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## DEUTSCHMANN SCHOLARS ESSAY

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# New Directions in Agenda-Setting Theory and Research

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As agenda-setting theory moves toward its 50th anniversary, its productivity in the past and at present augurs a highly promising future. In this essay, the original theorists trace the development of agenda setting and identify seven

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distinct facets. They explore three of the seven facets—need for orientation, network agenda setting, and agendamelding—in greater detail because those are particularly active arenas of contemporary research. Grounded in more than 40 years of productive collaboration among the authors, this inaugural Deutschmann Scholars Essay offers numerous new ideas about recent trends in and future directions for agenda-setting theory and research. The three authors are all recipients of AEJMC's Paul J. Deutschmann Award for Excellence in Research recognizing a career of scholarly achievement. The Deutschmann scholars observed that this may well be the most original article they have ever written together.

As agenda-setting theory moves toward its 50th anniversary, its productivity in the past and at present augurs a highly promising future. Beginning with a tightly focused study in Chapel Hill of media effects on the salience of issues among the public, agenda setting has evolved into a broad theory with seven distinct facets:

- Basic agenda setting, the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda regarding the salience of issues, political figures and other *objects* of attention (the first level of agenda setting).
- Attribute agenda setting, the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda regarding the salience of the *attributes* of these *objects* (the second level of agenda setting).
- Network agenda setting, the impact of the *networked* media agenda of objects or attributes on the *networked* public agenda of object or attribute salience (the third level of agenda setting).
- Central to understanding the strength of agenda-setting effects is the concept of need for orientation, which details the psychology of each individual's encounter with the media. More recently, dual psychological paths linking media exposure and agenda-setting effects have been detailed.
- Consequences of agenda-setting effects at all three levels for attitudes, opinions, and behavior.
- Origins of the media agenda, which range from the prevailing cultural and ideological environment to news sources, the influence of the media on each other, the norms and routines of journalism, and the individual characteristics of journalists.
- Agendamelding<sup>1</sup>, the way we merge the civic agendas of the media and our valued reference communities with our personal views and experience to create a satisfying picture of the world.

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<sup>1</sup>Agendamelding is the unhyphenated construction we coined to describe the intimate, often unconscious process by which we borrow from a variety of agendas to find, or create, the personal communities in which we choose to live.

All of these facets are appropriate venues for research guided by agenda-setting theory, both now and in the future. The core concepts of agenda-setting theory are an object agenda, attribute agenda, and the transfer of salience between pairs of agendas. In the now vast research literature on agenda setting, there are many different *operational definitions* of these core concepts. The issue agendas of the news media and the public are the most dominant operational definitions, but far from the only ones. Contemporary research, which continues to build on these theoretical foundations, is characterized by two trends:

- a centrifugal trend expanding to domains beyond the original focus on public affairs;
- a centripetal trend of research, further explicating agenda-setting theory's core concepts.

Both of these trends will introduce new and diverse operational definitions to the research literature.

Three of the seven facets listed are discussed here in greater detail because they are particularly active theoretical arenas of contemporary research. These three facets are need for orientation, network agenda setting, and agendamelding.

### NEED FOR ORIENTATION AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AGENDA SETTING

The concept of need for orientation (NFO) was created more than 40 years ago at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in the early 1970s by Maxwell McCombs and David Weaver, and was first introduced to a wider academic audience in a paper presented at the April 1973 annual meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA) in Montreal, Canada (McCombs & Weaver, 1973). In that paper, the authors asserted on pages 2 and 3:

Explication of an agenda-setting function of the press must include the relevant social and personal characteristics that mediate such an effect. The traditional 'effects orientation' of communication research must be combined with the 'information-seeking' or 'uses and gratifications' approach. . . . the basic explanation of those effects lies at the psychological level, *within* the individual citizen. At the psychological level, our major theoretical assertion is that every individual has a need for orientation. Each individual feels some need to be familiar with his surroundings, both his physical and cognitive environment. In terms of Tolman's (1932) concept of cognitive mapping, each individual

will strive to 'map' his world, to fill in enough detail to orient himself, to intellectually find his way around.

McCombs and Weaver (1973) defined need for orientation as a combination of relevance and uncertainty, such that low levels of relevance led directly to low levels of NFO, a high level of relevance coupled with low uncertainty led to a moderate level of NFO, and a high level of relevance coupled with high uncertainty led to a high level of NFO. They operationally defined political relevance in terms of interest in, and discussion of, the 1972 presidential campaign and political uncertainty in terms of the consistency of voting record, strength of political party identification, and degree of certainty about choice of presidential candidate. They found strong support for their hypotheses that use of newspapers and television for political information would increase monotonically with levels of NFO and that the agenda-setting effect of newspapers would also increase in a linear pattern with levels of NFO. In a later book chapter, Weaver (1977) found support for NFO's impact on television agenda-setting effects as well as on newspaper agenda-setting effects in the 1972 U.S. presidential election.

Since that early 1972 election study, there have been a number of tests of NFO in a variety of settings, with somewhat different models, and mostly consistent support for it as a useful predictor of both frequency of news media use for political information and different levels of agenda-setting effects, especially the first level of issues or general topics.

In 1980, Weaver tested whether NFO was a stronger predictor of media exposure-effects relationships than more specific measures of gratifications. In this article, NFO was measured in terms of four groups based on a 2 by 2 typology of relevance and uncertainty for the first time (low relevance-low uncertainty, low relevance-high uncertainty, high relevance-low uncertainty, and high relevance-high uncertainty). The two middle groups were both considered to have "moderate" levels of NFO and thus equal status as predictors of news media use and agenda-setting effects, an assumption that was not fully supported in later studies. Weaver (1980) found that the more general measure of NFO had more influence as a contingent condition on relationships between media use and media effect than did specific gratifications measures, supporting Blumler's (1979) proposal that we need to use basic audience orientations to predict and explain media effects.

A careful explication and testing of the NFO concept by Matthes (2006) found that the original assumption by McCombs & Weaver (1973) that relevance precedes uncertainty appears to be valid – that is, when there is low relevance, NFO will be low, regardless of uncertainty level, but when there is high relevance, uncertainty does matter. The Matthes study also

found that another related concept, need for cognition, was a predictor of NFO along with relevance, and it suggested that there are at least three separate types of NFO – toward issues, facts, and journalistic evaluations.

In an experimental study, Chernov, Valenzuela, and McCombs (2011) compared the measures of NFO introduced by Weaver (1977) with those used by Matthes (2006), and found that both measures were correlated and equally strong predictors of first-level agenda-setting effects (the relative salience of issues), but the new measures of Matthes did not predict orientations toward facts or evaluations (second-level agenda-setting effects). Chernov et al. (2009, p. 14) conclude, “It might be that the first exposure to certain information leads to heightened awareness and subsequent perceived issue importance while only after repetitive exposure do the second-level agenda-setting effects start to build up.”

A more recent study by Camaj (2014), using survey data from Kosovo, distinguished between the two “moderate” NFO groups identified by Weaver (1980) and found that those who were high in relevance and low in uncertainty (the “moderate-active” group) were more likely than the other groups to use partisan news, in keeping with their tendency to be partisans (highly interested and low in uncertainty). This “moderate-active” group was also as likely to use independent media as the “high” NFO group, and both groups used independent media more frequently than the other “moderate” group (those she calls “moderate-passive” who were low on relevance and high on uncertainty) and the low NFO group that was low on both relevance and uncertainty. Camaj’s evidence suggests that the two “moderate” NFO groups are not equal as predictors of media use.

Another study by Camaj and Weaver (2013) using survey data from the 2008 U.S. presidential election found that NFO was a stronger predictor of attention to political news than sheer frequency of news media exposure, and that media attention was a better predictor of second-level agenda-setting effects (the salience of attributes of presidential candidates) than media exposure. Similar to the Chernov et al. 2009 study, this study found that NFO did not predict opinions regarding the salience of candidate attributes (a second-level agenda-setting effect). This finding is also consistent with results of a second study by Matthes (2008, p. 450), who concluded that, “NFO does predict that individuals will turn to news media in order to gather information, but it fails to predict which specific issue attributes will be chosen as orienting cues.”

And in another study of the 2008 U.S. presidential election relying on interviews with voters in Chapel Hill, NC, the site of the original 1968 agenda-setting study, Weaver et al. (2010) found that those voters with a higher level of NFO did tend to use vertical (traditional) news media, especially newspapers and news web sites, to deepen their knowledge of

issues. They also found that traditional media use was not strongly related to which attributes of the candidates were emphasized by voters, whereas more specialized and partisan (horizontal) media use was more strongly associated with the attributes that voters associated with candidates. Again, these findings seem consistent with those of other studies mentioned above that did not find NFO predicting second-level agenda-setting effects.

### Why Agenda Setting Occurs

In a comprehensive analysis of the psychology of agenda-setting effects, McCombs and Stroud (2014) conclude that NFO is only one part of the answer to the question of why agenda setting occurs. They review recent research that outlines a second way to answer the why question by describing the psychological processes that lead to agenda-setting effects, including accessibility and applicability. They conclude that those who use media more passively have lower levels of NFO than those actively using media, and those with “moderate-active” NFO (high relevance and low uncertainty) use partisan media more than those with a high level of NFO (high relevance and high uncertainty). Because of this pattern, they speculate that those with a moderate-active level of NFO may be motivated by directional goals and those with high NFO by accuracy goals. Those with low and moderate-passive (low relevance and high uncertainty) NFO tend to process mediated information passively and use the news media relatively infrequently, resulting in limited agenda-setting effects. Those with moderate-active NFO and high NFO engage in more active information seeking and are less susceptible to an accessibility (top of the mind) bias. Those with moderate-active NFO seek more partisan media outlets, resulting in high first- and second-level agenda-setting effects, whereas those with high NFO seek mainstream, less partisan, media, resulting in strong first-level (issue) agenda-setting effects, but only moderate second-level (attribute) effects.

To conclude, NFO and agenda-setting research have been elaborated and expanded since the studies of the early 1970s. It’s now clear that there are conceptual and practical benefits to expanding NFO to at least four different categories instead of the original three, and that the effects of NFO vary depending on which type of media are analyzed (mainstream/vertical vs. niche/horizontal) and which level (first or second) of agenda-setting effects is being predicted. It’s also becoming increasingly clear that agenda setting can occur from casual or passive exposure to media mainly through the accessibility process and also from more active information seeking and reasoning through the applicability process, and that the role of NFO in predicting these psychological processes differs depending on the type of media use and the kind of agenda-setting effects being predicted.

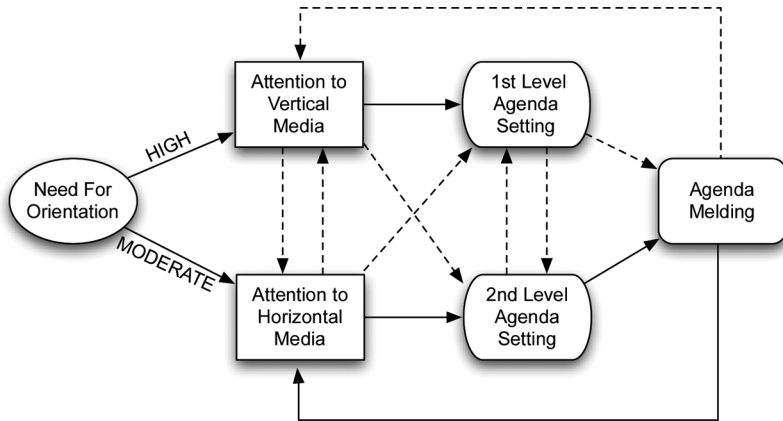


FIGURE 1 David H. Weaver's need for orientation model (March 2013).

Another way of summarizing the more active information-seeking relationships between NFO, media attention, agenda-setting effects and agendamelding is illustrated in a model of Need for Orientation proposed by Weaver. Displayed in Figure 1, this model assumes that high NFO (Need for Orientation) is more likely to lead to more attention to vertical rather than horizontal media, and that moderate-active NFO (high relevance and low uncertainty) is more likely to lead to more attention to horizontal media than to vertical (because uncertainty is lower than with the high NFO group). It also assumes that the most likely outcome from attention to vertical media is first-level (object) agenda setting, and the most likely outcome from attention to horizontal media is second-level (attribute) agenda setting, although attention to vertical media can result in some second-level agenda setting, and attention to horizontal media can result in some first-level agenda setting. Also, attention to vertical and to horizontal media are sometimes correlated, as are first-level and second-level agenda setting. Finally, this model assumes that agendamelding is more likely the result of second-level agenda setting than first-level agenda setting, and that agendamelding has more influence on attention to horizontal media than on attention to vertical media.

### A WORLD OF AGENDAS

Although there are seven distinct facets of agenda-setting theory, many regard agenda setting as the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public agenda. Although this facet of the theory has received the dominant attention from researchers over the years (Kim, Kim & Zhou, 2014),

even within this arena agenda setting has expanded to include many other channels of communication—political advertising, conversations, and social media—as well as content other than public issues that ranges from major news events to cultural topics (Kliger-Vilenchik, 2011; Bantimaroudis, Zyglidopoulos & Symeou, 2010). Among the hundreds of agenda-setting studies, there are many different *operational definitions* of agendas. The issue agendas of the news media and the public are the most prominent operational definitions, but far from the only ones.

With the widespread diffusion of social media, agenda-setting theory can be applied to a much wider array of channels and more easily to an array of content extending far beyond the traditional focus on public affairs. Scholars have the opportunity to examine the transfer of salience between many different kinds of agendas. Even within the dominant news media agenda/public agenda dyad, numerous operational definitions of these agendas are emerging. And as these emerging agendas are defined by wider ranges of content and communication channels, agenda setting as we have known it—the flow of the salience of the top issues of the moment from the news media to the public agenda—will be only one of numerous agenda-setting processes.

These new versions of the familiar media agenda/public agenda comparison are very different from most previous studies of agenda setting, research in which the most frequent starting point was the Gallup Poll's MIP question: "What is the most important problem facing this country today?" With its tight focus on the public issues that respondents nominated as "most important," this operational definition can appropriately be called the *prioritized agenda*. In other words, this agenda is a highly filtered version of what people found in the news and evaluated as most important. Although at any moment dozens of issues compete for attention, only a very small number garner a constituency of 10% or more among the public to rise to the top of public issue agenda. Ten per cent has been identified as the threshold for significant public attention (Neuman, 1990). For example, a review of 60 monthly Gallup Polls asking the MIP question from 2009 to 2013 found a range of 2 to 5 issues in these polls that met the criterion of 10%. The modal number of issues meeting this criterion in a poll was three.

### The Social Media Civic Conversation

The *prioritized agenda* is a stratified sample of the broader civic conversation on public affairs. A much larger sample of this civic conversation is the *social media conversation* taking place on Twitter, Facebook, blogs and numerous other channels. Of course, much of social media conversation is focused on personal interests and activities and has little to do with public affairs (Kelly, 2009). Nevertheless, a substantial record of both media and public discussion



of public affairs is now available for observation and analysis. In the 2012 presidential election, Vargo et al. (2014) compared the Twitter issue agendas of Romney and Obama supporters with the Twitter issue agendas of mainstream, conservative and liberal journalists. Across the entire year of 2012, Neuman et al. (2014) compared the discussion of 29 public issues in both traditional news media and social media—Twitter, blogs, and forums/discussion boards.

The *social media issue agenda* is far more expansive than the priority issue agendas defined by responses to the Gallup MIP question. And the vast quantity of the available data enables continuous monitoring of the civic conversation about public issues. However, despite its huge size, this stratum is still a limited sample of the civic conversation. In regard to the central hypothesis over the years in research on the priority agenda—the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public agenda—the social media issue agenda is simultaneously too inclusive and too limited. Both of these limitations will be discussed.

The agenda-setting processes involving the social media issue agenda extend beyond the relationship between the media and the public that has been at the center of agenda-setting research over the years. This expansion can be detailed in terms of the origins for three distinct subsets of the social media issue agenda.

Some of the messages that define the social media issue agenda originate in citizens' longstanding—and often passionate—interest in particular issues. Hot button issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and regulation of guns immediately come to mind. From time to time news events may trigger a spike in social media messages on such topics, but by and large the news media agenda play little part in stimulating citizens to converse about these topics on social media. In rare instances citizens directly observe events and subsequently comment about them on social media. This is mostly commentary about sports events or political events such as debates, but some aspects of citizen journalism also fit here.

Both of these first two subsets are a small portion of the messages defining the social media issue agenda, but they do introduce noise into our observations of the media/public relationship when we rely upon large data sets collected from the social media. In other words, the social media issue agenda is too inclusive, a *mélange* of messages with highly diverse origins.

A primary source of the messages that make up the public issue conversation on social media are the news events of the day, which call attention to a wide variety of topics and issues. Citizens then use the social media to comment, distribute information or seek additional information on these topics and issues (Meraz, 2013; Vargo et al., 2014). Increasingly, news organizations monitor this conversation with the result that high levels of social

media activity sometimes prompts continuing news coverage (Messner & Garrison, 2011; Wallsten, 2007).

The first two of the social message subsets just described are largely original contributions by the public to the social media issue agenda. The third is a broadening and redefinition of the traditional agenda-setting role of the news media. This latter social media issue agenda encompasses a much larger set of issues than the priority issue agenda. Sometimes this social media issue agenda is part of a two-stage agenda-setting process in which the news media initially stimulate the public agenda and subsequently the public agenda stimulates the news media agenda. In other words, there is a flow in both directions (Meraz, 2011a, 2011b).

The Acapulco typology (McCombs, 2014) identifies three research designs that have been used to study the agenda-setting process, designs that frequently have documented strong agenda-setting effects of the media priority issue agenda on the public priority issue agenda. Type I studies measure the correspondence between the salience of a set of issues on the media and public agendas. In the Chapel Hill study, this was five issues on the media and public priority issue agendas. The size of the social media issue agenda is much greater and a high degree of correspondence between two very large sets of issues is very unlikely. Type III and IV studies focus on the salience of individual issues. Because of the much greater number of individual issues that can be observed, there will be considerable variance in the salience of these issues in the news media. There also will be a wide range of variance in the salience of these issues on the social media agenda because of the numerous variables other than media coverage that result in internet activity by the public. In terms of the traditional agenda-setting hypothesis that the media agenda sets the public agenda, this wide variance in the salience of issues will attenuate this relationship.

The agenda-setting effects of the media on the public's perception of the priority issues of the day result from the high degree of redundancy in the media messages received by the public about the priority issues of the day. However, as our operational definitions of the media agenda expand beyond the handful of priority issues of the day, this redundancy is greatly reduced. As we consider larger and more inclusive issue agendas, the flow of information experienced by the public has very low levels of redundancy for many issues.

Atkinson et al.'s (2014) longitudinal study of 90 issues on the agendas of 12 major news organizations found a vast range in the salience of these issues. The most frequently covered topic on the media agenda, international organizations, averaged 687 articles per month. The issue that ranked 5 out of the 90 averaged 438 articles per month. At rank 15 the monthly average is 192; at rank 50, the average is 42; and at rank 90 the average is less than 2. The

statistical description of the salience of these 90 issues is very much a long-tailed distribution.

A factor analysis of the data for each of these 90 issues found that issue salience, the frequency with which an issue appears on the media agenda, is a key determinant of the emergence of a strong national agenda, that is, an agenda characterized by homogeneity across news media. Across these 90 analyses, the proportion of variance explained by the first factor—the extent of homogeneity across the news media—ranges from 0.12 to 0.93. This considerable variance in the redundancy of issues on the media agenda makes it clear that the topic matters considerably. Earlier research on priority agendas introduced a number of concepts that identify topics more susceptible to the agenda-setting influence of the news media and those that are less susceptible. These concepts include obtrusive and unobtrusive issues (Zucker, 1978) and abstract versus concrete issues (Yagade & Dozier, 1990). Recent attention to expanded agendas calls for renewed theoretical attention to the characteristics of issues that impact the public's response to media coverage of the topics.

Finally, a caveat and research question. A recent report by the American Association for Public Opinion Research's task force on the use of social media as a data source noted that the unit of analysis in social media data commonly is the message, not an individual (AAPOR, 2014). Do the measures of an issue's standing on the internet agenda based on the number of messages correspond to the frequencies in the Gallup MIP question about which issues are perceived by the public as the most important ones? This difference in the units of analysis needs careful scrutiny.

Even if there is little difference in the two approaches to measurement, the internet issue agenda remains an incomplete portrait of public opinion. Among the caveats raised by the AAPOR task force about the use of social media to determine public opinion is the continued existence of a digital divide that is especially pronounced among older citizens. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, as of 2013, 81% of the US adult population had internet access, and among those with access, only 73% used social media (Duggan & Smith, 2013). That leaves more than a third of all Americans out of the internet conversation, particularly older Americans. While nine in 10 of 18-29 year-olds use social media, fewer than half of the 65+ population do. For Twitter, a popular source of data because of the large volume of publicly available messages and relatively simple process of obtaining them (O'Connor et al., 2010), considerably less than a quarter of the US population uses this social media channel (Duggan & Smith, 2013).

Big data analyses of the social media issue agenda afford a continuous look at a major portion of public opinion on the issues of the day, but nevertheless are a limited outcropping of public opinion. Survey research will

continue to play a role in determining the issue agenda of interpersonal communication and even the agenda of those who remain silent until asked by an interviewer. Neuman et al. (2014) stated:

Big data methodologies do not represent a panacea or a substitute for carefully designed surveys, experiments, and content analyses. Instead they represent a complement, an additional resource for better understanding a fast-changing public sphere.

### A New Vantage Point – A Third Level of Agenda Setting

All of the agendas considered to this point have one thing in common. Theoretically and analytically, they treat objects and their attributes as separate and distinct disaggregated elements. Of course, in reality objects and their attributes are bundled together in media messages and in public thought and conversation. Lippmann's concept of the 'pictures in our heads' raises the question: To what extent are the media able to transfer the salience of an integrated picture?

Some psychologists and philosophers hold that people's mental representations operate pictorially, diagrammatically or cartographically. In other words, audiences map out objects and attributes as network-like pictures according to the interrelationships among these elements. From this perspective, the news media transfer the salience of relationships among a set of elements to the public. These sets could be the objects on the media or public agendas, the attributes on the media or public agendas, or a combination of objects and attributes. These sets of relationships among elements of the media and public agendas are the third level of agenda-setting (Guo, 2014).

The initial exploration of the extent to which the news media can transfer the salience of relationships among a set of elements to the public focused on the transfer of the salience of the relationships among a set of attributes in the media to the public. To afford a comparison with traditional attribute agenda setting, this pilot study conducted network analyses on datasets initially collected by Kim and McCombs (2007). Studying candidates for Texas governor and US Senator, Kim and McCombs found strong attribute agenda-setting effects in their analyses for each candidate separately and for all four candidates combined. Their analysis compared the frequency with which various attributes appeared in news stories and citizens' descriptions of the four candidates. Reanalysis from a network perspective examined the co-occurrence of attributes in the news stories and citizens' descriptions of the four candidates and found significant network agenda-setting effects consistent with the strength of the effects in the original study. For example, the overall correlation between the media and public attribute agendas in

Kim and McCombs (0.65) corresponds with the correlation (0.67) between the media and public network agendas (Guo & McCombs, 2011).

Another study examining the transfer of object salience compared the networked issue agenda of the U.S. news media, using the Project for Excellence in Journalism's extensive national samples, with the public's networked issue agenda measured by monthly national polls for 2007 through 2011. The correlations for each of these five years ranged from 0.65 to 0.87. Similar to the analysis of attribute agendas just discussed, the statistical results for network analysis and traditional correlation analysis are very similar (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014).

While it seems likely that the redundancy in the presentation of these relationships by the media is again key, the level of redundancy necessary to create these effects among the public is among the new research questions presented to scholars. Conceptually and methodologically distinct, this new, broader perspective on the bundling of agenda elements—the third level of agenda-setting—tests a comprehensive agenda-setting hypothesis that the salience of relationships on the media network issue agenda can be transferred to the public network issue agenda. The operational definitions of agendas continue to expand, affording scholars a rich terrain to explore.

### AGENDAMELDING AND CIVIC COMMUNITY BALANCE

If there is a media message and no audience, there is no agenda setting. Since the rediscovery of a powerful media in the 1960s and 1970s (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli & Shanahan, 1994; Noelle-Newmann, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), we have become increasingly aware of the role audiences play in selecting among media agendas. The available media in the marketplace have exploded. Some of us read newspapers on the Web, find or create groups of similar interest on Facebook or Twitter, and monitor news channels of many types throughout our day. Some of us, especially if we are older, still read daily newspapers and watch the television evening news. We have choices and we are using them to mix agenda messages into agenda communities that satisfy our individuality. We sample among media, such as network broadcasting, that reach for everyone. We draw from media, such as sports magazines, Websites, or blogs that fit our personal interests or the interests of others whom we value.

Network and local broadcast stations reach for the diversity of a large community as if shouting from the top of an Egyptian pyramid to a vast audience below. These vertical media usually cover and reflect the basic institutions of our society. By contrast magazines, cable television, Twitter and Facebook, among many others, usually connect us via valued special interest

and personal interest communities, as if we lived, horizontally, on one level of the pyramid. Of course, we do live in a mix of vertical, institutional community and valued personal community. We are not passive. We find or create our own communities by mixing information about vertical and horizontal communities to match our own experiences and preferences. Agendamelding is the social process by which we meld agendas from various sources, including other people, to create pictures of the world that fit our experiences and preferences. In this section, we use the word “agendamelding,” rather than “agenda melding” because the process is so intimate and personal that we are not aware we are doing it.

Agenda-setting correlations measure the level of agreement between a medium and audience. If there is no agreement on the basic issues, there cannot be a stable civic community unless police or military forces maintain order. If there is a stable society there is a modicum of agreement among leaders, institutions, and citizens. The civic agenda is an evolving set of priorities around which a social or political system exists. Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* argues that media connect us in complex modern society. From this point of view, media do not just cover community. An agenda community, in a way, *is* community. The media cover the communities where we live, work, and play. Agenda setting represents a sharing of saliences, and agendamelding describes the process by which we borrow from a variety of agendas to find, or create, the personal communities in which we choose to live.

### Elements of Agendamelding

What level of agenda agreement is needed for a functioning community? One might imagine that a perfect correlation between media and public of 1.00 would represent a rigid, controlled community. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party controlled the German national press agenda and imposed penalties on those caught attending to any alternative political agenda, such as the BBC. Today, one imagines that the agreement between media and public in North Korea, if it could be measured, would be very high. The 2011 Arab Spring in Egypt, enabled in part by social media, seems to have become stalled as significant segments of Egyptians cannot seem to agree on national priorities. The correlation between media and public needs to have some reasonable level of agreement.

In the third century B.C., the Greek mathematician Eratosthenes used the known distance between Alexandria and Cyrene to determine the angle of shadows made by the moving sun to compute the size of the earth. Drawing from Eratosthenes who triangulated distances and angles to compute physical measurements, we can use triangulation to compute social distances. And we can devise a formula to measure agendamelding.

There are some powerful forces that pull us together. For example, we feel a duty to vote as citizens at one level. We recognize the necessity of a collectivity. We also have many competing interests. These are alternative communities of interest, and any time spent with an alternative community necessarily takes the time away from the more general civic community. Earlier we called the civic community vertical because it represents all the people, and alternative communities horizontal because they pull us toward people or interests that are more personal. So the ingredients for melding agendas are 1) information about the civic community, 2) information about personal communities, and 3) our personal interests, experience and beliefs. Figure 2 shows these three elements.

How can we blend these three elements? We argue that the forces that urge us toward agendamelding can be stated in the following way:

**Agenda Community Attraction (ACA)**

= Vertical Media Agenda Setting Correlation (Squared)

+ Horizontal Media Agenda Setting (Squared) + Personal Preferences.

Vertical media agenda setting is the square of the level 1 agenda-setting correlation for the social system correlation being measured. Let’s say that the figure for a given social system is .80. The square of .80 is .64. Of course *at least* .20 (1.00 minus .80) is not accounted for by vertical media. In our formula, we allocate this “missing” correlation to horizontal media. The square of .20 is .04. Horizontal agenda setting measures the level of agreement between citizens and more personalized media sources, including other people and specialized media, such as magazines, Websites, or other desired media. So if we cannot measure horizontal media—which is a very broad array of sources indeed—we may, like Eratosthenes, estimate it. If we know

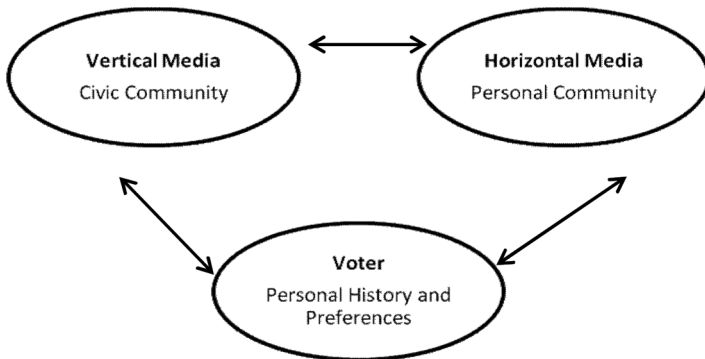


FIGURE 2 The elements of agendamelding.

two parts of the variance, .64 to vertical media and .04 to horizontal media, we can compute how much is personal.

If the audience-vertical media correlation were 1.00 and the audience-horizontal media correlation (if we could completely measure it) were 1.00, then we could predict audience issue saliences perfectly. But it is difficult to imagine that audiences are ever that passive. We do not make all our judgments on what media are saying, vertical or horizontal, and so we can take the vertical media correlation we do know, and make reasonable guesses about both horizontal media and audience preferences. A more exact description of personal is this:

$$\text{Personal Preferences} = 1.00 - \left[ (\text{AS1})^2 + (1 - \text{AS1})^2 \right]$$

The residual reflects the individual values and preferences not accounted for by our responses to vertical and horizontal media. Psychologists have long known that personal predispositions are an important part of our makeup. Our preferences and experiences influence the media we choose and the messages to which we give attention and what we take away from the message. The concept of need for orientation, which was discussed in the previous section of this essay, takes these individual differences into account. But our personal preferences are not fully engaged or satisfied by our responses to the media. Here we are able to look clearest at vertical media and estimate horizontal media and personal influences. We have used a political election here as a test but we theorize that a similar process occurs with all major choices we have to make.

In our hypothetical example, we use .64 (.80 squared) for the vertical issue correlation, leaving .04 (.20 squared) for the alternative “missing” mediated issue agenda. Adding .64 and .04 results in .68, leaving .32 for residual personal preferences not reflected in the media agendas. For an agenda community with a correlation of .80, therefore, the ACA formula would look like this:  $\text{ACA} = .64 + .04 + .32 = 1.00$ . This accounts for all the collective variances in the social/political system. The challenge will be to determine and measure the contribution of alternative horizontal communities. Of course, these results are hypothetical. Shortly, we will present some empirical results.

### Dynamics of Agendamelding and Civic Balance

One would expect that audiences would meld vertical and horizontal agendas with their own experiences differently across groups and over time. Figure 3 demonstrates the theoretical dynamics as the correlations vary between vertical and horizontal media in a given social system. These dynamics describe agendamelding and civic balance at any point in time,



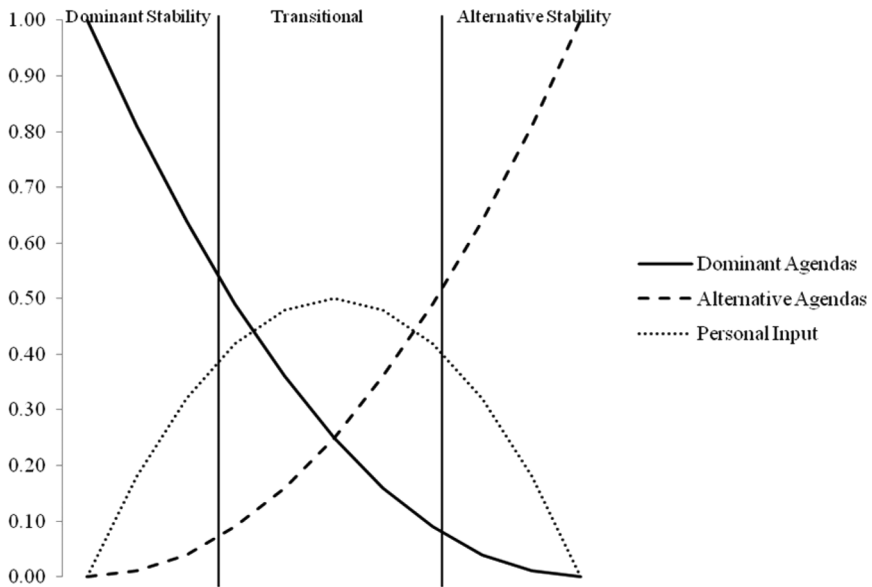


FIGURE 3 The dynamics of agendamelding and civic community balance.

the balance among vertical and horizontal media and personal preferences. As vertical media agendas go up and down, so do horizontal media and personal inputs.

The figure suggests there is a dynamic at work and that political/social systems are constantly in transition. On the left side of the model, we argue that systems with correlations that are reasonably high with vertical media suggest a relatively stable social system. But as the power of alternative community agendas rises, there is a transition period of instability. To the far right, stability reemerges but around an alternative community. Then the process continues with a new stability or a new shift to another alternative community. A community with an agenda setting vertical media correlation of .75 (squared, .56) and a horizontal media correlation of .25 (squared, .06) would represent a residual public involvement of .38. This seems like a stable civic balance among communities of media and public because there is a dominant civic thread with reasonable alternative agenda communities providing challenging views to the dominant vertical agenda. In terms of percentages, the contributions of the elements are 56% vertical, 6% horizontal, and 38% personal. Protecting these alternative community agendas is what the First Amendment is about. Of course this model remains to be tested with agenda-setting data across national states.

A Test of Agendamelding and Civic Balance

We conducted a short test of this model in our 2008 replication of the 1968 Chapel Hill study. In 1968, we content analyzed area media — newspapers, television, and other media — and conducted door-to-door interviews with a random sample of 100 voters (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In 2008, we interviewed 70 Chapel Hill voters in depth over the June-early August period in the summer of 2008 when voters finally settled on the candidates, Barack Obama for the Democrats and John McCain for the Republicans. We content analyzed newspapers and five network evening news programs, ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, and Fox News (here we are using television data only). These represented the vertical media. In the 2008 study, unlike 40 years earlier, we also content analyzed samples of horizontal broadcast radio and television hosts. Among these were Stephanie Miller, Rush Limbaugh, and Jon Stewart. This was our attempt to compare voters with at least a small sample of alternative news programs that represented alternative communities, primarily liberal or conservative. Of course we also asked voters about other ways they sought information, including other people, but we limit our analysis here to these broadcast hosts. So in this study we compare the melding of vertical and horizontal agendas by different groups of voters in the 2008 presidential election.

The first six columns of Table 1 demonstrate the correlations among all the voters, and then among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents with vertical and horizontal media. The voters of different parties did relate to the vertical and horizontal media differently. Table 1 shows that Republicans and Democrats related in a similar way to vertical media, and neither were linked very strongly to horizontal media. Independents fell below both

TABLE 1  
2008 Agendamelding, Actual and Theoretical

	<i>Actual</i>					<i>Theoretical</i>				<i>Personal Difference Actual vs. Theoretical</i>	
	<i>Vertical</i>		<i>Horizontal</i>		<i>Sums</i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Horizontal</i>		<i>Personal</i>	<i>Theoretical</i>	
	1	2	3	4	5 (2+4)	6	7	8	9	10	11
	AS	AS <sup>2</sup>	AS	AS <sup>2</sup>			AS	AS <sup>2</sup>	(2+8)		
All	.77	.60	-.07	.01	.61	.39	.23	.05	.65	.35	.04
Democrat	.79	.63	-.26	.07	.70	.30	.21	.04	.67	.33	.03
Republican	.75	.57	.19	.04	.61	.39	.25	.06	.63	.37	.02
Independent	.69	.47	.00	.00	.47	.53	.31	.10	.57	.43	.10

Note: The agenda setting correlations in columns 1 and 3 are partial correlations in which the influence of the other agenda (horizontal or vertical) has been partialled out.

Democrats and Republicans in their relationship to vertical media. Although not displayed in Table 1, we also compared the 41 men voters with 29 women voters in this study and found that they did not use vertical and horizontal media significantly differently, and we compared the 47 voters who were 40 or older with the 23 voters younger than 40 and found that older voters related somewhat more to vertical media and younger voters to horizontal media, perhaps reflecting changing media use habits. These are the results from an actual measure of the agendas of some alternative community news agendas.

We can compare these 2008 results, where we measured some horizontal media, with our ACA formula prediction. Columns 7–11 in Table 1 show the results expected with the estimated correlations of audience to the alternative communities. Column 11 shows the difference in personal inputs between the hypothesized ACA model and the actual data, and we see that the ACA formula underestimates the attraction of alternative communities. With both measured and theoretical calculations, there is evidence of agendamelding, as all voters did not use the vertical and horizontal/alternative media agendas the same way. Whatever made voters identify as Democrats, Republicans or Independents also seemed to lead them to mix media messages differently.

### Extending Agendamelding Studies

One might also speculate that the dynamics of agendamelding shift over time. For example, the young soldiers of the so-called greatest generation who fought in World War II were socialized in a period in which daily newspapers were powerful, along with local and network radio. These vertical media from the 1920s and 1930s did not confront the same level of horizontal media competition as they now do. That would suggest that the social system in the late 1930s and early 1940s was anchored in stability on the left side of our figure of the dynamics of agendamelding and civic balance. Times change, of course. Today we find a lack of consensus about the conflicts in which we are involved, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and potentially in Syria and other troubled spots in the world. This is not just true in the United States but also around the world where various religious or sectarian groups have challenged the institutional vertical agenda. Often social media provide routes of information, coordination, recruitment, and social support. The vertical agenda provides a flagpole around which citizens can gather, whether or not they agree on what to do about the issues. Vertical media present the big acts in a circus while the sideshows entice us to see the tallest man or fastest turtle.

If media agenda community is community, as we argue, then the lack of consensus around a civic agenda means there is a decentralization of

authority from the core toward the periphery. This seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. The evolution of social/political community civic balance does not seem to come directly from changing media technology but from how we are melding the emergent media agenda communities. There is a caution in this for us. More than at any time in history, we have the opportunity to find satisfying personal community, but also the opportunity to divert attention from the civic community that sustains us.

### CODA

As agenda-setting research approaches the half-century mark, there are exciting and challenging times ahead. In the words of that famous, albeit fictional, investigator Sherlock Holmes, “Come, Watson, come. . . The game is afoot.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Abbey Grange,” *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1904).

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