

Framing and Agenda Setting: Media Effects on Gun Violence in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses agenda setting and framing theories to explain how media influences audience perceptions of gun control, public opinion and behavior. Using the hypothesis of agenda theory, this paper explains how agenda setting raises issue salience among audience and its impact on behaviors at personal and social levels. Drawing from McCombs and Guo's (2014) idea of second level or attribute agenda setting, the author highlight the potential effects that can be seen if the media covers specific attributes of an issue.

Keywords: media, framing, gun control, audience, social levels

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper uses agenda setting and framing theories to explain how media influences audience perceptions of gun control, public opinion and behavior. Using the hypothesis of agenda theory, this paper explains how agenda setting raises issue salience among audience and its impact on behaviors at personal and social levels. Drawing from McCombs and Guo's (2014) idea of second level or attribute agenda setting, the author highlight the potential effects that can be seen if the media covers specific attributes of an issue. This phenomenon is also known as emphasis framing and is further explained in this paper with respect to the gun control issue (Cacciatore et. al., 2017). It is important to discuss the effect of emphasis framing because manipulating content to hide or highlight a certain attribute of the issue can impact the ways in which the audience perceives issue of gun control. Finally, the paper describes how accessibility (resulting from agenda setting) and applicability (part of framing theory) influence perceptions and behaviors towards an issue. The concept frame building and frame setting is also explained to support applicability hypothesis and its influence on perceived public opinion.

II. AGENDA SETTING AND ISSUE SALIENCE

According to McCombs and Guo (2014, p. 251), media agenda-setting is the transference of issue salience from media's agenda to public's agenda. Meaning that, if the media gives considerable amount of coverage to gun control and discusses it frequently, the issue will gain salience among the audience. To put it in McCombs words, media's agenda of gun control and its importance in discussion will set the public or audience agenda. This means that the member of the public will think of gun control as an important issue that needs to be thought about or discussed socially with friends or colleagues. First level of agenda setting effect transmits issue salience from the media to the public that also results in widespread exposure (McCombs and Guo, 2014, p. 253), often selective, where the public is more likely to seek additional information about the issue. In this case, audience will be more likely to seek information about gun control, motivations of activists for supporting this cause, social and political implications, etc.

Another level of agenda setting effects could be behavioral changes among individuals after the transmission of issue salience. In this case, individuals who consume media focusing on gun control may show behavioral changes if this issue has more emotional, personal or social relevance to them (McCombs and Guo, 2014, p. 263). For example, an individual who is moved by footage of gun violence will have increased emotional relevance and will consider gun control as an important issue. Similarly, individuals who have been personally affected by gun violence (victim's were their friends or acquaintances) or those who feel it their duty to do something about the issue due to peer influences will show increased relevance for gun control. Such individuals will develop perceptions about the issue based on its relevance to them and may express their opinions about the issue, show support for gun control policies, or favor politicians who talk about gun control in electoral campaigns or during voting.

III. ATTRIBUTE AGENDA SETTING OR EMPHASIS FRAMING

The second level of agenda setting is also known as attribute agenda setting where features of the issue are given more coverage or appear more often in the media and hence get more importance in the public agenda (McCombs and Guo, 2014, p. 254). This by definition is emphasis framing or as Cacciatore et. al. (2017, p. 8) put it “framing that involves manipulating the content of a communication.” In the case of gun control issue, I would like to highlight two attributes that have been given a lot of salience in media coverage but are not necessarily mutually inclusive in discussions: defensive gun use and gun violence/crimes.



For example, conservative or right-leaning news channels will give more salience to the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution and the right to bear arms for defensive uses without focusing on the repercussions of lack of gun control. The audience viewing these channels will give more salience to the right to bear arms and defensive gun use. They may also see gun control as a means of taking away an individual's freedom to protect themselves. On the other hand, channels that are more liberal will give a lot of coverage to gun crimes, the motivations behind them and liberal politician's appeal for gun control. However, they don't necessarily talk about the ease of buying semi-automatic guns or gun show purchases along with their implications (where the problem stems from). Audience watching these liberal news channels may feel inclined to support gun control policies but they may not be informed where the problem stems from. Some of the audience may seek out additional information as a result of high personal, emotional or social relevance of the issue. On the flip side, audience members who are novices to the issue may be easily manipulated and polarized into favoring politicians supporting gun control during elections for political benefit.

IV. ACCESSIBILITY

This brings our attention to accessibility, defined by Tewksbury & Scheufele (2019, p. 58) as increased salience of an issue after repeated exposure to the media. Accessibility can be a common effect of agenda setting and framing (Cacciatore et. al., 2017, p. 13) and can be used to explain the influence of media on perceptions and behaviors related to gun control. We have established that attribute agenda setting or emphasis framing of gun control can increase the salience of this issue among the audience. The cues given by the media while covering these issues (from above example: Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, right to bear arms, gun violence, gun control policy, gun regulation, etc.) will be stored in the memory schemas of the audience (McCombs and Guo, 2014, p. 257). Whenever the issue will be discussed in social groups or media programs, the audience will use these cues stored in the schema related to the gun control issue to perceive the information and share their opinions about gun control.

For example, audience who have stored cues like gun violence, gun regulation or gun control policy, when exposed to gun crime reports on TV, public debates about gun control or political campaigns regarding the same will be more likely to show support for gun control, depending on the relevance they give to the issue and their personal beliefs. On the other hand, audience who received cues like Second Amendment to the United States Constitution and the right to bear arms are more likely to deny that gun violence is caused due to lack of gun control, depending on their beliefs and value system. Such audiences are also less likely to support gun control policies or politicians who champion this cause.

V. APPLICABILITY, FRAME BUILDING AND FRAME SETTING

Applicability is the link between issue showed in the media and the meaning perceived by the audience (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019, p. 58). Journalists are also members of the audience in terms of receiving and interpreting information about issues like gun control before they report on these issues. Here I want to draw attention to the frame building procedures since what journalists report influences the audience and vice versa (Scheufele, 1999). Journalists observe what is being discussed in the public sphere and among the political leaders based on the current national issues. They report these issues as influenced by their own ideologies, attitudes and organizational pressures (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019, p.56). The process is known as frame building and the frames are called media frames (Scheufele, 1999). In case of gun violence, journalists will gather their information from events, public and political discussions to report about the issue. However, the channel for which they are covering the issue will influence the resulting frames. For example, a journalist reporting for Fox News will be pressured to follow the conservative norms and focus less on gun violence or gun crimes, and divert attention to other aspects of the issue. While a reporter from CNN will be expected to be more liberal in their coverage stressing on the importance of gun control and giving more coverage to politicians who speak in favor of it.

Frame setting is when the audience is exposed to the frame and perceives it using their knowledge, ideas and values. This process is also known as individual-level of framing (Scheufele, 1999). For example, individuals who are conservative and believe in the freedom of bearing arms are more likely to disregard the frames set by CNN and more likely to accept the frames set by Fox News, support right to possess guns for safety and politicians who are in favor of the Second Amendment. On the other hand, individuals with liberal values are more likely to refute the frames set by Fox News and more likely to show support for frames set by CNN, gun control policies and politicians who are in favor of gun regulation. The audience members have elites representing the society, who are more vocal about their opinions and share their views on issues like gun control. The journalists then pick up these opinions for building frame around gun control.

VI. DISCUSSION

This essay emphasizes the application of framing and agenda setting theory to understand how media influences audience perception of issue, perceived public opinion and behaviors that led to social interactions and policy support. Gun control is a good case study to understand the application of these two theories and highlights the ways in which media transmits issue salience and frames issues that influence response of the audience. Applicability also helps us understand how the audience uses their own knowledge and values to interpret media frames that may result in behavioral changes.

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