

# *The language of journalism – The language of agenda setting effects*

*A linguagem do jornalismo – A linguagem dos efeitos do agendamento*

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## *Abstract*

The evolution of agenda setting over the past 50 years is an in-depth, large-scale case study of the scientific method. This oscillating history of theoretical explication and extensive empirical investigation has identified major aspects of the language of journalism that have significant impact on the formation of public opinion. The theory of agenda setting now includes three levels of agenda setting effects, intermedia agenda setting and the concept of compelling arguments that identify key aspects of the language of journalism. Other theoretical concepts, need for orientation, and most recently civic osmosis and agendamelding explicate the process of agenda setting. All of these are intellectual tools for dealing with the contemporary problem of fake news.

**Keywords:** Three levels of agenda setting; intermedia agenda setting; compelling arguments; need for orientation; civic osmosis; agendamelding; fake news.

## *Resumo*

A evolução do agendamento ao longo dos últimos 50 anos é um caso de estudo profundo e de larga escala do método científico. Essa história oscilante de explicação teórica e de extensa investigação empírica identificou aspectos importantes da linguagem do jornalismo que possuem um impacto significativo na formação da opinião pública. A teoria do agendamento inclui agora três níveis de efeitos de agendamento, agendamento *intermedia* e o conceito de “*compelling arguments*” que identifica aspectos-chave da linguagem do jornalismo. Outros conceitos teóricos, como necessidade de orientação e, mais recentemente, osmose cívica e *agemelding*, explicam o processo de agendamento. Todos eles são ferramentas intelectuais para lidar com o problema contemporâneo das notícias falsas.

**Palavras-chave:** Três níveis de agendamento; agendamento *intermedia*; “*compelling arguments*”; necessidade de orientação; osmose cívica; *agemelding*; notícias falsas.

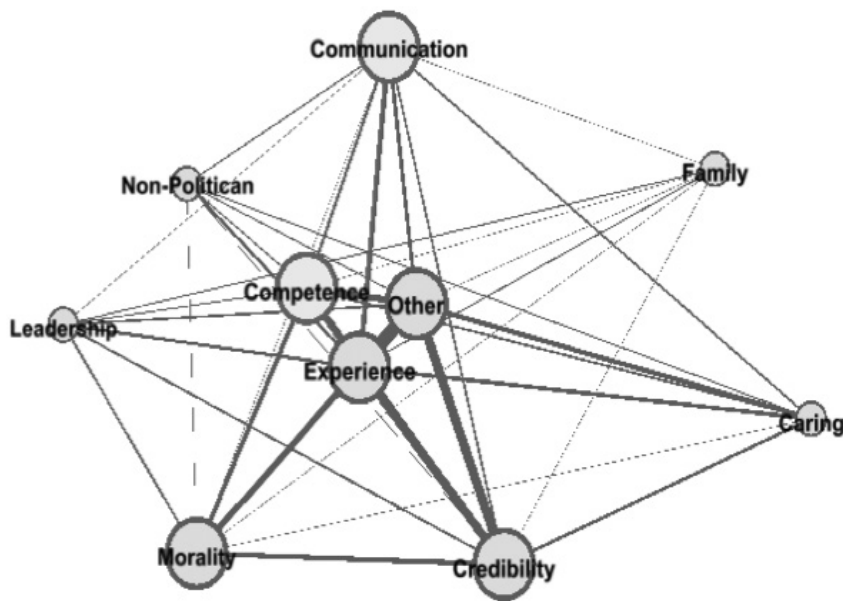


Figure 1  
Media network attribute agenda of a  
candidate

The evolution of agenda setting over the past 50 years is an in-depth, large-scale case study of the scientific method, an oscillating history of theoretical explication and extensive empirical investigation. This continuous expansion of agenda setting, theoretically and empirically, has identified major aspects of the language of journalism, especially in the news media's reporting of public affairs, which have significant impact on formation of public opinion and on observable civic behavior.

The seminal Chapel Hill study (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) compared news coverage of public issues and public concern about those issues during the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign. The substantial correspondence between the media agenda and public agenda found in Chapel Hill subsequently has been extensively replicated worldwide (McCombs, 2014). And these hundreds of studies have included other *objects of attention*, such as public figures. In the language of journalism these are the key nouns that impact public opinion. This focus on objects of attention is now referred to as the *first level of agenda setting*.

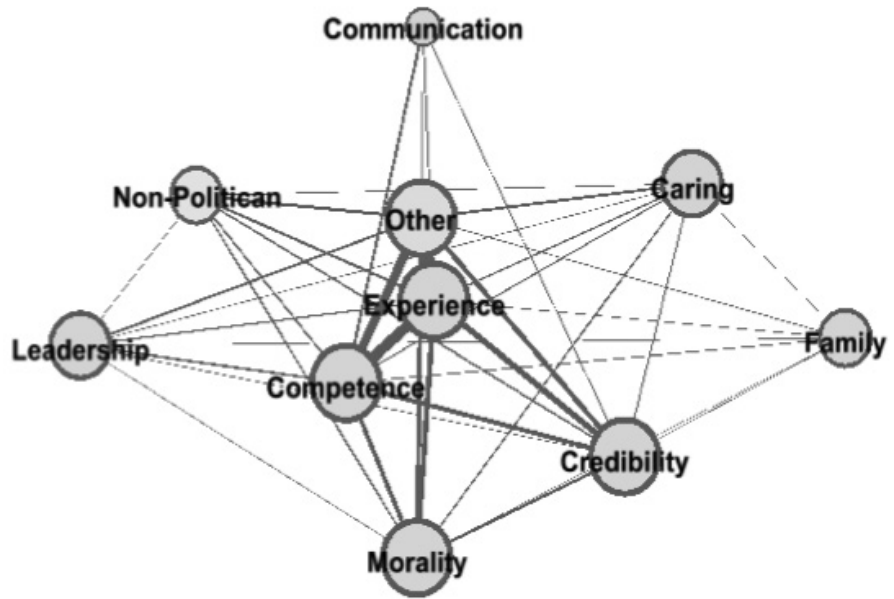
Expansion of the theory followed swiftly. The second major agenda setting study, a panel study during the 1972 U.S. presidential election (Shaw & McCombs, 1977), introduced the theoretical concept of *attribute agenda setting*. The objects that are the focus of attention at the first level of agenda setting have *attributes*, those characteristics and properties that describe each object. And the third major agenda setting study, which was carried out in three diverse communities during the 1976 U.S. presidential election (Weaver et al., 1981) empirically compared the attribute agendas of the news media for the two major presidential candidates with the public's attribute agendas for these men. The strong fit between these attribute agendas also has been widely replicated, and this area of research is now referred to as the *second level of agenda setting*. In the language of journalism these are the key adjectives that frame the objects of attention.

The first and second levels of agenda setting identify key elements in the language of journalism that have significant impact on the formation of public opinion. Subsequent research

also has identified additional dynamics in the language of journalism involving these elements that also have significant impact on public opinion. These are the *third level of agenda setting – network agenda setting, inter-media agenda setting* and the concept of *compelling arguments*.

The most recent of these additions to the theory of agenda setting is the *third level of agenda setting, network agenda setting* (Guo & McCombs, 2016). First and second-level agenda-setting treat objects and their attributes as separate and distinct disaggregated elements. Of course, in reality sets of objects and their attributes are bundled together in media messages and in public thought and conversation. That is, the media agenda and the public agenda are networks defined by sets of objects and/or attributes. Evidence for network agenda setting effects, strong matches between the media agenda and the public agenda comparable to those found at the first and second levels, also has been found in a wide variety of setting. These setting range from networks of issues and networks of candidate attributes (see Figures 1 and 2) to net-

Figure 2  
Public network attribute agenda of a  
candidate



works of the attributes of biometric companies.

Network agenda setting also introduced a new measure of salience, *degree centrality*. First and second level agendas, beginning with the Chapel Hill study, measured the salience of objects or attributes by their frequency of appearance on each agenda under consideration. Network agenda setting uses a network measure, *degree centrality*, the number of links each object or attribute in the network has to all the other units in the network, to measure salience. Some units in a network stand at the center of the network with numerous links to the other units in the network. Other units are at the periphery with few links to any of the other units in the network.

Central to all three levels of agenda setting is agenda setting's core theoretical idea, *the transfer of salience from one agenda to another agenda*. This central axiom holds regardless of whether the agendas under consideration are defined by objects, attributes or networks or regardless of how salience is measured.

This core idea also is the theoretical foundation for another basic

concept, *intermedia agenda setting*, that entered the research literature in the 1980s in response to the question "Who sets the media agenda?" (Reese & Danielian, 1989; Breen, 1997; Lin, 2006; Ragas & Kioussis, 2010; Mohammed, 2018). Among the numerous influences on the media agenda the influence of high status news organizations, such as *The New York Times*, on smaller news organizations is among the most constant and dominant.

The concept of *compelling arguments* is another explication of the transfer of salience, the transfer of salience from attributes of an object on the media agenda to the salience of that object on the public agenda. Certain characteristics of an object presented in the media may resonate with the public in such a way that they become especially compelling arguments for the salience of the issue, person or topic under consideration (Ghanem, 1996, 1997; Saldana, 2017). The diagonal arrow in Figure 3 diagrams the concept of compelling arguments.

All five of these concepts, the three levels of agenda setting, plus intermedia agenda setting and compelling arguments, identify aspects of the

language of journalism that influence the formation of public opinion. In addition, another theoretical concept, *need for orientation*, provides a psychological explanation for the strength of agenda setting effects (Weaver, 1977). Conceptually, an individual's need for orientation is defined by two lower-order concepts, relevance and uncertainty. Relevance is the initial defining condition of need for orientation. Where relevance to the individual is low or even non-existent, the need for orientation is low and agenda setting effects are weak. If relevance is high, but uncertainty is low – that is, individuals already have all the information that they desire about a topic – then the need for orientation is moderate and the strength of agenda setting effects is moderate. If both relevance and uncertainty are high, the need for orientation is high and the agenda setting effects are strong.

### Concepts, domains and settings

To understand fully the continuing expansion of agenda setting theory, it is useful to distinguish between the

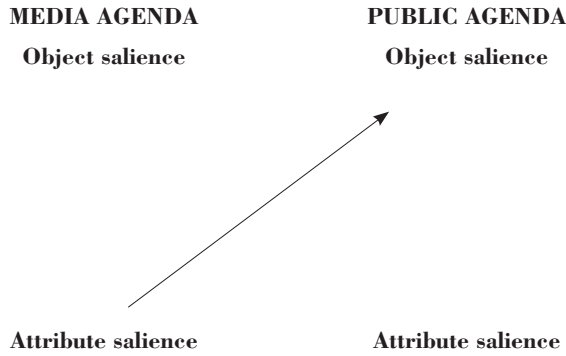


Figure 3. The concept of compelling arguments

*concepts, domains, and settings* that define specific details of the transfer of salience between two agendas. The basic concepts of agenda-setting theory are the object agenda, the attribute agenda, the network agenda, intermedia agenda setting, compelling arguments, and need for orientation. These theoretical concepts can be studied in many different domains and settings.

Beginning with the Chapel Hill study and continuing to this day, the dominant domain of agenda-setting research is public affairs, particularly public issues. A very different set of domains with a significant literature dating from the past decade or so are cultural domains that range from educational and religious institutions to a society's collective memory of its past, contemporary museum visits and global interest in professional basketball.

Within each of these domains, agenda-setting can be studied in many settings. That is to say, the operational definitions of the basic concepts of agenda-setting theory can be particular aspects of many different domains. In the traditional domain of public affairs, the most studied setting is the news media-public dyad, par-

ticularly during elections. However, the concepts of agenda-setting theory also have guided research in a wide variety of geographic settings at many points in time. And the emerging new domains of agenda-setting introduce a vast array of new operational definitions for the basic concepts of agenda setting, all in settings far removed from public affairs.

Separating the basic concepts of agenda-setting theory from their operational definitions, this rich variety of domains and settings helps us to see the language of journalism and its agenda setting effects more clearly and to envision new directions of research. This separation also clarifies the various – and sometimes confusing – definitions of agenda-setting proffered by various scholars. Hewing to the original domain and setting of agenda-setting research, some narrowly define agenda setting as the transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. A somewhat broader definition states that elements prominent on the media agenda frequently become prominent on the public agenda. Both definitions are correct, but neither encompasses the

full range of agenda-setting theory and research that exists today. For example, neither of these definitions covers intermedia agenda setting. Recognizing the distinction between concepts, domains and settings provides a useful context for defining agenda-setting and for understanding the broad range of agenda-setting phenomena. In this variety of domains and settings, the core axiom of agenda-setting theory about the transfer of salience from one agenda to another provides parsimony in our theoretical vocabulary.

In the early days of our field Lasswell (1948) noted that mass communication has three broad social roles: surveillance of the larger environment, achieving consensus among the segments of society, and transmission of the culture. The process of agenda setting is a significant part of the surveillance role, contributing substantial portions of our pictures and thoughts about the larger environment beyond our direct experience. As the roving spotlights of the media move from object to object and across the attributes of those objects in their surveillance of the environment, the public acquires significant knowledge and understand-

ing, especially about the relative salience of elements in that environment. This aspect of learning is the core of the agenda-setting process. The agenda-setting process also has major implications for social consensus and transmission of culture, implications that take agenda-setting theory beyond its traditional setting in public affairs and political communication. Mass communication's role in achieving social consensus is manifest in creating a high degree of homogeneity among the news media and among the public as a whole up and down over time. Exploration of the media's role in the transmission of cultural agendas moves agenda-setting across new intellectual frontiers far beyond its traditional realm of public affairs. These new lines of cultural inquiry extend from the historical agenda defining a society's collective memory of the past to contemporary museum visits in Greece and global interest in professional basketball.

#### **Agenda setting in the expanded media landscape**

We swim in a vast sea of news and information, a gestalt of commu-

nication channels where the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. In learning about the world around us through a continuous process of *civic osmosis* (McCombs, 2012), the Internet has added a host of new channels to this gestalt. In the scholarly examination of communication effects, there is a tendency to emphasize individual media more than the communication media collectively. The concept of *civic osmosis* emphasizes the collective role of the communication media and the inter-related nature of communication sources used by citizens for information about public affairs. Evidence about the absorption of news and information from a media sea dates from the earliest days of our field to the present era of the Internet (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas, 2000; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). This does not deny that there are powerful and influential individual media. However, the gestalt of media voices composed of legacy media and social media – this vast sea of information – is the core of our social fabric.

The concept of *agenda melding* further explicates how individuals re-

spond to this sea of information. Agenda-melding describes how individuals mix objects and attributes from a variety of media and personal sources to construct a picture of the world (Shaw et al., in press).

Agenda-melding does not replace media agenda-setting, but rather seeks to explain why the strength of media agenda-setting varies between different media, groups and individuals. Some media ...reach for large audiences, as if shouting from the top of a pyramid to any and all... *vertically* as it were... By contrast, [other] media are *horizontal* in that they reach out for audiences with special interests. (Shaw & Weaver, 2014)

This mix of vertical and horizontal media facilitates the creation of personally satisfying personal agendas.

#### **Fake news**

In some cases, the personally satisfying agendas created by agenda melding may contain some amount of *fake news*, misinformation and falsehoods planted online by persons or organizations *with an agenda* in the pejorative sense of that phrase. This

fake news, which can range from totally false news reports to fake facts embedded in news stories about actual events, often become part of a personal agenda because they support strongly held views. At other times, however, they become part of a personal agenda simply because of their widespread appearance and repetition in social media. Presumably in this latter case they are for the most part deleted as fact-based news reports catch up and debunk them. This is largely an untested hypothesis.

Ultimately, there are two safeguards to the diffusion of fake news. The first rests with the media, especially with social media where individuals can quickly spread false news. Unlike the traditional media which have editors and a tradition of verifying news reports, social media do not have editors. However, at least some social media do have fact-checking staffs who identify and delete fake news. For example, Facebook, YouTube and Pinterest recently have taken steps to significantly reduce the amount of fake news about measles vaccines on their platforms. However, in some cases fake news may have al-

ready diffused to thousands of people before it is blocked from a communication channel.

This leads to the second safeguard, the news audience itself. Over-reliance on a few news channels, especially horizontal channels that seek out individuals with specific interests, can make an individual more susceptible to fake news. Any news report that an individual truly considers relevant and important should be verified across numerous channels. This should be a variety of vertical and horizontal news sources because a major finding of agenda setting research dating from the Chapel Hill study is the high degree of homogeneity across the agendas of major news organizations who hew to the tradition of vetting multiple sources for a story (Lee, 2007; Boczkowski, 2010; Maier, 2010). Or one can directly check the veracity of a news reports with major fact-check organizations. For example, Vosoughi, Roy & Aral (2018) classified news as true or false using information from six independent fact-checking organizations that exhibited 95 to 98% agreement on the classifications. Disconcertingly, they

found: Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. We found that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information. (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018, p. 1146)

Neither of these strategies for identifying fake news is perfect, but they are substantial starting points for the elimination of truly fake news, as distinguished from news stories labeled fake news by persons discomfited by the facts.

## **Conclusion**

Expansion of agenda setting over the past 50 years, theoretically and empirically, has identified key aspects of the language of journalism that have significant impact on the formation of public opinion. The first and second levels of agenda setting identify two key elements, the “nouns” and “ad-

jectives” that influence the public’s focus of attention and their pictures of the world beyond immediate personal experience. Other research has identified additional dynamics in the language of journalism involving these elements that also have significant impact on the public. These are the third level of agenda setting – network agenda setting, intermedia agenda setting and the concept of compelling arguments. And the concept of need for orientation has added a psychological explanation for the strength of agenda setting effects. These theoretical concepts can be studied in many different domains and settings, not just news and public affairs.

The concept of agenda melding further explicates how individuals respond to the sea of information created by the blend of legacy media and social media. Agenda-melding describes how individuals mix objects and attributes from a variety of media and personal sources to construct their personal pictures of the world. In some case these personal agendas contain fake news. Ultimately, there are two safeguards to the diffusion of fake news, the vigilance of legacy and

social media communication channels to delete misinformation and the verification across numerous channels of communication by individual members of the public of news they consider relevant and important.

Presentations on agenda setting theory, whether in essays such as this one or in book-length discussions present a smoothed case study of the theory. In reality, the scientific method is not so smooth. Kim, Kim & Zhou’s (2017) description of the trends in the various aspects of agenda setting theory shows irregular progress over the years. However, their research also shows a continuous pattern of theoretical and empirical growth, a pattern that predicts a productive future for agenda setting research over coming decades.

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