

Agenda-Setting Theory: A Literature Review and Application to Public Relations

Laura C. Bonfiglio

Radford University

“What is the most important problem facing this country today?” This survey question, known as the Gallup Poll, was used in the early 1930s as one of the first assessments of what the public perceived to be important in comparison to media coverage at the time (Lei, Hong Tien, & McCombs, 2012). This linkage between public perception and media coverage is inherent in Agenda-Setting Theory. According to Rosenberry and Vicker, “agenda setting is from the sociological perspective, that is, theories that examine the ways in which the media have been shown to be influential on large groups or society in general” (2009, p. 149-150). This literature review follows agenda-setting theory from its groundbreaking exploration of media effects, through the concepts of agenda building and framing, and it concludes with application by the field of public relations. A final discussion will address further consideration of the theory from a public relations perspective.

### **Literature Review**

The formation of agenda-setting as a theory can be traced back to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century although the media’s role in shaping an environment and public opinion was explored before then by journalist Walter Lippmann (McCombs, 1997; Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). The first major study to explore such influence and in turn define the theory was conducted during the 1968 U.S. presidential election. The Chapel Hill study, conducted by Shaw and McCombs, focused on how agenda-setting is used to build consensus among individuals in a community (McCombs, 1997). They compared the issues the Chapel Hill voters perceived to be most important to the “coverage of those issues in the news media used by those voters” (McCombs, 1997, p. 435). The study found the media to be a dominant source for political information (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and that the “play of issues on the news agenda significantly influences the prominence of issues on the public agenda” (McCombs, 1997, p. 435).

Since McCombs and Shaw conducted this major study and devised agenda-setting theory, researchers have continued to explore the concepts and terminology associated with the theory. Scheufele and Tewksbury define agenda-setting as “the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that media place on certain issues and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences” (2007, p. 11). They continue on to say that it is an “accessibility model” based on “memory-based models of information processing,” and the effects on audiences align “with the heightened accessibility an issue receives in the news” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 14). A more basic approach to defining agenda-setting is given by Shaw and Martin, as they claim agenda-setting theory addresses how the media tell people what to think about (Shaw & Martin, 1992).

Determining what news will make its way onto the media agenda and public agenda is dependent upon the factors associated with agenda-setting theory. Since the initial assertion of media’s ability to effect what the public thinks about, the theory has been expanded upon. Agenda-setting theory is often considered from two levels. First level agenda-setting is “focused on the relative salience of issues or objects,” and second level agenda-setting “examines the relative salience of attributes of issues or objects” (Weaver, 2007, p. 144).

One approach that determines what news will make its way onto the media agenda is the concept of agenda building. Agenda building, according to Weaver and Elliot, focuses on “how the press interacts with other institutions in society to create issues of public concern,” and the approach is “concerned with how issues originate, or how subjects of news coverage become issues” (1985, p. 88). According to Manheim (1987), as cited by Hallahan, it “involves pushing issues in the arenas of public discussion, onto the media agenda” (1999, p. 218).

Another approach, priming, involves the selection of topics (Scheufele & Tewksbury,

2007). Priming can be defined as “changes in the standards that people use” to make evaluations and “occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks” for evaluation (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Weaver defines priming as “making certain issues or attributes more salient and more likely to be accessed in forming opinions” (Weaver, 2007, p. 145). Weaver’s definition of priming opens the door of agenda-setting to the realm of how an audience thinks about a topic (Weaver, 2007). Central to this extension of agenda-setting’s role of influencing what an audience thinks about, to how an audience thinks about it, is the concept of framing (Weaver, 2007).

Some scholars refer to framing as a theory, and some refer to it as a concept within agenda-setting. According to Rendahl (1995), as cited by Hallahan, “framing has been used as a paradigm for understanding and investigating communication and related behavior in a wide range of disciplines” (1999, p. 206). Whereas agenda-setting and priming are involved in making an issue or object more accessible, framing effects how audiences think about a topic by altering its description (Weaver, 2007). According to Scheufele and Tewksbury, framing “is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in reports can have influence on how it is understood by audiences” (2007, p. 11). According to Hallahan, there are two types of framing that are prevalent in news coverage: episodic and thematic. “Episodic framing involves storytelling from the perspective of people and individual events;” whereas, thematic framing involves storytelling “more broadly from a societal perspective using abstract concepts instead of case studies or exemplars” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 221).

Weaver, Scheufele and Tewksbury address that the communication field is at a loss for a consistent understanding of agenda building, priming, and framing, as different scholars often assign different meanings to each concept (2007; 2007). In an effort to clarify definitions and

move research on agenda-setting forward, Scheufele and Tewksbury review how the concepts relate to and differ from one another in regard to news production, news processing and produced effects (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

In regard to message construction, how societal groups “try to shape public discourse about an issue by establishing predominant labels” is an area of interest to framing but not to agenda-setting (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 14). In regard to news processing, audiences are more likely to be effected by framing as they pay more attention to a message; whereas, message exposure may be enough to achieve agenda-setting effects (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Finally, the difference in produced effects on the audience also contrasts, as framing effects rest “within the description of an issue or the label used in news coverage applicable to the issue” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 14). Stated more simply, “the primary difference is therefore the difference between whether we think about an issue and how we think about it,” referring to agenda-setting and framing respectively (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11).

Upon review, it is clear that these concepts relate but also have their differences. Further distinctions exist among scholars in regard to how the concepts function within the larger role of agenda-setting. McCombs (2004) places framing in the second level of agenda-setting, where he claims its role is to make “aspects of an issue more salient through different modes of presentation and therefore shifting people’s attitudes” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 15). Although some researchers accept this association, many believe it does not appropriately acknowledge the key differences mentioned above in regard to news production, processing and produced effects (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 15). Nevertheless, it is important to note that they are interrelated. Agenda-setting effects have an influence on framing effects and vice-versa. To demonstrate their co-dependence, according to a model by Price and Tewksbury in 1997, “an

applicable construct is far more likely to be activated when it is accessible,” meaning framing efforts are more likely to effect an audience when the story is prominent in the news, an effect brought upon through agenda-setting (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 16).

Shaw and Martin acknowledge the professions and players involved in agenda-setting, of which public relations and its practitioners play a key role alongside journalists, reporters and government officials (Shaw & Martin, 1992). Public relations practitioners apply the concepts of building, priming and framing in a variety of contexts. From the management of issues, crisis, and reputation (Darmon, Fitzpatrick, & Bronstein, 2008; Oliveira & Murphy, 2009), to the demonstration of social citizenship efforts (Kioussis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007) and other purposes that “will help them negotiate the evolving organization-public relationship,” (Darmon et al., 2008, p. 72) agenda-setting and its properties are utilized in public relations. According to Reich, “the extent to which the news media rely on public relations materials has attracted considerable research attention” (2010, p. 799). Furthermore, Kioussis et al. conducted a study that found “object salience in public relations leads to increased salience in news coverage,” in addition to findings that show a “positive correlation between public relations messages’ tone and media coverage tone” (2007, p. 161).

According to Oliveira and Murphy, materials submitted to media outlets by public relations practitioners influence media coverage; therefore, public relations is involved in building the media agenda (2009). Through supplying reporters and journalists information subsidies, topic ideas and access to topic experts, the role of public relations practitioners as agenda builders, in turn, influences their role in agenda-setting (Kioussis et al., 2007). In addition, much of the research on public relations’ role in agenda-setting centers on framing. According to Darmon et al., “framing decisions may be the single most important strategic decision made in a

public relations effort” (2008, p. 100).

There are seven models in which public relations’ use of framing can be explored, which include “the framing of situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 209). To frame situations, practitioners must ensure the situation is “framed properly to facilitate dialogue and open discussion” (p. 225). When framing attributes, practitioners frame “particular aspects of the causes, candidates, products, or services they represent” (p. 225). When framing choices, practitioners frame risks in a manner that will aid in the audiences’ decision-making process. Practitioners framing actions often frame desired behaviors positively (Hallahan, 1999, p. 226).

When framing issues, practitioners usually frame them as “significant or insignificant” depending on how they believe the audience should perceive the issue (Hallahan, 1999, p. 227). Regarding responsibility, practitioners frame the organization as responsible, usually if the topic will enhance organizational reputation, or will avoid responsibility in framing, typically if the topic will damage their organization’s reputation (p. 227). Finally, when framing news, practitioners do so in a way to gain audience interest and encourage evaluations from a perspective consistent to the way the organization would want that topic to be perceived (Hallahan, 1999, p. 228).

Research regarding practitioners’ use of agenda building and framing aligns with their overall contribution to agenda-setting. Practitioners serve as a source for nearly half of news media content (Reich, 2010). With statistics representing the prevalence of public relations generated content within news stories, positive relationships between practitioners and journalists are essential to both parties. According to Zoch and Molleda (2006), as cited by Kiouisis, “since agenda building begins with generating a story idea, the institution or individual

who creates and promotes the idea can have considerable power.” Furthermore, “when reporters and practitioners cultivate personal relationships ‘with a high level of interpersonal contact based on similar approaches to news values, professional standards, and education level,’ those sources can have a greater impact on the agenda-building process” (Zoch & Modella, 2006, p. 290 as cited by Kiouisis et al., 2007, p. 369).

### **Discussion of Agenda-Setting’s Use by Public Relations Practitioners**

Based on the literature, public relations is clearly involved in agenda-setting, and research findings can aid practitioners in effectively setting media and public agendas. By considering factors such as the goals and objectives of their organizations, the intended or desired focus and/or evaluation of audiences, proper craftsmanship of communication materials and information subsidies, and establishment and maintenance of constructive relations with the journalists to whom these materials are distributed to, practitioners’ agenda-setting efforts are likely to produce more desired effects. Agenda-setting theory may be beneficial to public relations practitioners if presented as a strategic process.

First, to participate in agenda building, practitioners should consider their organization’s needs by conducting an environmental scan to identify what topic(s) are most crucial to push to the media’s agenda. Depending on the organization and current environmental conditions, this may be a current issue, crisis, corporate social responsibility effort, or other topic.

To be successful agenda builders, practitioners ought to consider the topic’s obtrusiveness. According to Rosenberry and Vicker, priming “affects the attention the public gives to the issue and how important it seems to the audience” (2009, p. 151). For public relations practitioners looking to gain audience attention, they should consider how their audience will perceive the topic or story they are trying to get them to think about. Specifically,



an unobtrusive issue, a topic the audience is lacking familiarity or experience with, is more likely to receive attention in the media than an obtrusive issue, one the audience has prior experience with (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). If the topic is obtrusive, public relations practitioner may be wise to put more effort into framing the topic to successfully help set the agenda and attain audience attention.

Practitioners must also work to frame the topic in a manner advantageous to their organization. To do so, when practitioners craft their communication materials they must consider if they want to influence audience knowledge, attitudes or behavior. Once that is established, they must consider how to frame the message to achieve organizational goals. Hallahan's seven models of framing serve as a useful reference at this point for practitioners to effectively address framing methods of the topic at hand (Hallahan, 1999).

Although the research and development of information subsidies are necessary, practitioners must get these materials into the hands of journalists in order to advance the process of reaching their audience. To do so, practitioners must realize the bi-directional relationship between themselves and journalists (Kiousis et al., 2007). Although journalists may rely on public relations generated content, it would be a significant error if the qualities of the journalist or reporter with whom the practitioner is working with were overlooked. The needs of the reporter and the media organization for which that reporter works must be considered to ensure maximum likelihood that messages will first make way onto the media agenda, and second remain in the format and frame originally intended by the practitioner.

A newer area of research may prove to be beneficial to public relations practitioners regarding agenda building sometime in the future. The proposal of a third level of agenda-setting, studied by Lei et al., addresses the salience of objects and attributes in the media agenda

in clusters, a concept referred to as the “Network Agenda Setting Model” (2012, p. 55). The researchers claim, “news media can actually bundle different objects and attributes and make these bundles of elements salient in the public’s mind simultaneously” (Lei et al., 2012, p. 55). Practitioners may be wise to utilize this assumption as they prime messages they hope to disseminate to the public through media outlets. For example, a practitioner may want the public to see their organization as environmentally friendly. This situation could benefit from the frequent and consistent use of key words associating the attribute alongside the organization within the messages crafted for public consumption. The reasoning behind this application is that, through repetitive exposure of associating the organization with the attribute of environmentally friendly, the company would be associated with social responsibility efforts by audiences when they recall either the organization or the cause. Research regarding the effectiveness of such word bundling requires further exploration; however, if additional studies show real effects, it can aid to practitioners looking to enhance an organization’s reputation.

As agenda-setting research continues to expand over the years, research diverges to review components of the theory in depth, and converges to tie the concepts together and demonstrate their interdependence in forming media and public agendas. Inherent in the theory and its concepts of agenda building and framing is the presence of public relations practitioners looking to build mutually beneficial relationships between their organization and its constituencies through the media. To effectively do so, those in public relations must study agenda-setting to remain competitive among countless others vying for the attention of the public. This review of the literature, expansion upon how agenda-setting theory can be approached as a process, and future possibilities will serve as a basis for practitioners looking to succeed on behalf of their profession and their organization.

## References

- Darmon, K., Fitzpatrick, K., & Bronstein, C. (2008). Krafting the obesity message: A case study in framing and issues management. *Public Relations Review, 34*(4), 373-379.  
doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.07.002
- Hallahan, K. (1999). Seven models of framing: Implications for public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 11*(3), 205-242.
- Kiousis, S., Popescu, C., & Mitrook, M. (2007). Understanding influence on corporate reputation: An examination of public relations efforts, media coverage, public opinion, and financial performance from an agenda-building and agenda-setting perspective. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 19*(2), 147-165. doi:10.1080/10627260701290661
- Lei, G., Hong Tien, V., & McCombs, M. (2012). An expanded perspective on agenda-setting effects. Exploring the third level of agenda setting. *Revista De Comunicación, 11*, 51-68.
- McCombs, M. (1997). Building consensus: The news media's agenda-setting roles. *Political Communication, 14*(4), 433-443. doi:10.1080/105846097199236
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *POQ, 36*, 176-187.
- Oliveira, M., & Murphy, P. (2009). The leader as the face of a crisis: Philip Morris' CEO's speeches during the 1990s. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 21*(4), 361-380.  
doi:10.1080/10627260902966425
- Reich, Z. (2010). Measuring the impact of pr on published news in increasingly fragmented news environments. *Journalism Studies, 11*(6), 799-816. doi:10.1080/14616701003760550
- Rosenberry, J., & Vicker, L. A. (2009). *Applied mass communication theory: A guide for media practitioners*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 9-20.

doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00326.x

Shaw, D. L., & Martin, S. E. (1992). The function of mass media agenda setting. *Journalism Quarterly*, 69(4), 902-920.

Weaver, D. H. (2007). Thoughts on agenda setting, framing, and priming. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 142-147. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00333.x

Weaver, D. H., & Elliott, S. (1985). Who sets the agenda for the media? A study of local agenda-building. *Journalism Quarterly*, 62(1), 87-94.