

Who Sets the Agenda? Agenda-setting Procedures and their Practical Implication

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ABSTRACT: The research focused on agenda-setting procedures and their practical implications, taking a qualitative approach to emphasize the significance of agenda-setting processes in shaping public discourse. The study examined agenda setting in relation to reality, media, and public perception, and carefully considered the arguments to determine the most effective methods for setting and promoting an agenda. The conclusion highlighted the critical role of agenda-setting in shaping public discourse, policy priorities, and resource allocation. It emphasized the importance of understanding how various actors and factors influence the agenda in order to navigate and influence the political and social landscape effectively.

Keywords: Agenda setting, procedures, practical implementation, models

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INTRODUCTION

In the realm of communication, the Agenda Setting Theory has become a widely popular notion. It has existed since 1968 when Max McCombs and Donald Shaw formalized it during the United States presidential election (Rogers et al., 1993). The writers' work became known as the 'Capitol Hill Study.' The theory illustrates how the media tends to influence how much emphasis is placed on issues that the public should discuss. Thus, agenda-setting theory's key assumption is that "the media filters and shapes what we see". In this way, media reality, or the media agenda generated from issues in society, influences public perception of real-life issues. Agenda-setting theory equally explains how the media tries to persuade the audience by creating an order of news importance (Figure 1). The theory proposes that the more attention a topic receives in the media, the more likely it is that society will think it is important.

Theoretically, to reduce noise and identify the valid scenarios in which a theory should be applied, it is essential to formulate assumptions that delineate a theory's boundaries and put forth connective statement(s) that illustrate the relationship between the concept(s).

McCombs and Shaw made the preceding assumption, 'the media filters and shapes what we see' and penned the statement about the relationship between 'the more attention a topic receives in the media' and 'the more probable it is that the society will think that it is important,' to guide the theory's application within a societal sphere of acceptability. With the qualities of its propositional claims, agenda-setting is still an idea, not a law. This suggests that the concept can only be applied in certain scenarios. The preceding statements emphasized the need for greater research on the subject.

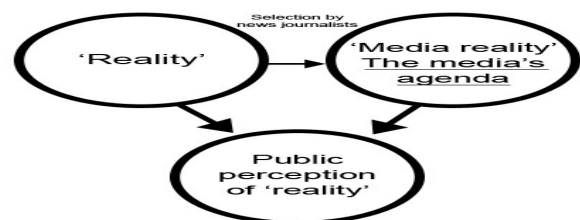


Figure 1: Agenda-Setting Theory Model
Source: Alonzo et al. (2014)

Thus, this study is in tandem with the call for research into how media agendas are created (Perloff, 2022; Carragee et al., 1987). Wang et al. (2023); Gärtner, (2023); Shoemaker and Reese (1991) and Rogers et al. (1993) equally called for a greater understanding of how and by whom the media agenda is set. According to the authors, the media agenda is created through a collaborative process involving news organizations and associated sources, as well as competing media outlets, traditional news-handling approaches and procedures.

The proposal from the authors illustrates how the study's narrative would be presented in Nigerian media, how agenda-setting theory functions in Nigerian journalism, how it shows up in media products and Nigerians' views of it. The research will take us to the newsroom where the Gate keeping model will be used to explain the 'organization' of the agenda and provide examples of newspaper headlines as the media attempts to build the agenda. Figure 2 depicts Bruce Westley and Malcolm MacLean's new way of expressing and expanding their thoughts on Newcombe's ABX Model which was discussed by McQuail and Windahl (2015). The agenda-setting process inherent in the model begins with A (journalists), who is a sender and who receives messages from a variety of sources X1, X2, X3, X4, X5. A codes/writes report based on his observation of the event and transmits it to the 'central hub' of the agenda creating process, here referred to as the Gate-Keeper C - the desk hands and editors are among the Gate Keepers. Thus, keeping a unique readership, viewership, listenership, or audience in mind, C, based on his level of symbolic interactionism as discussed by Mead, Dewey, Cooley, Thomas, and different theorists (Meltzer et al. 2020) and overcoming what Osgood-Schramm would refer to as semantic barriers (Marks and DeWitt, 2020), highlight or deemphasize certain elements in the story to achieve a balance as what is generally referred to as the editorial-communicating function is performed - that is, the process of deciding what and how to communicate. The Gate-Keeper C then sends a report to the audience, who is labeled as B in the diagram.

However, the process remains incomplete until A gets feedback through the fBA loop about how audience B decoded or interpreted the story based on his internalization of the semantic lessons that he and sender A learned from society. It is critical to establish this understanding between A (the field journalist or whoever is exchanging information) and B (the audience who consumes or receives the news or information) because words are ordinary symbols with no meaning other than the meaning that the culture to which A and B belong has assigned to them. Because of the shared understanding of the meanings that their societies have given words, A had to compose his report with B in mind, just as C edits. While C conducts its job by fulfilling a variety of editorial duties, it ultimately contributes to the news agenda-setting for the day. First, he positions himself between A and B, ensuring that the noise in the communication process is removed in terms of the story's content, the facts included within it, its logical submissions, organizational drive, and grammar's simplicity. C is in charge of selecting the most important stories for publication or broadcast from the day's pools of stories. Thus, C chooses the most important story of the day as the top headline or major story for the day, with an appropriate caption, using his gift as a rational creature - a point that pokes holes in the magic bullet theory. To summarize, this C-exercise is used by all media organizations when picking leading stories for the day's news publishing or broadcasting. As a result, most Nigerian media outlets' headlines or main news can sometimes (or often) be identical. The above claim demonstrates that the media filters and shapes what we see and that the similarity and frequency of what we see culminate in the agenda-setting's proposition that the more attention a topic receives in the media, the more likely it is that society will think it is important and conforms to Lippmann (1922) book where Bernard Cohen evidenced (in 1963) that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think" (Cohen, 2015; Oji, 2019; Oji 2009).The identical and similar nature of the headlines in Nigerian newspapers therefore emanates from what gatekeepers in their filtering and shaping of stories consider as the most important and salient stories of the day. The two steps flow theory that considers the rationality of humans and their ability to think and make choices may help explain how the flow of human thoughts from the different media fronts culminate in the picking of choice stories for the day and in the process casting headlines that are identical and similar in outlook. Thus, media audiences are made to consume these stories that aggregate their views as a harvest of public opinion on the most important local, national and international salient matters. The market in which Zenith Bank Nigeria Plc competes is cutthroat. Remember that in Nigeria, bank consolidation

Westley and MacLean's Model of Communication

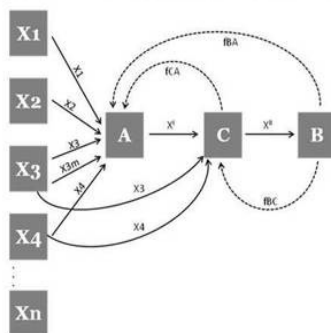


Figure 2: Model of Gate Keeping

reshapes the horizons of banking, requiring to engage in robust advertising to be in contention. Four Nigerian newspapers, The Punch, Vanguard, Daily Independent, and Nigerian Tribune, were polled on December 6, 2007, and the results showed similarities in the newspapers headlines "Zenith floats Bumper Hybrid Offer" was the splashy headline that The Punch used. "Zenith Bank's N130 billion offer opens today" was the caption used by Daily Independent, The Nigerian Tribune and the Vanguard (Omenugha and Oji, 2008). Evidence of such similarities in headlines can also be found in the headlines of the publication on Dangote Refinery opening on January 12th 2024 by Vanguard and The Punch. Newspapers. These narrative bubbles of commonality therefore bear some resemblance to conspiratorial propagandist view points (Oji, 2022)

Conclusion

The identical and similar nature of newspaper headlines, particularly in Nigerian newspapers, can be explained theoretically by an examination of who sets the agenda. Gatekeepers shape and filter stories to determine what they believe are the most significant and noteworthy stories of the day. These stories are intended to be consumed by media audiences as a harvest of public opinion on the most significant local, national, and global issues. As a result, the agenda-setting theory's premise—that the media greatly shapes the opinions of its viewers by promoting certain ideas over others—holds sway.

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