Agenda setting

People, Barack Obama

Agenda Setting Patricia Wigington Grand Canyon University COM 126 Introduction The mass media today, no longer reports public opinion, it drives it. This paper discusses how mass media sets the agenda, and what impact this had on the issues that emerged during the 2008 presidential election. According to Donald Shaw and Maxwell Combs, agenda is a theory to describe now the news media can have a considerable impact on shaping the publics opinion of a social reality, on influencing what people believe are important issues.

(Shaw&McCombs, 1977) Agenda Setting

Media consolidation is one thing that contributes to agenda-setting. As the number of newspapers dwindles and radio and TV stations are sold to one or two conglomerates, the news is in effect being censored because it reflect only the viewpoint of a single organization. If conflicting views are never even mentioned, the public is never aware that there is an entirely different side to the issue than the one being presented. It requires persistence to find out the facts of an issue, and people may not make the effort.

Then too, the media itself has changed dramatically in recent years.

Many people now get their news from digital media including the Internet, but the flood of electronic information may not make them more knowledgeable, just more informed about issues they may not consider important. Marshall McLuhan once famously argued that the medium is the message; David Considine twists it slightly, to the idea that the " medium is the massage," and that we are all being worked over by the media, in particular younger people (Considine, 2009, p. 65). Today's technology,

people using several electronic devices simultaneously, practice widely known as multitasking (Considine, 2009). Time Magazine wondered, however, if people are " too wired for their own good," and whether modern media were contributing to " students' reduced attention spans, making it harder for educators to reach and teach them" (Considine, 2009, p. 65). There is a legitimate question as to whether this environment of electronic noise and constant communication makes them " active and informed citizens" or merely " spectators moving from one distraction to another" (Considine, 2009, p. 65).

The answer seems clear when Considine reveals that despite the fact that in 2006, the number of young people ages 18-29 in the U. S. was 50 million, only seven million voted in the mid-term election (Considine, 2009). In other words, they have access to information but don't transform that information into knowledge or political action. Younger people are a volatile population when it comes to voting. They become wildly enthusiastic for a particular candidate such as Ron Paul or Howard Dean, but fail to show up at the polls (Considine, 2009).

Barack Obama was able to energize this group on his own behalf and that of other Democratic candidates: " Exit polling from the January 2008 Iowa caucus for the Democratic candidates showed a record turnout among eighteen-to twenty-nine year olds, who heavily supported the theme of change promoted by Senator Barack Obama" (Considine, 2009, p. 66). Now of course they seem to have disengaged again and organizations such as

Democracy for America and Moveon. org are actively working to re-energize them and get them to the polls in November.

Part of Barack Obama's success in the 2008 election was due to his savvy use of electronic media (Considine, 2009). He was able to " use new technology to reach and energize voters; his campaign built a substantial database and achieved record-breaking fundraising" (Considine, 2009, p. 66). It also seems logical that part of his appeal is that he does know how to use Twitter and FaceBook, and that he tweets personal messages; his electronic presence immediately makes his opponent look old and out of touch.

He further endeared himself to young voters and " reaffirmed his commitment to communication technology when he insisted on keeping his personal Blackberry" (Considine, 2009, p. 66) The tendency of the media to set agendas was clearly shown in the summer of 2009, when electronic forums such as YouTube and Twitter, along with traditional outlets such as newspaper columns, took up the health-care debate and buzzed about such ludicrous and inaccurate items as "'death panels,' socialism, Hitler and fascism" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 29). These scare tactics, which are all completely false, were used to try and discredit both the reform effort and the President, and are a clear example of the way the media sets an agenda. Picking up on the hysteria of the far right, the media repeated the lies without doing any fact checking, leading commentators to wonder " how these ideas rationally relate to the debate over reform" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 329).

The fact that these crazy notions were not only given credence but reported widely, and continue to appear in the media, show how powerful such things can be " in shaping public opinion and ultimately in shaping governmental action" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 329). The misleading claims about " death panels," the idea of Obama being Hitler and leading the country into a Socialist government are all " elements of larger policy tall-tales that were intentionally used by opponents of health-care reform attempting to derail President Obama's reform.

Obama's supporters countered these lies with stories of their own: personal accounts from Americans who, for various reasons, were priced out of the heath care system or even denied care (Jones & McBeth, 2010). The use of narratives is a powerful tool in setting the political agenda in the United States. One study found that although TV and internet users had a common agenda (the use of electronic media), their " ranked agendas" differed greatly from the ranked agendas of the media themselves (Brubaker, 2008).

That is, the TV watchers and internet users were not interested in the programming or information that was being presented to them: " The overall general media audience ranked 10 or the 11 public affairs issues significantly different than presented by the media" (Brubaker, 2008). TV watchers and internet users were interested in " important public affairs issues," but the agenda they were following " significantly differed from the agenda that medium was showing them' (Brubaker, 2008). This implies that the media " are not powerful in setting the agenda of important public affairs or political issues.

People have particular issues they feel are important, regardless of what the media present" (Brubaker, 2008). This seems to be at odds with the idea that the media sets the agenda. and people simply put up with it. With regard to the 2008 Presidential election, the agenda presented by the media was that of the war in Iraq, but it was quickly displaced by concern about the economy; an agenda driven by consumers' interests, not those of the media (Agenda setting and the Obama election, 2010). But this source claims that the media set another agenda, a highly visible but totally unnecessary one, that of race.

Barack Obama is black, and that became a major issue in the election: " The measurement of Obama's potential success didn't lie in whether or not voters were willing to vote for a black candidate, but whether or not voters, more specifically white voters, could view Obama, or blacks in general, as leaders (Agenda setting and the Obama election, 2010). Had the media been more concerned about Obama's positions and qualifications and less about the color of his skin, the entire election would have been conducted on a much higher level.

This source also notes that the racial issues was studied in swing states like Ohio, where it was deemed to be extremely important (Agenda setting and the Obama election, 2010). In one study, Ohio was measured for " favorability between candidates in the areas of republicans, democrats, independents, men, women, whites and blacks;" it was found that a vast majority of black voters, as many as 90%, favored Obama, no matter what

their previous voting record or party affiliation was (Agenda setting and the Obama election, 2010).

The question raised by this result is whether our society " is the way it is because of the media, or is the media a direct reflection of the way society is … In the case of Obama for President, the media clearly allowed race to chase to the top of the list of exaggerated issues that never should have been a part of the presidential election in the first place" (Agenda setting and the Obama election, 2010).

In response to the popularity of Obama, the Republicans tried to set the media agenda to focus on issues such as Iraq and health care, arguing that race should not be consuming the attention focused on it (Agenda setting and the Obama election, 2010). But Republicans also tried to set an agenda favorable to them by introducing Sarah Palin as their vice presidential candidate to appeal to women voters; setting the agenda worked in Ohio, where pollsters noted a shift among women of all races who were not previously affiliated with a particular party (Agenda setting and the Obama election, 2010).