

Relevance and Challenges of the Agenda-Setting Theory in the Changed Media Landscape

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ABSTRACT: Is traditional agenda-setting theory still relevant in a converged media environment? Scholars' opinion vary. However, many concede that changed media landscape has dramatically affected the dynamic of agenda setting, and the original theory that the news media sets the public agenda needs to be reevaluated. Some scholars are now questioning whether the Internet media are changing the dynamic of agenda-setting theory and whether a new model of agenda setting is required in the digital age. This study attempts to answer this fundamental question and argues that intermedia agenda setting—how one medium influences

Keywords: Agenda-setting; convergence; Internet media.

Perhaps agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) is the most dominant theory in mass communication research, as thousands of academic articles have been published since the hallmark 1968 study of Max McCombs and Donald Shaw arguing that news media set the public agenda. There has been a renewed interest in the theory after the College of Media, Communication and Information at University of Colorado Boulder organized a three-day conference to commemorate the 50 year anniversary of the Chapel Hill study. (Vargo, 2018). McCombs and Shaw attended the conference along with David Weaver, another phenomenal figure in agenda-setting research. Scholars from many different universities around the globe presented 27 papers past, present and future of agenda-setting research. While some argued expansion of the theory, majority of them “validated the theory in the current digital and political” (Vargo, 2018). However, this article proposes that while it is still a very important theory to analyze the relationship between media and public agenda, the agenda-setting theory shall be revisited in the current media landscape, which is undergoing a rapid and unpredictable changes in the wake of Web 3.0 revolution. This changed media landscape, where Internet based publications, blogs and social media have enormous influences, challenges the fundamental assumptions of agenda-setting theory to the extent that the nearly 52-year-old model, including

the notion of a shared public agenda, should be reevaluated.

For decades, it has been a given in scholarly research into the agenda-setting effects of the media that traditional media—newspapers, magazines, radio and television news, primarily—have played a major role in setting the public agenda (McCombs, 2004). Now, however, with the revenue, audience and other struggles of the traditional media industry, its needs and efforts to adapt to a changing media landscape as it strives to maintain its relevance and, more significantly, the explosion of the Internet media, may be changing that role. Some media scholars are now questioning whether the Internet media are changing the dynamic of agenda-setting and whether a new model of agenda setting is required in the digital age. This study attempts to answer this fundamental question.

Even though the emergence and influence of Internet media have brought about a new phase of agenda-setting, the traditional agenda-setting proposition largely remains stuck in its earlier conclusions, due to its typically late move to add the Internet to its theoretical structure, and the role of Internet media in influencing the public agenda is not well comprehended. This study represents an attempt to overcome these shortcomings and to understand the most recent incarnations of Internet media.

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Does the traditional agenda-setting approach still apply in a fragmented media environment (Takeshita, 2005)? Scholars disagree, but many concede that changes in the media landscape have at the very least dramatically affected the dynamic of agenda setting, and the original theory that the news media sets the public agenda needs to be revisited. Even McCombs (2005) argued that with a host of potential influences on the media agenda not well apprehended, intermedia agenda setting—how one medium influences another—remains an area of agenda-setting research that demands increased attention.

The Changing Media Landscape

The extent of change in how information is assembled and disseminated is much discussed but perhaps little appreciated, at least in a quantitative sense. Consider the following: Eric Schmidt, former CEO and current executive chairman of Google, estimated that humans now create as much information in two days as we did from the appearance of *Homo sapiens* through 2003 (Siegler, 2010). Or that Facebook did not exist in 2003—yet now reaches more people than all other major U.S. media outlets combined (FCC, 2011). As these observations demonstrate, the digital revolution has completely changed the ways and extent to which information is created, distributed, shared and displayed.

By most measures, today's media environment is more vigorous than ever. Consumers of news and information can avail themselves of faster and cheaper distribution networks, purveyors of information face fewer barriers to entry, and there are more ways to consume information than ever (FCC, 2011). The same digital means that have recently helped overthrow governments abroad (Tunisia and Egypt, for example) are providing Americans dynamic and inventive opportunities to consume, share, and chronicle the news. But the changes brought by technology have not all been sanguine. Even as technology has offered people new opportunities, it has turned traditional news-industry business paradigms upside down, leading to enormous job cuts—13,400 newspaper newsroom positions alone in just the past four years (FCC, 2011). Not only that, from 2006 to 2009, daily newspapers cut their annual editorial (i.e., news) spending by \$1.6 billion a year, or more than a 25% (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2011). Industry-wide, staffing at daily newspapers has been trimmed by more than 25% since 2006, with several big-city newspapers seeing fully 50% of their staff vanish in that period of time. According to industry figures, the newsroom workforce for daily newspapers in 1971 was in the neighborhood

of 38,000 (Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1976), with newsroom employment in 2010 at 41,600 (American Society of News Editors, 2011). These numbers show newspapers employing approximately the same number of journalists today as before Watergate, some 40 years ago, even though the population of the US has grown by more than half since then.

Notwithstanding the precipitous drop-off in newsroom investment in recent years, The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, in its 2011 report analyzing and reporting on the state of the news media in the U.S., has found that people are more interested in news than ever before. As for the platform of preference, the Web is moving up quickly while other sectors—print, primarily—are losing, with digital media being the lone sector seeing audience growth, while cable news joined the ranks of traditional media suffering audience losses (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2011)

As surveys show, Americans are increasingly turning to the Internet for their news and information. In December 2010, 41% of respondents named the Internet as their source for “most of their news about national and international issues,” up 17% from December 2009. For any kind of news, 46% of people now say they search out news online three times a week or more, trumping newspapers (40% for the first time), with only local TV news providing a more attractive platform in America (50%).

With one exception, every sector of the news media Pew studied in 2010 saw revenues grow above the levels of (an admittedly dismal) 2009. That exception was newspapers, where revenues fell once more, in a sign that the industry's organic problems are more severe than those of any other media category. According to Pew, newspaper advertising revenues dropped by 6.4% in 2010 compared to 2009, adding to a frightening drop of 26% in 2009. Over four years, newspaper revenue from advertising is down a calamitous 48%. Adding to the woes of the newspaper industry, while circulation revenue in 2010 was expected to be flat or down only marginally, it fell a painful 10% from 2003 to 2009. Even as print advertising was in serious doldrums, the Web hit a milestone in 2010, as, for the first time, more money was spent on advertising there than in newspapers. Overall, online advertising grew an impressive 13.9% to \$25.8 billion in 2010, according to data from eMarketer.

Even though most traditional American newsrooms are considerably smaller than they were 10 years ago, investment in other news sectors is growing. Online

“publications” such as AOL’s Patch and Yahoo are seeing growth, as is Bloomberg Government, a new website covering government and aimed at audiences believing themselves no longer served by the traditional media.

In the online sector, after years of investing in aggregation, news entities began putting money into their news gathering operations, such that, by one count, even before acquiring *The Huffington Post*, AOL had hired 900 employees in the summer of 2010, and Bloomberg’s new Washington operation, *Bloomberg Government*, was expecting to number 150 journalists and analysts by the end of 2011, doubling its Washington bureau and making it the biggest in the capital.

Change in News Source Cycle

As is widely acknowledged, the growth of digital technologies has brought about momentous changes in the media environment as well as shifts in the way public opinion is formed, in turn spawning critically important debates about the very direction of society. The dramatic changes in the media environment can nowhere be better illustrated than by looking at the original agenda-setting study, in which McCombs and Shaw (1972) needed to evaluate only five local and national newspapers, two television networks and two major news magazines to cover “nearly all of the sources used by Chapel Hill voters during the 1968 presidential election” (p. 63). Now, with the explosion of numerous media platforms brought about by the arrival of 24/7 cable and satellite television, cell phones, video games, and the Internet, some scholars are beginning to ask the once-heretical question of whether the concept of mass communication itself has ended (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001).

Brubaker (2008) emphatically stated that the assumption of agenda-setting theory that people are receiving a common media agenda, and thus acquiring a common public agenda, becomes questionable in a new media world. Another aspect of the news has also been influenced by the advent of new media, in this case, social media, in that, according to Messner and DiStaso (2008), the news cycle has changed to what they define as a news source cycle, in which content is reciprocated from media to media. The researchers introduced their idea after examining the use of blogs as sources for the traditional media and the use of sources in blogs by analyzing 2,059 articles over six years in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. They found that there was an increasing tendency by the newspapers to give legitimacy to blogs as reliable

sources and, in a separate analysis of 120 blogs, determined that the blogs relied on the traditional media as sources, hence creating the news source cycle. In turning agenda-setting theory on its head, researchers have noted that today the locus and role of the traditional media have changed, from the former “offensive” posture of placing items on the public agenda, to a “defensive” one in which they are required to report on certain issues or cover them in a certain way (McLeary, 2007) because those issues were first placed on the agenda by the political blogosphere (Messner & DiStaso, 2008). Even as these changes are occurring, political blogs are expanding the traditional agenda-building process by sending the traditional media content into the digital universe.

On numerous occasions, news coverage that was initiated by political blogs has found its way into the traditional media (Garrison & Messner, 2007), a phenomenon supported by many research studies and professional articles focusing on the political blogs’ impact on the traditional news media. Starting with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in 1998 (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004) and the resignation of Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott in 2002 (Alterman, 2003) and up to the sexting scandal involving New York Congressman Anthony Weiner that led to his resignation on 16 June, 2011 (CNN, 2011), the number of investigative “coups” by political blogs has steadily increased. To cite another important example of their influence, it was bloggers who called into question the report by CBS news on the military files of then-President George W. Bush that led the retirement of long-time news anchor Dan Rather (Pein, 2005). In another telling example, in 2005, CNN executive Eason Jordan resigned after making controversial comments on the war in Iraq—comments first reported on blogs. Also that year, the identity of White House correspondent “Jeff Gannon” was exposed by bloggers, with the attendant news exposure forcing him to return his accreditation (Kurtz, 2005).

While it has been personal scandals involving the private lives of political figures such as Florida Congressman Mark Foley in 2006 or Weiner where the impact of political blogs has been most noticeable, blogs also influenced the reporting by newspapers and television networks during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Iraq War from its beginning in 2003 to the present and the South Asian tsunami in 2004 (Farhi & Wiltz, 2005). Today, as the case of Weiner reaffirms, it is a given that the traditional news media will refer to the reporting or editorializing of political blogs (Messner & DiStaso, 2008). In the Weiner scandal, conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart on his BigGovernment.com

blog first reported that the former member of the House of Congress sent sexually suggestive photos to different women via Twitter. The traditional media picked it up, and the story dominated the cable and mainstream news cycle for almost 10 days in early June 2011 (CBS News, 2011). In this incident, as in countless others, the traditional media relied on political blogs as source and reminded theorists and lay observers alike how blogs have become powerful agenda-setters for the traditional media.

But it was the affair between President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky which eventually led to the president's impeachment that is generally considered to be the first incident in which blogs had a major impact on politics and the traditional news media (Bucy et al., 2007). In a study by Williams and Delli Carpini (2004), the publication of the scandal on the blog *The Drudge Report* was seen as the first breach in the dike of gate-keeping theory as developed by White (1950), in that, while the traditional news media (in the form of *Newsweek* magazine) acted as a gate-keeper in refusing to break the story, it was a blog that made the decision to report what were, at the time, only rumors. Soon the story was being picked up by the traditional media, which cited *The Drudge Report* as a source and which covered the scandal on a daily basis through the spring of 1999 (Yioutas & Segvic, 2003).

The Paradigm Shift in the News Media Industry

Seismic changes are shaking up U.S. newsrooms, changes brought about, in large part, by an explosion of new media technologies (Christians et al, 2009), which are enabling an unprecedented increase of "citizen-journalists" using ubiquitous, relatively inexpensive media production devices to report the news (Filloux, 2009). Specifically, social-media platforms such as Facebook and the popular micro-blogging service Twitter, among others, offer people ever-greater opportunities for instant information access and interaction. The power and impact of such platforms has been seen in the "Arab Spring" uprisings in such countries as Tunisia and Egypt, revolutions that were partially organized and widely publicized by witnesses and participants using interactive media devices and services (Kirkpatrick & Sanger, 2011). With the change in the news-media industry, the traditional producer/consumer relationship is no more; now, in the media's brave new world, it is the consumers of news who are empowered to create content and contribute news (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). A report from Oxford University's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism argues that the production order in the news industry has been turned upside down as the

user is now the producer of news (Kelly, 2009). Matters have changed so dramatically that the old producers—the newspapers and TV news operations—are now users, as today the mainstream media are in thrall to urging readers/viewers to let their views be known. Writing in 2009, Kelly insisted that henceforth the measure of the news product would be judged in part by its willingness and ability to empower users to contribute to, share and customize that product.

But citizen participation in and shaping of the news does not paint the entire picture. The changing environment has empowered people to create and share media contents, since the news media now encourage interaction by and contributions from their users (Boyd, 2007). The public is taking the initiative to create and produce news content, in essence circumventing the traditional press. Jay Rosen, New York University journalism professor, wrote that "the people formally known as the audience" now have the means to create and distribute media content that was previously the monopoly of the mainstream media due to their high cost (Rosen, 2006). Today, anyone with access to these means can "report the news" directly to the conversational communities on the social web (Bowman & Willis, 2003), and citizen journalists can challenge the news media's ownership of breaking news.

One of the most notable characteristics of the Internet media is interactivity: digital technologies empower users to actively participate in the communication process. While researchers differ on their definition of interactivity (Kioussis, 2002; Bucy, 2004), their explanations are based on the two-way nature of the communication stream.

With new media technologies providing information availability that differs from what television exclusively provided in an earlier era (Havick, 2000), changes are being seen not only in communication volume and availability but also in communication diversity, the last directly related to people's opportunities to choose media content congruent with their beliefs or interests. This phenomenon has been found to have a measurable, important impact on the political process by allowing the public to choose entertainment materials over news content (Prior, 2007) and to be selectively exposed to partisan messages (Stroud, 2006).

Challenges of the Agenda-Setting Theory in the Changed Media Landscape

As the media landscape in the United States, over the past two decades, has changed dramatically, the

relationship between the news media and the public is not as clean-cut as the agenda-setting theory, which was developed when people relied primarily on a few mainstream news-media choices to inform their understanding of issues (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001), historically held. Largely as a result of these technological changes, the abilities of the so-called mainstream media to influence an agenda for the general public is challenged and threatened by the ever-increasing array of information sources made available by developments in new communication technologies (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; McCombs, 1993).

Since the early 1970s, the agenda-setting theory has been used to explain how issues not only become news but how that news shapes public priorities. Even though the theory has been the bedrock of studies and hypotheses for nearly 40 years, researchers readily acknowledge its limitations and the challenges to its hegemony put forth by scholars. A key challenge lies in the belief that a common news agenda and a common public agenda are incompatible with the advent of Internet-based media (Brubaker, 2008).

Several developments have marked the distinction of the new media: more information is available; the information can be gathered, retrieved and disseminated with increased speed; consumers have more “control” of the media; media audiences are more atomized and as a result can be more easily targeted; the media in some ways have been decentralized; and there is more interactivity between senders and receivers of the media messages (Williams & Caprini, 2004). As a result of these changes, many are questioning the very basis of the agenda-setting theory, including its claim to setting the public agenda as it once did. The changing media landscape throws into question the ability, through repetition of coverage to increase the salience of issues in the public’s mind, of the media to set the public agenda. In addition, as Chafee and Metzger (2001) argued, “the key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about” (p. 375).

In the 1970s, when the agenda-setting model was set down, most Americans received their news from their local newspapers and the three network television news bulletins. Now, in what many see as the biggest threat to the agenda-setting theory, fragmentation of the audience, in the form of 24-hour cable stations and literally countless websites, the public can shape a news agenda of their preference and choosing.

In their 1972 study setting forth the agenda-setting theory, McCombs and Shaw noted a powerful link between voter attitudes and mainstream media coverage, adding that while news professionals may not tell people what to think, they tell them what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, the media environment 40 years ago included neither nationwide cable television nor the World Wide Web, which have come to be among the most influential media in today’s world. More specifically, one of McCombs and Shaw’s key assumptions can be seen as under direct challenge by the proliferation of these and other media: “For most, mass media provide the best—and only—easily available approximation of ever-changing political realities” (McCombs, 1972, p. 185).

While the two researchers’ Chapel Hill (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and Charlotte studies (Shaw and McCombs, 1977) investigated how exposure to the media may influence the public’s agenda, the reverse—how the public may alter the media’s agenda—was not investigated, a shortcoming that has led recent scholars to explore how the public may be influencing the media by means of such interactive media as blogs. Examining the agenda-setting impact of blogs (professional as well as amateur) on the mainstream press in the 2004 presidential campaign, Wallsten (2007) showed through time series analyses evidence that both types of blogs influenced issues covered in the *New York Times*.

The influence of “citizen journalists” is changing the agenda-setting process by forcing mainstream journalists to change the way they gather and measure the value of news. Researchers have noted how blogs and microblogs like Twitter have gained legitimacy as story sources in an impressively short span of time. As recently as 2008, in a poll by George

Washington University and media research company Cision of more than 12,000 journalists, it was shown that fully 90% of the respondents considered the Web as a whole to be a primary news source; 79% used blogs, to track responses to stories; and 50% were users of social media (Arno, 2009).

On the public-agenda side, agenda-setting scholars have used polls and surveys to assess the public agenda (McCombs & Bell, 1996) by asking for the respondents’ perceptions of the most important current issues or what issues respondents are most concerned about (McCombs & Bell, 1996). Today, the growth of the Internet has given researchers additional methods to determine the public agenda, by, for example, measuring the online public agenda by assessing

Internet users' commentary in online spaces (Lee, Lacendorder, & Lee, 2005).

In the traditional paradigm of agenda-setting theory, it was assumed that the traditional media played an offensive role, that coverage by them routinely puts an item on the public agenda. Today, however, the traditional media are often seen to be defensive in that they are forced to cover issues they might have ignored in the pre-Internet age (McLeary, 2007) because political blogs placed it on the agenda (Messner & DiStaso, 2008).

Simultaneously and somewhat counter intuitively, political blogs are broadening the traditional agenda-setting process by redistributing mainstream media content.

Occurring at any time during the news-accurring or production process, agenda setting can take place when journalists are identifying, choosing, and developing story ideas and when they are determining the value of using facts, sources and background research in a story (Len-Ríos et al., 2009).

Blogs are particularly important sources for journalists when covering breaking news, more or less so depending on the extent to which access to a news event may be restricted.

Three recent major events in which so-called alternative sources were influential include the coverage of Hurricane Katrina (Xie, 2007), the election protests in Iran, and the terror attack in Mumbai (Heald, 2009). Most recently Internet media played a major role in covering the protests in Arab countries. In Egypt, Facebook and Twitter played such a big role that the uprising against the deposed government of Mubarak has been called as "revolution 2.0." Often times coming seemingly out of nowhere, viral stories are nothing more than the buzz created by the media themselves, which allows the story or message to find a place on the agenda it might otherwise not have found. An enormously popular video of a car crash conducted by a police department in Wales to discourage texting went viral and as a result prompted a closer look such driving hazards (Clifford, 2009).

The news cycle, according to Messner and DiStaso (2008), has been altered by the arrival and dramatic growth of social media. Looking at the use of blogs as sources in the traditional media and the use of sources in blogs in general, combined with a content analysis of 2,059 articles over a six-year period from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Messner and

DiStaso (2008) found that the newspapers increasingly valued blogs as credible news sources.

Agenda Setting in the Internet Age

Even as the explosive growth and use of the Internet has reached into more and more lives, and scholarly concepts have been influenced by the "high-tech" explosion, so too has this trend, coupled with the public's diminished reliance on traditional media, affected the theory of agenda setting itself. The question being asked more and more is this: Is the agenda-setting process as relevant and applicable to the Internet as it is and was for traditional media?

The overriding trend in the 16 years since Dearing and Rogers published their comprehensive review of agenda-setting research (1996)—when, for example, Internet Explorer was less than a year old—is that the growth of the Internet has exponentially fragmented communicative power. Blogs and, more recently, microblogs are only one of the most recent manifestations of this trend. At the same time this decentralization has taken place, traditional media have embraced the web, with newspaper and broadcast stories no longer transitory, being, indeed, archived, indexed, and technologically able to receive links.

Until recently, researchers on agenda-setting and Internet media have for the most part defined for purposes of study Internet media as websites, bulletin boards or online discussion groups. These same scholars have come to realize that Internet media encompass much more, as publishing on the Internet has been simplified, and individuals can now easily put information online. As noted, blogs, in particular, have seen untold growth and popularity.

As they increase in popularity, blogs have garnered the attention of academics, although there is no consensus in the academy as to whether what bloggers are doing is journalism or not (Lasica, 2002; Andrews, 2003; Blood, 2003). On one side of the divide are researchers who believe that blogs, and online sources in general, offer credible information. Among online users themselves, Johnson and Kaye (2004) found that Internet information is seen as more credible than traditional media information. This conclusion was supported by the findings of Abdulla et al. (2005), who also measured the credibility of online information. Overall, the high credibility ratings for blogs have caused public relations practitioners, to name just one group of professionals, to give more attention to blogs (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006).

Today it is seen as a given that people will conduct Internet searches to gather information needed to deal with an issue (Spink & Cole, 2001), and millions upon millions of inquiries are processed daily by numerous Internet search engines (Spink & Ozmultu, 2002). Using Dearing and Rogers' definition of the public agenda as "the public's hierarchy of issues at a certain point in time" (1996, p. 40), one can conceive of Internet searches as a conceptualized form of public-agenda building in the sense that people carry out information searches in a hierarchical order of salience at a given moment, such as when they seek information that is salient to them but not information that is not or is less salient to them.

Other researchers also implied search terms as the Internet users' agendas in their studies when they tried to measure the relationship between traditional media coverage and users' search trends (Aikat & Frith, 2003; Frith & Aikat, 2003). They have done so in many ways, rather than propose that an overall agenda for something as limitless and ever-changing as the Internet can be constructed. In one group of studies, researchers investigated how agenda setting works on the Internet, linking Internet usage (Wanta & Cho, 2004) as well as the nature of the medium itself (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002) to factors that may shape or affect the agenda-setting process.

In examining the differences in the perceived importance of issues between audiences reading the print versions and those reading the online versions of three newspapers, Li (2003) found a high correlation between issues perceived as important by readers of the print versions and those deemed a high priority by the same newspapers' editors. On the other hand, there was no significant correlation when comparing issues perceived important by readers of the online versions and issues believed to be a high priority by the newspapers' editors. Li (2003) theorized that the difference could be the result of variations in the delivery of news and access patterns of user-readers.

In another study, Ku, Kaid and Pfau (2003) compared Internet and print media by investigating the impact of the campaign websites of the Democratic and Republican candidates in the 2000 U.S. presidential election. They found that the campaign agenda of candidate websites in turn mirrored the news agenda of the traditional media. Furthermore, a path analysis showed that the websites also directly established the public's agenda (Ku et al., 2003), with the researchers noting that though the applicable relationships between the candidates websites and the public's agenda could not be specified, there was nevertheless clear evidence

of the resemblance of the campaign websites' agenda to the public's agenda.

In studies on agenda setting and non-print media alone, Roberts, Wanta and Dwz (2002) studied the online versions of *The New York Times*, The Associated Press, Reuters and *Time* magazine. They compared the content of these online news sources with electronic bulletin-board discussions at AOL. The researchers selected four issues, immigration, healthcare, taxes and abortion, for content analysis, and the investigation found significant correlation between the four news sources and the bulletin board for all issues except abortion. The authors suggested that the lack of correlation for abortion might be the result of the controversial nature of the issue, leading the topic to be discussed regardless of media coverage. They theorized that online news media may set the agenda for online users, as the traditional media have set the agenda for the public.

Examining the role of the Internet in the agenda-setting process, Wanta and Cho (2004) compared data from telephone interviews (the public agenda) with traditional news coverage (the media agenda) and found that Internet use can both diminish and increase agenda-setting effects, as those who remain online for longer periods may be self-selecting their exposure to issues, therefore reducing the salience of the media agenda (Wanta & Cho, 2004), while, conversely, users who go online motivated by information-seeking are probably doing so in ways that reinforce the media agenda, thus enhancing the agenda-setting effect.

In one of two other studies, Tremayne and Schmitz Weiss (2005) carried out an experiment to find out whether the look of a news website can influence the transfer of issue salience to readers. Their study revealed no difference in the strength of the agenda-setting ability between a website with just headlines and one with the same website design but with headlines and a blurb. They also found contradictory evidence for the question of transfer of issue salience, as one of the two most featured stories on the faux-news website—the war in Iraq—showed greater issue salience in the headline-only version, while the other prominent story—gay marriage—demonstrated a stronger issue salience in the headline-and-blurb version.

In the other study, Schiffer (2006) investigated the relationship of news coverage of the Downing Street memo controversy and the "blogswarm"—passionate and constant coverage by blogs—occasioned by the memo and which lasted over 60 days. The secret memo, leaked in 2005, concerned Britain's

involvement in the Iraq war, with passages revealing that the Bush administration did not have an iron-clad case for the invasion of Iraq and had in fact massaged facts to justify the invasion (Schiffer, 2006). The “blogswarm” included ten leading blogs, the “blogswarm” at Daily Kos (a liberal group blog), five television channels and twenty-eight American newspapers, all of which were examined for coverage of the dispute. As part of his findings, Schiffer reported that in their news reporting, large newspapers and television news tended to be more influenced by official sources, with stories appearing at those times when statements by government officials were made. Op-ed pages of newspapers were more consistent in their coverage, with Schiffer suggesting that the non-stop coverage of the issue by the “blogswarm” could have affected op-ed columns of newspapers more than official government pronouncements did.

Conclusion

The advent of Internet media has popularized a hybrid media form that includes elements of participatory journalism (Lasica, 2003) and those of other communication models, such as the personal diary (Herring, Scheidt, Wright & Bonus, 2005). There is no “right way” to write, as some Internet media writers subscribe to the norms of traditional journalism (Fiedler, 2008) while others practice a form of journalism not tied to its traditions and norms (Lasica, 2003), and nearly two-thirds do not consider their writings to be a form of journalism at all (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

While journalists and Internet media writers are both inspired by a motive to tell a story, they are not necessarily inspired in the same manner. The essence of journalism, according to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), is a discipline of verification (p. 71), and the Society of Professional Journalists’ ethics code urges reporters to “test the accuracy of information from all sources” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2006). For Internet media writers, the approach to truth-telling is more in line with the “marketplace of ideas” notion described by John Milton: ideas are given a public airing before they have been fully vetted in the hope that truth will arise from the discussion that follows (Singer, 2003), a model characterized by Shirky (2003) as the process of “publish, then filter” rather than the traditional gate-keeping model of “filter, then publish.” The most popular manifestation of this model can be found at Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, which invites readers to edit and correct its entries after they have been posted. Journalists and Internet media writers display functional as well as normative

differences from each other. Blood (2002), in a pioneering handbook for bloggers, reported several differences between what bloggers do and what journalists do, including the tendency of most bloggers to engage in little direct reporting, employ no fact checkers, and answer to themselves, not to an editor or publisher, concluding that, “What [blogs] do is impossible for traditional journalism to reproduce, and what journalism does is impractical to do with a weblog” (2002, p. 19).

While accurate to a certain extent, Blood’s points, however, may be more relevant for personal journal-style blogs than for the top-tier blogs that receive thousands of “hits” on a daily basis. To make matters even more convoluted, the line between journalism and blogging has blurred now that many of the most-visited bloggers have adopted gate-keeping practices similar to those of mainstream news outlets (Haas, 2005). In Ugland and Henderson’s (2007) characterization, such bloggers are “second-level” journalists—that is, people who gather news on a regular, deliberate basis, even if they are not necessarily committed to all of the norms and values that have traditionally shaped the journalism ethos (p. 253).

Accordingly, such similarities between A-list political bloggers and traditional journalists could be expected to produce a likeness in the agendas of both media, and new studies on blogs and agenda setting have provided empirical support for such a thesis. For example, Lee’s (2007) content analysis of posts on eight political blogs and of news items in four mainstream news outlets between Labor Day and Election Day during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign showed that the issue agenda was noticeably consistent across the various media, with most correlations exceeding +.80. In addition, Metzgar (2007), using a blog search engine to compare the number of blog posts discussing immigration with the number of immigration-related stories appearing in major newspapers and on the television networks’ evening newscasts during a 179-day span, found a significant, though relatively weak, correlation of +.293 between blogs and newspapers, and a somewhat stronger correlation of +.453 between blogs and television news. Finally, Meraz (2009) compared the framing of three issues in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* with the framing of the identical issues in 18 political blogs across the ideological spectrum and found that the attribute agendas of the liberal and moderate blogs, although not those of the conservative blogs, were strongly correlated with the media’s attribute agendas.

Although showing that significant positive correlations exist between the agendas of Internet media writers and the traditional media is a requisite step in understanding how agenda setting works in the contemporary media environment, by themselves these correlations do not show that a given agenda determines or influences another, nor do the correlations help us learn how such agenda setting might work. “Blogs,” McCombs said (2005), “are part of the journalism landscape, but who sets whose agenda under what circumstances remains an open question” (p. 549).

Wallsten (2007) examined the question of directionality by investigating daily *New York Times* coverage and blog discussion of 35 issues during the 2004 presidential election campaign. His conclusion, based on time-series analysis, was that the agenda-setting relationship is “a high-speed, two-way street rather than a slow-moving, one-way road leading from media coverage to blog discussion or vice versa” (p. 567). He found that for some issues news coverage preceded blog discussion by one or more day, while for others bloggers led the way, even as, for still others, no correlation was found.

While Wallsten’s analysis of agenda setting as a “two-way street” is a critical insight, his study nevertheless seems to fuse events and issues, given that many of the 35 issues examined, such as “Mary Cheney,” “missing explosives,” and “Abu Ghraib,” might arguably be described as events, events and issues being, in Rogers and Dearing’s (1988) formulation “discrete happenings that are limited by space and time,” and matters “involving cumulative news coverage of a series of related events that fit together in a broad category,” respectively (p. 566). Agenda setting, as it has customarily been thought of, appears more focused on broader issues and more sustained effects than on whether writers blog about a given event shortly before or after traditional journalists (which might be partly a function of nothing more than different publication schedules and/or writing habits). As shown in the literature, strong correlations between the traditional news media and political blogs suggest an agenda-setting effect.

As the media landscape has and will continue to change, agenda-setting scholars should be prepared to

jettison certain basic beliefs, beginning with that the media and the audience are monolithic entities (Song, 2007). In addition, as an increase in user-generated content and citizen journalism reduces the distinction between producers and consumers of news, scholars and researchers should also be slow to categorize players into one group or the other. Finally subject to question is the concept of the public agenda itself, as it now may be more accurately conceived as the loci where atomized audiences’ many agendas overlap.

It can be safely said that agenda setting no longer involves a passive public content to have its agenda set but, rather, that the news media could both guide and be guided by the public. In an ever more mediated world, agenda-setting scholars must rely on inter-media agenda-setting research to learn more about the exchange between the news media and the public.

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