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# Applying Agenda-Setting Research in an International Context: A Roadmap for Future Research

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## Resumen

El proceso de llevar a cabo investigaciones que examinen la función de la *agenda setting* de los medios de comunicación implica una serie de decisiones.

El proyecto de investigación: ¿examinará el primer nivel de la agenda (con los temas o *issues* como unidad de análisis) o el segundo nivel (con los atributos como unidad de análisis) ¿Cuál o qué será el objeto de estudio? ¿Qué tipo de atributos se incluirán en el análisis? ¿Qué contenido se comparará?

En este estudio se esbozan algunas posibles aplicaciones de la teoría de la *agenda setting* en un contexto internacional, lo cual podría servir de guía para futuras o posibles investigaciones.

La fusión entre la cobertura de noticias internacionales y la investigación de la *agenda setting* parecería ser un área fructífera para los investigadores.

## Abstract

*The process of conducting research examining the agenda-setting function of the news media involves a series of decisions. Will the research project examine the first-level (with the issues as the unit of analysis) or the second-level (with attributes as the unit of analysis)? Which "object" will be the focus of the study? What types of attributes will be included in the analysis? What content will be compared? This study outlines some possible applications of agenda-setting theory in an international context, providing a guideline for future research. Merging international news cover-*

## Palabras clave

teoría de la *agenda setting*, los efectos de comunicación de masas, teoría de la comunicación de masas, metodología de investigación, noticias internacionales.

## Key words

*agenda-setting, mass communication effects, mass communication theory, research methodology, international news.*

*age and agenda-setting research appears to be a fruitful area for researchers.*

Agenda-setting research has undergone many refinements in the 40 years since the initial study conducted by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 U.S. Presidential election (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). For example, researchers have examined conditions affecting the magnitude of agenda-setting effects and have recently developed a second-level involving an agenda of attributes.

Several researchers also have examined agenda-setting in countries other than the United States. For example, Brosius and Kepplinger (1990) conducted an extensive agenda-setting study in Germany, (1990), while other studies have been conducted in countries such as Japan (Takeshita and Mikami, 1995) and Spain (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar and Llamas, 2000)

Relatively few studies, however, have examined agenda-setting in an international context – involving both countries and newsmakers in countries other than the nation of the media being examined. These types of studies, however, offer great potential for understanding both the process of constructing a news media agenda and how this international news agenda can impact news consumers.

This article will construct a framework for applying the theory of agenda-setting in research dealing with international news coverage. It will discuss the five branches of agenda-setting research, and how these branches could be applied to international news. Finally, it will report on a few recent studies combining agenda-setting and international news research.

Agenda-setting has been the focus of hundreds of studies through the years. It has been arguably the most important theory in the mass communication field. It has shown great resiliency by evolving through four decades. Linking this area of research with international news coverage has met with significant success in the past and could lead to important new avenues of mass communication research in the future.

### **The agenda-setting tradition**

McCombs and Shaw (1972) first tested the hypothesis that the news media have a significant influence on the perceived importance of issues held by the public. Combining a content analysis

of the news media with survey responses from the public, McCombs and Shaw found support for the notion – proposed earlier by Cohen (1963) – that the news media may not be successful at influencing what the public thinks but is “stunningly successful” in influencing what the public thinks about.

Since the seminal study conducted during the 1968 U.S. presidential election, hundreds of subsequent studies have found broad support for agenda-setting. These studies generally found that individuals learn the relative importance of issues based on how much coverage these issues receive in the news media.

### **The five branches of agenda-setting**

Broadly, agenda-setting research can be grouped into five categories. These categories were first proposed by McCombs.

#### **1. THE ORIGINAL HYPOTHESIS**

The original agenda-setting study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) ignited a long series of studies examining the influence of the news media on the perceived importance of issues held by the public. Almost immediately, a vast array of studies was conducted examining this new area.

Funkhouser (1973) examined the agenda-setting effect across the entire decade of the 1960s. Using Gallup poll data dealing with the often-asked question “What is the number one problem facing our country today?” Funkhouser found a strong correlation with the issues that received coverage in this decade and public responses to the MIP question.

The agenda-setting hypothesis proposed an effect on individuals’ cognitions: The public gains knowledge from the news media regarding the relative importance of issues facing society. Thus, the agenda-setting affect involves social learning.

Almost all subsequent agenda-setting studies that followed the initial McCombs and Shaw study have examined a similar hypothesis – the amount of media coverage that issues receive influences the issues that the public is concerned with. Thus, this first branch of agenda-setting provides the basis for the following four other branches.

## 2. CONTINGENT CONDITIONS

This area of research investigates the factors that either enhance or inhibit agenda-setting effects. The vast majority of previous research has found strong support for the agenda-setting effect within society. However, not all people and not all messages produce the same magnitude of agenda-setting effects. Other factors, both within individuals and within the media messages, intervene. Broadly, then, contingent conditions research has been concerned with two types of factors – individual variables, or variables that differ across different types of people; and message variables, those that are related to the medium or the message.

Hill (1986) was one of the first researchers to examine individual differences. He found that agenda-setting effects were most pronounced among television viewers who had at least some college education. Other factors influencing the magnitude of the agenda-setting effects were prior awareness of news topics through exposure to newspapers and level of attention paid to the news content.

Wanta (1997) examined a model of agenda-setting that involved several stages. The model started with demographics of respondents. Based demographics – mainly education level – individuals formed opinions regarding the credibility of the news media. This perceived credibility of news media influenced the level of reliance individuals felt toward the media. Media reliance influenced individuals' level of exposure to news media content. Finally, exposure to the news media led to strong agenda-setting effects. Thus, the more educated individuals were, the more positively they viewed the media, which led to high reliance on the news media for information, which led to high levels of exposure to the media and ultimately strong agenda-setting effects.

Several studies have examined message variables. Zucker (1980), for instance, argued that media coverage of obtrusive issues, those in which people are directly involved, would have less agenda-setting effect than coverage of unobtrusive issues. People do not need the media to tell them that an issue such as high gasoline prices is a problem; they merely need to drive up to the gasoline pump to see high gas prices are a problem. On the other hand, few people are personally involved with international problems. Thus, public must rely on the news media to inform them that they should be concerned with international problems through their coverage of terrorist attacks in Madrid, for instance.

Of course, each research study is unique in and of itself. Lasorsa and Wanta (1990) found a trend that was the opposite of the above findings of Zucker. Lasorsa and Wanta (1990) found that agenda-setting effects were most pronounced for obtrusive issues. They argued that personal involvement with an issue sensitizes individuals to this issue. Individuals then seek out additional information from the news media. Thus, in the example above, an individual may become concerned with high gasoline prices after a trip to the gas station, but they will then seek out information about gasoline prices in the news media, which ultimately leads to a powerful agenda-setting effect.

*An international context:* If how a news medium is viewed by the public influences the magnitude of agenda-setting effects, as Wanta (1997) found, then individuals in different cultures obviously would demonstrate different levels of agenda-setting effects.

Wanta, King and McCombs (1995) conducted a comparative study of agenda-diversity, an area related to agenda-setting. Their study tested whether the news media had an influence on the number of issues individuals were concerned with in both the United States and Taiwan. Individuals who use the media often would likely be exposed to a large number of issues and thus should be concerned with more issues than low media users. Their results showed that it wasn't frequency of media use, but the variety of media use that mattered: People who used several news media sources were concerned with more issues than people who used few or no media. In addition, cultural differences were also found. For example, older individuals in the United States were concerned with more issues – suggesting that people who lived a longer life had been exposed to more issues. In Taiwan, however, younger individuals were concerned with more issues – suggesting that education level played a role in agenda-diversity, since younger people tend to have higher education levels than older individuals in Taiwan.

Comparative studies across nations pose many challenges for researchers, however. News coverage in different countries can often be very different. As Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) note, definitions of news vary across cultures. Thus, while individual variables, such as age, education level, income and gender, can be examined similarly across nations, message variables may not be as simple to compare.

### 3. SOURCES OF THE MEDIA AGENDA

A third stream of agenda-setting research involves the source of the media agenda. Based on previous research, we know the media, through their coverage, create an agenda of issues. Also based on previous research, we know the media agenda, through their coverage, influence the public agenda. What is less certain is where the media agenda comes from. In other words, what are the sources that influence the media agenda? This area of research sometimes has been called “agenda-building” – investigations of how the media agenda is built.

Lang and Lang (1981) first used the term agenda building in their study involving President Nixon and Watergate. They argued that the agenda-building process often involves three actors: the news media, the public and news sources. The news media and public are at the heart of agenda-setting, but adding news sources implies that there is an interrelationship between the three actors. Lang and Lang (1981) argue that issues become part of a cycle of debate in which media coverage influences statements from sources, which in turn creates more media coverage, which influences public concerns with the issue. The media continue to cover issues, sources continue to react to the issue, and the public continues to be concerned with the issue until one of the actors tires of the issue and it falls off the agenda.

Agenda building therefore is concerned with influences on the media agenda. The U.S. president has been examined as one potential influence on the media agenda.

Wanta, Stevenson, Turk and McCombs (1989) used issues mentioned in four State of the Union address to determine a presidential issue agenda and compared the relative emphasis placed on issues in the speeches to news coverage both before and after the addresses. They found President Nixon influenced subsequent media coverage and President Carter was influenced by previous media coverage. President Reagan, meanwhile, seemed to have influenced newspaper coverage but was influenced by television news coverage during one year, but influenced both print and broadcast coverage in another. The results suggested factors such as the personality and/or popularity of a president may have played a role in the analysis.

Other newsmakers have also influence the agenda-setting process. Zibluk (1999), for instance, found that education reporting in three small Ohio dailies was greatly influenced by school superintendents in the area. His study revealed that journalists rely

on official sources, which leaves citizens out of the education debate. In turn, citizens are ultimately left out of the policy-making process as well.

Horvit (2001) examined whether presidents influenced media coverage through their weekly radio addresses. The results show President Reagan attracted more media coverage than President Clinton.

*An international context:* The level of influence exerted by national leaders certainly differs across nations. Thus, the influences found in studies of the U.S. president may or may not be replicated in other countries and cultures. China, for instance, would offer an excellent counter-comparison to the findings from the U.S. Clearly, an examination of the relationship between the media and the Chinese government would provide interesting results.

Dai (2006) conducted a study examining U.S. media coverage of China during the Olympic Games from 1980 to 2004). The author found that the news media frame changed in areas of primary focus, content orientation, critical issues and tone based on U.S.-China foreign relations. In other words, the coverage appeared to be largely based on stances of the U.S. government toward China. Walkosz and Foss (2007), meanwhile, found that the Chinese government was able to transform its image from a backward, repressive nation to a progressive pseudo-democracy through its public relations efforts with the international news media.

#### 4. POLICY AGENDA

Most previous research has examined two main agendas: the media agenda and public agenda. A few studies have examined a third agenda: a source agenda. These studies have investigated the ability of important newsmakers to influence the news agenda. Fewer studies have examined a fourth agenda: a policy agenda, or how media coverage and public opinion influence political decision-making.

Zibluk (1999), in his analysis of education coverage, found that school officials actively sought to use local newspapers to build support for their policies. Journalists relied heavily on quotes from school officials while providing less space to opponents to a tax levy. Thus, the normal reporting routines resulted in a heavy reliance on public officials for information, which in turn worked to the advantage of the public officials.



Keefer (1993) makes a similar argument. In his study of Congressional debate, he argues that the established routines of news reporting often deter citizen participation in the policy-making process.

Taha (1999) found a similar passive reporting trend in coverage of Somalia. He suggests that reporters who work near policy makers are less critical than reporters far removed from the policy makers. The New York Times, thus, played a minimal role in setting the policy agenda on Somalia.

These findings are in sharp contrast to the arguments of Linsky, Moore, O'Donnell and Whiteman (1986). They found that policy makers believe that the news media play a vital part in agenda setting and policy evaluation.

*An international context:* Again, the impact of media coverage and public concern on governmental policies can differ across nations. Nations with a great deal of press freedom, Finland and Iceland, for instance, could influence governmental policies more strongly than news coverage in countries with strict governmental controls – China or North Korea, for example. Overall, then, the effects of the press, president, public opinion and real world events on U.S. policy remain unclear. More research is needed in this area.

Kalyango and Wanta (2007) demonstrate one example of research examining the policy agenda in an international context. They examined U.S. funding for anti-terrorism within nations in Africa. The study examined real world events (terrorist attacks within individual African nations), statements made by President Bush about the African nations, media coverage of the African nations and whether these two “agendas” were related to the amount of money the U.S. Congress allocated to individual countries. The results show that real world events did not influence President Bush’s statements, media coverage or the amount of money a nation received. However, President Bush’s statements about nations led to media coverage of nations – an example of agenda-building. On the other hand, if framing was taken into consideration, the policy agenda-setting model worked perfectly: The amount of deaths within a country attributed to terrorism influenced the frequency of the country being mentioned in President Bush’s statements, the amount of media coverage a country received and the amount of money they country was allocated. President Bush’s speeches on terrorism also influenced the media and policy agendas. Finally, media coverage of terrorism within a country influenced the amount of money a country received.

Clearly, the policy agenda – the implications of concern and coverage of an issue – would be a significant area of research for international news researchers.

## 5. THE SECOND-LEVEL OF AGENDA-SETTING

The vast majority of the agenda-setting studies traditionally have employed a similar methodological strategy – with the focus of the analysis centered on issues. McCombs, Lopez-Escobar and Llamas (2000) examined a “second-level” of agenda-setting, one that focused on attributes. Their examination of second-level agenda-setting during the 1996 Spanish general election ushered in a new research framework.

Ghanem (1997), in her description of the theoretical underpinnings behind second-level agenda-setting, categorized several different types of attributes. Two types will be examined here: cognitive attributes, or sub-issues, and affective attributes, or the tone of the coverage.

Cognitive attributes involve factual pieces of information that are linked to an object in the news. For example, Golan and Wanta (2001) found several cognitive attributes that were linked to candidates in the 2000 New Hampshire presidential primary. Survey respondents linked attributes such as “best chance to win” and “will cut taxes” to George Bush and John McCain in a similar proportion as media coverage of the same attributes. Their findings suggest a stronger agenda-setting effect for cognitive attributes than for affective attributes.

McCombs et al. (2000), in their initial study of second-level agenda-setting, referred to “substantive” attributes. They too found strong support for second-level agenda-setting in their analysis of election coverage in Spain.

*An international context:* Second-level agenda-setting has been applied in the area of coverage of international news. Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) compared news coverage of individual countries to survey results. The survey asked respondents if certain countries – ranging from Russia to the Baltic States – were vitally important to the United States (similar to first-level agenda-setting) and how positive certain countries were viewed through a “feeling thermometer that was similar to affective attributes. They found support for agenda-setting at both levels. The more coverage a country received, the more respondents thought the country was of vitally important to the U.S (first-

level) and the more negative coverage a country received, the more negatively the country was viewed by the respondents (second-level). Importantly, positive and neutral coverage was not related to public perceptions of the countries. Thus, with regard to affective attributes in second-level agenda-setting, only negative attributes were correlated with negative views of countries.

Given the fact that most news coverage in the U.S. media of international countries is negative and the fact that this negative coverage impacts on how individuals perceive countries, this negative influence could be impacting public perceptions in other nations as well.

### **Links to international news research**

As with agenda-setting, research examining the flow of international news has a long tradition in the field of mass communication. Larson and Hardy (1977), for example, found that more than 30 percent of network news content in the U.S. dealt with international news. However, not all countries are deemed newsworthy by a nation's press.

Chang (1998) noted that because of economic pressures, powerful industrialized nations form a core that receives significantly more news attention than countries in the periphery. Research has consistently supported this World Systems Theory approach. Findings from Larson (1982), for example, bear this out. In his study, 23.8 percent of international news in U.S. media came from Western Europe. The Middle East (at 22.7 percent) and Asia (21.8 percent) followed closely, with Latin America (8.6 percent) and Africa (5.6 percent) far behind.

World Systems Theory also was applied as the theoretical framework in a study examining news coverage of international elections in the U.S. Golan and Wanta (2004) found that of the 138 elections held worldwide between January 1, 1998, and May 1, 2000, only eight received coverage on all four newscasts that they examined. Their findings suggest that industrialized nations do form a core that generally receives extensive news coverage, but that the remaining countries form a two-tiered periphery: A semi-periphery that includes countries with close cultural ties to the U.S., and an outer periphery. Nations in the outer periphery receive coverage only if there are certain circumstances that make the country newsworthy – oil production or nuclear arms capabilities, for example.

Based on World Systems Theory, a similar pattern could be expected in the Slovak news media. Economic pressures in this Central European country could mean that the news media will concentrate coverage on industrialized nations, especially those in the region, leaving other countries on the periphery and off the news agenda.

Researchers have found several other determinants of international news coverage, such as gross national product (Dupree, 1971), language (Kariel and Rosenvall, 1984), geographic proximity (Wu, 2000) and population (Kim and Barnett, 1996). Adding to the complexity of research in this area, however, is that variables affecting the status of one country do not uniformly impact coverage in other countries, as Wu (2000) discovered.

Bennett (1990) argues that international news coverage often is consistent with the foreign policy of a nation. Thus, U.S. media cover allies more positively than countries viewed as enemies. Again, these findings could be replicated in the Slovak press. Countries with close political ties to Slovakia could be covered more positively than countries with no political ties. Moreover, countries that have been political foes historically – Germany and Russia, for instance – could be covered more negatively than other countries.

Thus, because of the difference in the amount of coverage countries receive, this coverage could also produce differences in public perceptions. Several researchers have studied the implications of the disparate news coverage patterns on public attitudes. Salwen and Matera (1992), for instance, found an agenda-setting impact of international news. Wanta and Hu (1993) examined different news frames and agenda-setting. Their findings suggest stories had a stronger agenda-setting effect if they involved international conflicts.

### **Potential applications**

If the news media provide vastly different amounts of coverage of individual nations, and if the media also link vastly different attributes to individual nations, this most certainly would produce different levels of agenda-setting effects within news consumers.

These relationships were found by Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) in their analysis of the coverage of foreign nations. Generally, the more news coverage a nation received, the more survey

respondents felt the country was “of vital importance” to the United States. In other words, public perceptions of nations followed the international news agenda covered by the media. Thus, Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) found support for a first-level agenda-setting effect involving an agenda of nations similar to the effect found in the research involving the traditional agenda of issues.

Broadly, first-level agenda-setting involves the transference of salience. Traditionally, this salience involved issues. Thus, news coverage of issues transmitted salience cues to the public. However, the findings of Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) showed that the transference of salience could be applied to foreign countries as well. Thus, news coverage transmitted salience cues about the relative importance of the countries to news consumers. The salience of countries increased as media coverage of the countries increased.

Beyond coverage of nations, though, agenda-setting could be applied to national leaders, including during times of elections. For example, agenda-setting could be applied to the 2007 national election in Argentina and news coverage in other nations. While the United States typically devotes relatively minimal coverage to international news beyond national disasters and other negative stories, it did provide some coverage of the Argentina election. For instance, there was some coverage of an instance in which Christina Fernandez was introduced as the next “presidente” of Argentina. Her response – “It’s Presidenta. Get used to it” – was part of several television reports. During the stories, however, there were extensive comparisons to Hilary Clinton in the U.S., as well as her stances on issues such as the economy. In other words, the news media in the U.S. linked the attributes of “Hilary Clinton, the economy, and “presidenta” to the “object” of Christina Fernandez.

Other second-level agenda-setting studies could examine attributes linked to other leaders, such as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Certainly, Chavez has received interesting news coverage in the United States and the world. Did the media link an attribute such as “strong leader” to Chavez because he is not afraid to speak out against George Bush, or did the media link an attribute such as “extremist” to Chavez because of his wild statements against the U.S. president? And of course, the types of attributes linked to Chavez could vary a great deal across countries such as Colombia or Argentina.

When researchers set out to conduct agenda-setting research in an international context, they face several key questions. The questions and some potential answers are shown in Figure 1.

**Question 1: First-level or second-level?** Researchers first must decide whether their study will examine “objects” or “attributes” or some combination of the two. Traditional agenda-setting examined issues as objects, but many other objects could be the focus of research. Objects could involve people, places or things in the news.

**Question 2: Which “object”?** Regardless of whether the study is at the first- or second-level, researchers need to decide what object will be examined. For example, a first-level agenda-setting study could focus on people: studies could examine the amount of coverage political candidates receive and whether it influences the perceived salience of the candidates among members of the public. The attributes linked to Christina Fernandez mentioned above is a good examples of once such study. Similarly, the amount of coverage other countries receive could be compared with how vitally important the country is perceived by the public, as in the Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) article. Finally, comparisons of things could involve issues in an international context – whether an issue such as the economy or environment is covered differently across countries. Deforestation in regions such as China and Brazil likely would be covered differently in the international media.

There are endless objects that could be examined, as well as many approaches regarding what will be compared. Thus, first-level agenda-setting offers many research opportunities. However, if researchers are interested in studying the second-level of agenda-setting, an additional question needs to be addressed.

**Question 3: Which attributes?** While research could examine many objects, endless cognitive attributes could be linked to these objects. A political candidate, for instance, could have “best chance to win” linked to him or her. A country to have “terrorism” linked to it. An issue could have sub-issues linked to it: the environment could be linked to economy through coverage noting how environmental controls could harm businesses. Cognitive attributes are difficult to define because they could change over time.

Affective attributes are easier to determine. A cognitive attribute such as “best chance to win” is also a positive affective attribute. A cognitive attribute such as “terrorism” could be negative if a story reports about a terrorist attack within a country or positive if a story reports about a strike against terrorism. A sub-issue such

as global warming would be a negative attribute for the environment issue, but a story about a clean water project would be a positive attribute.

Affective attributes also would have differing effects based on whether the attribute is positive or negative. A story about a positive story about a clean water project would transmit negative salience cues – showing the news consumer that the environment is less of a problem than in the past. A negative story about global warming would increase the issue salience among the public – showing the news consumer that the environment is an important issue. The Wanta, Golan and Lee study found that only negative news reports were related to perceptions of foreign countries.

*Question 4: What is being compared?* The original agenda-setting study was based on a dual methodology: A content analysis of the news media coverage of issues and a survey of the public's issue concerns. The original second-level agenda-setting study involved a similar method, but with the analysis focused on attributes. Using two methods has been an effective way of studying agenda-setting.

However, researchers have many other types of comparisons at their disposal. Researchers can compare news media in different countries, such as the study by Wu (2000). Researchers can compare coverage across media within a country – examining whether media that have foreign correspondents in a region cover countries differently than media that rely on wire reports, for instance. Researchers can also compare media coverage across countries. News coverage in Argentina could be compared with coverage in Chile, Colombia or other Latin American countries. Research also can compare coverage across time – whether news coverage of the United States has changed in the foreign news media since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for example. Again, the possibilities are endless.

The agenda-setting function of the news media has a long tradition of research that has provided excellent avenues for scholarly investigations. The potential of applications of agenda-setting appears especially fruitful in examinations of international news. Indeed, the linkage of agenda-setting with international news research is a marriage that should provide limitless opportunities for researchers.

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FIGURE 1  
AN AGENDA-SETTING FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNATIONAL NEWS:

