

# The Power of the Media to Influence Public Opinion by Setting the Agenda

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**Abstract:** There is abundant evidence that the media significantly shapes public opinion and policy in a given country. People learn not only the facts about current events from the news but also the relative importance of specific issues by observing how much coverage they receive. The prominence of a story in a newspaper's front page layout, other front page displays, enormous headlines, etc., all indicate how important a story is that day. Saliency can also be inferred from television news, including the lead-in story, time spent on the topic, etc. The significance of each issue is effectively communicated through the repetition of these cues across multiple days. The news media can direct the public's focus on the relatively few problems that ultimately shape public opinion.

## Introduction

**Principal Dimensions of Influence:** A Review of Walter Lippmann's Public Opinion (1922) In his seminal work, Public Opinion, Walter Lippmann delves into the fundamental aspects of influence. Published in 1922, this influential piece commences with a chapter aptly headed "The World Outside and the..."<sup>1</sup>

The Concept of Mental Imagery. As the individual observed, the news media serve as a principal conduit for forming mental imagery about public affairs. This domain remains inaccessible, unseen, and disregarded by most residents. The user's text is already academic. The knowledge we possess in the world is predominantly derived from the information disseminated by the media. The outcome of this mediated perception of reality is such that the preferences and concerns of the press significantly shape the priorities and circumstances of the general public. The prominence of elements on the media agenda directly correlates with their reputation in the public consciousness<sup>2</sup>.

Scholars in the field of social sciences have traditionally directed their attention to the impact of the media on public opinion by primarily analyzing matters of public concern. The ideological orientation of a news organization can be discerned by analyzing its consistent coverage of general problems throughout a given timeframe, such as a week, a month, or even an entire year. Many concerns are given prominence during this time frame, while others are briefly discussed, and a significant number still need to be acknowledged. Recognizing that the term "agenda" used in this context is solely employed for descriptive purposes is essential. There is no inherent negative connotation associated with the notion that a news organization possesses a deliberate and persistent agenda.<sup>3</sup> The media agenda disseminated to the general public is a product of several daily choices made by many journalists and their superiors on the current news landscape. The assessment of the public agenda, which refers to the issues that capture the general public's attention, is typically conducted through public opinion polls. These polls often utilize a question similar to the well-established Gallup Poll query: "What is the most significant problem currently confronting our nation?"<sup>4</sup>

There is substantial evidence indicating the agenda-setting function of the news media through comparisons of the media agenda in the weeks leading up to these opinion polls that assess the public plan. In the context of a voter survey conducted in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, participants were requested to identify the most. In the inaugural empirical study on the subject matter, the participants' responses strongly correlated with the news coverage from the preceding month. This alignment was observed across several media platforms, including newspapers, network television news, and news magazines, that were accessible to the participants. The user's text needs to be longer to be rewritten academically. Since the inception of the inaugural study conducted during the 1968 U.S. presidential election, a substantial body of literature comprising over 300 published studies from various regions across the globe has extensively documented the profound impact exerted by the news media.<sup>5</sup> It is essential to acknowledge that the evidence presented

spans diverse study approaches, including multiple panel studies, time-series analyses, and controlled laboratory trials.

To provide a comprehensive assessment of the impact and enable cross-context comparisons, social scientists often compute the correlation between the prioritization of topics on the media agenda and the subsequent prioritization of those topics on the public plan. Utilizing this quantitative metric offers significant accuracy in our comparisons, akin to the superiority of accurate numerical readings from a thermometer over a mere subjective observation that today appears cooler than yesterday.<sup>6</sup> The bulk of comparisons between the media agenda's ranking of issues and the public's perception of the importance of these issues have resulted in correlations of  $+0.50$  or higher. The user's text needs to be longer to be rewritten academically. This indicates a significant level of influence.<sup>7</sup>

The initial investigation of the agenda-setting impact of the news media in Chapel Hill focused on a specific month within the context of the 1968 United States presidential election. Subsequent research endeavors have undertaken investigations over extended durations, such as a comprehensive panel study spanning a year and consisting of nine waves conducted during the 1976 U.S. presidential election. These subsequent studies have yielded comparable findings, providing substantial evidence of robust agenda-setting effects within the general populace. Upon examining the complete span of the 1960s. <sup>8</sup>

The present analysis focuses on the extent of media coverage in news magazines and the patterns observed in public sentiment as indicated by the responses to the Gallup Poll's inquiry regarding the foremost issue confronting the nation—the number 5.

The presence of agenda-setting effects has also been seen at the local level, and ample evidence supports the existence of national and regional impacts across diverse settings globally. During the spring of 1995, the primary worries of citizens in Pamplona, Spain, were unemployment and urban congestion. A thorough analysis of the six primary topics on the public agenda and their alignment with local news coverage over the past fortnight revealed a significant level of contact.<sup>8</sup>

The impact on mental imagery

The news media's ability to set the agenda extends beyond the initial stage of directing public attention toward a specific subject matter. The media influence subsequent phases of the communication process, shaping our comprehension and viewpoint towards news subjects. When considering the agenda conceptually, it becomes evident that there is a significant opportunity for a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of media on public opinion. Within the abstract, the constituents that delineate the agenda are tangible entities. The targets of our discussions encompass various general issues. However, they may also pertain to alternative things or themes, such as the agenda pursued by political candidates in the context of an election. The objects refer to the entities that capture the attention of both the media and the general public.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, each of these entities possesses many attributes, encompassing the various features and traits that serve to delineate and define that entity. Everything has a set of associated characteristics, as the media and the public engage in discussions and thoughts about the object. Specific attributes are highlighted during these discussions, while others are downplayed or wholly disregarded. The above traits represent an additional facet of the news media's agenda-setting function.

According to Walter Lippmann's concept of "the pictures in our heads," the news media's presentation of various subjects or things significantly shapes the content of our mental images. The traits associated with different situations, prominent persons, or items significantly shape our mental representations of them.<sup>10</sup>

The news media's influence on attribute agenda-setting is most evident in the public's perception of political candidates and other public personalities, mainly through disseminating images. In the context of the 1996 general election in Spain, it was observed that the descriptions provided by voters in Navarra on the three prominent party leaders had a notable alignment with the portrayal of these individuals by the media—the number 10. The local newspapers had a median correlation of  $+0.70$  with the descriptions provided by the local voters. On the other hand, the national newspapers demonstrated a higher correlation of  $+0.81$ , while national television had a comparatively lower correlation of  $+0.54$ .<sup>11</sup>

Previous studies have identified resemblances between the visual representations presented by the news media and the mental pictures held by the general people during the United States presidential elections. The analysis reveals substantial evidence of media effect by comparing the descriptions of the Democratic

candidates for the 1976 presidential nomination provided by New York Democrats with the traits shown in Newsweek's early January sketches of these 11 individuals. The number 11. Of particular significance in this body of information is the observed increase in the correlation between the traits emphasized in the news agenda and those prioritized by the voters, which rose from +0.64 in mid-February to +0.83 in late March. Voters not only acquired knowledge of the media's plan, but via extended exposure throughout the primary elections, they also enhanced their understanding of it.<sup>12</sup>

Shifting the focus to a distinct political and cultural context, an analysis was conducted to examine the electorate's perceptions of the three mayoral candidates in Taipei, juxtaposed with the portrayals of these individuals as presented by local media and television channels. The number 12 is the numerical value being referred to. The agenda of qualities comprised a comprehensive range of human and political attributes, encompassing 12 distinct areas. Comparisons of the voters' preferences. <sup>14</sup>

The photos depicting qualities in the China Times and United Daily News exhibited positive values, ranging from +0.59 to +0.75. The calculated median value of the six comparisons, which involved three candidates and two publications, was found to be +0.68. The lack of significance in the comparisons made with TV news can be attributed to the voters' awareness of the direct control exerted by the government and the long-standing KMT political party over all three television stations during that period. This particular piece of data substantiates the broader observation that the manifestation of agenda-setting effects necessitates the presence of media and political institutions that are relatively unrestricted and transparent.<sup>15</sup>

There are also instances of attribute agenda-setting about public problems. The selection of specific features of topics by the media significantly impacts the public's view of these concerns. In the context of the 2000 presidential election in the United States, there was a positive correlation of +0.60 between the portrayal of social welfare by the news media and the discourse of American voters on this matter at a national level—the number 13.

The outcomes exhibit notable parallels in environmental concerns despite the distinct nature of the challenges at hand. In the context of global environmental issues, a significant positive correlation of +0.78 was observed between the portrayal of this matter in Japanese publications and the perceptions of Tokyo inhabitants about eight dimensions of such issue. The number 14 is the numerical representation of the quantity between 13 and 15. In an environmental scenario inside the United States, a significant degree of concordance (+.71) was observed between individuals' mental imagery and the coverage provided by local newspapers.<sup>16</sup> This relationship pertained to six distinct facets of a venture to construct a substantial artificial reservoir in central Indiana. The number 15 is the subject of discussion.

Covering different facets of a problem in the news and the relative emphasis on these aspects significantly influence individuals' perceptions of the topic.<sup>17</sup> Individuals gain knowledge about the information journalists disseminate by analyzing the overall news coverage.

It is imperative to examine the significant matters at hand and identify the notable public characters of the contemporary day. The general constructs its perceptions and viewpoints towards various subjects and public figures based on the information and characteristics supplied by the news media in their coverage.<sup>18</sup> Shaping public attention holds significant influence, although it may be argued that exerting control over the traits ascribed to an issue or political figure represents the pinnacle of political power. The process of establishing the framework within which a topic is discussed and deliberated can exert a substantial impact on the final result.

While the media agenda undoubtedly wields significant influence, it is essential to note that it is not the sole determinant of the public plan. The drivers of the public agenda extend beyond the information and cues on objects and attribute salience provided by the news media. The considerable impact of the news media has not invalidated or undermined the fundamental premise of democracy, which posits that the general populace possesses adequate wisdom to shape the trajectory of their nation, state, and local communities.<sup>19</sup> The general public can discern the fundamental significance of the subjects and characteristics put forward by the news media, both about their own lives and the broader public sphere. The media's ability to shape the agenda is contingent upon the extent to which citizens view its news stories as pertinent.

The lack of success in the United States regarding the extensive news coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, which aimed to shape public opinion and determine the public agenda, despite its overwhelming

and continuous nature often referred to as "All Monica, all the time," serves as a significant indication of the constraints on media influence. Data indicates a substantial majority in favor of the proposed policy change. The American public demonstrated a need for more belief in the significance of the controversy as a determining factor in their evaluation of the president's effectiveness or ineffectiveness in governing.<sup>20</sup>

The explanation for the occurrence or non-occurrence of agenda-setting effects by the news media is a fundamental psychological characteristic known as our desire for orientation. The inherent inclination to comprehend the surrounding environment is present throughout every individual. Upon encountering unfamiliar circumstances, individuals often experience a sense of psychological unease until they engage in exploration and cognitive comprehension, thereby obtaining a rudimentary understanding of the given context. Consider, for instance, the initial emotional response evoked when one travels to an unfamiliar urban setting. The inherent desire for guidance is also present in civic engagement, particularly during elections when individuals encounter unknown candidates or referendum topics about which they possess limited understanding. In several circumstances, including those mentioned above, individuals experience a requirement for guidance or direction.<sup>21</sup>

The variability in the need for direction among individuals is attributed to its psychological nature. Specific individuals in various contexts may have a pronounced inclination toward seeking orientation. For particular individuals, exposure may be deemed unnecessary or of minimal importance. They need more curiosity. The concept of the need for direction encompasses two fundamental elements: relevance and uncertainty. The idea of relevance is the primary determining factor in assessing the degree of necessity for orientation in each person. When a subject is seen as lacking significance or having very low importance, the need for direction is diminished.<sup>22</sup> Individuals in this context exhibit minimal or negligible engagement with news media reporting and, at most, display limited influence from the agenda-setting phenomenon.

The level of need for orientation among individuals is contingent upon the degree of uncertainty they possess regarding a specific topic, mainly when the relevance of this topic is significant. When the level of ambiguity is minimal, indicating a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, the orientation requirement is deemed modest. These individuals, who find themselves in a situation of significant relevance and importance, the level of uncertainty is minimal, as the user intends to check the media for updates regularly and occasionally delve into further background information. However, it is improbable that they are strongly inclined toward consuming news stories about the subject matter. The impact of agenda-setting effects inside this particular group is moderate.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, persons who perceive a situation as highly relevant and experience significant ambiguity tend to exhibit a high desire for orientation. These individuals are known for their considerable interest in consuming news content, and it is commonly seen that the agenda-setting effects highly influence them.<sup>24</sup>

The priming of viewpoints, which subsequently shape the public's opinions of people, is widely regarded as the most extensively documented outcome of object and issue salience.<sup>26</sup>

Television news and other news media impact the criteria used to evaluate governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office by selectively highlighting specific issues while disregarding others. The number provided by the user is 20.<sup>26</sup>

The psychological underpinnings of priming can be attributed to the phenomenon of selective attention exhibited by individuals within the public sphere. Individuals are only able to allocate attention to some items. Furthermore, individuals rely on heuristics and intuitive heuristics when generating evaluations—whether in the act of voting on election day or merely in responding to inquiries from pollsters. The number provided by the user is 21. Instead of conducting an exhaustive examination of all available information, individuals often rely on the most relevant information when making judgments. The number 22 is the subject of discussion. Individuals depend on the prominence of specific objects and traits within their cognitive framework, significantly influenced by the mass media.<sup>27</sup>

Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder conducted a comprehensive set of agenda-setting studies, which yielded substantial evidence indicating a priming impact of television news on individuals' evaluations of the president's overall performance over their tenure. The number 23 is the subject of discussion. The study found that individuals who were exposed to significant news coverage on one or more of five specific issues (defense, inflation, arms control, civil rights, and unemployment) were more likely to have their overall opinion about the president's performance influenced by their ratings of the president's performance on the

issues receiving substantial news coverage. This effect was not observed among individuals not exposed to such news coverage. The impact above persisted regardless of whether the news narrative insinuated a significant level of presidential accountability. In subsequent trials, the researchers deliberately altered the level of presidential responsibility for a particular issue. They found that the influence of problem performance ratings on individuals' evaluations of the president's overall performance was more pronounced when the news reports emphasized the president's responsibility for the issue more significantly.<sup>28</sup>

Shifting our focus to a distinct context, the perception of the final British governor of Hong Kong was significantly shaped by the media portrayal of his initiatives aimed at expanding public involvement in the electoral process of the Legislative Council. The number provided is 24. Throughout 52 consecutive weekly surveys starting from the autumn of 1992, the governor's debut policy address notably impacted public opinion regarding his overall performance. This impact was mainly influenced by the consistent news coverage of his reform ideas in Hong Kong's three prominent newspapers.

The American public opinion on the Persian Gulf War illustrates both the differentiation and connection between traditional agenda-setting effects and the subsequent priming resulting from these effects. The numerical value provided by the user is 25. The war gained significant prominence on the public agenda due to extensive media coverage, exhibiting a conventional first-level agenda-setting effect. This study examines the public perception of President Bush from 1988.<sup>29</sup>

1991 marked a notable transition in the foundation of his popularity, shifting from economics to foreign policy, which can be attributed to a priming effect. This study examines the impact of attribute agenda-setting on public opinions, explicitly focusing on the relationship between exposure to television news and preferences for military or diplomatic solutions in the Persian Gulf conflict. The findings indicate that individuals who reported higher exposure to television news, which prominently featured military options in its framing of the war, were more inclined to support an army approach rather than a diplomatic resolution.<sup>30</sup>

The phenomenon of priming also manifests in the context of political parties. The television news agenda exerted an influence on the political party preference of German voters in 1986. The number 26 is the numerical value representing the quantity between 25 and 27. The inclination towards the Christian Democrats was significantly shaped by the media's portrayal of two critical matters: the energy supply and the situation in East Germany. The preference for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was impacted by three key factors: the dynamics of East-West relations, the imperative of environmental conservation, and the concerns around pensions. Analogous trends were noted in the weekly surveys of public sentiment about various political factions. The study reveals a consistent trend where topics covered on television news had distinct effects on political partisanship. The main conclusion is that prominent concerns highlighted by the media were closely associated with political alignment changes throughout the year.<sup>31</sup>

The attribute of agenda-setting refers to the ability of media outlets to influence the salience and importance of specific topics or issues in public discourse. This power allows media organizations to shape the public's perception of what the impacts of mass communication can arise due to extensive exposure. The initial level of agenda-setting effects serves to illustrate the phenomenon. However, it is essential to note that both agenda-setting and priming theories highlight the significance of analyzing the precise content of mass media messages, including their tone. This level of scrutiny allows for a more comprehensive comprehension of the mental images we form and the subsequent attitudes and opinions influenced by these mental images.

In the period spanning from 1975 to 1984, the political perception of Helmut Kohl among the German public was significantly shaped by the prevailing discourse found in news magazines and prominent newspapers.<sup>32</sup>

The individual's performance was evaluated in two distinct roles: firstly, as the leader of the opposition, and afterward, as the chancellor. The number 27 is the result of adding 20 and 7 together. The German public's degree of approval towards Kohl experienced considerable changes due to the shifting patterns of positive and negative tone in the media, which were measured across six categories. The study found a median connection of +.48 between the affective tone of six news media's attribute agendas and later public opinion, with a lag time of six months.

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A comprehensive analysis of the final three months of the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections in the United States revealed that the tenor of television news reporting on significant campaign events had a discernible impact on voters' inclination towards particular candidates. Positive portrayal of

The televised Republican campaign events on four major national television networks elicited a positive impact on the level of support received by the Republican candidate. On the other hand, positive media portrayal of campaign events affiliated with the Democratic party resulted in a decline in support for the Republican candidate. The magnitude of these media effects on voters' opinions exhibited comparable potency in both years.

The impact of tone extends beyond individuals' attitudes and opinions towards political leaders.

Negative newspaper headlines about economic matters might influence the public's perceptions regarding the state of the economy. The number 29 is the numerical representation of a quantity. Consequently, these viewpoints manifest as self-fulfilling prophecies when individuals adapt their actions to align with their convictions. A study conducted between 1980 and 1993 examined the notable impacts observed in economic headlines included in the New York Times, monthly consumer sentiment surveys about financial well-being, and leading statistical indicators reflecting the actual state of the economy.

The topic of media coverage and behavior is of significant academic interest. The influence of media on human behavior has been extensively studied and analyzed in various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and communication studies.

The influence of media agenda on observable behavior is also affected by the relevance of issues and other topics. The media provides comprehensive coverage of criminal activities and acts of violence, encompassing homicide and sexual assault.

According to the dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania, an incident on the university campus a few years ago resulted in a notable decrease in the number of applications from prospective first-year students. The numerical value provided by the user is 30. The reduction primarily transpired within the female population. Furthermore, it is worth noting that other colleges of similar standing also observed a rise in applicants within the same timeframe. An additional illustration of media's impact on young individuals' conduct can be observed in Harvard University's effective utilization of entertainment television programming to disseminate the concept of the "designated driver." This refers to an individual within a social gathering who refrains from consuming alcohol to transport their companions home responsibly. The numerical value provided by the user is 31.

The 1988 Indiana Poll effectively synthesized various dimensions of agenda-setting and its resultant implications. The numerical value provided by the user is 32. In line with a recurring trend, there was a notable association between the prominence of a significant matter during a particular period, namely the United States federal budget deficit, and the extent of individuals' exposure to newspapers and television news. The combined influence of issue salience and exposure to newspapers and television news was a significant predictor of public opinion towards a potential resolution to the problem and an individual's knowledge about the topic.

Moreover, when considered alongside the utilization of a specific medium, namely television news, the level of importance attached to an issue was found to be a significant predictor of the intensity of individuals' opinions. On the other hand, the level of importance attached to a topic, when combined with reading newspapers, was a significant predictor of actual behavioral outcomes, such as writing a letter or attending a meeting. This study presents compelling evidence of substantial correlations between media consumption and the prominence of societal issues, as well as the subsequent impact of these factors on individuals' knowledge, opinions, and observable behaviors.

## Conclusion

Individuals' collective perceptions regarding the external world are subject to substantial impact from the media, encompassing both the content and portrayal of these mental images. The agenda-setting impacts of the press possess significant ramifications that extend beyond the mental images formed in individuals' minds. In the realm of agenda-setting, which pertains to the prioritization of public concerns, substantial

evidence indicates that changes in the prominence of issues on the media agenda frequently serve as the foundation for public opinion regarding the overall effectiveness of a public leader's performance in office. The correlation between the prominence of a leader in the media and an individual's inclination to hold an opinion is evident. In the second tier of agenda-setting, the importance of emotional characteristics coupled with the public's cognitive perceptions of these leaders signifies the merging of attribute agenda-setting with forming and altering opinions. In addition to shaping attitudes and ideas, the depictions of reality presented by the mass media have significant ramifications for individual behaviors, from the decision-making process in college applications to voting on election day.

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