

# THE MEDIA IN THE FORMATION OF THE AGENDA

Yadira Carrera Ontiveros\*

## ABSTRACT

Mass media play a relevant role in spreading public affairs that occur. Through the Agenda Setting Theory has been proven the high-power media have, to transfer to the citizenship, the hierarchy issues towards public discussions should be oriented and considered as the Most Important Problems (MIP) that government should attend. This article shows evidence of media contribution of the public agenda and contributes to the discussion about the actions carried out by the different actors to impose public affairs.

**KEYWORDS:** Agenda setting, public agenda and media.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of the public agenda from the perspective of research in communication has shown the media power to establish public discussion topics on which citizens focus their attention. The press not only provides media coverage to events and news of the public agenda, resulting from different sources of information, among those interest groups that will seek their issues, demands, requirements and needs to be placed on the discussion. The media play a major role in defining the issues that will reach greater public visibility in the debate and will be considered by citizens as the most concerning, and these must be incorporated in government agenda.

Is common to listen that the media set the trend, determine the agenda and build the Agenda Setting. It is precisely this last one, the Agenda Setting theory, emerged since 1972, that tries to explain how media define the relevance in public opinion issues' that must be considered as a priority and frame them as part of public discussion.

---

\* PhD in Social Science and Research Professor at the Faculty of International Studies and Public Policies (Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa). Member of the National Research System (CONACYT, México). Email: carreraontiveros@hotmail.com

The Agenda Setting concept was coined by McCombs and Shaw (1972) to prove the media capacity to transfer the relevance of news to the society agenda. Through its daily information organization, *the mass media* influence the agenda's setting of social and politics issues that citizens must focus their attention.

Knowledge about public matters it is based on a small sample that shows the real-world aspects in which *mass media* have decided to spread:

The real world is greatly reduced by the informative systems that choose which aspects to convey in their broadcasts, and to the extent that as an audience we decide which news messages we want to be exposed to (McCombs and Shaw, 1997, p. 7).

Media have the power to decide the part of reality or environment to spread, in Lippman words (2003, p. 45) the pseudo-environment and to build our perceptions about the world. Starting from the media, the different political actors seek to place their agenda to society.

Investigation about public agenda seems to have different nuances from the political analysis point of view and from studies in communication. The first of these disciplines is centered on understanding the combination of public issues that government must intervene, while for the Agenda Setting is based on media power to transfer the relevance of matters that citizenship consider as the Most Important Problems (MIP) that government must understand.

This article analyses the role of the media in the confirmation of the public agenda, from the initial process until the positioning of topics such as MIP that citizen's place as the main issues government should take care of and will show some evidence that proves the postulates of the theory around the world.

## **MEDIA IN PUBLIC ISSUES**

The public policies define to the government agenda as “the set of priorities that a constituted government poses as a project and seeks to make a reality along its command” (Casar and Maldonado, 2008, p. 10), as well as the problems and demands that have been selected as objects of its actions or considers that must act (Aguilar, 1992, p. 29). In this process, media also represent an important element, as the public arena in which the interested remained political actors will use to expose their ideas, projects, and interests.

The media constitute an important actor in political policies that can be part of actions taken by different opinion leaders to place their affairs. Through the press different press groups of interests will evaluate, criticize, or praise the

actions and government programs and try to incorporate their demands. In this way, mass media can be not just a channel for information transmission, but also an instrument of pressure that other actors use as a subject of their interest which is placed in the public discussion and considered by the authorities to attend it.

The attention agenda of a government can be nurtured by different sources: from the campaign plan proposed by leaders, political parties' platforms, diagnoses carried out supporting external actors, sexennial plans presented, as well as issues presented by media with greater insistence should be taken care of. Meanwhile, public agenda, referring exclusively issues that citizenship has considered as the most relevant a government should pay attention to; it is highly correlated with the issues *mass media* has provided greater coverage. In this way, the different actors who participate in the discussions issues, (from unions, entrepreneurs, civil society organizations, and bureaucracy itself) could find in the media a way to create eco in their demands and support their point of view in different moments in the process of public policies.

The Media are an important filter at the moment of deciding the news, facts, events and opinions that will be known by the audience and the ones that will be rejected, according to McCombs (1996) media dismiss 75% of the news at a first glance, these never get to the audience, and they are in charge of deciding the topic and the news audience must know because of the lack of sufficient space to deal with all the news that happen. Also, not all the material receives the same treatment when presented to the recipients, since it is previously selected and some subject is extensively and prominently exposed, while others receive a minor coverage. In the case of newspapers, they express the news relevance according to the placement, title, and extension.

The newspaper companies play an important role in the definition of the subjects' citizenship must know and through their spots generate Agenda Setting<sup>1</sup> Deciding and motivating the problems and ideas public should concentrate their attention to. At the same time, the media have an important role to "inform political elites the existence and magnitude of problems and build mass consensus for government activity" (Nelson, 1992, p. 122). In this way, problems receive greater coverage from the press, gets greater visibility for the government, and then decides to pay attention to it.

Aguilar Villanueva (1992, p. 25) questions the role of the press in the promotion of public affairs: What is the role and impact of electronic media in the configuration of public affairs and agenda formation? Does it facilitate or

---

<sup>1</sup> The Agenda Setting process is achieved when the media manage to establish priority topics that people focus. This is evidenced by correlations between the items of greater journalistic coverage and those that the public has pointed out as the most important issues.

hinder, clarify or distort, order or confuse, radicalize or institutionalize? Also, wonders if it is limited only to the reading elite that it is used to reasoning and to be politically informed (Aguilar, 1992, p. 25). The research and findings of the Agenda Setting theory during its 40 years of existence contribute to the role of mass media in the public agenda.

## **AGENDA'S ESTABLISHMENT EVIDENCE**

Media do not only work as socializing agents, but they can also become agents of pressure in the process of building public policies and at the same time, assessors of public duty. The coverage carries out by media could direct the discussion topics, the aspects in which opinion and citizens' interests should focus on. Mass media narrative will also influence the approving or reject perceptions public opinion will have a government, official, politician, or particular candidate.

Different studies along history have proven the high impact media have on citizens. From the Agenda Setting perspective (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) the media have a high capacity to transfer the relevance of the news to society's agenda. In this way, the list media, and the coverage issues assigned as greater importance become an instrument that can achieve to influence in the government agenda to get the attention of a particular social, economic, and political difficulty disregarded by power elites.

The parents of McCombs and Shaw (1972) explain that the media are highly effective in conveying the relevance of issues that citizens should direct their attention to and not only point out the objects on which the discussion should focus, but also the aspects or what is said of the public problematic. So that at the moment, of questioning the society through Gallup polls, what are the Most Important Problems (MIP) that in their opinion considers that the government should attend? Has been found a high correlation between those indicated by the Public opinion and the issues that the media have provided greater coverage.

Throughout its existence, the Agenda Setting theory has documented its effectiveness, in about 400 studies that have been carried out all over the world. The evidence is growing in the United States of America, the country of the founding fathers, but there is also proof of the implementation of Agenda Setting in Great Britain, Japan, Taiwan, Spain, Argentina, Colombia and Chile.

Research on the power of the media in transferring the relevance of the press to the public agenda has been placed mainly in electoral contexts to analyze the candidates and the issues that the journalistic coverage highlights in contrast to the assessments that the citizens do of politicians. In the pioneering poll

in the election process in Chapell Hill, North Carolina, voters were questioned, and the television newscasts used by voters were analyzed. In the end, McCombs and Shaws (1972) found a high degree of correspondence between the two agendas: of 24 comparisons made, 18 favored the establishment of an Agenda Setting of news and correlation with the voter's Agenda (McCombs, 1996, p. 18).

The studies of the effects of the Agenda Setting on non-electoral issues have been developed since the 1980s and have analyzed periods of time greater than those of a campaign, which is a move towards theories of long-term effects (Casemeiro, 2004, p. 89). In non-electoral contexts, the methodology used has been the same, where content analysis is carried out to the media to identify issues of greater news coverage and is contrasted with the results of a public opinion poll in which the Citizens answer about the MIPs that the government should address and in the end undergoes a process to verify the degree of statistically significant correlations.

The subjects of study have been varied in different parts of the world. Winter and Eyal (1981) studied the issue of civil rights focusing on the time in which the media delay in creating the effect from their coverage and concluded that the strongest effect is between four and six weeks. In the area of public security, high statistical correspondence has also been detected in the coverage of the media with issues of public concern. Even Ghanem (1996) went further and wanted to discover to what extent the media did not reflect reality. Through a series of surveys conducted between 1992 and 1995, he observed that crime in Texas was a subject mentioned above 10 percent of the population as MIP, but the reality was that the crime rate had been declining for the last three years. Ghanem (1996) documented a high correlation between the media agenda on crime and the public agenda by recording a Rho  $+ .70$  correlation.

In other countries, there are already antecedents that have investigated the evolution of the public agenda in different periods. Tamayo and Carrillo (2004) studied the public agenda in Spain from 1985 to 2004 analyzed the time series on the issues that citizens' judgments are the biggest problems of that country. The investigation found that five issues were able to remain on the agenda during all the years, such as unemployment, terrorism, drugs, crime and economic problems, as well as recently immigration. Tamayo and Carrillo (2004, p. 41) concluded that a significant number of issues come and go to compete with public attention, but the Spanish public agenda is relatively stable.

A joint research between Argentina and Spain during 1997 and 1998 by D'Adamo, García Beadoux, Freidenberg (2000) to measure the impact of the media agenda, conducted a survey of 1100 university students from the

humanities and sciences area where they were asked to mention the three problems that they considered most important in the country in order to compare the agenda established by the mass media. In the case of Argentina, they found that the issues were issues that had received extensive treatment in the media: “The public poses an agenda very similar to the one set by the media” (D’Adamo, García Beadoux, Freidenberg, 2000, p. 51).

The respondents in Argentina mentioned as main problems: 1) unemployment, 2) corruption, 3) crisis in education, 4) justice, 5) economy, 6) insecurity, while the media made more mention of the following: 1) Economy, 2) Justice, 3) Unemployment 4) Corruption, 5) The crisis in education and 6) Insecurity. Citizens agreed to point out the issues that the media had also given more prominence, albeit with differences in their position of importance, reinforcing the thesis that “there is a remarkable convergence between what the public perceives as more important and what the Media characterize in the same way” (D’Adamo, García Beadoux, Freidenberg, 2000, p. 54).

The researchers went further and asked about the influence of the political agenda of the media: 72% of Spaniards believe that the political agenda has control over the press, while 45% of Argentines considered it this way. Another interesting fact was the answer to the question: do you think that the media have the power to influence the decisions of politicians? Where 54.5% of Argentines believe so and 67% of Spanish subjects (D’Adamo, García Beadoux, Freidenberg, 2000, p. 56).

Recent studies of Agenda Setting have incorporated the analysis of new media and social networks. Alonso and Casero (2016) demonstrated how a social movement could influence through social networks in the media agenda and public debate. The case study of the Mortgage-Affected Platform (MAP) in Spain showed how the activist movement manages to condition discussion topics and the framework of how they are spoken of in the media. It then gives “an influence of the discourse on social change in the media agenda regarding access as framing or framing. With this, the PAH obtains both public visibility for its demands as a discursive capacity to influence the public debate, placing its frames at the center of it thanks to the media” (Alonso and Casero, 2016, p. 45).

This study seems to give a new dimension to social networks as a possible influence on the media, incorporating digital platforms between information providers in the production of news and as Alonso and Casero (2016, p. 45) conclude: “Web 2.0 offers an opportunity for social movements and actors linked to social change, to broaden their scope for maneuver in the digital context”.

The Digital Agenda approach is still little explored in the Agenda Setting study, but there are already indications that allow to orient towards the competition between traditional and new media, such as the study carried out by Rubio García (2014), who analyzed the Messages from the digital public through Twitter and detected that there is a strong correspondence between the agenda of the media and the public agenda on Twitter.

The Agenda Setting theory consolidated a method to demonstrate how the media transfer to the audience the hierarchical list of issues or problems most important to society (López-Escobar, Llamas and McCombs, 1996, p. 9). Through content analysis in the media, coverage is analyzed and contrasted with the list of topics revealed by public opinion as for the most important that should be addressed. But what are the characteristics that gather public affairs to be of interest to citizens? What are the criteria of the media and what other factors influence for an issue to gain greater visibility?

## **FROM THE ISSUES TO THE AGENDA**

In order for an event, happening or public declaration to be incorporated into the media agenda, there is a series of internal filters directly controlled by the journalistic companies that must be accepted. From the field of journalism, agrees that events or declarations must comply with certain requirements called “newsworthiness”, that is, the criteria by which certain information is evaluated to consider that it meets the necessary value that justifies the appearance in the mass media of communication.

Among them outstand newness, present, proximity, relevance, or interest in the audience and the divisiveness (Alsina, 1993; Cook, 1996; Lawrence, 2000; Martini, 2000). Wolf define the news values as the component of the newsworthiness and answers to the question of which events are considered interesting, meaningful, relevant enough to be transformed into the story? These values are present in the journalism practice and along the process of production, not just in the selection of news, but in other steps of the process and interact until transform into relevance criteria (Wolf, 1987, pp. 119-123).

From the Agenda Setting theory has also tried to find an explanation on who sets the agenda in the communication media. Turning to the metaphor “layers of the onion”, McCombs, Eiseidel y Weaver (1991) explain the different influences that exist to the decision making in a journalistic organization to transform an affair in the news and give it greater relevance. Among the different factors are 1) the public relation offices of companies, institutions, and government that try to place their media press releases, 2) a different one points out that media

also nurture themselves from journalistic competence, 3) the technologies that allow immediate information transmission in the audiovisual media, than in the printed ones, such as 4) The Organizational Culture that rules inside companies and determines the informative coverage style depending on whether it is “serious” and “sensational” newspaper. 5) another important element are the individual differences journalists related to their professionalism and lastly 6) the styles or journalistic genres which are the heart and soul that determine what news is and how is focused. This demonstrate how the facts presented by the press come not only from what happens, but also from different actors struggling to incorporate their agenda into the media to position the topics of their interest and the approaches from which they can position themselves in the agenda of public opinion and is also attended by the governmental sphere, in such way that “the social facts are not problems, no less public themselves, except there are certain actors with particular resources and strategies that accomplish to position their vision in the government agenda”, (Leyva, Vázquez and Olaya, 2016, p. 10).

But not all the issues addressed by media accomplish to impact public opinion without having the same influence equally among citizens, given that there are the ones named “conceivable conditions” that avoid all messages to be equally permeable. These are also related to the individually oriented needs, with his/her interest in politics, educational level, sex, age, economic status, as well as credibility in media and the types of issues addressed (Casemeiro, 2004, pp. 101-104).

This vision is closely related to the Uses and Gratification Theory perspective that precisely studied the needs of the individual access to information satisfaction. Mario Wolf argues that “the mass media effect is understood as consequences of the gratifications to the experimented needs by the receptor” (Wolf, 1991, p. 78).

Based on the oriented need as the key issue to measure the influenced difference a message can have, researchers Weaver, Takeshita, and McCombs have explored these variables separately. Weaver (1977, p. 112) concluded that the greater the need for guidance of individuals in public affairs, the more likely they are to pay attention to the media agenda.

McCombs (2006, p. 119) argues that relevance and significant uncertainty among the public define a great need for guidance, which is the general condition in which the highest degree of correspondence between the media and public agenda is predicted. To analyze the Japanese municipal elections, Takeshita (1993, pp. 193-216) found that the effect of agenda setting steadily increases with the degree of need for guidance.



In addition to the individual psychological and sociodemographic variables that mediate the fixation of the media agenda among the public, there are other elements that influence, so the thematic agenda does not penetrate the audience in a homogenous way. Harold Zucker points out that in some occasions the public has personal references towards topics covered by media which are resilient or independent from the attention news have on them. Zucker (1978, p. 225) classifies the items according to the personal experience of the audience with them. In this way, he refers to *obtrusive issues*, such as those that affect the individual personally. Previous experience “obstructs” the influence of the media, so the more direct information you have on a minor issue will be the effect. Secondly, there are *unobtrusive issues* where you do not have direct experience and are issues away from everyday life that you only have access to the media. Eyat (1979) identified a set of topics in this classification. In the obtrusive included inflation, unemployment and economics, while in the non-obstructive ones mentioned security, environment and foreign policy. Following this same logic and using Agenda Setting methodology to detect the establishment of media issues in public opinion, Casemeiro (2017), supported by the annual surveys conducted in the period 2011 to 2015 by the Observatory of the Social Debt of the Catholic University of Argentina, found that the issues of agenda of greatest public concern were the problems of insecurity, poverty, and education, which concentrated almost 60% of the problems mentioned by the interviewees.

The study included in a novel way an element not previously considered: to analyze the possible link between personal experiences on the consideration of the most relevant public issues. The findings showed that the first place, insecurity was the most mentioned problem in Argentina between the years of 2011 and 2013. Regarding experiential factors, mention of danger as the most important issue (PMI) is greater among people who reported having been robbed of physical violence and firearms or white in the past 12 months, reaching among the victims. A mention of 51.4% compared to 41.7% of non-victims in 2012; of 38.8% compared to 30.2% in 2013; of 45.7% compared to 44.1% in 2014; and 39.4% compared to 35.5% in 2015. On the other hand, insecurity remained a topic of considerable coverage in the mass media, (Casemeiro, 2017, p.11). The results of this study open a gap that allows broadening the understanding of the effects of the press incorporating new elements previously not empirically demonstrated.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Agenda Theory is employed now a day no just to point out the influence of mass media in the establishment of topics that citizens consider as the Most Important Problems (MIP), but also as an instrument through which the mass media can achieve influence in the government public agenda to get the attention of a particular social, economic, and political problem disregarded by power elites.

The Setting Agenda premise supports that media have a lot of authority to transfer to public opinion the relevance of the public discussion topics towards attention must be directed, however, not necessarily is translated to the immediate positioning, and automating attention to the government agenda. It has been proven that the mass media role in the confirmation to the public agenda is highly relevant, but is necessary to move forward to new stages where the possible existing bonds between public opinion and the attention to the public problems with government actions. Mass media are also the arenas where the struggle between different political, social, economic, religious, and educational actors compete with the press to visualize the problems from the point of the view that results profitable, as Garrud (2009, p. 61) would say, the way as a public question is built, sets the ways they are thought to condition and treat it... every general problem is a social construction.

The discoveries of the Agenda Setting Theory can be used as an important contribution to the analysis in the confirmation of topics, issues, or public affairs of the media agenda towards public opinion, as a previous process to the government agenda incorporation. This perspective can enrich the study of power struggles that occur in the process that a topic is presented as a problem in society and is pushed into the institutional agenda of governments. Both the Agenda Setting Theory and the study of public policies need to move to another phase, where it is shown how the concerns of the public opinion agenda escalate towards issues that the government assigns attention priority and seeks alternative solutions.

## REFERENCES

- Alonso Muñoz, L. y Casero Ripoles, Andreu (2016). La influencia del discurso sobre el cambio en la agenda de los medios. El caso de la plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca. *OBETS. Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 11 (1), 25-51. Doi: 10.14198/OBETS2016.11.1.02
- Aguilar Villanueva, L. F. (1993). *Problemas Públicos y Agenda de Gobierno*. México: Porrúa.
- Aguilar Villanueva, L. F. (1992). *El estudio de las políticas públicas*. México: Porrúa.
- Bryan, K. (1997). *Political Communication and Agenda Setting in Local Races*, Tesis doctoral no publicada, Universidad of Texas, Austin. USA.
- Canel Crespo, M. J. (1998). Los efectos de las campañas electorales. *Revista Comunicación y Sociedad*. 6 (1), 47-62.
- Casar, M. A. y Maldonado, Claudia (2008). "La formación de la agenda y procesos de toma de decisiones: una aproximación desde la ciencia política". *CIDE*. Recuperado de <http://repositorio-digital.cide.edu/handle/11651/815>
- Casemeiro, A. (2004). *Los medios y las elecciones. La Agenda Setting en la ciudad de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Educa.
- D'Adamo, O. y García Beadoux, V. (2003). ¿Distorsiona la prensa la percepción social que la opinión pública construye acerca del delito de la violencia y la inseguridad?, *Boletín de Psicología*, 90, 19-32. Recuperado de <http://www.uv.es/seoane/boletin/previos/N90-2.pdf>
- D'Adamo, O. & García Beadoux y Freidenberg, F. (2000). Efectos políticos de los medios de comunicación. Un análisis de la función del establecimiento de la agenda. *Psicología Política*, 20, 47-63. Recuperado de <http://www.uv.es/garzon/psicologia%20politica/N20-3.pdf>
- Dussailant, P. (2004). La Neutralidad como forma de encuadre en una campaña Electoral. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 17 (2), 42- 71. Recuperado de [http://www.unav.es/fcom/communication-society/es/resumen.php?art\\_id=80](http://www.unav.es/fcom/communication-society/es/resumen.php?art_id=80)
- Eyat, C. H. (1979). Time-Frame in Agenda Setting Research: A Study the Conceptual and Thodological Factors Effecting the Time Frame Context of Agenda Setting Process. Trabajo doctoral no publicado, Syracure University, NY: USA.
- Ghanem, S. (1996). *Media Coverage of Crimen and public opinion: an exploration of the second level of agenda setting*. Tesis doctoral no publicada. Universidad de Texas, Austin, USA.
- Gobbi, J. B. y Gilson R. (1996). The economy and second-level Agenda Setting: A time-series analysis of economic news and public opinion about the economy, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quartely*, 80, 73-90.
- Hester y Gibson (2003). The economy and second-level Agenda Setting: A time-series analysis of economic news and public opinion about the economy, *Journalis and Mass Communication Quartely*, 80, 73-90.
- Lang, Kurt; Lang, Gladys Engel (1966). The Mass Media and Votting, en Berelson, Bernard; Janowitz (ed).

- Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*. Glencoe, The Free Press.
- Lippman, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York, USA: Mcmillán.
- López-Escobar, E.; Llamas, J. P. y Mc Combs, M. (1996). Una dimensión social de los efectos de los medios de difusión: Agenda Setting y consenso, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 9 (1), 91-125. Recuperado de [http://www.unav.es/fcom/communication-society/es/articulo.php?art\\_id=289](http://www.unav.es/fcom/communication-society/es/articulo.php?art_id=289)
- McCombs, M. (1996). Influencia de las noticias sobre nuestra imagen del mundo, pp. 13-34. En Bryant, J. and Zillmann, D. (comps.) *Los efectos de los medios de comunicación. Investigaciones y teorías*, Barcelona, España: Paidós.
- McCombs, M. and Shaw, D. (1972). The Agenda Setting function of the mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176-187.
- McCombs, M. Eideidel, E., & Weaver David (1991). *Contemporary Public Opinion*, Nueva Jersey, USA: Lawrence Erl-baum Associates (LEA).
- Rubio Ferreres, J. M. (2009). Opinión pública y medios de comunicación. Teoría de la agenda setting, *Gazeta de Antropología*, 25 (1). Recuperado de <http://hdl.handle.net/10481/6843>
- Rubio García, R. (2014). Twitter y la teoría de la Agenda-Setting: Mensajes de la Opinión Pública Digital. *Estudios sobre el mensaje periodístico*, 20 (1). Recuperado de <http://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/ESMP/article/view/45230>
- Takeshita T. (1993). Agenda setting effects of the press in a Japanese Local Election. *Studies of Broadcasting*, 29, NHK, Japan.
- Tamayo M. y Carrillo, E. (2004). La agenda pública en España. *Revista Internacional de Sociología* (RIS) 62 (38), 35-59. Recuperado de <http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/ris.2004.i38.253>
- Weaver, D. (1977). Political issues and voter Need for Orientation. En Shaw, Donald; McCombs, Maxwell (ed) *The emergence of American Political Issues*, USA: West Publishing Company.
- Wimmer, R. y Dominick, J. (2001). *Introducción a la investigación de medios masivos de comunicación*. México: Thomson Learning.
- Wolf, M. (1991). *La investigación de la Comunicación de Masas*, México: Paidós.
- Zucker, H. (1978). The Variable Nature of Media Influence. En Brent, R. (ed.) *Communication Yearbook 2*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick-New Jersey, USA. pp. 225-240.