Agenda Setting Theory: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive discussion of agenda setting theory touches upon the merits and limitations of the theory as measured against a post-positivist yardstick. Extensions of agenda setting theory, namely policy agenda, agenda building and agenda setters are explained. Subsequently, contingency factors that influence agenda setting such as causal direction, time lag, issue obtrusiveness and the need for orientation and informational utility are also discussed. A discussion of the type of research undertaken is also included. The conclusion of this paper touches upon the possibility of other variables intervening in the development of policy agenda.

PART I: AGENDA SETTING THEORY
AGENDA SETTING
A Brief Introduction to Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda setting theory was formulated by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study of the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina that found the media to be highly influential in shaping viewers' and readers' perceptions of what issues were important. The simple and straightforward premise of this theory is that media agenda will influence public agenda. In this causal relationship, gatekeepers of the media will determine the issues and events that the public deem important.

Agenda setting theory came at a time when theorists were seeking for ways to correct the flaws found in the then popular notion of limited media effects. The theory supported the shift from the stress on attitude and behavioral effects of the media to **cognitive psychological effects**, as seen in "the importance that people assign to certain issues and how these saliences are arrived at" (Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 210).

Strengths and Limitations of Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda setting is a powerful theory in that it successfully meets several criteria of a good theory (See Littlejohn 2002: 30-32). For one, as illustrated in its definition, agenda setting is **parsimonious.** It also holds a distinctive claim to **heuristicity**. Numerous studies have been done using agenda setting as a theoretical framework, adding to the wealth of empirical evidence available to support and expand the theory. These studies have contributed to the **validity** of agenda setting; establishing its **utility** in explaining media messages and extending its

generalizability across different media types, different audiences, and different issues. The broad range of agenda setting research also illustrates the theory's wide **theoretical scope.**

However, agenda setting as first defined by McCombs and Shaw in the early 1970's is not without criticism. Firstly, agenda setting did not explain the relationship between media agenda and public opinion. Secondly, there is also the question of **issue obtrusiveness** as well as audience's **selective exposure** to media content and the media in general. As Em Griffin points out in his explanation of the theory, the original agenda setting focused only on issue salience during political campaigns. It was also only pertinent to undecided voters with some interest in politics, that is, people who had a **need for orientation.** In addition, the media focused more on analyses of campaign issues rather than on the issues themselves.

There are also questions pertaining to the **causal direction** of the relationship between media agenda and public agenda; does the media agenda really influence public agenda, or does it merely reflect public agenda? The possibility of a third variable influencing media and public agenda has also been hinted at by several studies. The concepts of **issue salience** and perceptions of important issues also raised questions of validity.

In various efforts to address these questions, researchers utilize the strengths of agenda setting and its initial hypotheses to continuously create extensions to the theory. The bulk of this paper will discuss several of the extensions of agenda setting theory.

PART II: AGENDA SETTING THEORIZING
EXTENSIONS OF AGENDA SETTING
Introduction

Agenda setting began as a very simple theory with a narrow scope. However, over the years, much work has been done to both address its initial limitations and even simply to test its assumptions on a broader domain.

Earlier research investigated the **causal direction** of agenda setting, and introduced **policy agenda** to the theory. More recent research has concentrated on **second-level agenda setting** effects such as **framing**. In addition, research is also moving beyond the causal equation of the theory to consider the **psychological elements** of the agenda setting process.

Some significant extensions of agenda setting are discussed in this section.

Policy Agenda

Miller defines **policy agenda** as issues salient to decision-makers (Miller 2002: 258) such as government officials. Corporate chiefs too, are powerful decision-makers with their own policy agenda (see Cohen 2002; McChesney 1998; Jackson & Mosco; Baoill). In addition, literature indicates that policy agenda can also include the issues on the priority list of other influential groups such as NGO's, interest groups and lobbyists (e.g. Callaghan & Schnell 2001).

This extension of the agenda setting hypothesis covers policy agenda and its relationship with public and media agenda. A comparison between the 2nd State of the Union address of American Presidents Carter and Nixon found that the causal direction of agenda setting was dependent upon situational factors (Gilberg, Eyal, McCombs & Nicholas 1980; McCombs, Gilbert & Eyal 1982) In certain situations, policy agenda is determined by media agenda, while in other situations, policy agenda is unrelated to prior media agenda.

Agenda Building

Agenda building is an expansion of agenda setting that focuses on the dynamics and interactions between news sources and the media agenda (Cassandra 1998). News sources in this case are

often powerful decision-makers such as high-ranking government officials and corporate chiefs. Agenda building links policy agenda (the issues salient to decision-makers) with media and public agenda.

Agenda building was initially proposed by findings of a study on the relationship between the news media and public opinion of the Watergate scandal. Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang (Lang & Lang 1983) suggested that to get an issue on the public agenda, a process of several stages is needed:

- Heavy media coverage of the issue is vital to making the issue seem prominent.
- Issue type (i.e. **obtrusive** or **unobtrusive**) will determine the extent of news coverage needed to make an issue salient.
- The issue at hand must be covered in a way that will make it easily understood and relatable to the public
- Similarly, the language used to describe the issue must be suitable to the importance attached to it.
- The public is given an uncomplicated basis to decide whom they support in a controversy; that is, the side taken by the media.
- The utilization of highly credible and renowned persons speaking out on an issue will step up agenda building.

A later study (Cassara 1998) of US President Carter's human rights initiative supports the agenda building thesis. It concluded that in foreign policy development and its subsequent ramifications, the government and the media are inter-reliant upon the other. While the US media functions quite independently as an agenda setter of domestic issues, it is rather dependent on the government when setting foreign policy as news and public agenda. Similarly, the government is reliant upon the media in to highlight or downplay certain aspects of foreign policy that may either prove either beneficial or detrimental to the administration's interests.

It is interesting to note that agenda building does not only involve newsroom decisions, but can also engage other resource aspects of journalism. For example, prior to Carter's human rights initiative, not only were there erratic reports of rights abuses in Latin America, very few correspondents were even posted there. By the end of Carter's term, not only had human rights coverage doubled, but more resources were also allocated to coverage of Latin America.

> As the result of the dynamics of news and news coverage during the Carter administration, human rights issues gained legitimacy as news, and the sources of information on human rights, such as Amnesty International and American Watch, had become legitimate sources.
>
> (Cassara 1998: 483)

Even when Carter was replaced by President Reagan, who strongly discouraged rights abuses coverage, human rights remained on the media agenda. It can also be noted that, subsequently, through the reign of three other vastly different presidents, human rights is still a major American agenda.

Once agenda building has succeeded in putting prominent issues on the media agenda, they tend to stay there despite withdrawal of policy support.

Agenda Setters

A discussion on agenda building inevitably hinges on the question of who sets the agenda salient to the media, the public, and the decision-makers and interest groups. While the initial premise of the theory seemed to suggest that decision-makers (election candidates) set the media agenda which in turn influences public agenda, reversed equations have also received support.

Dimensions of The Media's Agenda Setting Function

Ultimately, by virtue of its inherent function as a medium of communication to the masses and as a vehicle for the dissemination of information, it is the media that has the most power to highlight salient issues. To a large extent, the media is a very important agenda setter. Media agenda, however, is very much dependent on certain inherent traits of the media. Shoemaker & Reese (1991) present a "hierarchy of influences" on media content. At the top of this hierarchy rests 'ideology' as the macro-level influence on content. As highlighted a number of times throughout this paper, the system of government—democratic vs. totalitarian etc, and the press system—free enterprise vs. authoritarian etc, of a country will often influence and determine media content. As illustrated by this model, the ownership structure of media organizations as well as the press system that a nation's media subscribes to often dictate media agenda (See Ostini & Fung 2002; Baoill).

The next macro-level influences on media agenda come from decision-makers and interest groups who have policy making clout. Accordingly, within these ideological frameworks and policy constraints, meso-level organizational influences also determine media content from inside the media. Organizational goals such as making money or winning awards will in turn influence micro-level newsroom decisions and journalistic routines that determine what stories are covered and how. Lastly, the values, experiences, biases and personalities of individual journalists will shape the news pieces (within the constraints of macro, meso and micro –level rules) that are presented to the public. (Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 223-225; see also Cohen 2002)

It has been noted that certain media outlets with very good reputations are often influential in driving the agenda of other media outlets. For example, the *New York Times* is often consulted by other newspapers (Hester & Gibson 2003: 79), and newspapers are found to be influential on television news agenda (Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1991).

Internal Dimensions of Agenda

Nevertheless, for either the media, the public, or the decision-makers and interest groups to succeed in setting agenda, certain elements of each domain of agenda must first be present. Manheim (1987) conceptualizes agenda types in an effort to understand the dynamics of setting agenda across all three domains.

For media agenda to influence other agendas, news coverage must have high visibility (issues with lots of prominent coverage), high audience salience (news content that is extremely relevant to audiences), and distinct valence (unambiguously negative or positive coverage).

For the public agenda to influence other agendas, familiarity (high public awareness of an issue), personal salience (the perceived relevance of an issue to people), and favorability (high negative or positive public judgment of an issue) must characterize issues at hand.

For the policy agenda to appear on media and public agenda, issues must be characterized by strong support (action that supports the issue at hand), likelihood of action

(the high likelihood that someone will act upon the issue), and freedom (the range of plausible actions on the issue).

Ultimately, the main idea that Manheim proposes is that agenda setting is contingent upon certain internal dimensions. The next section will deal further with the contingency factors in agenda setting, with emphasis on media agenda.

Contingency Factors in Agenda Setting
Causal direction

The media agenda does not always correspond with reality, as shown in a study by G. Ray Funkhouser on issues covered by the US media of the 1960's (Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992). Determining whether the media agenda influences the public agenda or vice versa is also problematic; although certain results of certain studies indicated influence, they are largely inconclusive.

The issue of causality in agenda setting is paradoxical. While the original study concluded that media agenda shaped public agenda without considering the possibility of it being the other way around, it has also been found that pubic agenda can also influence media agenda. While extensive coverage and sudden increases in coverage of certain issues ensured that they reached the public agenda, problems that the public were highly involved in also tended to find their way into the media agenda after a period of time (Brosius & Kepplinger 1990 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 216).

Time Lag

The causal hypothesis of agenda setting brings up the question of how long it takes for media agenda to become public agenda. A number of early studies were done to determine the length of this time lag. McCombs teamed up with Gerald Stone to compare public agenda and media agenda (Stone & McCombs 1981 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992). The media agenda was compared to public agenda a number of times prior to interviews with the public for three different sets of public survey data. It was concluded that two to six months were normal for agenda setting effect to take place. A study focusing specifically on civil rights coverage found that the "optimal effect span" for civil rights to reach the public agenda was four to six weeks (Winter & Eyal 1980 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992).

A later study on coverage of the drug problem confirmed both time lags. The study found that public concern over drugs were highest at two time periods – one to two months following extensive media coverage, and then four to five months following media focus.

However, time lag is a contingency factor that is not final; different issues may take need different lengths of time to appear on the public agenda. Other contingency factors such as those discussed in this section need to also be considered. For example, it is highly likely that the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing war against terror required negligible time lag to surface on American public agenda because of its high **obtrusiveness** and the consequent **need for orientation** that Americans felt .(These two concepts are explained in the proceeding sections)

Issue Obtrusiveness

Issues that the public are highly involved with have a high degree of obtrusiveness, such as the annual budget, or the teaching of Math and Science in English. Unobtrusive issues include the Malaysia-Singapore water crisis and the lack of non-indigenous personnel in the Malaysian military. Initial studies on agenda setting were based on the assumption that agenda setting

effects were the same for all issues. This assumption did not take into consideration issue obtrusiveness.

In a comparison of obtrusive and unobtrusive issues in the US, it was found that media coverage of unobtrusive issues preceded their rise of importance to the public, thus supporting the agenda setting hypothesis. However, media coverage and public awareness of obtrusive issues tended to increase simultaneously. (Zucker 1978 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 219)

Need for Orientation and Informational Utility

Need for orientation is an individual's "high interest in an issue … (combined with) … his high uncertainty about the issue" (Miller 2002: 261). It is hypothesized that agenda setting effects will be stronger when the public's collective need for orientation is strong than when it is weak. McCombs' subsequent Charlotte study of election campaign coverage found this to be true, especially with newspaper coverage.

A related contingency factor is "information that potentially and primarily serves comprehension of happenings of interest" (Knobloch et al. 2003: 92). Knobloch et al. found that the **informational utility** of news messages also determines the public's susceptibility to media agenda.

Agenda setting by the media is more influential on public agenda when news leads are **framed** in such a way that increases the informational utility of issues or events being covered. People are likely to pay more attention to the media agenda when news leads suggest a high magnitude of negative consequences, or bring high likelihood of negative occurrences to readers, or contain higher immediacy. High informational utility is especially significant in minimizing the effects of **cognitive dissonance** in face of news reports that arouse negative affective emotions. This leads us to the important extensions of **second-level agenda setting** effects.

Second-level Agenda Setting
"Bias by Agenda"

In an essay on "Online Journalism as Market Driven Journalism*"*, Elisia Cohen points out that political and commercial pressures have great influence on the media agenda and consequently on public agenda since the public have little recourse to learning events and happenings outside of the news media. Thus gatekeepers not only have the power to decide the kinds of issues that receive coverage but the kinds of coverage given as well. The public in turn will view certain issues, events and personalities according to the positive, negative or neutral slant of media coverage. The aspects of the issues deemed important by the public will also depend on the areas focused on by the media.

For example, Severin & Tankard illustrate this **bias by agenda** (Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 220) in their citation of a study on the liberal vs. conservative bias of television news coverage. It was found that American news broadcasts often covered issues that support liberal causes while giving coverage to issues that cast conservatives in bad light. Examples are American news coverage on homosexual rights (pro-liberal) vs. inefficiency at handling terrorism intelligence that could have prevented 9/11 (con-conservatives). This pro-liberal con-conservative agenda bias however may be different in media systems that are authoritarian or developmental as seen in Malaysia where media coverage is often pro-government (that is, pro-conservative) in that even liberal causes, such as the maltreatment of Indonesian maids, are given a spin that depicts immigration, police and health authorities as being vigilant and compassionate.

The concept of bias by agenda lies in the development of **second-level agenda setting.**

Second-level Agenda Setting

Bernard Shaw's often paraphrased quote that the media "may not be successful … in telling people *what to think*, but it is … successful in telling (people) *what to think about*" (Cohen 1963 in Miller 2002:258) finds contradiction in **second-level agenda setting.**

The first-level of agenda setting assumes that media agenda determines public agenda and does not consider media influence on the public's opinion. Agenda setting theory of the second-level posits that the way that the media presents an issue will affect the way that people think about the issue. Second-level agenda setting is sometimes termed **attribute agenda setting** because instead of just analyzing the issues highlighted by the media, analysis is also done on the specific **attributes** of these issues that the media chooses to include in its coverage. The underlying hypothesis is that "both the selection of *topics* [sic] for attention and the selection of *attributes* [sic] for thinking about these topics play powerful agenda setting roles" (Hester & Gibson 2003: 74).

Priming and **framing** are two of the ways that the media manipulate the issues they cover to add bias to agenda.

Priming

Priming is the process by which the media highlights certain issues and ignores or downplays certain other issues, consequently influencing people's perceptions of what issues are significant and what issues are not.

The effects of priming were seen in an experimental study of edited news broadcasts where viewers were found to rate a president's performance in certain areas according to news coverage of those areas. When the news gave high coverage to a certain issue, people would rate it important. When the news neglects to cover certain issues, people would rate these issues as unimportant. (Iyengar, Peters & Kinder 1982 and Iyengar & Kinder 1987 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 216)

Framing

While priming serves to prompt viewers to focus on certain issues, **framing** influences viewer attitudes in relation to these issues. Framing is the process in which the media emphasize certain aspects of an issue while downplaying other aspects. Positive or negative slants of media coverage are often the consequence of framing.

Framing is element of agenda setting that is often highlighted in literature with a number of studies focusing on this concept, most notably in studies analyzing media coverage of election campaigns and public opinion on candidates, parties and issues played up by the media. Studies indicate that the media's framing of political stories *do* influence the public's perception of politicians.

Cognitive and Affective Attributes

In their study of second-level agenda setting effects of media coverage of economic news and its correlation to public perceptions of the economy, Hester & Gibson (2003) employ the terms **cognitive** and **affective attributes** to describe priming and framing.

Transfer of **cognitive attributes** from the media to the audience, can be likened to the effects of priming. They involve the specific information that the media provides about an

issue. For example, the number of American soldiers killed in post-war Iraq. When news consumers read or hear reports about American occupation of Iraq, they will associate the occupation with the issue of post-war American military casualties.

Affective attributes on the other hand involve opinions and views that the media propagate, such as a negative view of the war, or a positive view of it. The hypothesized result is that media consumers will associate the war in Iraq with post- war American losses, and will view this as a negative or a positive development depending on the affective tone of media coverage, much like framing.

Accessibility and Applicability

An interesting extension of attribute agenda setting deals with the **cognitive processes** that determines an issue's salience in the mind of the media consumer. Kim et al. (2002) conceptualized issue salience as being the relative speed with which a person can retrieve an issue and its attending attributes from his memory bank; that is, how **accessible** the issue is in his mind.

Whether a person agrees with the media's slant however is a different matter. Whether or not the media's view of an issue (i.e. supporting or opposing) is shared by a media user is conceptualized as **applicability**. The media is only successful in its framing of an issue in so far as the media consumer's pre-existing views and opinions parallel the media's slant. In this, Kim et al. argue that framing should be considered as separate from agenda setting because the media's outlook is not necessarily applicable to public opinion.

Instead, they propose that second-level agenda setting occurs only when the media is able to influence the accessibility of certain issues in a person's memory retrieval. The faster, or more often, a person thinks about an issue, the more successful is the media's agenda setting function.

Framing and the Dual Role of the Media

Framing of issues is not a function unique to the media. Decision-makers and lobbyist who need to get their views across also frame salient issues according to their needs. Callaghan & Schnell (2001) define framing as "the process by which all political players define and give meaning to issues and connect them to a larger political environment" (ibid.: 185). Thus framing effects arise when issues are multidimensional and can be packaged to focus on certain themes or attributes. By advancing a specific frame, the media, or decision-makers, are able to adjust how an issue is comprehended and perceived by the public.

Callaghan & Schnell (2001) posit that the media and various decision-makers are in a constant tug-of-war in defining the news that reaches that public. The end results of this political power struggle can be seen in the slant that news reports carry. They hypothesize three possible outcomes:

- The news is dominated by one decision-maker's version of events.
- The news is an "amalgamation" of the views of all the different decision makers. The media acts as a "final arbitrator" that oversees the messages that finally reach the public.
- The media creates its own emphasis of issues distinctive from the rhetoric of the decision-makers concerned.

These three possible types of news reports define the media as playing a **dual role**. It either acts as a **conduit** to disseminate the various messages created and framed by decision-makers,

or it acts as an ***independent player*** that creates its own frames of events and issues. The power of the media as a second-level agenda setter lies in its power to frame its news reports. If the media is free to select its own themes and slant on news stories, it may very well be an important political player. For media that are highly controlled or dependent upon government or political direction, the power of framing the news ultimately lies with political decision-makers. In such cases, the media's role in second-level agenda setting is merely as a conduit of other players' issue frames.

From a study on coverage of the American gun-control policy debate, Callaghan & Schnell concluded that the media often independently frames issues that are social in nature, hence playing its second role. However, when covering more macro-level controversies, the media would often rely on government-created frames of issues, hence playing its first role.

These assessments of the media's agenda setting function are supported by a number of studies. For example, an investigation of the 1996 US presidential primaries found that the media realized its independent role in "cover(ing) substantive concerns that were not included in candidate press releases" (Miller et al. 1998). A comparative analysis of press support for the US invasion of Panama supported the mainstream media's role as a message conduit, but found that alternative media framed the issue independent of government policy (Guiterrez-Villalobos et al. 1994). Similarly, American media deferred to official slants in coverage of the first Persian Gulf War (Newhagen 1994).

In so far as the media constructs and disseminates its own themes and slants of issues, it does so by bearing the criteria of ***newsworthiness*** in mind. This brings up the question of political economy in that the free enterprise system of the press dictates that the media must be ***ratings-savvy*** above all other considerations (Cohen 2002; Callaghan & Schnell 2001). So news that reach the public must focus on ratings-driven aspects like "personality, sensationalism, drama and conflict of stories" (Callaghan & Schnell 2001: 186) in order that the audience will pay attention, thus drive up ratings, thus generate advertising revenue. Inadvertently, this concentration "downplays the larger social, economic, or political picture" (ibid).

Decision-makers who are able to frame their concerns in a newsworthy way stand better chance of having their messages emerge unchanged on the public agenda. While decision-makers whose issue frames do not fit media norms face the possibility that their views may be underplayed, ignored or even contradicted in the final news reports that the public receive. (Callaghan & Schnell 2001)

To the extent that the audience is aware of the media's susceptibility to market force, ***skepticism*** of the media is expected. This skepticism arbitrates the media's effectiveness in setting public agenda. For example, Tsfati (2003) found that correlation between media agenda and that of media skeptics were significantly weak, compared to the correlation between media agenda and the agenda of those who were not skeptical of the media.

AGENDA SETTING RESEARCH
Research Method Issues

Agenda setting is a very ***empirically*** based theory that follows the traditions of ***post-positivism***. Theorists look to strengthen its ***causal hypotheses*** and its ***predictive powers***. Additionally, the theory is also tested across various situations to strengthen its ***generalizability*** and ***universality***. ***Quantitative*** research is a very important stage of theorizing agenda setting and holds important implications for the development of the theory (Miller 2002).

The following sections touch on some of the concerns pertinent to research in agenda setting.

Media Outlet Studied

While the bulk of studies have focused on **news publications**, **electronic media** have also been the focus of agenda setting research. While television news broadcasts are understandably quite often investigated, interestingly there is a dearth of agenda setting research on radio news bulletins. This is true not only of agenda setting, but across other theoretical frameworks as well.

Comparative analyses of agenda setting effects across **new and traditional media** indicate that traditional media produce stronger agenda setting effects. Althaus & Tewksbury (2002) found that readers of the paper version of the *New York Times* more closely followed the paper's agenda than readers of the online version. Similarly, Johnson et al. (1998) concluded that voters were more influenced by candidate portrayals in traditional media than nontraditional media.

A number of studies also extend the agenda setting hypothesis to **photojournalism** to determine if photographs in the media have an influence on audience agenda. Studies indicate that they do (Wanta 1988 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 215; Moriarty & Popovich 1991).

Research Scope
Narrow Scope of Studies on Single Issues or Single Locations

Literature on agenda setting research indicates that researchers either choose **issues in collectivity** or focus on **single issues**. The significance of this is that researchers can choose to attempt to either **generalize the effects of agenda setting to different environments** (e.g. Hester & Gibson 2003; Yang & Stone 2003; Althaus & Tewksbury 2002), or **understand the processes of agenda setting** through probing particular issues and communities (e.g. Kim et al. 2003; Callaghan & Schnell 2001; Cassara 1998).

Longitudinal and Latitudinal Studies

As with other fields of social science, **longitudinal studies** and **latitudinal studies** have also proved useful in gathering useful data on agenda setting.

Studies employing **panel design** have been used to investigate the sequence of cause-and-effects in the relationship between media, policy and public agenda (McCombs & Shaw 1972 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 212; Althaus & Tewksbury 2002). The employment of panel design allows the same measures to be repeated several times throughout a study allows the investigation of causal sequences.

Comparing data drawn from different times and different studies have also proved useful in studying agenda setting. The study comparing the speeches of two different US presidents, President Nixon and President Carter, for example, is actually an undertaking that combined the results of two separate studies, each comparing one president's 2nd State of the Union address with issues in the media prior to and following his address [Gilberg, Eyal, McCombs & Nicholas (1980) and McCombs, Gilbert & Eyal (1982) in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 216-217].

A study of fair and balanced coverage of different nations across 11 media representing 8 nations (Tai 2000) employed content analysis of newspaper coverage of the Taiwan-China conflict over territorial waters. The study looked for the spin given on the story by the conservative

and liberal media from the countries directly involved, countries indirectly involved, and disinterested states.

Methodology
Experimental Studies

Experimental studies manipulating news content have been employed to study the effects of agenda setting (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder 1982 and Iyengar & Kinder 1987 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992: 213-215). Content manipulation, and other **controls** in **laboratory settings** are employed to eliminate **spurious variables** in the determination of public agenda. Experimental studies make easier the task of identifying possible relationships between agenda setters and agenda followers, and are useful in the attainment of conclusive, if somewhat inflated, findings.

Content Analysis and Questionnaires

Scientific methods such as **content analysis** and **survey questionnaires** were often employed in agenda setting research (e.g. Althaus & Tewksbury 2002; Cassara 1998)

Many determine public agenda by either interviewing (using survey questionnaires) selected samples of media users, or by referring to the public opinion polls of what people consider the most important problems facing a country. Media agenda is often determined through content analysis, while policy agenda is often gleaned from speeches, government reports, press releases and official statements.

Conceptual Framework
Salience vs. Perceived Importance

Kim et al. (2002) highlighted the possible inconsistency of using **the most important problems** phrasing as a criteria to measure **issue salience**. This would pose problems for many agenda setting studies that utilize public opinion polls such as the US Gallup Polls. Measures of perceived importance assume that respondents are able to consciously determine and accurately rank the issues that are important to them. In addition, many survey questions are closed-ended, thus artificially inflating or deflating the number of issues that respondents list as being salient. Kim et al. also cite a previous study that found "importance" and "salience" to have distinguishable characteristics.

Instead, Kim et al. conceptualized a measurement of salience that defined issue salience as "the ease with which (an issue) can be **retrieved from memory**, for example, during a process like priming" (Kim et al. 2003: 10). Issue salience was measured by assessing a respondent's failure to respond to questions about different attributes of a particular issue.

Time Lag

As most agenda setting studies make comparisons between the results of media content analysis and survey of public opinion, the time difference between these two stages is important. Previous studies that have been done of **time lag** and **optimal time span** (Stone & McCombs 1981; Winter & Eyal 1980 in Severin & Tankard, Jr. 1992) are often referred to determine a suitable time for interviewing respondents (e.g. Kim et al. 2003).

CONCLUSION
Agenda Setting Beyond the News Media
Fiction and the Public Agenda

Other types of media have also been looked at in studying agenda setting. For example, a study was done on how the 1980's American public rated the possibility of nuclear war after the airing of a fictional program called *The day after*. This dramatic fictional program depicted the devastation that hit Americans following a nuclear attack.

It was found that viewers were more likely than non-viewers to mention nuclear war as an important problem. Viewers who ranked nuclear war as second in a list of important issues prior to the program ranked it first following the program. This study provides support to the hypothesis that agenda setting effects can also be found in forms of mass media beyond news media.

Terrorism and Video Games

It is also interesting to note that following the 2001 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US, war video games with **terrorist themes** have made a notably presence on the market. These video games pit players against 'terrorists' who resemble Arab or Muslim terrorists as often highlighted in the news media. This is a contrast to the video games of the 1980's which are often based on Cold War themes of Communism vs. the Free World, or drug lords and mafia-like gangsters, both issues heavily covered by the US media of that time. In addition, in recent years, the US Army has also been a constant theme, with some games even sponsored by the US Army to boost recruitment.

In light of the policies drawn along the US's *War on Terror*, it is interesting to ponder if these video games are part of American "war" propaganda, or if they are merely reflections of the media agenda, or if they may be influencing the American, and global, video-gaming public's perception of terrorism.

Conclusion
Retrospective Review of Agenda Setting

The bulk of literature suggests that media agenda, public agenda and policy agenda are intertwined in a dynamic relationship. The media is often the central player bridging public and policy agenda. As agenda setting theory and its extensions suggests, issues salient to the public and to policy makers often go through the channels of media, emerging on the media agenda with alterations.

This raises the issue of journalists' responsibilities as gatekeepers and their sometimes conflicting needs to serve organizational interests as illustrated in the dichotomy between a) fair, balanced and accurate news that truly informs the public and b) sensationalist entertaining news that drives up ratings. The premises of this theory indicate that the issues highlighted by the media, and the way that they are framed, will determine what the public think is important, and influence their views and opinions. Likewise, the decision makers and interests groups in a democracy also have the ability to influence public thoughts and views, for as long as they are media savvy.

Future Theorizing of Agenda Setting

Current trends seem to indicate that agenda setting is moving beyond causal processes to the cognitive process of individual media users and media professionals (e.g. Yang & Stone 2003; Kim et al 2002; Callaghan & Schnell 2001). Exponential advances in ICT also merit investigations

into the agenda setting effects of new technology (Althaus & Tewksbury 2002; Johnson et al. 1999).

Controversial and tragic issues and events such as CNN and al-Jazeera coverage of the political developments in post-war Iraq, and the 26 December Tsunami of 2005 are ideal for further and deeper probing of agenda setting theory.

There are vast opportunities for deeper probing of the contingencies of agenda setting, as well as further expansion into other dominions of salient issues. Ambitious further research may investigate the dynamics between all the existing media channels—traditional and new, liberal and conservative, free and controlled, formal and informal—and the complete social reality—political, social, economic, environmental, to determine the collective effects of collective agenda setting. The psychological processes of individuals and their surrounding environment can also be further explored to further understand the cognitive and environmental processes of agenda setting.

Perhaps the near future will see further theorizing with these foci.

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