theory:
A Critique of Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw’s Theory
In Em Griffin’s *A First Look at Communication Theory*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The media has long been a powerful force in today’s world, capable of delivering copious amounts of information within our society on an increasingly quick basis. In the last century, media’s audience range and popularity continued to grow as more and more people were able to access the media easily. As a result of this substantial growth, it was observed in the 1970’s that the ‘current’ media content had a relationship with the ‘current’ public agenda. This observation of the media in society led to theorists presenting hypothesis and testing different theories to explain the power of the press in the media as it relates to people’s public agendas. A notable theory that focuses directly on this topic is the Agenda Setting Theory by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. These two theorists saw an association between mass media and society’s opinion and as a result, theorized a cause-and-effect relationship between the power of the press and the public opinion that is known as the Agenda Setting Theory.

II. SYNTHESIS

A. WHAT IS THE AGENDA SETTING THEORY?

The Agenda Setting theory of mass media communication attempts to determine how the popular agenda of the media affects society and attempts to explain why mass media has gained so much power over the thoughts of people everywhere. This theory conceptualizes and explains the different forces that dictate how important issues in the media are perceived by people in society. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw regarded Watergate as a perfect example of the agenda-setting function of the mass media. The Agenda Setting theory also takes a back-to-the-basics approach to communication theory and research. The Agenda Setting Theory was first discussed “during the 1968 presidential election” (McCombs 1993). According to McCombs, “Agenda Setting is a robust and widespread effect of mass communication, an effect that results
from specific content in mass media” (McCombs 2004). The Agenda-setting theory contrasted with the prevailing selective exposure hypothesis, reaffirming the power of the press while maintaining individual freedom. In their groundbreaking study, McCombs and Shaw first measured the media agenda during a presidential election campaign. They established the position and length of story as the primary criteria of prominence. They disregarded articles about matters extrinsic to the issues. The remaining stories were divided into five major issues and ranked in order of importance. Overall, McCombs and Shaw believed that the hypothesized agenda-setting function of the media causes the correlation between the media and public ordering of priorities. This created a cause and effect relationship but particularly a match between the media’s agenda and the public’s agenda later on.

Throughout the last decade, McCombs has emphasized that the media influences the way we think. The Agenda Setting Theory attempts to prove that the media is able of telling the public what current issues are important. The Agenda Setting Theory was discovered to create public awareness of issues created by the mass media. According to McCombs, “Over time, the salience of individual issues rises and falls as the attention of the mass media and the public shifts” (McCombs 2004). This quote explains how the press and the media filter and shape what they ‘believe’ the public would like to hear. Overall the media concentrates on select key subjects that leads the public to perceive certain issues in the media as being more important than others.

B. HOW THE AGENDA SETTING THEORY WORKS

There are many steps that make up the agenda setting theory. As we know today there is a “wide-ranging effect on the tremendous variability of the geographical and cultural settings” in which by the media occurs (McCombs, 2004). So the first step to the agenda setting theory is
that an event must happen. It can be a small event or even a large event. The second step is that the story and/or an event must spark the interest of a media station that seeks to cover it. According to McCombs, the “ongoing stream of public opinion evolves in these civic areas around the world and that are defined by open political and mass media systems” (McCombs, 2004). After the media station/network airs the event/story, it is open to the public to view the event. The size of the public is explained by the limits of the public’s resources, which include both time and psychological capacity. The limit on the size of the media agenda can be very obvious, but it ultimately depends on the amount of space available in the newspaper, websites, and time slot for the broadcasted news. After something is aired in public, the individual comprehending the knowledge tries to understand what happened as well as why it happened. As a society, we attempt to learn from our past in order to avoid making mistakes in the future. If we do not take the time to process information about specific events in history, we will never learn from these past mistakes and are more likely to see history repeating itself. After this processing takes places, a person develops a “frame” on the issue they view in the media. Framing is known as “the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object or issue is discussed” (Griffin, 2012). Overall a media frame is 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. This suggests that the media not only sets an agenda, but also transfers the salience of specific attributes to issues, events, or candidates. The way an object is framed can “have measurable behavioral consequences” (McCombs, 1993).

Lastly, there are two levels of agenda setting, which are important to understanding how the theory works. The first level of this theory is that there is a transfer of salience from an
object in the mass media’s pictures to a prominent picture of the story in our minds. The other level of this theory is that the transfer of salience of a bundle of attributes the media associate with an attitude object effects the specific features of the image in our minds. There are a lot of individuals who are affected by the media in today's world as people struggle to figure out what is true in today’s society. Not surprisingly, the people most affected by the media’s agenda are those who have a high need for orientation or index of curiosity, which arises from high relevance and uncertainty. Overall, uninformed individuals are the most vulnerable and most likely to be affected by the media’s agenda in today’s world.

C. NOT JUST WHAT TO THINK, BUT HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT

The Agenda Setting Theory has gone beyond its original limits to include the mass media and public agenda. After their first and second phase of research in 1970’s, McCombs and Shaw wanted to find out the conditions of the limit that mass media creates with a psychological idea. Their third research phase began during 1976 when their colleagues extended the idea of having two domains stemming from the agenda setting theory. McCombs and Shaw now contend that the media may not only tell us what to think about, they also may tell us who and what to think about it, and perhaps even what to do about it. In today’s society, there are so many different outlets to receive multiple types of information. Due to the amount of outlets, there is no need for a common agenda. Twitter is a good example of an outlet. Many different companies and new stations can tweet the new information they have received within a few seconds. Twitter allows the public instant access to information. Viewers can now receive information quicker than other media forms such as radio and television.

While conducting their most recent studies, McCombs discovered two hypotheses that involved the agenda, opinions and behaviors that would need to be tested in the online world.
McCombs, discovered that “the internet in today’s world has a large audience with so many different resources” (McCombs, 2005). McCombs also discovered that in the online world, the “agendas need to be largely opposing rather than having redundant agendas found in more traditional news media, for example television” (McCombs, 2005). It was pointed out in the findings that “online news sources are very mainstream compared to other news sources making online news redundant” most of the time (McCombs, 2005). Finally, through discussion of both of these hypotheses that Agenda-Setting Theory will always be influential even through media contexted and opinions.

D. CAN THE AGENDA SETTING THEORY STAND THE TEST OF TIME

The agenda setting theory was made in the 1970’s before personal un-massed media devices were available to everyone. The power of agenda setting that McCombs and Shaw describe may be on the wane, even though scholars argue that the changing media merely opens up the theory to new domains. The issue is that the media may not have as much power to transfer the salience of issues or attributes now as a result of users’ expanded content choices and control over exposure. With un-massed media, the agenda setting theory may lose its relevance completely overtime.

III. CRITIQUE OF GRIFFIN’S ANALYSIS

A. THOROUGHNESS

Our group evaluated Em Griffin’s chapter on Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw’s Agenda Setting Theory using three criteria: thoroughness of interpretation, originality of interpretation, and accuracy of interpretation. Griffin’s analysis of the Agenda Setting Theory was very thorough in the sense that it encompassed many of the aspects published in the three original scholarly articles. This chapter on the Agenda Setting Theory was written with quality
as Griffin took great effort to explain how the theory came about and went even further to explain how the theory works on people in a society. Expanding on what the original scholarly articles explicate on the Agenda Setting Theory, Griffin states “the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of issues on their news agenda to the public agenda” (Griffin, 2009). This quote by Griffin points out the power of mass media on its ability to influence the public agenda. It is clear the Griffin gathered information from many scholarly sources in order to synthesize a thorough textbook chapter that brings different articles together into a cohesive and knowledgeable textbook chapter.

In this textbook chapter, Griffin thoroughly highlighted the past, present, and future of the Agenda Setting Theory, as well as the two different levels of the Agenda Setting Theory. These comprehensible sections are dedicated to exploring the theory in detail and obtaining knowledge that goes far beneath the surface of this theory. In regards to the past of the Agenda Setting Theory, Griffin states “McCombs and Shaw’s agenda-setting theory represents a back-to-the-basics approach to mass communication research” (Griffin 2009). Griffin further explains from this quote how this theory was simple to understand, very able to be tested, and could be very practical and useful in research on mass media and society. He then talks about the present use of the Agenda Setting Theory and how the theory has developed two distinct levels that work to explain the theory. Drawing conclusions from the scholarly article entitled “How Agenda-Setting Works,” Griffin states, “the first level, according to McCombs, is the transfer of salience of an attitude object in the mass media’s pictures of the world to a prominent place among the pictures in our head” (Griffin, 2009). Expanding of from this quote, Griffin talks about the second, deeper level of Agenda Setting. He explains, “The second level of agenda setting is the transfer of salience of a dominant set of attributes that the media associate with an attitude object
to the specific features of the image projected on the walls of our minds” (Griffin, 2009). These different levels showcase the growing power of the Agenda Setting Theory and also provide insight and thorough interpretation of the theory as it relates to the media in society today. Lastly, Griffin does a thorough critique of the theory’s future as well as some of the flaws that may arise due to “new media” constantly evolving. Griffin is not afraid to document, “As years of careful research have shown, however, agenda setting doesn’t always work” (Griffin, 2009). But, Griffin also documents that the theory is constantly being revised and updated in order to keep with the evolution of the media and society and stay as thorough as possible. Through this chapter, Griffin provides detailed information documenting the Agenda Setting Theory’s conception and experimentation, its acceptance as a communication theory, and its future as a communication theory. Griffin’s chapter greatly details the Agenda Setting Theory as a credible system of ideas that can be used to study the media’s effect on society.

B. ORIGINALITY

When we evaluated Griffin’s textbook chapter on the subject of originality of interpretation, we found solid examples of the author’s ability to explain and critique the Agenda Setting Theory independently and creatively, utilizing the original scholarly articles to back up his statements. Griffin brings up a very interesting statement about the Agenda Setting Theory while explaining the chapter. He states, “the agenda-setting theory boasts two attractive features: it reaffirms the power of the press while still maintaining that individuals are free to choose” (Griffin, 2009). This statement is very original in that it synthesizes information from scholarly articles into insightful conclusions about the theory that the reader is able to understand and commit to memory.

Another way in which the author shows an originality of interpretation of the Agenda
Setting Theory is by narrating personal stories that help the reader visualize concepts in the chapter and gain a deeper understanding of the theory’s prevalence and validity in the world today. Griffin goes into detail about a time when the Agenda Setting Theory applied to his own life. He discusses a time when he was assigned to read current events in the newspaper and stay updated on world events. He states, “Our assignment was to stay informed about worldwide current events by reading the New York Times. I chose to read the paper online—to my detriment. I found myself clicking on stories of personal interest and didn’t even notice headlines on other issues. My weekly quiz grades let me know that my study agenda didn’t match the media agenda” (Griffin, 2009). This original quote helps readers connect this communication theory to their own lives, and serves as a good example of how the Agenda Setting Theory is a valid theory that can be applied to society.

The last way in which Griffin’s chapter on the Agenda Setting Theory was original in its evaluation and interpretation was the author’s insightful critique of the theory. Griffin leaves the end of the chapter with a question to readers. He states, “are the effects too limited, the scope too wide?” (Griffin, 2009). In this quote, Griffin is referring to the modernization of the Agenda Setting Theory and questioning its strength when used in the “new media” forms that technology has produced in our world today. While the theory held steady for a while after its creation, the evolving world of the media might be changing the theory’s validity and workability. Griffin’s originality of interpretation is a key factor in this chapter to understanding and comprehending the Agenda Setting Theory.

C. ACCURACY

The last concept that we used to evaluate the textbook chapter on the Agenda Setting Theory was its accuracy of interpretation. Accuracy is an integral aspect in any communication
theory because it helps to establish credibility towards the theory and can prove that the evidence contained within the theory is reliable. Griffin’s information paralleled the scholarly articles that we synthesized, and the information contained between them was analyzed to be accurate and correct. Griffin helped establish credibility and accuracy in this textbook chapter on the Agenda Setting Theory by using precise dates, presenting information in a chronological order and using accurate examples to illustrate the theory’s points. An example where Griffin uses precise dates is in the beginning of the chapter when he discusses the original experiment to test the Agenda Setting Theory during the “1968 race for president between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey” (Griffin, 2009). This information is accurate when compared to the original scholarly articles and helps readers to frame in their minds a precise timeline that illustrates the formation of the Agenda Setting Theory.

Griffin also presents his synthesized information in a chronological order, from the late 1960’s when the theory was being developed, to the present day as well as a discussion about the future of the theory. Because he places this chapter in chronological order, the information is easy to process and remember. Lastly, Griffin uses accurate examples of the Agenda Setting Theory to give credibility to his textbook chapter. One of the most compelling examples contained in the textbook chapter deals with the news stories on airplane crashes and hijackings, and their effect on society. As explained in the text, it was predicted by Alexander Bloj, a graduate student of McCombs, that “prominent stories of airplane crashes and hijackings in the New York Times would both lower ticket sales and increase the purchases of trip insurance the following week” (Griffin, 2009). In this specific example, media salience of flight safety was defined as stories that ran for 2 or more days that discussed airplane crashes with many fatalities or a hijacking occurring on a plane in the air. As predicted, when news stories ran on these
topics, “fewer people bought tickets and more people bought flight insurance” (Griffin, 2009). This accurate example of the Agenda Setting Theory and its effect on society provides the topic with proven credibility and accuracy on how the media’s agenda has been proven to become the public agenda.

IV. COMMUNICATION THEORY PARADIGM STANDARDS

A. INTERPRETIVE PARADigm

The Agenda Setting Theory is not part of the interpretive or critical paradigms because it does not uphold all of the requirements to completely fit in with either communication paradigm. For the Agenda Setting theory to be considered interpretive, it must fall under and fulfill certain standards within the paradigm. The first interpretive standard is to create a new understanding of people, which would entail the Agenda Setting theory to help elaborate on specific one on one communication, study patterns within communication, and provide opinions and values on the information found. But the Agenda Setting theory focuses on the media and their filtering of information and more of a mass communication than a personal communication in which we develop and uncover secret patterns within communication. The second interpretive standard requires the clarification of values and regards these theories to describe cultural distinctions through comparison and contrast of data collected. It also needs to explain and elaborate the life styles and patterns of communication in the research. The Agenda Setting theory provides an outlook on a large spectrum of data within the mass media and the mass consumer and also questions the ideals and values of what is being produced, but has to ignore a value a belief system of which is being research to provide a focused and concise theory in which hypothesis can be replicated and researched again. The third interpretive standard is the idea of aesthetic appeal of the theory, and considers the scholars to be artists in their own way,
who can please an audience with the beauty and captivation of their research. Even though
the Agenda Setting Theory is interesting and still a relevant theory, its appeals and interests are
not in the aesthetic qualities, but oppositely in its factual research and ability to provide a process
to replicate research and improve upon itself. The last interpretive standard is that the theory
supports a community of agreement. All theories must be scrutinized by scholars and be
continually used to remain relevant and in good standing within the interpretive paradigm. The
Agenda Setting Theory is respected in the community of scholars, and is constantly being
reevaluated. But there are also many questions about the theory from scholars about the validity
within the theory, and not all can agree upon everything within the study.

B. CRITICAL PARADIGM

The Agenda Setting Theory is also not part of the critical paradigm either because it
cannot fulfill the bulk of its standards. The first critical standard states the theory to
systematically unmask the ideologies of the communication practices within it. The
communication practices within the Agenda Setting Theory do not contain different or multiple
ideologies, but instead investigate the different mediums of communication through which we
are being communicated to through mass media. So it isn’t trying to explain ideologies within
the theory or clarify that, but rather research and investigate for one specific truth. Since the
Agenda Setting Theory also is not a study or explanation of specific people involved in the
communication process, it definitely doesn’t follow the second critical standard, of uncovering
power imbalances that are embedded within the research. The third critical standard also calls
for a community of agreement, like stated previously in the interpretive section, which the
Agenda Setting Theory does not follow. The final standard is the theory to generate alternatives
for policy change and social action. The Agenda Setting Theory does not call for social
activism, yet is more shedding light on an issue that is present within the research. The theory gathers data to present what is happening in our media, but doesn’t necessarily call upon us to act in some monumental change. That being said, the Agenda Setting Theory cannot be considered a critical theory due to all the contradictions with these standards above.

C. OBJECTIVE PARADIGM

The Agenda Setting Theory is absolutely an objective theory because it fulfills each of the scientific standards necessary to rest within this paradigm. The first objective standard is the complete explanation of data. Within this theory the collection, presentation and explanation of data has been very prominent. When McCombs and Shaw first began with their hypothesis they thoroughly documented their research and as a end result were able to present and explain all data thoroughly. The second objective standard is the ability of prediction of future events through the theory. This theory has been applied in multiple studies where the hypothesis is tested true, because the theory is accurate and concrete enough to breed plausible outcomes and predict somewhat future events. The third objective standard is the relative simplicity of the theories. As humans we all have an easier time processing and using clear and concise data and conclusion over more complicated and complex.

So the Agenda Setting theory is straightforward and provides the audience an adequate but clear amount of information instead of with an abundance of unwanted or unnecessary information. As stated in the text by Griffin, there is a clearly defined hypothesis that can be tested, so the Agenda Setting theory also fulfills the fourth objective standard of their being a required testable hypothesis. Finally, the last objective standard is practical utility. A good objective theory of any magnitude must provide control and the ability to be completely understood. The Agenda Setting theory is easily understood and provides a formula that has
made a lasting impact in the objective paradigm.

V. CONCLUSION

The Agenda Setting theory has held that the media agenda, those items the media deem important, is directly linked to the public agenda, or what the public deems important. This means that the stories shown by the media will eventually become important stories in the public’s mind as well. Although the media is constantly changing and evolving, the Agenda Setting theory continues to prove in society today that people use the media in order to shape and frame current issues and stories happening all over the world. With the knowledge that the media is capable of shaping and framing the public agenda, it is important that members of society develop media literacy skills in order to remain educated and wise when it comes to the salience of issues found in the media. The power of the press is likely to always have certain powers over the public agenda and the Agenda Setting Theory is an excellent way to conceptualize, experiment and continue to discover new research associated with this fascinating topic of study.
References


