

1 Influencing Public Opinion

The American humorist Will Rogers was fond of prefacing his sardonic political observations with the comment, ‘All I know is just what I read in the newspapers.’ This comment is a succinct summary about most of the knowledge and information that each of us possesses about public affairs because most of the issues and concerns that engage our attention are not amenable to direct personal experience. As Walter Lippmann long ago noted in *Public Opinion*, ‘The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.’¹ In Will Rogers’s and Walter Lippmann’s day, the daily newspaper was the principal source of information about public affairs. Today we also have television and an expanding panoply of new communication technologies, but the central point is the same. For nearly all of the concerns on the public agenda, citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists’ reports about these events and situations.

A similar, parsimonious description of our situation vis-à-vis the news media is captured in sociologist Robert Park’s venerable phrase, the signal function of the news.² The daily news alerts us to the latest events and changes in the larger environment beyond our immediate experience. But newspapers and television news, even the tightly edited pages of a tabloid newspaper or internet web site, do considerably more than signal the existence of major events and issues. Through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda-setting role of the news media.

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Newspapers communicate a host of cues about the relative salience of the topics on their daily agenda. The lead story on page 1, front page versus inside page, the size of the headline, and even the length of a story all communicate the salience of topics on the news agenda. There are analogous cues on web sites. The television news agenda has a more limited capacity, so even a mention on the evening television news is a strong signal about the high salience of a topic. Additional cues are provided by its placement in the broadcast and by the amount of time spent on the story. For all the news media, the repetition of a topic day after day is the most powerful message of all about its importance.

The public uses these salience cues from the media to organize their own agendas and decide which issues are most important. Over time, the issues emphasized in news reports become the issues regarded as most important among the public. The agenda of the news media becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public. In other words, the news media set the public agenda. Establishing this salience among the public, placing an issue or topic on the public agenda so that it becomes the focus of public attention and thought – and, possibly, action – is the initial stage in the formation of public opinion.

Discussion of public opinion usually centres on the distribution of opinions, how many are for, how many are against, and how many are undecided. That is why the news media and many in their audiences are so fascinated with public opinion polls, especially during political campaigns. But before we consider the distribution of opinions, we need to know which topics are at the centre of public opinion. People have opinions on many things, but only a few topics really matter to them. The agenda-setting role of the news media is their influence on the salience of an issue, an influence on whether any significant number of people really regard it as worthwhile to hold an opinion about that issue. While many issues compete for public attention, only a few are successful in doing so, and the news media exert significant influence on our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This is not a deliberate, premeditated influence – as in the expression ‘to have an agenda’ – but rather an inadvertent influence resulting from the necessity of the news media to select and highlight a few topics in their reports as the most salient news of the moment.

This distinction between the influence of the news media on the salience of issues and on specific opinions about these issues is summed up in Bernard Cohen’s observation that the news media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but they are

stunningly successful in telling their audiences what to think about.³ In other words, the news media can set the agenda for public thought and discussion. Sometimes the media do more than this, and we will find it necessary in later chapters to expand on Cohen's cogent observation. But first let us consider in some detail the initial step in the formation of public opinion, capturing public attention.

Our pictures of the world

Walter Lippmann is the intellectual father of the idea now called, for short, agenda-setting. The opening chapter of his 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, is titled 'The World Outside and the Pictures in our Heads' and summarizes the agenda-setting idea even though Lippmann did not use that phrase. His thesis is that the news media, our windows to the vast world beyond direct experience, determine our cognitive maps of that world. Public opinion, argued Lippmann, responds not to the environment, but to the pseudo-environment constructed by the news media.

Still in print more than eighty years after its original publication, *Public Opinion* presents an intriguing array of anecdotal evidence to support its thesis. Lippmann, for example, describes a discussion in the United States Senate in which a tentative newspaper report of a military incursion on the Dalmatian coast becomes a factual crisis.⁴ He begins the book with a compelling story of 'an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived'. Only the arrival of the mail steamer more than six weeks after the outbreak of World War I alerted these friends that they were enemies.⁵ For Lippmann, who was writing in the 1920s, these are contemporary updates of Plato's Allegory of the Cave with which he prefaces the book. Paraphrasing Socrates, he noted 'how indirectly we know the environment in which nevertheless we live . . . but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself.'⁶

Contemporary empirical evidence

Empirical evidence about the agenda-setting role of the mass media now confirms and elaborates Lippmann's broad-brush observations. But this detailed picture about the formation of public opinion came much later. When *Public Opinion* was published in 1922, the first scientific investigations of mass communication influence on public

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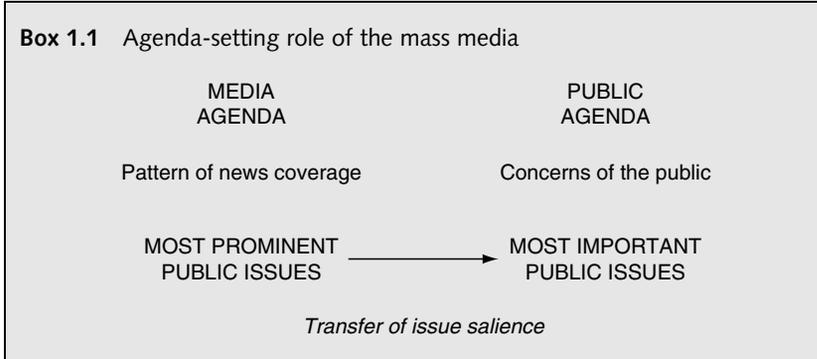
opinion were still more than a decade in the future. Publication of the first explicit investigation of the agenda-setting role of mass communication was exactly fifty years away.

Systematic analysis of mass communication's effects on public opinion, empirical research grounded in the precepts of scientific investigation, dates from the 1940 US presidential election, when sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University, in collaboration with pollster Elmo Roper, conducted seven rounds of interviews with voters in Erie County, Ohio.⁷ Contrary to both popular and scholarly expectations, these surveys and many subsequent investigations in other settings over the next twenty years found little evidence of mass communication effects on attitudes and opinions. Two decades after Erie County, Joseph Klapper's *The Effects of Mass Communication* declared that the law of minimal consequences prevailed.⁸

However, these early social science investigations during the 1940s and 1950s did find considerable evidence that people acquired information from the mass media even if they did not change their opinions. Voters did learn from the news. And from a journalistic perspective, questions about learning are more central than questions about persuasion. Phrases such as 'what people need to know' and 'the people's right to know' are rhetorical standards in journalism. Most journalists are concerned with informing. Persuasion is relegated to the editorial page, and, even there, informing remains central. Furthermore, even after the law of minimal consequences became the accepted conventional wisdom, there was a lingering suspicion among many social scientists that there were major media effects not yet explored or measured. The time was ripe for a paradigm shift in the examination of media effects, a shift from persuasion to an earlier point in the communication process, informing.

Against this background, two young professors at the University of North Carolina's School of Journalism launched a small investigation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, during the 1968 US presidential campaign. Their central hypothesis was that the mass media set the agenda of issues for a political campaign by influencing the salience of issues among voters. These two professors, Don Shaw and I, also coined a name for this hypothesized influence of mass communication. We called it 'agenda-setting'.⁹

Testing this agenda-setting hypothesis required the comparison of two sets of evidence: a description of the public agenda, the set of issues that were of the greatest concern to Chapel Hill voters; and a description of the issue agenda in the news media used by those voters. Illustrated in box 1.1, the central assertion of agenda-setting



theory is that those issues emphasized in the news come to be regarded over time as important by the public. In other words, the media agenda sets the public agenda. Contrary to the law of minimal consequences, this is a statement about a strong causal effect of mass communication on the public – the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda.

To determine the public agenda in Chapel Hill during the 1968 presidential election a survey was conducted among a sample of randomly selected undecided voters. Only undecided voters were interviewed because this new agenda-setting hypothesis went against the prevailing view of mass media effects. If this test in Chapel Hill failed to find agenda-setting effects under rather optimum conditions, voters who had not yet decided how to cast their presidential vote, there would be little reason to pursue the matter among the general public where longstanding psychological identification with a political party and the process of selective perception often blunted the effects of mass communication during election campaigns.

In the survey, these undecided voters were asked to name the key issues of the day as they saw matters, regardless of what the candidates might be saying. The issues named in the survey were ranked according to the percentage of voters naming each one to yield a description of the public agenda. Note that this rank ordering of the issues is considerably more precise than simply grouping sets of issues into those receiving high, moderate or low attention among the public.

The nine major news sources used by these voters were also collected and content analysed. This mix of media included five local and national newspapers, two television networks and two news magazines. The rank order of issues on the media agenda was

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determined by the number of news stories devoted to each issue in recent weeks. Although this was not the very first time that survey research had been combined with content analysis to assess the effects of specific media content, their tandem use to measure the effects of mass communication was exceedingly rare at that time.

Five issues dominated the media and public agendas during the 1968 US presidential campaign – foreign policy, law and order, economics, public welfare, and civil rights. There was a nearly perfect correspondence between the rankings of these issues by the Chapel Hill voters and their rankings based on their play in the news media during the previous twenty-five days. The degree of importance accorded these five issues by these voters closely paralleled their degree of prominence in the news. In other words, the salience of five key campaign issues among these undecided voters was virtually identical to the salience of these issues in the news coverage of recent weeks.

Moreover, the idea of powerful media effects expressed in the concept of agenda-setting was a better explanation for the salience of issues on the public agenda than was the concept of selective perception, which is a keystone in the idea of minimal mass media consequences.¹⁰ Since agenda-setting challenged the prevailing view at that time about mass media effects, the evidence for this statement needs to be examined in some detail.

Agenda-setting is not a return to a bullet theory or hypodermic theory of all-powerful media effects. Nor are members of the audience regarded as automatons waiting to be programmed by the news media. But agenda-setting does assign a central role to the news media in initiating items for the public agenda. Or, to paraphrase Lippmann, the information provided by the news media plays a key role in the construction of our pictures of reality. And, moreover, it is the total set of information provided by the news media that influences these pictures.

In contrast, the concept of selective perception locates the central influence within the individual and stratifies media content according to its compatibility with an individual's existing attitudes and opinions. From this perspective, it is assumed that individuals minimize their exposure to non-supportive information and maximize their exposure to supportive information. During an election, voters are expected to pay the most attention to those issues emphasized by their preferred political party.

Which does the public agenda more closely reflect? The total agenda of issues in the news, which is the outcome hypothesized by agenda-setting theory? Or the agenda of issues advanced by a voter's

preferred party, which is the outcome hypothesized by the theory of selective perception?

To answer these questions, those undecided voters who had a preference (albeit not yet a firm commitment to vote for a candidate) were separated into three groups, Democrats, Republicans, and supporters of George Wallace, a third party candidate in that election. For each of these three groups of voters, a pair of comparisons were made with the news coverage on the CBS television network: the issue agenda of that voter group compared with all the news coverage on CBS, and the issue agenda of the group compared with only the news on CBS originating with the group's preferred party and candidate. These pairs of comparisons for CBS were repeated for NBC, the *New York Times*, and a local daily newspaper. In sum, there were a dozen pairs of correlations to compare: three groups of voters times four news media. Which was the stronger correlation in each pair? The agenda-setting correlation comparing voters with all the news coverage, or the selective perception correlation comparing voters with only the news of their preferred party and candidate?

Box 1.2 The power of the press

The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about – an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins.

No major act of the American Congress, no foreign adventure, no act of diplomacy, no great social reform can succeed in the United States unless the press prepares the public mind. And when the press seizes a great issue to thrust onto the agenda of talk, it moves action on its own – the cause of the environment, the cause of civil rights, the liquidations of the war in Vietnam, and, as climax, the Watergate affair were all set on the agenda, in first instance, by the press.

Theodore White, *The Making of the President*

In the stream of the nation's capital, the *Washington Post* is very much like a whale; its smallest splashes rarely go unnoticed. No other newspaper dominates a city the way the *Post* dominates Washington. . . . There are complaints that the paper has lost energy since Benjamin C. Bradley retired as editor, in September of 1991, but nothing seems to have diminished the influence that the *Post* holds over the nation's political agenda; and nothing has diminished the paper's almost mystical importance to the city's permanent population of malcontents, leaders, and strivers.

The New Yorker (21 & 28 October 1996)

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Eight of the twelve comparisons favoured the agenda-setting hypothesis. There was no difference in one case, and only three comparisons favoured the selective perception hypothesis. A new perspective on powerful media effects had established a foothold.

The accumulated evidence

Since that modest beginning in Chapel Hill during the 1968 presidential election, there have been hundreds of empirical investigations of the agenda-setting influence of the news media.¹¹ The accumulated evidence for this influence on the general public in many different geographical and historical settings worldwide includes all the news media and dozens of public issues. This evidence also documents the time-order and causal links between the media and public agendas in finer detail. Here is a sampling of that evidence.

The 1972 US presidential election in Charlotte

To extend the evidence for agenda-setting beyond the narrow focus on undecided 1968 voters in Chapel Hill and their media sources during the early part of the fall election campaign, a representative sample of all voters in Charlotte, North Carolina, and their news media were examined three times during the summer and fall of 1972.¹² Two distinct phases were identified in election year agenda-setting by the news media. During the summer and early fall, the daily newspaper was the prime mover. With its greater capacity – scores of pages compared to half an hour for network television news – the *Charlotte Observer* influenced the public agenda during the early months. Television news did not. But in the final month of the campaign, there was little evidence of agenda-setting by either the local newspaper or the television networks.

In addition to documenting the agenda-setting influence of the local newspaper on the public, these observations across the summer and fall of that election campaign eliminated the rival hypothesis that the public agenda influenced the newspaper agenda. Whenever there are observations of the media agenda and the public agenda at two or more points over time, it is possible simultaneously to compare the cross-lag correlations measuring the strength of these two competing causal hypotheses. For example, the influence of the newspaper agenda at time one on the public agenda at time two can be compared with the influence of the public agenda at time one on the

newspaper agenda at time two. In Charlotte, the agenda-setting hypothesis prevailed.

The agenda of issues during the 1972 presidential campaign included three very personal concerns – the economy, drugs, and bussing to achieve racial integration of the public schools – and four issues that were more remote – the Watergate scandal, US relations with Russia and Red China, the environment, and Vietnam. The salience of all seven issues among the public was influenced by the pattern of news coverage in the local newspaper.

The 1976 US presidential election in three communities

An intensive look at an entire presidential election year followed in 1976 and again highlighted variations in the agenda-setting influence of the news media during different seasons of the year.¹³ To capture these variations, panels of voters were interviewed nine times from February through December in three very different settings: Lebanon, New Hampshire, a small town in the state where the first presidential primary to select the Democrat and Republican candidates for president is held each election year; Indianapolis, Indiana, a typical mid-sized American city; and Evanston, Illinois, a largely upscale suburb of Chicago. Simultaneously, the election coverage of the three national television networks and the local newspapers in these three sites was content analysed.

In all three communities the agenda-setting influence of both television and newspapers was greatest during the spring primaries, when voters were just beginning to tune in to the presidential campaign. A declining trend of media influence on the public agenda during the remainder of the year was particularly clear for the salience of seven relatively remote issues – foreign affairs, government credibility, crime, social problems, environment and energy, government spending and size, and race relations. The salience of more personal matters, such as economic issues, remained high for voters throughout the campaign regardless of their treatment by newspapers and television. Personal experience can be a more powerful teacher than the mass media when issues have a direct impact on people's lives.

Although these detailed examinations of the issues on the public agenda help us understand the variations in the agenda-setting influence of the news media, the specific issues change from election to election. So it is useful to have some kind of summary statistic that will allow us to compare the degree of agenda-setting taking place in different settings. The most common measure used by scholars exploring the agenda-setting role of the news media is the correlation

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statistic. This statistic precisely summarizes the degree of correspondence between the ranking of issues on the media agenda – which issue received the most news coverage, which issue the second most coverage, etc. – and the ranking of those same issues on the public agenda – which issue most members of the public regard as most important, which issue ranks second among the public, etc. The possible range of scores for the correlation statistic is from +1.0 (perfect correspondence) through 0 (no relationship at all) to –1.0 (a perfectly inverse relationship). Agenda-setting theory predicts a high positive correlation between the media agenda and the subsequent public agenda.

Using this correlation statistic to summarize a key finding from the intensive year-long look at the 1976 presidential election in three different communities, we find that, during the spring primaries when the agenda-setting influence of both television and newspapers was at its peak, the correlation between the national television agenda and the subsequent voter agenda was +0.63. That is a significant degree of influence. In contrast, the correlation between the agendas of the three local newspapers read by these voters and the voters' agenda of public issues was only +0.34. Nevertheless, this was the peak period for the newspapers. Although it is fashionable to attribute great influence to television in many aspects of life, do not rush to generalize this particular finding about the relative influence of television and newspapers. Chapter 3 will compare these two news media across many settings and find a more cautious picture that, in fact, tilts towards newspapers as the stronger agenda-setters on many occasions.

Finally, these extensive observations of the 1976 presidential campaign across the entire election year provide another opportunity to compare the core hypothesis of agenda-setting theory that the media agenda influences the public agenda with the competing causal hypothesis that the public agenda influences the media agenda. In comparison to the agenda-setting correlation of +0.63 noted above for national television, over the same time period the correlation between the public agenda and the subsequent national television agenda is only +0.22. The difference between the two is further amplified by comparison with the Rozelle–Campbell baseline, a statistic indicating the value to be expected by chance alone. In this instance the Rozelle–Campbell baseline is +0.37. The agenda-setting correlation is far above this baseline. Its rival is below the baseline.

For newspapers, the rather low agenda-setting correlation of +0.34 nevertheless compares quite favourably with the rival correlation of –0.08. The Rozelle–Campbell baseline in this instance is +0.08.

Again the agenda-setting correlation is far above this baseline, and its rival is below the baseline. In both of these instances, the evidence corroborates the causal influence of newspaper and television issue agendas on the public agenda.

These initial empirical efforts to map the agenda-setting role of the mass media encompassed three consecutive US presidential campaigns. Election settings were not selected because of any assumption that agenda-setting effects are limited to elections, but rather because national elections create a natural laboratory for the examination of media effects. During a national election there is a continuing massive barrage of messages on public issues and other aspects of politics. If these messages are to have any significant social effects, the effects must occur by election day.

In addition to these advantages for studying media effects, there is also an enduring tradition of scholarship on the role of mass communication in national elections that began with the seminal studies of Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, first in Erie County during the 1940 US presidential election and then in Elmira, New York, during the 1948 US presidential election. For all these reasons, the initial examinations of agenda-setting were conducted in election settings. But, as we shall see, the agenda-setting role of the mass media is limited neither to elections nor to the United States, nor even to the arena of political communication broadly defined. American presidential elections were just the starting point. The phenomenon of agenda-setting, a continuous and inadvertent by-product of the mass communication process, is found in both election and non-election settings, at both the national and local levels, in a wide array of geographical settings worldwide, and even for a broad array of agendas extending beyond political communication. However, for now we will focus on issue agendas, the best mapped domain of the agenda-setting role of the mass media.

National concern about civil rights

From 1954 to 1976, a 23-year span of time encompassing half a dozen presidential elections and all the years in between, the salience of the civil rights issue in the United States rose and fell with great regularity in response to news coverage.¹⁴ The percentage of Americans naming civil rights as 'the most important problem' facing the country ranged from 0 per cent to 52 per cent in the twenty-seven Gallup polls conducted during those three decades. When this continuously shifting salience of civil rights on the public agenda was compared with the news coverage on the front page of the *New York*

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Times for the month preceding each of the twenty-seven polls, the result was a robust correlation of +0.71. Even when the influence of news coverage in earlier months is removed, the correlation remains +0.71.

This is especially compelling evidence of the media's agenda-setting role across a lengthy period of time, a time-span encompassing numerous shifts both up and down in the salience of civil rights. Also note that the salience of the civil rights issue among the public primarily reflects the preceding month of news coverage, a relatively short-term response to the media agenda. Because the media agendas examined over this 23-year period were prior in time to the public agenda, this evidence on time-order further supports agenda-setting's causal assertion that the public agenda results, to a considerable degree, from the media agenda.

British and American concern about foreign affairs

Obviously, the news media are most people's primary source of information about foreign policy issues. In both the United Kingdom and the US, there is major evidence that the salience of foreign affairs regularly rises and falls in response to media attention.¹⁵ The salience of foreign affairs among the British public from 1990 to 2000 was significantly correlated (+0.54) with the number of foreign affairs articles in *The Times*. During an overlapping twenty-year period in the US, 1981–2000, the salience of foreign affairs among the American public was significantly correlated (+0.38) with the number of foreign affairs articles in the *New York Times*. Beyond the sheer number of articles in each newspaper, there is an additional impact on the public agenda by news stories reporting home country involvement.

Public opinion in Germany

Weekly comparisons of the public agenda and media agenda in Germany across the entire year of 1986 revealed that television news coverage had a significant impact on public concern about five diverse issues: an adequate energy supply, East–West relations, European politics, environmental protection, and defence.¹⁶

The energy-supply issue illustrates these agenda-setting effects. Early in 1986 this issue had low salience on both the news agenda and the public agenda. But a rapid rise in May on the news agenda was followed within a week by a similar rise on the public agenda. News coverage catapulted from fewer than a

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dozen mentions per week to over a hundred per week. Concern among the public about an adequate supply of energy, which had been around 15 per cent of the population, suddenly moved into the 25 to 30 per cent range. When news coverage subsequently declined, so did the size of the constituency expressing concern about Germany's energy supply.

During this same year there were no agenda-setting effects on eleven other issues. As noted previously, the public is not a collective automaton passively waiting to be programmed by the media. The pattern of media coverage for some issues resonates with the public. For other issues, there is no resonance.

Replication with other issues

Similar evidence about the variable impact of news coverage on the trends in public opinion comes from the individual analysis of eleven different issues in the United States during a 41-month period in the 1980s.¹⁷ In each of these eleven analyses, the media agenda is based on a rich mix of television, newspapers and news magazines. The public agenda is based on thirteen Gallup polls that asked Americans to name the most important problem facing the country. Two patterns are immediately evident in box 1.3. First, all except one of the correlations summarizing the match between the media agenda and the public agenda are positive. The median correspondence between these agendas is +0.45. The negative match for morality is easy to

Box 1.3 Comparisons of the trends in news coverage and concerns of the American public for eleven issues, 1983–6

Government performance	+0.87
Unemployment	+0.77
Inflation/cost of living	+0.71
Fear of war/nuclear disaster	+0.68
International problems	+0.48
Poverty	+0.45
Crime	+0.32
Economy	+0.25
Budget deficit	+0.20
Budget cuts	+0.14
Morality	-0.44

Source: Howard Eaton Jr, 'Agenda setting with bi-weekly data on content of three national media', *Journalism Quarterly*, 66 (1989), p. 946.

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explain because morality is a topic seldom broached in the news media.

For the other ten public issues during this period in the 1980s, all the correlations are positive. This suggests some degree of agenda-setting influence. However, a pattern of considerable variability in the strength of the association between the two agendas is also apparent. This calls our attention to factors other than media coverage that influence the public's perception of what are the most important issues of the day. The public mind is not a *tabula rasa* waiting to be written upon by the mass media, and chapters 3 and 4 will discuss a variety of psychological and sociological factors that are significant in the public's daily transactions with the mass media and the issues of the day. These factors can enhance or constrain the degree of mass media influence.

Public opinion in Louisville

All our examples of the agenda-setting influence of the news media examined to this point have been grounded in presidential elections or national portraits of public opinion. But there are also agenda-setting effects on local public issues. We begin with the long-term public opinion trends in an American city, trends that are analysed for the aggregate agenda as well as separately for the eight individual issues on that agenda.¹⁸ When the trends in public opinion from 1974 through 1981 in Louisville, Kentucky, were compared to the news coverage of the *Louisville Times*, the overall correlation between the public agenda and the news agenda was +0.65. Further analysis examined the ebb and flow of concern across these eight years for each of the eight issues. Significant agenda-setting effects were found for the top four issues on the news agenda: education, crime, the local environment, and local economic development.

Despite their influence on many issues, the news media are not all-powerful dictators of public opinion nor do they determine their own agenda with total professional detachment from the world about them. The issues ranking fifth and sixth on the *Louisville Times's* agenda – public recreation and health care, respectively – are examples of reverse agenda-setting, a situation where public concern sets the media agenda.

The lack of media omnipotence is also detailed in two other instances. Public concern about local government was independent of the trends in news coverage despite the fact that local government is one of the traditional staples of daily newspaper coverage. Perhaps heavy continuing coverage of local government – or any other topic,

for that matter – becomes a blur of white noise rather than a stream of information. Not only was public concern about local government immune to any agenda-setting influence of the press, the trend in news coverage was also immune to any reverse agenda-setting even though local government ranked sixth on the public agenda during those years.

Similarly, road maintenance, which ranked third on the public agenda, was all but ignored by the *Louisville Times*. Only twenty articles appeared in the newspaper during eight years, an average of one article about every four or five months. Again, there was no evidence of any agenda-setting influence in either direction.

Local public opinion in Spain

Unemployment and urban congestion, especially in the old quarter of the city during the weekends, topped the public agenda in Pamplona, Spain, during the spring of 1995.¹⁹ Comparisons of all six major concerns on the public agenda with local news coverage in the preceding fortnight found high degrees of correspondence. The match with the dominant local daily newspaper was +0.90; with the second Pamplona daily, +0.72; and with television news, +0.66.

A local election in Japan

Agenda-setting at the community level also occurred in a 1986 Japanese mayoral election.²⁰ Voters in Machida City, a municipality of 320,000 residents in the Tokyo metropolitan area, regarded welfare policies, urban facilities and local taxes as the three most important issues in the election. Comparison of the public agenda, which had seven issues in all, with the coverage of the four major newspapers serving Machida City yielded a modest, but significant, correlation of +0.39. Although there were no significant variations in the strength of this relationship among persons differing in age, sex or level of education, chapter 4 will take up a factor that does provide an explanation for this relatively low correlation.

Local elections in Argentina

This local focus was replicated in the 1997 legislative elections in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.²¹ Corruption was prominent on both the public and media agendas throughout the fall, always ranking first or second. But in September the correlation for the top

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four issues of the day was -0.20 between the public agenda and the combined issue agenda of five major Buenos Aires newspapers. However, as election day approached in October, the correspondence between these agendas for the top four issues soared to $+0.80$, an increase that suggests considerable learning from the news media in the closing weeks of the election campaign.²²

Additional evidence of significant agenda-setting effects in Argentina was found during the 1998 primary election held to select the presidential candidate for a major political coalition. For the six major issues of the day, the correspondence between the public agenda at the time of the election and the newspaper agenda of the previous month was $+0.60$. For television news, the correspondence was even higher, $+0.71$.²³

Cause and effect

The evidence reviewed here, plus many other field studies conducted around the world, corroborate a cause-and-effect relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. The initial necessary condition for demonstrating causality is a significant degree of correlation between the presumed cause and its effect. In line with this evidentiary requirement, there are substantial correlations between the media and public agendas in all of the analyses just reviewed as well as in hundreds of others.

A second necessary condition for demonstrating causality is time-order. The cause must precede the effect in time. Even the initial Chapel Hill study was careful to juxtapose the results of the public opinion poll measuring public concern about the issues of the day with the content of the news media in the weeks *preceding* the interviewing as well as with the days concurrent with the interviewing.²⁴ Evidence of the agenda-setting effects of the news media in the two subsequent US presidential elections was based on panel studies. There were two waves of interviewing and content analysis during June and October in Charlotte during the 1972 presidential election, plus a third wave of interviews immediately following the election.²⁵ During the 1976 presidential election there were nine waves of interviewing from February to December and content analyses of local newspapers and national television news across the entire year in three different communities.²⁶ As we have seen, both of these panel designs allowed detailed, sophisticated tests of the time-order involved in the relationship between the media and public agendas.

Other evidence of agenda-setting effects reviewed here from a variety of non-election settings also involves longitudinal research designs that allowed detailed, sophisticated tests of the time-order involved in the relationship between the media and public agendas. The examination of the civil rights issue in the US spanned twenty-three years.²⁷ There are eleven replications of this type of single-issue analysis based on a 41-month period during the 1980s,²⁸ and an intensive week-by-week examination of five individual issues in Germany during 1986.²⁹ Eight local issues were analysed, both in the aggregate and individually, in Louisville during an eight-year period.³⁰ There are many other longitudinal studies corroborating the time-order of the agenda-setting role of the media.

All of this evidence about agenda-setting effects is grounded in the 'real world' – public opinion surveys based on random samples of the public and content analyses of actual news media. This evidence illustrates agenda-setting effects in a wide variety of situations, and it is compelling for the very reason that it portrays public opinion in the real world. But these *réalité* portraits of public opinion are not the best evidence for the core proposition of agenda-setting theory that the media agenda influences – that is, has a causal influence on – the public agenda, because these measures of the media and public agendas are linked with numerous uncontrolled factors.

The best, most unequivocal evidence that the news media are the cause of these kinds of effects comes from controlled experiments in the laboratory, a setting where the theorized cause can be systematically manipulated, subjects randomly assigned to various versions of this manipulation, and systematic comparisons made among the outcomes. Evidence from laboratory experiments provides the third and final link in the chain of causal evidence that the media agenda influences the public agenda, demonstration of a direct functional relationship between the content of the media agenda and the response of the public to that agenda.

Changes in the salience of defence preparedness, pollution, arms control, civil rights, unemployment, and a number of other issues were produced in the laboratory among subjects who viewed versions of TV news programmes that had been edited to emphasize a particular public issue.³¹ A variety of controls ascertained that changes in the salience of the manipulated issue were, in fact, due to exposure to the news agenda. For example, in one experiment, subjects who viewed TV news programmes emphasizing defence preparedness were compared to subjects in a control group whose news programmes did not include defence preparedness. The change in the salience of this issue was significantly higher for the test subjects than

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for the subjects in the control group. In contrast, there were no significance differences between the two groups from before to after viewing the newscasts for seven other issues.

Bringing the cause-and-effect evidence of the laboratory up to date in terms of simulating actual media experience, two recent experiments documented the agenda-setting effects of online newspapers on personal agendas. One experiment found that the salience of racism as a public issue was significantly higher among all three groups of subjects exposed to various versions of an online newspaper discussing racism than among those subjects whose online newspaper did not contain a news report on racism.³² Another experiment compared the salience of international issues among readers of the print and online versions of the *New York Times*. Although there were stronger effects for the print version of the newspaper, subjects exposed to both versions were significantly different from a control group with no exposure to the *New York Times*. Opening the door to further exploration of the agenda-setting process, these experimenters also argued that ‘contemporary incarnations of Internet news are subtly, but consequentially, altering the way that the news media set the public’s agenda.’³³

While laboratory experiments like these are sometimes criticized as artificial situations, they provide vital complementary evidence for the agenda-setting role of the news media. A complete set of evidence for agenda-setting effects requires both the internal validity of experiments where the media and public agendas are tightly controlled and measured and the external validity of content analysis and survey research whose designs assure us that the findings can be generalized beyond the immediate observations at hand to larger settings in the real world.

Methodologically, the agenda-setting role of the mass media is well supported:

Methodological skill . . . has increased rapidly over the years. Initially tied to procedures involving rank-order correlations, it has expanded to include the most sophisticated structural equations modeling, as well as cross-sectional data and multi-wave panels. Researchers also have used time series analysis of aggregated public opinion measures, naturalistic experimental designs, and in-depth case studies to study agenda setting. Given the amount of activity surrounding agenda-setting research, we can conclude that it is one of the most vigorously pursued models in the field.³⁴

There is also methodological strength in the wide variety of substantive measures used to ascertain the agenda-setting effects of the

media. The early research – and even most of the research today – focuses on the cognitive effects of the mass media. Frequently, these effects are measured by responses to the question used by the Gallup Poll since the 1930s and now widely imitated by academic researchers and pollsters worldwide: ‘What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?’³⁵ As we shall see in subsequent chapters, this measure of agenda-setting effects among the public has been supplemented with questions that probe a wide range of behaviours, including conversations, holding opinions, voting, and taking a variety of other actions.

In terms of the media agenda, which is the cause of these effects, a major contribution of agenda-setting theory is that it makes an explicit connection between *specific* media content and its effects among the public. Explicating the basic assumption of quantitative content analysis,³⁶ agenda-setting theory specifies that the salience of this content can parsimoniously be measured in terms of its frequency of appearance.³⁷

Summing up

This is far from all the accumulated evidence that the news media can exercise an agenda-setting influence on the public, but it is a wide-ranging sample of that evidence. The examples presented here describe agenda-setting effects on a wide array of national and local issues, during elections and more quiescent political times, in a variety of national and local settings in the United States, Spain, Germany, Japan and Argentina, and from 1968 to the present.³⁸

There are, of course, a number of other significant influences that shape individual attitudes and public opinion. How we feel about a particular issue may be rooted in our personal experience, the general culture or our exposure to the mass media.³⁹ Trends in public opinion on an issue are shaped over time by new generations, external events and the mass media.⁴⁰ None the less, the general proposition supported by this accumulation of evidence about agenda-setting effects is that journalists do significantly influence their audience’s picture of the world.

For the most part, this agenda-setting influence is an inadvertent by-product of the necessity to focus on a few topics in the news each day. Television newscasters have a very limited capacity, and even newspapers with their dozens of pages have room for only a fraction of the news that is available each day. Even web sites with their huge

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capacity must organize their contents into a useful agenda, and each page of the site is highly constrained.

Regardless of the medium, a tight focus on a handful of issues conveys a strong message to the audience about what are the most important topics of the moment. Agenda-setting directs our attention to the early formative stages of public opinion when issues emerge and first engage public attention, a situation that confronts journalists with a strong ethical responsibility to select carefully the issues on their agenda.

In abstract theoretical terms, this chapter's examples of agenda-setting illustrate the transmission of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, agenda-setting as a theory about the transmission of salience is not limited to the influence of the mass media agenda on the public agenda or to an agenda of public issues. There are many agendas in contemporary society. Chapter 7, for example, reviews the transmission of salience between the president's agenda and the media agenda. In turn, the president's agenda is only one instance of what has come to be called the policy agenda. Beyond the various agendas that define the context in which public opinion takes shape, this idea about the transmission of salience has been applied to a variety of other settings. Chapter 9 discusses a few of these new, broader applications that extend agenda-setting theory beyond political communication. But first we will add further detail to our theoretical map of the causal influence that the media agenda has on the public agenda.