1 Influencing Public Opinion

The American humorist Will Rogers was fond of prefacing his sardonic political observations with the comment, 'All I know is just what I read in the newspapers.' This comment is a succinct summary about most of the knowledge and information that each of us possesses about public affairs because most of the issues and concerns that engage our attention are not amenable to direct personal experience. As Walter Lippmann long ago noted in *Public Opinion*, 'The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.'[1] In Will Rogers's and Walter Lippmann's day, the daily newspaper was the principal source of information about public affairs. Today we also have television and an expanding panoply of new communication technologies, but the central point is the same. For nearly all of the concerns on the public agenda, citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists' reports about these events and situations.

A similar, parsimonious description of our situation vis-à-vis the news media is captured in sociologist Robert Park's venerable phrase, the signal function of the news.[2] The daily news alerts us to the latest events and changes in the larger environment beyond our immediate experience. But newspapers and television news, even the tightly edited pages of a tabloid newspaper or internet web site, do considerably more than signal the existence of major events and issues. Through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda-setting role of the news media.

Newspapers communicate a host of cues about the relative salience of the topics on their daily agenda. The lead story on page 1, front page versus inside page, the size of the headline, and even the length of a story all communicate the salience of topics on the news agenda. There are analogous cues on web sites. The television news agenda has a more limited capacity, so even a mention on the evening television news is a strong signal about the high salience of a topic. Additional cues are provided by its placement in the broadcast and by the amount of time spent on the story. For all the news media, the repetition of a topic day after day is the most powerful message of all about its importance.

The public uses these salience cues from the media to organize their own agendas and decide which issues are most important. Over time, the issues emphasized in news reports become the issues regarded as most important among the public. The agenda of the news media becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public. In other words, the news media set the public agenda. Establishing this salience among the public, placing an issue or topic on the public agenda so that it becomes the focus of public attention and thought – and, possibly, action – is the initial stage in the formation of public opinion.

Discussion of public opinion usually centres on the distribution of opinions, how many are for, how many are against, and how many are undecided. That is why the news media and many in their audiences are so fascinated with public opinion polls, especially during political campaigns. But before we consider the distribution of opinions, we need to know which topics are at the centre of public opinion. People have opinions on many things, but only a few topics really matter to them. The agenda-setting role of the news media is their influence on the salience of an issue, an influence on whether any significant number of people really regard it as worthwhile to hold an opinion about that issue. While many issues compete for public attention, only a few are successful in doing so, and the news media exert significant influence on our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This is not a deliberate, premeditated influence – as in the expression 'to have an agenda' – but rather an inadvertent influence resulting from the necessity of the news media to select and highlight a few topics in their reports as the most salient news of the moment.

This distinction between the influence of the news media on the salience of issues and on specific opinions about these issues is summed up in Bernard Cohen's observation that the news media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but they are

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stunningly successful in telling their audiences what to think about.[3] In other words, the news media can set the agenda for public thought and discussion. Sometimes the media do more than this, and we will find it necessary in later chapters to expand on Cohen's cogent observation. But first let us consider in some detail the initial step in the formation of public opinion, capturing public attention.

Our pictures of the world

Walter Lippmann is the intellectual father of the idea now called, for short, agenda-setting. The opening chapter of his 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, is titled 'The World Outside and the Pictures in our Heads' and summarizes the agenda-setting idea even though Lippmann did not use that phrase. His thesis is that the news media, our windows to the vast world beyond direct experience, determine our cognitive maps of that world. Public opinion, argued Lippmann, responds not to the environment, but to the pseudo-environment constructed by the news media.

Still in print more than eighty years after its original publication, *Public Opinion* presents an intriguing array of anecdotal evidence to support its thesis. Lippmann, for example, describes a discussion in the United States Senate in which a tentative newspaper report of a military incursion on the Dalmatian coast becomes a factual crisis.[4] He begins the book with a compelling story of 'an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived'. Only the arrival of the mail steamer more than six weeks after the outbreak of World War I alerted these friends that they were enemies.[5] For Lippmann, who was writing in the 1920s, these are contemporary updates of Plato's Allegory of the Cave with which he prefaces the book. Paraphrasing Socrates, he noted 'how indirectly we know the environment in which nevertheless we live . . . but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself.'[6]

Contemporary empirical evidence

Empirical evidence about the agenda-setting role of the mass media now confirms and elaborates Lippmann's broad-brush observations. But this detailed picture about the formation of public opinion came much later. When *Public Opinion* was published in 1922, the first scientific investigations of mass communication influence on public

opinion were still more than a decade in the future. Publication of the first explicit investigation of the agenda-setting role of mass communication was exactly fifty years away.

Systematic analysis of mass communication's effects on public opinion, empirical research grounded in the precepts of scientific investigation, dates from the 1940 US presidential election, when sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University, in collaboration with pollster Elmo Roper, conducted seven rounds of interviews with voters in Erie County, Ohio.[7] Contrary to both popular and scholarly expectations, these surveys and many subsequent investigations in other settings over the next twenty years found little evidence of mass communication effects on attitudes and opinions. Two decades after Erie County, Joseph Klapper's *The Effects of Mass Communication* declared that the law of minimal consequences prevailed.[8]

However, these early social science investigations during the 1940s and 1950s did find considerable evidence that people acquired information from the mass media even if they did not change their opinions. Voters did learn from the news. And from a journalistic perspective, questions about learning are more central than questions about persuasion. Phrases such as 'what people need to know' and 'the people's right to know' are rhetorical standards in journalism. Most journalists are concerned with informing. Persuasion is relegated to the editorial page, and, even there, informing remains central. Furthermore, even after the law of minimal consequences became the accepted conventional wisdom, there was a lingering suspicion among many social scientists that there were major media effects not yet explored or measured. The time was ripe for a paradigm shift in the examination of media effects, a shift from persuasion to an earlier point in the communication process, informing.

Against this background, two young professors at the University of North Carolina's School of Journalism launched a small investigation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, during the 1968 US presidential campaign. Their central hypothesis was that the mass media set the agenda of issues for a political campaign by influencing the salience of issues among voters. These two professors, Don Shaw and I, also coined a name for this hypothesized influence of mass communication. We called it 'agenda-setting'.[9]

Testing this agenda-setting hypothesis required the comparison of two sets of evidence: a description of the public agenda, the set of issues that were of the greatest concern to Chapel Hill voters; and a description of the issue agenda in the news media used by those voters. Illustrated in box 1.1, the central assertion of agenda-setting

Box 1.1 Agenda-setting role of the mass

MEDIA
AGENDA

Pattern of news coverage

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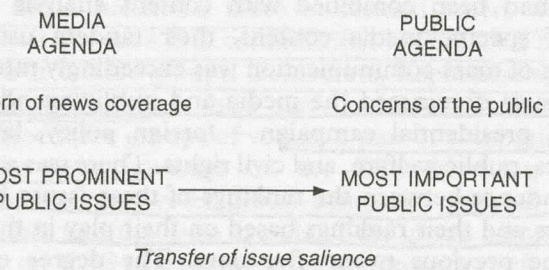
Box 1.1 Agenda-setting role of the mass media



theory is that those issues emphasized in the news come to be regarded over time as important by the public. In other words, the media agenda sets the public agenda. Contrary to the law of minimal consequences, this is a statement about a strong causal effect of mass communication on the public – the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda.

To determine the public agenda in Chapel Hill during the 1968 presidential election a survey was conducted among a sample of randomly selected undecided voters. Only undecided voters were interviewed because this new agenda-setting hypothesis went against the prevailing view of mass media effects. If this test in Chapel Hill failed to find agenda-setting effects under rather optimum conditions, voters who had not yet decided how to cast their presidential vote, there would be little reason to pursue the matter among the general public where longstanding psychological identification with a political party and the process of selective perception often blunted the effects of mass communication during election campaigns.

In the survey, these undecided voters were asked to name the key issues of the day as they saw matters, regardless of what the candidates might be saying. The issues named in the survey were ranked according to the percentage of voters naming each one to yield a description of the public agenda. Note that this rank ordering of the issues is considerably more precise than simply grouping sets of issues into those receiving high, moderate or low attention among the public.

The nine major news sources used by these voters were also collected and content analysed. This mix of media included five local and national newspapers, two television networks and two news magazines. The rank order of issues on the media agenda was

determined by the number of news stories devoted to each issue in recent weeks. Although this was not the very first time that survey research had been combined with content analysis to assess the effects of specific media content, their tandem use to measure the effects of mass communication was exceedingly rare at that time.

Five issues dominated the media and public agendas during the 1968 US presidential campaign – foreign policy, law and order, economics, public welfare, and civil rights. There was a nearly perfect correspondence between the rankings of these issues by the Chapel Hill voters and their rankings based on their play in the news media during the previous twenty-five days. The degree of importance accorded these five issues by these voters closely paralleled their degree of prominence in the news. In other words, the salience of five key campaign issues among these undecided voters was virtually identical to the salience of these issues in the news coverage of recent weeks.

Moreover, the idea of powerful media effects expressed in the concept of agenda-setting was a better explanation for the salience of issues on the public agenda than was the concept of selective perception, which is a keystone in the idea of minimal mass media consequences.[10] Since agenda-setting challenged the prevailing view at that time about mass media effects, the evidence for this statement needs to be examined in some detail.

Agenda-setting is not a return to a bullet theory or hypodermic theory of all-powerful media effects. Nor are members of the audience regarded as automatons waiting to be programmed by the news media. But agenda-setting does assign a central role to the news media in initiating items for the public agenda. Or, to paraphrase Lippmann, the information provided by the news media plays a key role in the construction of our pictures of reality. And, moreover, it is the total set of information provided by the news media that influences these pictures.

In contrast, the concept of selective perception locates the central influence within the individual and stratifies media content according to its compatibility with an individual's existing attitudes and opinions. From this perspective, it is assumed that individuals minimize their exposure to non-supportive information and maximize their exposure to supportive information. During an election, voters are expected to pay the most attention to those issues emphasized by their preferred political party.

Which does the public agenda more closely reflect? The total agenda of issues in the news, which is the outcome hypothesized by agenda-setting theory? Or the agenda of issues advanced by a voter's

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Box 1.2 The power of the press

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preferred party, which is the outcome hypothesized by the theory of selective perception?

To answer these questions, those undecided voters who had a preference (albeit not yet a firm commitment to vote for a candidate) were separated into three groups, Democrats, Republicans, and supporters of George Wallace, a third party candidate in that election. For each of these three groups of voters, a pair of comparisons were made with the news coverage on the CBS television network: the issue agenda of that voter group compared with all the news coverage on CBS, and the issue agenda of the group compared with only the news on CBS originating with the group's preferred party and candidate. These pairs of comparisons for CBS were repeated for NBC, the *New York Times*, and a local daily newspaper. In sum, there were a dozen pairs of correlations to compare: three groups of voters times four news media. Which was the stronger correlation in each pair? The agenda-setting correlation comparing voters with all the news coverage, or the selective perception correlation comparing voters with only the news of their preferred party and candidate?

Box 1.2 The power of the press

The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about – an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins.

No major act of the American Congress, no foreign adventure, no act of diplomacy, no great social reform can succeed in the United States unless the press prepares the public mind. And when the press seizes a great issue to thrust onto the agenda of talk, it moves action on its own – the cause of the environment, the cause of civil rights, the liquidations of the war in Vietnam, and, as climax, the Watergate affair were all set on the agenda, in first instance, by the press.

Theodore White, *The Making of the President*

In the stream of the nation's capital, the *Washington Post* is very much like a whale; its smallest splashes rarely go unnoticed. No other newspaper dominates a city the way the *Post* dominates Washington. . . . There are complaints that the paper has lost energy since Benjamin C. Bradley retired as editor, in September of 1991, but nothing seems to have diminished the influence that the *Post* holds over the nation's political agenda; and nothing has diminished the paper's almost mystical importance to the city's permanent population of malcontents, leaders, and strivers.

The New Yorker (21 & 28 October 1996)

Eight of the twelve comparisons favoured the agenda-setting hypothesis. There was no difference in one case, and only three comparisons favoured the selective perception hypothesis. A new perspective on powerful media effects had established a foothold.

The accumulated evidence

Since that modest beginning in Chapel Hill during the 1968 presidential election, there have been hundreds of empirical investigations of the agenda-setting influence of the news media.[11] The accumulated evidence for this influence on the general public in many different geographical and historical settings worldwide includes all the news media and dozens of public issues. This evidence also documents the time-order and causal links between the media and public agendas in finer detail. Here is a sampling of that evidence.

The 1972 US presidential election in Charlotte

To extend the evidence for agenda-setting beyond the narrow focus on undecided 1968 voters in Chapel Hill and their media sources during the early part of the fall election campaign, a representative sample of all voters in Charlotte, North Carolina, and their news media were examined three times during the summer and fall of 1972.[12] Two distinct phases were identified in election year agenda-setting by the news media. During the summer and early fall, the daily newspaper was the prime mover. With its greater capacity – scores of pages compared to half an hour for network television news – the *Charlotte Observer* influenced the public agenda during the early months. Television news did not. But in the final month of the campaign, there was little evidence of agenda-setting by either the local newspaper or the television networks.

In addition to documenting the agenda-setting influence of the local newspaper on the public, these observations across the summer and fall of that election campaign eliminated the rival hypothesis that the public agenda influenced the newspaper agenda. Whenever there are observations of the media agenda and the public agenda at two or more points over time, it is possible simultaneously to compare the cross-lag correlations measuring the strength of these two competing causal hypotheses. For example, the influence of the newspaper agenda at time one on the public agenda at time two can be compared with the influence of the public agenda at time one on the

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