Preface

Setting the agenda is now a common phrase in discussions of politics and public opinion. This phrase summarizes the continuing dialogue and debate in every community, from local neighbourhoods to the international arena, over what should be at the centre of public attention and action. In most of these dialogues the mass media have a significant and sometimes controversial role. Noting this role of the media in setting the national agenda during a critical phase of his country's political transition, the editor of South Africa's largest daily, *The Sowetan*, remarked, 'It is our contention that in a country like South Africa, it simply cannot be right that, because of its dominance in the media, a minority should continue to set the public agenda.'[1] In the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* made a similar comment: 'The profoundly dysfunctional British press, over 75% controlled by three rightwing men, has the bit between its teeth, setting the agenda for the nation's political discourse.'[2]

Should there be any doubt about this longstanding and widespread role of the news media, note the *New York Times*'s description of twentieth-century British press baron Lord Beaverbrook as a man 'who dined with prime ministers and set the nation's agenda'.[3] Or former *New York Times* executive Max Frankel's description of his own newspaper:

> It is the 'house organ' of the smartest, most talented, and most influential Americans at the height of American power. And while its editorial opinions or the views of individual columnists and critics can be despised or dismissed, the paper's daily package of news cannot. It frames the intellectual and emotional agenda of serious Americans.[4]

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The enormous growth and expansion of these mass media institutions that are now such a compelling feature of contemporary society was a central aspect of the last century. To the host of newspapers and magazines spawned in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century added ubiquitous layers of film, radio, television and cable television. In its closing years came the internet and a kaleidoscopic mix of communication technologies that continue to blur the traditional boundaries between the various media and their content.

Although everyone talks about the impact of these emerging technologies in the new millennium, the enormous social influence of mass communication was already apparent decades before the latest waves of technology spread across the world. In *The Making of the President, 1972*, American journalist Theodore White described the power of mass communication to set the agenda of public attention as 'an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins'.[5] In the years since White's cogent observation, social scientists across the world have elaborated the ability of the mass media to influence many aspects of our political, social and cultural agendas.

One of the most prominent and best-documented intellectual maps of this influence, the theory of the agenda-setting role of mass communication, is the subject of this book. Theories seldom emerge full-blown. They typically begin with a succinct insight and are subsequently elaborated and explicated over many years by various explorers and surveyors of their intellectual terrain. This has been the case for agenda-setting theory. From a parsimonious hypothesis about the effects of mass communication on the public's attention to social and political issues, this theory has expanded to include propositions about the contingent conditions for these effects, the influences that shape the media's agenda, the impact of specific elements in the media's messages, and a variety of consequences of this agenda-setting process. Agenda-setting theory has become a highly detailed map of the mass media agenda and its effects.

The immediate origins of this idea in its contemporary form began with a casual observation about the play of news stories on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* one day in early 1967. There were three big stories that day: internationally, the unexpected shift from Labour to Conservative in the British county council elections; nationally, a budding scandal in Washington; and locally, the firing of the Los Angeles metropolitan area director of a large federally funded programme that was a keystone in the national 'War on Poverty'. Not surprisingly, the *Los Angeles Times* put the local story in the lead

position on page 1. With its conservative page design, this relegated the other two stories to single-column headlines elsewhere on the front page. Any one of these stories – in the absence of the other two – easily would have been the page 1 lead, a situation that led to a speculative conversation over drinks among several young UCLA faculty members at their Friday afternoon 'junior faculty meeting' in the lobby of the Century Plaza Hotel. Is the impact of an event diminished when a news story receives less prominent play, we wondered? Those speculations grounded in a scattered variety of ideas and empirical findings about the influence of mass media on the public were the seeds for the theory of agenda-setting.

While there are now more than 400 published empirical investigations worldwide, the formal explication of the idea of agenda-setting began with my move that fall to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I met Don Shaw and began what is now a 35-year plus friendship and professional partnership. Our initial attempt at formal research on this idea built literally on those speculations in Los Angeles about the play of news stories. We attempted to construct an experiment based on actual newspapers that played the same story in radically different ways. The *Charlotte Observer* was a widely respected newspaper in North Carolina that produced a series of editions during the day, early ones for points distant from Charlotte, the final edition for the city itself. One result of these multiple editions was that some stories would begin the day prominently played on the front page and then move down in prominence in subsequent editions, sometimes moving entirely off the front page. Our original plan was to use these differences from edition to edition as the basis of an experiment. However, the shifts in news play from day to day proved too erratic – in terms both of the subjects of the stories and in the way that their play in the newspaper changed – for any systematic comparison of their impact upon the public's perceptions.

Despite this setback, the theoretical idea was intriguing, and we decided to try another methodological tack, a small survey of undecided voters during the 1968 US presidential election in tandem with a systematic content analysis of how the news media used by these voters played the major issues of the election. Undecided voters were selected for study on the assumption that, among the public at large, this group who were interested in the election, but undecided about their vote, would be the most open to media influence. This was the Chapel Hill study,[6] now known as the origin of agenda-setting theory. A fundamental contribution of the Chapel Hill study was the term itself, 'agenda-setting', which gave this concept of

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media influence immediate currency among scholars. Steve Chaffee recalls that, when I saw him at the 1968 annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and told him about our study of agenda-setting, the term was new and unfamiliar, but he immediately understood the focus of our research.

Since Don Shaw trained in history, you might expect us to have exact records on the creation of the term 'agenda-setting' – the 'One Tuesday afternoon in early August . . . ' kind of sentence – but, ironically, neither Don nor I recall exactly when we came up with that name. We didn't mention 'agenda-setting' in our 1967 application to the National Association of Broadcasters for the small grant used in partial support of the research, but our 1969 report to the NAB on the results of the Chapel Hill study uses the term as if it had been around forever. Sometime during 1968 the name 'agenda-setting' appeared,[7] and Steve Chaffee undoubtedly was one of the first 'referees' to acknowledge its utility – perhaps the very first outside the immediate Chapel Hill circle involved in the project. Chapter 1 presents the details of that investigation as well as some of the key intellectual antecedents of this idea predating both Chapel Hill and Los Angeles. Additional links with other longstanding communication concepts are reviewed in the discussion in chapter 6 of agenda-setting theory's continuing evolution.

To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, with the success of the 1968 Chapel Hill investigation the game clearly was afoot. There were promising leads in hand for the solution to at least a portion of the mystery about the precise effects of mass communication upon public opinion. Subsequently, many detectives began to pursue these clues about how public attention and perception are influenced by the media and how various characteristics of the media, their content and their audiences mediate these effects. Much like the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, whose cases fill nine lengthy volumes, a wide variety of links in this vast intellectual web have been chronicled. However, it has been a disjointed series of contributions. Because the marketplace of ideas in communication research is very much one of laissez-faire, elaboration of the agenda-setting role of the mass media has not proceeded in any orderly or systematic fashion. There have been many detectives working on many cases in a variety of geographical and cultural settings, adding a bit of evidence here and another bit there over the years. New theoretical concepts explicating the idea of agenda-setting emerged in one part of this intellectual web, then at another.

Until very recently, the primary emphasis was always an agenda of public issues. Especially in its popular manifestation of polls in the

news media, public opinion is frequently regarded in these terms. Agenda-setting theory evolved from a description and explanation of the influence that mass communication has on public opinion about the issues of the day. An open-ended question used by the Gallup Poll since the 1930s, 'What is the most important problem facing this country today?', is frequently used for this research because polls based on this question document the hundreds of issues that have engaged the attention of the public and pollsters over the past five or six decades.[8]

More recently, agenda-setting theory has encompassed public opinion about political candidates and other public figures, specifically the images that the public holds of these individuals and the contributions of the mass media to those public images. This larger agenda of topics – public figures as well as public issues – marks an important theoretical expansion from the beginning of the communication process, what topics the media and public are paying attention to and regard as important, to a subsequent stage, how the media and public perceive and understand the details of these topics. In turn, this second stage is the opening gambit for mapping the consequences of the media's agenda-setting role for attitudes, opinions and behaviour. All of these significant media effects upon the public are presented in this volume, not just theoretically, but in terms of the empirical evidence on these effects worldwide.

In contrast to the piecemeal historical evolution of our knowledge about agenda-setting since the seminal 1968 Chapel Hill study, the chapters of this book strive for an orderly and systematic presentation of what we have learned over those years, an attempt to integrate the vast diversity of this evidence – diverse in its historical and geographical settings, mix of mass media and specific public issues, and research methods. Presenting this integrated picture – in the words of John Pavlik, a *Gray's Anatomy* of agenda-setting theory[9] – is the central purpose of the book. Much of the evidence forming this picture is from an American setting because the 'founding fathers' of agenda-setting, Don Shaw, David Weaver,[10] and me, are American academics, and the majority of the empirical research has been conducted in the United States. However, the reader will encounter considerable evidence from Britain, Spain, Japan, Taiwan and other countries around the world. One of the great strengths of agenda-setting theory is this geographical and cultural diversity in the evidence replicating the major aspects of this mass communication influence on society.

Beyond the immense gratitude to my best friends and long-time research partners, Don Shaw and David Weaver, this book owes a great debt to that host of scholars worl mulated literature that is catalogued h an absent-minded professor and omitt I especially acknowledge my personal extended periods of time with Est Evatt, Salma Ghanem, Spiro Kiousis, Rey Lennon, Juan Pablo Llamas, Pau shita, Wayne Wanta and Jian-Hua due James Dearing and Everett Rogers a 'must read' on the history and bas and special thanks to John Thompson patience in waiting for this book. There professors, Walter Wilcox at Tulane to graduate study at Stanford Univ Richard Carter, Nathan Maccoby and down this theoretical trail. More recent Universidad Nacional Autonoma de the University of Navarra in Pamplona sity and Diego Portales University in been instrumental in the diffusion of a America.

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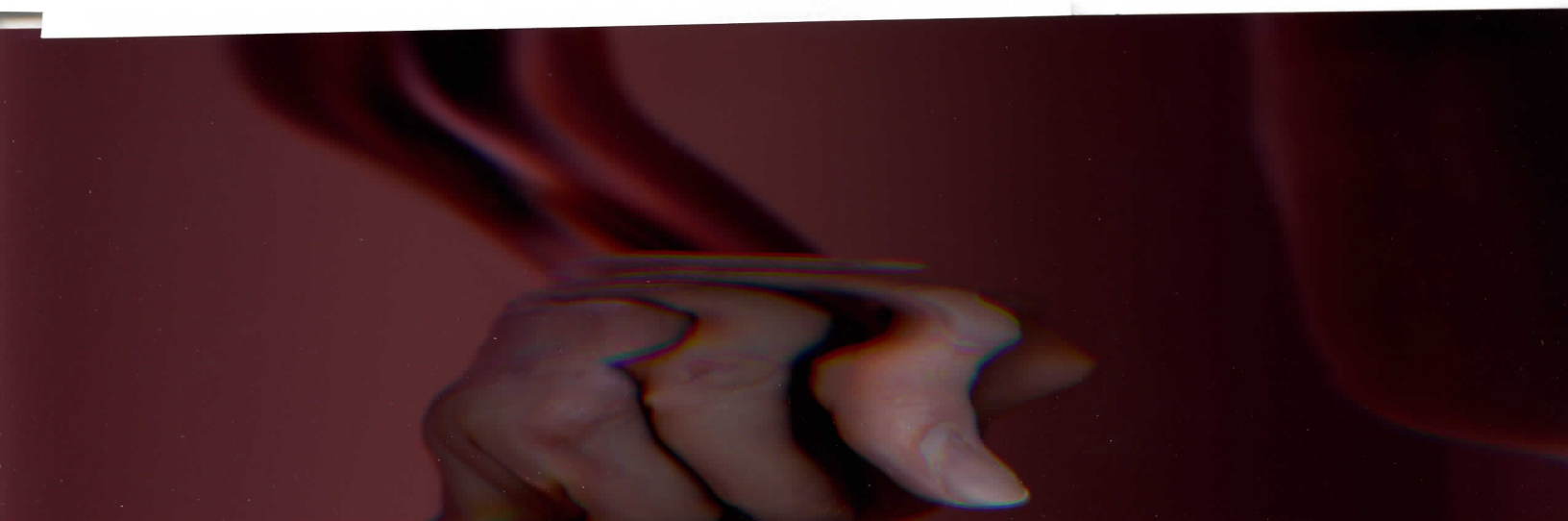

great debt to that host of scholars worldwide who created the accumulated literature that is catalogued here. With the risk of being an absent-minded professor and omitting significant contributors, I especially acknowledge my personal enjoyment of working over extended periods of time with Esteban Lopez-Escobar, Dixie Evatt, Salma Ghanem, Spiro Kiousis, Dominic Lasorsa, Federico Rey Lennon, Juan Pablo Llamas, Paula Poindexter, Toshio Takeshita, Wayne Wanta and Jian-Hua Zhu. Special recognition is due James Dearing and Everett Rogers for their book *Agenda Setting*, a 'must read' on the history and basic ideas of agenda-setting,[11] and special thanks to John Thompson of Polity Press for his long patience in waiting for this book. There also is a personal debt to my professors, Walter Wilcox at Tulane University, who guided me to graduate study at Stanford University, where Chilton Bush, Richard Carter, Nathan Maccoby and Wilbur Schramm started me down this theoretical trail. More recently, my thanks to Issa Luna at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico and to colleagues at the University of Navarra in Pamplona, Spain, and Catholic University and Diego Portales University in Santiago, Chile, who have been instrumental in the diffusion of agenda-setting theory in Latin America.

The theory of agenda-setting is a complex intellectual map still in the process of evolving. Although the emphasis in this book is on an empirically grounded media-centric map of what we now know about the role of the mass media in the formation of public opinion, there is considerable discussion in the later chapters of the larger context in which this media influence occurs. This agenda-setting role of the mass media has been a rich lode for scholars to mine for more than thirty-five years, and yet much of its wealth remains untapped. However, even the existing theoretical map already identifies exciting new areas to explore, and the flux in our contemporary public communication system creates a plethora of new opportunities for elaborating the map presented here. Reviewing this new age of political communication that is upon us, British scholars Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh observed:

> Such a situation is highly promising for research, but demands imagination in tailoring it to these tensions and the new conditions.... Among the field's master paradigms, agenda setting may be most worth pursuing. Are media agendas diversifying across the many different outlets of political communication, and, if so, how are they being received by the audiences of those outlets?[12]

The goal of this book is to present some basic ideas about the role of the mass media in the shaping of public opinion and to catalogue a representative sample of the supporting empirical evidence. This knowledge can guide future map-makers' explorations of mass communication and open the way to understanding the larger social context of mass communication.

Even within the original domain of public opinion, there is more to consider than just the descriptions and explanations of how the mass media influence our views of public affairs. For journalists this phenomenon that we now talk about as the agenda-setting role of the news media is an awesome, overarching ethical question about what agenda the media are advancing. 'What the public needs to know' is a recurring phrase in the rhetorical repertoire of professional journalism. Does the media agenda really represent what the public needs to know?[13] In a moment of doubt, the executive producer of ABC News's *Nightline* once asked: 'Who are we to think we should set an agenda for the nation? What made us any smarter than the next guy?'[14] To a considerable degree, journalism is grounded in the tradition of storytelling. However, good journalism is more than just telling a good story. It is about telling stories that contain significant civic utility.[15] The agenda-setting role of the mass media links journalism and its tradition of storytelling to the arena of public opinion, a relationship with considerable consequences for society.

1 Influencing Opinion

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