Jessica T. Feezell: Agenda Setting through Social Media: the Importance of Incidental News Exposure and Social Filtering in the Digital Era

**Author's Biography:**

Jessica Feezell earned her BA from the University of Oregon (2000) and her PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Santa Barbara (2008). Now she is an assistant professor of Political Science at the University of New Mexico where she teaches American politics and political communication. Her research draws on scholarship in political behavior, media effects, social media & information technology, and public policy. She is co-author of the Politics of Energy Crises (2006) published by Oxford University Press.

**Main Argument**

Audience fragmentation and information selectivity made possible by today's digital technologies limit the mass media's ability to set public agenda. The author, by conducting a longitudinal online experiment, argues that incidental exposure to political information enabled by opinion leaders in personal network on the social media can help the mass media set the public agenda, and this effect is the strongest among those with a low interest in political news.

**Key Points for Discussion**

1). Two-step flow of communication through social media
"The digital sharing of political information, therefore, is similar to the two-step flow of communication….: **mass media produce information, opinion leaders share it by posting links on social media, and less attentive citizens enjoy low-cost information shared by the opinion leaders in their social networks**. In this way, social media platforms may help to disseminate the mass media agenda to a broader audience…" (p. 4)

*Questions*:
"Two-step flow of communication" was described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) as the process wherein political information is filtered to receivers through the opinion leaders in their **personal** network.

● Do you think it appropriate for the author to apply this model proposed in 1950s to today's social media era? Are there any differences between opinion leaders back then and today's online opinion leaders? Are today's online opinion leaders more influential than opinion leaders in the past or not?

2). Incidental exposure

"The **social sharing of information** through social media might help to offset some of the consequences of **audience fragmentation**, and **informational selectivity** in particular, and therefore help to distribute the mass media agenda to the broader public…through i**ncidental exposure**." (p.2)

"Subsequently, social media present a unique environment where people with low levels of political interest and high uncertainty regularly encounter incidental political information." (p. 4)

*Questions*:
Incidental exposure is key if the two-step communication flow is to take effect on social media (because otherwise those who are not interested in politics can avoid political information):

- In terms of personal experiences, do you think the effect of incidental exposure is significant enough to offset some of the consequences of audience fragmentation (coupled with algorithms that create "filter bubbles" which limit information exposure based on past searches and interests) and information selectivity?
- Do you regard participants' checking administrators' Facebook updates as "incidental" or not? Is it possible that participants felt obliged to do so because they signed for the study? If so, do you think this negatively impacts the experiment design?

3). Flaws of this study
The author thinks the differences in the changed percentages (see Figure 1) are only duo to the fact that the two groups (treatment and control) receive different news items. However, it's possible that those in treatment groups read local newspapers or watch local or national news programs on TV every day, through which they received the information about the four pieces of political news shared by the administrator. Do you consider this as a flaw in this study?

Do you think there are other flaws in the design of the current study? Can you enumerate some, if any, of them?

### In relation to *The end of framing as we know it…and the future of media effects*

"Emphasis framing" has some overlaps with agenda-setting, because studies from this perspective often manipulates "*what* an audience receives rather than *how* equivalent information is presented" (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Lyengar, 2016, p. 10). The three authors proposed a narrower conceptual definition of framing. If equivalence framing won't have much to do with the concept of agenda setting.