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## Breaking Agenda Setting Boundaries: A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Understanding Salience of Gun Control in the Polarized Public Sphere.

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If more than 50 years of agenda-setting theory in Communication Sciences have proven its influence and vitality, it is safe to say that continuous theoretical and methodological deepening has increasingly emphasized the subtleties behind an overarching theory. If the initial postulation of the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) benefited from undeniable clarity and simplicity, the same must be more prudently said today, given the accumulated knowledge and growing complexity of studying the power of mediation and the more than five decades of scientific evolution.

It is also true that the theoretical and methodological dimensions have since significantly broadened, and with them, the methodological demands, with recurrent reminders of the need to prove a causal relationship rather than a mere correlation (*cf.* McCombs & Shaw, 1972: 184).

However, understanding agenda-setting as a theoretical instrument for predicting thematic salience is less common. Vargo and Minooie's new article, which delves into the predictors of the thematic relevance of arms control in the United States of America, is a compelling addition to the field, whose approach and findings reinforce the urgency of its reading and invite further exploration and open-minded discussion.

The original agenda-setting formulation postulates a theory of effects more than the study of the coincidence between thematic salience in the media and public agendas. Better said, the theoretical hypothesis coined – but not proven – in the article by McCombs and Shaw does not just address a relationship but a relationship characterized by the impact of one agenda over another. Using Castells' theoretical formulation of power relations (2009: 11), more than influence (*cf.* McCombs & Shaw, 1972: 185), it postulates a power relationship: while influence is reciprocal, power also presumes an asymmetry of forces.

The need for caution when using correlation as a means of proof is present in the self-analysis of the limitations of the founding study. A proof of rigor and scientific humility of the theory's fathers that, more relevantly, understand that proof of causality always requires openness to the hypothesis that the effects exerted by media and public agendas can be explained by factors other than a relationship of power exercised by the media agenda.

The understanding that to fully commit to agenda-setting theory requires more than the domain of Communication Sciences but also an openness to different areas of knowledge in the Social Sciences is in line with the lucid understanding present in the founding article about the need to develop the theory with the help of sociological and psychological analysis instruments (1972: 187), proving to be a theory founded since its genesis in interdisciplinarity.

It will not be particularly disruptive to assume that interdisciplinary efforts have greatly enriched the literature during these five decades, adding and densifying comprehensive models encompassing a complex social reality.

Vargo and Minooie have long followed this path and embraced the complexity of agenda-setting effects and their non-linear nature, notoriously patent in the most recent works focusing on agendamelding.

This analysis of gun control's thematic salience in the United States follows this line of work and further explores the intricacies of an overarching theory submerged in societal turmoil and rampant technological evolution,

offering “the most comprehensive understanding of the interplay between personal experiences, search behaviors, and a polarized media environment in shaping public salience on gun control to date” (2024: 1).

If absolutes are rarely not misleading, we must recognize that this boldness is accompanied by a genuine effort at rigor and scope, employing a penalized regression approach to navigate variations in the occurrence of gun-related events, in media coverage and discourse, in patterns of Google search and audience profiles between 2015 and 2022.

The results are beyond obvious. If the results reinforce the agendamelding hypothesis, verifying an effective salience variation depending on the ideology of the observed population, the variation around other variables is less blatant.

In this regard, it is worth highlighting the low correlation identified between traditional media coverage and the importance attributed by different audiences. Likewise, discourse on social networks was found to be of low relevance in predicting the salience of the topic in question. Both these results were inferior to partisan media’s ability to influence salience.

In turn, the results on the impact of real-world events suggest a strong effect deferred in time between them and the relevance attributed to gun control. However, when analysing the salience in greater temporal proximity to the events, it is found that this correlation is mainly dependent on the ideological profile of the audience.

The results support the understanding of a theory far from linearity and consolidate the position of both authors as references in the study of agenda-setting. If the possibility of extrapolating this analysis implies well-founded care, we cannot be indifferent to the results obtained. Although they cannot be read in isolation nor aim to address proof of causality, the intriguing findings deserve further investigation and discussion.

Certainly one of the most interesting recent articles on agenda-setting in Communication Sciences, this publication by Vargo and Minoioe deserves careful and dedicated reading by everyone who enjoys confronting the unexpected and exploring fertile future research paths.

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