



2ND LEVEL AGENDA SETTING CONTROVERSY: DISTINCTIONS AND INTERDEPENDENCIES BETWEEN AGENDA SETTING AND FRAMING

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ABSTRACT

McCombs, M. E, Shaw, D. L. and Weaver D. H. (2014) continue to hold that framing is a second dimension of agenda setting as in attribute agenda setting despite arguments to the contrary. Borah (2011) noted that scholars have disagreed by distinguishing between the two processes (p.250). She points to Capella & Jamiesin's (1997) distinction between agenda-setting and framing in which they stated that "Agenda-setting occurs due to frequency with which an issue is discussed in the media, it does not involve how the issue is treated in the media and is not relevant to framing. This paper examines the arguments with a view to identifying the dividing lines between Agenda Setting and Framing as well as their intersection points. This paper argues that both processes are different but does not hold the opinion that agenda setting is not relevant to framing. It posits that both are closely related and the thinness of the demarcating lines may have led to the supposition that framing is second 2nd level agenda setting. It is not difficult to prove that inherent in agenda setting is framing and that agenda Setting cannot be described as 2nd level Framing. Neither is it difficult to see that Agenda-setting could play out in framing. Their differences certainly qualify them to be recognised as distinct processes. The position of this discourse is that both are separate yet closely related and, in some cases, interdependent. It is therefore recommended that a better term for description of what is currently termed as 2nd Level agenda setting is Frame agenda setting and that media practitioners, communication educators and scholars should prioritise and underpin the distinctions between Agenda setting and framing rather than making blurrier the tiny line that separates both at conceptual and practical levels.

Keywords: Framing, Agenda Setting, 2ndlevel Agenda Setting Controversy

Introduction

McComb and Shaw (2014) recognized three levels of Agenda setting, namely, Basic agenda setting, Attribute agenda setting, and network agenda setting namely, basic agenda setting which they describe as the first level of agenda setting; attribute agenda setting, the second level of agenda setting and network agenda setting. Question arises as to whether referring to Framing as 2nd level agenda setting is the same as speaking of Frame or Attribute Agenda Setting.

When the media selects an attribute of a person, an object or issue, upon which they build a story, that becomes the key narrative device. In other words, that attribute becomes the frame(context)within which, and through which media exposed public's view the person, object or issue. This certainly is a framing function. However, when the media focuses (persistent emphasis) on this attribute and elevates it by giving it prominence, agenda setting function sets in. Hence, we believe a more appropriate reference to what McComb and Shaw (2014) refer to it as attribute agenda setting would be Frame agenda setting.

We therefore contend that referring to Framing as 2nd level agenda setting is not the same as speaking of Frame or Attribute Agenda Setting. Framing is a distinct process that is different from Agenda setting process. Framing can and certainly does play a role in setting of media agenda because every media agenda comes out *framed*. However not every media Frame becomes a public agenda. When a framing becomes a public agenda, we can speak of Frame agenda setting. Thus, framing investigations are actually Framing agenda setting investigations. Understanding of the basic principles of agenda setting will further unveil the marked distinctions as well as the independencies between Agenda setting and Framing and enable the understanding of Framing agenda setting.

Fundamentals of Agenda Setting

Agenda-setting is a mass communication theory that seeks to investigate and explain the dynamics in the nexus of media projections and emphasis, and public perception of the salience of those projections and emphasis. It is therefore persistent presentation, projection or emphasis in the media that confers upon an individual, object or issue an elevated degree of salience relative to others within a given period or over a period.

Agenda setting studies are consistent in finding evidence that show that the media, by drawing the public's attention to particular issues, objects or personalities, causes the media exposed publics to attach salience to the projections. This is tandem with Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso's (2008) view that by "the hierarchical placement of issues in the media, the salience of issues relative to each other is established by the media operators thereby warranting media exposed publics to view the issues' salience hierarchically" (p.124).

The above observations suggest that the media is a social influencer capable of shaping public perception of social realities. It presumes that if it is important to the media operators that it will inevitably matter to the public, one way or the other. This is in line with the original agenda setting "hypothesis" by McCombs and Shaw (1972) which centred on the correlation between the relative salience of political issues in the media during the 1968 US presidential election and the relative salience of those issues among 100 residents of Chapel Hill. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) result of the investigation showed a very strong correlation between the two. Specifically, they found out that:

The correlation between the major issue emphasis on the main campaign issues carried by the media and voter's independent judgment of what were the most important issues was +.967 (p.180).

Other related studies have since collaborated the AST postulation in different settings; thereby establishing that media agenda does influence public agenda. Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) found that US citizens viewed countries that are more frequently mentioned in US media as being important to United States interest. And they also viewed negatively countries that are more negatively portrayed in US media.

According to Zhu and Blood (1996) therefore, media agenda setting is the process whereby the news media leads the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues by giving these issues preferential treatment, such as more frequent coverage and more prominent positions. It involves two concepts "media agenda and public agenda" (p. 99) and postulates a causal relationship between them. The media agenda serves as the independent variable while the public agenda serves as the dependent variable. The former influences the later.

While McCombs and Shaw's (1972) landmark research are often given credit for developing the agenda-setting concept, a historical overview of the idea underpinning it dates far back into time. Lippmann (1922) wrote of the relationship between the media and the image of the world that we hold in our minds. His submission was that the media curates for the public aspects of social reality out of the avalanche of events that take place within society and is therefore pivotal in the creation of our perception of the world.

Wanta and Alkazemi (2017) note that by 1938, the media had already been described as an agenda making body. To that effect they cite Political and Economic Planning (1938) British report: Perhaps the influence of the press may best be estimated by considering it as the principal agenda making body...Newspaper in a democracy form the daily agenda of public affairs (p. 263).

Further, they also note that Long (1958) had linked “agenda” and media by using the term, “territorial agenda;” and that McQuail (1967) presumed the agenda setting role of the mass media when they concluded that people think about what they are told ...but at no level do they think what they are told.” (p. 2).

It can therefore be said, that scholars intuitively were positively suspicious of the potential of the media to affect perception if not behaviour. But it took McCombs and Shaw (1972) to provide concrete evidence to validate that suspicion. It could also be argued that the need to provide evidence for that hypothesis had its roots in several academic debates of the period.

The hypodermic needle theorists had posited that the media had a bullet effect on the audience. The assumption rooted on the impact of world propaganda messages in the media was that the audiences were hapless captives of the media. Criticisms trailed the theory and gave rise to minimal effects assumption which was diametrically opposed to hypodermic needle or bullet effect theories. The limited effect theorists believed that the media had little or no effect on behaviour and attitudes of the audience. That the most it could do was to reinforce already held convictions, opinions and predispositions. Directly preceding Agenda-setting theory, it may have given, as Onyebadi (2008) posits, an attempt to prove that the media does indeed produce effect- agenda setting. This serves as a middle ground between the maximum effect paradigm and the limited effects school of thought. Onyebadi (2008) further notes that the limited effects proposition of the 1940s that is exemplified in the works of Lazarsfeld, Baerelson and Gaudet (1948) and Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948).

Onyebadi (2008) also believes that agenda setting theory may also have risen to challenge the normative thinking at that time which held that the principal function of mass communication was information dissemination.

A sequential order of contributors to the development of the foundation of Agenda setting concept would be Lippmann (1922) through “the pictures in our heads; Political and Economic British Report(1938) considering the Press to be “The principal agenda body” that sets daily agenda for “public affairs”; Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), observing that the media confers status upon what it emphasises; Lang (1958), Lang and Lang (1959) arguing that the media forces attention on certain issues; and McQuail’s (1961) submission that people think about what they are told. Cohen, (1963) believed the “media is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about. McCombs and Shaw (1972) pinned it down to Agenda-setting function of the mass media. Funkhouser (1973), linked media emphasis and public response to the “most important problem (MIP)” question in the public opinion poll question style. Upon that foundation AST has continued to build and advance, leading to various dimensions in Agenda-setting investigation.

Wanta and Alkazemi (2017) point out that six categories of Agenda-setting research has developed since the initial field work by McCombs and Shaw (1972) on Agenda-setting appeared in the 1970s. Of the six he credits McCombs (2014) for identifying five. These include media agenda and public agenda, sources of media agenda, policy agenda, contingent conditions, and attribute agenda otherwise referred to as 2nd level agenda setting. Wanta and Alkazemi (2017) refer to the sixth category as “social media and the internet agenda setting.” And also proposed a possible 7th category of agenda setting as visual agenda setting.

The foregoing points to the versatility and utility of the theory and its wide acceptance among researchers. Its elasticity and adaptability to change occurring over the mass communication landscape makes it very attractive. Its wide acceptability is evidenced in Onyebadi’s (2008) assertion that agenda setting is among the eight most popular theories of the 21st century. That view is taken further by Wanta

and Alkazemi's (2017) claim that Agenda-setting is arguably the most important theory in mass communication.

It is reasonable to contend that its versatility is rooted in the strength of its employment of triangulated methodologies that enables it to have high predictive capacities. Ideally, Agenda-setting research comprises content analysis of media content in a bid to identify media agenda or salience of issues in the media on one hand followed by a survey and or experiment to ascertain public agenda or public estimation of the salience of issues that the media has emphasised. A correlation test is then executed to examine the relationship between the two. The latter, in reality, is agenda setting effect research.

A distinction needs to be made between agenda setting and agenda setting effect. It seems there is a blanket assumption that agenda setting research inherently entails Agenda-setting effect research. But media agenda can be examined independent of public agenda (Vargo, 2011; Vu, Guo & McCombs 2014). It is the research objective that provides a guide as to whether the investigation would be delimited to identifying the media agenda or whether it would extend to correlating media agenda with public agenda. Research executed by content analysis with sole objective of ascertaining the issues emphasised in the media would not need a test of public agenda. This study falls into that category.

It is of such a nature because, as a media Agenda-setting research, it seeks to identify the dominant issues or topics published by the media (Tanjong & Gaddy, 1994). Media agenda forms the basis for the determination of the frequency of news coverage of an issue(s) or social objects such as regions of Africa. In that regard, the salience of sub-regions of Africa and the salience of issues about them as captured by the media could form the objective of a research seeking answer a question such as "what are the dominant topics covered by CNN Africa on its mobile posts concerning each sub-region of Africa?" (Obi, 2023, p.11) According to Zhu and Blood (1996), an issue is a long standing problem or series of events that involve continual coverage while an event is characterised by a quick one-set happening over a discrete period of time, attracting intense but short-term media attention.

Differences and Relationship Between Agenda Setting and Framing

Borah (2011) notes that McCombs has argued that framing is a second dimension of agenda setting but that scholars have disagreed by distinguishing between the two processes (p.250). She points to Capella & Jamieson's (1997) distinction between agenda-setting and framing in which they stated that "Agenda-setting occurs due to frequency with which an issue is discussed in the media, it does not involve how the issue is treated in the media and is not relevant to framing."

These researchers agree that both processes are different but do not hold the opinion that agenda setting is not relevant to framing. The fact is that both are closely related and the thinness of the demarcating lines may have led to the supposition that framing is second dimension of agenda setting. It is not difficult to prove that inherent in agenda setting is framing. And it is easy to see that Agenda-setting could play out framing. That link needs to be established even though their differences certainly qualify them to be recognised as distinct processes because of the differences in their primary focus. The differences between the two concepts as outlined below will illustrate the point being made that differences between agenda setting and framing are discernible. For instance, Agenda-setting focuses on an issue/event in general while Framing focuses on the angle(s) of that issue or event that is of interest to the framer. That is, framing emphasises specific angle(s). Secondly, while Agenda-setting highlights the facts of the 'issue' in general, framing contextualises the issue and the facts of the issue by placing them within a social framework. Thirdly, Agenda-setting presents the facts of the 'issue' but framing interprets or emphasises selected fact(s) in the light of prevailing social ideology and media policy/agenda. Fourth, Agenda-setting tells the people 'What to think about' while framing tells the people 'How to think' about what to think about. Fifth, an issue on agenda (Agenda-setting) can be uniform across the media landscape including media that are operating in completely opposing media ecosystems while the framing of the same issue which is on the agenda can be as varied as the number of media reporting it. Lastly, a frame can be built into an agenda e.g.,

“War on Terror” while an agenda “retaliation against 9/11 terrorist attack on America” can be framed as “War on Terror.”

The fact remains that inherent in agenda-setting is framing whether it is examined or not. This is because whatever is set before the public is framed. Framing on the other hand may not necessarily embody agenda setting in every instance because frequency of coverage is a factor in measuring Agenda-setting. While frequency and or prominence, denoted by volume of ‘repeatedness’ of the coverage and positioning in the news hole is the primary focus of agenda setting, it may not matter in framing analysis beyond enabling the understanding of the prominence of frames relative to each other in order to identify the salience of the frame surrounding the topic on the agenda. In that sense we demarcate between topic, object or issue media Agenda-setting and media frame Agenda-setting.

Given that Agenda Setting in general refers to tenacious presentation, projection or emphasis in the media that confers status, individual, object or issue Agenda Setting would refer to persistent presentation and projection of, or emphasis upon an individual, object or issue by the media to the end that its importance becomes elevated. On the other hand, Frame Agenda Setting is the elevation of a particular narrative about an individual, object or issue through repeated presentation or projection of, or emphasis upon that particular narrative about an individual, object or issue to the end that that particular narrative, for good or for bad, become preeminent in the eyes of the public. It can be argued that the negative perceptions held by people of non-African decent in most parts of the world about Africa and Africans mostly a product of Frame Agenda Setting. Poverty, for instance, is a global problem to the extent that its eradication is cardinal plank of the Sustainable Development goal. As an issue, Agenda Setting would presume its emphasis in the media. However, relative to other parts of the world, the elevation of a particular narrative about poverty in Africa will determine how the rest of the world will view poverty in Africa. It will also determine how eradication of poverty in Africa will be approached. In particular, it could determine whether the rest of world would see opportunities for partnership with Africa and Africans in poverty eradication or whether they will continue to give donations to Africa for the amelioration of effects of poverty within the continent. The foregoing not only points to the difference between Issue Agenda Setting and Frame Agenda Setting, it reinforces, in general, the deference between Agenda Setting and Framing.

Furthermore, ‘what to think about’ (Agenda setting) is a distinct function requiring skills for news selection. “How to think about” “what to think about” (Framing) on the other hand is another distinct function requiring skills for news writing and narratives. Selected news issues are what to think about. Their portrayals and, or descriptions given to them suggest ‘how’ to think about them. While Agenda setting is focused on issues, events and topics in the news media, framing focuses on the explanatory devices employed in the narrative of those issues, topics and events within a context that gives them meaning for audience consumption. Framing is thus responsible for news perspectives or narrative styles. As such, the same event, appearing in two different news media, can have two different narratives. The difference and relationship between Agenda-setting and Framing can be likened to those between the content and its container with the former as the content and the latter as the container.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

In conclusion, it can be seen that attribute agenda setting is a dimension of framing and not all that framing is. Framing extends beyond attribute agenda setting because factors that shape framing are not always found within the item in the news but attributes are necessarily inherent or manifest traits of the item being projected in the media. Thus, they are the elements that give the news item its essence. Framing on the other hand, can be influenced by an external intervening variable that provide context much like a backdrop in a staged performance rather than a painter’s canvas. For instance, Framing can be influenced by cultural perspectives of the journalist which have no bearing on the issue at hand. It may be determined by the ethos of the news media, socio-cultural and socio-political environment of the media. Even the nature of the channel of communication does influence framing. Therefore, to restrict framing by describing it as

attribute agenda (a 2nd level agenda setting) is to confine to a part of what it is. In other words, a part of framing is being described as the whole of it. Attribute agenda setting is part of a whole. It is not the whole. McCombs & Valenzuela (2007) interpreting Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss and Ghanem (1991) and Reese's (2001) definitions of framing opined that there are at least two ways to look at framing. The first being its focus on the prominence of the "characteristics and traits in which a topic or other news object is portrayed in the mass media." The other way of looking at it is considered that "framing looks at the creation of media frames and how the public uses these frames to interpret social reality" (p. 47-48). They noted that the latter approach

Considers the power conflicts that lead journalists to use certain frames over other frames and to the factors associated with the audience's active interpretation of the texts that embody frames. This version of framing involves a broader range of processes than the previous approach and *diverges widely from agenda setting.* (p. 48)

The above aligns with our argument that attribute agenda is a subset of framing and not the whole.

Study Implications

There are at least two theoretical implications of this discourse. The first is the need for media practitioners, communication educators and scholars to underpin the distinctions between Agenda setting and framing rather than making blurrier the tiny line that separates both at conceptual and practical levels. By focusing on the distinctions in their processes, the debate over the conceptualization of Framing as a 2nd Level agenda setting would be seen as detracting from conceptual integrity of both concepts.

The second implication of the discourse is the need to recognise the interdependence of both concepts in their function and that this interdependence should not lead to confusion of seeing both concepts as one and the same.

At a practical level, keen awareness of the distinctions and interdependencies of both concepts' will enable communication personnel of organizations and media gate-keepers to be more deliberate in the employment of these devices in the pursuit of predetermined outcomes.

Recommendation

Based on the foregoing theoretical deliberations, arguments and illustrations, it is recommended that a better term for description of what is currently termed as 2nd Level agenda setting is Frame agenda setting because an attribute is simply one out of many frames around which a story can be built. It is further recommended that media practitioners, communication educators and scholars should prioritise and underpin the distinctions between Agenda setting and framing rather than making blurrier the tiny line that separates both at conceptual and practical levels.

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