

Media Agenda Setting of A Specific Political Event

By Lynda Lee Kaid, Kathy Hale
and Jo Ann Williams

► The inconclusive and inconsistent findings of research on the agenda setting function of the mass media have stimulated a search for more precision in the measurement of mass media effects on public priorities and issue saliencies. This study suggests a rationale for applying the broad concepts of agenda setting to specific political events.

The general theory of agenda setting, first tested empirically by McCombs and Shaw,¹ posits a direct relationship between the media's coverage of important issues and the public's judgment of the relative importance of these issues. McCombs and Shaw's initial test of this relationship during the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, N.C., indicated a strong correlation (+ .967) between the rank order of campaign issues in the media as determined by content analysis and the rank order of voters' independent judgments of the importance of the issues.²

The original test of agenda setting and most of the subsequent research in its tradition³ have dealt with extremely broad public issues over relatively long periods of time. The use of extremely broad categories of issues may be an Achilles Heel of agenda setting since, as Murdoch notes, more specific categories seem to have decreased the correlations between media and public agendas.⁴ Narrowing the focus of agenda setting to information about a specific political event at one point in time should provide a more rigorous test. Such nar-

rowing limits intervening variables which might affect cognitions over time. If the media have an agenda setting effect, independent of inter- and intrapersonal variables, the effect should be apparent in this more controlled context.

The use of a specific political event, in this case a local visit and speech by the President of the United States, requires a somewhat more microcosmic view of agenda setting than that found in most studies. This study sought to determine the effect of media coverage on audience knowledge *about* the event, and in this sense is similar to what McCombs calls the study of "attributes" of an issue.⁵ Cohen's study of an environmental issue⁶ and Benton and Frazier's study of levels of information holding about the economy⁷ are examples of such research but are not sufficiently limited in time to provide a precise test.

On the other hand, McCombs, Becker and Weaver have argued that *time* itself may be an important prerequisite for agenda setting. They suggest that a period of several months may be neces-

¹ Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Function of the Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36: 176-87 (1972).

² McCombs and Shaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-1.

³ Maxwell McCombs, "A Comparison of Intra-Personal and Inter-Personal Agendas of Public Issues," Paper presented to the International Communication Association Convention, New Orleans, 1974; Leonard Tipton, R.D. Haney and J.R. Baschert, "Media Agenda Setting in City and State Election Campaigns," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 52:15-22 (1975); David H. Weaver, Maxwell McCombs, and Charles Spellman, "Watergate and the Media: A Case Study of Agenda-Setting," *American Politics Quarterly*, 3:458-72 (1975); Charles Atkin and Gary Heald, "The Impact of Political Advertising on Knowledge, Agenda and Affect," Paper presented to the American Association for Public Opinion Research Convention, Chicago, 1975; Donald Shaw and Thomas Bowers, "Learning from Commercials: The Influence of TV Advertising on the Voter Political Agenda," Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism Convention, Fort Collins, Colo., 1973; and Thomas A. Bowers, "Newspaper Political Advertising and the Agenda-Setting Function," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 50:552-6 (1973).

⁴ Johnny Murdoch, "The Agenda-Setting Function: A Critical Review," Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Convention, Houston, 1975, p. 10.

⁵ Maxwell McCombs, "Agenda-Setting Research: A Bibliographic Essay," *Political Communication Review*, 1:1-7 (Summer, 1976).

⁶ David Cohen, "A Report on a Non-Election Agenda-Setting Study," Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism Convention, Ottawa, Canada, 1975.

⁷ Marc Benton and P. Jean Frazier, "The Agenda Setting Function of the Mass Media at Three Levels of Information Holding," *Communication Research*, 3:261-74 (1976).

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sary for items to move from the media agenda to the public's agenda.⁸ If correct, this would seem to negate the possible effects of agenda setting for specific events. They do admit, however, that some major events move very rapidly onto everyone's agenda. The event of focus in this study should have been such a fast-moving event in the local area where it occurred, and therefore, be subject to the operation of agenda setting. The following hypotheses were tested:

H₁ There will be a significant correlation among the agendas of issues as covered by the various media of radio, television and newspapers.

H₂ There will be a significant correlation between the agenda of issues stressed by the media coverage of an event and the agenda of issues recalled by the public.

Methodology

The event which provided the data for this study was the campaign visit of President Gerald R. Ford to Oklahoma City on Oct. 23, 1974. The trip was one of many he made throughout the country during October in an attempt to increase support for Republican candidates in the fall elections. Because it was the first time Ford had visited the area since he became President, his midday speech and the preceding activities were an important event locally.

For this study, coverage of the event in newspapers and on radio and television was monitored and analyzed. All stories were coded and analyzed by a panel of judges to determine the relative amount of coverage given to each issue included in the media accounts of the event. An issue was coded if it was mentioned at least once in the story. Number of mentions per issue was the sole criterion; no weighting was given to other factors. Seven categories were

⁸ Maxwell McCombs, Lee Becker and David H. Weaver, "Measuring the Cumulative Agenda-Setting Influence of the Mass Media," Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Convention, Houston, 1975.

⁹ Media coverage was coded by graduate students in a mass communications research seminar. The coefficient of inter-coder reliability was +.92.

then formulated, and an agenda consisting of the rank-order of issues stressed by the media as a whole and by each separate medium was compiled.⁹

Stories from the Oct. 24 editions of four newspapers were content analyzed in this fashion: the Oklahoma City daily with the highest circulation, the University of Oklahoma daily newspaper, the New York Times (available and widely read in the area) and a small local newspaper carrying the Associated Press report of the event. The news on five radio stations and two major television stations was also analyzed.

In addition, 166 subjects were interviewed by telephone in the 72-hour period immediately following the event. A random sample of numbers was drawn from the Oklahoma City area, and trained student interviewers were used. Respondents were asked the questions "From which sources did you receive information about the event—newspapers, radio, television and/or other people?" and "From which medium did you receive most of your information concerning the event?" An issue agenda for these respondents was compiled from answers to an open-ended question asking what issues the President had stressed in his speech. Respondents were also asked several other questions regarding the President's visit and other related questions and demographic information.

The data were analyzed using the Spearman rank-order correlation (corrected for ties). Correlations were calculated among media sources and between media issue agendas and respondent issue agendas.

Results and Discussion

Comparisons of Media. Content analysis yielded the following seven categories of information about the President's visit: 1) inflation, 2) support for Republican candidates, 3) peace, 4) the two-party system, 5) problems of the Cattle-men, 6) energy, and 7) the problem of a "veto-proof" congress. The correlation between newspapers and radio is low, .29; while moderate correlations

TABLE 1
Comparison of Media Agenda and
Public Agendas

Issue	Rank		
	Media	Public	Public with Multi- ple Sources
Support Republican Candidates	1	1	1
Inflation	3	2	3
Peace	2	6	4
Veto-Proof Congress	4	3	2
2-Party System	6	5	5
Problems of Cattle-men	5	4	6
Energy	7	7	6

(.64) exist between newspaper and television and between radio and television. Thus Hypothesis 1 was rejected. There was no significant correlation among the media.

Although the findings indicate that the media in general do not present a consistent view of the issues, there is no indication of a clear distinction between newspapers and broadcast media, as Tipton, Haney and Basehart report in their study of state and local election coverage.¹⁰ One issue which seems particularly inconsistent in the rankings is "peace." President Ford had commented briefly in his speech that if he were not given a supportive Congress, world peace might be in danger.¹¹ "Peace" was ranked second in emphasis by radio and television and fourth by newspapers.

Comparisons between Media Agendas and Public Issue Agendas. The combined media agenda, consisting of a summation of television, radio and newspaper agendas, correlated with the agenda of issues recalled by the public at .64, a moderate correlation but not significant at .05. Thus, the second hypothesis, that a sig-

nificant correlation would exist, was also rejected. Table 1 provides the rank order of issues for both the media and public agendas.

Since exactly half (n=83) of the sample received information about the event from more than one medium, it seemed worthwhile to compare the issue agenda of this group (also contained in Table 1) with the agenda of items derived from the analysis of media coverage. These agendas correlated at .79 (p<.05), indicating that respondents who were exposed to more than one medium were more likely to recall the issues stressed by the media.

A further breakdown of the sample allowed a comparison of the issue agenda of those who got *most* of their information from a specific medium with the agenda of issues stressed by that medium. Although fairly consistent, such correlations were only moderate. The television issue agenda correlated with the public issue agenda at .53 for respondents (n=77) who cited television as their primary source of event information. The radio agenda correlation with the public issue agenda for radio listeners (n=20) was .55 and the corresponding correlation for newspapers (n=59) was .62. The correlation between those getting most of their information from newspapers and the major Oklahoma City newspaper alone was slightly higher at .69. None of these correlations is significant at .05.

Although all agendas agree on the issue of first rank (support for Republican candidates), the rankings of the "peace" issue are again highly discrepant. This issue is second in emphasis on the composite media agenda, and sixth among issues recalled by respondents. The discrepancy between the rankings of this issue in the media and public agendas appears to indicate more clearly than any other issue that the public's agenda was not set by the media. Even though the media stressed this point and

¹⁰Tipton, Haney and Basehart, *op. cit.*

¹¹Lynda Lee Kaid, Craig Corgan and Phil Clappitt, "Perceptions of a Political Campaign Event: Media vs. Personal Viewing," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 20:303-12 (1976).

it appeared in the newspaper headlines and as the lead story in coverage by most of the electronic media, the public did not seem to be influenced by it.

This unsuccessful media agenda setting may be explained by the media's prior publicity of the event. The purpose of the President's trip, according to prior media reports, was to support Republican candidates, an issue which was number one on both media and public agenda. The public, therefore, may have *already had their agendas set*. They may have been so conditioned to believe that the President's visit was to campaign for Republican candidates that they failed to adjust to new cues.

Evidence for the agenda setting function of the mass media in specific event situations is questionable from the present results. Certainly, no wide-spread support for the operation of the theory in this more controlled context can be claimed, though correlations are moderate.

Perceived Need for Minority Ownership of Radio Stations

By Stuart H. Surlin

► Systematic analysis of license renewal applications for predominately white-owned, black-oriented radio stations uncovers many shortcomings in ascertain-

¹ Stuart H. Surlin, "Ascertainment of Community Needs by Black-Oriented Radio Stations," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 16:421-9 (Fall 1972); Stuart H. Surlin, "Black-Oriented Radio's Service to the Community," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 50:556-60 (Autumn 1973); Stuart H. Surlin, "Broadcasters' Misperceptions of Black Community Needs," *Journal of Black Studies*, 4:185-93 (December 1973).

² Bernard E. Garnett, *How Soulful is "Soul" Radio?* (Nashville: Race Relations Information Center, 1970); Stuart H. Surlin, "Black-Oriented Radio: Programming to a Perceived Audience," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 16:289-98 (Summer 1972).

³ Orville C. Walker, Jr. and William Rudelius, "Ascertaining Programming Needs of 'Voiceless' Community Groups," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 20:89-99 (Winter 1976).

⁴ Milan D. Meeske, "Black Ownership of Broadcast Stations: An FCC Licensing Problem," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 20:261-71 (Spring 1976).

⁵ See: *Broadcasting Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Broadcasting Publications, Inc., 1976).

ment procedures, local need identification and programming designed to meet local needs.¹ Likewise, entertainment programming on white-owned, black-oriented radio has also been found to be narrow and stereotyped.²

Attempts are currently being made to involve the relatively "invisible" and "voiceless" minority groups, (above and beyond blacks, low educated and low social class) such as the physically disabled, the elderly, runaway teenagers, etc., so that they can become more involved in the radio programming decision-making process.³ The logical extension of radio station programming involvement is "ownership." The owners of radio stations do have the final word in programming, irrespective of the types and numbers of other people they contact for need and programming ideas.

The "ownership" issue has become a growing concern of the broadcasting industry. Recent court decisions have put the Federal Communications Commission on notice that minority ownership should be a consideration in license application and challenge cases.⁴ While the monied interests of the broadcasting industry are growing uneasy over the minority-ownership issue, the general public has not been surveyed on this issue.

The study reported here attempts to document the attitudes of the public, especially the black, lower educated, and powerless alienated sub-groups of the public, concerning the need for minority-ownership of minority programming radio stations. Blacks and less educated groups of individuals are the major "voiceless" groups in our society when one considers radio station ownership relative to each subgroup's size.⁵ The psychological results of this "voiceless" status may result in a "fatalistic" outlook on life.

Powerless-alienation, or fatalism, is defined as the perceived inability of an individual to control his own destiny. Re-

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