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Kensicki, L.J. (2000) *Second level agenda setting: A study of integration and progress*. Egyptian Journal of Public Opinion Research, 1(3), pp. 85-100.

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A Study of Integration and Progress

Published:

Kensicki, Linda Jean (2000). *Egyptian Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 1, (3), 85-100.

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Lessons from History

In 1922, Lippman argued that there is an essential difference between ‘the world outside and the pictures in our heads.’ In *Public Opinion*, he recalled an island that was inhabited by an English, French and German populace. Not knowing that the English and French were at war with the Germans, the island continued peacefully – until the unfortunate news arrived six weeks later. Thus, Lippman began his argument for the pseudo-environments we all live in. One that is fundamental for classifying, decoding and organizing information, but may not be a true reflection of our surroundings.

Lippman himself first purported that media play an integral role in negotiating the ‘reality’ of our outside world with our internal perspectives, opinions and thoughts. Indeed, it was this axiom that led McCombs and Shaw to examine Chapel Hill voters in what has become the theoretical basis for over three hundred agenda setting studies (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas, 2000). The entire breadth of research which followed their seminal piece *The Agenda – Setting Function of Mass Media*, essentially derived from an initial hypothesis which suggested that mass media effectively sets the agenda for political campaigns, thereby influencing the salience of attitudes toward political issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Since 1972, countless researchers have relentlessly attempted to dissect public opinion from media representation in areas outside of politics as well. This effort has resulted in a multitude of approaches and applications, which have been replicated numerous times over. Ghanem has correctly suggested that agenda setting is now poised to become an indisputable theory in the field of mass communications (1997). She references basic theoretical standards to bolster her argument: scope, parsimony, precision of prediction, and accuracy of explanation (Hage, 1972). Clearly, agenda

setting has already satisfied all four requirements and continues to strengthen its position with the continual coupling of core agenda setting principles with other mass communication theories. One of the more recent contributions to agenda setting has been the introduction of second level agenda setting, which has a fundamental partnership with framing research. However, before turning to this promising area of work, a brief review of the transformations that have taken place throughout agenda setting history should offer an unique perspective as to the profound impact second level agenda setting could have on the field of mass communications.

First Level Foundations

The groundbreaking agenda setting study by McCombs and Shaw made the direct claim that the media tell the public *what* to think about (1972). As McCombs stated, “agenda setting is a theory about the transfer of salience of elements in the mass media’s pictures of the world to the elements in the pictures in our heads” (1997, p.1). Through their examination of Chapel Hill voters, these scholars discovered that public salience of an issue often reflects the agenda put forth by media. This basic concept, at last empirically verified through research, generated a good deal of excitement in scholars who began to question long held beliefs of weak mass media effects. At about the same time as the Shaw and McCombs piece, Funkhouser released another agenda setting study – although at the time it was not yet labeled as such (1973). He analyzed specific public opinion issues, juxtaposed their ranking to their appearance in media and found the correlation between the public’s notion of issue importance and the amount of news coverage was a rather remarkable $+0.78$ (1973). An important revelation from this

study proved to be that even when an issue was showing improvement in reality, it could be simultaneously showing negative coverage in the media or vice versa (1973).

Apparently drawing somewhat upon Funkhouser's work, Gordon and Heath demonstrated that crime during the nineties was exaggerated in the media and later caused unwarranted fear in the public (1981). Like a majority of other agenda setting studies, these scholars found a relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda through a careful examination of news content and an analysis of the Gallup Poll's 'Most Important Problem' question. However, while many first level agenda setting studies have followed this format, a few others have attempted to examine the effect of media through other methodological means. For example, Iyengar, Peters and Kinder found strong agenda setting effects through laboratory experiments that showed manipulated television footage to willing participants (1982). However, agenda setting has also been found through personal questionnaires administered in the privacy of one's home (Smith, 1987).

It is important to note that a common theme throughout most first level agenda setting studies has been the focus on behavioral outcomes, mainly political voting choices. Studies of agenda setting and voting patterns have revealed that the actual vote is increasingly a determinant of issues received through the media and not due to party identification (Nie, Verba & Petrocik, 1976). "Thus, issues imply a link between the cognitive effects of the media and their behavioral consequences" (Takeshita, 1997, 21). First level agenda setting research has demonstrated that these behavioral consequences are predicated on exposure to media content, confirming the main doctrine of first level agenda setting research – the media does in fact tell the public *what* to think.

Second Level Insight

More recent research into agenda setting has demonstrated that the media not only tell the public *what* to think about but *how* to think about it – the fundamental principle of second level agenda setting. First level agenda setting views the transfer of salience from media to the public as largely the result of information about the objects in a story. However, second level agenda setting (or attribute agenda setting) views attributes as an additional important component of issue salience within the media and the public.

Understanding the trajectory from first level to second level agenda setting is made more simple when one examines the field from an abstract perspective. For example, it logically follows that in the abstract, an agenda is comprised of both objects and narratives of objects. First level agenda setting considers objects as the principle component in the transfer of salience from the media to the public. However, second level agenda setting recognizes that objects must have descriptors if they are to have any meaning to the public. Therefore, how an object is described – or the attributes of an object – are as important as the object itself.

Ghanem suggests that there are two major hypotheses about attribute salience (1997). The first being that how an issue is covered in the media, or the attributes emphasized, affects how the public thinks of that issue. The second hypothesis of second level agenda setting states that how an issue is covered in the media, or the attributes emphasized, affects the salience of that issue on the public agenda (1997). These basic tenets guide much of second level agenda setting research.

While second level agenda setting does have a different focus than its first level predecessor, the parallels between first and second level agenda setting have become

relatively clear. In both methods, the independent and the dependent variables do not differ. Both are comprised of a media agenda and a public agenda. The only variation between the two approaches is how one conceptualizes the variables (Ghanem, 1997). Whereas first level agenda setting views the independent variable of the media agenda as objects, second level agenda setting considers the independent variable of the media agenda as attributes. The same is true for the dependant variable as well. It still remains as the public agenda but in the first level it is in terms of issue salience and in the second level it is considered as the salience of the attributes. Another explanation of the symbiotic relationship between first and second level agenda setting comes from Kosicki who wrote that agenda setting itself is the 'shell of a topic' (1993). In this example, the shell itself can be evaluated in terms of first level agenda setting whereas the interior of a topic is where attribute agendas are located.

Media presentation of attributes is an important characteristic of agenda setting because it addresses the quantity of coverage and the qualities of an issue (Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber & Fan, 1998). In terms of public opinion change, attribute agenda setting recognizes that *how* a story is presented is as important as how many times a story is presented. Thus, attribute agenda setting suggests that by emphasizing certain attributes of an object, the media effectively create *how* the public actually views an issue (McCombs, 1994; McCombs & Evatt, 1995).

Reconsidering the Archives

Second level agenda setting was not firmly solidified until the mid to late nineties (McCombs, 1994; McCombs & Evatt, 1995; McCombs & Bell, 1996; McCombs & Estrada, 1997). However, as a testament to the current importance of agenda setting

theory, several studies originally formulated far before the creation of second level agenda setting were actually examining aspects of attributes rather than the objects themselves.

As McCombs himself has noted, a study released in 1981 that examined the 1976 presidential election is an excellent example of contemporary second level agenda setting research (McCombs, 1997). In this study, Weaver, Graber, McCombs and Eyal found a +.70 correlation between the agenda of attributes found in the *Chicago Tribune* and the agenda of attributes in the public's descriptions of Jimmy Carter and Jerry Ford (1981).

Further, Becker and McCombs examined a presidential primary and found strong correlations between the descriptions of candidates purported by New York voters and coverage of attributes in *Newsweek* (1978). Another example comes from Cohen who examined the public's perception concerning the construction of a manufactured lake in Indiana. He found that there was a +.71 correlation between the public's opinion of the lake construction and local newspaper coverage (1975). These early studies were not formulated as second level agenda setting studies but served to initiate what has become an ever-continuous tradition of constant transformation within in agenda setting research.

Recent Developments

More recent second level agenda setting effects have been found on issues as diverse as political candidates (Bryan 1997; Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas & McCombs, 1997), local environmental pollution (Maher, 1995), and crime (Ghanem, 1996). However, it was Takeshita and Mikami who first addressed both first

and second levels of agenda setting within one study (1995). At the first level, they found that an overwhelming 82% to 94% of news coverage during the 1993 Japanese general election focused on political reform. These scholars found a correlation between the salience of political reform and attentiveness to political news of +.24 for television and +.27 for newspapers. However, at the second level they found that the attributes of news coverage pertaining to political reform were imbalanced – system related aspects were referred to twice as much as ethics-related aspects of political reform. By deconstructing the object into two separate attributes, they found that ethics-related perspectives on political reform had almost no correlation with attentiveness to news (+.05 for television and +.09 for newspapers). Conversely, system-related aspects of political reform were positively correlated with attentiveness to the news (+.20 for television and +.26 for newspapers). Thus, in this study Takeshita and Mikami found evidence for two distinct levels of agenda setting effects (1995).

King approached his second level agenda setting study through an exhaustive content analysis of candidate coverage in Tapei contrasted against information from surveys of local voters (1997). He coded candidate images along three dimensions: personal attributes (including four political attributes of ability, experience, leadership, political style and six nonpolitical attributes including integrity and virtue, personality, appearance, intelligence, education and family, and speaking ability); partisan affiliation; and the candidates' position on specific issues and policies. King found that all of the candidates' attributes emphasized in the media were significantly correlated with the attributes perceived in the minds of Tapei voters. The correlations ranged from +.54 to +.71 (1997). While he found varying strengths of correlations in relation to the

substantive versus affective dimensions within agenda setting, his overall conclusions gave strong support to the presence of second level agenda setting within the media.

While extremely brief, these examples should provide some conceptual connections between framing research and agenda setting study. When discussing media frames, one is essentially explaining *how* media present an issue. Thus, second level agenda setting – or examining attributes of an issue in the media to discern *how* media is presenting an issue, and in turn, *how* the public perceives that issue – is intrinsically linked to framing. In fact, Takeshita explains that “agenda-setting research and framing research are exploring almost the same problem – that of the reality-definition function of the media” (1997).

The Framing Alliance

An Elusive Explication

News and information must be categorized if any meaningful comprehension and communication is to take place. News, like any other communication system, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings. Otherwise stated, “news and information has no intrinsic value unless embedded in a meaningful context which organizes and lends it coherence” (London, 1993, 1). The ‘meaningful context’ is the frame that shapes a news story. However, this is only one perspective of framing research and assembling a conclusive frame definition has become an increasingly complicated endeavor.

Perhaps the confusion surrounding any definition of framing comes from its mixed usage in common dialect. Indeed, to frame can be defined as the act of falsely incriminating someone for a crime as well as putting words together to ‘frame’ a reply.

However, a frame can also be defined as an object that holds a photograph on the wall or as the process of inclusion and exclusion within a given perspective. These widely diverse definitions in common language are nearly equaled in the framing definitions present within mass communication research.

Bateson (1972), an anthropologist-psychologist, is credited for creating the framing metaphor by Goffman, a sociologist, who is often noted as the founder of framing approaches. Thus, even the origins of framing research have become somewhat questionable. However, one of the more recent and popular definitions of framing comes from Gitlin. He defines frames as, “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse” (1980, p. 7). While this organization of meaning bestows frames a power to record events into assembled structures, it does not recognize the effect these frames have within society – an integral component of second level agenda setting. Rather, Gitlin’s framing definition does not fully recognize the powerful and pragmatic effect frames can have on issues within society.

Hertog and McLeod state that, “the frame used to interpret an event determines what available information is relevant” (1995, 4). This construction of power and relevance is integral in understanding the frame’s significance and alludes to the assimilation of frames by the receiver. Supporting this position, Entman suggests that frames increase the salience of particular aspects of a story by promoting a specific “problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (1993, 52). Entman goes on to state that audiences often ‘counterframe’ against dominant meanings within the text. Another complementary framing definition comes from Tankard et. al. who define frames as “the

central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration" (1991, 3).

When reviewed aggregately, these definitions allow for media's influence on how the public thinks of an issue and presumably their behavior toward that issue. However, while constructions of power are integral for understanding the significance of framing studies, they alone do not form the entirety of a frame definition.

One of the principle points of confusion in framing research has to do with the level of complexity allowed in the definition. Qualitative scholars searching for nuance and detailed explications of complicated social issues often find strictly quantitative work over-simplified and far too reductionist. However, framing research that does not place restrictive barriers the frames examined are often lost in a perplex conundrum of ambiguity. This fundamental theoretical divide is illustrated through the widely used definitions from Entman and Tankard. Entman speaks of frames as aspects of the object while Tankard views frames as central themes (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas, 2000). Borrowing a photographic metaphor from Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss and Ghanem, the former perspective examines what is included within the frame and the later views frames as the general focus (1991). This crucial distinction is indicative of the inconsistent and paradoxical history that has plagued framing studies (Smith, 1997). However, second level agenda setting research has the potential to offer a more parsimonious perspective to this field of contradictions.

A Promising Proposal

Iyengar and Simon have purported that the attributes examined in second level agenda setting are indeed frames (1993). McCombs, Lopez-Escobar and Llamas

logically draw the parallel between framing and second level agenda setting as well. These scholars state, “to frame is to ascribe defining attributes to an object; in other words, to define an agenda of attributes that characterizes the principal defining features of an object” (2000). Thus, in the realm of second level agenda setting, frames become attributes. The advantages of viewing frames as attributes are both its restrictive and expansive qualities, according to McCombs (1997). Thinking of a frame as an attribute is restrictive in that it brings organization to the continued disorder that has permeated the search for a conclusive frame definition. However, this definition is also expansive, according to McCombs, because it allows for various other agendas of attributes to be included in research that may have otherwise been overlooked in a strict singularly thematic frame study.

Agenda setting offers insight into framing research in that it does not merely describe frames. Rather, it draws conclusions from these descriptions. Ghanem asserts that framing and agenda setting are intrinsically and logically linked (1997). This scholar posits that the principle difference between framing studies and second level agenda setting is that the former are only concerned with the frames themselves while the later are focused on how those frames influence public opinion. Thus, frames and attributes can be used interchangeably in second level agenda setting studies. The principle difference is that second level agenda setting studies strive to discover how these frames affect the public.

Indeed how media issues are framed does lead to specific behavioral changes within the message receiver (Machina, 1990). Elster found that behavior can be influenced differently when presenting an issue in terms of losses as compared to presenting an issue in terms of gains (1990). Again, in reference to agenda setting, this is

a fundamental principle – *how* an issue is framed can influence *how* the issue is perceived by the public.

Clearly the contradictions found in framing studies are a fertile area for future academic research – and desperately needed in the field of mass communication theory. However, second level agenda setting offers a uniquely parsimonious perspective from which scholars can begin to dissect this complex issue. Future work that explores attributes as frames will do much to help solve upcoming issues as they arise in this exciting, but at times confusing, field of research. While framing has become inextricably linked to second level agenda setting, other research has revealed that these journalistic techniques do not affect every person in the same exact manner.

Points of Differentiation

Zhu and Boroson continue to purport homogeneous agenda setting effects between the public and the individual (1997). However, most recent work in agenda setting has recognized individual differences within public opinion. Even older agenda setting studies have found factors that differentiate responses within the public to media messages. For example, in 1976 Benton and Frazier suggested that higher educated people retain more information from news media than lower educated respondents, and thus are more susceptible to agenda setting effects. From this broad and rich history of agenda setting studies, the public's need for orientation and compelling arguments have emerged as important components in the second level agenda setting process.

Compelling Arguments

Compelling arguments posits that there is a link between attribute salience on the media agenda and object salience on the public agenda. Therefore, when specific attributes are emphasized in the media agenda, the level of object salience on the public agenda is affected. It is at this level that emphasis on attributes – or frames – is fully united with second level agenda setting. The ‘compelling arguments’ position suggests that the frames used by media have direct influence on the level of object salience the public has for an issue.

For example, Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber and Fan found that four frames in news coverage concerning the federal budget – non-confrontational talks, conflict and clashes, impasse, and crisis (1998). They demonstrated that the first two dimensions (non-confrontational talks and conflict and clashes) were compelling arguments in that they had strong correlation with the salience of the federal budget within the public.

Ghanem found that excessive crime coverage in the media generated high levels of fear in the public (1996). However, this was occurring at a time when crime was actually decreasing in the Texas community. After examining the media frames, Ghanem found that two frames in particular had a strong influence on public levels of fear – crime that the average person would feel threatened by (.78) and crime that occurred in Texas (.73). Obviously, these two frames were ‘compelling’ to Texas readers and thus, had a large agenda setting effect. As these examples indicate, what constitutes a compelling argument varies from issue to issue much like the public’s need for orientation.

Need for Orientation

Agenda setting research has discovered that the desire to be familiar with ones surroundings can influence the ability media have on altering the public's level of issue salience. Generally speaking, research has found that an increased need for orientation leads to increased media use, which leads to increased agenda setting effects (Takeshita, 1993; Weaver, 1991).

Weaver developed a typology of orientational need that divides the public among three categories (1991). Group one experiences high relevance and high uncertainty (thus a high need for orientation), group three has low relevance (thus, a low need for orientation), and group two has high relevance and low uncertainty (thus, a moderate need for orientation).

Other researchers have used the term 'obtrusiveness' instead of need for orientation. However, the resulting findings have proven the same. For example, Zucker found that media has the greatest influence on the public when an issue is non-obtrusive (the public has no direct experience with the issue) and when the issue has been on the media agenda for a short time (1978). This has interesting implications after McCombs' and Zhu's study that found the average duration of issues on the public agenda has become shorter over time (1995).

Ghanem has suggested that readers are drawn to stories for several affective attributes, such as proximity and human interest (1997). Mikami et. al. found that those who had a moderate interest in the environment showed the strongest agenda setting effects at the subissue level (1995). These scholars suggested that those who were highly interested already had fixed notions of environmental issues while those who were uninterested did not attend to media issues. Therefore, interest appears to play an important role in attribute agenda setting.

Back to the Future

Second level agenda setting has the potential to offer far more detail about the pictures in our heads that Lippman first explored in 1922 (Ghanem, 1997). Indeed, as these examples have illustrated, one of the principal strengths of this body of research is its ability to traverse several theoretical concepts in mass communication. McCombs has noted that gatekeeping and status conferral are incorporated into agenda setting studies (1997). Stemming from the work of Lazarsfeld and Merton, status conferral refers to the amount of personal increased salience one receives during media attention (1948). Gatekeeping is also becoming increasingly important to scholars who investigate how messages are selected and why these messages resonate with the public. Furthermore, stereotyping and image building clearly involve second level agenda setting in their examination of attributes.

It has also been suggested that cultivation analysis and the spiral of silence have a firm footing in agenda setting work in that both examine the cognitive effects of mass communication. Finally, as this paper has shown, framing has become inextricably linked with second level agenda setting. Indeed, the linkages between agenda setting and other mass communication theories offers as much excitement for new insight and promise for upcoming research areas now as it did nearly thirty years ago.

When agenda setting first arrived on the theoretical landscape, it helped bring mass communication theory out of a weak media effects tradition. Through today's cognitive effect research and agenda setting theory, recent studies have continued the search into understanding the public's motivations behind media attentiveness and any behavior resulting from their exposure. Indeed, the consequences of second level

agenda setting are far reaching. As McCombs stated, “framing has consequences for reasoning, attitudes and opinions, and even public behavior” (2000a). Second level agenda setting, coupled with other mass communication theories such as framing, has the potential to better answer exactly how powerful media’s influence is on the pictures inside the minds of the public – something that Lippman first proposed nearly eighty years ago.

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