

News Coverage of Politics and Policies

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Trends in the Field

The coverage of politics, and more specifically policies or political issues, in news media has been abundantly studied by scholars of agenda setting (see for example, McCombs and Shaw, 1972, 1993; Baumgartner and Jones, 2010, 1991; Soroka, 1999; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2016; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2016; Baumgartner et al., 2006). Building on Walter Lippmann's (1957) argument of the media's ability to construct social realities in the public mind, **agenda setting** refers to the transfer of often covered topics in news media to its salience in the public agenda. McCombs and Shaw (1972) pioneered this field, surveying voters in North Carolina (USA) on the most important political issues and comparing these results to a media content analysis of nine local news media outlets. This finding has been coined the **first-level** agenda setting theory. Ever since the seminal study of McCombs and Shaw (1972), this finding has been replicated hundreds of times all across the world – ranging from other locations in the USA, to Europe, Asia, Latin America and Australia – for both election and non-election settings over a broad range of public issues and other aspects of political communication. Moreover, the agenda-setting theory has been extended from **objects of attention** to **attributes**, known as the **second-level** (McCombs, 1992; McCombs and Shaw, 1993; McCombs et al., 2014). From the second-level, it became apparent that “the media not only can be successful in telling us what to think about, they also can be successful in telling us how to think about it” (McCombs, 2005, p.546, emphasis in original). In the early 2010's, the theory extended with a **third-level** (Guo et al., 2012; Guo and McCombs, 2011). This level includes a network component to the theory. In this section, we will describe the state-of-the-art of agenda-setting theory for the coverage of politics, and especially policies and political issues in media in three trends. Thereafter, we discuss the most common used research designs (pp.5–8), and we conclude with the limitations and possible future directions of the field (pp.8–10).

As briefly mentioned above, over the 50 years of the existence of agenda setting theory, the original study of McCombs and Shaw (1972) has been **replicated and extended** many times. In this paragraph, the newest trends of these extensions are discussed. Nownes (2019) demonstrated that political issues are even more salient in the public minds when celebrities 'spotlight' the political issues. Additionally, following the discussion on whether there is 'news in soft news' (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2003; Reinemann et al., 2012), Boukes (2019) demonstrates that satire – a form of soft news – also carry out an agenda setting function. Agenda setting has also shown to impact the public's emotional state. Reporting crime news fuels fear among the public (Graziano and Percoco, 2017; Burscher et al., 2015), whereas partisan reports on economic news drives polarization (Anson, 2016), and reporting on violations of the campaign finance laws, as well as other political scandals drives anger (Gaskins et al., 2019). Besides, Liu et al. (2016) demonstrate for the environmental issue, that the media's reporting on issues influences the policy solutions that are brought up. Another 'new' issue that extends the coverage of politics using agenda setting theory is looking at demonstrations (for example, see Hutter and Vliegenthart, 2018). Jennings and Saunders (2019) argue that the agenda-setting power of protest must be understood in dynamic terms. Using a dataset covering 48 street demonstrations in nine countries, they flesh out that demonstrations increase media coverage of protest issues, yet this effect decays quickly over time. In other words, the time window for exerting pressure on the media agenda is short. Hellmeier et al. (2018), however, find the opposite for authoritarian regimes. The dynamic nature of agenda setting power not only holds for demonstrations, but also for post-referendum Brexit news coverage (Morrison, 2019; McLaren et al., 2018), for political parties (Maier et al., 2019), and for consumer confidence (Vliegenthart and Damstra, 2019). Next to these extensions, the theory has recently been replicated in developing democracies (Hughes and Mellado, 2016) – showing that after the reintroduction of elections in Chile, the media performs as agenda setters - as well as in local levels of politics, such as the German Federal elections (Bevan and Krewel, 2015).

Another trend in this field is to extend the **type of media data** from traditional print media to the online environment. The findings of the agenda setting theory have been replicated for Google Trends data (Kalmoe, 2017; Lee et al., 2016). Likewise, social media platforms have been studied. Combining Facebook data with web-tracking data (for an explanation of this design, see Common Research Designs and Results, pp.5-8) in Spain, Cardenal et al. (2019) demonstrate that the use of Facebook as a news referral has negative effects on the common public agenda, because it alters citizens' perceptions of the most important problems in the

country. This study thereby implies that the traditional (print) media's agenda setting power has been limited by social media platform, such as Facebook. Cardenal et al. (2019) alludes to the presence of populist leaders and populist messages being omnipresent at social media. Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés (2018) describe that European populist leaders using social media (i.e. Twitter) to influence saliency of topic of their (potential) electorate. Nevertheless, Feezell (2018) demonstrates experimental evidence that social media platforms as Facebook do have an agenda setting function, when participants are exposed to political information on Facebook. The work by Kruckeberg et al. (2018) lays out – in contrast to Cardenal et al. (2019) – that the traditional media and social media, looking at Twitter data, mutually influence each other when looking at political candidates. In a similar vein, the work by Banducci et al. (2018) also find considerable evidence of reciprocal media influence between television, newspapers and radio. A couple of years earlier, Conway et al. (2015) pioneered intra-media agenda setting using Twitter and traditional media, showing a symbiotic relationship between agendas in Twitter posts and traditional news. While traditional media follow candidates on certain topics, on others they are able to predict the political agenda on Twitter. The study of Su and Borah (2019), however, contradicts Cardenal et al. (2019); Kruckeberg et al. (2018); Banducci et al. (2018), and Conway et al. (2015) by illustrating that Twitter's agenda is similar to the public opinion: Both follow the (print) media agenda. Banducci et al. (2018) results, nonetheless, indicate that inter-media agenda setting on leaders is complex and contingent, and seems to turn in part on the familiarity of the party leaders and the extent to which media coverage of them has established tropes prior to the campaign.

A third trend that can be observed in this field is to investigate **how to get on the media agenda**, given their immense agenda setting power. Carrying out a content analysis of political parties' press releases and media reports in Austria using plagiarism software, Meyer et al. (2017) demonstrate that systemic media and party system agendas affect which issues make the news, while individual parties' issue strategies have limited autonomous impact. For the agenda setting theory, their finding implies that addressing issues that are important to the media and other parties help rank-and-file politicians and opposition parties, which lack the newsworthiness of their competitors in government. While Meyer et al. (2017) did not find any evidence that the media's selection of messages is driven by a party's issue profile or voters' issue concerns, Zoizner et al. (2017) found that the portrayal of the politicians does matter: Those who view themselves as a conduit of the public (delegates) are more responsive to the media than those acting on their own judgment (trustees). Also, in contrast to Meyer et al.

(2017), Maier et al. (2019) – using a different analysis technique – **show** that Austrian parties were able to steer the media agenda on EU related issues. The same dynamic has been **unfold** by Jansen et al. (2019) and van der Pas et al. (2017). Looking at other organizations than political parties, Grömping (2019) demonstrates that first of all, the media institutions determine the room **for** manoeuvre, which is similar to the findings of Meyer et al. (2017), and second, Grömping (2019) shows that for human rights organizations individual strategies matter for their media attention, and thereby agenda setting power – i.e. in contrast to Meyer et al. (2017). This mixed bag of findings could be explained by the findings of Walgrave et al. (2017). The authors find evidence that the influence of media attention on political attention is non-linear: Agenda-setting operates differently when the media are in storm mode.

Common Research Designs and Results

There has been a wide variety of research designs when it comes to analyzing political content and policies. They all start with the important task of identifying content as political: This either implies taking content that is inherently political due to the sources producing it or identifying part of content as political and other as non-political. The first contains documents drawn up by parties and politicians such as party manifestos and other policy documents. The second is mostly related to news and social media content which is not inherently political but can exert an important influence on variables such as political knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

Party manifestos and policy documents

This strand of research is aimed at identifying policy positions and ordering parties on various scales such as left-right. This can be done either by manual or automated content analysis or by using expert surveys. When it comes to manual content analysis, one of the most influential sources is the Manifesto Project (following the Manifesto Research group and the Comparative Manifestos Project). They specifically aim at using quantitative content analysis to analyze party manifestos all over Europe and have been doing so for the past decades (Merz et al., 2016). There has been some discussion regarding whether content analysis of party manifestos leads to results comparable to expert surveys, showing some differences (Benoit and Laver, 2007).

Going even further from there, many scholars have proposed various (semi-) automated techniques for identifying policy positions, such as the wordscores approach (Laver et al., 2003; Klemmensen et al., 2007) relying on reference texts for placing political positions or by using

scales based on the logarithm of odds-ratios (Lowe et al., 2011). However, in an overview of using automatic content analysis for political texts, Grimmer and Stewart (2013) also stress that those approaches are prone to conflating stylistic differences with ideological language, creating room for misinterpretation and thus require careful preprocessing of texts.

Political news content

Apart from analyzing content directly produced by political actors, another challenge lies in identifying political content in other domains, such as news. Here, the first question is to (1) identify political content in news as opposed to other content and (2) how to do this in a (semi-)automated way.

The first point is related to mostly theoretical considerations about what constitutes as political and can be part of creating manual codebooks as well as coding scripts and writing classifiers. One discussion that has been going on since Tuchman (1972) is a distinction between so-called "soft news" and "hard news" to distinguish politically relevant from less relevant content. In their literature review on the soft/hard news distinction (Reinemann et al., 2012) propose that for identifying "harder news" (which is usually associated with political information) three dimensions are needed: topic, focus, and style dimension (p. 232). This stresses that identifying political news content might not only be about the topic (is it political or entertainment content) but also a matter of framing and reporting style.

The second question regarding (semi-)automation especially becomes more of an issue in a time where content is constantly produced at scale. One example of using a mix of manual and automated content analysis in a supervised machine learning approach to identify different policy issues as well as frames in news content is Burscher et al. (2015), who annotated a large dataset manually to train a classifier on it that can be applied to other datasets and time contexts. Wiedemann (2019) proposed to use active learning for those approaches to reduce the amount of manual coding needed while not compromising the quality of results.

When having identified political content, the focus of research is often to identify **parties and their positions** in the news. This strand of research is mostly aiming at questions related to **visibility** of actors and topics and is related to **agenda setting** research. Another focus is also put on identifying different **perspectives** or **frames** on issues (Borah, 2011). Within this complex of questions, often normative considerations play a role, evaluating whether the news media are "balanced" or "biased" regarding certain actors, topics, or perspectives. This ties in with different

understandings of diversity in news media (McQuail, 1992; Bozdag and van den Hoven, 2015; Möller et al., 2018).

Effects of political (news) content

One core question when studying political content in news media is to not only examine what is in the media (focus of content analytical methods) but also what **influence** it has on people. In order to do this, one very important question is finding out what content people were exposed to since only that can have a possible influence on variables such as **attitudes, knowledge, or behavior**.

The standard approach for judging the effect of (political, news) media content on political variables was survey research – using **self-reported media usage** as independent variable. This implies that simply the amount and type (newspaper, television) of media usage is the crucial factor for media effects. However, this approach has been questioned early on as being only a mere proxy for the influence of the content and failing to account for individual-level differences (Price and Zaller, 1993). Additionally, while being a feasible approach in a media environment with limited choices, the diversifying supply of content over the last decades further decreased the usability of this methodological approach.

Thus, it was quickly replaced by so-called **linkage analyses**, used in political communication starting in the 1990's (see e.g. Kleinnijenhuis, 1991; Roessler, 1999): Combining survey data with more detailed content analysis. This involved having (more or less detailed) self-reported media use of outlets and frequency of usage, combining it with the content in the respective sources during the researched time period. This already allowed to better model individual consumption of political content and remains until today the standard approach for measuring effect of political media content on various outcome variables (Fazekas and Larsen, 2016; Schuck et al., 2016; Takens et al., 2015).

However, as stressed in a recent meta-analysis Scharkow (2019) the reliability of self-reports has to be seen as rather problematic. Especially in a fast-paced, ever-changing (online) media environment, getting reliable and valid media exposure data remains a challenge. An important methodological development for this is the usage of **online trace data** (e.g. browsing histories, donated data takeouts from social media accounts) with a subsequent content analysis of the collected content (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2016) or the usage of ad-hoc mobile surveys (Ohme et al., 2016).

Limitations of the Method & Future Direction of the Field

The core concepts of agenda-setting theory are an object agenda, attribute agenda, and the transfer of salience between pairs of agendas. Especially the latter core – the transfer of salience between the pairs of agenda – has received attention recently, when the focus on causality in, especially, the field of politics, strengthened. Sevenans (2018b) notes that there is no consensus on the exact role these media play in the agenda-setting process. This in turn leads to diverse causal interpretations of the media's role in the central theory of agenda setting. Sevenans (2018b) identifies three controversies that make a causal claim that media attention leads to their importance on the agenda difficult. She fleshes out the potential risk of spurious relationships, possible endogeneity problems, and the lack of an integrated theory explaining why the media influence agendas.

For the latter issue, Sevenans (2018a) takes stock and shows that a piece of information gets more attention from politicians when it comes via the media rather than an identical piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This effect occurs largely across the board: it is not dependent on individual politician characteristics. Alluding to the same problem of lack of understanding of the media's role, Shpaizman (2020) notices that non-decisions are excluded in each study. Non-decisions refer to the pre-decisional process whereby some issues are systematically blocked by powerful actors from being placed on the formal agenda. Without looking at these, Shpaizman (2020) argues that scholars have been looking at a biased sample to test their theory.

The first two limitations hampering causal interpretation in the agenda setting theory – i.e. spurious relationships and/or possible endogeneity – as identified by Sevenans (2018b), could be the reason why some scholars have reported the media influences on mass opinion and behavior to be much weaker than commonly assumed (Newton, 2019). More specifically, Sciarini and Tresch (2019) show that the media's influence on the issue salience among the public mainly holds for domestic issues, not so much for Europeanised issues. This might be because people could either respond to the real-world events, about which the media also provides coverage, or entering the 'post-truth society', the (mainstream) media, might have lost (parts of) its legitimacy (Guess et al., 2020; Lischka, 2019).

Issue salience, the central focus in the accumulated research on agenda setting to date, has been operationally defined in a variety of ways on both the media agenda and the public agenda (McCombs, 2005). The development of new methods, as well as the availability of new types of data, have created an opportunity for scholars interested in the interaction between the media,

politics, and the public. Techniques like digital-tracking data (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2016; Cardenal et al., 2019) or the usage of ad-hoc mobile surveys (Ohme et al., 2016) allow researchers to rely on other measures than the self-reports. This is an important development, as Scharkow (2019) show that the reliability of self-reports is rather problematic in terms of reliability and accuracy of the measure. Such new insight that these new data could bring, could also lead to further develop a theory on the exact role these media play in the agenda-setting process, for which Sevenans (2018b) has made a start.

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