

Chapter Fourteen:

Agenda-Setting Theory: Take One

By Hawa Tejan-cole

Introduction

Agenda-Setting Theory suggests that the media has the power to influence the **public agenda** by deciding what topics and issues are considered important (Griffin et al., 2019). This theory proposes that the media's selection and emphasis on certain news stories can shape people's perceptions of what is significant and worthy of attention.

Click on this [link](#) to watch a short video that explains the background of Agenda-Setting Theory, as well as the topic of **framing**.

The origins of this theory can be traced back to research conducted in the 1960s by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. In their study, McCombs and Shaw examined the relationship between news media and public opinion during the 1968 presidential election in the United States. They found that the media had a powerful effect on which issues the public perceived as the most important, and that the media's coverage of these issues had a greater impact on the public's perceptions than the actual events themselves.

Griffin et al. (2019) believe that the media can't tell the public what to think, but they can tell them what to think about. They explain that McCombs and Shaw's original research focused on the effects of traditional news media, such as newspapers and television, but that the theory has since been expanded to include other types of media, including social media.

Application of Agenda-Setting Theory

Media and Politics

Political advertisements, campaigns, business news, PR (public relations), and other media use Agenda-Setting Theory. **Gatekeeping** is the central idea behind the theory as **gatekeepers** decide what gets published (Griffin et al., 2019). The main gatekeepers of the media are editors; they decide what news information should or should not be included. Gatekeepers “decide ‘what’ events to broadcast and show through the media ‘gates’ on the basis of ‘newsworthiness’” ([“Agenda setting theory”](#), n.d.).

Media and Public Opinion

We as a society need to be careful about how media outlets shape public opinion and set the agenda because they may be promoting values that are not beneficial to the audience. According to [Lippmann et al. \(2009\)](#), media outlets are driven by their own agenda and profit motives, which may not always align with the public interest. Therefore, it is important for individuals to critically evaluate the information they receive from the media. Lippmann also discussed how slogans and stereotypes are used by the media to encrypt messages in their broadcasts, and that

audience members don't always get all the facts, resulting in issues being reduced to soundbites ([“The agenda-setting theory”, 2021](#)).

Criticisms of Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory has some drawbacks—it is challenging to quantify. The theory's research has largely been unable to prove that media coverage and public prominence are causally related (Griffin et al., 2019). With 24/7 access to media sites, people can pick and choose where they get their information from which impacts the stories they're shown (Griffin et al., 2019).

Agenda-Setting Theory also fails to account for people who have already made up their minds. For instance, someone might think that their elected official was the best choice for the job despite the mass media's abundance of compelling reports to the contrary.

Conclusion

Overall, **Agenda-Setting Theory** suggests that the media has a powerful influence on what issues and topics are considered important by the public and policymakers. This influence is not necessarily direct, but comes through the media's ability to shape **what** people think about and **how** they think about it.

References

Agenda setting theory. (n.d.). *Communication Theory*.

<https://www.communicationtheory.org/agenda-setting-theory/>

Griffin, E. A., Ledbetter, A., & Sparks, G. G. (2019). *A first look at communication theory* (10th ed.). McGraw Hill.

Lippmann, W., Curtis, M., Brunswick, N., & London. (2009). *Public opinion*. Transaction Publishers. https://monoskop.org/images/b/bf/Lippman_Walter_Public_Opinion.pdf

The Agenda-Setting Theory. (2021). *Media studies*.

<https://media-studies.com/agenda-setting-theory/>

About the Author



Hello! My name is Hawa Tejan-cole, and I graduated from the State University of New York at Fredonia in May of 2023 with a Public Relations major and a minor in Leadership Studies. I enjoyed contributing to this textbook because it will help students in the future.

Having students create a textbook for other students helps it be more relatable, and it will hopefully help others learn the material better.