

# Dialectics of Mass Media Agenda Setting Theory in an Era of Confluence

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## Abstract

The agenda setting theory of the mass media has transcended almost all spheres of media influence studies. Scholars agreed that the theory has served as a foundation for understanding some other theories of media influence/effect. However, the boundaries of the tenets of the agenda setting theory which initially gives 'absolute' power to the mass media to set an agenda on what the public thinks about is presently being pushed by some extraneous factors that hitherto were of lesser considerations. Adopting a qualitative approach and using existing literature, this paper reviews the concept of the agenda setting theory of the media vis-à-vis factors that are shaping and possibly revamping the frontiers of the age long media theory. The paper establishes that although the mass media to a large extent still set the agenda, the activities leading to the agenda they set is not totally the original idea of the mass media as expected with their surveillance function. Individuals' perception and background, typical media routine, economic considerations, public relations activities and lately, the activities of the social media have continuously shaped how and what the media set as the agenda for the public to discuss. It thus identifies an inter-media agenda-setting or a possible convergence-agenda setting because, at some point, a confluence exist in the ideologies of the parties leading to what the mass media eventually set as an agenda for the public. Thus, the paper makes a recommendation for studies and an expansion on the concept of media agenda setting in recognition of the contemporary developments which are modifying the assumptions of the theory.

**Keywords:** *Mass media .Agenda setting .Inter-media/convergence-agenda setting .Confluence, Extraneous factors.*

## INTRODUCTION

Agenda setting media theory in over four decades of existence has probably been one of the theories that have transcended every sphere of media studies. Because of its critical attention to issues salience and influence on public opinions, scholars have struggled and attempted to uncover the underlining factors that influence the operationalisation of this theory in the mass media. By mass media, we refer to the traditional forms of news media which are print and broadcast media which hitherto have enjoyed the monopoly of being the institutions setting the agenda for the public. However, that role, which has made the traditional news media achieve the status of the fourth estate of the realm, could no longer simply be adjudged as still holding waters in view of current and ongoing development in the media landscape that is reshaping the concept and context of the agenda setting theory of the media.

There has been several debates and attempt by scholars and professionals to determine the nexus in the conceptualisation but there still exist an area of a variance in the ideologies, assumptions and submissions. However, in reviewing the situation, one cannot but agree that there is an area of confluence where scholars could further research in order to advance the course of redefining one of the oldest media influence/effect theories.

In view of the foregoing, the objectives of this paper are to review the concept of the agenda setting theory; to examine factors that are redefining and influencing the concept

and context of media agenda-setting and make recommendations with a view to challenging and advancing the thoughts around the theory. This paper adopts a qualitative approach using available literature and personal observations to advance its objectives.

### **Agenda Setting - A Conceptual Exposition**

Agenda setting generally refers to the capabilities of the media to capture the importance of an issue in the mind of the public. Scholars have contended that a lot of times, these publics may be unsuspecting of this move of the media and on the flip side the issue being given the most attention by the media that later becomes public agenda may be unintentional positioned as such by the media. Rogers and Dearing (1988) identify three types of agenda setting to include as follows: public agenda setting, in which the public's agenda is the dependent variable (the traditional hypothesis); media agenda setting, in which the media's agenda is treated as the dependent variable ("agenda building"); and policy agenda setting, in which elite policy makers' agenda are treated as the dependent variable ("political agenda setting").

For instance, when we watch, listen or read the news, we observe a pattern of reportage that usually calls our attention to issues that we may likely have to pay more attention to. In the broadcast media, such 'issues of relevance' are captured as the "the major news highlights/headline news". In some instances, these issues are presented as special reports within the news bulletin, aimed at drawing a special attention from the audience to such news elements. In the print media, these issues are those mostly presented on the front pages as headline news. These issues may also be presented as special reports in the form of features, reviews and analysis. We may also notice the frequency of reportage of such issue, which most time is significantly higher. In the broadcast media, often times, analysts on the particular issue are invited during major news bulletin to discuss the issue, all in a bid to set an agenda for that issue the media perceive as the most important.

However, it must be noted that the agenda-setting power of the media resides in more than the amount of space or time devoted to a story and its placement in the broadcast or on the page. Also, important is the fact that there is significant consistency between media sources across all media in the choice and type of coverage they give an issue or event. This consistency and repetition signal to people the importance of the issue or event.

Thriving news media do not just relay but uncover relevant information. In uncovering this information, the agenda setting theory establishes a correspondence between the information the media provides and the influence on the public. The correspondence here lies in the link between the public "thinking process" which inadvertently, turn out to be the "media's thoughts". Baran, explaining the concept of agenda setting theory states that the media may not tell us what to think, but the media certainly tell us what to think about.

Essentially, agenda setting describes a powerful influence of the media. For instance, during the build up to the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, the All Progressive Congress' "Change Agenda" as a campaign theme for the party during the election, seem to naturally sleek into the media agenda which later became the public agenda. Although, as at the time of writing this paper, the general influence of this agenda set by the media during the election was still being studied, personal observations from public discourse and social media interactions reflect a significant influence of this agenda among majority of the electorate.

In carrying out the agenda-setting functions, there have been extensions in the conceptualisation of the approach. Biagi (2012) explains that agenda setting works in two ways: the flow of information from one news organisation to another and the flow of information from news organisations to their audiences. The stories that appear in the

nation's widely circulated print media provide ideas to the other media. For example, in Nigeria, news given prominence by newspapers like *The Punch* and *The Guardian* or Channels Television may become a focus area for other media because of the perception of these media as highly credible sources of news within the Nigeria media landscape.

Furthermore, since the 1990s, agenda setting has been operationalised at three levels of analysis: first level or first order agenda-setting which considers objects as the principal component in the transfer of salience from the media to the public; and second level or second order agenda setting in which through narratives and provision of contexts, the mass media extend the focus on objects of news and guide the understanding of the topics under consideration influence what and how the public think about an issue and the third level or third order agenda setting in which issues become salient in newspaper editorials. Editorials are standpoint of the newspaper organisation on momentous and topical issues of public interest" (Mustapha 2012, p.64).

For example, the Catholic Church's child molestation issue in early 2000 became very popular due to the reportage of Boston Globe. The reports transcended the three levels of agenda setting and eventually led the Church to take some drastic actions. The media employed a simple story line that aptly captured the actions of condoning an illicit act by the Church using very simple analogy (Center, Jackson, Smith and Stansberry, 2008, p.265).

### **Issues in Agenda Setting Theory**

Agreed as a helpful media influence theory, the agenda setting theory has also been found to be deficient in some of its applicability. In shaping public opinion, not too many studies have probed into other factors affecting the reception of the media agenda. McQuail (as cited in Ngoa, 2012) noted that the doubts on agenda-setting as a theory stem not only from the strict methodological demands but also from theoretical ambiguities and as such agenda theory remains within the status of a plausible but unproven idea.

While a strong and useful theory, Rochelle (2013) observed a weakness of the agenda-setting theory is that it is most suited for political news, making it a weak theory to apply to all aspects of mass communication. Some researchers and scholars question the direction of effect in agenda-setting theory asking, do the media affect what the audience thinks about, or do the audiences' opinions drive what the media report on? Also, the agenda-setting theory assumes that media outlets can transfer their opinions of what is important through their media content to the audience's opinions. This, however, is a weak assumption because the theory fails to take into account the differences among individual audience members. Even when exposed to the same media content, not all audience members will place importance on the same issues. Also, this assumption is further weakened when audience members that already have pre-existing opinions are considered. If an individual already has his or her mind made up about an issue, media agenda-setting may not be as influential on them as it would be to someone who has no opinion on that matter.

### **"Extraneous" Factors in Agenda Setting Theory**

The word "extraneous" has been deliberately used in this paper because from the review of the available literature on this subject, little or no attention was paid to these factors by the early adopters of the agenda setting theory. Apparently set in the realm of political happenings, the propositions in terms of how the theory will accommodate other exigencies was less considered, thus a deficiency in its applicability to other areas of mass communication. The question about who actually sets what eventually becomes the media agenda vis-à-vis the public agenda is of great interest here. Interestingly, these factors that were initially unconnected and unrelated to the concept are presently shaping and responsible for pushing the new frontiers in the conceptualisation and contextualization of the agenda setting theory.

Ironically, the foundation for some of these extraneous factors may have its background in the assumptions of the agenda theory which give some allowances for an incursion of some sort. Riaz (2008) citing Shoemaker & Recce also identified these factors in theorising the influences as follows:

- Mass media content is influenced by media workers' socialisation and attitudes. Their professional training, personal and political attitudes and affiliations lead them to produce a social reality.
- Media content is influenced by media routines. These routines are the ways in which media workers and their organisations perform their work. For example to write a news story before a deadline time or to write it in inverted pyramid are two media routines.
- News media content is influenced by the ideology of those who are in power in the society. Mass media follow an ideology consistent with those motives and interests, which helps ensure that society will continue in its present form.
- Media content is influenced by other social institutions and forces. This approach suggests that economic and cultural factors and audience members determine content.

These assumptions or theoretical approaches are captured by Weaver and Choi (2014) as five possible influences on the news media agenda viz: influential news sources, other media, journalistic norms and traditions, unexpected events, and media audiences.

As observed, individual journalist or group of journalists' interests are sacrosanct in whatever they are considering as the agenda to be projected through their individual medium. For instance, during the reign of General Sanni Abacha as the Head of State in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the frequent arrest and torture of members of the Nigerian Union of Journalists who dared to criticise the government became the agenda for the media and that eventually become the public agenda that was widely discussed. Biagi (2012) in his analysis agrees that "when a group of journalists, reporting the same story individually, presents a similar picture of the event they covered, rather than differing interpretations of events, this is called *consensus journalism*" (p.269).

In terms of the influence of media routine on agenda setting, the pattern of leadership vis-a-vis hierarchical model of a news media house could be a major determinant. The ideologies and the interest of the leadership/hierarchy of the media organisation in this instance are quite connected.

At the most micro level, journalists who create news stories and their editors may unknowingly shape content. Their socio-demographics as well as political views and training, and their perceptions of norms all have some bearing on what and how content gets presented which sometime may be drawn along gender lines (Moy & Bosch, 2013).

That people get their news from limited sources because people do not pay attention to all outlets thus relying on the rest of the mass news media, has been a probing area in the studies of the agenda setting theory. For instance, during the CNN-You Tube debate, while both CNN and YouTube positioned the debate format as one that would bring equality through participation, the selection control retained by CNN ensured that only videos selected by CNN would be broadcast during national live fora. Additionally, the criteria for video selection were never made public effectively allowing CNN control everything from the questioners' demographic to the topics addressed during the broadcasts (Ricke 2010, p.68).

The influence of the political elite or the operating political ideologies on what eventually become the media agenda is quite an extraneous factor to deal with in the media agenda setting theory. When the media finds itself in this situation, Moy et al (2013) believe what the media is doing is 'indexing'. Indexing occurs when the types of

viewpoints presented in news media tend to be calibrated to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic.

For instance, most government-owned media institutions such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and state-owned stations like Lagos Television (LTV) and Ogun State Television (OGTV) show the tendencies of a hegemonic nature in their style and pattern of reporting.

Another extraneous factor is the commercial motivations on the part of individuals, the media organisations and advertisers. It has been noted that the information the mass media often projected as "real" news as part of their editorial content a lot of times have "sponsors" as the case may be with advertising. There have been several arguments on how professional is the submerging of such paid content into main news/programmes in a broadcast or print output without been stated.

### **"Invasion" of the Social Media**

Another extraneous factor that has invaded the space of the media agenda setting theory is the social media enabled by the advent of the internet. Set in the 1970s, the agenda setting theory basically acknowledged the activities of the traditional mass media. However, with Web 2.0, online news and the social media are reinventing how the media agenda is been set. It is now a common phenomenon to hear in the main news broadcast by evening or read on the front pages of newspapers the next day, issues that were flagged or debated on the social media during the day or the day before. Some of the traditional media platform who has a presence online either like or follow conversations on these social media platforms through their twitter handles, on their Facebook pages and instagram pages.

Matei and McDonald (2010) explain with regard to the social media that,

Agenda setting has evolved over time from an 'issue salience' theory to a more complex proposition which overlaps with the priming/framing theory...Unlike the late '60's, the modern media landscape is now populated by bloggers, citizen journalists, Facebook and Twitter users as well as traditional media giants. Today, anyone can become a node in the media production process.

Inferring from studies by other scholars, Matei and McDonald (2010) also noted that the mass media and the social media influence each other in what could be described as the *inter-media agenda-setting* since they both cite one another thereby establishing the existence of a possible area of confluence. For them, "many continue to find value in the (agenda setting) theoretical framework, adapting it or expanding it to examine the complex new media landscape".

On the political scene in Nigeria, the pre-2015 general election provided a practical example of social media influence on media agenda setting. Before the election, Mojeed-Sanni (2015) stated that,

One avenue Nigerians have explored and are still exploring in the last five years to engage and indirectly participate in the everyday governance of the country is through the social media. *Social media has arguably taken the role of the fifth columnist where every rumour, action and inaction of government is first oozed out.* The popularity of the social media platform as a viable tool to pass and disseminate information ascribes the logical presumption that the social media to a large extent would determine who wins the 2015 elections (Emphasis mine).

Although many have queried what is perceived as "hate" citizen journalism and the high propaganda use of the social media during the 2015 elections, the fact that the social media was indeed a major incursion into the Nigeria public sphere, setting the agenda for public discourse cannot be underestimated.

However, Messner and Distaso's (as cited in Mustapha, 2012) inter-media agenda-setting study between blogs and traditional media found that reputable media institutions like *New York Times* and *Washington Posts* sometimes use blogs as news source while 73% of the bloggers in the study source their reports from the traditional media. The symbiosis between the two news genres, as demonstrated by the study thus predicts a complimentary rather than a threatening relationship.

### **Conclusion and Proposal**

The paper so far has reviewed the concept of the media agenda setting theory and established the authenticity of the theory in explaining media influence. However, some extraneous factors such as individual background and perception, political and economic factors, public relations activities and the social media which were hitherto not particularly considered at the inception of the agenda setting theory are now shaping the concept and context in which the agenda setting theory is applied to queries on who and what actually influence the media agenda cum public agenda.

In reality, an area of confluence has been established as both the traditional media and the new (social) media both quote themselves as news sources, either to confirm or debunk the information. As the mass media look at shaping the public opinion on social, economic and political issues by providing information which may directly or indirectly inform their perception, the players in the industry are also subtly shaping the public perception, mostly employing public relations techniques to seed their views and opinion in the public domain through the mass media.

In view of these identifiable areas of confluence or convergence of purpose in the quest for media agenda setting, this paper proposes an expansion in what may become a refined convergence-agenda setting theory of the media. By convergence, this paper acknowledges that varying interests from different actors within the sphere of mass communication at some point are responsible for what become the media agenda and subsequently the public agenda. The inter-media agenda-setting may also be studied further particularly now that the social media has come to stay as a major source of news to its various audiences including the mainstream (mass) media.

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