

Extending our theoretical maps: Psychology of agenda-setting



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ABSTRACT: Two aspects of the psychology of agenda-setting are discussed, the social psychology of academic research and contemporary research extending our theoretical knowledge about the psychology of the agenda-setting process. To counter academic conservatism regarding new applications of agenda-setting theory, distinctions are made between concepts, domains and settings. A major trend in contemporary research on the psychology of agenda-setting is the explication of the theory's basic concepts. This research includes the impact of incidental learning and the visual content in TV news on first-level and second-level agenda-setting effects, respectively, an expanded set of measures for the concept of need for orientation, and the consequences of agenda-setting effects for the formation of opinions and both priming and attribute priming of the affective dimension of opinions.

KEYWORDS: agenda-setting, incidental learning, need for orientation, formation and direction of opinions, knowledge activation



SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Two distinct aspects of the psychology of agenda-setting will be discussed. Prior to exploring the contemporary research that is extending our theoretical knowledge about the psychology of the agenda-setting process, the larger psychological setting that defines the context of most social science research in the academy, including agenda-setting, will be considered.

A central axiom describing our research environment is the highly conservative nature of the academy. This has nothing to do with politics. The academy is not conservative in any political or ideological sense, but rather in terms of its mindset and its receptivity to change and innovation. For an intellectual setting that presumably values original thinking and the development of theory, this is a very ironic situation.

Nevertheless, this conservatism has been highly visible over the 40-year evolution of agenda-setting theory, beginning with the seminal Chapel Hill study that

launched this line of research. As is well known, the Chapel Hill study was conducted during the U.S. presidential election in the fall of 1968. My colleague Don Shaw and I were very excited about our findings and had a draft paper ready in early 1969 to submit for that summer's annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. We were absolutely dismayed when our paper was rejected out of hand.

Although it took some time to deal with that rejection, nevertheless, we pressed ahead with pilot tests for a full-scale replication with a general population sample of voters in the next presidential election to complement the Chapel Hill study which had focused on undecided voters. Prior to that 1972 study we also submitted our original Chapel Hill paper to *Public Opinion Quarterly*, and, as the cliché goes, the rest is history. Our paper was accepted for publication and appeared in the Summer 1972 issue of *POQ*. This delayed history of the publication of the Chapel Hill study explains the well known "McCombs and Shaw, 1972" citation for a study conducted during the 1968 presidential election.

This initial fate of the Chapel Hill study was the first of many instances in the development and evolution of agenda-setting theory that illustrate the conservative nature of the academy. To borrow a concept from physics and apply it in a social psychological setting, these are all instances of the Principle of Inertia. That is, individuals, groups, disciplines, and institutions generally tend to continue doing what they have been doing in the past. One might say that change does not come naturally or easily.

Beyond the Chapel Hill study, there have been numerous other examples of the Principle of Inertia as agenda-setting theory expanded from its initial focus on the influence of the news media's agenda of issues on the salience of those issues among the public. That initial work, often described today as first-level agenda-setting, is now one of five theoretical stages. As the theory expanded to a second level of agenda-setting, attribute agenda-setting, and encompassed the consequences of agenda-setting for attitudes and opinions, the contingent conditions for both levels of agenda-setting effects, and the origins of the media agenda, scholars, have encountered the same barrier of psychological inertia – assertions by reviewers and critics that these phenomena are not part of agenda-setting. One critic took the Principle of Inertia to its ultimate, asserting that agenda-setting theory could not expand to a second-level because it was not explicitly stated in the original Chapel Hill model (Griffin, 2009). This position is, of course, totally contrary to the cumulative dynamic of the interplay between empirical scientific research and theory building over time (Merton, 1957). During the early 1980s, just as agenda-setting theory was moving into new areas, the provost of Syracuse University constantly obstructed my research, stating that agenda-setting research should be abandoned.

Needless to say, if agenda-setting research encountered the barrier of psychological inertia historically as it expanded from basic first-level agenda-setting effects

to the current five stages of the theory, scholars continue to encounter this barrier as they expand the application of agenda-setting theory beyond public affairs to a broad variety of other settings ranging from corporate reputations to professional sports.

CONCEPTS, DOMAINS, AND SETTINGS

One weekend last year, my personal agenda was to complete the reviews that were due to three research journals. All three manuscripts reported new agenda-setting studies, and all three included a definition of agenda-setting. The first cited the Chapel Hill definition of agenda-setting, the influence of the media agenda of public issues on the salience of these issues among the public. Forty years after Chapel Hill, this definition is totally out of date and totally silent in regard to attribute agenda-setting. The second manuscript offered a much broader definition: Elements that are prominent in the media tend to become prominent among the public. This definition does encompass attribute agenda-setting and the vast majority of the research to date. Its major limitation is that this definition is media-centric, and a handful of studies have now applied agenda-setting theory in settings that do not involve a media agenda. The third manuscript's definition was the broadest and most general: Agenda-setting is the transfer of salience from one agenda to another. Although in most cases, at least one of these agendas is the media agenda, this definition does cover applications in totally different settings. The strength of both the second and third definitions is that they make the important point that agenda-setting effects are not limited to public affairs.

To place the increasingly broad range of contemporary applications of agenda-setting theory in an appropriate intellectual context, we need to distinguish between the *concepts*, *domains*, and *settings* involved in our research. The core concepts of agenda-setting theory are the object agenda, using the term *object* here in the same sense that we speak of attitude objects; the attribute agenda, those aspects of the object that are the focus of attention; the transfer of salience between agendas; and a key contingent condition for this transfer of salience, need for orientation.

These theoretical concepts can be studied in many different domains and settings. Beginning with the Chapel Hill study and continuing to this day, the dominant domain of agenda-setting research are public affairs, particularly public issues. A very different domain with a significant literature dating from the past decade or so are corporate reputations. Other domains touched on in recent years include the economy and economic activity, professional sports, and national images.

Within each of these domains, agenda-setting can be studied in many settings. That is to say, the operational definitions of the core concepts of agenda-setting theory can be particular aspects of many different domains. In the traditional do-

main of public affairs, the most studied setting is the news media-public dyad. But among the many settings found in the research literature are the links among the various news media, links between sources and the news media, and the influence of personal conversations on the public agenda. Other aspects of these domains include the kinds of agenda items studied (issues or candidates, for example). Use of the concepts of agenda-setting theory to investigate these various domains has taken place across a wide variety of geographic settings worldwide at many points in time.

Separating the core concepts of agenda-setting theory from their operational definitions, the rich variety of domains and settings found in the literature, helps us to see the past more clearly and to envision the directions of new research. It also clarifies the various – and sometimes confusing – definitions of agenda-setting proffered by various scholars.

PSYCHOLOGY OF THE AGENDA-SETTING PROCESS

More than forty years after Chapel Hill, agenda-setting theory remains a vigorous arena of research that is characterized by two dynamic trends. The *centrifugal trend* has already been noted, the continuing expansion of the scope of the research into new domains and settings far beyond the original realm of public affairs. The counterpoint to this line is a *centripetal trend* in which scholars have turned their attention inward to concentrate on the continuing explication of the theory's basic concepts. Much of this work is focused on the psychology of the agenda-setting process.

As previously noted, scholars have elaborated five distinct facets of the agenda-setting process in the years since the Chapel Hill study. The second of these five theoretical stages, the contingent conditions for agenda-setting effects, appeared very quickly in response to a very basic question, "Why do agenda-setting effects vary in their strength?" There are two paths for answering this "Why" question: Why in the sense of *for what reason*, and Why in the sense of *how, through what process*. The initial scholarly response to this "why" question focused on *for what reason* and introduced, both theoretically and empirically, the concept of need for orientation. And on the strength of the explication and findings in Charlotte during the 1972 U.S. presidential election and in subsequent replications, need for orientation has become a well-established aspect of agenda-setting theory (Weaver, 1977, 1980; Takeshita, 1993; McCombs, 2004).

More recently, Matthes (2006) has returned to the concept of need for orientation to expand its measurement through the explication of three distinct aspects. First, Matthes noted that the items used to define relevance in the early studies of need for orientation focused on general interest in politics, public affairs, and the issues of the day. However, the relevance of the issues of the day can differ considerably among individuals, and agenda-setting as a phenomenon refers to the shift of

salience in individual issues over time. Therefore, concluded Matthes, need for orientation should be measured separately for each issue on the agenda.

Matthes also specifically takes into account the distinction between first-level agenda-setting, the awareness of objects, and second-level agenda-setting's focus on the agenda of attributes for each of those objects. Therefore, in addition to measuring interest in the issue *per se*, Matthes introduces a second dimension of need for orientation, a person's orientation toward the specific details, facts and perspectives regarding each issue. Also noting the distinction in agenda-setting theory between the substantive and affective dimensions of attributes presented on the media agenda, Matthes conceptualizes a third dimension of need for orientation, citizens' interest in journalistic assessments of public issues.

In sum, Matthes presents a new perspective involving three aspects of need for orientation (NFO):

- NFO toward the issue,
- NFO toward the specific attributes of the issue,
- NFO toward journalistic evaluations of the issue.

These three aspects of NFO map three basic theoretical components of agenda-setting theory: the object, which is the unit of analysis in traditional level-one agenda-setting; and the two dimensions of the attributes, the substantive dimension and the affective dimension, which are the units of analysis in second-level, attribute agenda-setting.

LEARNING FROM THE MEDIA AGENDA

Returning to basic first-level agenda-setting effects, research by Lee (2009) and Coleman and Banning (2006) has expanded our knowledge about the scope of the learning process involved in the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. Their studies provide new evidence about the ease with which the issue agenda can be learned *via* incidental exposure – Lee's research – and with which the attribute agenda can be learned from the visual component of TV news – Coleman and Banning.

Lee conducted an experiment to ascertain whether incidental exposure to an online news site results in basic agenda-setting effects. Out of five measures of incidental exposure, three had significant associations with the perceived importance of the environment, the issue featured in the news story section of the college Web site that subjects were evaluating as their task in the experimental session. Participants who were asked to click on the banner news story and spend at least 10 seconds reading it in order to verify their attention to a new Web page were more likely to perceive that the environment was an important problem facing society. Also, the more time participants spent on news story Web pages and the more times participants visited the news story Web pages, the more likely they were to report that the environment was important as a social problem.

Obviously, exposure to the media agenda is a necessary condition for the appearance of agenda-setting effects. Previous research on the learning process involved in the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda tended to emphasize the extent of exposure over substantial periods of time. And there is considerable evidence that greater amounts of exposure result in stronger effects. Be that as it may, Lee's research demonstrates that agenda-setting effects also can result from rather cursory incidental exposure.

Although dozens of agenda-setting studies include the television news agenda, with few exceptions, the TV news agenda is based on the text of the news, not the visual component that is unique to television news. Coleman and Banning (2006) expanded second-level agenda-setting theory and our knowledge of how people learn from the visual content of television news by examining the affective framing of U.S. presidential candidates George Bush and Al Gore on the evening news programs of the ABC, CBS and NBC national networks during the Labor Day to Election Day period of the fall 2000 campaign. Analysis of nonverbal behaviors in these visual messages – the candidates' facial expressions, posture and gestures – found significantly more shots showing positive behavior by Gore than Bush, and significantly more shots showing negative behavior by Bush than Gore.

Parallel to these findings, in the benchmark National Election Study Gore was rated significantly higher on the positive attribute index than Bush; and Bush was rated significantly higher on the negative attribute index than Gore. In addition, significant correlations were found between exposure to these nonverbal behaviors on television and opinions about the two candidates.

As noted, the visual content of television news is an important set of messages apart from the text of the news, a set of messages that has been understudied up to this point in time. Coleman and Banning have shown the way to further explicating what people learn from the visual component of television.

CONSEQUENCES OF AGENDA-SETTING EFFECTS

Other elaborations of agenda-setting theory are investigating the relationship between agenda-setting effects, both first-level and second-level effects, and the public's opinions and subsequent behavior. Figure 1 identifies major consequences of these effects on two aspects of opinion and on observable behavior.

First, there is a theoretical link between the salience of objects in the mass media and the strength of opinion, beginning with whether an opinion even exists. For example, with the increasing salience of public figures in the news, more people form an opinion about these persons (Kiousis, 2000).

A second consequence of agenda-setting effects is the priming of perspectives that subsequently guide the public's opinions about public figures, a consequence that brings the agenda-setting influence of the mass media into the very centre of the public opinion arena (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). In short, the media agenda

influences the criteria that people use to evaluate the performance of political actors.

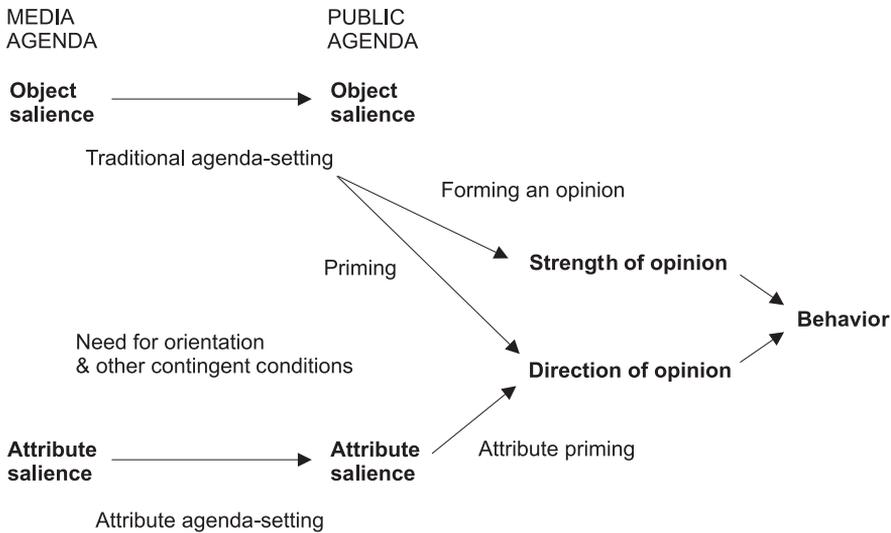


Figure 1. Consequences of agenda-setting effects for opinions and behavior

Source: author's elaboration.

The third consequence, attribute priming, an outcome of attribute agenda-setting effects, is the process in which media emphasize certain attributes of an issue and thereby influence the direction of opinion. Studies that have found significant links between public opinion and the general affective tone of news coverage include German public opinion regarding Helmut Kohl across a decade (Kepplinger, Donsbach, Brosius, and Staab, 1989), the tone of news reports and voters' presidential candidate preferences during the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign (Son & Weaver, 2006), and the negative tone of news stories about the economy and consumer expectations (Sheafer, 2007). Kim and McCombs (2007) found that attributes positively or negatively covered in the local newspaper were related to opinions about the candidates for governor and U.S. Senator.

Also, the substantive (cognitive) attributes receiving extensive media attention were more likely to affect attitudinal judgment for heavy newspaper readers than for light ones.

The consequences of agenda-setting effects go beyond public opinion. Issue salience can be a significant predictor of citizens' actual votes on election day (Roberts, 1992). There also are links between public behavior and agenda-setting effects resulting from business news. For example, during a three-year period when the Standard & Poor 500 stock market index increased 2.3 percent, the stocks of fifty-four companies featured in *Fortune* magazine increase 3.6 percent (Keiffer, 1983).

In sum, the agenda-setting effects of mass communication have significant implications beyond the pictures created in people's heads. The shifting salience of objects and their attributes in the news is often the basis for public opinion and observable behavior.

ANOTHER THEORETICAL PATH

As previously noted, in response to the fundamental question about why agenda-setting effects occur, there is the option of following two different psychological paths. The theoretical path that has been mapped theoretically and empirically in the greatest detail is grounded in the concept of need for orientation and provides an answer for why in its meaning of *for what reason*. A more recent theoretical path, grounded in the knowledge activation model, explores the question of why in its meaning of *how, in what manner*.

Focusing on the cognitive processes underlying both agenda-setting and framing, theoretical papers by Price and Tewksbury (1997) and Scheufele (2000) discussed two aspects of knowledge activation, the concepts of accessibility and applicability, arguing that framing is grounded in applicability, so that only if the cues presented by the media activate pre-existing cognitive schema will there be framing effects. In contrast, they argue, both agenda-setting effects and a key consequence of these effects, priming, are a function of how accessible information is in a person's mind. In other words, they argue, agenda-setting is limited to the frequency with which issues are portrayed. However, this distinction has found very limited empirical support.

There is evidence from the earliest years of agenda-setting research that the salience of issues on the public agenda – agenda-setting effects – involves considerably more than the accessibility of those issues as a consequence of the frequency with which they have appeared in the news. As already noted, the perceived importance to an individual of an issue presented by the media is significantly moderated by that individual's state of mind, in particular, his or her level of need for orientation.

Kim, Scheufele and Shanahan (2002) focused specifically on the accessibility of six issue attributes of an urban development issue. Although the accessibility of the issue attributes increased sharply with greater exposure to the newspaper, the resulting attribute agendas among the public – the salience of the attributes measured in terms of their accessibility – had little correspondence to the attribute agenda presented in the news coverage. Unlike previous attribute agenda-setting studies demonstrating substantial correlations between the attribute agendas of the media and the public, in this study the pattern of salience among the public measured in terms of cognitive *accessibility* was not correlated with the media attribute agenda. What emerged was an exposure effect, not an agenda-setting effect, in which the relative amount of increased accessibility for the six attributes among newspaper readers largely paralleled the media agenda. These effects are not the equivalent of

the attribute agenda-setting effects found for various issues and public figures over many decades (McCombs, 2004).

Directly challenging the assumption that accessibility can account for agenda-setting effects, Miller (2007) reports two experiments with quite different manipulations of accessibility that failed to find support for the hypothesis that accessibility is a mediating variable between exposure to the media agenda and the salience of an issue among the public. She concludes that the content of the news, rather than its accessibility, is the primary determinant of agenda-setting effects.

In terms of the knowledge activation model, accessibility is a necessary condition for agenda-setting effects, but it is not sufficient. Agenda-setting effects result from both accessibility and applicability.

A FINAL COMMENT

In the 40 plus years since Chapel Hill, we have gained considerable knowledge about agenda-setting effects and about the psychology of the agenda-setting process. This has been a productive theory over a long period of time, and many interesting and theoretically important questions remain to be explored. In the words of my favorite fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, “Come, Watson, come. The game is afoot.”

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