

# Agenda setting theory: the world outside the pictures in our heads essay sample

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“ The 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. The world will look different to different people.” Bernard Cohen Agenda-setting theory describes the “ ability [of the news media] to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda.” That is, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently the audience will regard the issue as more important. Mass media only shows you what they want you to see.

They are very successful at telling you what to think about. Print or broadcast news will then take away the audiences ability to think for themselves. Developed by Dr. Max McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw in a study on the (1968) presidential election. In the 1968 “ Chapel Hill study,” McCombs and Shaw demonstrated a strong correlation between what 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina thought was the most important election issue and what the local and national news media reported was the most important issue. Since the 1968 study, published in a 1972 edition of Public Opinion Quarterly, more than 400 studies have been published on the agenda-setting function of the mass media, and the theory continues to be regarded as relevant.(Carroll & McCombs, 2003) HISTORY

The theory can be traced to the first chapter of Walter Lippmann’s 1922 classic, Public Opinion. In that chapter, “ The World Outside The Pictures In Our Heads,” Lippmann pointed out that the media dominates over the creation of pictures in our head and memory; he believed that the public reacts not to the actual event produced but the picture of the actual event in our memory.(Miller, 2005) Lippmann argues that the mass media are the principal connection between events in the world and the images in the <https://assignbuster.com/agenda-setting-theory-the-world-outside-the-pictures-in-our-heads-essay-sample/>

minds of the public. Without using the term “agenda-setting,” Walter Lippmann was writing about what we today would call “agenda-setting.” Following Lippmann, in 1963, Bernard Cohen observed that the 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.

The world will look different to different people,” Cohen continues, “depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read.” [5] As early as the 1960s, Cohen had expressed the idea that later led to formalization of agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw. The concept of agenda setting was launched by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 presidential election in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They examined Lippmann’s idea of construction of the pictures in our heads by comparing the issues on the media agenda with key issues on the undecided voters’ agenda. They found evidence of agenda setting by identifying that salience of the news agenda is highly correlated to that of the voter’s agenda. ([www.wikipedia.com.ph/agendasettingtheory](http://www.wikipedia.com.ph/agendasettingtheory))

#### IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THEORY

1) Public agenda setting- Is in which most important public issues or problems are measured by public opinion and agenda. Example (people’s strong beliefs) 2) Media agenda setting- Is the pattern in which news coverage print and broadcast news gets measured through the importance and depth of the story. Example (Presidential race information) 3) Policy agenda setting- Is more scientific in its nature it’s the thought in which we pay more attention to how the media or public might influence elite policy

makers. Example (President, Congress, Religion) 4) Corporate agenda setting-issues that big business and corporations consider important (corporate)

#### CORE ASSUMPTIONS AND STATEMENTS

(1) The press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) Media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.(Wilson p. 14, 2005)

#### NEED FOR ORIENTATION

Agenda-setting studies typically show variability in the correlation between media and public agenda. To explain differences in the correlation, McCombs and colleagues created the concept of “ need for orientation,” which “ describes individual differences in the desire for orienting cues and background information.”

Two concepts: relevance and uncertainty, define an individual's need for orientation. Relevance suggests that an individual will not seek news media information if an issue is not personally relevant. There are many issues in our country that are just not relevant to people, because they do not affect us. Many news organizations attempt to frame issues in a way that attempts to make them relevant to its audiences. This is their way of keeping their viewership/readership high. Frequently, individuals already have all the information that they desire about a topic. Their degree of uncertainty is low.” When issues are of high personal relevance and uncertainty low, the need to monitor any changes in those issues will be present and there will be

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a moderate the need for orientation. If at any point in time viewers/readers have high relevance and high uncertainty about any type of issue/event/election campaign there was a high need for orientation.

(Schonbach and Weaver, 1985) ISSUE OBTRUSIVENESS OF AUDIENCE

Audience's pre-existing sensitivities to produce changes in issue concerns. For instance, for high-sensitivity audiences who are most affected by a certain issue or a problem, the salience of this issue increases substantially with news exposure, while the same exposure has little effect on other groups. But there is also the index of curiosity which the audience measures the extent or need for orientation then in turn motivates them to allow the media to shape their views within the extent of their orientation. Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller (2005) have also demonstrated that people who do not talk about political issues are more subject to agenda-setting influence because they depend more heavily on media content than those who receive information from other sources, including their colleagues and friends.

## FACTORS

Obtrusive or issues with low threshold are generally the ones that affect nearly everyone and with which we can have some kind of personal experience (e. g. city-wide crime or inflation at the gas pump). Unobtrusive or high threshold issues are those issues that are generally remote from just about everyone (e. g. wrongdoing high up in the government like Watergate, plight of refugees from Syria). Research performed by Zucker suggests that an issue is obtrusive if most members of the public have had direct contact with it, and less obtrusive if audience members have not had direct

experience. This means that the less direct experience people have with an issue, the greater is the news media's influence on public opinion on that issue. Moreover, unobtrusive or high threshold issues do not pertain into media agenda as quickly as obtrusive issues and therefore require a buildup, which is a function of more than the amount of space and/or time the media devote to the story. The latter may push the story past the threshold of inattention, but it is also important to look at the kind of coverage to explain how a certain incident becomes an issue. (Zucker, 1978)

### VARIOUS LEVELS OF AGENDA SETTING

First-level agenda setting- This is the level that is most traditionally studied by researchers. In this level the media use objects or issues to influence the public. In this level the media suggest what the public should think about (amount of coverage) Second-level agenda setting- In this level the media focuses on the characteristics of the objects or issues. In this level the media suggest how the people should think about the issue. Intermedia agenda setting – salience transfer among the media. (Coleman and Banning 2006; Lee 2005; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996)

### IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Gatekeeping- control over the selection of content discussed in the media; what the public know and care about any given time is mostly a product of media gatekeeping. Through this process many people have to decide whether or not the news is to be seen or heard. Some gatekeepers might include reporters, writers, and editors. Priming- Effects of particular, prior context on the retrieval and interpretation of information. The media's

content will provide a lot time and space to certain issues, making these issues more accessible and vivid the public's mind.(Miller, 2005) Framing – a process of selective control over media content or public communication. Framing defines how a certain piece of media content is packaged so it will influence particular interpretations. This is accomplished through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. USAGE OF THEORY

Political advertising, Political campaign and debates, Business news and corporate reputation (Carroll & McCombs, 2003), Business influence on federal policy(Berger, 2001), legal system, Trials(Ramsey & McGuire, 2000), Role of groups, Audience control, Public Opinion and Public relations(Carroll & McCombs, 2003). STRENGTHS OF THEORY

1- It has explanatory power because it explains why most people prioritize the same issues as important. 2- It has predictive power because it predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will feel the same issues are important. 3- It is parsimonious because it isn't complex, and it is easy to understand. 4- It can be proven false. If people aren't exposed to the same media, they won't feel the same issues are important. 5- Its meta-theoretical assumptions are balanced on the scientific side 6- It is a springboard for further research

7- It has organizing power because it helps organize existing knowledge of media effects. LIMITATIONS

Media user may not be as ideal as the theory assumes. People may not be well-informed, deeply engaged in public affairs, thoughtful and skeptical.

Instead, they may pay only casual and intermittent attention to public affairs and remain ignorant of the details.

For people who have made up their minds, the effect is weakened. News media cannot create or conceal problems; they may only alter the awareness, priorities and salience people attached to set of problems.

Research has largely been inconclusive in establishing a casual relationship between

public salience and media coverage. CRITISM

- 1) Agenda setting is an inherently causal theory, but few studies establish the hypothesized temporal order (the media should set the public's agenda).
- 2) The measurement of the dependent variable was originally conceptualized as the public's perceived issue " salience," but subsequent studies have conceptualized the dependent variable as awareness, attention, or concern, leading to differing outcomes.
- 3) Studies tend to aggregate media content categories and public responses into very broad categories, resulting in inflated correlation coefficients.(McCombs and Shaw, 1972)

## References

<http://communicationtheory.org/agenda-setting-theory/>

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framing consists of three elements