EXPLORING NEW FRONTIERS OF AGENDA BUILDING DURING THE 2012 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PRE-CONVENTION PERIOD
Examining linkages across three levels

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Grounded in an agenda-building theoretical perspective, this study explored in depth the relationships between political campaign information subsidies and elite national news media coverage. Specifically, this investigation examined three levels of agenda-building linkages (object, attribute, and network connections) simultaneously during the 2012 US Presidential Election pre-convention period between Barack Obama (Democrat) and Mitt Romney (Republican). A total of 2655 campaign information subsidies and 345 news stories were content analyzed. The results suggest solid support for all three levels of agenda building. Our findings indicate the strongest linkages were at the third level for stakeholder network associations and at the second level for substantive issue frames. Campaign blog posts, press releases, and issue platforms were the most effective agenda-building tools at this phase of the election campaign. The theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS   agenda building; information subsidies; Network Agenda Setting model; political campaigns; political public relations

Introduction

According to Strömbäck and Kiousis (2011, 8), political public relations can be defined as "the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals." Prior studies have emphasized the necessity of political public relations garnering public support for candidates or policies (Froehlich and Rüdiger 2006; Trammell 2006). Despite its impact, our theoretical and empirical understanding of political public relations is underdeveloped when compared to other arenas of public relations and political communication scholarship (e.g., Jackson 2010).

Among the key objectives of political public relations efforts are to establish and communicate the salience of political priorities in media coverage, public opinion, and policymaking (Strömbäck and Kiousis 2011). Given their emphasis on salience formation, transfer, and exchange, agenda-building and agenda-setting theories offer germane

conceptual frameworks for better understanding the role of political public relations in elections and governance (Kiousis, Laskin, and Kim 2011; Kiousis et al. 2006; Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban 1999; McCombs 2004).

A limitation with much of the existing empirical work in agenda building is the tendency to focus on just one type of information subsidy and presume that this represents all communication efforts from political communicators. Recent research suggests, however, that this may be a questionable assumption (e.g., Kiousis et al. 2009; Kiousis and Shields 2008; Kiousis and Strömbäck 2010; Miller 2010), especially with the growing impact of digital communications (Ragas and Kiousis 2010). Thus, this study explores the agenda-building role of multiple information subsidies, from traditional to digital messages.

In addition to the explicated linkages among object and attribute salience, recent conceptual developments in agenda-setting theory suggest an extension of the model to examine *networks of associations* among agenda elements (Guo 2012; Schultz et al. 2012). That is, the *co-occurrence* of elements (objects and attributes) on agendas can impact on the process of salience formation and transfer across stakeholder groups (Carroll 2005b). As a consequence, we apply this expansion to agenda building in the present study. Because most scholarship has focused on the general election or primary period, the present investigation contributes to the existing literature by scrutinizing the understudied period between the completion of the primaries and party conventions, a time that had substantial activity during the 2012 election cycle. As such, the purpose of our research is to fill this gap in scholarship and study the agenda-building process at three levels using multiple information subsidies during the 2012 US Presidential Election pre-convention period between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

Literature Review

Election Backdrop

The 2012 US Presidential Election pitted the incumbent, President Barack Obama (Democrat), against the challenger, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney (Republican), in a highly competitive race for the White House. This tight contest was one of the most expensive elections in US history, with the two candidates intensely competitive on a range of issues, including the economy, healthcare, and foreign policy. Obama signed the 2010 healthcare bill to reform the healthcare system and improve patient care; on the other hand, Romney proposed repealing the bill and making changes to Medicare. Obama and Romney also showed significant differences on economic policies. For example, Obama supported a tax cut for the middle class, while raising taxes for higher income taxpayers; Romney, on the other hand, proposed a tax cut across all income levels (Steber 2012).

Cumulatively, the two campaigns directly raised more than $1 billion dollars. The inclusion of donations from party committees and primary super political action committees (PACs) saw this total increase to nearly $2 billion (Ashkenas et al. 2012). Millions of dollars were invested by both campaigns in using a diverse range of traditional and digital information subsidies (Wortham 2012) to shape the salience of issues, candidates, and their stakeholders in media coverage (Sullivan 2012). The pre-convention period of the campaign was particularly active as the two candidates attempted to articulate their agendas to the public by working through the news media.

First-level Agenda Building

In its classic conceptualization, agenda setting examined the transfer of issue salience from the media to the public (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Support for the basic theoretical relationship has been found in numerous studies (for a recent review, see McCombs and Reynolds 2009). While issues were the original focus of research, scholars have noted that conceptually 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.

In contrast to agenda setting, agenda building in political public relations explores the reciprocal linkages among several stakeholder groups in the process of salience formation, transfer, and exchange (Hughes and Dann 2009). These groups include policymakers, news media, businesses, voters, interest groups, activists, candidates, parties, and so forth. Empirical support for first-level agenda building has been gleaned in a number of investigations (e.g., Kim, Xiang, and Kiousis 2011; Kiousis and Strömbäck 2010; Kiousis and Wu 2008; Ragas, Kim, and Kiousis 2011; Roberts and McCombs 1994; Sweetser and Brown 2008). The primary strategy for activating news attention in agenda building is through the use of information subsidies. According to Gandy (1982, 8), information subsidies can be defined as "efforts to reduce the prices faced by others for certain information in order to increase its consumption." Elsewhere, Lieber and Golan (2011, 60) succinctly define them as "the currency of the trade within the marketplace of information."

Perhaps the most widely used and analyzed type of information subsidy is the standard news release. News releases have been shown to play a meaningful role in shaping news coverage. For example, research suggests that up to 80 percent of news content is generated from information subsidies, particularly in the form of news releases (e.g., Sweetser and Brown 2008). A robust body of research has offered strong empirical support that the salience of objects in news releases contributes to the media agenda (McCombs 2004; Turk 1986).

Scholars have also studied the role of other types of information subsidies in the agenda-building process. Considerable effort has been spent examining the impact of political advertising (e.g., Ghorpade 1986; Lopez-Escobar et al. 1998; Ragas and Kiousis 2010). In particular, Roberts and McCombs (1994) scrutinized the influence of political advertising 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 broadcast news content during the 1996 Presidential Election.

Other types of information subsidies that have been investigated include debates, political speeches, and issue platform statements (e.g., Kiousis and Shields 2008; Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2008). Despite this prior work, what is lacking is research that examines *multiple* information subsidies and object types within the *same* analysis (Miller 2010). A major assumption implicit in most agenda-building research is that relationships across different types of information subsidies are similar, yet when tested this has not always been the case (Kiousis et al. 2009; Kiousis and Strömbäck 2010). For example, the investigation by Kiousis et al. of campaign information subsidies during the 2006 election cycle found stronger associations between candidate news releases and media content regarding issue salience, but stronger linkages between candidate advertisements and media content for attribute salience.

Agenda Building and Digital Communications

In addition to looking at a more diverse range of information subsidies, scholars have also documented the need to better understand the role of digital communications tools, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Waters, Tindall, and Morton 2010). The use of these new communication vehicles as agenda-building tools has risen dramatically in recent election cycles (Woolley, Limperos, and Oliver 2010), meriting greater scholarly scrutiny. Unlike traditional information subsidies, these digital tools are touted for their potential to promote dialogue, thereby leading to enhanced relationships and reputations between organizations and their constituencies (Reber and Kim 2006).

In an analysis during the 2004 Presidential Election, researchers compared the role of political advertisements and candidate blogs on media coverage (Sweetser, Golan, and Wanta 2008). Their findings revealed strong connections between both information subsidy types with coverage, although the direction of influence seemed to flow from the 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, and Pfau 2003).

Second-level Agenda Building

In addition to object salience, scholars have examined attribute salience as a component of the agenda-setting and agenda-building processes. These inquiries demonstrate that news media (or public relations efforts) highlight certain *aspects* of objects while simultaneously ignoring others to help stakeholders develop an under-standing about objects (e.g., Fahmy et al. 2011; Schultz et al. 2012; Wanta, Golan, and Lee 2004). Linked to framing research, the second-level agenda-setting (and agenda-building) literature suggests that media (and public relations activities) play a role in shifting public opinion by telling stakeholders "how to think about" objects (e.g., Carroll and McCombs 2003; Kiousis et al. 2006; McCombs and Reynolds 2009; Wang and Shoemaker 2011; Wanta, Golan, and Lee 2004).

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 (2004) also explained that communication messages help people cognitively structure perceptions about objects. Issue frames, corporate reputation attributes, or candidate image attributes are examples of the substantive attribute dimension used in prior agenda-building (and agenda-setting) studies (e.g., Carroll and McCombs 2003; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Kiousis et al. 2006). In a gubernatorial election context, Kiousis et al. (2006) found connections between the portrayal of candidate attributes (i.e., issue positions, biographical information, qualifications, personality, and integrity) in candidate news releases and media coverage. In the current study, candidate attributes have been used to examine the salience of substantive attributes along with campaign issue frames (i.e., issue/policy, game/horse race, scandal, media, conflict, human interest, consequence assessment, and personalization) (e.g., Entman 1993; Scheufele 2006; Painter et al. 2010).

Affective attributes focus 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 influences how individuals perceive them. In the context of elections, Kim et al. (2011) found supportive evidence of affective attribute associations between candidate public relations materials and global media coverage of the 2008 Presidential Election. Although research also suggests that arousal is an important dimension of affective attributes (Coleman and Wu 2010; Kim 2012; Kim and Kiousis 2012), the emphasis of the present study is tone concerning portrayals of issues. Scholars have found that the evaluative tone of media coverage can directly affect how publics perceive an overall object (e.g., Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban 1999; Schoenbach and Semetko 1992; Sheafer 2007).

Third-level Agenda Building

Given the established role of object and attribute salience, current theoretical and empirical work has explicated that the *connections* among elements on different agendas—dubbed third-level or Network Agenda Setting—can impact on the salience formation and transfer process (e.g., Guo and McCombs 2011a, 2011b; Schultz et al. 2012; Vu, Guo, and McCombs 2012). The theoretical origins of this perspective can be traced to the work of Carroll (2005a, 2005b), though empirical testing came later. As summarized by Guo, the Network Agenda Setting model:

> asserts that the salience of the network relationships among objects and attributes can be transferred from the news media to the public. In addition to shaping the perceived importance of news items separately in the public's mind as the traditional approach suggests, this new model suggests the news media can actually make *bundles* of items prominent simultaneously. (Guo 2012, 619, italics added)

Hence, the co-occurrence of certain objects and/or attributes 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 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 political outcomes.

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 connect with 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 policymaking 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 at the time—thereby making these elements less salient in relation to one another—it is possible that a different policy strategy may have been engendered. By extension then, we explore such possible network agenda-building associations within the context of the 2012 US Presidential Election pre-convention period. This time range is important from both an empirical standpoint because of limited research in this area and from a practical perspective because so much campaign activity occurred in this election compared to prior presidential elections.

Hypotheses and Research Question

Based on the theoretical framework explicated above on first-level, second-level, and third-level agenda building, the following hypotheses and research question are offered[1]:

H1: The relative emphasis of issues in public relations messages will be positively connected to the relative emphasis of issues in news media content.

H2: The relative emphasis of stakeholders in public relations messages will be positively connected to the relative emphasis of stakeholders in news media content.

H3: The relative emphasis of issue attributes in public relations messages will be positively connected to the relative emphasis of issue attributes in news media content.

H4: The relative emphasis of candidate image attributes in public relations messages will be positively connected to the relative emphasis of candidate image attributes in news media content.

H5: The tone of issue portrayals in public relations messages will be positively connected to the tone of issue portrayals in news media content.

H6: The relative emphasis of network associations among issues in public relations messages will be positively connected to the relative emphasis of network associations among issues in news media content.

H7: The relative emphasis of network associations among stakeholders in public relations messages will be positively connected to the relative emphasis of network associations among issues in news media content.

H8: The relative emphasis of network associations among issue attributes in public relations messages will be positively connected to the relative emphasis of network associations among issue attributes in news media content.

RQ1: How do the relationships between information subsidies and news coverage of object and attribute salience vary by message type?

Method

A content analysis was conducted to explore all three levels of agenda building. Content data were collected from candidates' official websites, candidates' social networking sites, and national television and newspaper media coverage. The time frame of the study was from March 6, 2012 to September 6, 2012 (i.e., the six-month period between the end of the primaries and both parties' conventions). A total of 2655 public relations materials and 345 news stories were collected: 173 press releases, 6 biographies, 32 issue platforms, 117 political advertisements, 293 emails, 76 speeches, 513 blog posts, 354 Facebook updates, 264 Google+ updates, 201 YouTube videos, 626 Twitter tweets, 234 newspaper stories, and 111 television news stories.

Sampling Procedure

The main sources of candidates' public relations messages were the official candidate websites (www.barackobama.com and www.mittromney.com). Biographies, issue platforms, press releases, advertising, speeches, and emails were collected. Social

media content was collected from the candidates' blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and YouTube channels. Blog messages and press releases, which had large volumes of data, were systematically sampled (30–40 percent of messages) while other types of data (i.e., biographies, speeches) were all analyzed.

National news media outlets were selected based on circulation or viewership data. According to the Alliance for Audited Media (2013), the top three daily newspapers were the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*. Archived articles during the time period were retrieved from LexisNexis and ProQuest. According to viewership data in the *State of the News Media 2012* (www.stateofthemedia.org), *NBC Nightly News*, *ABC World News*, and *CBS Evening News*, the three largest nightly news broadcasts, were selected for TV network news. Transcripts of the television news programs were obtained from LexisNexis.

In keeping with prior research (e.g., Kim et al. 2011), the candidates' names—Obama and Romney—were used as the keywords in the search query to gather news content. Due to the large volume of newspaper data, one constructed week was sampled for news. Using a random numbers generator, the following seven dates were selected: April 2 (Monday), July 24 (Tuesday), June 27 (Wednesday), April 5 (Thursday), June 1 (Friday), August 11 (Saturday), and July 1 (Sunday) (i.e., Riffe, Aust, and Lacy 1993; Roberts and McCombs 1994).

Object Salience Measurement

Issues. The 14 issue categories were developed based on CNN's 2012 election center information (www.cnn.com/election/2012): economy, healthcare/Medicare, immigration, foreign policy, education, abortion, same-sex marriage, social security, gun control, environment/global warming, terrorism, role of government, military/defense/veterans, and campaign strategies/horse race. Each issue category was coded as (1) present or (0) absent.

Stakeholders. The 12 stakeholder groups were coded as follows: political parties and candidates, campaign staffs, governmental agencies, legislatures, electoral commissions, international observers, media, voters, issues/activists groups, donors/donor community, business, and other social institutions. Adopted from previous literature (e.g., Hughes and Dann 2006, 2009), each category was coded as (1) present or (0) absent.

Attribute Salience Measurement

Issue frames. The following eight categories were used to code the issue frames: issue/policy, game/horse race, scandal, media, conflict, human interest, consequence assessment, and personalization (e.g., Entman 1993; Scheufele 2006; Painter et al. 2010). These categories assess whether a message is dealing with a specific issue or policy; is about who is winning or losing; is about rumors and sensational gossip; presents an evaluative tone regarding the media; presents two opposite viewpoints; shows feelings of empathy; is about the results of action; or is about candidates' private lives. Each issue frame was coded as (1) present or (0) absent.

Candidate attributes. Six candidate image attributes were adopted from prior studies (e.g., Kiousis et al. 2006; Weaver et al. 1981). They were credibility (e.g., believable), morality (e.g., ethical or integrity), intelligence (e.g., knowledge or skills), leadership (e.g.,

charismatic or inspiring), ideology and issue positions (e.g., policies), and biographical information (e.g., hometown or family). Each was coded as (1) present or (0) absent.

Affective Attribute Measurement

Affective attributes were measured with regard to the overall tone toward each issue in the messages. The tone was coded as (1) negative, (2) neutral or mixed, and (3) positive when it was present.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability was measured with 10 percent of each message type among the seven trained coders. A total of 265 public relations materials and 35 news media messages were randomly selected and coded. Holsti's (1969) test and Scott's Pi (Scott 1955) were used to assess reliability for each of the variables. Holsti's scores were reported as 0.95, 0.93, 0.90, 0.88, and 0.93 (issue, stakeholder, issue frame, candidate attributes, and tone); and Scott's Pi scores, which protect against chance agreement, were reported as 0.84, 0.78, 0.74, 0.66, and 0.75, respectively.

Data Analysis Strategy

To test the first- and second-level agenda-building hypotheses, this study used Spearman's rho correlations (e.g., McCombs and Shaw 1972) between campaign information subsidies and media coverage. Then, to test the third-level hypotheses, a matrix in which each row and column represents measurement items (i.e., issues, stakeholders, and issue frames) was created, calculating the frequencies of co-occurrence in a message (Guo, Vu, and McCombs 2012). UCINET 6.0 (Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman 1999) was used to generate quadratic assignment procedure (QAP) correlations from the matrices, which measured the network agenda associations among both candidates' information subsidies and the news content (e.g., Guo and McCombs 2011a, 2011b).

Results

First-level Agenda-building Findings

H1 predicted a positive relationship between the relative emphasis of issues in candidate public relations messages and media coverage. Our results are presented at the *aggregate level* to examine the relationship between information subsidies and news coverage in general, as well as at the *strategic level* to examine the effectiveness of each candidate's specific messages. The aggregate results support this hypothesis in 9 out of 22 possible comparisons with a median correlation value of 0.38. The data also support H1 when examining the individual candidates in 17 out of 44 possible comparisons. The median correlation value was 0.25 for Obama and 0.44 for Romney. The number of significant correlations is 4 for Obama and 13 for Romney. Thus, the evidence is modest in supporting H1, the basic issue agenda-building hypothesis.

Table 1 summarizes the results for this and the other hypotheses.[2] It is noteworthy that Romney's communications emphases seem more consistently linked with coverage.

H2 predicted a positive relationship between the relative emphasis of stakeholders in candidate public relations messages and media coverage. The data offer support for this

hypothesis in 10 out of 22 cases, and the median correlation value is 0.40. At the level of individual candidate data, 24 out of 44 possible comparisons support the hypothesis. The median value is 0.45 for Obama and 0.47 for Romney. The number of significant correlations is 11 for Obama and 13 for Romney. Collectively, the data only modestly support H2 and extend the traditional agenda-building hypothesis to the transfer of stakeholder salience as well (Ragas 2010, 2012).

Second-level Agenda-building Findings

Moving to the second level of agenda building, H3 predicted a positive relationship between the relative emphasis of issue frames in candidate public relations messages and media coverage. The data support the hypothesis in 7 out of 22 possible comparisons with a median correlation value of 0.55. When broken down by candidate, the data offer support for H3 in 11 out of 44 possible comparisons. The median values are 0.55 for Obama and 0.56 for Romney. The number of significant correlations for Obama is four versus seven for Romney. Again, the evidence suggests stronger linkages for Romney-controlled messages than Obama messages. The overall evidence again is only modest.

H4 predicted a positive relationship between the relative emphasis of candidate attributes in public relations messages and coverage. The data provide support for this hypothesis in 4 out of 22 possible comparisons at the aggregate level with a median value of 0.39. When examining each candidate, the data support the hypothesis in 4 out of 42 cases.[3] The median value is 0.34 for Obama and 0.46 for Romney. The number of significant correlations is one for Obama and three for Romney. Overall then, H4 is at best only weakly supported.

Shifting to affective attributes, H5 predicted that the tone of issue portrayals in public relations messages and news content would correspond. The data support this hypothesis in 4 out of 22 possible comparisons and the median value is 0.09. When broken down by candidates, the data support this hypothesis in 13 out of 42 possible comparisons with two comparisons falling in the opposite direction than predicted. The median value with Obama subsidies was 0.01, while it was 0.14 for Romney. The number of significant correlations consistent with the hypothesis was seven for Obama and six for Romney. Similar to candidate image attribute salience relationships, this hypothesis received weak to little support.

Third-level Agenda-building Findings

In addition to traditional first- and second-level agenda-building relationships, this study examines the recently explicated role of third-level agenda-building associations within a political public relations context. To test this, H6 expected a positive relationship among the network of associations between issues in public relations messages and news content. This hypothesis is supported in 10 out of 22 possible comparisons. The median QAP correlation coefficient is 0.22. At the strategic level, it is supported in 12 out of 42 possible comparisons. The median correlation coefficient and number of significant correlations for Obama is 0.01 and 1. The same values are 0.39 and 11 for Romney. Thus, H6 received weak support, but stronger linkages for Romney were again observed.

H7 replicated the previous hypothesis but for stakeholders. This hypothesis was confirmed in 21 out of 22 possible comparisons and the median QAP correlation value was 0.60. For the individual candidates, the hypothesis was supported in 41 out of 42 possible

TABLE 1
Summary of three levels of agenda-building linkages

Level of agenda-building linkage	Aggregate level		Strategic level	
	Number of significant associations[a]	Median correlation	Number of significant associations for Obama (median correlation)	Number of significant associations for Romney (median correlation)
First level				
Issue	9[a]	0.38	4[a] (0.25)	13[a] (0.44)
Stakeholder	10[a]	0.40	11[a] (0.45)	13[a] (0.47)
Second level				
Issue frames	7[a]	0.55	4[a] (0.55)	7[a] (0.56)
Candidate attributes	4[a]	0.39	1[b] (0.34)	3[b] (0.46)
Issue tone	4[a]	0.09	7[b] (0.01)	6[b] (0.14)
Third level				
Issue	10[a]	0.22	1[b] (0.01)	11[b] (0.39)
Stakeholder	21[a]	0.60	21[b] (0.57)	20[b] (0.65)
Issue frames	3[c]	0.17	2[d] (0.12)	2[d] (0.32)
Median correlation		0.39	0.30	0.45

Total number of possible correlations is: [a]22; [b]21; [c]10; [d]8.

comparisons. The median value for Obama associations was 0.57 and 0.65 for Romney associations. The number of significant correlations observed was 21 and 20 for Obama and Romney, respectively. Overall, H7 received robust support.

Shifting to attribute salience, H8 expected a positive connection among the relative emphasis of network associations for substantive issue attributes in public relations messages and media coverage. The hypothesis is supported at the aggregate level in 3 out of 10 possible comparisons and the median QAP value is 0.17. At the candidate level, the hypothesis is supported in 4 out of 16 possible comparisons. The median QAP value and number of significant correlations for Obama is 0.12 and 2. For Romney, they are 0.32 and 2. H8 received only weak support.

Collective Findings

Beyond examining associations across all three levels of agenda building, RQ1 explored what the differences were among the various types of information subsidies and news coverage regarding object and attribute salience transfer during the 2012 US Presidential Election pre-convention period. Table 2 reports the summary results across information subsidies via the total number of significant correlations and the median correlation value for each message type. Considering the number of significant associations to total possible associations, we found that blog posts (29 out of 36), press releases (26 out of 36), and issue platforms (23 out of 36) were the top three most effective subsidies at this phase of the campaign.

Discussion

In general, the agenda-building correlations found in this study of the 2012 US Presidential Election pre-convention period were of a moderate strength, similar to the median correlation values found by Kiousis et al. (2009) in an examination of agenda building during statewide political campaigns. All three levels of agenda building received some support; only affective issue salience between campaign subsidies and media coverage was marginal. More specifically, at an aggregate level, the strongest agenda-building linkages were found at the third level regarding stakeholder salience (i.e., meaning that the stakeholder network agendas displayed in the campaign subsidies and coverage were generally similar) and at the second for issue frame salience (i.e., meaning that the issue frame agendas for the subsidies and coverage were generally related). Taken as a whole, these results suggest that, at least during the pre-convention period of the election, the agendas of the campaigns and the national news modestly overlapped.

Theoretical Implications

Theorization in agenda building has been stunted in some regards by concentrating on news releases and assuming that they are representative of *all* communication efforts (Hallahan 2011). Consistent with several other recent studies (e.g., Kiousis et al. 2009), the findings of the current investigation indicate that the role of different information subsidy types in political agenda building is not uniform or redundant. The growth of digital communications (Reber and Kim 2006; Waters et al. 2010) has resulted in many new types of information subsidies (i.e., blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). This inquiry importantly introduces new information subsidy types and their effectiveness into the literature.

TABLE 2
Candidate information subsidy and news coverage linkages

| | Aggregate level | | Strategic level | |
	Number of significant associations[a]	Median correlation	Number of significant associations for Obama (median correlation)[b]	Number of significant associations for Romney (median correlation)[c]
Press releases	26	0.67	4 (0.53)	12 (0.66)
Biographies	9	0.45	3 (0.45)	2 (0.45)
Issue platforms	23	0.51	8 (0.50)	7 (0.55)
TV ads	16	0.57	5 (0.58)	5 (0.57)
Emails	13	0.56	3 (0.56)	6 (0.59)
Speeches	21	0.53	7 (0.41)	8 (0.65)
Blogs	29	0.63	4 (0.67)	14 (0.60)
Facebook	14	0.51	3 (0.71)	6 (0.49)
Google+	14	0.54	4 (0.56)	5 (0.50)
YouTube	13	0.58	4 (0.41)	4 (0.53)
Twitter	16	0.53	5 (0.48)	6 (0.55)
Median correlation		0.54	0.53	0.55

Total number of possible correlations is: [a]36; [b]16; [c]16.

First, this study found that campaign press releases, blog posts, and issue platforms were the most powerful agenda-building sources among the 11 different types of information subsidies examined. While confirming the continued powerful role of traditional press releases (e.g., Kiousis et al. 2009), this study also suggests a significant impact for blogs on news media and *vice versa* (Sweetser et al. 2008)—a finding also supported by a recent analysis of more than 2500 news sources (Messner 2009). Blogs have become important information sources because they allow journalists to connect more closely with their sources and engaged readers, and to monitor topics and readers' feedback easily (Chung et al. 2007; Singer 2005). Our results also show issue platforms—a natural venue for prioritizing and delivering issue information—to be one of the most effective information subsidies during this pre-convention period, suggesting that journalists' coverage and voters' attention early in the campaign is driven by an interest in the issues.

Moreover, this study's findings set the stage for future research examining the *comparative influence* of information subsidies with additional stakeholder groups beyond journalists or elections. More specifically, to build out a broader mosaic regarding effectiveness, the relative influence of information subsidies should be scrutinized in contexts such as activist communication (Ragas and Kiousis 2010), crisis communication (Coombs and Holladay 2012), issues management (Hallahan 2011), brand communication (Ragas and Roberts 2009), and corporate reputation (Carroll and McCombs 2003).

Second, this study represents possibly the first empirical examination of all three levels of agenda building *within the same investigation*. Probing all three levels simultaneously provides a more nuanced understanding of agenda building that is paramount to generating a more sophisticated theoretical map of this fundamental public relations process. For example, in this analysis, the strongest aggregate median agenda-building linkage was found at the third level (for stakeholder network connections) followed by the second level (for substantive issue frame salience). That stronger correlations were detected for some agenda elements at the second and third level, rather than at the traditional first level where this theory started, speaks to the value of looking deeper into the agenda-building process. New research suggests that agenda-setting effects may occur due to people's tendency to rely on someone else's judgment to make less cognitive efforts in interpreting social issues or problems (Pingree and Stoycheff 2013). In this regard, the stronger correlations found in this study at the third level (co-occurrence) and the second level (attributes) may imply that public relations materials have more agenda-building effects when the materials contribute to reducing cognitive efforts for journalists by telling them "how to think about." Replications are, of course, needed to see if this pattern emerges in other political campaigns and other settings, or if this pattern is situational.

Third, this study helps further extend the Network Agenda Setting model (Carroll 2005a, 2005b; Guo 2012; Guo and McCombs 2011a, 2011b) to agenda building and the realm of public relations (Schultz et al. 2012). The current study's rigorous internal replications of each third-level hypothesis increase the confidence we may place in these findings (Chaffee 1991) and speak well to both external validity and generality (Shoemaker, Tankard, and Lasorsa 2004) of this major theoretical extension. These results suggest that the transfer of salience occurs not only among discrete agenda elements found in information subsidies and news content, but also through the *co-occurrence* or *bundling* of such elements in these messages and media coverage.

Practical Implications

Overall, these results indicate that press releases, blog posts, and issue platforms played the strongest agenda-building role during this phase of the 2012 Presidential Election. This suggests that these three information subsidy types are the most versatile and effective communication vehicles for working with and through the news media and should be treated as such by political public relations professionals. It is important to note that certain subsidies may be more effective from an image or reputation management perspective, such as in shaping or responding to media coverage, while other subsidies may be better used for relationship building, such as the cultivation of donors, volunteers, or activist groups (Kiousis and Strömbäck 2011).

As scholars have claimed, "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" (originally written by Lewin 1952, 169). The development of third-level agenda building is not only an important theoretical development, but offers practical value. Part of the job of a public relations professional is as a frame strategist (Hallahan 1999). Often professionals not only seek to increase the salience of a particular object or object attribute, but also to link pairs of objects and/or attribute objects in news and public opinion (Guo 2012; Guo and McCombs 2011a, 2011b). Given that real-world politics involve bargaining over multiple issues among multiple stakeholders simultaneously (e.g., Conconi and Perroni 2001; Perez 2006), the salience of issue pairs would appear to be a promising area for future research. Some prior research on issue linkages (also called an issue tie-in) suggests that issue linkages can be effective in reaching a policy agreement among negotiation members (Conconi and Perroni 2001; Perez 2006).

The Network Agenda Setting model provides professionals with a way to gauge if the efforts to link pairs (objects and/or attributes) are successful, and consequently to examine the effects of the pairs of issues and/or attributes. The initial tests of this new model are encouraging (particularly regarding stakeholder salience), and offer the potential to equip professionals with more sophisticated ways to monitor campaign effectiveness.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, there are limitations that should be taken into account. This study used a cross-sectional correlational design to extensively test the proposed three-level agenda-building framework. Having now established linkages between a diverse mix of information subsidies and news content across these levels, future research should look to incorporate longitudinal designs that get at time ordering in these relationships and allow for stronger causal inferences.

Also, this current study did not provide evidence of a strong agenda-building impact of social networking sites on the news. These results indicate that journalists still rely on traditional information subsidies (e.g., news releases). However, in today's digital age, publics can directly interact with political candidates (or their public relations professionals) as well. Hence, to further explore the agenda-building role of social networking sites, future studies should explore the linkages between candidate public relations efforts and public opinion. Finally, the agenda-building role of these tools should also be explored at a more *micro-level* against the agendas of specific sub-sets of the electorate to better understand impact.

To date, including the current study, the third-level agenda-building hypothesis has been tested during national and state-level political elections and a corporate crisis (Schultz

et al. 2012). While the initial findings are promising, a logical progression is to examine third-level agenda building in additional settings and contexts in which media relations plays an instrumental role, such as health communication, non-profit communication, international public relations, corporate reputation, and non-election political public relations. It is hoped that this study serves as a touchstone for future research into the impact of political public relations on the electorate.

NOTES

1. Due to space constraints and the exploratory nature of the study in terms of third-level relationships, network associations are explored for issue salience, stakeholder salience, and substantive issue-attribute salience.
2. Due to space constraints, the results of the hypothesis testing are presented in two summary tables. The individual tables are available upon request by contacting the corresponding author.
3. Two comparisons were dropped due to lack of statistical variance in the data. This approach was used whenever this problem emerged in the data set.

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