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# Time-lag analysis of the agenda-building process between White House public relations and congressional policymaking activity

White House  
public  
relations

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the linkages between public relations efforts and policymaking activity during a non-election setting.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a time-lag design, this study used content analysis to examine public relations materials and policymaking activity during the first six months of US President Barack Obama's second term. The public relations data were collected from the official White House website and social media. The policymaking data were collected from congressional calendars of business.

**Findings** – The data revealed varying degrees of support across the three levels of agenda-building for issues, attributes, and issue/attribute co-occurrence. Contrary to the expected relationship that public relations drives policymaking activity, the data suggest that policymaking activity was a stronger predictor of public relations material.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study provides modest support for time-lag agenda-building effects across three levels. However, future experimental research is needed to truly assess causal relationships. Future research should also explore alternative sources of data for policymaking activity.

**Practical implications** – This study demonstrates that the efficacy of information subsidy types is not uniform and should be chosen strategically. Traditional subsidy types were most effective for driving issues, while digital subsidy types provided more useful outlets for driving issue attributes.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to political public relations scholarship by exploring the temporal relationships between public relations efforts and policymaking activity in a non-election setting. The time-lag design serves as an exploratory inquiry into the agenda-building process.

**Keywords** Political public relations, Agenda building, Policymaking, Time-lag analysis

**Paper type** Research paper



The use of political public relations is a well-established practice, but the theoretical and empirical understanding of its role in political communication and governing is limited. As a growing academic field, the study of political public relations has primarily focused on political elections, particularly at the national level (e.g. Johnson *et al.*, 2004; Kioussis *et al.*, 2015; Liu, 2006). Although previous research has demonstrated the influence of

political public relations on elections and governing, more concerted efforts are needed for causal or predictive theory building to advance the field.

One of the central goals of political public relations is to identify and communicate the importance of political priorities in news coverage, public opinion, and policymaking (Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011). Relevant to determining the transfer and exchange of political issue salience, agenda-setting and agenda-building theories are valuable frameworks for understanding the use and influence of political public relations activities in relation to congressional policymaking activity (Kioussis *et al.*, 2011, 2013). However, it is important to differentiate between the two theories. Agenda-setting is the byproduct of journalism – the result of journalists reporting on certain issues that are in turn made salient in the minds of the public. On the other hand, agenda-building is the process by which strategic communication efforts are made on behalf of a variety of stakeholders by public relations practitioners to influence the news media, the public, or other stakeholders either directly or indirectly (Zhang *et al.*, 2016).

An extensive body of public relations research has examined the influence of information subsidies on the agenda-building process (e.g. Carroll, 2005a, b; Kioussis *et al.*, 2006; Sweetser and Brown, 2008), and most of these inquiries have focused on the salience of issues and attributes of news releases on media content. Scholars have also noted the limitations of examining a single information subsidy type and recommended that future research needs to include more diverse sources of information (Kioussis and Strömbäck, 2010). Additionally, the rapid rise of digital media warrants the inclusion of these sources along with traditional subsidy types in agenda-building research.

In addition to the salience of issues/objects (first-level), and issue/object attributes (second-level), scholars have explicated a third-level of agenda-building based on network theory (Guo *et al.*, 2012; Guo, 2013; Schultz *et al.*, 2012). Third-level agenda-building refers to the co-occurrence of elements (i.e. issue/object and attributes) that can influence the salience formation and transfer process across several stakeholder groups.

Much of the existing research is lacking in terms of examining the causal effects of agenda-building and furthermore focuses primarily on the role of public relations in campaigning as opposed to governing. Given this gap in research, and the need for explanatory and predictive models to enhance the understanding of political public relations, agenda-building scholarship can greatly benefit from time-lag analyses. A time-lag analysis serves as an initial exploratory step for future experimental work in order to determine causality. As such, this study examined the influence of multiple information subsidies on congressional policymaking activity during a non-election setting. Using a time-lag design to explore agenda-building, this study examined the agenda-building process at three levels during the first six months of US President Barack Obama's second term.

## Literature review

### *Political public relations*

The burgeoning field of political public relations consists of research from public relations, political communication, political science, and political marketing. From a political communication lens, McNair (2003) defines political public relations as “media and information management tactics designed to ensure that a party receives maximum favorable publicity, and the minimum of negative” (p. 7). However, this definition is not reflective of the contemporary understanding of public relations but is focused primarily on media, image, and information management (Moloney, 2008).

Zipfel (2008) defines political public relations as “the strategic communication activities of actors participating in the political process that aim at informative and persuasive goals in order to realize single interests” (p. 677). This definition assumes that political public relations is a one-way communication process and does not account for the many stakeholders involved in creating and influencing a shared goal or message.

However, Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011) offer a more comprehensive definition that is indicative of contemporary, relational public relations research and practice that also acknowledges the complexity of information exchange and formation by political actors. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the field and the need for a unifying conceptual definition, Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011) defined political public relations as “the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals” (p. 8).

Much of the existing research related to political public relations and agenda-building has focused on correlational relationships among information subsidies, news media, public opinion, and policymaking. In order to advance agenda-building as a theoretical framework and, in turn, offer greater insight into the study and practice of political public relations, more concerted efforts of identifying causal and predictive relationships need to be made. This advancement in research can be achieved by exploring possible causal relationships through time-lag analyses, coupled with experimental studies to more confidently assess causality in terms of agenda-building, and more broadly, political public relations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to begin addressing causal relationships, specifically by examining those between White House political public relations messages and congressional policymaking activity by employing a time-lag analysis.

### *First-level agenda-building*

In their seminal study of agenda-setting, McCombs and Shaw (1972) examined the transfer of issue salience from the media to the public. The original conceptualization of the relationship between the media and the public has received well-documented support and continues to enjoy a steady stream of scholarly research interest (McCombs, 2014; McCombs and Reynolds, 2009). The transfer of issue salience from the media to the public is thought of as the result of the media telling the public what to think about, but not how to think about an issue. The role of the media is central to the agenda-setting process, but scholars have also noted the fundamental influence other stakeholders have in terms of shaping agendas, known as agenda-building. In relation to political public relations, the influence of issue salience is created and shared by policymakers, political parties, candidates, voters, lobbyists, nonprofits, activists, businesses, and the like (Hughes and Dann, 2009). The agenda of political discourse is therefore created and maintained by a multitude of stakeholder groups, in addition to the media (Hughes and Dann, 2009).

First-level agenda-building has received significant support across many political stakeholder groups and contexts such as government agencies (Foster *et al.*, 2012), political parties (Hopmann *et al.*, 2010), political candidates (Kim *et al.*, 2011; Kioussis and Shields, 2008; Tedesco, 2005), and congressional leaders (Kioussis *et al.*, 2011). Despite the sheer number of stakeholders influencing the political public agenda, the

president remains one of the most influential stakeholders driving the agenda-building process (Parmalee, 2014). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H1. The salience of issues in public relations messages positively influences the salience of issues in policymaking activity after a three-month lag.

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### *Second-level agenda-building*

Extending agenda-setting theory, scholars have examined a second-level of agenda-building to include the salience of attributes – in other words, how an issue or object is framed. This line of research is concerned with the ways in which the news media or public relations efforts seek to highlight or emphasize certain features of an object or issue while disregarding others. Highlighting specific attributes of an object or issue, the news media or public relations activities seek to create a certain understanding about the object or issue, or tell people how to think about an object or issue.

The most prominent object or issue attributes identified in second-level agenda-building research are affective and substantive elements. Affective attributes refer to the emotional elements of a message or object/issue. The most common way to measure affective attributes is to assess the overall tone of a message, typically as positive, neutral, or negative (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). Studies have shown support for affective attribute salience in a variety of political contexts, such as news media influence on public evaluations of politicians and political issues (Sheafer, 2007), political candidates (Kim and McCombs, 2007), and foreign nations (Wanta and Mikusova, 2010).

Substantive attributes refer to the cognitive elements of a message. Among the most common substantive attributes that have been examined are the conflict, human interest, problem definition, responsibility attribution, moral evaluation, and consequence assessment frames (De Vreese, 2003, 2005; Shah *et al.*, 2001; De Vreese *et al.*, 2001; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; Hallahan, 1999; Knight, 1999; Price *et al.*, 1997; Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991). Similar to affective attribute salience, support for substantive issue salience in the agenda-building literature has been identified for special interest groups (Yao, 2009) gubernatorial candidates (Kioussis *et al.*, 2006), presidential campaigns (Heim, 2013), and public health communication (Rim *et al.*, 2014). Given the previous research, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H2. The salience of substantive issue attributes in public relations messages positively influences the salience of substantive issue attributes in policymaking activity after a three-month lag.

### *Third-level agenda-building*

Most recently, scholars have been examining a third-level of agenda-building, which is concerned with the co-occurrence of issues and/or attributes within an agenda. In other words, when issues and/or attributes occur together within an agenda, the likelihood of those attributes and issues being jointly seen as salient increases (Guo, 2013; Guo and McCombs, 2011a, b; Kioussis *et al.*, 2013; Schultz *et al.*, 2012; McCombs, 2014). The explication of the third-level, also known as network agenda-setting, originated with Carroll's (2005a, b) work and network theory. Summarized by Guo *et al.* (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 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).

Results from Kioussis *et al.*'s (2016) study suggest strong support for the third-level of agenda-building for political public relations messages and news media content. More specifically, speeches, press briefings, blogs, and Twitter were found to have the strongest relationships for issue and attribute salience as opposed to the other subsidies examined, including weekly addresses, news releases, Facebook, and Google+. Relatedly, the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of political public relations message on policymaking activity. Therefore, the following network association hypotheses are proposed:

- H3. The salience of network associations among issues in public relations messages influences the salience of network associations among issues in policymaking activity after a three-month lag.
- H4. The salience of network associations among substantive issue attributes in public relations messages influences the salience of network associations among substantive issue attributes in policymaking activity after a three-month lag.

#### *Causal effects of agenda-building: time-lag analysis*

While much of the existing literature has focused on the influence of communication outputs, that is, the relationship between information subsidies and news media, scholars have highlighted the importance of assessing communication outcomes, such as behaviors and actions (Hon, 1997, 1998; Kim, 2001; Ragas, 2013; Watson, 2012) in order to understand the effectiveness of public relations efforts. One of the central goals of political public relations is to stimulate shifts in attitudes or behavior (Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011). In terms of presidential public relations, shifts in attitudes or behavior can be observed in the form of policymaking activity. For example, Kioussis *et al.* (2016) found that issue salience in presidential information subsidies were positively linked to issue salience in policymaking activity.

As previously discussed, a central focus of this study is to evaluate communication outcomes. Although only a few agenda-building studies have examined such outcomes (Carroll *et al.*, 2014; Kioussis *et al.*, 2013; Wirth *et al.*, 2010) with regard to objects and attributes, this study is concerned with examining the salience of objects and attributes in terms of policymaking outcomes. Furthermore, the co-occurrence of issues and/or attributes as being salient together is another integral part of the current analysis. For example, the ability of the Obama administration to not only make a certain issue (e.g. gun control) salient, but also connect that issue with a substantive frame (e.g. cooperation – two groups working together), would be seemingly important for promoting a bipartisan bill. Thus, a major purpose of this study is to examine the third-level of agenda-building relationship between political public relations messages from the White House and congressional policymaking activity.

Given that previous studies have observed relationships at all three levels cross-sectionally, the current project extends such research and uses a time-lag design to begin exploring the causal effects of agenda-building. Time-lag analysis was first used to examine how long media agenda-setting effects remain and which media messages (among different time frames) have the most impact on public opinion (i.e. Roberts *et al.*, 2002; Stone and McCombs, 1981; Winter and Eyal, 1981). Using different time frames,

scholars have found that the optimal time span can be different by the type of media from a few weeks to months (i.e. national network newscasts: one week, regional newspapers: three weeks, or local newspapers: four weeks) (Wanta and Hu, 1994). For example, Shoemaker *et al.* (1989) found that a three- or four-month span would be most influential between media coverage and public opinion.

Given that previous research suggests that public relations efforts influence media coverage, similar patterns in relation to policymaking activity are expected. Scholars have also longitudinally examined how the media influences various policy agendas (e.g. van Noije *et al.*, 2008; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2011) and how the media can influence other media over time (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2008). However, the possibility that policymaking drives public relations messaging will be explored in the statistical analysis. Moving beyond descriptive or correlational analyses, this study advances the exploration of causal theory-building in political public relations by employing a time-lag analysis, while also drawing attention to the need for future experimental studies to more confidently assess causality effects.

### *Agenda-building and digital communication*

The role of digital media in political public relations has been recognized as an increasingly important source of communication for the agenda-building process. Improved accessibility and low costs make digital media an attractive method to disseminate information and engage with political stakeholders. Recent studies have shown that digital media tools are highly effective when aimed at promoting greater candidate-voter dialogue (Adams and McCorkindale, 2013; Conway *et al.*, 2013; Vaccari, 2013), strengthening existing relationships between representatives and their constituencies (Johnson, 2012; Reber and Kim, 2006), or increasing overall political engagement (Murphy, 2012).

However, the influence of digital information subsidies, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the like, on the media agenda have proved to be inconclusive (Lariscy *et al.*, 2009; Parmalee, 2014). Heim's (2013) content analysis of the 2008 Iowa Democratic caucus primaries analyzed the attribute agendas of major news sources, partisan political blogs, and the news releases of the top three candidates. He reported an intermedia agenda-setting effect between the news media and the Clinton campaign, but bloggers were not able to dictate the campaign narrative and invert control from traditional journalists. A related analysis of the 2004 presidential election examined the role of political advertisements and candidate blogs on media coverage (Sweetser *et al.*, 2008). The results indicated a strong influence from the news media to the campaigns. Other subsidies have highlighted reciprocal influence between digital information subsidy types and mainstream news media, whether at the presidential level (Ku *et al.*, 2003), state level (Sayre *et al.*, 2010), or the daily commentary of political news (Meraz, 2009). Despite the relatively mixed results regarding the influence of digital information subsidies, it is, however, clear that impact varies by subsidy type. To explore the influence of different information subsidy types on policymaking activity, the following research question is proposed:

*RQ1.* How do the relationships between information subsidy types and policymaking activity vary regarding object and attribute salience?

### **Method**

To address the proposed hypotheses and research question, a quantitative content analysis was conducted. The time frame of this study was January 1-June 31, 2013,



representing the first six months of the Obama administration's second term. This time frame was chosen in order to capture the president's public relations materials in a non-election setting, avoid any potential campaign material by focusing only on communication activities related to policymaking or governing, and to ensure the communication activity was not impacted by any episodic events. To examine the Obama administration's public relations activities, six weekly addresses, 53 speeches and remarks, 20 press briefings, 117 statements and releases, 109 blog posts, 16 Facebook updates, 385 tweets, and 31 Google+ updates were analyzed.

Consistent with prior research (Kioussis *et al.*, 2011, 2013), policymaking activity was collected from the House Calendar of Business (general order), the Senate Calendar of Business (general order), and the Daily Congressional Record (Daily Digest). A total of 177 congressional calendars were examined.

### *Time frame*

Two time periods were chosen in this study: Time 1 (T1: January 1-March 31, 2013) and Time 2 (T2: April 1-June 30, 2013). In total, 338 public relations information subsidies were collected in T1 and 399 were collected in T2. Regarding the congressional policymaking activities, 85 congressional records were collected in T1 and 92 were collected in T2.

### *Sampling procedure*

The official White House website ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)) was used to collect speeches and remarks, statements and releases, and press briefings. The remaining presidential public relations material was collected from the White House's official blog, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and YouTube channel. Public relations materials were systematically sampled given the large amount of data, resulting in 20 percent of the total population for the six-month time frame.

### *Object salience measurement*

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

### *Attribute salience measurement*

*Issue frames.* Consistent with previous research, the following seven categories were used to code 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 between groups, cooperation between groups, intentional description of an issue, attribution of responsibility for an issue, placement of a "human face" on an issue, economic consequences of an issue, or moral and religious aspects of an issue. Each issue frame was coded as 1 present or 0 absent. Examples of these frames are shown in Table I.

### *Inter coder reliability*

Two trained coders conducted the content analysis of information subsidies and policymaking activity. Inter coder reliability was measured by randomly selecting

**Table I.**  
Issue fame  
conceptualizations  
and examples

Frame	Conceptualization	Example
Conflict	Underlines the conflicting nature of an issue by emphasizing the polarization between two groups, institutions, or ideologies	Describing the different viewpoints of Republicans and Democrats on a piece of legislation
Cooperation	Emphasizes the cooperation between two groups or institutions	Describing the joint efforts of an NPO and political figure to pass legislation
Problem definition	Contains a deliberate description about an issue	Describing the conflict of the Affordable Care Act while ignoring the outcomes
Attribution of responsibility	Emphasizes the attribution of responsibility for a problem to a person, institution, or government	Attributing the state of the economy to a specific political party
Human interest	Brings a “human face” to an issue by focusing on people who are or will be affected by an issue	Describing or profiling a woman who will have access to birth control as a result of legislation
Economic consequences	Reports an event/issue/problem in terms of the consequences they will have on people or institutions	Describing the amount of money small businesses will save as a result of legislation
Morality	Emphasizes the moral and religious aspect of an issue/event/problem	Describing the moral or religious beliefs for limiting funding to women’s health clinics

a subsample (10 percent) of each message type and double coding. Holsti’s (1969) score and Scott’s (1955) Pi were used to assess reliability, the latter of which corrects for chance agreement. The average Holsti’s scores were 0.95, 0.94, and 0.90 (issue, issue frame, and issue tone), respectively; and the average Scott’s Pi scores were 0.84, 0.81, and 0.75, respectively. According to Riffe *et al.* (1998), the minimum requirement for reliability is 0.70, with an ideal reliability between 0.80 and 0.90.

*Data analysis*

This study used Spearman’s  $\rho$  cross-lagged correlations (e.g. McCombs and Shaw, 1972) to assess the first- and second-level hypotheses regarding the transfer of issue salience and substantive issue attribute salience between the two agendas. To test third-level hypotheses, UCINET 6.0 (Borgatti *et al.*, 1999) was used to generate quadratic assignment procedure (QAP) correlations, which measured the network agenda associations between the various agendas (e.g. Guo and McCombs, 2011a, b). A lagged model was used here as well to assess temporal order, more specifically, a three-month lag between Time 1 public relations messages and Time 2 policymaking activity as well as Time 1 policymaking activity and Time 2 public relations messages. While a lagged model is not the most sophisticated approach for assessing agenda-building linkages, the current analysis was limited by the relatively small number of data points included in the study, making more advanced procedures, such as ARIMA or VAR, inappropriate (Box and Jenkins, 1970; Vliegthart, 2014).

**Results**

*H1* expected that the salience of issues in public relations messages will predict the salience of issues in policymaking activity. As shown in Table II, the results only support this hypothesis in one of eight possible comparisons, while supporting the opposite prediction in three of eight possible comparisons. Thus, policymaking activity seems to drive political public relations messages in terms of issue salience, in contrast to the expectation of the proposed model.

*H2* expected that the salience of substantive issue attributes in public relations messages will predict the salience of substantive issue attributes in policymaking activity. Table III reports the findings. As shown in the table, the results support this hypothesis in two of eight possible comparisons and suggest reciprocal influence in a third case. Thus, only weak support was gleaned for this hypothesis, but a pattern did emerge indicating stronger relationships for social media tools.

*H3* expected that the salience of network associations for issues in public relations messages predicts the salience of network associations for issues in policymaking activities. As depicted in Table IV, the hypothesis was supported in two cases while the

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Information subsidy   T1 public relations → T2 policymaking   T1 policymaking → T2 public relations

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Weekly addresses	0.41	0.10
Speeches	0.29	0.66***
Press briefings	0.39	0.50*
News releases	0.48*	0.32
Blogs	0.20	0.67**
Facebook	-0.09	-0.30
Twitter	0.26	0.31
Google+	-0.11	-0.10

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

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**Table II.**  
Linkages among  
presidential  
information  
subsidies and  
policymaking  
activities of issues

---

Information subsidy   T1 public relations → T2 policymaking   T1 policymaking → T2 public relations

---

Weekly addresses	-0.35	0.32
Speeches	0.13	-0.05
Press briefings	0.23	0.11
News releases	0.45	0.54
Blogs	0.65*	0.31
Facebook	0.17	0.32
Twitter	0.62*	0.67*
Google+	0.78**	0.49

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

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**Table III.**  
Linkages among  
presidential  
information  
subsidies and  
policymaking  
activities of  
substantive  
issue attributes

---

Information subsidy   T1 public relations → T2 policymaking   T1 policymaking → T2 public relations

---

Weekly addresses	-0.07	0.20
Speeches	0.34	0.52*
Press briefings	0.22	0.29
News releases	0.40*	0.40
Blogs	0.33	0.44*
Facebook	-0.01	-0.02
Twitter	0.45*	0.14
Google+	0.12	0.09

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$

---

**Table IV.**  
QAP linkages  
between presidential  
information  
subsidies and  
policymaking  
activities of issues

opposite pattern was found in two other instances. Thus, only weak support was observed for this relationship.

*H4* predicted that the salience of network associations among substantive issue attributes in public relations messages predicts the salience of network associations among substantive issue attributes in policymaking activities. Due to a lack of variance in the data, statistical comparisons were not possible, so *H4* is not supported.

In addition to examining associations across all three levels of agenda-building, *RQ1* explored what the differences were among the various information subsidies and policymaking activities regarding object and attribute salience. Table V reports the summary results for all information subsidy types via the total number of significant correlations and the median correlation value for each type with policymaking activity. Among the eight different types of information subsidies, blogs, Twitter, speeches, and news releases showed the most meaningful relationships with policymaking activity.

Discussion and conclusions

In order to advance both the theoretical and practical understanding of political public relations, this study examined the three levels of agenda-building across presidential public relations messages and congressional policymaking activity. The results provide some support for the three levels but mixed results for time-lagged analysis. The proposed model expected that political public relations messages would influence policymaking. While the results support this relationship modestly, they also suggest that policymaking may drive political public relations. This relationship could be due to the competing priorities among political stakeholders in shaping the policymaking process, of which the president is only a single, albeit significant, contributor.

This study offers unique insight into the time-lag agenda-building relationships between two branches of government, how tailored messages affect those relationships, and how the medium in which those messages are disseminated influences their outcome efficacy. By focusing on the policy outcomes through a temporal lens, the subtle differences throughout presidential information subsidies become clearer. Consistent with previous research (Kiousis *et al.*, 2009; Kiousis and Shields, 2008; Kiousis and Strömbäck, 2010; Miller, 2010), the results of this study demonstrate that uniformity does not exist for both how and to what extent differing information subsidies contribute to the agenda-building process.

Table V.  
Agenda-building  
linkages between  
information  
subsidies and  
policymaking  
activity across  
object and  
attribute salience

Information subsidy	T1 public relations → T2 policymaking		T1 policymaking → T2 public relations	
	Number of significant associations	Median correlation <sup>a</sup>	Number of significant associations	Median correlation <sup>a</sup>
Weekly addresses	0	n/a	0	n/a
Speeches	0	n/a	2	0.59
Press briefings	0	n/a	1	0.50
News releases	2	0.44	0	n/a
Blogs	1	0.65	2	0.56
Facebook	0	n/a	0	n/a
Twitter	2	0.54	1	0.67
Google+	1	0.78	0	n/a

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Value calculated by identifying the total number of significant associations for each subsidy type, within each time-lag relationship, and calculating the median score of the associations

*Theoretical implications*

Time-lag analysis results suggest weak support of agenda-building relationships between presidential public relations messages and congressional policymaking activity. A time-lag agenda-building relationship was found from presidential news releases to policymaking activity in terms of issue salience, while few relationships were found from presidential blogs and Google+ to policymaking activity regarding substantive attribute salience. Twitter showed reciprocal relationships in terms of substantive attribute salience. At the third level, agenda-building influences of presidential news releases and Twitter were found on congressional policymaking activity.

The first hypothesis predicted that the salience of issues in public relations messages will predict the salience of issues in policymaking activity. Of the information subsidies examined, only news releases were shown to predict the salience of issues in policymaking activity. This finding is consistent with extensive previous research that shows news releases are an influential information subsidy in the agenda-building process (Hopmann *et al.*, 2010; McCombs, 2014; Turk, 1986; Wanta and Ghanem, 2007) and continue to be important tools for political public relations even with the growing influx of different digital communication tools.

Contrary to the proposed model of political public relations influence on policymaking, the results indicate that policymaking may actually determine political public relations in terms of issue salience for governing. In this case, policymaking was shown to shape presidential speeches, press briefings, and the White House blog for issue salience. Although these results are at odds with the conceptual notion of political public relations influencing policymaking, they also may indicate a more nuanced understanding of different subsidy types. For example, the Obama administration seems to use speeches, press briefings, and the White House blog to communicate with political stakeholders about ongoing policymaking activity, given the reverse direction of influence, while using news releases as a tool for initiating political issues to influence policymaking.

The second hypothesis expected that the salience of substantive issue attributes in public relations messages predicts the salience of substantive issue attributes in policymaking activity. The results support this hypothesis for two subsidy types (White House blog and Google+) and indicate a shared influence for Twitter. The role of digital media in political public relations has been recognized as an increasingly important source of communication for the agenda-building process. Although minimally supported, the results of this hypothesis suggest a stronger relationship for issue attribute salience formation and transfer for social media than for traditional information subsidies. These findings are consistent with previous research that show digital media positively influence the agenda-building process (e.g. Kioussis *et al.*, 2013) and also embody a shared influence with the mainstream media (e.g. Ku *et al.*, 2003; Meraz, 2009; Sayre *et al.*, 2010), or in this study, policymaking activity. Despite the existing and current mixed results regarding the strength and direction of influence for digital information subsidies, it is clear that digital media are indeed contributing to the agenda-building process for political public relations.

The third hypothesis expected that the salience and co-occurrence of issues in public relations messages predicts the co-occurrence of issues in policymaking activity. This relationship was minimally supported with only news releases and Twitter shown to predict policymaking activity for the co-occurrence of issues. Consistent with first-level results in terms of subsidy type, news releases are shown to predict the co-occurrence of issues while speeches and blogs were influenced by policymaking activity. These results further demonstrate the dynamic relationship between the president's ability to

connect certain political issues with each other, and make salient or transfer those connections to policymaking activity.

The president and congress are two of the most powerful agenda builders involved in the practice of political public relations, and by examining their agenda relationships, scholars have found a positive influence by the president on the congressional agenda for multiple policy issues (Rutledge and Price, 2014). While the scholars found a significant presidential agenda-setting role in the policymaking process, they also suggested a reciprocal influence between the two (Rutledge and Price, 2014). Our current investigation also added evidence of the reactive relationships through the empirical testing – issue, substantive attributes, and their co-occurrence. Moreover, this study suggested that we may need to consider the different agenda-building role of multimedia platforms predicting the direction of the relationships.

### *Practical implications*

Overall, the results suggest that blogs, Twitter, speeches, and news releases have the most consistent agenda-building associations between presidential public relations and congressional policymaking activity. While election campaigns have been the prevalent agenda-building study context in previous political public relations scholarship (i.e. Heim, 2013; Kiouisis and Shields, 2008; Tedesco, 2005), the current inquiry expanded the understanding of the agenda-building role of public relations information subsidies in a non-election communication setting. Presidential public relations information subsidies play a significant role in affecting congressional policymaking activity suggesting what issues would be discussed and how the issues are discussed.

Specifically, the strategic role of information subsidies was explored in terms of policymaking activity, one of the most important political public relations outcomes, among eight different forms of information subsidies. The findings confirmed that the time-lag agenda-building relationships were found for both traditional (news releases) and digital communication subsidies (White House blog and Google+), and the role of information subsidies is not consistent among the different types of communication tools. Hence, the strategic use of each communication medium is suggested for political public relations practitioners. For example, traditional information subsidies such as news releases were more effective for guiding what issues should be discussed, while digital information subsidies such as the White House blog or Google+ were more effective for guiding how the issues should be addressed. These results are also consistent with the findings of Kiouisis *et al.* (2009) during statewide election campaigns.

Furthermore, our study examined the relationships between two time periods – three months each. This provides practitioners another applied consideration regarding timing of the agenda-building process. Prior scholarship has investigated the relationship in weekly or monthly intervals (i.e. Edwards and Wood, 1999; Rutledge and Price, 2014). Our results may show that the strong influence of the president on the congressional agenda may weaken in a few months, and in the mid-term (three months, for instance), congress may have more of a chance to affect the presidential agenda using multimedia platforms.

Finally, our current investigation also added empirical evidence regarding the relationships on three different levels of agenda-building – issue, substantive attributes, and their co-occurrence. The results show that the relationship is not only dependent on certain issues (Rutledge and Price, 2014), but also combinations of issues. Expanding from object and attribute salience relationships, network theory was suggested as a way

to understand and explore the associations of co-occurrence of objects/attributes between agendas (i.e. Guo *et al.*, 2012; Guo and McCombs, 2011a, b). Hence, our study suggests that practitioners should consider what issues can be discussed together effectively. For example, agenda-building effects were most frequently evident when economic issues dealt with healthcare or foreign policy issues together in news releases, and the effects were consistently significant when economic issues dealt with healthcare or education issues on Twitter. Moreover, the results of this study indicate that news releases and Twitter can be the most effective agenda-building tools on policymaking activity in terms of the co-occurrence of issues.

### *Limitations and future study*

The current study has some limitations worth noting when interpreting the results. The findings are limited to only analyzing data that are publicly available via the chosen information subsidies. It should be noted that internal communication strategies can significantly impact policy-making activity, and while mediated communication may reflect these strategies, it is impossible to fully understand the agenda-building process without access to this data. Due to the lack of variance in the data, time-lag analysis of second-level agenda-building (substantive attributes) was not possible. Future inquiries should identify alternative sources of data for policymaking activity that may provide more detailed substantive attributes. This study also only focused on the substantive dimension of issue attributes. Future scholarship may include time-lag analysis for both substantive and affective dimensions of issue attributes. The current study used a three-month time lag to explore the relationship between presidential information subsidies and policymaking activity among eight different types of information subsidies; however, the optimal time span for time-lag analysis should be examined further. Depending on the characteristics of media, optimal time lags can vary from a few hours to months. Although the results show some support for time-lag agenda-building effects, experimental designs are needed to truly assess causal relationships and are recommended for future study in political public relations.

Furthermore, the results show the direction of influence between public relations information subsidies and policymaking activity is not uniform. In particular, Twitter was found to be an effective communication tool for both directions in terms of substantive attributes. This reciprocal communication strategy, particularly with digital communication tools, should be explored further in future research. This may be particularly useful for identifying the utility of various subsidy types for communicating about ongoing political issues or for initiating or influencing policy. Additionally, contextual factors such as presidential and congressional approval rating should be considered in future research when interpreting the results, along with the political makeup of both government branches (Republican and Democrat). And finally, future research should explore which issues/attributes that co-occur are the most salient. Identifying these patterns will aid practitioners in creating more strategic, salient messages to communicate their political priorities.

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