

The Evolution of Agenda-Setting Research: Twenty-Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas

by Maxwell E. McCombs, University of Texas at Austin, and Donald L. Shaw, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Communication scholars frequently invoke the concept of a marketplace of ideas during discussions about speechmaking, the diversity of media content and voices, and related First Amendment issues. They invoke it less often during intramural discussions of how specific concepts and perspectives, or our research agendas as a whole, have evolved over the years. Yet communication research does operate in a marketplace of ideas that is the quintessential *laissez-faire* market. The role of our journals is to create a market for the ideas advanced by members of the field. Individual scholars pick and choose topics at will—idiosyncratically and whimsically, some critics say—and publish at irregular intervals. Research teams, to the extent that they exist in communication research, usually arise spontaneously and have short life spans. Institutionalized focused research programs are rare. The communication research marketplace is a volatile arena, a situation fostered by the rapidly changing nature of communication itself during the past 50 years. Under these circumstances the continuing and growing vitality of agenda-setting research is remarkable. As a theoretical perspective, it has had a rich 25-year history since McCombs and Shaw's (1972) opening gambit during the 1968 presidential election.

Philosopher of science James Conant (1951) noted that the hallmark of a successful theory is its fruitfulness in continually generating new questions and identifying new avenues of scholarly inquiry. The fruitfulness of the agenda-setting metaphor is documented by three features: (a) the steady historical growth of its literature, (b) its ability to integrate a number of communication research subfields under a single theoretical um-

Maxwell E. McCombs holds the Jesse H. Jones Centennial Chair in Communication in the Department of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. Donald L. Shaw, a Senior Fellow for 1992–93 at the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center at Columbia University, is a Kenan Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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brella as it has moved through four phases of expansion, and (c) a continuing ability to generate new research problems across a variety of communication settings. Each of these three features is a distinct aspect of agenda-setting research's 25-year history in the marketplace of ideas.

The Historical Growth of Agenda Setting

Rogers, Dearing, and Bregman (1993) identify more than 200 articles about agenda setting in the social science literature since the publication of McCombs and Shaw's seminal article in 1972. Scholarly research has been steady since then, with the widely spaced key years of 1977, 1981, 1987, and 1991 each producing 17 to 20 publications. There is no sign of diminution or decline. Quite the contrary, 1987 and 1991 share the record for the publication of agenda-setting studies.

Two trends in the intellectual history of agenda-setting research account for this steady rate of publication over the years and the occurrence of the most recent high-water mark in 1991. These trends also argue well for future productivity. First, agenda-setting research has rapidly expanded beyond its original theoretical domain, the interface of the mass media agenda and the public agenda. The opening phase was marked by the publication of McCombs and Shaw's original research in 1972. By the time their study was published that summer, the two researchers already were in the field again (Shaw & McCombs, 1977) and the second phase had begun. McCombs and Shaw pursued two objectives in this study. The first was to replicate their original findings on the *basic agenda-setting hypothesis*. The second was to investigate the *contingent conditions* that enhance or limit media agenda setting, with particular emphasis on the concept of need for orientation because it provides a psychological explanation for agenda setting (Swanson, 1988). Agenda setting entered its third phase during the 1976 election when Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981) extended the idea of agendas into two *new domains*. One was the agenda of candidate characteristics reported by the media and learned by voters; the other was the larger agenda of personal concerns on which all aspects of politics—issues, candidates, and so on—are but a single, and usually minor, item. In the 1980s, research from agenda setting's fourth phase, work focused on the sources of the *media agenda*, appeared in the marketplace.

In short, the fruitfulness of the agenda-setting idea and the laissez-faire nature of the communication research marketplace resulted in a rapid and continual expansion of this theoretical perspective. The latter characteristic of the marketplace, laissez-faire, is further illustrated by the fact that there are four historical phases of agenda-setting work only in the sense that they appeared in a distinct chronological order. But they are phases, points of emphasis in the larger communication process, not eras

or stages in which one succeeds or replaces its predecessor. Today all four phases are active venues of research. Researchers continue to exercise their freedom in the marketplace of ideas.

Just as the evolution of four distinct phases of agenda-setting research accounts for the steady rate of publication, a second trend, the changing character of this scholarship as we move into the 1990s, accounts for the growing volume of research (McCombs, 1992). The intellectual history of agenda setting, like so much of communication research, is primarily the exploration of new vistas. Each of the four phases just described introduced opportunities to explore new aspects of mass communication and public opinion. In recent years some agenda-setting scholars have taken on another role, as surveyors who come to map in careful detail the territories previously sketched out by explorers. Emergence of this second role in considerable strength reflects the maturation of communication research as a discipline.

The contemporary vigor of both strategies, exploring and surveying, is illustrated by the diversity of agenda-setting papers presented at key communication conventions this past year. Surveyors presented a variety of "maps" of the agenda-setting process, including the competition between direct and mediated information (D'Alessio, 1992), decay of memory for TV news (Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1992), and personal versus social issues (Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992). Other maps documented linkages between the media and public agendas, such as media cues about issue importance (Schoenbach & Semetko, 1992) and agenda competition among issues (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992). Researchers also presented new explorations in two major areas, political advertising (Roberts, 1992) and the consequences of agenda setting for subsequent behavior (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992). These scholars—from China, Germany, and the United States—are contributors to an international marketplace of ideas.

The Integration of Research Areas

In its evolution over the past 25 years the agenda-setting perspective has provided a common umbrella for a number of research traditions and concepts in communication. While the opening phases of agenda-setting research concentrated on the question "Who sets the public agenda—and under what conditions?", the most recent phase of work has shifted its attention to the question "Who sets the media agenda?" The question has linked agenda-setting research to a number of social science, communication, and journalism subfields. The vast *sociology of news* literature with its wide variety of perspectives on the influences shaping daily construction of the news agenda is highly relevant to this aspect of agenda-setting research. In their detailed exposition of these influences, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) include media routines, organizational sociology (both internal and external to news organizations), and ideology, all in addition

to individual differences among journalists. Also relevant to the broad question of who sets the media agenda are Breed's (1955) classic theory of *news diffusion*—an area now called intermedia agenda setting, which has been supplemented with new research on the role of public relations (Turk, 1986)—and the tradition of *gatekeeping* research in journalism—whose perspective has been transformed by the theory of agenda setting (Becker, McCombs, & McLeod, 1975; Whitney & Becker, 1982).

In some instances, established traditions are used to inform agenda-setting research. In other instances, agenda setting informs older traditions. In yet other instances, this research on the media agenda initiates new traditions, such as a theoretically informed media criticism focused on the central characteristics of news stories (McCombs, 1992). This exploration of journalism as a genre differs from earlier work because the characteristics of news reports are linked to key criterion variables defined by agenda-setting theory. These criterion variables, which are agenda-setting effects in the classic sense of that phrase, include the salience of issues, overall salience of politics, and the salience of particular perspectives on the topics of the day. This approach links audience responses to specific aspects of media content—what Hofstetter (1976) called the *structural biases* of journalism—rather than to global or topical measures of media content (e.g., news on the front page or news about the presidential campaign) or simply broad measures of frequency of exposure to various news media. For example, McCombs, Son, and Bang (1988) mapped the variation in reader attention to hard and soft news items in the main news section of the newspaper.

A very different kind of theoretical integration linking agenda setting and another social science area is illustrated by McCombs and Weaver's (1985) explication of the common conceptual ground shared by the agenda-setting concept of *need for orientation* and the concept of a *quasi-statistical sense* in Noelle-Neumann's (1984) spiral-of-silence theory. Each theory offers its concept as a psychological explanation for its distinct and separate phenomena. But McCombs and Weaver (1985) demonstrate that these seemingly discrete phenomena fit together hand in glove. The two theories' seemingly disparate views of the world are akin to two travelers riding the same train but looking out the windows on opposite sides.

If we pause for a moment to consider the key term of this theoretical metaphor, the *agenda*, in abstract terms, the potential for integrating numerous other communication concepts—such as status conferral, stereotyping, and image—becomes clear. In the original Chapel Hill study and many of the studies that have followed, both the media agenda and the public agenda consisted of a set of objects, public issues. But Weaver et al. (1981) introduced a new agenda to the literature, the agenda of personal concerns, on which politics is but a single entry. This agenda also is a set of objects. Viewed in these terms, the agenda metaphor can be ap-

plied in many settings. Communication is a process. It can be about any set of objects—or even a single object—competing for attention.

There also is another dimension, another agenda, to consider. Each of these objects also has numerous attributes, and this set of attributes defines another agenda. Just as objects vary in salience, so do the attributes of each object. The 1976 election study not only considered an agenda of candidates, it focused more specifically on the candidates' agendas of attributes. The news media define an agenda of attributes for each contender in their presentation of the campaign. From exposure to the news media, as well as from other sources such as family and friends, voters form an image of each candidate—an agenda of attributes. Weaver et al. (1981) applied the basic agenda-setting model to these agendas of attributes, examining the degree of correspondence between media and public. Benton and Frazier (1976) observed only a single object, the economy, but focused their analysis on two sets of attributes: (a) the specific problems, causes, and proposed solutions associated with the economy as a national problem, and (b) positive and negative arguments for specific national economic policies. Agenda setting is a theory about the transfer of salience, both the salience of objects and the salience of their attributes.

New Research Venues

Agenda setting is considerably more than the classical assertion that the news tells us *what to think about*. The news also tells us *how to think about it*. Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of frames for thinking about these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles. Central to the news agenda and its daily set of objects—issues, personalities, events, etc.—are the perspectives that journalists and, subsequently, members of the public employ to think about each object (McCombs, 1992). These perspectives direct attention toward certain attributes and away from others. The generic name for these journalistic perspectives is *newsworthiness*. But newsworthy objects are framed in a wide variety of ways.

Todd Gitlin (1980) introduced the concept of framing to mass communication research in his classic examination of how CBS trivialized a major student movement during the turbulent 1960s. News coverage of a social movement can select from a number of alternative framing strategies. The news can document the scope of social problems, critique alternative proposals for coping with problems, or focus on the tactical efforts of activists and government officials to cope with problems. This latter strategy frequently includes an emphasis on outrageous statements, and on conflicts among the players in particular, because these aspects of an issue fit the traditional journalism agenda of vivid, newsworthy stories.

Even when multiple attributes of an issue are included on the news agenda, there is likely to be a perceptible set of priorities. Presidential campaign stories are carefully balanced so that Democrats and Republicans have the same salience. But the issues on which they are quoted seldom have identical salience, and the priorities in the coverage influence the priorities of the public. In a nonelection setting, David Cohen (1975) found this kind of an agenda-setting effect for the attributes of one issue, the development of Lake Monroe in central Indiana. The attributes of this issue emphasized in the news coverage correlated very highly with the attributes deemed important by the public and discussed most often by the public.

There also is evidence that the way an object on the agenda is framed can have measurable behavioral consequences. The attributes of an issue emphasized in the news coverage can, for example, directly influence the direction of public opinion. That was Gitlin's (1980) major point. Page and Shapiro (1992) found that television news coverage of major foreign issues over a 15-year period did much more than influence the salience of these issues. This news coverage was a significant predictor of the shifts in public opinion, shifts toward greater or lesser favorability toward these issues. Even the name applied to an issue can influence the salience of certain points of view and the distribution of public opinion. Journalists covering the current struggle over abortion agonize about what label to use for this issue because both of the terms commonly used by participants—"freedom of choice" and "right to life"—are affectively loaded.

Whatever the attributes of an issue—or other topic—presented on the news agenda, the consequences for audience behavior are considerable. How a communicator frames an issue sets an agenda of attributes and can influence how we think about it. Agenda setting is a process that can affect both what to think about and how to think about it. In their analysis of voters' response to Watergate, Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman (1975) found

that for persons with a high need for orientation about politics, mass communication does more than merely reinforce preexisting beliefs. In fact, the media may teach these members of the audience the issues and topics to use in evaluating certain candidates and parties, not just during political campaigns, but also in the longer periods between campaigns. (p. 471, emphasis ours)

And in an experimental setting, increasing the number of news stories about defense preparedness did far more than just increase the salience of that issue for subjects exposed to this series of TV newscasts. The news coverage also primed this issue as a criterion for evaluating the president's overall performance (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In light of the findings by Page and Shapiro (1992), it is not surprising that subjects exposed

to a series of news stories on the inadequacies of U.S. defense preparedness gave President Carter lower ratings on his performance in regard to this issue than did subjects not exposed to those news stories. But similar differences were found in the groups' evaluations of the president's overall performance, a considerable generalization from the specific information communicated to the audience. At least under some circumstances, the media's agenda can alter the standards that people use in evaluating the president (Iyengar, 1991).

There also is the implication here that in the course of priming a particular criterion (or set of criteria) the news media promote social consensus—not consensus in terms of opinions about whether the president is doing a good or bad job, but consensus about the criteria used in reaching that judgment. More generally, the key agenda-setting role of the media may be the promotion of social consensus on what the agenda is, whether it be the traditional agenda of issues or whatever. For example, evidence is accumulating that there are not discrete agendas for each demographic grouping in society (Graber, 1984; Shaw & Martin, 1992). The media, by providing an agenda that everyone, to a considerable degree, can share, create a sense of community. This is, of course, a social function that is threatened by the expanding choice of information sources created by the plethora of new communication technologies. At the time of the initial agenda-setting study in Chapel Hill, a content analysis of nine newspapers, TV networks, and major news magazines covered nearly all the sources used by Chapel Hill voters during the 1968 presidential election. Today two dozen newspaper racks are in front of the downtown post office, and an equal number of channels are available on cable television. The media system has fragmented.

Under these circumstances it is especially important that scholars explicate in ever greater detail the response of audiences to public communication. Edelman (1993) opens the door to one vastly expanded, but integrated, exploration of agenda setting's dependent variable(s). His theory of *problematic situations*, with its detailed specification of how topics are framed—five conditions of discrepancy and five steps taken to address those discrepancies—is equally appropriate for analyzing the media agenda and public agenda. It is both theoretically and methodologically superior to the usual linkage between these agendas stated in terms of ever-changing news topics. If the content of media and public agendas also can be parsimoniously linked to subsequent behavioral responses, agenda-setting theory will have solved in three decades a problem that eluded the much larger field of attitude and opinion research for a considerably longer period of time. Be that as it may, the problematic situation opens interesting new doors for exploration.

The concept of the problematic situation is an answer to the demand of some critics that common units of analysis be used for each agenda. Not everyone agrees on the necessity of common elements. This may well be a premature call for theoretical closure. As we have noted, agenda-setting

researchers have steadily expanded the locales of their explorations during this first 25 years. Over a decade ago McCombs (1981) also pointed out the existence of four basic versions of the agenda-setting phenomenon in the literature. Typical of communication research, these versions include both individual-level and social-level analyses. The marketplace has not yet settled on the most appropriate domains for agenda-setting theory.

Looking Toward a Fruitful Future

The expanded version of agenda-setting theory traced in the last section, a perspective that includes agendas of both objects and attributes, illustrates all three aspects of the theory's fruitfulness. The hearty evolution of agenda-setting research in the marketplace of ideas over the past 25 years is itself preview to a robust future of scholarly publication, theoretical integration, and conceptual innovation. There is no question that the literature will grow as scholars continue to expand agenda setting into new domains. Employing the concept of framing to talk about the rich variety of attribute agendas will contribute to the integration of communication research. Major new research venues and new insights will be called into existence.

Bernard Cohen's (1963) classic summation of agenda setting—the media may not tell us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about—has been turned inside out. New research exploring the consequences of agenda setting and media framing suggest that the media not only tell us what to think about, but also how to think about it, and, consequently, what to think.

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