

Course Name: Communication Theories-II

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Agenda Setting Theory

Introduction:

We are living in a world where millions of events are taking place simultaneously. Media organizations and institutions have employed thousands of people to observe those events and report them. The news media tell us which issues are important and which ones are not. We have never seen the war situations of Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Kashmir with our own eyes. Even then we have pictures of these disputed areas in our minds. The media's daily reports inform us about the latest events and changes taking place in the world beyond our reach. As a result of this phenomenon, most of our perceptions about the world are a second-hand reality created by the media organizations. There is no assurance and no guarantee that this reality is an accurate picture of the world.

Media organizations do not just passively broadcast information repeating the words of the official sources or conveying exactly the incidents of an event. They also do not select or reject the day's news in proportion to reality. Through their selection and display of the news stories, the reporters and the editors focus their attention and influence the public's perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. Our pictures of the world are shaped and refined in the way journalists frame their news stories. This function of media is called the agenda-setting function of media (McCombs 2002).

Agenda Setting is one of the most important media theories of the present times. The concept of agenda setting took its name from the idea that the mass media have the ability to carry the salience of items on their news agendas and then transfer it to the public agenda. Usually journalists deal with the news in several important ways.

Agenda setting claims that audiences obtain this salience of the issues from the news media, incorporating similar sets of priorities into their own agendas. Agenda setting describes the transmission of these saliencies as one of the most important aspects of mass communication. The news media not only inform us about the

world at large, giving us the major elements for our pictures of the world, they also influence the prominence of those elements in these pictures.

Researchers have shown that the more headlines a certain topic receives via media, the more the people find it important

Historical Background

The concept of agenda setting is attributed to Walter Lippmann (1922) who, in his book *Public opinion* argued that the mass media create images of events in our minds and that policy makers should be aware of those pictures in people's heads.

In 1963 Bernard Cohen observed that 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. It follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of papers they read.”

McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 conducted a study of media's role in the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In this study they found that the media were highly influential in telling readers and viewers what to think about and they coined the term agenda setting to describe this process.

Assumptions of agenda setting theory

There are two basic assumptions of agenda setting theory

- The press and media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it.
- Media concentration on few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as important as any other issue.

Types of agenda setting

Rogers, Dearing and Bregman gave three types of agenda setting

- Media Agenda
- Public Agenda
- Policy Agenda

The media agenda: is the set of topics addressed by media sources.eg newspapers, television and radio.

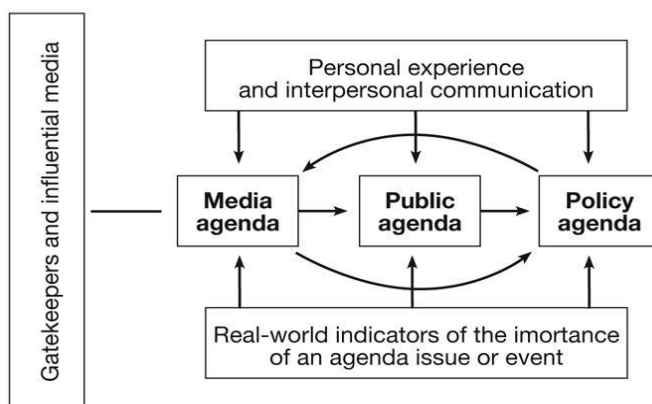
The public agenda: is the set of topics that the members of public believe is important.

The policy agenda: represents issues that decision makers believe are particularly salient.eg legislators and those who influence the legislative process.

Each of the three agendas can be seen as a dependent variable in casual equation, as in public agenda setting the public agenda is dependent variable, in media agenda setting media's agenda is treated as dependent variable and in policy agenda setting elite policy maker's agenda is dependent variable.

The consideration of these three processes defines agenda setting theory and research in a broad scope. Traditionally these three areas have been the purview of different academic disciplines. For example investigation of the public agenda setting process has been undertaken by mass communication researchers, policy agenda setting has been considered by political scientists and media agenda setting has been largely the purview of sociologists.

A model of agenda setting



Chapel Hill Study

McCombs and Shaw in 1972 first conducted a thorough analysis of the content of newspaper and television coverage of the 1968 presidential election. This content analysis considered the time and space accorded to various issues, for example, foreign policy, law and order, public welfare, civil rights and fiscal policy and served as a representation of the media agenda.

McCombs and Shaw then interviewed 100 undecided voters in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and asked them what issues they believed were most important. This public opinion polling served as public agenda.

In looking at the relationships between these two variables McCombs and Shaw found an incredibly strong correlation. The public agenda was a virtual reflection of the media agenda.

The basic purpose of the McCombs and Shaw's study was to investigate a link between the content of the news agenda and the public agenda. The researchers tried to avoid the misleading idea of possible effects, which occurs when only media content is studied. For example, it cannot be assumed that people watching televised violence will repeat the same act of violence in their real lives. Only after analyzing television content and the public's reactions the researchers can say that a correlation exists. Secondly, McCombs and Shaw wanted to examine effects on people that resulted from some specific content of the media messages. Earlier media effects studies did not attempt to establish a link between the effects and specific media content. This study tried to determine a relationship between media and public regarding acceptance of media messages.

Theoretical Developments in Agenda setting

Levels of Agenda Setting

There are two levels of agenda setting

- The first level enacts the common subjects that are most important.
- The second level decides what parts of the subject are important.

First level deals with the objects on the media and public agendas. This is the traditional domain of agenda setting research in which the media are seen as influencing what issues are included on the public agenda.

Second level considers attributes of these objects. At this level media not only suggest what the public should think about but also influence how people should think about the issue.

For example: an examination of first level agenda setting might conclude that media coverage of welfare reform has set the topic as an agenda item for the public. Second level agenda setting would argue that the media also present this issue in particular ways that might be in favor of welfare reform or against welfare reform.

Framing

The concept of framing is central to consideration of second level agenda setting. In the context of agenda setting, **framing is a process through which the media emphasize some aspects of reality and downplay other aspects.** Framing can be conducted through the consideration of particular subtopics, through the size of placement of news item, narrative form, and tone of presentation and particular details included in the media coverage. According to Scheufele “framing influences how audiences think about issues, not by making aspects of the issue more salient but by invoking interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information.”

The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. Framing is an important topic since it can have a big influence and therefore the concept of framing expanded to organizations as well. News media frame all news items by emphasizing specific values, facts, and other considerations, and endowing them with greater apparent applicability for making related judgments. News media promotes particular definitions, interpretations, evaluations and recommendations. Framing involves the social construction of a social phenomenon by mass media sources, political or social movements, political leaders, or other actors and organizations. In essence, framing theory suggests that **how something is presented to the audience through the frame which influences the choices people make about how to**

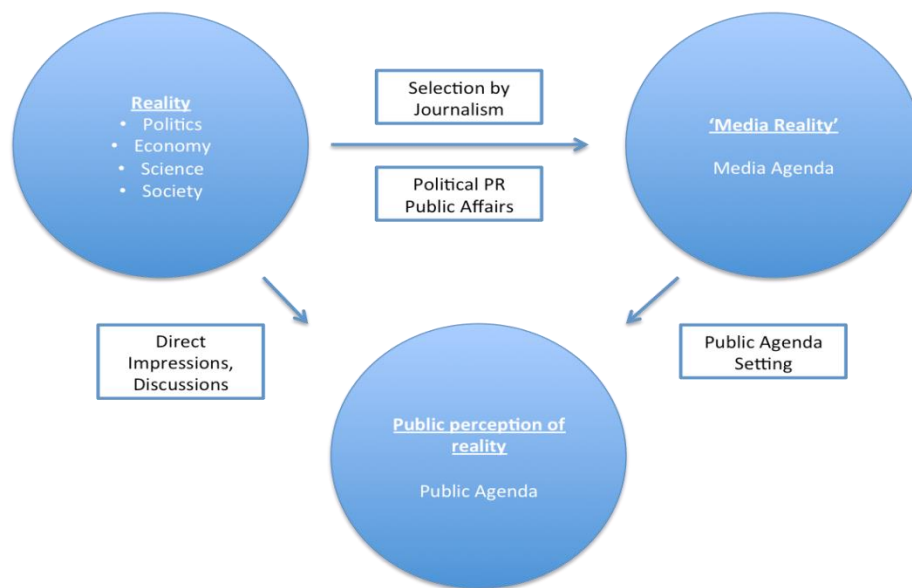
process that information. Frames are abstractions that work to organize or structure message meaning.

Priming

Priming can be defined as the **effects of particular, prior context on the retrieval and explanation of information.** Priming provides explanation for the psychological processes that support the agenda setting effect. That is when the media accord a great deal of space and time to certain issues, these issues become particularly accessible and prominent in an individual's cognitive structure. These primed topics will then be considered especially important for individuals (first level agenda setting). Furthermore, because humans have limited information processing capabilities, these primed topics will serve as a way of analyzing other particularly ambiguous information. (Second level agenda setting)

Priming is a concept through which the media effects among the people are enhanced by providing a basic perception human minds take decisions based on the preconceptions that are already been stored in our memory. The memories are stored as a form of nodes and they are interconnected effectively and mostly act as frame of reference to the decisions that we make. Priming enables the audience to evaluate the situation and to conclude how effective the media have been in order to make a decision by providing a frame of reference. Thus media creates an influence among people to make judgment or a decision.

Priming is an important concept in media effects. As agenda setting brings out only the importance of the issue, priming offers explanation on how the information from the media are stored in the human mind and how it influences in making decisions. Media affect the judgment or behavior by stimulating the associating thoughts which are caused due to the mental relationships created inside the memory. agenda setting and priming are related to each other in that mass media affect people-s judgment (priming) by making some issues salient than others agenda setting, and both model are based on media-s ability to increase accessibility. On other hand, framing refers to how news media characterize an issue influences audiences- perception of the issue.



Critiques of Agenda Setting Theory

- Some scholars do not even believe that agenda setting is a theory, preferring to call it a model, a term more modest than the term theory.
- Scholars have noted that ambiguity exists about the level of effect, the nature of effect and the mechanism through which the effect occurs.
- Insufficient theory and lack of specification in terms of long term and short term agenda setting effects.
- Lack of agreement between conceptual and operational definitions among researchers, causing ambiguity to cloud results.
- Ambiguity in terms of methodology, especially survey studies in which casual direction is not all clear.

References

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