The language of journalism – The language of agenda setting effects

Abstract
The evolution of agenda setting over the past 50 years is an in-depth, large-scale case study of the scientific method. This oscillating history of theoretical explication and extensive empirical investigation has identified major aspects of the language of journalism that have significant impact on the formation of public opinion. The theory of agenda setting now includes three levels of agenda setting effects, intermedia agenda setting and the concept of compelling arguments that identify key aspects of the language of journalism. Other theoretical concepts, need for orientation, and most recently civic osmosis and agendamelding explicate the process of agenda setting. All of these are intellectual tools for dealing with the contemporary problem of fake news.

Keywords: Three levels of agenda setting; intermedia agenda setting; compelling arguments; need for orientation; civic osmosis; agendamelding; fake news.

Resumo
A evolução do agendamento ao longo dos últimos 50 anos é um caso de estudo profundo e de larga escala do método científico. Essa história oscilante de explicação teórica e de extensa investigação empírica identificou aspectos importantes da linguagem do jornalismo que possuem um impacto significativo na formação da opinião pública. A teoria do agendamento inclui agora três níveis de efeitos de agendamento, agendamento intermedia e o conceito de “compelling arguments” que identifica aspectos-chave da linguagem do jornalismo. Outros conceitos teóricos, como necessidade de orientação e, mais recentemente, osmose cívica e agendamelding, explicam o processo de agendamento. Todos eles são ferramentas intelectuais para lidar com o problema contemporâneo das notícias falsas.

Palavras-chave: Três níveis de agendamento; agendamento intermedia; “compelling arguments”; necessidade de orientação; osmose cívica; agendamelding; notícias falsas.
The evolution of agenda setting over the past 50 years is an in-depth, large-scale case study of the scientific method, an oscillating history of theoretical explication and extensive empirical investigation. This continuous expansion of agenda setting, theoretically and empirically, has identified major aspects of the language of journalism, especially in the news media’s reporting of public affairs, which have significant impact on formation of public opinion and on observable civic behavior.

The seminal Chapel Hill study (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) compared news coverage of public issues and public concern about those issues during the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign. The substantial correspondence between the media agenda and public agenda found in Chapel Hill subsequently has been extensively replicated worldwide (McCombs, 2014). And these hundreds of studies have included other objects of attention, such as public figures. In the language of journalism these are the key nouns that impact public opinion. This focus on objects of attention is now referred to as the first level of agenda setting.

Expansion of the theory followed swiftly. The second major agenda setting study, a panel study during the 1972 U.S. presidential election (Shaw & McCombs, 1977), introduced the theoretical concept of attribute agenda setting. The objects that are the focus of attention at the first level of agenda setting have attributes, those characteristics and properties that describe each object. And the third major agenda setting study, which was carried out in three diverse communities during the 1976 U.S. presidential election (Weaver et al., 1981) empirically compared the attribute agendas of the news media for the two major presidential candidates with the public’s attribute agendas for these men. The strong fit between these attribute agendas also has been widely replicated, and this area of research is now referred to as the second level of agenda setting. In the language of journalism these are the key adjectives that frame the objects of attention.

The first and second levels of agenda setting identify key elements in the language of journalism that have significant impact on the formation of public opinion. Subsequent research also has identified additional dynamics in the language of journalism involving these elements that also have significant impact on public opinion. These are the third level of agenda setting – network agenda setting, inter-media agenda setting and the concept of compelling arguments.

The most recent of these additions to the theory of agenda setting is the third level of agenda setting, network agenda setting (Guo & McCombs, 2016). First and second-level agenda-setting treat objects and their attributes as separate and distinct disaggregated elements. Of course, in reality sets of objects and their attributes are bundled together in media messages and in public thought and conversation. That is, the media agenda and the public agenda are networks defined by sets of objects and/or attributes. Evidence for network agenda-setting effects, strong matches between the media agenda and the public agenda comparable to those found at the first and second levels, also has been found in a wide variety of setting. These setting range from networks of issues and networks of candidate attributes (see Figures 1 and 2) to net-

Figure 1
Media network attribute agenda of a candidate
works of the attributes of biometric companies.

Network agenda setting also introduced a new measure of salience, *degree centrality*. First and second level agendas, beginning with the Chapel Hill study, measured the salience of objects or attributes by their frequency of appearance on each agenda under consideration. Network agenda setting uses a network measure, *degree centrality*, the number of links each object or attribute in the network has to all the other units in the network, to measure salience. Some units in a network stand at the center of the network with numerous links to the other units in the network. Other units are at the periphery with few links to any of the other units in the network.

Central to all three levels of agenda setting is agenda setting’s core theoretical idea, *the transfer of salience from one agenda to another agenda*. This central axiom holds regardless of whether the agendas under consideration are defined by objects, attributes or networks or regardless of how salience is measured.

This core idea also is the theoretical foundation for another basic concept, *intermedia agenda setting*, that entered the research literature in the 1980s in response to the question “Who sets the media agenda?” (Reese & Danielian, 1989; Breen, 1997; Lin, 2006; Ragas & Kiousis, 2010; Mohammed, 2018). Among the numerous influences on the media agenda the influence of high status news organizations, such as *The New York Times*, on smaller news organizations is among the most constant and dominant.

The concept of *compelling arguments* is another explication of the transfer of salience, the transfer of salience from attributes of an object on the media agenda to the salience of that object on the public agenda. Certain characteristics of an object presented in the media may resonate with the public in such a way that they become especially compelling arguments for the salience of the issue, person or topic under consideration (Ghanem, 1996, 1997; Saldana, 2017). The diagonal arrow in Figure 3 diagrams the concept of compelling arguments.

All five of these concepts, the three levels of agenda setting, plus intermedia agenda setting and compelling arguments, identify aspects of the language of journalism that influence the formation of public opinion. In addition, another theoretical concept, *need for orientation*, provides a psychological explanation for the strength of agenda setting effects (Weaver, 1977). Conceptually, an individual’s need for orientation is defined by two lower-order concepts, relevance and uncertainty. Relevance is the initial defining condition of need for orientation. Where relevance to the individual is low or even non-existent, the need for orientation is low and agenda setting effects are weak. If relevance is high, but uncertainty is low – that is, individuals already have all the information that they desire about a topic – then the need for orientation is moderate and the strength of agenda setting effects is moderate. If both relevance and uncertainty are high, the need for orientation is high and the agenda setting effects are strong.

**Concepts, domains and settings**

To understand fully the continuing expansion of agenda setting theory, it is useful to distinguish between the
concepts, domains, and settings that define specific details of the transfer of salience between two agendas. The basic concepts of agenda-setting theory are the object agenda, the attribute agenda, the network agenda, intermedia agenda setting, compelling arguments, and need for orientation. These theoretical concepts can be studied in many different domains and settings.

Beginning with the Chapel Hill study and continuing to this day, the dominant domain of agenda-setting research is public affairs, particularly public issues. A very different set of domains with a significant literature dating from the past decade or so are cultural domains that range from educational and religious institutions to a society’s collective memory of its past, contemporary museum visits and global interest in professional basketball.

Within each of these domains, agenda-setting can be studied in many settings. That is to say, the operational definitions of the basic concepts of agenda-setting theory can be particular aspects of many different domains. In the traditional domain of public affairs, the most studied setting is the news media-public dyad, particularly during elections. However, the concepts of agenda-setting theory also have guided research in a wide variety of geographic settings at many points in time. And the emerging new domains of agenda-setting introduce a vast array of new operational definitions for the basic concepts of agenda setting, all in settings far removed from public affairs.

Separating the basic concepts of agenda-setting theory from their operational definitions, this rich variety of domains and settings helps us to see the language of journalism and its agenda setting effects more clearly and to envision new directions of research. This separation also clarifies the various – and sometimes confusing – definitions of agenda-setting proffered by various scholars. Hewing to the original domain and setting of agenda-setting research, some narrowly define agenda setting as the transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. A somewhat broader definition states that elements prominent on the media agenda frequently become prominent on the public agenda. Both definitions are correct, but neither encompasses the full range of agenda-setting theory and research that exists today. For example, neither of these definitions covers intermedia agenda setting. Recognizing the distinction between concepts, domains and settings provides a useful context for defining agenda-setting and for understanding the broad range of agenda-setting phenomena. In this variety of domains and settings, the core axiom of agenda-setting theory about the transfer of salience from one agenda to another provides parsimony in our theoretical vocabulary.

In the early days of our field Lasswell (1948) noted that mass communication has three broad social roles: surveillance of the larger environment, achieving consensus among the segments of society, and transmission of the culture. The process of agenda setting is a significant part of the surveillance role, contributing substantial portions of our pictures and thoughts about the larger environment beyond our direct experience. As the roving spotlights of the media move from object to object and across the attributes of those objects in their surveillance of the environment, the public acquires significant knowledge and understand-
ing, especially about the relative sali- 
ence of elements in that environment. 
This aspect of learning is the core of 
the agenda-setting process. The agen-
da-setting process also has major impli-
cations for social consensus and trans-
mission of culture, implications that 
take agenda-setting theory beyond its 
traditional setting in public affairs and 
political communication. Mass commu-
nication’s role in achieving social con-
sensus is manifest in creating a high 
degree of homogeneity among the news 
media and among the public as a whole 
up and down over time. Exploration of 
the media’s role in the transmission of 
cultural agendas moves agenda-setting 
across new intellectual frontiers far 
beyond its traditional realm of public 
affairs. These new lines of cultural in-
quiry extend from the historical agenda 
defining a society’s collective memory 
of the past to contemporary museum 
visits in Greece and global interest in 
professional basketball.

**Agenda setting in the expanded media landscape**

We swim in a vast sea of news 
and information, a gestalt of commu-
nication channels where the whole is 
much greater than the sum of its parts. 
In learning about the world around us 
through a continuous process of *civic 
osmosis* (McCombs, 2012), the Inter-
net has added a host of new channels 
to this gestalt. In the scholarly exami-
nation of communication effects, there 
is a tendency to emphasize individual 
media more than the communication 
media collectively. The concept of civ-
ic osmosis emphasizes the collective 
role of the communication media and 
the inter-related nature of communica-
tion sources used by citizens for infor-
mation about public affairs. Evidence 
about the absorption of news and in-
formation from a media sea dates from 
the earliest days of our field to the 
present era of the Internet (Lazarsfeld, 
Berelson & Gaudet, 1944; McCombs, 
Lopez-Escobar & Llamas, 2000; Web-
ster & Ksiazek, 2012). This does not 
deny that there are powerful and influ-
ential individual media. However, the 
gestalt of media voices composed of 
legacy media and social media – this 
vast sea of information – is the core of 
our social fabric.

The concept of *agenda melding* 
進一步 explicates how individuals re-

spond to this sea of information. Agen-
da-melding describes how individuals 
mix objects and attributes from a vari-
ety of media and personal sources to 
construct a picture of the world (Shaw 
et al., in press).

Agenda-melding does not replace 
media agenda-setting, but rather 
seeks to explain why the strength of 
media agenda-setting varies between 
different media, groups and individu-
als. Some media …reach for large au-
diences, as if shouting from the top of 
a pyramid to any and all… vertically 
as it were… By contrast, [other] media 
are horizontal in that they reach out 
for audiences with special interests. 
(Shaw & Weaver, 2014)

This mix of vertical and horizontal 
media facilitates the creation of per-
sonally satisfying personal agendas.

**Fake news**

In some cases, the personally sat-
ifying agendas created by agenda 
melding may contain some amount of 
*fake news*, misinformation and false-
hoods planted online by persons or 
orGANizations with an agenda in the 
pejorative sense of that phrase. This
fake news, which can range from totally false news reports to fake facts embedded in news stories about actual events, often become part of a personal agenda because they support strongly held views. At other times, however, they become part of a personal agenda simply because of their widespread appearance and repetition in social media. Presumably in this latter case they are for the most part deleted as fact-based news reports catch up and debunk them. This is largely an untested hypothesis.

Ultimately, there are two safeguards to the diffusion of fake news. The first rests with the media, especially with social media where individuals can quickly spread false news. Unlike the traditional media which have editors and a tradition of verifying news reports, social media do not have editors. However, at least some social media do have fact-checking staffs who identify and delete fake news. For example, Facebook, YouTube and Pinterest recently have taken steps to significantly reduce the amount of fake news about measles vaccines on their platforms. However, in some cases fake news may have already diffused to thousands of people before it is blocked from a communication channel.

This leads to the second safeguard, the news audience itself. Over-reliance on a few news channels, especially horizontal channels that seek out individuals with specific interests, can make an individual more susceptible to fake news. Any news report that an individual truly considers relevant and important should be verified across numerous channels. This should be a variety of vertical and horizontal news sources because a major finding of agenda setting research dating from the Chapel Hill study is the high degree of homogeneity across the agendas of major news organizations who hew to the tradition of vetting multiple sources for a story (Lee, 2007; Boczkowski, 2010; Maier, 2010). Or one can directly check the veracity of a news report with major fact-check organizations. For example, Vosoughi, Roy & Aral (2018) classified news as true or false using information from six independent fact-checking organizations that exhibited 95 to 98% agreement on the classifications. Disconcertly, they found: Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. We found that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information. (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018, p. 1146)

Neither of these strategies for identifying fake news is perfect, but they are substantial starting points for the elimination of truly fake news, as distinguished from news stories labeled fake news by persons discomforted by the facts.

**Conclusion**

Expansion of agenda setting over the past 50 years, theoretically and empirically, has identified key aspects of the language of journalism that have significant impact on the formation of public opinion. The first and second levels of agenda setting identify two key elements, the “nouns” and “ad-
jectives” that influence the public’s focus of attention and their pictures of the world beyond immediate personal experience. Other research has identified additional dynamics in the language of journalism involving these elements that also have significant impact on the public. These are the third level of agenda setting – network agenda setting, intermedia agenda setting and the concept of compelling arguments. And the concept of need for orientation has added a psychological explanation for the strength of agenda setting effects. These theoretical concepts can be studied in many different domains and settings, not just news and public affairs.

The concept of agenda melding further explicates how individuals respond to the sea of information created by the blend of legacy media and social media. Agenda-melding describes how individuals mix objects and attributes from a variety of media and personal sources to construct their personal pictures of the world. In some case these personal agendas contain fake news. Ultimately, there are two safeguards to the diffusion of fake news, the vigilance of legacy and social media communication channels to delete misinformation and the verification across numerous channels of communication by individual members of the public of news they consider relevant and important.

Presentations on agenda setting theory, whether in essays such as this one or in book-length discussions present a smoothed case study of the theory. In reality, the scientific method is not so smooth. Kim, Kim & Zhou’s (2017) description of the trends in the various aspects of agenda setting theory shows irregular progress over the years. However, their research also shows a continuous pattern of theoretical and empirical growth, a pattern that predicts a productive future for agenda setting research over coming decades.

REFERENCES

Boczkowski, P. (2010). News at Work: Imitation in an age of information abundance. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Breen, M. J. (1997). A cook, a cardinal, his priests, and the press: Deviance as a trigger for intermedia agenda setting. Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 74, 348-356. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909707400208

Guo, L. & McCombs, M. (2016). The Power of Information Networks: New directions for agenda setting. New York: Routledge.

Kim, Y., Kim, Y., & Zhou, S. (2017). Theoretical and methodological trends of agenda-setting theory: A thematic analysis of the last four decades of research. The Agenda Setting Journal, 1, 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1075/asj.1.1.03kim

Lasswell, H. (1948). The structure and function of communication in society. In L. Bryson (ed.), The Communication of Ideas (pp. 37-51). New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies.

Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). The People’s Choice: How a voter makes up his mind in a presidential election. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lim, J. (2006). A cross-lagged analysis of agenda setting among online news media. Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 83, 298-312.
Lee, J. K. (2007). The effect of the internet on the homogeneity of the media agenda: a test of the fragmentation hypothesis. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 84*, 745-760. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900708400406

McCombs, M. (2014). *Setting the Agenda: The mass media and public opinion, (2nd ed.)* Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

McCombs, M., Lopez-Escobar, E., & Llamas, J. P. (2000). Setting the agenda of attributes in the 1996 Spanish general election. *Journal of Communication, 50*(2), 77-92. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02342.x

McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 36*, 176-187. https://doi.org/10.1086/267990

Maier, S. (2010). All the news fit to post? Comparing news content on the web to newspapers, television and radio. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 87*, 548-562. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769901008700307

Mohammed, S. (2013). Inter-media agenda setting between Egyptian and international online newspapers within the framework of political groups’ agenda. Doctoral dissertation at Minia University and the University of Texas at Austin, USA.

Ragas, M., & Kiousis, S. (2010). Inter-media agenda-setting and political activism: MoveOn.org and the 2008 presidential election. *Mass Communication and Society, 13*, 560-583. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2010.515372

Reese, S., & Danielian, L. (1989). Intermedia influence and the drug issue. In P. Shoemaker (ed.), *Communication Campaigns about Drugs* (pp. 29-46). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Saldana, M. (2017). Attribute agenda setting and information overload: Computer-assisted analysis for understanding compelling arguments. *The Agenda Setting Journal, 1*, 13-43. https://doi.org/10.1075/asz.1.1.04sal

Shaw, D. & McCombs, M. (eds.) (1977). *The Emergence of American Political Issues*. St Paul, MN: West.

Shaw, D., Minooie, M., Aikat, D., & Vargo, C. (in press). *Agendamelding: How we use digital media to create personal community*. New York: Peter Lang.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science, 359*, 1146–1151.

Weaver, D. (1977). Political issues and voter need for orientation. In D. Shaw & M. McCombs (eds.), *The Emergence of American Political Issues* (pp. 107–19). St Paul, MN: West.

Weaver, D., Graber, D., McCombs, M., & Eyal, C. (1981). *Media Agenda Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images and Interest*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Webster, J., & Ksiazek, T. (2012). The dynamics of audience fragmentation: Public attention in an age of digital media. *Journal of Communication, 62*, 39-56. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01616.x