



The Political Agendas of Three Newspapers and City Governments*

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The political power of writers has been suspect for a long time. The record goes back at least as far as Plato. In *The Republic*, he tells us the authorities will always have to control poets and dramatists carefully. Otherwise, they will soon lead the common people out of the paths of goodness and mercy laid down by their betters. The Lord Chamberlain of England was specially charged with keeping a close eye on the likes of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare. Some years after their time, Andrew Fletcher was also proclaiming the political power of popular communication when he declared: "Let me write the songs of a country and I care not who writes its laws."

For more than 150 years it has been traditional to speak of the press as the fourth estate. In some way it was supposed to be analogous to the British Lords spiritual, the lords temporal, and the Commons. Yet the press has seldom been acknowledged as a legitimate political institution — except perhaps in the United States. Elsewhere the terms used are those of usurpation and illegitimacy. That has not stopped either the practitioners or the students of politics from speaking of the press as a potent political force.

Despite their importance to the governing process, the mass media are not primarily political institutions. At heart, they are entertainment and commercial institutions. And most people pay attention to them for non-political reasons. Perhaps that helps explain why political scientists have given little serious study to the mass media. That has been largely left to students of sociology, advertising, applied psychology, and cultural communications. For politics, the bulk of the relevant inquiry during recent years has been limited to electoral and voting effects, political development, socialisation, and something called public opinion.

Walter Lippman's pioneer work on public opinion made the first suggestion, in 1922, that there was a close connection between the newspapers' political contents and the mass public's political images. The early American voting studies tried to probe this but without much success. A more important development came in the mid-fifties when Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld developed the "two-step" theory of communication in their *Personal Influence*. Lippman's notion was taken a good deal further in 1961 by V.O. Key, jr. In his *Public Opinion and American Democracy* he noted that the evidence for a stimulus-response model of the power of the press was weak and contradictory at best. Perhaps the more profitable area to examine would be the connection between the mass media's selection and presentation of political news and the agenda of political discussion in the general public. The press cannot tell us what to think. There are too many mediating factors, he said. Everyone was agreed on that by the early sixties and perhaps what the press really ends up doing is telling us which issues to think and talk about. The idea was not unique to Key but his discussion of it was very influential. The proposition was put in more dramatic terms by Theodore White in, *The Making of the President 1972*:

"The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion....It determines what people will talk and think about — an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins."¹

It was some time before these propositions were carefully examined. Virtually all the major voting studies of the nineteen-sixties paid some attention to the mass media but most simply described the campaign content and partisan editorial stands. Others tried testing some version of the old stimulus-response model. A few turned up, almost incidentally, suggestive correlations between the reporting priorities of the mass media and the relative salience of particular issues for the mass publics. What appears to be the first study specifically tailored to test the concept of agenda-setting was reported by Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs in 1972. They summarized their findings during the 1968 presidential election in this way:

"Among undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, there were substantial correlations between the political issues emphasized in the news media and what the voters regarded as key issues in that election. The voters' beliefs about what were the major issues facing the country reflected the composite of the press coverage,

even though the three presidential contenders in 1968 placed widely divergent emphasis on the issues. This suggests that voters — at least undecided voters — pay some attention to all the political news in the press regardless of whether it is about or originated with a favored candidate. This contradicts the concepts of selective exposure and selective perception, ideas which are central to the law of minimal consequences.”²

The field of study blossomed during the seventies with different attempts being made to define and expand the boundaries of the notion of agenda-setting. McCombs’ definition, now fairly widely accepted, specifies the concept as a “strong positive relationship between the emphases of mass communication and the salience of these topics to the individuals in the audience.”³ Many studies assume a causal line running from the mass media agenda to the public agenda, but without extensive time-lag research it is difficult to demonstrate. Some interdependence and “reverse flows” have also been suggested. The projects which have been undertaken encompass the contents and presentation schedules of different communications media and varying, non-comparable time periods. The most common approach looked at television, daily newspaper, and/or radio broadcasting in one particular locality over a fairly short time span. The public agenda varies in content somewhat more. Two political scientists, for example, say that

The public agenda consists of all issues which (1) are the subject of widespread attention or at least awareness, (2) require action, in the view of a sizeable proportion of the public; and (3) are the appropriate concern of some governmental unit in the perception of community members.⁴

That is the most closely specified definition of the public agenda. More partial ones are used increasingly as much of the work is carried out in the field of communication studies and not political science. One consequence is that the bulk of research attention is drawing away from studying public issue attitudes.

A focus on agenda-setting involves at least two analytically separate political roles. The first is the role of the press as a communication channel serving general and elite audiences. “Agenda-setting” is only one of a number of indications that it is not a “clear channel” like a telephone line that we are discussing. The process always affects the message. The second role is that of actor who influences the subject and sometimes the tilt of authoritative decisions. In practice it is difficult to distinguish the two roles.

The research has confirmed important aspects of the agenda-setting hypothesis. There are distinct connections between the prominence the mass media give to certain politicians, issues, and data and the importance that people in the audience attach to those items. We cannot, however, speak of a generalized effect. Once again, characteristics of members of the audience have a lot to do with how much their scales of importance are influenced by the mass media. Those most vulnerable are people whose partisan attachments, political convictions, independent knowledge, and general interests are low or non-existent. Among these and others, the range of influence seems to vary with the amount individuals are exposed to mass media content, their use of the various channels, access to other information sources, and technological features of the way in which the mass media arrange and present different items.

In what may be an excess of scholarly caution, Shaw and McCombs have suggested that "the major political role of the mass media may be to raise the salience of politics among the American electorate every four years." Only then presumably are enough voters paying close enough attention to political happenings in the mass media that agenda-setting influences begin to operate. In the early weeks of the campaigns studied by Shaw and McCombs, newspapers seemed to be the more powerful agenda-setters with television coming on to a stage of equal influence much closer to the election date. Once again, the better-educated tended to agree more with the newspapers' agendas of issue salience and the lesser-educated with television agendas. This report concluded:

"The differential effects of the two media also depend on the nature of the personal agenda. Newspapers have more influence on the intra-personal agenda of issues, those issues considered personally most important, while television has more influence on inter-personal agendas, what people talk about with each other. This is compatible with the earlier evidence that newspapers wield a long-term influence while television fills a short-term influence role."⁵

The study of agenda-setting and similar phenomena is complicated by the previously unsuspected existence of dynamic mechanisms in social intercourse. One such is the "spiral of silence" series of effects reported by Elizabeth Noelle-Neuman.⁶ Most people prefer to have harmonious relations with their peers despite differences — over public affairs, for example. Noelle-Neuman points out that a constant process goes on in which an individual tests his reactions and opinions against those of his peers. He learns which topics are "worth discussing", deduces the range of

tolerable agreements and disagreements, and begins adjusting his own conversational agenda so as to maximize the comfort of his social relationships. It is yet another process of reducing social discomfort. In all of it, the press may play little or no direct role (except possibly for the provision of potential topics), but the mechanism undoubtedly conditions agenda-setting possibilities.

Bureaucratic routines and time limits written into financial and other measures are responsible for putting many of these matters on the schedule for debate and decision. The communication networks of individual decision-makers generate other items on the schedule but in what proportion they arise from the various mass media, public representations, and private approaches we have very little idea.⁷

The research has concentrated on the functional relationship of the press to the community's political agenda. Political scientists, however, need particularly to discover the relationship between the press and the established structures of political discussion and decision. That would also help us to pick out and examine the two, analytically separate political roles of the press. The first is as a channel of political communication, serving both general and elite audiences. It is not a "clear channel" like a telephone line; the process usually affects the message. The second role is as an actor who influences the subjects and direction of authoritative decisions whether intentionally or unintentionally. Because, among other things neither role is usually overtly adopted, it is difficult in practice to distinguish the two roles.

Decision Schedules

The least complex of the possible sets of mass media and political elite relationships are probably those at the local level. To explore some of the questions involved in those relationships a research team at Queen's University, Canada, mounted a project focussed on three small eastern Ontario cities which seemed roughly similar to each other and were partially insulated from outside mass communication flows. Primary attention was given to the relationships between the press agenda and the schedule of issues which were dealt with collectively over a twelve-month period by the city councils and their chief executive officers. While the latter is sometimes referred to as a political agenda, the less ambiguous term used here is civic decision schedule.

Focussing the inquiry on the decisional elite avoided some of the difficulties encountered in using mass public agendas. First, the principle actors have personal access to the information reported in the press as well as the ability collectively to change their own agenda of debate and decision. Second, focussing on principal actors

at the local level made it much easier to approximate a whole population than does any sampling procedure. Besides improving logistical efficiency, the method helps to raise the significance of the findings. Third, the focus on decisions and those taking them helped reduce confusion of the press, a confusion that has beset some studies using mass public opinion agendas.

This study discriminated between two types of agenda elements — the item and the issue. An item was a story or story element arising from routine surveillance of civic events. Perhaps more importantly, it evokes no particular emotion in the reader (apart from the so-called ‘human interest’ story which is not issue-relevant here). Such matters are usually items of routine administration, introduced to council meetings, and passed with little or no comment.

An issue is more important and complex than an item. Schattschneider goes to the heart of the distinction by reminding us that “an issue does not become an issue merely because someone says it is. The stakes in making an issue are incalculably great. Millions of attempts are made, but an issue is produced only when the battle is joined.”⁸ His discussion of issue attributes was adopted for this study.

Of special relevance for us is that issues arise from within particular social structures of political controversy. Occasionally they arise from other, non-political structures of controversy as well. These structures play significant, if not determining, roles in the degree of influence particular actors exert on the content of the civic decision schedule, that is the elite agenda for debate and decision. Press influence on the decision schedule will similarly be related to the degree of access and legitimacy the press enjoys within the community. Its extent depends on a whole constellation of cultural, personal, social, and historical factors.

The Research Project

The three cities selected were all in Eastern Ontario, had population bases under 70,000 and one daily newspaper each. They were Kingston (population 61,870) with *The Whig Standard* (circulation 36,000), Belleville (34,500) and *The Intelligencer* (17,300), and Peterborough (64,500) and *The Examiner* (23,700). The three cities are fairly modernized communities which are difficult to characterize along class lines in either subjective or objective terms. They lie outside the main information currents of Toronto and Ottawa metropolitan centres and are very different from them. The three cities have broadcast media which seemed more interested in their entertainment than their news information function. They appeared neither to spend substantial resources on covering city politics nor to exercise much impact on them.

For the print agendas, each paper's major newspapers were catalogued for a full twelve-month period beginning in December 1977 and timed to take in the city general elections. Stories were listed by subject, headline topic, page, and display characteristics. Excluded from the final list were reports of coming community events, human interest stories outside the jurisdiction of the city councils. A jury of three persons familiar with the newspaper's reporting for the year aggregated items into principal issue areas. Reports on these issues were ranked in terms of the proportion that front page stories bore to the total of all news stories on city politics. (Differences in display habits might preclude this type of comparison for other newspapers.) The result was three sets of print agendas.

The agenda of the political decision-makers — the decision schedule — for the same period of time was determined through interviews with the mayors and virtually all the elected councillors of each city. The city clerk or chief administrative officer was also interviewed. Respondents were asked to recall the most important items of business dealt with by council, the most controversial and conflict-laden issues, and the most important decisions made in council. After free association responses, recollection aids were supplied but these prompted little change. The individuals ranked the issues twice, once in terms of the importance they had given them, and once in terms of the importance they thought the whole council had given them. These rankings were rationalized and aggregated to yield the decision schedules for each city. Then they were compared to the appropriate print agendas.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the rank orders of issues in each of the paired sets of agenda and decision schedule for the three cities. To summarize the tables, the item rankings in the agenda pairs were found to be in fairly close correspondence (within four ranks of each other) in 60 per cent of the cases for two cities, and in 43 per cent of the cases in Peterborough, the third city.

TABLE 1
Comparison of Press and Elite Agendas: Kingston

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Press Salience</u>	<u>Elite Salience</u>
Fluoridation of the city's water supply	1	8
The quality and efficiency of municipal services	2	5
Inefficiency and management problems in the PUC	3	9

Waterfront planning and development proposals	4	1
Taxi by-laws and by-laws enforcement	5	7
Labour disputes in the city labour pool	6	6
Budget, finance and spending	7	3
Development and general matters of city planning	8	2
Protection and safety of the public	9	10
Zoning and the official city plan	10	4

TABLE 2
Comparison of Press and Elite Agendas: Belleville

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Press Salience</u>	<u>Elite Salience</u>
Conflicts between Mayor and Ald. Meeks	1	5
Harbour control transfer from the federal government to the City of Belleville	2	4
Quinte Sports Arena management and administrative problems	3	1
Annexation in Thurlow Township	4	6
Pinnacle Street and downtown traffic	4	2
Downtown improvement and Front Street development	5	2
Quinte '78 Marina project	6	4
Humane Society shelter	7	2

Courthouse and registry office location	8	6
Flood control dams on Moira River	9	5
Downtown parking	10	2
Zoning and the official plan	11	3
Meyer's Mill restoration	11	5
Neighbourhood Improvement Project (N.I.P.)	12	4

TABLE 3

Comparison of Press and Elite Agendas: Peterborough

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Press Salience</u>	<u>Elite Salience</u>
Newspaper coverage of civic affairs	1	6
Mayor-council disagreements	2	7
Appointment to Civic Hospital Board of Directors	3	6
Woods-Gordon consultants' study	4	5
Parking and parking by-law enforcement	5	6
Local economic development programs and policies	6	1
Controversy in the PUC	7	6
Clonsilla Street development	8	6
C.G.E. nuclear plant	9	5
CEMP construction project	10	3

Abolishing the Ward system	11	6
Housing development issues	11	4
Zoning and planning	12	2
Land assembly plan	13	6

Can the wide rank differences for the other items be explained? Let us take one case, Kingston (Table 1), and examine the divergence in issue salience between the print agenda and the decision schedule. Three of the four issues ranking lower on the print budget were items of routine civic business: budget and finance, general development proposals, and relatively minor zoning matters. More to the point, each of the three issues lacked high degrees of emotional commitment and failed to generate much controversy. That is another way of saying they ranked low in conventional news values. The newspaper did not find them as high in newsworthiness as the political elite found them in importance. Another issue category, waterfront development, was rather a catchall. When the data were recoded to single out from it the highly controversial Marina City development, the two agendas came even more closely into line. The issues which ranked higher in the print agenda than in the decision schedule were all matters on which community opinion was significantly polarized. They therefore ranked high in news value.

The tabular data tell us nothing about the Kingston newspaper's ability to influence the decision schedule. The causal arrow could run either way — or even alternately depending on the issue. The interview data did suggest a degree of influence for the newspaper but it was limited to those issues on which *The Whig Standard* found itself in alliance with recognized community interest groups. It was not the press which was responsible for getting the Marine City issue on the civic timetable in the first place. But once there, the continued opposition of the pressure groups enabled the newspaper to keep the issue at the top of the debate and decision schedule long after the political elites wanted desperately to drop it.

City councillors reported the press had inspired three other issues which they had ranked rather low: taxis, snow removal, and water fluoridation. Certainly the politicians did little about them and some cited this as evidence of their resistance to newspaper pressure. Strong moral fibre on the council part is only one possible explanation. Although most of the elected officials had had to make some kind of comment on the three issues, they were able to shift political responsibility for them quite handily. Taxicab control was under the jurisdiction of the independent Police Commission. The quantity and quality of snow removal was decided by the vagaries of Old Man Winter and by budget allocations made the year before and

which were unchangeable by that time. The third question, fluoridation, was quickly transmuted by council action into a public referendum on which the councillors did not commit themselves. The press agenda suggests two other attempts to influence the city's decision schedule — public safety concerns and industrial relations in the public utilities. The newspaper gave these items considerable prominence but not one of those interviewed freely recalled them. On being prompted, the councillors attributed little importance to the issues and less than half thought the press had exercised any influence at all on council's patterns of discussion.

Council-Newspaper Relations

Earlier it was suggested that the correspondence between a press agenda and a civic decision schedule would depend on the newspaper's place in the community structure of issue cleavages. Sitting in continuous assessment of that standing are members of the local political elite. Their judgement will provide others with appropriate behavioural cues. It will decide the scope and direction(s) of influence between council and press, and those may well depend on the issue area involved.

Council and newspaper relations certainly varied from Belleville to Peterborough to Kingston as did the cleavage structures. During the study period, Belleville manifested a single deep split among members of council — not a partisan one because party organization in anathema to the Ontario municipal culture. Most issues saw the mayor and six or seven aldermen lined up against three 'non-establishment' aldermen.

The long-standing battle between the mayor of Belleville and one 'maverick' culminated in electoral confrontation in 1978. At the last possible moment, the newspaper strongly urged re-election of the mayor. The challenger was defeated and thus removed from active politics. Even the local influentials who were interviewed endorsed the common cafe claims that the council majority represented the city's business and industrial interests. The newspaper was said to do the same and editorials appearing in *The Intelligencer* during the study period did nothing to disprove the claim. Most of the 'insiders' applauded the fairness and understanding of the newspaper's approach to city affairs. As a group, they insisted that its reporting and commentary exercised no influence at all on their discussion agendas or decision-making. Only the three outsiders had negative opinions about the press reporting of city politics.

The city of Peterborough presented a different picture, almost a mirror image. There the mayor had recently won office over an establishment figure and was one of the outsiders although several of the councillors would usually support him. "I'm just a working man

myself," was one of his frequently-voiced populist notes. He spoke of his time in office as a mission to improve the city's economic base by attracting more industrial employment. That mission often put him at odds with some of the established business interests, possibly because a measure of success would tend to undermine their position. The mayor was also in direct conflict with the leading paid officials. Several of them he had criticized openly and he had tried several times to overhaul the entire administration. Legally, the mayor of an Ontario city is closer in status to a British than to a "strong" American mayor but his direct, popular election, range of his committee memberships, and his casting ballot combine to give him significant political weight. The Peterborough mayor was a popular public figure. He worked closely with the newspaper, *The Examiner*, and sometimes gave it copies of consultant's reports and other official papers before council members had seen them.

Not surprisingly, most of the then-councillors in Peterborough were anti-newspaper and critical of the mayor for conducting city business openly through the newspaper. Only the mayor and three council supporters thought the newspaper coverage of civic politics was fair and professional. At one time, the majority sought to make an issue out of the mayor-and-newspaper relationship. They proposed a motion censuring the "biased and unprofessional reporting" of the press but were dissuaded from proceeding with the issue. Those members of council who were happiest about the situation were most likely to assert that *The Examiner* exerted no direct influence on the council's agenda. Others disagreed. The paper had too much influence in their affairs. The majority particularly complained that the newspaper was always stimulating the city voters to complain to them and generally made political life more troublesome than it need be.

Kingston represented a third case. All observers were agreed that the council was a heterogeneous body with no cleavage line cutting across a range of issues. A fairly even balance of power resulted. The mayor was frequently forced to use his casting ballot to decide issues. The citizenry, by contrast, displayed a number of rather durable cleavage lines. Two of them provided a semi-permanent division — that between the business-professional community and the academic-artistic group. The civic battle was often joined by some of the larger numbers of people in the extensive hospital and medical research establishments. Other participants in the city's lively politics came from the various electors and ratepayers' associations and a poor people's lobby. While most of these interests lacked stable communications and formal organizations, their intercourse was enhanced by common workplaces, common recreation and leisure activities, and the city's compact size. Different combinations of

these interest groups mobilized from time to time to attack what was always called "civic progress" by its promoters. A well-established local family owned the newspaper and it is Canada's oldest in continuous daily publication. These roots were in curious contrast to the ambivalent status of its news/editorial staff.

In the first two cases, Belleville and Peterborough, the newspaper's relationship to factions within the decision elite gave it direct and continuing access to the arena of legitimate disputants. The Kingston newspaper seemed to lack such standing. Its access was only intermittent and had to be won (or lost) issue by issue through support and enlistment of more legitimate participants in the process or by appealing directly to the interests of community groups which enjoyed legitimate access. Generally, those interviewed in Kingston were prone to raise very direct questions about the newspaper trying to "butt into" local affairs. Charges were made about reporters and news editors that they lacked "understanding of community issues," had no commitment to Kingston, were "too unprofessional", and were all working toward employment or reemployment in Toronto. (The numerous awards won by the daily newspaper would tend to undermine at least the charges of journalistic incompetence.) The decision-makers' criticisms all turned out to be directed toward press involvement in issues which did not have the support of other legitimate community interest groups. Only in Kingston were issues mentioned on the decision schedule which did not win ranking in the print agenda. The newspaper published what amounted to surveillance reports of such issues but did not find them either important or controversial.

Findings

The three Ontario cities study brought a mixed bag of conclusions. In the Kingston situation, most elite members saw the press *qua* political actor as an outsider to be excluded from the debate. It was accorded little or no legitimacy in raising issues on its own. In Belleville, *The Intelligencer* was inside the structure. The print agenda reflected the decision schedule. Association with the majority faction of local notables legitimated its participation; in turn, the established groups could count on the newspaper to voice its concerns. In the Peterborough case, press legitimacy and validation for its agenda came from association with the mayor and the council minority. In both Belleville and Peterborough challenges to the newspaper's role in civic affairs came from those people in opposition situations. For students of agenda-setting it is rather a perverse finding that the print agendas seemed to exercise greater influence on what the local opposition elites talked about. That happened in two ways.

Sometimes the opposition tried to beat the governing group about the head for failing to give adequate attention to certain issues on the print agenda. At other times they tried to make the newspaper's pattern of reporting into an issue. Otherwise, the print agendas seemed to correspond to the interest patterns of those in the local elites most closely associated with the press.

The ability to influence local decision schedules appears — on the basis of the interview data — to be a function of the prevailing structures of debate and decision-making. The ability may not be generally inherent in local newspaper reporting as such. Of this, the Kingston case provided the strongest evidence. There, significant effects were noted only when the press was associated with other legitimate actors. The situation conforms with some of the findings of Robert Dahl and other American pluralists. In contrast, the Belleville situation would confirm the expectations of those social critics who see local dailies simply as the mouthpieces of local elites. The Peterborough case cannot be readily categorized in similar terms.

The three newspapers studied are small but do a respectable job in terms of most English-language local dailies. A study of three different cities and their press might well give different results, particularly if the communities were larger, more socially variegated, and exhibited correspondingly wider social representation in the political elites. Urban sociologists have not reported many such cases. In those circumstances a study like the present would have to deal successfully with even more variable influences on press agendas and civic decision schedules.

The press affects the political system in numerous ways, most of them not well understood. Into this category falls things like the media's function as a channel of inter-elite communications and the consequences of the routine surveillance reporting of governmental institutions and activities. These things, however, do not provide much of the stuff of press legendry. For that we must move closer to some of the concerns of this study. Even here disappointments are probable. Daily newspapers have undoubtedly led local politicians to particular policy decisions which the newspapers preferred and which, left entirely to their own discretion, the politicians would not have taken. Defined that way, the power of the press — even in local affairs — is an ability to get 'City Hall' talking about preferred issues depends very much on the alignment of socio-political forces in the community and the place among them that the newspaper has won for itself.

Footnotes

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1. New York, Bantam, 1973, p. 327.
2. *The Emergence of American Political Issues*, p.8.
3. "Expanding the Domain of Agenda-Setting Research: Strategies for Theoretical Development," Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, Washington, D.C., December 1977.
4. R.W. Cobb and M.H. Keith-Ross, "Agenda-Building as a Comparative Political Process," *American Political Science Review*, vol. (1976) pp. 126-138.
5. *The Emergence of American Political Issues*, p. 156.
6. "Turbulences in the Climate: Methodological Applications of the Spiral of Silence Theory," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 41 (1977), pp. 143-158.
7. For one of the few studies of its type, see Anthony Barker and Michael Rush, *The member of parliament and his information*, (London, Allen and Unwin, 1970). Also relevant is J.L. Walker, "Setting the agenda in the U.S. Senate," *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 7, (1977), pp. 423-445.
8. E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's view of Democracy in America*, (Hinsdale, Ill., Dryden Press, 1975), first published 1960, p. 72.