

SHOULD AGENDA MIRRORING HYPOTHESIS REPLACE AGENDA-SETTING THEORY?

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Abstract

This paper is a response to Nwodu's (2007) criticism of agenda-setting theory, and call for its replacement with agenda mirroring hypothesis. It argues that most of the criticisms are based on a misunderstanding of postulations of the original proponents of the theory. It also argues that the corporate agenda and policy agenda that corporations, government and powerful elites bring to the media end up as media contents following news judgment of editors, not of anyone else. The agendas end up as media contents and it is as such that they make sense to society as subjects of social discourse, nay public agenda. This work is, however, not arguing that agenda-setting is faultless. In fact, it includes what should be viewed as the real shortcomings of the theory, but which do not render it totally untenable. This paper confirms that agenda-setting theory continues to be applied in many studies on media-society relationship. The arguments of some critics not only show crass misinterpretation of agenda-setting theory but also reflect a misunderstanding of the place of mass communication as a professional institution of modern society.

Key words: agenda-setting, mass media, agenda mirroring, agenda carrying hypothesis, campaign, communication, events, social agenda, public communication, media content

Introduction

Agenda-setting is a micro level theory. That is, it is a theory of media-society relationship at the level of the media and the audience. Agenda-setting is one of the theories that focus on the social effects of mass communication on the audience members (both as individuals and as members of groups) in terms of the consequences of their using media to gain social experience. Agenda-setting research covers the question of the everyday life experience of media consumers and the social context of media reception. The theory establishes a link between the priorities of the audience and media priorities.

Agenda-setting theory has received both deserved and undeserved criticisms from communication scholars. Some of the undeserved criticisms appear plausible because of the difficulty of establishing precise kinds of media effects on people. This work therefore examines the criticisms of agenda-setting theory, its centerpiece being Nwodu's (2007) critique of agenda-setting. Most other criticisms refrained from calling for total rejection of agenda-setting theory. Nwodu, however, believes that the theory should be discarded in favour of agenda mirroring or agenda carrying. As a result, there is also a review of Nwodu's agenda mirroring hypothesis, which is already being cited as theoretical framework in some students' research project. Nwodu said he was challenging 'the validity of agenda-setting theory in order to provoke intellectual debate on the subject by proposing agenda mirroring hypothesis for further investigation and validation' Nwodu, (2007, p.44).

Agenda-setting theory

The idea behind agenda-setting is that major social issues discussed among members of the audience have been prioritized, popularized and shaped by the mass media. Agenda-setting is traceable to Lipmann (1922, p.16). He had argued: 'For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations...' Lipmann contended that average people can't be trusted to make important political decisions based on simplified pictures. They have to be protected and the important decisions have to be made by technocrats who use better models to guide their actions.

Bernard Cohen refined the ideas of Lipmann to create a research path that ended as agenda-setting theory. Although Cohen did not use the term agenda-setting, he made one of the most-quoted statements about agenda-setting. According to Cohen, (1963, p.13)

The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion [it does not just mirror]. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is successful in telling them what to think about. The world comes differently to people depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read.

The research done by McCombs and Shaw (1972, p.176) not only popularized agenda-setting, but also threw it to the status of an empirically-based theory. The researchers interviewed one hundred registered voters during the US presidential election of 1968. Each respondent was asked "to outline the key issues [of the election campaigns] as he saw them, regardless of what the candidates might be saying at the moment".

From the responses received, the researchers identified and ranked by magnitude just what the respondents saw as the crucial issues facing them. In addition, McCombs and Shaw did a content analysis to rank the time and space given to various issues in the campaign speeches in the television news, newspapers and magazines, and editorial pages accessible to voters in the study area. Then the findings were compared to the responses earlier received.

According to the findings,

The media appear to have exerted a considerable impact on voter's judgments of what they considered the major issues of the campaign.... The correlation between the major item emphasis on the main campaign issues carried by the media and voters' independent judgments of what were the important issues was +.967.' In short, the data suggest a very strong relationship between the emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media... and the judgments of voters as to the salience and importance of various campaign topics', McCombs and Shaw, (1972, pp.180-81).

The above findings led the researchers to make the following often-quoted statement about agenda-setting:

In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position.... The mass media may well determine the important issues – that is, the media may set the ‘agenda’ of the campaign.

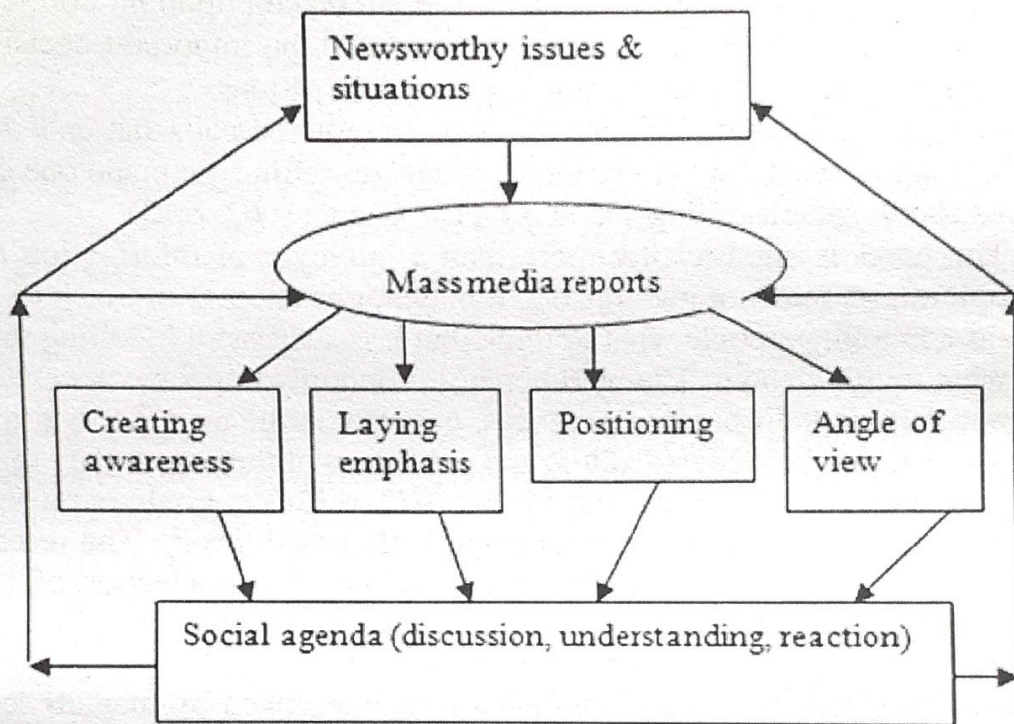


Fig. 1. Agenda-setting process. Newsworthy events and situations determine news. Media reports can also trigger other newsworthy events and situations, further strengthening the agenda-setting function. News is repeated, hyped, given positions, and is portrayed in some ways. Consequently, media reports influence what is known/discussed in society (as social priorities), how it is understood and reacted to. This results in social agenda, which can go all the way back to determine subsequent media reports in other forms and titles.

Nwodu faults agenda-setting theory

To set the stage for his hypothesis, Nwodu began with a semantic analysis of agenda-setting, beginning with agenda as follows:

Nwodu quoted Summers et al's (1991, p.25) definition of agenda: 'a list of the subjects to be discussed at a meeting.' 'From this definition,' according to Nwodu, "it can be inferred that agenda is synonymous with group communication denoted here as meeting.' Nwodu explains further:

- When people meet as groups, they can list and prioritize issues for discussion
- Leaders of groups may collectively articulate, list and prioritize the items on the agenda

- It is thus technically wrong to say that the leaders determined the agenda; rather, events and unfolding events within the group make, shape and set the agenda in order they will be taken and discussed. The common features of agenda therefore include:
 1. Agenda is predetermined before it is made public.
 2. Agenda is prioritized.
 3. Agenda is jointly decided by group or opinion leaders and approved by members of a group
 4. Agenda is deliberately conveyed to members of a group (or public in the context of our discourse) for their reaction.

Nwodu recognizes, interestingly, that media agenda and meeting agenda are hardly synonymous. That is why his third point above can hardly be said of media agenda. Members of the audience rarely, if ever, approve (literally) the agenda set by the media before the agenda are publicized. However, Nwodu affirms: 'it cannot be controverted that what is regarded as media agenda not only revolves around a given event or occurrence but is also determined by the wind of events or occurrences. Media agenda therefore is an aftermath of an event or occurrence. They are hardly means to the creation of events.' He notes further: 'this explains why Galtung and Ruge (1965) did not identify media agenda as one of the factors that make events newsworthy. According to the scholars, [Galtung and Ruge] concept of unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, continuity and negativeness determine the newsworthiness of an event'. **(But agenda-setting has never been a news value. It is a theory of media-society relationship.)**

Nwodu (pp.46-47) then asks what he calls the 'persisting' question: "Do media (press) set agenda?" He also answers: "... There is no arguing the fact that members of the public look up to the media for the latest gist of the day or even fresh angles to already known issue." He argues: "it does not follow that without media portrayal of an event (like the plane crash in October 2006 in Nigeria) that actually occurred does not occur even when the people within the locality already know about it, discuss it, and were already doing something about it." Nwodu adds: 'Agreed, the mass media can draw the attention of greater percentage of people to an event but they do not necessarily set agenda pertaining to the issue.' (Why then do people get attracted to the media? Is setting agenda pre- or post-news?)

Further criticisms of agenda-setting

Nwodu presented a critique of agenda-setting as given by other writers as follows:

Nwodu noted at p.48 that "McCombs and Shaw whittled the potency of the theory by purposively discarding news items about the campaigns in what they considered substantive issues." "This," he said, "is a major methodological fault taking into consideration that what they considered as substantive issues were comments, viewpoints and/or opinions arising from news content.' Nwodu thus said he is inclined to believe that 'the researchers deliberately dropped news items because of their realization that the media do not manufacture actions that give birth to news, events do and as such, including news items among the variables tested will weaken the argument about agenda-setting.'

To buttress his points, Nwodu (p.47) also cited the case of the content of a 1980 cartoon by Robert Mankoff published in Griffin (1991, p.334). In the cartoon, a child who was

bothered and even confused about the agenda-setting idea asked the father: ‘dad if a tree falls in the forest, and the media aren’t there to cover it, has the tree really fallen?’ Nwodu concludes: ‘the reality on ground is that with or without mass media report on the event, the tree is already fallen and members of the public within that locality will not only be aware of it but also talk about it.’

He quotes Griffin (1991, p335) as saying: ‘It’s possible that newspaper and television coverage simply reflects public concerns that already exist’. Nwodu adds that ‘a true test of the agenda hypothesis must be able to show that a matching public agenda lags behind media schedule of priorities.’ He quotes Griffin, p.336 again: ‘there is a possibility that media agenda and public agenda “are similar because they both mirror what is actually happening in the world.’

The following are points raised by Nwodu at page 47 on why the media do not set agenda. (He was using the plane crash near Nnamdi Azikiwe airport in 2006 involving ADC airline)

- Prior to the ill-fated crash, did the media predict or predetermine that such event would happen?
- Soon after the crash, were the media men the first to notice and report the crash?
- Given the enormity of human and material loss, does the public have any option but to talk about it?
- Despite the use of mass media by government to warn the public against unguarded statement about the crash, why is there widespread insinuations that the plane crash was masterminded?
- Could aviation reporters help but report such an occurrence as the plane crash just to set a different agenda?

Agenda Mirroring

In the light of the above observations, Nwodu affirmed: “the bottom line of this discourse is that media do not set agenda. At best they mirror agenda set by events. It is instructive therefore that communication researchers and theorists should begin to reflect on a paradigm shift from agenda-setting to agenda carrying or mirroring hypothesis”. (It was curious though that Nwodu had no empirical study to back up his argument. Why the demand for a change?)

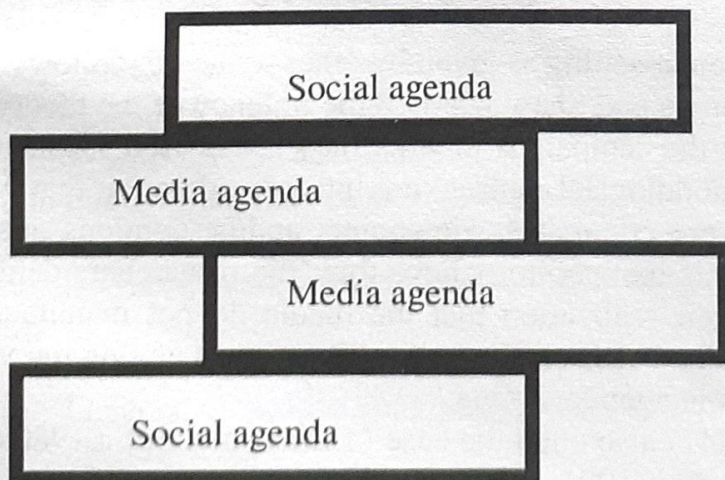


Fig. 2: From media agenda to social agenda or from social agenda to media agenda? Either way, media agenda, according to critics, must be seen to be equal to social agenda. Is this not a simplistic equation about what agenda-setting really assumes?

Nwodu, (2007, p.50) made the following claims, which form the basis of his call for agenda mirroring hypothesis.

- (a) Media do not set, create or determine agenda, events do.
- (b) Media do not chronologically list a number of agenda for members of the public to discuss; they merely report events for public consumption and have no control over the use the public makes out of the reports.
- (c) Media do not determine to the public what they should consider as public agenda. The public decides what item to be selectively exposed to, discuss, adhere to, retain or reject. This position is reinforced by the uses and gratification theory which has been tested and found to be valid regarding the fact that audience members deliberately expose themselves to media contents that tally with their needs and gratifications sought.
- (d) Audience members are increasingly becoming active consumers of media contents and therefore are capable of weighing media reports on issues objectively with a view to fathom what is worth their while to think about and what to dismiss as a propaganda tool.

Nwodu then challenges “communication scholars and researchers to redirect their energies to the study of media as public agenda mirroring tools to reinforce or refute the product” of his analytical study.

The question is: what does Nwodu mean by the fact that the researchers withdrew news items from the variables tested? What must be tested are opinions, comments and viewpoints of people concerning items in the news to see if they correspond with what had been in the news. How else do you test items in the news? Thus one does not really know what Nwodu means by saying that the researchers purposively discarded news items about the campaigns in what they considered substantive issues, at least within the context of his critique.

On the notion that the “media do not manufacture the actions that give birth to news [but that events do]”, the election campaign used for the research by McCombs and Shaw had already begun as an event and it was on the basis of the event that the research was conducted. Agenda-setting does not presume that the media determine events as Nwodu wrongly posits. All other empirical studies, for example, Iyengar and Kinder, (1987) were based on already existing situations. Agenda-setting holds people rank and assess social issues in line with the level of media emphasis and pattern of discussing social issues; media angles to social issues usually become the most reechoed by people; the angles generally dominate further social discussion. Events are not even agenda as Nwodu understands. The real agenda are the issues around an event, and the media are presumed, according to proponents of agenda-setting, to determine/influence these issues more than anyone else.

Agenda-setting as construed by its proponents is more about the angle and ranking of events, not that the media throw up or decide those events. But one could also ask: do the media have to predict every event they report? Is that in their power? When eventually the media got involved in discussing the plane crash, did they regurgitate what people had been saying or did they introduce their own angles? Who did society believe – the media or those who initially started discussions about the crash? Let us assume that the society believed

those who first started the discussion. Did those people reach other members of the public without going through the mass media? Who really made the crash a social issue?

It seems though that Nwodu understands an event only as something that has happened. There are situations that are not organized events in themselves, but which, if reported, can trigger other events, and in themselves come to the spotlight. In this respect, it should be pointed out that the media trigger events at times, and can become the only source of many social issues to majority of people. Issues raised by the media on carbon emissions, food crisis, hunger, terrorism, and disease have spurred even international conventions and actions.

In its January 12, 2009 edition, the Nigerian Newswatch magazine exclusively reported that a hospital in Aba Nigeria was selling babies. That discovery triggered action among the National Association of Medical and Dental Surgeons (which suspended the owner of the hospital, Dr James Ezuma) as well as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, (which arrested, investigated and charged Dr. Ezuma), the Umuahia High Court (which started trying Ezuma), and indeed some NGOs and government agencies (which intervened to look after 'rescued' babies).

Consider the following

- Critics see 'setting agenda' as the same with 'determining or creating agenda' or the events leading up to social agenda. Agenda-setting does not assume this. Events are often the basis of news, but news in turn can be the basis of how people understand and react to events as they (events) unfold in a news cycle – the beginning through the end of reportage of given newsworthy events. McCombs and Shaw said that the mass media may well determine the important issues in the campaign, (before it began, and as it unfolded) not that the media decide whether or not there should be political campaigns.
- In society, events themselves do not qualify as news, but those that the media consider news worthy and eventually report.
- Events and issues around them are placed in context to make meaning; media provide this meaning which can be presented in a variety of ways to influence people both in terms of action, and in terms of how they grade the issues, what they say and do about the issues.
- Even in meetings, leaders may still refuse to play up some issues, hide others, and bring up others for discussion; those brought up for discussion may be steered in certain directions with the executive powers of the chairman. What makes meaning to people in a meeting is the outcome of discussing the agenda, or even the choice of what was discussed, and it is in the power of some – the executive – to influence all these. So also the media; they choose the day's news, and colour/frequency of presentation/emphasis
- Agenda is not only what is tabled for discussion, but also how it is portrayed, how it is perceived and how it is reacted to. The media can ignore the causes of terrorism and piracy on the high seas by Somali pirates (poverty in Somalia), and focus only on the viciousness of piracy. Four French men were caught in 2008 with 28 Chadian children. The western media (France 24 television and BBC) called them French aid workers; but to Chadian media, they were child traffickers. The five Iranian men taken from the

Iranian embassy in Iraq by American military in 2008 were construed by the CNN as terror suspects, but the Iranian Press TV called them diplomats. Is it 64 years of Israeli independence or 64 years of illegal occupation of Palestinian lands? These are images the media propagate, which affect the way discussion on social issues go.

Nwodu's postulations are a negation/misunderstanding of the role of mass communication as an institution of modern society. Nwodu shows a misconstruction or total oversight of the true meaning of media or mediation as an aspect of mass media. He negates the professional significance of the media in society which is the root of agenda-setting.

Event is not Agenda

It is not about an event happening or not happening, but about the social relevance of the event for which the media decide to give it attention. The media can set agenda before an event occurs as the British and French media did before the British elections of 2010 and French elections of 2012. At times, too, after events occur, agenda surrounding them are set, such as CNN and Al Jazeera did with the (presidential nomination) acceptance speeches of Barak Obama and Mitt Romney –the issue was how many times the candidates mentioned economy and military in their speeches. It is not just the event that is reported; the media try to influence the issues around the event; they even invent most of the issues, and coin up words and slogans that continue long after the issue happened, and which may play up more issues. Remember what we earlier said about McCombs and Shaw: In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important part in shaping reality, [they must not necessarily determine reality].

Even if people know about events before the media report them, and even if events determine what the media report, the media are still decisive factors in how people further understand, categorize, discuss, and react to the events. People still follow up the details by turning to the media. This is the kernel of agenda-setting. The campaign speeches used in the McCombs and Shaw's research belonged to the presidential aspirants, but making them public belonged to the media. And once they were in the domain of the media, they became media contents. People turned to the media to get the speeches. Agenda-setting is only highlighting the relationship between media contents and what people discuss in society.

For instance, about the plane crash issue cited as an example by Nwodu:

- Why did the crash occur?
- Where was the plane coming from?
- Whose function is it to coordinate discussion about the crash?
- Who helped society see the face and anguish of the families of the victims?
- How many air crashes have happened in Nigeria especially in the recent past?
- How prepared is Nigeria for emergencies (following a plane crash in the US in December 2008, rescue boats raced to the scene within 15 minutes of distress call by the pilots. All 115 passengers and crew came out alive before the plane sank in the New York Hudson River. The plane was eventually pulled out. (These were issues that dominated headlines in the international media thereafter.) The American media succeeded in making people around the world focus more on the emergency readiness of the US than on other issues

such as the frequency of air crashes in the US.

- What is the future of air travel in Nigeria?
- What is the maintenance culture of airlines in Nigeria?
- What is the number of crashes in Nigeria before and after 1996 when the aviation industry was privatized?
- Will privatization not compromise safety and maintenance standards in the face of the need to keep profits high against a backdrop of the cost of maintaining planes?

These were agenda thrown up by the media, which the people of Lisa village, Ogun State (site of an October 2005 plane crash) would never have dreamt of. Actually, the media reported that the chief priests of Lisa were asking the federal government for one million Naira reparation to appease their gods because their village was desecrated with the blood of victims. It was even the media that helped the people of Lisa to throw up this side to the crash. But that is the kind of thing ordinary people will talk about such an issue of grave concern.

The world media are portraying the war in Afghanistan as a lost battle (on the part of the NATO forces), because of the increasing number of NATO troops killed and rising Taliban insurgency. But in fact, viewed from the angle of Afghan casualties, and the near facelessness of the Taliban, the Taliban are not even an opponent, and cannot match the military might of NATO. Yet the world feels that NATO may lose the war. Why? The media are making it look so, especially when they conduct and report opinion polls on support for the war.

The meaning of media then is the need for a go-between in a social situation that demands communication coordination. Mediation is about the relationship between mass media and social beings who are connected with one another in society in terms of the socialization received from the media. Mediation, additionally, is more for society as an entity than for people connected with an event, or around whom events occur. The agenda-setting theory believes that the media, more than other social institutions (such as government, school), influence the discussion of social reality.

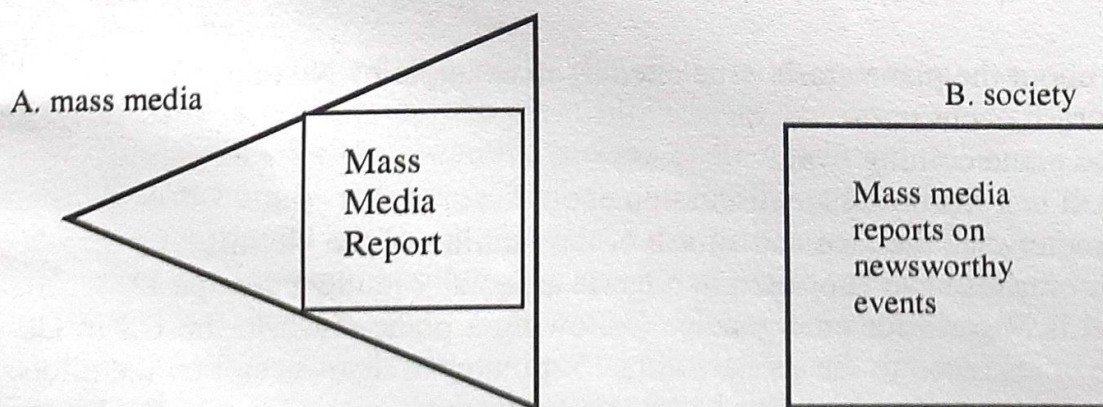


Fig.3 Media as mirror of society: media simply face society and reflect events to society.

Agenda-setting answers the questions: why do the media get involved in events and issues? What do they do with the events? What are the effects of the things they do with events and issues? To answer, the media are public communication instruments that help various social fabrics to interact and to address social issues in order to properly address relevant issues, and thus enhance awareness, progress, coexistence, development and sustenance. The media, as a unique/pivotal part of social discussion, influence social thought, actions and inactions.

If the media merely mirror events, then why do people need the media? What in fact is the function of the mass media as a social institution of communication experts? Agenda mirroring does not give the media any professional function. It merely dismisses them as effete information pipes that channel information to people, who have already determined and known about the information.

When President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela closed down 34 radio stations in his country in July 2009, critics accused him of muzzling robust public debates necessary for social equality to thrive in every civil, free society (Chavez has ruled his country for over a decade, and wants to continue in power). When the Olusegun Obasanjo administration created 37 new FM radio stations in Nigeria, Obasanjo was accused of establishing more campaign outfits for his reelection bid in 2003. Critics charged that he wanted to use the stations to influence public opinion about the campaign in his favour. Those critics understood the power of the mass media in political campaigns, perhaps no more than Obasanjo. In fact, Obasanjo avoided a TV debate with Olu Falae, another presidential aspirant, during the 1999 presidential election campaigns presumably because he was not in control of the media then.

In 2008, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) of Nigeria closed down Channels TV for reporting on former President Umaru Yar'Adua's state of health. NBC knew what powers media views bore. Yar'adua had been going abroad for medical checkup between 1999 and 2007 when he was governor of Kaduna State. It was the media that started giving attention (beginning from his presidential campaign in 2007) to his health checks and used statements like 'not fit to rule', 'terminal illness', 'frequent trips abroad', 'sick president-divide country'. From then until 2010 when he died, people began to take Yar'adua's illness as an issue of great social significance, calling on him to resign. Since 1960, television (and lately the internet) has been a major forum for winning and losing presidential elections in countries. The major issues of campaigns are those thrown up and set by the media. It is arguable that the media convinced people that Mitt Romney flawed Obama in the first one-on-one TV debate done on October 3, 2012. The media brought out the issues on which the candidates were measured, especially economy. Moreover, many people did not watch that debate live; they only got further analysis from the media.

A research by these writers showed that the mass media in Nigeria influenced most

views Nigerians had about Obasanjo's third term bid, government's privatization efforts, and the Niger-Delta crisis. These were serious social issues that demanded media intervention to highlight, investigate, follow up, and explain to many average Nigerians who initially did not understand the issues. Media reports about the Israeli offensive on Gaza in December 2008 – January 2009 led to a lot of opposition to the war around the world. Israel was forced to declare a unilateral ceasefire in January 2009.

Without the media, discussion of international social issues would be difficult. The media set, drive and shape issues in diplomacy, trade, and politics for international audience because the media provide a veritable forum for worldwide discussion of international issues. Agenda-setting may well be more suited to international communication than anywhere else. Media are powerful diplomatic and propaganda tools used by countries to build and sustain given images.

It was media views about Farouk Abdulmutallab that dominated social discussions in Nigeria. (Farouk Abdulmutallab was the Nigerian who on December 25, 2009 unsuccessfully attempted to bomb a US-bound Delta North-West Airlines plane with 278 passengers and 11 crew members on board). Most Nigerians shuddered in disgust when they learnt that a Nigerian had wanted to bomb an airplane. It was also the media that brought up most of the issues around which the incident was subsequently discussed. These writers conducted a study to find out what people knew and said about Abdulmutallab. A random sampling of 100 students from the faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka was done. Questions such as the following were used

1. Have you heard of Farouk Abdulmutallab?
2. What was your source?
3. What else do you know?
4. Was the US right to have blacklisted Nigeria?
5. Give reasons for your answer.

Analysis of the answers made it incontrovertible that respondents were saying only what had been echoed in the media. In more than 85% of the cases respondents said 'according to what the papers are saying.... Abdulmutallab was trained overseas, he got the link to al Qaeda while in Britain, he was trained and equipped in Yemen, and so he is not a Nigerian'. Based on these views, all the respondents backed the call by Nigeria that the country should be de-listed from the US terror watch list.

Agenda-setting and the problem of correlation vs. causation

The problem

Another point against agenda-setting, says Nwodu, is the inconclusive nature of most of the studies on the subject. He quotes McQuail (1987, p.276) to corroborate his stand in the following lines: "most evidence (e.g. Behr and Iyengar, 1985) is inconclusive and assessments (e.g. Karus and Davis, 1976; Becker, 1982) tend to leave agenda-setting with the status of plausible but unproved idea. The doubts, according to critics of agenda-setting, stem not only from the strict methodological demands, but also from theoretical ambiguities. "The hypothesis presupposes process of influence from the priorities of political

or other interest groups to the news priorities of media in which news value and audience interest play a strong part, and from there to the opinions of the public.... It is likely that the media do contribute to a convergence of the three 'agendas' but that is a different matter from setting any particular one of them" Nwodu, p.48.

Nwodu also noted at page 48 that some researchers in agenda-setting substituted correlation for causality. He adds: "The import is that regardless of whatever claim or finding anybody tends to allude to, the causal linkage binding the various agenda items or issues is yet to be established empirically. Mere correlation, as we already pointed out, is far from casual connection." He quotes Dominick (2002, p.493): though studies have suggested firm "relationship between personal agendas and media agendas, they do not address the question of causation..." Nwodu then asserts: "And not until this major factor [causation] is tested and found worthy, agenda-setting theory does not exist or at best, it will remain a hypothetical mutation that needs strong empirical validity."

The facts

At no time did McCombs and Shaw substitute correlation for causation. The researchers even used the word correlation. Nevertheless, many studies in communication hardly state findings about causality in media effects with any degree of finality. Researchers believe the media do not have all-powerful effect, but they (the media) have limited effects because the audience is active, and there are other factors apart from the media which influence action. But no one knows how much the media contribute, and how much other factors contribute. This is because of individual differences as well as varying environmental factors.

Causality has always been difficult to establish in all social research. But this does not stop governments from creating bodies to regulate the media, and laws/ethics to guide media operations. Media regulators understand that the media have effects, some of them undesirable. Does it help anyone to establish the exact nature of effects before regulating the media? Causality and accuracy of measurement are thorny issues in social research (not just agenda-setting), for which the so-called pure sciences dismiss social research as impure, soft, inexact, imprecise and suchlike names that depict inferiority more than anything. Yet medical sciences, meteorological sciences, and other hard/pure sciences state research findings with caution. That is why many diseases cannot be cured despite seeming understanding of the cause and possible cure. High winds continue to cause havoc despite advances in meteorology.

In uses and gratifications theory (cited by Nwodu at page 50 as having been found to be valid), research has found that the audience is active and it uses media content according to needs. Yet the definition of activity is still debated, and the real uses of media products are not definite. McQuail (2005) notes media functions may differ for people at the point people convert the functions into actual uses, i.e. an entertainment programme for someone may be purely informative for another person. What the proponents of agenda-setting found about the theory are far more than just correlative evidence, no less than what has been established about the real meaning of audience activity in uses and gratifications and selectivity theories. The need to establish causality is necessary in agenda-setting no more than it is in uses and gratifications and selectivity theories.

However, there has been a successful attempt to establish causality in agenda-setting research. Baran and Davis, (2006, p.319) note that agenda-setting research “empirically demonstrates links between media exposure, audience motivation to seek orientation, and audience perception of public issues”. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) attempted to overcome the problem of establishing causation in agenda-setting research. They thus offered a testable “agenda-setting hypothesis: Those problems that receive prominent attention on the national news become the problems the viewing public regards as the nation’s most important” (1987, p.16). Their series of experiments examined agenda-setting, the vividness of news reports, the positioning of stories, and what they called priming.

- **Agenda-setting:** Iyengar and Kinder demonstrated causality: They wrote, “Americans’ view of their society and nations are powerfully shaped by the stories that appear on the evening news. We found that people who were shown network broadcasts edited to draw attention to a particular problem assigned greater importance to that problem -greater importance than they themselves did before the experiment began, and greater importance than did people assigned to control conditions that emphasized different problems. Our subjects regarded the target problem as more important for the country, cared more about it, believed that government should do more about it, reported stronger feelings about it, and were much more likely to identify it as one of the country’s most important problems” (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p.112).

- **Vividness of presentation:** Iyengar and Kinder found out that dramatic news accounts undermined rather than increased television’s agenda-setting power. They also found that lead stories had a greater agenda-setting effect, because of their prime positions as well as people’s tendency to think that an issue is important because it is first on the headlines (see Baran and Davis, 2006, p.319).

But whose agenda?

It is true that the mass media take their information from society, and retransmit it to society, and that people (especially the ruling class) might influence media contents for given motives. People can thus influence social agenda, and use the media to reinforce already existing agenda. Media messages may also reflect audience interest or even the interest of the powerful few, making the media to merely ‘mirror’ predetermined agenda. These are arguments critics say weaken agenda-setting. In fact some say that the above situations should make someone not to overstress the agenda-setting function. In other words, critics see agenda-setting this way:

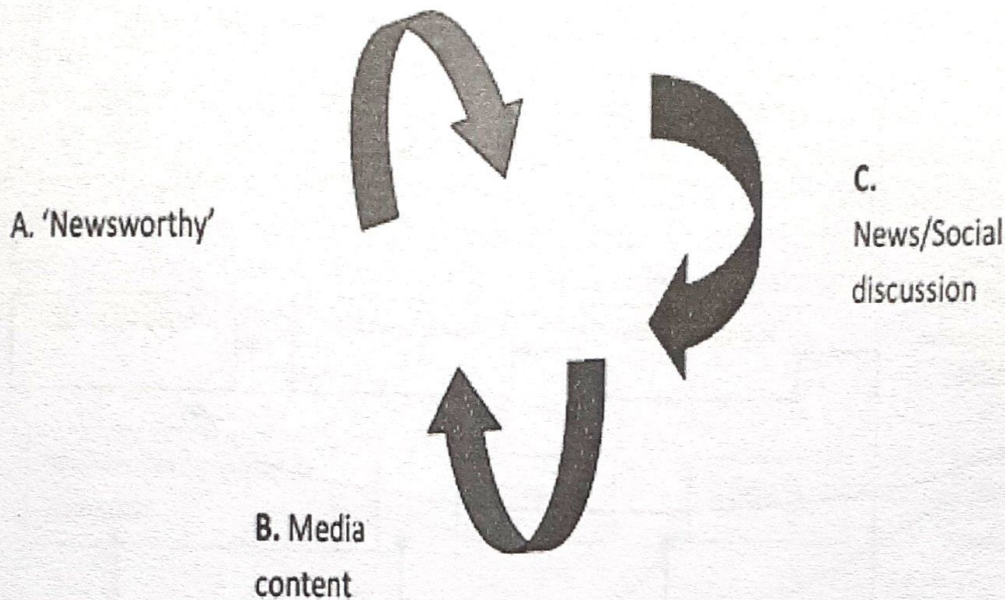


Fig. 4 Agenda Cycle

Events occur in society and are carried as media contents, which in turn are relayed back to society as news. Critics charge, therefore, that a, b and c interrelate in a circle that makes agenda-setting undistinguished. As such, no one knows which is a. or b. or even c.

McQuail and Windahl (1986) argue that it is uncertain 'whether agenda setting is initiated by the media or by the members of the public and their needs, or as Watson (2003, p. 129) added, by institutional elites who act as sources for the media. Watson had argued that 'members of the public have their own agendas, shaped by their own personal circumstances'. This is because many intervening variables shape people's perceptions of social issues, although Watson acknowledges that none may be quite as powerful as media coverage.

In reaction, Rogers and Dearing came up with a model talking about three agendas, namely, media agenda, public agenda and policy agenda. Media agenda can influence policy agenda or vice versa. Personal experiences and interpersonal communication among elites can also influence both media agenda and policy agenda. But once any combination of factors culminates in media agenda, the latter also goes ahead to influence or become public agenda.

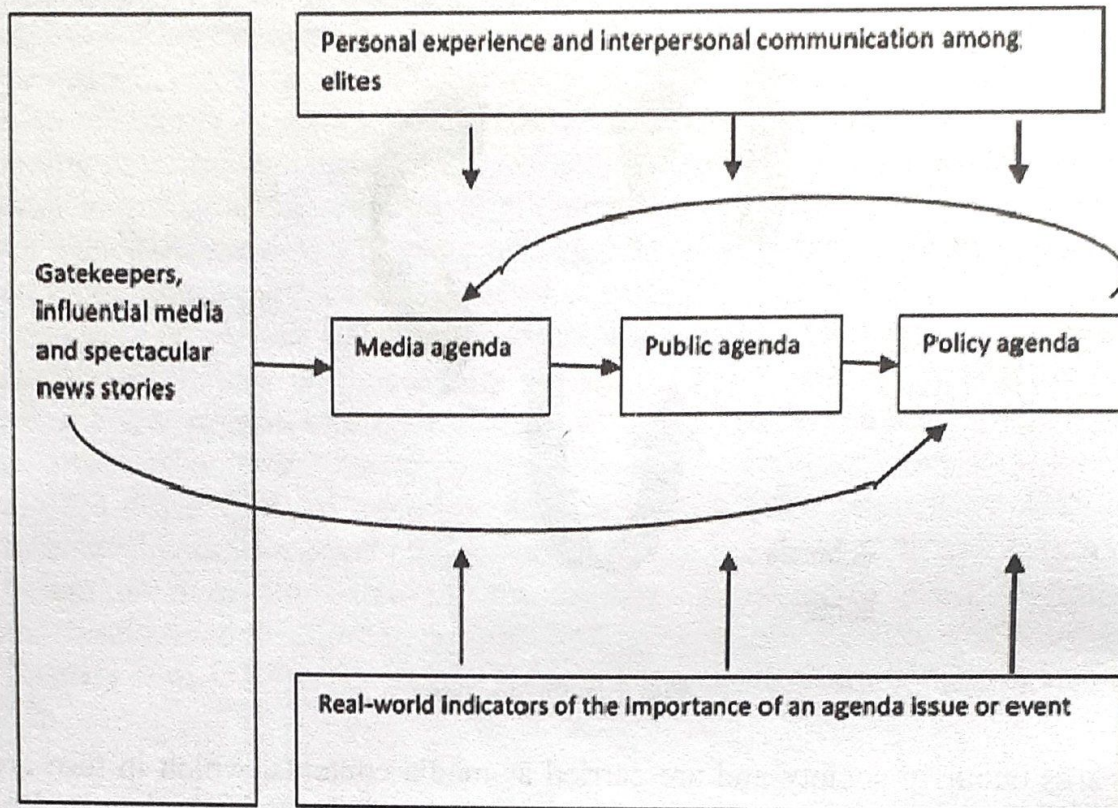


Fig 5: Rogers and Dearing's model of the agenda setting process (1988); cited in Watson (2003, p.130)

Watson, (2003, p. 129) added an extra agenda, the corporate agenda: that of corporations which dominate contemporary life, and further argued that the three agendas were presented by Rogers and Dearing as equal, and that because the model is linear, 'it does not sufficiently indicate the dynamic relationship between the agendas or the potential for conflict'.

Watson, (2003, p. 30) says that any analysis of agenda-setting must start with the question – Whose agenda, and articulated through which discourse? He adds that 'what is obvious is that there is much more to the agenda-setting process than merely listing what is important and what is less important'. News is a discourse (a systematic way of talking or discussing a particular topic usually according to the meanings and values of an institution) as Watson acknowledges.

However, Watson says that, beyond the views of reporters, agenda-setting is influenced by media ownership, the powerful elite and the credibility of given media stations. In his words, 'the degree to which the media agenda is also that of the public, its discourse an influential part of public discourse, depends in large part upon the standing of the media in public perception – its credibility as a source of information'.

Watson's argument is however an extension of the general debate on media effects, not just on agenda-setting, because the latter is simply interested in the success of the media in giving people what to think about – not the credibility of, or the original source (policy or

corporate agenda) of what to think about. This is why agenda-setting talks about the media as an entity, rather than about individual media firms.

In addition, we ought not to see society as one indivisible mass. Society is large and heterogeneous. This is the meaning of mass in mass communication. Information taken from one part of society reaches others in other locations. Remember also that the media choose who is to appear in the news according to news values. Whoever the media allow to propagate any view is still a decision of the mass media. The media are ultimately the agenda setters. No matter how much any government tries to introduce anything; no matter how much lawyers try to promote something, neither the government nor the lawyers can on their own reach everyone in society unless they use the mass media.

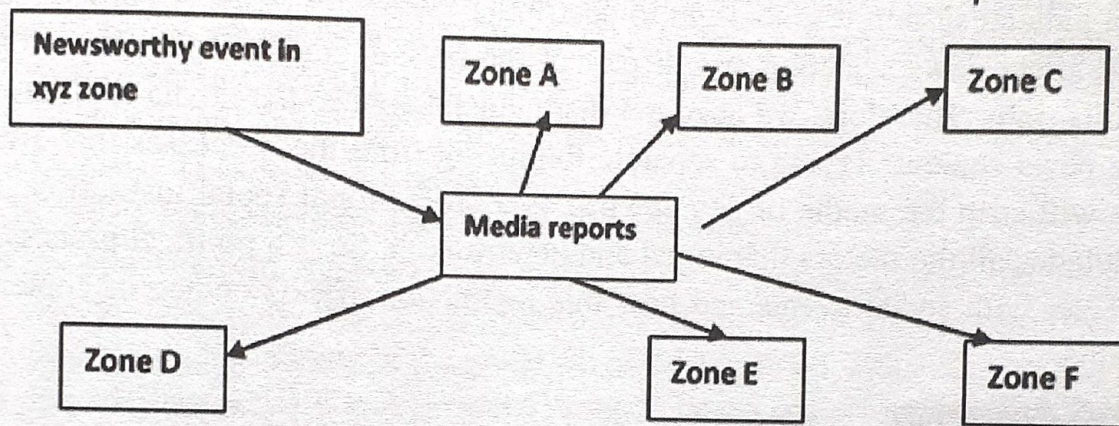


Fig. 6: Making events social issues. Events in one part of society are relayed to other parts of society whose people have interest and may also be affected by the event in zone xyz. For them, the media set the agenda of what is discussed about events in other parts of society, sometimes far removed from their environment.

It is because the media are the media that other people and institutions need them to ultimately reach others in society. Yet the media add their own dimension; they are well tutored in persuasion, interpretation and explanation, which are important ingredients of social agenda-setting. That a concern already exists in society is not a sufficient condition for it to be an already existing agenda. The media sharpen the focus, hype it, and frame issues in certain ways. For instance, a fashion designer makes a good dress; a president introduces new way to wear suit; a musician introduces new dance steps, etc. They each need the media to make their innovation to become social fad (remember the media threw up the Obama way to wear suits).

The camera angles, the number of media insertions, headline sizes, positioning of stories, schemas, and framings etc, are media additions that not only hype issues, but also draw people to them. Because the fashion designer cannot use the judiciary, the police, etc, it becomes clear that something makes the media the media. If, for instance, the fashion designer introduced nudity as part of the new wear, morally conscious parents in distant places often place greater blame on the mass media for propagating indecency instead of on the fashion designer. Most researches on the link between media-portrayed violence and

child aggression have said little about those who produce violent films. Media are often the centre of attraction. The films become the making of the media, not of those who created them. This is because the films make meaning to society and to researchers as far as they (the films) are media contents.

The question of those who influence the media (government, corporations, elites) in the choice of content is an issue to tackle within media circles, in journalism training institutions, and by media practitioners as well as by employers of media labour (as part of ethical guidelines). The media are made up of professionals who should take responsibility for judgments and actions. The 'biases' of a judge/imperfections of a judicial system are treated within the context of the judicial process – appeals – not outside, and such biases do not make a judicial system lose its right to determine the fate of parties in any litigation. The factors that affect news selection are all part of the mass media, and media men should be accorded this right. Therefore, we need not distinguish between the media and the process of generating news content. Trying to separate the media from the processes that affect media operations will strip the media of any essence as a professional social institution. A judicial process includes all the factors that impel and determine it. So is a political process. How the media interact with social events and how this interaction affects choice of contents are all part of media.

Conclusion

This work has attempted to state what agenda-setting really means. In other words, it is a warning to critics to understand the media profession and refrain from castrating it. Agenda setting should be treasured as the theory of the sociology of mass communication. Media people need to assert their expertise/professional right in guiding and directing social discourse. It is their own preserve; therefore, medical doctors, lawyers and politicians are not the ones to order social debates and discussion. The views and policy issues that government, powerful elites and corporations bring to the media end up as media contents following news judgment of editors, not of anyone else. The views should be seen as the end product – media contents and it is as such that they make sense to society as subjects of social discourse.

Some critics commit theoretical suicide by proposing a paradigm shift from one theory to another without empirical backing. Indeed, it would be extremely hard to ever prove that the media only mirror society. The methodological difficulties this will throw up will be the toughest ever. Again, there is no attempt to affirm the infallibility of agenda-setting theory. In fact this work has noted the perceived weaknesses of the theory, and offered ways to address the weaknesses. Undoubtedly, the social face and place of the mass media will need continual review against a backdrop of ICTs, network/information society, which are causing a change in patterns of audience interaction with media as well the relationship between public communication and social experience.

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