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Presidential Agenda Building and Policymaking: Examining Linkages Across Three Levels

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ABSTRACT

To investigate the role of strategic political communication in governing, this study comprehensively examined presidential agenda-building associations at three levels during the first six months of U.S. president Barack Obama's second term. Multiple presidential information subsidies, national news content, and policymaking activity were monitored. The results revealed solid support for all three levels of agenda-building (i.e., object salience, attribute salience, and network associations among objects or attributes), but the linkages with media coverage and policymaking were not uniform across information subsidy types. Based on the analysis, presidential news releases, blog posts, and presidential speeches were the most effective all-around strategic agenda-building tools for media management and policymaking purposes during this time period. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

The influence of strategic communication in politics via governing has received some scholarly attention (Avery & Graham, 2013), but our theoretical and empirical knowledge of its role is underdeveloped when compared to other areas of political communication scholarship (Jackson, 2010). Although the use of political public relations in practice is longstanding, more concerted efforts to apply and build strategic communication theory within the field is new (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2011). A powerful case can be made that public relations strategies and tactics were first established by political actors, in political contexts, and used for political purposes (Cutlip, 1995; Lamme & Russell, 2009), but the majority of strategic communication theory and research targets business, health, and nonprofit settings, and many textbooks treat strategic political communication and public relations only in passing.

One of the major goals of political public relations efforts is to determine and communicate the salience of political priorities in news coverage, public opinion, and policymaking in order to achieve strategic goals and objectives (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2011). Given their emphasis on salience formation, transfer, and exchange, agenda-building and agenda-setting theories offer germane conceptual frameworks for better understanding the use of strategic political public relations activities in elections and governance (Berger, Hertog, & Park, 2002; Johnson, 2014; Kiouisis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999; Kiouisis, Laskin, & Kim, 2011; Kiouisis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006; Ragas & Tran, 2013).

From a strategic communication standpoint, a robust body of research has probed the influence of information subsidies—source-controlled public relations messages—in impacting the agenda-building process, yet a major limitation with such research is the tendency to focus on just one type of information subsidy—often news releases or speeches—within a single analysis. When tested

empirically, though, research suggests this tendency may be problematic because the pattern of associations found among such messages is not as consistent as might be conceptually expected (e.g., Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2010). Consequently, the present analysis examines a wide range of information subsidies to address their comparative agenda-building effectiveness. Further, most extant work has been limited to elections and the role of these messages in shaping media coverage. In political public relations, a central strategic outcome is policymaking. As such, the current study will include indicators of policymaking activity during nonelection settings to move the analysis beyond *outputs* to *outcomes* (Manning & Rockland, 2011; Stacks, 2010; Watson, 2012).

In addition to the explicated connections among the salience of objects (e.g., issues) and attributes (e.g., the framing and valence of the issues), contemporary developments in agenda-setting theory suggest an extension of the model to examining *networks of associations* among agenda elements (Guo, 2012, 2013; Kiousis et al., *in press*; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & van Atteveldt, 2012). That is, the *co-occurrence* of elements (objects and attributes) on agendas can impact the process of salience formation and transfer across several stakeholder groups (Carroll, 2005a, 2005b). The purpose of this study is to fill the aforementioned gaps in scholarship through examining the agenda-building process at three levels based on multiple political public relations message types, media coverage, and policymaking activity during the first six months of U.S. president Barack Obama's second term.

Literature review

First-level agenda building

In its classic conceptualization, agenda setting examined the transfer of issue salience from the media to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Support for that basic theoretical relationship continues to be found in a number of studies (see Johnson, 2014 for recent reviews of the accumulated evidence). Although issues were the original focus of research, scholars have noted that first-level agenda setting is about the transfer of object salience and can be applied to several types of objects, including candidates, nations, products, organizations, and stakeholders (McCombs, 2014). The use of "object" here is similar to the attitude object concept in psychology.

Agenda-building theory considers the process of salience formation, transfer and exchange to involve *reciprocal* and *shared* influence among a variety of stakeholder groups and constituencies (Hughes & Dann, 2009). These groups include journalists, bloggers and other online opinion leaders, voters, politicians, corporations, nonprofit organizations, interest groups, and activists. Even though an agenda-building perspective suggests a broader array of voices to monitor in the salience formation and transfer process, most agenda-building research has considered the relationship between news sources and the news media in the development of news content. Under this more classic conceptualization, "agenda building explores the sources that make up news content and influence the mass media agenda" (Tedesco, 2011, p. 78). Empirical support for first-level agenda building within the news has been gleaned in numerous investigations (e.g., Kim, Xiang, & Kiousis, 2011; Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2010; Kiousis & Wu, 2008; Ragas, 2013b; Ragas, Kim, & Kiousis, 2011; Roberts, 1997; Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Sweetser & Brown, 2008).

The leading strategy for activating news attention in agenda building is through information subsidies. According to Gandy (1982), information subsidies can be defined as "efforts to reduce the prices faced by others for certain information in order to increase its consumption" (p. 8). Lariscy, Avery, and Sohn (2010) employ Gandy's conceptualization and define information subsidies as "controlled information provided to a recipient at minimal cost and effort on his or her behalf" (p. 114). Finally, Lieber and Golan (2011) succinctly define such messages as "the currency of the trade within the marketplace of information" (p. 60).

Among the sources of information subsidies, presidential communications have been found to wield substantial influence on news attention (e.g., Foster et al., 2012; Parmalee, 2014). White House

communication activities have increasingly been identified as paramount to the successful management of the executive branch of government (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Kernell, 2007; Kumar, 2007; Mayer, 2004). Journalistic norms and routines dictate a heavy reliance on “official sources,” and there is no figure larger in U.S. politics steering such processes than the president. Nonetheless, although some studies suggest influence (Cohen, 2005; Hill, 1998; Lawrence, 2002), others display or imply limited impact (Edwards, 2004; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2005). One reason for this discrepancy is that studies typically have focused on only *one* form of presidential communication, most often the State of the Union address. Few investigations have explored in this context the comparative role of *different* types of information subsidies beyond news releases. Thus, one aim of this inquiry is to explore the comparative role of different presidential information subsidies in the dynamics of agenda building and policymaking.

Research indicates that the most widely studied political information subsidies are news releases and speeches. News releases have been shown to play a meaningful role in shaping news coverage with the salience of objects in releases contributing to the salience of objects on the media agenda (Heim, 2013; Hopmann, Elmelund-Praestekaer, Albaek, Vliegthart, & De Vreese, 2010; Kioussis et al., 2011; Sweetser & Brown, 2008; Turk, 1986). Research suggests that up to 80% of news content is generated from information subsidies, such as news releases (e.g., Sweetser & Brown, 2008).

Similarly, prior empirical work has found that presidential speeches may shape the content of news coverage to varying degrees (Hopmann et al., 2010; Kioussis et al., 2011; Turk, 1986). More specifically, a review by McCombs (2014) of agenda-building research into the high-profile, annual U.S. presidential State of the Union Address finds that the priorities of the president and the national news media are often linked, with this address at times impacting subsequent media coverage, while at other times, the address seems to respond to prior coverage. The approval rating of the president, a measure of political capital, may play a role, as research indicates that presidents with higher ratings generally see their information subsidies, such as speeches, have a greater influence on the issues on the media agenda (Fahmy, Wanta, Johnson, & Zhang, 2011; McCombs, 2014; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008).

Scholars have also examined the role of other types of information subsidies in the agenda-building process. For example, considerable effort has been spent examining the impact of political advertising (e.g., Ghorpade, 1986; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Ragas & Kioussis, 2010; Roberts, 1997). In particular, Roberts and McCombs (1994) scrutinized the influence of political ads on media content during the 1990 Texas gubernatorial race. Their findings revealed that advertising shaped the salience of issues for both television news coverage and newspapers. Boyle (2001) found similar relationships between advertising and television news during the 1996 presidential election.

Other types of information subsidies that have been investigated include debates, news conferences, and issue platform statements (e.g., Kioussis & Shields, 2008; Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2010; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008). Despite this, missing from research are studies that examine *multiple* information subsidies and object types within the *same* analysis (Miller, 2010). One exception is Kioussis, Kim, McDevitt, and Ostrowski's (2009) inquiry examining the relative agenda-building influence of campaign news releases and advertisements on news coverage during the 2006 election cycle. Their findings produced connections regarding the salience of issues and their attributes (Kioussis et al., 2009). It is noteworthy that stronger associations were found between news releases and media content for issue salience, but stronger linkages between ads and media content for attribute salience, suggesting differences across levels of agenda building.

A major assumption implicit in most agenda-building research is that relationships across different types of information subsidies are similar, yet when tested empirically this has not always been the case. Illustrating this assumption, Kioussis and Strömbäck (2010) found that the relationship between presidential news conferences and job approval ratings can be different from the relationship between presidential speeches and job approval ratings. Thus, comparisons between different types of information subsidies are essential for theory development.

Based on the logic of first-level agenda building, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1: The salience of issues in public relations messages positively correlates to the salience of issues in news media content.

H2: The salience of issues in public relations messages positively correlates to the salience of issues in policymaking activity.

Agenda building and digital communications

In addition to looking at a more diverse range of information subsidies, scholars have also stressed the need to better understand the role of digital communication tools, such as Twitter and Facebook (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). The use of these new communication tools for agenda-building and agenda-setting purposes has risen dramatically in recent election cycles (Avery & Graham, 2013; Parmalee, 2014), meriting greater scrutiny. Unlike some traditional public relations activities, these digital tools have the potential to promote dialogue and collaboration, thereby leading to enhanced relationships between organizations and their constituencies (Avery & Graham, 2013; Reber & Kim, 2006). Nonetheless, research has produced mixed evidence regarding their influence on journalists (e.g., Lariscy et al., 2009; Parmalee, 2014).

One investigation compared the role of political ads and candidate blogs on media coverage during the 2004 presidential election (Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008). The findings revealed strong connections between both information subsidy types and media coverage, although the direction of influence seemed to flow from the news media to the campaigns. A related analysis during the 2000 presidential election also found agenda-building linkages between candidate websites and news content regarding issue salience (Ku, Kaid, & Pfau, 2003). Meraz (2009) observed reciprocal influence between political blogs and mainstream news media content. Finally, Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, and Shah (2010) reported mutual influence among social media content (YouTube), state news media coverage, and Google News search traffic regarding a California proposition to ban same-sex marriage in 2008 and 2009.

Given the need to examine multiple types of information subsidies through traditional and digital channels, the following research questions are offered:

RQ1: How do the relationships between public relations messages and news coverage of object and attribute salience vary by message type?

RQ2: How do the relationships between public relations messages and policymaking activity regarding object and attribute salience vary by message type?

Second-level agenda building

Beyond *object* salience, scholars have also examined *attribute* salience as a component of the agenda-setting and agenda-building processes. These inquiries demonstrate that news media (or strategic communication and public relations efforts) highlight certain *aspects* of objects while simultaneously ignoring others to help stakeholders develop an understanding about objects (e.g., Fahmy et al., 2011; Schultz et al., 2012). Linked to framing research, the second-level agenda-setting (and agenda-building, by extension) literature suggests that media (and strategic communication and public relations activities) play a role in shaping public opinion by telling stakeholders “how to think about” objects and affect comprehension (e.g., Kioussis et al., 2006; Wang & Shoemaker, 2011).

The two major types of attributes identified in the literature are substantive and affective. Substantive attributes refer to the cognitive dimension of attribute salience based on reasoning. For example, Entman (1993) defined framing as a process of promoting certain aspects of issues

more than other aspects in messages. McCombs (2014) also explained that communication messages help people cognitively structure perceptions about objects—i.e., how to understand them. Issue frames, corporate reputation attributes, and candidate image attributes are all examples of the substantive attribute dimension used in prior agenda-building (and agenda-setting) studies (e.g., Kioussis et al., 2006; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

In a gubernatorial election context, Kioussis et al. (2006) found connections between the portrayal of candidate attributes in candidate news releases and state media coverage. At the national level, Heim (2013) discovered similar evidence for Hillary Clinton's public relations efforts on news media content during the 2008 Iowa Democratic Caucuses but not for John Edwards and Barack Obama. Wirth et al. (2010) found evidence of second-level agenda building and agenda setting during a 2006 referendum campaign in Switzerland. A unique feature of that investigation is that it was one of the few to explore strategic organizational outcomes as a result of agenda-building activities. The current study examines a different dimension of outcomes by looking at actual policymaking activity rather than public opinion, but the emphasis on evaluation is parallel.

Affective attributes converge on the valence dimension of salience that is based on emotion. The tone of messages is often used to operationalize affective attributes. Kim and McCombs (2007) explained that the positive or negative portrayal of candidates in news shapes how individuals perceive them. In the context of presidential elections, Kim et al. (2011) found supportive evidence of affective attribute associations between candidate information subsidies and global media coverage of the 2008 presidential election. Although contemporary research also suggests that arousal is an important dimension of affective attributes in second-level agenda setting and agenda building (Coleman & Wu, 2010; Kim & Kioussis, 2012; Kim, 2012), the present study is concerned with the tone regarding portrayals of issues. Scholars have found that the evaluative tone of media coverage can directly affect how publics perceive an object (e.g., Kioussis et al., 1999; Schoenbach & Semetko, 1992; Sheafer, 2007).

Based on the theorizing behind second-level agenda building, the following hypotheses are generated:

H3: The salience of substantive issue attributes in public relations messages positively correlates to the salience of issue attributes in news media content.

H4: The tone of issue portrayals in public relations messages positively correlates to the tone of issue portrayals in news media content.

H5: The salience of substantive issue attributes in public relations messages positively correlates to the salience of issue attributes in policymaking activity.

H6: The tone of issue portrayals in public relations messages positively correlates to the tone of issue portrayals in policymaking activity.

Third-level agenda building

Given the established role of object and attribute salience, current theoretical and empirical work in agenda setting has explicated that the *connections* among elements on different agendas—dubbed third-level or network agenda setting (NAS)—can impact the salience formation and transfer process (e.g., Guo, 2012, 2013; Schultz et al., 2012). The theoretical origins can be traced to the work of Carroll (2005a, 2005b) and network theory, though empirical testing of the model came later. As summarized by Guo, Vu, and McCombs (2012):

...news media can actually bundle different objects and attributes and make these bundles of elements salient in the public's mind simultaneously. Drawing from Lang's (2000) theoretical framework, the [network agenda setting] NAS model hypothesizes that the more likely the news media mention two elements in tandem, the greater chance that the audience will perceive these two elements as interconnected (p. 55).

Previous studies on first- and second-level agenda setting/agenda building have explored the rank-order relationships between two agendas (i.e., media and public) (i.e., McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In these rank-order analyses, however, the relationships among elements are usually excluded. To fill in the gap, we applied the Network Agenda Setting model (Guo, 2012) that integrates the concept of social networks into agenda-setting and agenda-building theoretical frameworks.

Hence, the co-occurrence of certain attributes and/or objects with one another leads to a greater likelihood that they will be perceived as salient *together*. This could range from a few elements on an agenda to the entire pattern of connections among elements. In strategic political communication and political public relations, this can have major ramifications for how politicians and issues are depicted and perceived in public affairs discourse. In turn, this can greatly influence strategic outcomes in terms of campaigning and governing.

For instance, during election campaigns, political candidates hope to associate favorable attributes with their own images and unfavorable attributes with their opponents. The success of candidates in making these associations salient to voters can mean the difference between winning and losing elections. Within the context of policymaking, when certain issue attributes are linked with an issue, different strategic outcomes may result. As a case in point, if the George W. Bush administration in 2004 had been unable to link weapons of mass destruction to the Iraqi regime—thereby failing to make these elements salient in relation to one another—it is possible that a different policy strategy may have been engendered. By extension then, this study applies the theorizing of the network agenda setting (NAS) model to agenda building. Specifically, this inquiry explores such associations within the context of the first six months of the Obama administration's second term as a contrast to most analyses focused on election settings.

Strategic political communication outcomes

Although understanding the relationship between information subsidies and news coverage is important, scholars have underscored the need to go beyond message *outputs* and focus on strategic *outcomes*—that is, tangible attitudes, behaviors, and actions—to assess the effectiveness of strategic communication in achieving desired organizational goals (e.g., Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2007; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014). In a political communication context, two central outcomes for determining success are public opinion and actual policymaking activities. One major challenge with monitoring public opinion is in developing an analytical strategy for ascertaining how changes in the salience of objects and attributes in information subsidies and media coverage are linked to shifts in public support for particular policies. Appropriate public opinion data are not always available. On the other hand, official records of policymaking activity are often available and easier to track, thereby providing for more straightforward comparisons. As such, policymaking activity will be the core outcome compared with strategic political communication efforts and news in this study, but we also suggest future research examine public opinion as well when appropriate data are available.

Based on the logic of network agenda building, the following hypotheses are given:

H7: The salience of network associations among issues in public relations messages positively correlates to the salience of network associations among issues in news media content.

H8: The salience of network associations among issues in public relations messages positively correlates to the salience of network associations among issues in policymaking activity.

H9: The salience of network associations among substantive issue attributes in public relations messages positively correlates to the salience of issue attributes in news media content.

H10: The salience of network associations among substantive issue attributes in public relations messages positively correlates to the salience of issue attributes in policymaking activity.

Method

A content analysis was conducted to explore all three levels of agenda building. The study time frame was six months (from January 1 to June 31, 2013). This nonelection time frame, representing the start of the Obama administration's second term, fits with the study's focus on strategic political communication during governing and policymaking, rather than during campaigning. Prior research shows that agenda building and agenda setting are cumulative processes that often take time to play out (i.e., months rather than days or weeks), particularly outcomes such as policymaking (Son & Weaver, 2006; Tan & Weaver, 2009). A total of 692 presidential public relations materials (5 weekly YouTube addresses, 50 speeches and remarks, 20 press briefings, 119 statements and releases, 110 blog posts, and 388 tweets), 623 news stories (109 *USA Today*, 441 *The New York Times*, 73 *Los Angeles Times*), and 194 policymaking calendars (1 House Calendar of Business, 78 Senate Calendars of Business, 115 Daily Congressional Record/Daily Digest) were collected.

Sampling procedure

The primary source of presidential public relations messages was the official White House website (www.whitehouse.gov). Speeches and remarks, press briefings, and statements and releases were collected from the site. Social media content was collected from the White House's official blog, Twitter, and YouTube channels. Due to the large volume of data, these messages were systematically sampled (20% of public relations messages).

USA Today, *The New York Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, the three national media outlets with the largest combined print and digital circulations at the time of the study (Alliance for Audited Media, 2013), were selected to represent the traditional media agenda. Archived articles during the time frame were retrieved from LexisNexis using the search keyword "Obama" for the headline and lead of stories because the inverted pyramid style of journalism places the most important information at the top of stories (Ragas & Tran, 2013). Due to the large volume of data, news stories were systematically sampled (20% of news stories).

Consistent with prior research (Kioussis, Park, Kim, & Go, 2013; Kioussis et al., 2011), policy-making activity was obtained by monitoring the House Calendar of Business (general order), the Senate Calendar of Business (general order), and the Daily Congressional Record (Daily Digest). A total of 194 calendars of policymaking activity were coded.

Object salience measurement

Issues

The following 12 issue categories were developed using the official list of issue priorities on the White House website: community issues, defense and homeland security, economy, education, energy and environment, ethics, foreign policy, health care, immigration, taxes, technology, and other. Each issue category was coded as 1) present or 0) absent.

Attribute salience measurement

Issue frames

The following seven categories were used to code the issue frames: conflict, cooperation (harmony), problem/issue definition, attribution of responsibility, human interest, economic consequences, and morality (e.g., Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 2006; Supadhiloke, 2012). These categories assess whether a message is framing an issue in terms of conflict; the cooperation between groups; the deliberate description of an issue; an attribution of responsibility for an issue; the placement of a "human face" on an issue; the economic consequences of an issue; or the moral and religious aspects of an issue. For example, a morality issue frame is reflected in the following Twitter message: President Obama

on #EqualPay for equal work: “It’s the idea that all of us are created equal.” Additionally, an example of a human interest issue frame includes the following Twitter post: “Worth a watch and a RT: White House staffers share their immigration stories.” Then, each issue frame was coded as 1) present or 0) absent.

Affective attribute measurement

Affective attributes were measured with regard to the overall tone displayed specifically towards each issue mentioned in the analyzed messages (Kiousis et al., 2013). The tone was coded as 1) negative, 2) neutral/mixed, and 3) positive when it was present.

Intercoder reliability

Intercoder reliability was measured by randomly selecting a subsample (10%) of each message type and double coding. Holsti’s score (Holsti, 1969) and Scott’s Pi (Scott, 1955) were used to assess reliability, the latter of which corrects for chance agreement. The issue categories, issue frame categories, and issue tone scores were reported for Holsti and Scott’s Pi. The average Holsti’s scores were reported as .95, .94, and .90 (issue, issue frame, and issue tone), respectively; and the average Scott’s Pi scores were reported as .84, .81, and .75, respectively.

Data analysis strategy

This study used Spearman’s rho correlations (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972) to assess the first- and second-level agenda-building hypotheses regarding the transfer of issue salience, substantive issue attribute salience, and affective issue attribute salience among the various agendas. To test third-level hypotheses, UCINET 6.0 (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 1999) was used to generate quadratic assignment procedure (QAP) correlations, which measured the network agenda associations between the various agendas (e.g., Guo, 2012, 2013). In particular, to test network correlations, matrix datasets were prepared for issues (12 rows \times 12 columns) and frames (7 rows \times 7 columns) for each information source (i.e., press releases, blogs, or Twitter) and the media coverage. Then, matrices filled with frequency numbers were analyzed to test whether the element-association patterns are correlated between matrices.

Results

First-level agenda-building findings

H1 predicts that the salience of issues in presidential information subsidies will positively correlate with the salience of issues in news content. Table 1 reports the data. The hypothesis is supported in two out of six possible comparisons, and the median correlation value is .48.

H2 expects that the salience of issues in presidential information subsidies will positively correlate with the salience of issues in policymaking activity. This hypothesis is supported in four out of six possible comparisons, and the median correlation value is .58. Thus, there is modest evidence suggesting presidential public relations efforts are linked with actual policymaking activity.

Second-level agenda-building findings

Moving to second-level findings, *H3* and *H4* expect that the salience of issue frames and tone in presidential public relations messages will positively correlate to news media content. Tables 2 and 3 report the findings. For issue frames, the hypothesis is supported in one out of six

Table 1. Linkages among presidential information subsidies, news coverage, and policymaking activities of issues.

Information Subsidy	News Media Coverage	Policymaking Activities
YouTube Weekly Addresses	.22	.65*
Speeches	.70**	.60*
Press Briefings	.49	.25
News Releases	.80***	.76**
Blogs	.47	.56*
Twitter	.38	.41

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Linkages among presidential information subsidies, news coverage, and policymaking activities of issue frames.

Information Subsidy	News Media Coverage	Policymaking Activities
YouTube Weekly Addresses	-.12	.25
Speeches	.28	.40
Press Briefings	.45	.47
News Releases	.77*	.49
Blogs	.39	.53
Twitter	.25	.53

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Linkages among presidential information subsidies, news coverage, and policymaking activities of issue tone.

Information Subsidy	News Media Coverage	Policymaking Activities
YouTube Weekly Addresses	.07	.08
Speeches	.11	.06
Press Briefings	.33*	.34*
News Releases	.56***	.40**
Blogs	.42**	.52***
Twitter	.16	.09

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

comparisons, and the median correlation value is .34. For issue tone, the hypothesis is supported in three out of six possible comparisons, and the median correlation value is .25.

H5 and *H6* predict positive associations between the salience of issue frames and tone in presidential public relations messages and policymaking activity. The data offer no support for *H5*, but do support *H6* in three out of six possible comparisons regarding policymaking. The median correlation value is .22.

Third-level agenda-building findings

At the third level of agenda building, *H7* expects that the salience of network associations among issues in presidential information subsidies will positively correlate with the pattern of network associations among issues in news media content. *H8* predicts similar relationships between presidential public relations messages and policymaking activities. Table 4 reports the findings. The data

Table 4. QAP linkages among presidential information subsidies, news coverage, and policymaking activities of issues.

Information Subsidy	News Media Coverage	Policymaking Activities
YouTube Weekly Addresses	.15	.23
Speeches	.46*	.43*
Press Briefings	.44*	.31
News Releases	.76***	.46*
Blogs	.40*	.41*
Twitter	.20	.18

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. QAP linkages among presidential information subsidies, news coverage, and policymaking activities of issue frames.

Information Subsidy	News Media Coverage	Policymaking Activities
YouTube Weekly Addresses	.16	.06
Speeches	.61*	.08
Press Briefings	.82**	.26
News Releases	.54	.27
Blogs	.69**	.35
Twitter	.59*	.28

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

support *H7* in four out of six possible comparisons, and the median correlation value is .42. For policymaking, the data support *H8* in three out of six possible comparisons, and the median correlation value is .36. In sum, modest evidence suggests that the salience of the network of associations for issues in presidential communications correlates with news content and policymaking activity.

Shifting to attribute salience, *H9* and *H10* predict that the network of associations among substantive issue attributes in presidential information subsidies positively correlates with the network of associations among these elements in news media content and policymaking activity. Table 5 summarizes the findings. *H9* is supported in four out of six possible comparisons. The median correlation value is a robust .60. The data do not support *H10* regarding policymaking in any of the possible comparisons. Taken as a whole then, the data suggest that the strongest relationships among political public relations messages, news content, and policymaking occur at the third level of agenda building.

Collective findings

Beyond examining associations across all three levels of agenda building, *RQ1* and *RQ2* explore the differences in correlations among the various information subsidies and news coverage, and information subsidies and policymaking activities, respectively, regarding object and attribute salience. Tables 6 and 7 report the summary results across information subsidies via the total number of significant correlations and the median correlation value for each information subsidy type with news content and policymaking

Table 6. Summary of agenda-building linkages between candidate information subsidies and news coverage across object and attribute salience.

Information Subsidy	Number of significant associations ^a	Median Correlation
YouTube Weekly Addresses	0	.15
Speeches	3	.46
Press Briefings	3	.45
News Releases	4	.76
Blogs	3	.42
Twitter	1	.25

^a Total number of possible associations for each information subsidy type is 5.

Table 7. Summary of agenda-building linkages between candidate information subsidies and policymaking activities across object and attribute salience.

Information Subsidy	Number of significant associations ^a	Median Correlation
YouTube Weekly Addresses	1	.23
Speeches	2	.04
Press Briefings	1	.31
News Releases	3	.46
Blogs	3	.52
Twitter	0	.28

^a Total number of possible associations for each information subsidy type is 5.

activities, respectively. Considering the number of significant associations to total possible associations, we found that news releases (4 out of 5), blogs (3 out of 5), speeches (3 out of 5), and press briefings (3 out of 5) are the top four most frequently associated information subsidies with media coverage. For policymaking, news releases (3 out of 5), blogs (3 out of 5) and speeches (2 out of 5) are the three most consistently linked subsidy types.

Discussion

These findings indicate three levels of agenda-building linkages among presidential information subsidies and national news content, and presidential information subsidies and policymaking activities, during the first six months of U.S. President Barack Obama's second term in office. Few previous studies have simultaneously examined three levels of agenda building all within one investigation and linked information subsidies with strategic *outcomes*, in this case Congressional policymaking activities, rather than just media coverage. The results of this study underscore the value in further explicating the emerging third level of agenda building (Kiousis et al., *in press*; Shultz et al., 2012) and extending the network agenda-setting model (Carroll, 2005a, 2005b; Guo, 2012, 2013) to a political strategic communication context, as the strongest linkages were found among network agendas.

Although the results of this study indicate that the president's priorities, as articulated in his presidential information subsidies, aligned to a decent degree with national media coverage and policymaking activities, the somewhat muted impact of his efforts may be due to his reduced popularity (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). President Obama started his second term in office with a hard-fought election win and a sharply divided country. Gallup (2013) data shows that Obama entered his second term in January 2013 with 53% public approval. That number had declined to 44% six months later. For further comparison, Obama entered office in late January 2009 with a commanding 67% approval rating (Gallup, 2013). Declining public opinion towards the president likely diminished his political capital and may have reduced his agenda-building influence (Fahmy et al., 2011; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008). Of course, the reduced agenda-building correlations could also be due to possible sampling, measurement, or research design issues so this represents one possible interpretation.

Theoretical implications

Several important theoretical implications emerged from this study. First, this analysis is unique in that it contributes to theory development by focusing on the application of agenda-building theory to an understudied area—political *governing*, rather than political campaigns (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011). Strategic political communication seeks to establish and communicate the salience of political priorities in news coverage, public opinion, and policymaking activities so as to achieve goals. Therefore, agenda-building theory provides a natural framework for exploring such relationships in an increasingly complex communication and media environment. The results of this study suggest that official and authoritative sources like the president still play a fundamental role in the political agenda-building process, but the raw power of this role in salience formation, transfer, and exchange among other stakeholder groups could be moderating (Meraz, 2009; Ragas & Tran, 2013; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013).

Second, this study clearly demonstrates that the agenda-building role and impact of different political information subsidies are *not* uniform and should *not* be treated as such (Kiousis et al., 2009). For example, at least from an agenda-building and noncampaign perspective, presidential news releases seemed to play an instrumental role. The effectiveness of specific subsidies also seems to vary across the levels of agenda building. For example, when it comes to both media coverage and policymaking, news releases seem ideal for conveying issue salience (first-level) and the substantive and affective framing of such issues (second-level). For issue tone, the priorities

expressed on the presidential blog and press briefings also appear consequential. At the third-level, in addition to news releases, blogs and press briefings, presidential speeches emerged as an effective tool for linking issues and making them salient together. Such insights and nuances would not have been possible if this study had been restricted to the analysis of only *one* level of agenda-building or *one* information subsidy type (Kiousis et al., 2013).

Third, this study complements and extends recent efforts to further agenda-building research to the study of strategic political outcomes (e.g., policymaking) rather than solely outputs such as media coverage (Kim & Kiousis, 2012; Kiousis et al., 2011, 2013, in press). Although media management is a meaningful step in managing public opinion and gauging success, in a political setting, determining the contribution a candidate or elected official's strategic communication efforts make on policymaking is paramount (Wirth et al., 2010). Even in the face of Obama's diminished political capital, this study's results show that some presidential public relations efforts were associated with a very consequential and strategic outcome—Congressional policymaking. More specifically, when looking at the linkages among presidential information subsidies and policymaking across three levels, two subsidy types stand out: news releases and blogs. A recent study by Kiousis and colleagues (2013) of the correlations among political subsidies, media coverage, and policymaking regarding the healthcare reform debate also found that traditional communication vehicles such as news releases were effective.

Finally, this may be the first study to extend and test the theorizing of the network agenda setting (NAS) model (Guo, 2012, 2013) to the agenda-building role of strategic communication efforts on policymaking. In practice, politicians and their political communication advisors not only attempt to bundle and make salient together pairs of issues or frames as part of a media relations strategy, but for this network agenda to impact policymaking discourse as well. Evidence in this study of significant linkages between the issue agenda network the president conveyed in his speeches, blog posts, and news releases with the issue agenda network articulated in Congressional policymaking activities, speaks to a subtle, more complex agenda-building impact than had previously been understood, prior to the explication of the third-level.

Practical implications

The White House has readily spoken of the challenges in attempting to manage the national conversations surrounding its political priorities in an increasingly complex communication environment (Kumar, 2007; Scherer, 2010). To better manage what Dan Pfeiffer, senior adviser to Obama on strategy and communication, has called the “constant swirl” of the news cyclone, the White House has broadened its political public relations efforts into a wider range of digital communication channels (Scherer, 2010). The results of this study provide evidence that these digital channels have varying levels of effectiveness in building the news and policymaking agendas. In particular, the White House blog was the most effective digital communication agenda-building tool at the start of Obama's second term. There is little to no evidence that the White House's Twitter account played a role in shaping coverage or policymaking. This may be due to the very short format of Twitter (i.e., 140 characters), which is adept at conveying breaking news, but has limited message carrying capacity.

These results indicate that cognitive factors are central to political information processing for journalists and policymakers. News releases, speeches, and blogs usually have more room for information about policies or issues than social network sites such as Twitter. The results may differ if public opinion data were included in the study. Compared to media or political professionals, the general public's information processing could be more influenced by their mood or affect. Hence, to explore the agenda-building role of social media content (Twitter), public opinion data would be a useful source in addition to the media and policymaking agendas.

The effectiveness of the White House blog at agenda building is particularly noteworthy when juxtaposed against another recent agenda-building study (Kiousis et al., in press), which looked at

the role of a wide range of political information subsidies during the preconvention phase of the 2012 U.S. presidential primaries. This aforementioned study also found that the candidate blogs were the most effective *digital* agenda-building tool. Although blogs receive less buzz than newer social media channels like Twitter, these findings suggest that blogs should remain a key component of communication strategy. Political blogs are often viewed as a key information source for journalists, but may play just as an important role for policymakers and their staffs. The longer-format nature of blogs allow for a more substantive presentation of issues by candidates and politicians than these other digital tools.

At the same time, the findings of the current study also speak to the continued value of using traditional, analog communication channels in building political agendas (Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2010). News releases were the most effective all-around information subsidy for both media management and policymaking. Although not as effective as news releases, presidential speeches also seemed to be a meaningful tool for both media management and policymaking. Taking a step back and looking at this study's findings from a high level, even in an era of digital communication (Avery & Graham, 2013; Parmalee, 2014), strategic communicators would seem well served to use a mix of digital and analog information subsidies to achieve political goals and objectives rather than adopt an "either or" philosophy.

Limitations and conclusions

As with any study, there are limitations that should be taken into account when reviewing these results and the conclusions drawn from them. Internal replications strengthened the reliability of the hypothesized relationships and results (Chaffee, 2009; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011), but this study was limited by its cross-sectional and correlation-based design. Such a design cannot get at causation among the presidential and media agendas. Future research should focus more on the time ordering and third-level variables in these relationships (Bryant, Thompson, & Finklea, 2013). For example, longitudinal designs would allow researchers to examine if there is mutual influence—agenda-sharing (Ragas, 2013a)—between the president and policymakers when it comes to setting policy agendas. As with any content analysis, this study is also limited by decisions made about the sampling procedure and coding protocol, which could introduce some level of sampling and measurement error into the results. As a research method, a content analysis is also limited by the availability of archived material to analyze. For example, there were far less policymaking material collected and used in the study than information subsidies and news articles. As such, only 20% of the available information subsidies and news articles were included in the study to achieve a more consistent sample size compared to policymaking material available. Also, a high level of reliability was achieved in coding, yet there may be questions about validity. As such, other research methods should be used in the future to support or refute these findings.

Further, the role of strategic political communication influence in governing should be extended from a national level down to statewide and municipal office levels (Avery & Graham, 2013), as well as in international settings. In addition, this study was conducted at the aggregate level of agendas and did not probe the specific influence of particular issues, frames, or tones. Future scholarship should consider such differences now that these baseline relationships have been established. Such research will help further establish the generalizability of these propositions and detect nuances based on places, people, and times. Finally, more types of political information subsidies and news content, such as broadcast coverage, should be probed and different markers of policymaking tested.

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