

A Review of the Impacts of Agenda-setting

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Abstract: Agendas of media have been affecting their audience, especially by shaping the political reality. In the era of the Internet, the distribution of news is no longer limited to a single area. The rapid growth of technology enhances the speed of information exchange and the distribution of news. The influence of agenda-setting becomes more significant. To explore the impacts of agenda-setting, we reviewed 17 articles on agenda-setting within 2009 to 2014. The research question is: What are the impacts of agenda-setting?

Keywords: Agenda-setting, Media, Determinants, Political reality

1. Introduction

For a long period even until now, many criticize media made polarized coverage to different news sources. Average audiences tend to associate media coverage of news with the importance of news.

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Media corporations then set an agenda and altered the coverage of news in order to “create” the importance of news. Journalist Walter Lippmann (1946) originated the idea of “Agenda Setting Theory” in 1922 but in 1972, two scholars Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) developed the more concrete concept of agenda setting. They thought media organizations may filter news issues and shape the political reality by modifying space or coverage volume. It built a perception in audience’s mind of which news is important.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) analyzed the presidential election in 1968, known as “Chapel Hill Study”. They wondered if media coverage would affect audience’s choice of voting. Then, they surveyed 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina on what they thought were the most important issues of the election campaign and checked whether voters’ agenda related to media news coverage. Two scholars summarized that media coordinators such as editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters shaped a political reality over reality. Audience received not only about a given issue, but also how important that issue from a mount of news stories. Media have the power to determine and shape candidates’ speech as important by altering coverage volume and this is a process of setting an “agenda” to a campaign.

General public gain filtered information from newspapers. Nowadays, the top media are owned by a few international enterprises. Taking News Corp (Wikipedia: News Corp, 2014) as an example, it was founded by media giant Rupert Murdoch who owned global vertically integrated media company. Before its spin-off in 2013, its final properties included 2 book publishing house, 6 printed media subsidiary companies in Australia, England, USA and Fiji which totally have over 60 newspapers and magazines. Besides printed media, News Corp owned 9 satellites TV channels, countless in whole or partly owned cable TV channels throughout Latin America, India, Taiwan, Australia and locally in USA. It was the top three largest entertainment corporations in 2009, audience will easily receive information conveyed by them. Undoubtedly, News Corp has its own agenda setting. Those media which were then under News Corp’s control should have had set agenda by then.

In 1983, 90% of American media was owned by 50 companies. However, in 2011, 90% of American media is controlled by 6 companies (Lutz, 2012). People think that these media giants are more credible, reliable and trustworthy and people tend to choose these media giants to watch, to read and to listen to. Hence, the general public gain information from these limited media.

Although there have been a lot of studies of agenda-setting in recent years, where a simple search in EBSCO: Academic Search Complete of the last five years (2009-2014) on agenda setting theory and media resulted in 176 studies. Among these results, very rare reviews were conducted, only 2-3 reviews were found in this period. Hence, we aimed in this study to review past literature in order to have a more in-depth understanding of the impact of agenda setting on political reality.

In the methodology section, we will outline the step choosing the article. In the finding section, we are going to list the major factors. In the discussion section, we are going to analyze why there are such findings.

2. Methodology

Online database, EBSCO: Academic Search Complete, was used to search for relevant articles. Two keywords, ‘agenda setting theory’ and ‘media’, were searched in abstract. The published date was limited to a six-year period, from 2009 to 2014. The search result was also limited to scholarly journals only. Finally, twenty-five articles were listed. However, after a preliminary review of the article, irrelevant articles were removed and 17 articles were further analyzed. The search results were summarized in Table 1 below. We intensively analyzed the findings of the selected articles and came up with 4 major consequences resulted from agenda-setting, including, coverage, government, choice/attitude and economic. They were summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 1. Summary of search results of online database EBSCO in recent years (2009-2014)

Keywords	Search Results (articles)
Agenda setting theory	484
Agenda setting theory and media	176
Agenda setting theory and media and review	2-3

3. Findings

3.1 Coverage

Many researches were done by researchers in last six years about the relevance between agenda setting and the coverage of media on certain issue, and how effective they were. Media selected certain issues to publish and broadcast to tell the public what to think about. The coverage of certain issues significantly affected the public. Based on the findings described below, it was proven that agenda setting still existed in our society.

In the study by Zeng, Go & Kolmer (2011), it explained the China's image in 9 foreign countries and the media coverage of it. Although the coverage of China had increased after 2008 Beijing Olympics, China's image had not been improved in foreign countries. However, the coverage raised awareness of China and framed its image indirectly, shown significant effect of agenda setting.

In the study by Yang & Liu (2012), there was another interesting topic about coverage on "China threat", coverage of the news focus on difference things about China when reporting in different eras, like in the early 1990s, the media focused on reported China's economic growth rates, media coverage focused on China's economy peaks, changing people's perception of China, that the study found significant effect on agenda setting.

The more the coverage in an issue, the greater the impact on government policy. For example, from the study of Kiss (2013), it examined the existence of adverse health effected attributable to in the Regulation of Bisphenol A in the U.S, which some stated legislatures considered or adopted legislative bans on products made from BPA. This example showed that because of the media coverage of the issue on the medicine, government tended to be aware of the problems and took necessary measure in dealing with the issue. With not such media coverage, probably there would not be enough pressure to the government. It revealed that there was a significant relevance of the routine and high-impact health coverage with the chance that a state legislature considered legislation banning products made with BPA.

According to Ragas & Tran (2013), there were findings showing that volume and valence of media coverage affected searching habits of internet users. By examining news coverage and search interest among the internet users in the first two administration years of Obama (2009-2010), the volume of news coverage significantly affected people's searching trends, showing a significant effect of agenda setting in the U.S. The news coverage was also caused by the searching trends according to the report, which the two criteria were inter-related and affecting each other.

3.2 Government

Agenda setting affects the government policies and influences the public's trust and support for the government policies.

On the part of the government influence, Delshad (2012) examined that the president, and Congress, and the effect of these variables were exogenous agenda-setting variables that would affect the agenda-setting model.

Table 2. A summary of prior studies on agenda-setting and its possible effects

Author (Year)	Coverage	Government	Choice/attitude	Economics
Abida (2012)	✓			
Aruguete (2009)			✓	
Boydston, Glazier & Phillips (2013)	✓			
Delshad (2012)	✓			✓
Dreser et al.(2012)	✓			
Kiss (2013)	✓			
Krystin (2014)		✓		
Lancaste (2011)			✓	
Lei, Tien & McCombs. (2012)	✓			
McCombs (2012)	✓			
Mulligan & Habel (2011)	✓			
Ragas & Tran (2013)	✓			
Rodríguez & Antonio (2009)		✓		
Oakley (2009)	✓			
Olmos & Garrido (2011)			✓	
Yang & Liu (2012)	✓			✓
Zeng, Go & Kolmer (2011)	✓			

Delshad (2012) stated in the study that in the election year, the election year politics would affect the agendas' of the media, for example, the president and Congress, would drown out the influence that they had on one another. And in study of Boydston and the colleagues' (2013), it was found that in the president election in 2008 on Obama and McCain, three agenda control methods, including agenda setting, issue framing and tone were used in their debates. Moreover, the study found a positive relationship between agenda-control behaviors in debates and the elections.

Moreover, Abida (2012) analyzed that there were three types of relationships between media and foreign policy (manipulative and monolithic and advocative, adversarial and indifferent). The example could be found in Pakistani. For media of Pakistani, which were under strict government control, they had remained indifferent towards foreign policy for most of the time.

On the part of how people view the government, Lei and the colleagues (2012) found that there were significant network relationships between the media object agenda and the public object agenda. Furthermore, Rodríguez and Antonio (2009) also found that there were significant relationships between the media agenda and the public opinion orientation. The studies showed that the media agenda setting would affect the public's opinion towards the government.

Dreser, Vázquez-Vélez, Treviño, and Wirtz (2012) found that the amount of message which was the media coverage of an issue would help produce the political reality in the eyes of public. McCombs (2012) also proved that political attitudes would be affected by the agenda setting in media such as television, news, and social media. These two studies stated that the view points of the public could then be changed with agenda setting. In addition, according to Mulligan and Habe (2011), the fictional media could also affect the viewers' political attitudes.

Krystin (2014) analyzed the effect of crime news on the government. In the study, it was found the crime news would lower the citizen trust in government institutions as the crime news would influence

the support for authoritarian crime control, thus the degree of trust of the public towards the government would be lowered. What's more, according to the same studies, Krystin suggested that the exposure to crime news would also affect the degree of support for a presidential candidate who promotes the “iron fist policies”, which is a hard-kill active protective system in Israel.

Moreover, in the study done by Rodríguez and Antonio (2009), it was found that the legalization of the action of the government, which was judged by the National Court, would be affected by the public opinion. Oakley (2009) also analyzed that the agenda-setting variables such as media attention and decisions made by the courts, would also affect the state's policy.

3.3 Choice/Attitude

Through agenda setting, media has shaped people's attitude towards certain issues, sometimes creating political discussions. Aruguete (2009) analyzes the news covering the privatization process of a telephone company and points out that mass media have a large influence on audiences by their choice of what stories to consider newsworthy.

Olmos & Garrido (2011) also stresses out the role of the media in constructing the public opinions and attitudes on immigration. The media has shaped people's perception of immigration as a threat with news framing negative profile of immigration like crimes and social integration policies.

Lancaster, et al. (2011) identified media's influence on individual and community attitudes towards risk by investigating media coverage of escalating heroin-related problems and proposed solutions. They found out that news covering escalating heroin-related problems generated interest in heroin overdose and brought out discussion on health and crime issues, affecting political debates.

3.4 Economic

Agenda setting on economic issues is influential to shape public opinion and draw government attention. Yang & Liu (2012) suggest that media shapes US public opinion and US foreign policy, promoting China as a threat economically, militarily and politically. Instead of reflecting China's steady growth, US media focus on China's economic peak to portray its increasing economic capabilities and influences to US, reinforcing the public opinion of “China threat”.

It should be noted that exogenous variables of economic indicators may be understated. Delshad (2012) examines agenda settings on bio-fuel which in a certain extent influence media, the Congress, and presidential election, to illustrate the importance of exogenous agenda-setting variables. He suggests corn prices being an economic indicator of general food prices as well as bio-fuels addressed in the president's agenda with broad public appeal.

4. Discussion

4.1 Key Findings

There are three major findings in this research paper that are worthy to be highlighted.

1. Media set the agenda and shaped the importance of certain news, not only affecting governments' decisions and policies, it also guide people's attitude and trust towards government.
2. Media agenda setting would shape people's perceptions and interest towards certain social issues that media set them as “important”.
3. Government and people's attentions would be drawn by agenda setting of specific sides of economic news, and their attitudes might be altered after then.

4.2 Effect and Strength Media Convey through Agenda Setting

Independent variables refer to variables that will affect the result of the dependent variable. In this research paper, the independent variable is the effect and strength media convey through agenda setting. We identified four dependent variables through our research work, that is effect on people's trust toward government, people's choices and attitude towards social issues and their choices of what story to consider newsworthy, how a country's economic status was being sculptured and described, together with the variable of media coverage. We seek to find out whether media's agenda setting affect these four dependent variables, and try to figure out how agenda setting affect them.

4.3 Theoretical contribution

Compared with prior literature and prior model, this study extends agenda setting model with two new angles. First, unlike the past, people always think that only government uses agenda setting tactics as tools to shape people's opinions towards certain issues, this paper states that, agenda setting also make government aware of what the public thinks is the major opinions, thus affect government's actions when they make decisions. Apart from that, this paper also stated that, indeed not only highlighting the importance of political news can affect people's attitude, shaping importance of specific sides of economic news can also alter people's point of view

4.4 Further Studies

Since social media like Facebook or Twitter gained popularity in the entire world and become one of the major media and cultural diffusion platform, it is essential that we put our focus on their effect on public. It is worthy to investigate issues like, whether the massive use of social media indeed weaken the traditional agenda setting effect of media, since news and information were coming from different channels instead of some traditional leading media enterprises; and somehow audiences "get used to" the "habitat" of Internet world, that the trustworthiness of information on Internet are lower. People knew that they cannot simply believe all things that media told them, they learned to choose in the Social Media World.

4.5 Limitations

Though we found out the independent variable, that is the effect and strength media convey through agenda setting might affect the dependent variables, that is government policies and people's attitudes and choices, we realized that in real life, media is totally not the only variable that affect the dependent variables, for example the governments' judgments and decisions. Therefore, we can only state that there might be correlations between IV and DV, yet we cannot prove the degree of correlations between them, and not to mention proving whether they are causally related.

4.6 Conclusion

By reviewing previous studies in recent years, this study is important in summarizing the factors affecting the agenda setting theory. Through this research, we identified the following factors that affect agenda setting: media coverage, government, choice and economy, that, in turn, affect people in shaping their political reality.

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