Agenda Setting in the New Media Landscape:
Two Perspectives and Approaches to Research

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Media effects studies naturally focus on audiences. Since the 1930s, scientific polling

has enabled scholars to trace audience reactions to media content with more precision

than could be done in earlier years. One can speculate that the early 20th century

reporting of muckrakers Lincoln Steffens and Ida Bell Tarbell, among others, led to the

passage of laws to rein in massive business cabals and to gather some federal income

taxes. Surveys in the 1930s and 1940s, especially those by such scholars as Harold

Lasswell, suggested that the connection among public information, attitude formation,

and political (or other) action is complex and not obvious. In fact, writer Joseph

Klapper's 1960 <u>The Effects of Mass Communication</u> suggested the media have no real

effects on attitudes. Agenda setting studies established a definite relationship between the

saliencies of highly publicized news topics and public awareness of those topics,

especially topics about which you could learn little except through some mediated, or

intermediate, source. This is true of nearly all foreign affairs topics and nearly all topics

about subjects beyond our own private lives, jobs, and communities – or, in other words,

public life.

In examination of mass media effects, there is a tendency to emphasize the media

more than the mass, to analyze the trees, but not to admire the forest. If we were to

construct a Web site for agenda-setting theory and research, a prominent FAQ – to use

the contemporary jargon of the Internet – would be whether newspapers or television is

the stronger agenda-setter. And the answer to this question is telling. About half the time,

there is no discernible difference in the agenda-setting influence of newspapers and

television news. The other half of the time newspapers have the edge by a ratio of

roughly two to one. Sometimes a particular *medium* holds center stage. More frequently, the *mass media* hold center stage.

The perspectives and approaches to agenda-setting research outlined here in regard to the Internet encompass both of these emphases. The civic osmosis perspective emphasizes the mass media. Another perspective, that of agendamelding, also emphasizes a broader picture of public communication in which many channels, both mass media and interpersonal, merge as a mixture of trees and forest. Collectively, these approaches will yield a more detailed understanding of the Internet's role in society.

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Civic Osmosis

We swim in a vast sea of news and information, a gestalt of mass media channels where the whole indeed is much greater than the sum of its parts. In this process of learning about the world around us through a continuous process of civic osmosis, the Internet is the *addition* of a dynamic and major channel to this gestalt. There is abundant empirical evidence regarding the inter-related nature of mass communication, evidence about the absorption of news and information from a mass media forest that dates from the earliest days of our field to the present era of the Internet.

In the benchmark 1940 Erie County study, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues found a substantial overlap in people's use of the various mass media. Comparing exposure to newspapers, radio and magazines, the primary media of that time, they concluded:

> People highly exposed to one medium of communication also tend to be highly
> exposed to other media. There are relatively few who are highly exposed to one

medium and little exposed to the other (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944,

p.122).

Years later in a graduate school research paper, McCombs replicated this finding at a

time when television had become a primary medium for news.

Even if this overlap among all the mass media has diminished somewhat in the

new media landscape, on the content side of the equation, the benchmark Chapel Hill

agenda-setting study found a high degree of overlap in the issue agendas of the nine news

media used by undecided voters during the 1968 presidential election. Across widely

diverse news media – local and national newspapers, national television news, and news

magazines – comparisons of all the agendas yielded a median correlation of +.71. And

the match of the undecided voters' issue agenda to the consolidated media agenda was a

highly robust +.97 (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Although in response to survey questions, people can name a particular news

medium as their primary source – the newspaper that they read most mornings, the radio

or TV news that they tune to with some regularity – people are far from immune to the

larger news environment. In the 1996 Spanish national election, McCombs, Lopez-

Escobar, and Llamas (2000) found a high degree of similarity in the strength of

agreement among the primary audience for each of six news media with their primary

medium's agenda in comparison to their correlation with the agenda of the primary

medium's principal competitor. For example, among voters who identified *Diario de

Navarra* as their primary news source, the agenda-setting correlation was +.62. Their

level of agreement with the competing local newspaper was +.57. Across 18

comparisons, the median difference in the correlations is only .09. Media share agendas;

we share agendas.

Scholar Leo Bogart found fascinating evidence about the intertwined nature, and

loyalty, of the public's use of news media during the 1978 New York City newspaper

strike. Common sense would suggest that with the three major dailies not publishing –

the *Daily News, New York Times* and *Post* – the public might well turn in even greater

numbers to television, particularly as a source of local news. However, examination of

the ratings for local TV news during the month-long strike indicated that

> in the absence of the major newspapers, the public did not turn in massive
>
> numbers to TV news as a substitute. It could be inferred, to the contrary, that the
>
> unavailability of the newspapers may have desensitized normal interests (Bogart,
>
> 1981, p.189).

Fast forward to the present. Media use patterns among different generations

diverge at least somewhat because of the Internet. As a consequence, some predict the

end of the agenda-setting role of the news media. However, drawing upon statewide

surveys in North Carolina and Louisiana, Coleman & McCombs compared agenda setting

effects among the generations and found little difference:

> … despite evidence that the youngest generation is not exposed to traditional
>
> media as frequently as the older generations, and does use the Internet
>
> significantly more, there is little support for the intuitive idea that diversity of
>
> media will lead to the end of a common public agenda as we have known it.
>
> Rather, different media use among the young did not seem to influence the

agenda-setting effect much at all (Coleman & McCombs, 2007, p.503). Particularly compelling is the comparison in the Louisiana data of the issue agenda of low and high internet users to the issue agenda of the state's major newspapers. There is a difference, but hardly an awesome one. For low internet users the correlation with newspaper agendas is +.90. For high internet users, who still seemed shaped by newspaper agendas, the correlations are +.70.

Finally, the collective influence of the mass media is vividly illustrated in Shaw and Martin's (1992) documentation of the positive role that higher levels of newspaper reading and TV news viewing have on citizens' consensus regarding the most important issues of the day. Their statewide study in North Carolina obviously reflects the influence of numerous news sources on the public's issue agenda. And this collective consensus-building role of the mass media subsequently has been replicated in settings as culturally and politically diverse as Spain and Taiwan (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas & McCombs, 1996; Chiang, 1995).

There are powerful and influential newspapers, broadcast stations, and Web sites. However, zooming out for a broader look, the vast gestalt of mass media voices are integral to our social fabric.

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Agendamelding

Civic osmosis suggests that journalism messages act through a variety of news channels, not just through a few major outlets, and that collectively we learn from reading newspapers *or* watching news on television *or* talking to people *or* reading blogs *or* watching Jon Stewart *or* from many other sources. From many sources it flows together

to form a picture. We have called those media that reach for big audiences—reach down to reach an entire nation or community, like network or local television or daily newspapers—vertical because the audiences for these media are often judged by size of the undifferentiated audience. By contrast, magazines, blogs, cable channels, and talk shows aim for those with an interest in the special topics. Readers of <u>Sports Illustrated</u> are interested in sports, for example, and listeners to talk radio host Stephanie Miller tend to be political liberals. Vertical media aim for objectivity and so do some horizontal media, but these media provide a diversity of general and special agendas for audiences.

The question is: How do audiences mix the content of the vertical and horizontal media? And what makes audiences seek certain types of media anyway? We argue that audiences do absorb agendas, as suggested in so many agenda setting studies, but that audiences most probably mix the agendas in ways that are personally comfortable. Audiences meld the agendas from a variety of sources. We argue that, beyond the media agenda, audiences meld issues of public life on a daily basis to make decisions about political candidates and resolve problems from the local community (where horizontal media may be powerful) to the nation (where vertical and horizontal media compete for agenda position in audience minds). Agendamelding is the personal side of civic osmosis.

For agenda setting to work, audiences have to attend to the news media and agree that the topics mentioned in the media are important to them individually or to the community. Agreement with the news media agenda is more than just exposure to those media. It also represents a degree of social commitment to the topics ranked as those topics are surrogates for the community. The news agenda results from journalistic

decisions made daily or hourly within news rooms. These agendas are the store windows

of the media. From the audience point of view, these agendas represent the community.

The news agenda *is* the community. Recent declines in daily newspaper circulation

suggest a loss of interest in the communities represented by those newspapers, not a

deterioration in content quality. Perhaps other media, Craig's List, free circulation

newspapers, blogs, local cable channels or Web sites, are gradually slicing up the former

newspaper grip on local community.

Certainly audiences have more informational choices than previously in our

history, although there has not been any time in the past five hundred years—since

Gutenberg—that there has not been some diversity in public agendas. Today, as in the

past, individual members of audiences with economic means seek media that fit their

interests. U.S. press historians commonly argue that the rich party press that emerged in

the days of President Andrew Jackson in the 1820s provided a diversity of points of view.

The assumption is, from John Milton's 1644 Areopagitica, that audiences read different

newspapers to sort truth from falsehood, a view very much influenced by the co-

occurring Enlightenment period in which Isaac Newton and Nicholas Copernicus found

facts separable from fable and myth. In retrospect, it seems as likely that audiences in the

19th century sought and read newspapers that supported already-established views than

sought newspapers that challenged those views. We cannot know for sure.

The instinct for birds of a feather to flock together is very strong. It seems likely

that we combine our commitment to the larger community with our desire to expose

ourselves to media that fit our own dispositions to see the world. In modern times,

conservative voters would view the Fox network, which many think favors that point of

view, while those with a more liberal outlook might favor the <u>Washington Post</u>, <u>New York Times</u>, or CNN.   All these media highlight the major issues of the day. Agenda setting studies from the very first have found that news media, which share reporter values, highly agree on the major topics. Today, we have come to call this agenda setting, level one. But those media differ on the *details* about those topics, which we have come to call agenda setting, level two.

The instinct to flock together works strongly when our social system is threatened. In 1952, Fred Siebert, in <u>Freedom of the Press in England, 1476-1776,</u> concluded that pressures on the press grew in direct proportion to the pressures on society. That thesis suggests that a national public agenda is likely to communicate itself to audiences very effectively in crisis, and that the range of public agendas is likely to shrink. At other times, one would expect "looser" fits between media and audiences, lower correlations. Most political agenda setting studies focus on periods of national elections, by definition periods of internal stress, and so it is not surprising that correlations tend to be high for both levels of agenda setting.

Daily newspapers and local and network television aim for large undifferentiated audiences, men and women, rich and poor, people of all religions, and old and young. We call these media vertical, as we said earlier, because they address all the audiences who have the time and interest to read, watch, and listen. By contrast, horizontal media reach out to audiences of special interest. While the fit is never completely clear because most media include both vertical and horizontal information to some extent—newspapers include sections on sports and business, among others—one intuitively can sort media generally into one category or the other. *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World*

Report are something of a challenge, but most cable channels aim at audiences with special interests—even the much-watched Weather Channel, since everyone has some interest in the weather. Entertainers Jon Stewart, David Letterman, and Jay Leno attract a large and loyal audience, and some suggest these entertainers are a major source of political news for many young voters. Certainly horizontal media are powerful players in presenting news of selected agenda communities.

Most times, individuals are not just members of a large aggregate, but also of many smaller groups. We are Republicans or Democrats. We are socialists or libertarians. We are environmentalists or small businesswomen. We are members of families, states, clubs, or the military. We are national citizens and attune ourselves to the national agenda community, but we also related to many agenda communities. One can argue that media organize themselves around agenda communities. People seek communities in selecting media.

We speculate that audiences attune themselves in their media activities across both vertical and horizontal media, thereby blending or melding those agendas to form their views of public and political events and issues. For example, one might scan the local daily newspaper for a picture of the public issues that journalists regard as important. Journalists, along with citizens, as Michael Schudson suggests in The Good Citizen (1999), watch the political and general environments and alert audiences to threats or dangers. Then we might turn to talk radio host Rush Limbaugh or Stephanie Miller, who also read newspapers for topics, for a discussion of how to interpret events. In other words, to arrange the attributes of topics, or objects, as McCombs has called them, in an order compatible with our own views, which might have been shaped long

ago by family, church, school, work, or other personal experience.   We can draw a

picture of the hypothesized process:
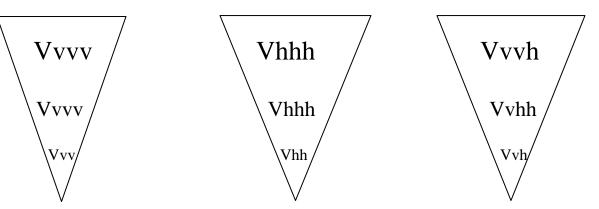
Figure 1

Objects and Attributes

Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Vertical Media Object & Attribute Agenda	Horizontal Media Object & Attribute Agenda	Individual Object & Attribute Agenda

Vvvv   Vhhh   Vvvh

Vvvv   Vhhh   Vvhh

Vvv   Vhh   Vvh

In this model, we suggest that the vertical media are most powerful in conveying a sense

of major issues at the time of events at both the object and attribute—there is little

challenge at that time, especially in times of emergency. Soon thereafter, however, we

turn to more personalized media that fit our horizontal interests and, if those more

personalized media provided alternative attribute views, we are likely to meld them to our

forming opinions of public issues. We fit issues into the communities in which we live.

   The greater the desire to learn about issues, and the less we know about those

issues, the great our need for orientation on those levels, as scholar David Weaver has

argued, and the greater our efforts to acquire the information that will orient us. Because

we have prior established views on many issues, there will be an effort to gain, blend, and

prioritize message attributes in a way that is cognitively comfortable, as suggested by

Time 3 of the model. The bottom half of figure 1 suggests that horizontal dominant

individuals are likely to seek out those media they use most often when confronted by a

need for information/orientation. Of course both "types" of individuals use both "types"

of media, as indicated by solid or dotted lines below. This is a hypothetical projection.

Agendamelding argues for an individual component to civic osmosis, a social theory that

connects media news content to individuals in a defined social system, needs to

incorporate perspectives (and data) from a number of research lines. We seem closer

than ever to such an integrated theory.

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