Problems and Opportunities in Agenda-Setting Research

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Research and theory on the media treatment and popularization of important social issues have many long traditions. The largest of these, agenda setting, has made its way over the years into newsrooms and think-tank analyses of public policy debates. And when the general public thinks about media effects, it almost always thinks of agenda setting. Unfortunately, these popular conceptions often characterize agenda setting as something of an iron law rather than the subtle, highly contingent effect that years of careful research has shown it to be.

During its first 25 years, the agenda-setting literature has grown to include more than 200 separate articles and more than a dozen books dealing specifically with this topic (Rogers, Dearing, & Bregman, 1993). The heuristic value of the agenda-setting perspective is undeniable, but heuristic value is not the only standard by which we judge the accomplishments of scientists. Agenda setting's key proponents have worked hard to expand its boundaries and scope, struggling valiantly to overcome the underspecified and constrained stimulus-response approach to media effects contained in agenda setting's original conceptualization. Researchers have amassed a large body of empirical generalizations, but they have had trouble developing the ties to clear theories of society, news work, and human psychology that would allow the perspective to become truly useful as a theory accounting for issue evolution in society. Fortunately, scholars have made some progress on these fronts, albeit sometimes from outside of the field, and sometimes by shaking up our normal scientific approach. What follows is an attempt to describe in broad terms the state of research in this area, to define the key problems, and to suggest a variety of alternative perspectives that, if given the chance, will enrich the study of this topic domain.

Defining Agenda Setting

This essay considers agenda setting in its most broad form—what Rogers and Dearing (1988) called the "agenda-setting process" (p. 556). This process has three subareas.

First is the *public agenda-setting* literature indigenous to mass communication, which takes as its starting point the original McCombs and Shaw (1972) article. Public agenda setting deals with the link between issues as portrayed in mass media content and the issue priorities of the public. Although this literature was originally the work of scholars in schools or departments of journalism and mass communication, or research institutes so affiliated, it also has a long history of involvement by scholars from sociology and political science, and recently from political psychology.

Second is what Rogers and Dearing (1988) define as *policy agenda-setting* work, literature growing out of institutional analysis perspectives in political science. Policy agenda-setting studies are those making their dependent variables the issue agenda of public bodies or elected officials, or those focusing on issues in the legislative arena and their connections to media content or procedures. Until relatively recently, this work has had little meaningful impact on the work of the public agenda-setting scholars.

Third is the *media agenda-setting* literature, which examines the antecedents of media content relating to issue definition, selection, and emphasis. This work grows largely out of sociology but has other sources as well, including political science and mass communication. This area also has been treated as largely irrelevant to the public agenda-setting work, with certain exceptions (e.g., Lang & Lang, 1983; Reese, 1991; Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991; Shoemaker, 1989).

This essay deals with all three subareas, reflecting the view that each part of the process is incomplete and somewhat unsatisfying by itself, but that by combining all three perspectives, the field can come closer to what a solid contemporary model of media influence ought to be. Some scholars (McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991; McLeod, Kosicki, & Rucinski, 1988) argue that by considering the antecedents of media content we might be able to provide insight that will broaden the study of media effects by putting findings in political and social contexts. Such "horizontalizing" of media models might also help researchers and students see connections more clearly among sources, journalists, public and policy. Furthermore, agenda-setting scholars, particularly McCombs (1981, 1992) McCombs and Gilbert (1986), and Protess and McCombs (1991) suggest strongly that such a broad look is appropriate to encompass the "metaphor" of agenda setting.

There is another, more pragmatic, issue that confronts anyone writing about agenda setting: Coming to grips with the totality of what has been written about agenda setting is an exceedingly complex task. As in many

areas of mass communication research, work relevant to this topic is spread out not only over many journals within the field, but also over journals in several adjacent academic fields, such as political science, public policy, sociology, psychology, and social psychology. While this generally reflects the interdisciplinary nature of mass communication, it is especially true of agenda setting, since its subject matter crosses the boundaries of a number of fields. Typically, literature finding its way into this tradition uses the catchphrase *agenda setting* in some fashion; often, but not always, it cites the stream of literature following McCombs and Shaw (1972). Books and monographs are harder to trace, since relevant work may never even reference other agenda-setting work, or do so only in a tangential manner (see Nelson, 1984; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). The literature that bears on the construction and popularization of public issues is even more difficult to trace. Typically, it is not cited as part of the formal agenda-setting canon (e.g., Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Kaniss, 1991).

One final definitional issue needs to be addressed, and that relates to the overall scope of agenda setting. Although there is much informal writing and loose talk describing agenda setting as a hypothesis, empirical generalization, concept, metaphor, or even a full-fledged theory, it seems best to refer to agenda setting as a model of media effects. *Model*, as used by McQuail and Windahl (1981), is a more modest and limited term than *theory*, and it seems to capture the essential characteristics of the perspective. As used here, the term *model* suggests that agenda setting is one type of complex media effects hypothesis linking media production, content, and audience effects. It is distinguished from other types of effects by its characteristics, described in more detail below. The implication of this assertion is that agenda setting is one particular type of media effects hypothesis that suggests a relationship between media coverage of topics and the salience of those topics. As McCombs (1981) noted, it can be specified at both macro and micro levels, and studied as a single issue or as a set of issues. Some researchers closely associated with agenda setting have examined broader topics such as agendas of candidate attributes, agenda of candidates, and the place of the political world on an agenda of personal concerns. Their studies seem to share with the agenda-setting model their authorship and a reliance on the rank-order linking mechanism employed in the basic agenda-setting model.[1]

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[1] Everything that researchers have associated with agenda setting is not necessarily agenda setting. For example, Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981) studied an agenda of candidates, an agenda of candidate attributes, and the larger personal agendas of which politics and the political world was just one item. Benton and Frazier (1976) incorporate an agenda-setting study with other hypotheses dealing with knowledge gain and media effects on causal attributions. Some attempts at "extending" the basic agenda-setting hypothesis cloud the clear central direction of agenda setting. As noted by Becker (1991), it is possible to extend the agenda-setting "metaphor" to such an extent that the essential meaning is lost and only confusion remains.

Agenda Setting and Media Effects Research

Media effects research has been a creature of its temporal and intellectual surroundings. As a "late-emerging" social science field (McLeod & Reeves, 1980), it had several powerful advantages besides the compelling nature of the subject itself. These included the diverse talents and training of its founders, as well as their connections with more established disciplines (see Rogers & Chaffee, 1992). Many talented individuals representing a variety of disciplines and backgrounds brought their skills and ideas to this hybrid field. This seemed to almost guarantee that the emerging field would be generally in concert with the trendy ideas and methods of its time, albeit frequently with some time lag. Agenda-setting research has a history worth recounting as the product of a unique place and time. Various ideas, methods, and orientations to the field came together at a particular moment, and the result has gained widespread notice, changing the entire development of the discipline in certain ways. Two forces played a seminal role in this change: the rejection of persuasion as a central organizing paradigm, and the rediscovery of a powerful effects model.

The Rejection of Persuasion
For much of the century, media research in America has concentrated on media effects, with a focus on some form of attitude change, or persuasion. There are other accounts of this history (e.g., Becker, McCombs, & McLeod, 1975; Delia, 1987), but they do not need to be repeated here. By the late 1960s, the field of mass communication was ready for a major shake-up. Decades of research into persuasive effects on attitudes and behaviors had left many scholars frustrated. Attitudes were not clearly connected to behavior, and media were not clearly and consistently connected to either. Agenda setting, in popularizing the summary statement about media not telling voters what to think but what to think about, clearly rejected persuasion as the central organizing paradigm. But, while agenda setting was influenced by the "cognitive" paradigm emerging at that time, only recently has this been a clear and consistent focus of agenda-setting research.

The Rediscovery of Powerful Effects
It is also evident that at the time of the agenda-setting breakthrough the field was eagerly seeking a way to break out of the limited-effects paradigm established by the Columbia research program (Klapper, 1960). Agenda setting, with its apparently simple, easy-to-explain, and intuitively appealing hypothesis, seemed right for the time. On its face it is a rejection of persuasion, a "reframing" of the basic research question from "telling people what to think" to "telling them what to think about" (Cohen, 1963). This seemingly small, but clever, twist of phrase focuses attention away from persuasion and onto something new. The freshness

of the model has obvious appeal. It signals not only a move away from persuasion toward other cognitive factors (e.g., Becker & Kosicki, 1991), but a move toward a particular kind of cognitive factor: an agenda of issues.

Characteristics of Agenda-Setting Studies

The agenda-setting literature is immense, encompassing everything from book-length works dealing with microlevel analysis of individual issues using experimental and survey data (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) to case studies of local samples using rank-order correlations on a handful of issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Several characteristics of the agenda-setting model set it off from others.

First, it deals with the importance or salience of public issues. This seems to be the heart of the enterprise, so much so that researchers seem to have considerable difficulty even formulating multiple measures of the dependent variable.

Second, these topics are almost universally constructed by the researcher, not the audience. It is not surprising then, that agenda-setting research has followed the intellectual legacy of public opinion polling. One of McCombs and Shaw's (1972) principal accomplishments was to legitimize and popularize the notion of a public issue as a rather broad, abstract, content-free topic domain, devoid of controversy or contending forces. Issue topics such as the economy, trust in government, and the environment are typical in agenda setting. Indeed, this conception of public issues is one of the signatures of the public agenda-setting approach.[2] Unfortunately, it also may be one of the model's major flaws (e.g., Swanson, 1988; Weiss, 1992; see also Greendale & Fredin, 1977). Swanson and Weiss argue that the content-free nature of the issues making up the agenda is too sterile to allow for thorough inquiry into the nature and evolution of controversial issues as treated by media.

Third, agenda-setting studies have a twin focus on media content and audience perception. Agenda setting is one of the few media effects mod-

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[2] There are exceptions to this, at least in terms of the goals articulated by agenda-setting researchers. Indeed, McCombs (1981) has noted that "in addition to providing cues about the salience of topics—objects, if you will—the mass media differentiate between the saliency of various attributes of these topics or objects" (p. 134). McCombs (1992, pp. 8–9) makes a similar claim:

> *Agenda-setting is about more than issue or object salience. The news not only tells us what to think about; it also tells us how to think about it. Both the selection of topics for the news agenda and the selection of frames for stories about those topics are powerful agenda-setting roles and awesome ethical responsibilities.*

Studying these attributes of the topics is another matter and has not often enough been explored by agenda-setting scholars.

els to explicitly prescribe a particular way of dealing with media content. Basically, it says that the amount of space or time devoted to particular issues should be measured, and that this measurement should relate to either the amount of attention people pay to issues or to their judgments of the issues' importance. This connection is an important strength that has sustained agenda setting over the years, and with appropriate modifications and refinements, will likely sustain it in the future as well. Too often in the media effects tradition, content is insufficiently theorized and accounted for, or measured in a relatively superficial manner. While agenda setting needs refinements in this area, scholars readily recognize that such work is necessary.

Fourth, agenda setting is characterized by some desire to deal with a range of issues rank-ordered into an agenda, although sometimes only the rise and fall of a single issue is considered. Finally, agenda setting is proposed as an effect of specific media content or trends in that content, not a general effect of watching television or reading newspapers or newsmagazines.

The Ambiguity of Public Agenda Setting
On almost every other dimension for categorizing media effects, public agenda setting is somewhat ambiguous. It defies easy categorization. To illustrate this point, let us consider briefly a classification scheme for media effects proposed by McLeod and Reeves (1980).

Micro measurement vs. macro. Agenda setting began as a model to explain the correspondence between aggregate-level media and public opinion data among independent voters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and to account for shifts in aggregate-level opinion rankings (see Tankard, 1990). But before long it was broadened to the individual level, where critics thought it should have been all along (Becker, 1982; McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974). McCombs (1981) has actually conceptualized four types of agenda setting based on whether a single issue or set of issues is considered, and whether aggregate- or individual-level data are employed. So agenda setting is apparently meant to be *both* macro and micro. However, Becker (1982; 1991), a proponent of the microlevel model, outlines the case against the macro view (see also McLeod et al., 1974).

Direct measurement vs. conditional measurement. Media effects are not equally probable for everyone, and much of the work done in recent years has gone into studying the conditions under which effects are more or less likely (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 1982; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, in press; McLeod et al., 1991; Schoenbach, 1992). Agenda setting has undergone something of a transformation on this dimension. The earliest studies treated effects as direct, both conceptually and empirically. The aggregate-data approach of McCombs and Shaw (1972) did not deal readily with contingent conditions. Almost immediately thereafter, studies began to suggest limits to effects grounded in such variables as partisan-

ship, political interest, and amount of newspaper use (McLeod et al., 1974). Later studies investigated a number of conditional variables at the micro level. These included need for orientation (e.g., Weaver, 1977), perceived source credibility, type of message, personalization (Iyengar & Kinder, 1985), and others (e.g., Weaver, 1987). At the macro level, scholars have studied factors such as media competition, degree of professionalization, political and social beliefs of news workers, characteristics of the political system, and others (Blumler, 1983; Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991; Siune, 1983). If all the mediating, conditional, and contributory variables used by media effects researchers (e.g., McLeod et al., 1991) are also available to those working in agenda setting, it is fair to say that this aspect of agenda setting has only begun to be investigated systematically.

Attitudinal measurement vs. behavioral measurement. Agenda setting comes out of a period when there was general dissatisfaction with the state of attitude research, and thus specifically rejects attitude research in favor of a more information-based, or cognitive, approach. Although agenda setting might be enhanced by broadening its focus to include more behavioral measures as dependent variables, relatively little progress has been made in this effort, with certain exceptions (e.g., Becker, 1977; Kepplinger & Roth, 1979; Roberts, 1992).

Alteration measurement vs. stabilization. Agenda setting is a distinctly causal hypothesis, suggesting that media treatment of issues causes changes in public opinion or behavior. Researchers studying agenda setting tend to discuss it as a dynamic process, focusing on the continuous fluctuation of media agendas, and their subsequent impact on audience agendas. However, there are some conceptual concerns with this causal hypothesis.

A major problem is that often conceptual and operational definitions do not match, causing ambiguity in the meaning of many of the agenda-setting results. While most of the language used by agenda-setting authors discusses an active, constructive approach to issues, it is normally studied with rather static notions of the issue agenda.

There are also methodological concerns. The most common types of studies seem to be one-time cross sections, more exercises in "agenda matching" than agenda setting; again, though, there are important exceptions (e.g., Rogers et al., 1991; Schoenbach, 1983; Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Smith, 1987; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). Given the specific nature of data that typically have been arrayed in support of the causal nature of agenda setting, causal direction must remain an open question for now, at least in terms of most survey studies. However, the experimental programs of Iyengar and Kinder (1987) are unambiguous in regard to internal validity and causal direction, and in field studies examining the issue of reverse causation, researchers have found that media agendas might be, in part, responses to public concerns about issues such as cost of living, energy, and dissatisfaction with government (Demers,

Craff, Choi, & Pessin, 1989) and explicitly local issues such as education, economic development, crime, local government, and public recreation (Smith, 1987).

Long-term measurement vs. short-term. Time, as McCombs and Gilbert (1986) noted, is a crucial matter in agenda setting. But, like many other matters, it is insufficiently theorized and underspecified. Agenda-setting researchers have examined issues over long periods of time (e.g., Funkhouser, 1973; MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Demers et al., 1989) and short periods of time (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) in attempts to demonstrate the robustness of the overall findings. However, the ad hoc, nontheoretical manner in which dynamic analysis is carried out is troubling. Typically, time lags are tested in numerous ways until the optimal one is found (e.g., Winter, 1981), with little discussion about *why* this might be so. Similar empirical work has been carried out in terms of other time parameters in agenda setting, such as the length of time to be included in the media agenda, and the period over which the public issue salience was measured.

The Complexity of Agenda-Setting Evidence

General statements about media effects generally involve, either explicitly or implicitly, causal language. In the strictest sense, to demonstrate a media effect conclusively, researchers should present various types of evidence. First, researchers should present evidence about the media content that is the purported cause of the effect under consideration. Second, researchers should present evidence that the people alleged to be affected have, in fact, been exposed to the content. Third, researchers should control for other extraneous factors, to guarantee the internal validity of the media effect stimulus and to rule out competing causal explanations for the effects they find. Fourth, researchers should specify the processes or mechanisms involved in the effect (McLeod & Reeves, 1980).

The various hypotheses surrounding the agenda-setting process generally either explicitly or implicitly specify causal language. Although this is not unique to agenda setting, few agenda-setting studies have been designed so that the causal ordering is unambiguous. There are exceptions—most notably the experimental research program of Iyengar and Kinder (1987) and some of the field studies incorporating panel designs and multivariate controls (e.g., Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990, 1992; Mac-Kuen & Coombs, 1981; Miller, Clarke, Harrop, LeDuc, & Whiteley, 1990; Rogers et al., 1991; Schoenbach, 1983; Smith, 1987).

When examined rigorously, many individual agenda-setting studies are deficient methodologically.[3] As McQuail (1987) said, evidence simply

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[3] See McGuire (1986) for additional problems in media effects studies generally. Also consult McLeod, Kosicki, and Pan (1991).

showing correspondence between the rank orders of issues in the media and by the public is not sufficient to demonstrate a causal relationship:

> *For that we need a combination of: content analysis of party pro-*
> *grammes; evidence of opinion changes over time in a given section of*
> *the public (preferably with panel data); a content analysis showing*
> *media attention to different issues in the relevant period; and some*
> *indication of relevant media use by the public concerned. Such data*
> *have rarely, if ever, been produced at the same time in support of the*
> *hypothesis of agenda-setting and the further one moves from the gen-*
> *eral notion that media direct attention and shape cognitions and to-*
> *wards precise cases, the more uncertain it becomes whether such an*
> *effect actually occurs.* (pp. 275–276)

Unfortunately, aggregating dozens of incomplete studies does not necessarily remedy the matter. In the future, researchers will need to address the issue of how best to bring critical masses of data together in agenda-setting research. As Iyengar (1988) noted, diffusion of structural equations modeling and other similar techniques may be helpful to agenda setters. In addition, Huegel, Degenhardt, and Weiss (1989, 1992) have shown that structural models can be put to good use by agenda-setting researchers, especially for modeling intervening variables to capture the process of the interrelationships more effectively. However, no amount of statistical technology can compensate for a lack of clear conceptualization and a critical mass of appropriate data.

Agenda Setting or Agenda Reflection?
Controlling extraneous factors, the third bit of evidence required, needs additional discussion because the special problems of agenda setting may confound it with agenda reflection. To claim that media truly set the agenda, one certainly must eliminate real-world indicators of problems (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Iyengar, 1988). Clearly, if real-world problems are driving both audience interest and news coverage, then it is not meaningful to attribute the cause to media. In such a case, media would be merely reflecting larger real-world concerns. A more meaningful case of agenda setting is one in which a problem is ongoing at a relatively constant level and media attention comes and goes in response to its own cues. Such was the case discussed by Bosso (1989) in the Ethiopian famine. Major news organizations were initially slow to deal with the problem. However, once the story made its way into the world press, a flood of publicity was unleashed, followed by massive relief efforts and so on. When publicity opportunities diminished and it became apparent that the problem was chronic, news organizations became bored with the story (or at least distracted by other news) and moved on, leaving the impression with many readers and viewers that the absence of coverage

somehow implied that the problem had been solved. (See Downs, 1972, for more on this type of chronic issue.)

The Ethiopian example illustrates an important point about media effects generally, and about media effects in agenda setting particularly. We must pay attention to how the news is gathered if we are really interested in speaking about media effects—effects due to something media have done by virtue of covering a story in a particular way. McLeod et al. (1991) argue that the transmission function of media is important because it provides a way for millions of people to experience an event simultaneously. Still, this is a rather low-level media effect compared to how the information is presented or framed.

A related aspect of delineating media agenda setting from reality effects is the fact that journalists and media organizations have considerable autonomy over how a story is constructed, at least at certain points of an issue's evolution. The take, spin, or frame of a story is not automatic. The choices that are made can have dramatic consequences for the definition of the issue itself and the connections that are made between it and other topics in the news. Consider the case presented by Linsky (1986) on the coverage of the neutron bomb's development. As Linsky relates, reporter Walter Pincus broke a story in *The Washington Post* in June 1977 about a secret weapon under development by the U.S. Energy Research and Development Administration, the agency responsible for the development of all nuclear weapons in the United States. According to the story, the U.S. was about to begin production of its "first nuclear battlefield weapon specifically designed to kill people through the release of neutrons rather than to destroy military installations through heat and blast" (quoted in Linsky, 1986, p. 21). This initial characterization of the new weapons system as killing people but leaving buildings intact became widely used as shorthand. Even today, we conjure up that characterization when thinking about this issue. First impressions, even of issues, tend to remain powerful. Agenda-setting research needs to find ways not only to cope with the content of issues (Swanson, 1988; Weiss, 1992), but to note how changes in content affect how they are understood and processed by audiences.

The final type of evidence that agenda-setting researchers need to ascertain relates to the conditional processes involved in the effect. It is not sufficient simply to demonstrate that media set the public agenda; researchers must identify important enhancing or limiting variables. These range from need for orientation to party identification and media attention. This theme will be discussed below in more detail, but in terms of the evidence required for effects, it is worth noting here that to conclusively demonstrate and document the existence of a media effect such as agenda setting, researchers must assemble a variety of evidence—including content, exposure, effect, and conditions. Often individual studies, particularly those published early in the development of a given model, simply lay out evidence consistent with the overall perspective taken, be-

cause the difficulty and expense of critical tests are not warranted until more supporting evidence suggests that such trouble is worthwhile. However, at this critical juncture in the history of agenda setting, we are no longer evaluating an embryonic idea. More comprehensive and well-ordered evidence must be provided in the future.

Agenda Setting and News Work

A key failing of public agenda-setting studies in general is the absence of any specific tie to a clear and specific theory of news work. However, a number of researchers have addressed the problem or are working on it (e.g., Ansolabehere, Behr, & Iyengar, 1991; Carragee, Rosenblatt, & Michaud, 1987; Linsky, 1988; Protess et al., 1991; Protess & McCombs, 1991; Reese, 1991; Semetko et al., 1991). But this is also a failing of the research on many other media effects models developed either at the same time or since agenda setting. As McLeod et al. (1991) have noted, all media effects research carries implicit or explicit assumptions about media content. Unfortunately, often these connections are not made explicit. This lack of a coherent tie to news work may reflect in part the long-standing tension in journalism between those who believe that journalists should merely report the news and those who believe that journalists have an affirmative obligation to make news themselves, at least in certain circumstances, such as when rooting out corruption and fulfilling other investigative functions. The first perspective, emphasizing the passive role of the press as neutral observer and chronicler, guides much of journalistic work today in the establishment media. In this case, agenda-setting researchers often simply examine the effects of information flow from policymakers to citizens.

The second perspective, that a key role of media is to provide meaningful agenda setting (see, for example, Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990), suggests that media have a larger role, not only to monitor social activity and provide surveillance of the sociopolitical environment, but to focus attention on a useful agenda, leading to political or social reform (see, for example, Protess et al., 1991).

For years, agenda-setting researchers have not felt it necessary to explicitly take sides in this debate or start out with either of these perspectives in mind, since it is possible to study the agenda-setting effect of media regardless of whether the agenda is intended or unintended. However, it is still worthwhile to examine the process of news construction, since it has bearing on the agenda that is being studied. Ultimately, it is useful to know something about the origins of the ideas being communicated, since this bears directly on the extent to which agenda setting is a media effect or a reality effect in which media are mere channels between policymakers and public. The benefits of this are clearly evident in the extensive research program of Protess et al., (1991), where researchers

aligned themselves with both social reformers and investigative reporters in an attempt to document the public opinion effects of investigative journalism on public opinion and policy. Mathis and Pfetsch (1991) have studied the same process in the alternative media.

Another reason to examine the conditions under which media content is decided is to allow greater insight into types of possible effects and where to look for them. For example, several researchers have looked at media and the operations of the U.S. House of Representatives (e.g., Cook, 1989; Ritchie, 1991), the role of media in house elections (Clarke & Evans, 1983), media and the operations of the U.S. Senate (Sinclair, 1989), and the role of media in senate elections (Abramowitz & Segal, 1992; Westlye, 1991). What these studies and others dealing with similar topics make clear is the role of structural and other variables in the choice of issues brought to the fore by political actors (see also Cobb & Elder, 1983; Kingdon, 1984; Light, 1983; Smith, 1988; Walker, 1977, 1991). Lobbyists, the role of campaign finance, changes in the committee structure and governance of the House and Senate, public relations and media staffing variables, and media technology combine to open up the range of issues to be discussed, and the manner in which they burst upon the political scene. Opening up the legislative arena from strict control by the leadership and the political parties allows room for a new breed of "issue entrepreneurs," who use committee and subcommittee chairmanships, and the media visibility they provide, to specialize on certain issues and bring them to the fore, often in exchange for the loyal support of lobbyists who can help provide funds for reelection (Smith, 1988). It seems virtually impossible to systematically study the rise of a given public issue without some understanding of these behind-the-scenes processes. Gandy's (1982) pathbreaking work on information subsidies and their effects on the evolution of discussion and action on public issues is an imaginative step in a useful direction. Other important work linking the agenda-setting model to news work has emerged in comparative (Blumler, 1983; Semetko et al., 1991), British (Miller et al., 1990), and U.S. settings (Shoemaker, 1989).

The desirability of pursuing such connections between news work and media content, and media content and audience effects seems to be well understood, but the complexities involved in developing ties are daunting. One of the most central issues, as in many other areas of research, involves levels of analysis. See McCombs, Einsiedel, and Weaver (1991); Pan and McLeod (1991), Shoemaker and Reese (1991), and Whitney (1991) for insights helpful in such connections.

Framing Public Issues
Studies of news work are crucial to the study of public issues because they offer the key to understanding how the particular issues are framed and offered to the public. How issues emerge and evolve over time is a matter of considerable importance, and at present we have only a frag-

mentary account of the process. However, starting from the point of view that journalists do not merely mirror reality but rather—through their work ways, norms, and rules of thumb—actively construct news out of the available raw materials, we can begin to understand how issues are framed. This active construction of reality may be more pervasive at certain points of an issue's evolution than others (e.g., Berelson, 1948; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Lang & Lang, 1983; Linsky, 1986). Linsky discusses five stages in the policy process—issue identification, solution formulation, policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation—and concludes that media are most influential in the first two stages, while the problem and solution are still in flux. (See also Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986.) Hall et al. (1978) raise the issue in terms of the media's choice of "primary definers" of issues and attribute it to the media's preferences for the opinions of the powerful:

> *Effectively, then, the primary definition sets the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is. This initial framework then provides the criteria by which all subsequent contributions are labeled as "relevant" to the debate, or "irrelevant"—beside the point.* (p. 59)

Hall et al. see the media not as the primary definers but as "reproducing the definitions of those who have the power" (p. 57), due to social or economic position.

Framing, as a way of organizing the world's experiences, owes much to the work of Goffman (1974). Goffman has described frames as devices that enable individuals to "locate, perceive, identify and label" occurrences or information (p. 21). According to Gitlin (1980), media frames are

> *persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual. Frames enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely: to recognize it as information, to assign it to cognitive categories, and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences.* (p. 7)

This framing perspective is important because it provides a way to view issues that goes beyond a simple researcher-designated label that takes all the controversy out of the issue. As Becker (1991) has argued, an issue should be "something in dispute, that is, something about which it is possible to articulate more than one point of view" (p. 343). In contrast, the current dominant agenda-setting framework strips away almost everything worth knowing about how the media cover an issue and leaves only the shell of the *topic*. Furthermore, the topic under consideration may be

quite a bit less straightforward upon reflection than it seemed at first glance. Political scientist E. E. Schattschneider (1961) has noted that

> *political conflict is not like an intercollegiate debate in which the opponents agree in advance on a definition of the issues. As a matter of fact, the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power; the antagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in its definition. He who determined what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power.* (p. 68)

By focusing attention on political language and the definition of the issue under consideration, framing goes well beyond the traditional agenda-setting model, which tends to take issues as givens. Perhaps some examples may help clarify the point.

Case 1: Media and elections. Perhaps the single most sophisticated study of media agenda setting and framing to date is the comparative analysis of British and U.S. media coverage in national elections by Semetko et al. (1991). The study examines the 1983 British general election and the 1984 U.S. presidential campaign. What makes the study satisfying is the process approach the authors take to developing the formation of the campaign coverage, and how this differs dramatically across the two media systems. These differences are explored in a very detailed chapter (pp. 33–61) using participant observation techniques that delve into the working assumptions of journalists, clearly noting how cultural, normative, and structural variables affect campaign coverage. Later, we see the authors going beyond the typical content-free issue approach to consider an innovative approach to "theme agendas" (pp. 81–83), similar to the frames discussed above. What is also interesting about the study is the careful manner in which media agendas are compared with candidate and party agendas to support strong conclusions about the discretionary power of media to truly *shape* agendas, not simply mirror the discourse of political elites. The point is that media "gatekeepers" do not merely keep watch over information, shuffling it here and there. Instead, they engage in active construction of the messages, emphasizing certain aspects of an issue and not others. This creates a situation in which the media add distinctive elements to the stream of public discourse instead of merely mirroring the priorities set out by the various parties or candidates.

Miller et al. (1990) also deal with an election campaign, but in a very different way. Their sophisticated agenda-setting study follows the stream of public issue agenda setting by television, assembling an impressive array of content analysis data plus a complex study of public opinion about the campaign featuring panel data. The authors not only consider the effect of the issues, they study them in a context they call the "back-

ground agenda," the pattern of issues covered in the rest of the nonelection news. In a very imaginative twist on standard agenda-setting studies, they asked their respondents what issues they wished to hear more about and compared these preferences to what the press and candidates were saying. In the short time frame of the British election, they found no significant agenda-setting effects. In fact, they found that television's issue agenda was very different from the public agenda. The television agenda in terms of the election issues was balanced between social and national defense issues, while the background agenda dealt primarily with security and defense issues. At the same time, the public was interested primarily in social and economic issues. This can be read as massive background bias in a conservative direction and somewhat lesser right-wing bias in the issue agendas of the campaign coverage itself. Both were out of step with the public. The authors concluded that

> *television failed to set the public agenda and the public failed to set the media agenda. . . . It is a comforting conclusion, however, because we have uncovered massive partisan bias in British television news coverage and a massive gap between television's priorities and the public's.* (Miller et al., 1990, p. 232)

While both of these studies engaged the agenda-setting model, both go well beyond it, albeit in distinctive ways. Taken together, however, they are an interesting example of how increased research concern with news coverage or news work can point public opinion studies in distinctive new directions.

Case 2: Routine coverage of public issues. Although the cognitive revolution has had sweeping effects on many areas of the social sciences outside of psychology, including mass communication, it is relatively late in coming to agenda setting. This is ironic in certain ways, since the original rationale for agenda setting was to return the study of media effects to something more closely related to the purpose of journalism—information transmittal and issues—than was earlier work growing out of the persuasion literature (Becker et al., 1975; Tankard, 1990).

Much agenda-setting research has not provided convincing theoretical arguments to explain the effects that have been found, although the weight of empirical generalizations has been growing steadily. Two notable exceptions are the work of Iyengar and Kinder (1987) and Iyengar (1991), which draw upon a distinctive cognitive psychology interpretation of the general problem.

Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) work linking agenda setting to the psychological approach is very important to agenda setting's future development. For perhaps the first time, the agenda-setting model has been tied to an established theoretical perspective in an explicit and unambiguous manner (Iyengar & Kinder, 1986). This provides a framework for the in-

terpretation of existing work, provides a common language using explicitly cognitive concepts, and rationalizes some previously unsuspected research questions such as evaluation of public officials and policies (priming hypothesis) and the effects of language (framing). One of the newest of these considerations is the definition of an issue itself.

As Swanson (1988) argued, the notion of *agenda* may be one of the most flawed in the agenda-setting model, largely because it tells little about the content of issues. This is true whether one is discussing the media agenda, policy agenda, or public agenda. This critique is consistent with the general constructive nature of much of the cognitive perspective, and supposes that we should reexamine the notion of what an issue is in light of recent developments in cognitive psychology. Of course, the notion of *agenda* implies more than a simple list of topics. For example, it may also imply that there is a limited set of topics to be considered, and as some are added, others are forced off. Recently Zhu (1992) has explicated this idea in terms of issue competition for agenda space in a zero-sum game.

Defining an issue entails locating a controversy in a particular conceptual category or classification scheme and providing a unique explanation. According to Goffman (1974), primary frameworks are principles that we use to organize events in everyday life. The frame helps classify, interpret, and direct reasoning about the event. Goffman (1974) notes:

> *Some (frames) are neatly presentable as a system of entities, postulates and rules; others—indeed, most others—appear to have no apparent articulated shape, providing only a lore of understanding, an approach, a perspective. Whatever the degree of organization, however, each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its limits.* (p. 21)

Frames, as discussed here, are consistent with the perspective of schematic information processing (e.g., Markus & Zajonc, 1985). Information processing is a constructive process that involves both top-down and bottom-up reasoning. That is, we make interpretations based on abstract conceptual reasoning, and accommodate new information into our existing frames. These frames may be thought of as a type of schema, similar to scripts, prototypes, categories, and so on. That is, they help structure our everyday experiences and basically facilitate the process of meaning construction (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). These frames allow us to understand issues in particular ways, and also guide news work and audience responses to media content.

An example may help to clarify the points:

President Bush declared a general "war on drugs" relatively early in his presidency. Other frames or metaphors could have been selected, but they were not. War, as a metaphor, suggests a lot of tough talk about in-

creased law enforcement intervention, civilian mobilization and sacrifice, tougher criminal penalties, tougher judges, tougher sentences, and perhaps the use of the military to interdict drugs at the border, or even within the borders of other countries. The war metaphor was presumably selected by President Bush and his advisers because it conveyed what he meant to convey about this issue. This was in sharp contrast to the Democratic congressional positions taken at the time: suggesting that tougher law enforcement was not the entire answer and offering different solutions such as treatment upon demand for drug addiction. Just as the framing of the problem was different between the parties, so were the proposed causes. President Bush tended to see the problem as one of personal responsibility and deviance. Critics saw the problem as a partial response to problems of alienation, hopelessness, and despair in contemporary society. Explanations citizens offer for issues are not only related to media portrayals of the issues, they are politically consequential (Iyengar, 1987, 1989, 1990), at least in terms of presidential evaluations. It is possible to study audiences' polysemic constructions of such issues, as demonstrated by McLeod, Pan, and Rucinski (1989) and McLeod, Sun, Chi, and Pan (1990). Traditional agenda-setting studies might investigate this as follows: The most crucial decision would likely be made first. The issue would be defined as "drug abuse" or some similar broad, content-free category. The salience of this would then be studied against a broad backdrop of other similarly broad, content-free topics, such as the environment, economy, national debt, and perhaps national defense. What would be missing would be a real focus on the nature of the disagreement between the parties and the essence of the controversy. In short, a great deal of valuable contextual information about the issue would be lost.

A partial answer to this problem may be found in the constructionist perspective offered by Gamson (1992) and Gamson and Modigliani (1989) and advanced by Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) and others as a way of helping understand audience responses to the news. This perspective points out that audience interpretation of issues is not always the same as that of journalists and media discourse generally (e.g., McLeod et al., 1990).

The Agenda of Agenda Setting

As we have seen, concern with issue construction and popularization, and the effects of this on public policy is a busy area of research. Some of the major concerns of authors working in this area overlap with those working in the agenda-setting model. In the larger literature, we see agenda setting attempting to branch out to include influences on the construction of media content (agenda building) and influences on policy (policy agenda). We are making progress in understanding the role of

media in these processes, and suggestions regarding possible solutions are not hard to find. What is necessary, however, is a willingness to seek out interdisciplinary work that is appropriate to the topic and make connections wherever possible with existing streams of research. Adding media perspectives to this literature, or modifying ones that already exist, can potentially add exciting dimensions and real vigor to the topics under consideration. There is more, however. We must keep in mind that agenda setting is one small part of a larger process of understanding the very complex interrelationships among media organizations, public opinion, and public policy-making. The agenda-setting model focuses our attention on a range of relatively fixed issues and specifies a precise manner in which media influences should be visible to researchers, by influencing the relative salience of issues in accordance with their relative salience in media content. The specific issues are typically discussed as broad, content-free topic domains, but recently there has been a recognition that issue themes or frames might be studied in this overall model as well.

The Future of Agenda-Setting Research

Agenda setting as a model has proven to be remarkably flexible, having expanded well beyond its initial boundaries of matching aggregate media agendas with aggregate public opinion data. As a research enterprise, it has branched out to guide inquiry not only in audience studies, but in the areas of news work, media content, and public policy as well. Methodological skill also has increased rapidly over the years. Initially tied to procedures involving rank-order correlations (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972), it has expanded to include the most sophisticated structural equations modeling (e.g., Huegel et al., 1989), as well as cross-sectional data and multiwave panels (e.g., Miller et al., 1990). Researchers have also used time series analysis of aggregated public opinion measures (e.g., Rogers et al., 1991), naturalistic experimental designs (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), and in-depth case studies (e.g., Semetko et al., 1991) to study agenda setting. Given the amount of activity surrounding agenda-setting research, we can conclude that it is one of the most vigorously pursued models in the field.

But agenda setting remains only one type of model for studying media effects on public opinion in the context of public issues. Others, such as priming and framing, also are available. Agenda-setting authors have tended to be somewhat hegemonic in their use of the term *agenda setting* in arenas far removed from its initial meaning. Priming and framing may be seen by some as extensions of agenda setting, but they are not. They begin from explicit cognitive perspectives and lead in new directions unanticipated by the original agenda-setting model. If the initial phase of mass communication research involving media and public issues examined primarily what topics made it onto the public agenda, the next phase is likely to examine how the issue is framed and discussed, and the con-

sequences of such framing. Whether this is best understood as an extension of agenda setting or as the supplanting of agenda setting by other perspectives is as yet unknown. Understanding the process by which issues are defined and popularized in pluralistic societies is worth pursuing, regardless of any tie to agenda setting. Whether research in this area is called agenda building or simply media sociology or communicator studies may not matter. Building up a media production literature around the agenda-setting model provides a clear focus and sense of purpose, as well as obvious connections to a larger literature. It is one thing to study journalists, news work, and media organizations; it is quite another to study the development of agendas in this framework. The obvious disadvantage is the narrowness of the question and the lack of generalization to other types of content. Agendas, no matter how broadly defined, are not enough.

Similar problems have been apparent in the general development of the media effects literature. The agenda-setting model is a product of a particular type of media effects paradigm growing out of a particular historical period. As other areas of media effects have shown, agenda setting can change with the times, adopting more sophisticated theoretical schemes, methods, and contingent variables (McLeod et al., 1991). As such, the future of agenda setting is very much the future of media effects. Agenda setting is one part of that larger tapestry, and its fortunes will rise and fall along with other perspectives in the media effects tradition.

Public Issues Research and Democracy
There are many ways to think about the roles of mass media and the coverage of social and political issues in democratic societies. Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) have outlined several expectations of media, including "meaningful agenda-setting," or "identifying the key issues of the day, including the forces that have formed and may resolve them" (p. 270).[4] Influencing what issues are considered and how they are discussed in a democracy is an important matter (Reich, 1990). Issues that are not aired are unlikely to achieve an early and satisfactory resolution.

By stressing meaningful agenda setting, Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) try to distinguish careful, thoughtful coverage from that driven by entertainment news values such as sensationalism and personalization, which

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[4] Other standards involve surveillance of the sociopolitical environment, providing platforms for intelligible and illuminating advocacy, dialogue across a diverse range of views, mechanisms for holding officials accountable, incentives for citizens to learn about and become involved in the political process, principled resistance to the efforts of outside forces to subvert media independence, and fostering a sense of respect for the audience member as potentially concerned and able to make sense of the political environment (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990).

tend to distract us from the big issues of the day. The coverage of recent American elections gives us much to ponder in terms of this standard. The multibillion-dollar savings and loan scandal was not a prominent part of the 1988 American presidential election campaign, but federal prison furloughs and the pledge of allegiance were. Furthermore, many issues featured prominently in news and advertising were often poorly backgrounded by media or argued imprecisely by the candidates (Jamieson, 1992).

In nonelection news, similar problems occur and need to be understood by citizens, worked on by media, and examined by researchers (Smith, 1992a, 1992b). Citizens should expect better from their politicians and their media, and media research should play an important role in the evaluation of media discourse (e.g., McQuail, 1992). In the coverage of disasters, media may concentrate on the dramatic, superfluous aspects of events, missing the larger, technical stories (Smith, 1992a) that have important long-term implications. This may have important consequences for public policy decisions and legislation. By priming citizens about the importance of particular issues, the media may shift the ground on which elections are decided (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Media also may be powerful in interpreting the meaning of elections once they are decided by voters (e.g., Kelley, 1988; Missika & Bregman, 1987).

In the legislative arena, however, special interest groups (special interest money, powerful lobbying groups, and campaign contributors) have an immense, and growing, ability to set the discussion agenda by providing incentives and information subsidies (Bennett, 1992; Etzioni, 1988). The need to raise large sums of money to finance increasingly expensive media campaigns is influencing political discourse and legislative activity. Part of the money goes to buy sophisticated public relations efforts to influence the discussion of public issues in a myriad of ways. Pertschuk and Schaetzel (1989) discuss the sophisticated and strategic use of background information by public interest groups in the context of the Robert Bork nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court. These factors not only influenced the topics that were discussed, but the manner in which they were framed.

Sometimes powerful interests try to keep information out of the public spotlight by placing other issues out in front as distractors. As Qualter (1989) notes, newspapers devote sections to sports, entertainment, food, and business, but rarely, if ever, to organized labor, for example. News routines, news values and procedures such as deadlines, needs for officially qualified sources and the like, contribute to news that tends to focus on discrete events, superficial issues, or personalities, not longer term trends or deeper causes. These factors limit the number of issues on the agenda, as well as the depth of the discourse or the items on the agenda. Reporters try to fight back against managed news with professional behavior such as "disdaining" news they are forced to report be-

cause of competition or other demands (Levy, 1981). Standard agenda-setting studies seldom consider whether a story is disdained by a reporter. However, we know that many readers read between the lines of stories and make their own interpretations about the meaning of a story (e.g., Graber, 1988; Kosicki & McLeod, 1990).

In the face of these challenges, researchers should try to understand the various factors that shape and engage public opinion. By studying the process of opinion formation in society and disseminating the results to working journalists and to the public, researchers may have a role not only in shaping scientific understanding but enhancing democratic decision-making in society. To achieve these goals, we will need to study public issues and mass media and become more closely tied to the specifics of issues. We need to look more closely at the particular frames that are used and trace these through to their antecedents in the legislative process, social movements, or grass roots. In this way, we can make the study of issues more vital and central, and relate better to other theoretical perspectives in the field.

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