

Agenda-Setting Theory in Mass Communication: The Influence of Media on Issue Prioritization in Society

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Abstract

Agenda setting theory suggests that mass media has great power in determining issues that should be of public concern, by prioritizing certain topics and influencing how people view these issues. Along with the development of communication technology, especially the emergence of social media, the role of the media in shaping the public agenda has changed significantly. If previously traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers played a dominant role in determining important issues, now social media allows audiences to be more active in the distribution and agenda-forming process, which introduces a new dimension in mass communication. This study aims to explore the application of agenda setting theory in the context of traditional media and social media, and to identify how both influence the formation of public opinion on contemporary issues, such as the 2020 US Presidential Election and the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article uses a qualitative approach with a case study, where analysis is carried out on traditional media coverage and conversations on social media to observe the agenda setting patterns that emerged during the two major events. Using content and framing analysis, this study explores how issues reported by traditional media can be influenced or amplified by social media, as well as how the two types of media interact in shaping public perception and influencing public responses to events that occur. The findings of this study indicate that although

social media offers greater space for public participation, traditional mass media still have a major role in directing public attention to certain issues, although in some cases, social media can accelerate the process of changing the agenda. Thus, this article concludes that the agenda setting theory remains relevant in understanding mass communication in the digital era, although adjustments are needed to understand the dynamics that occur in social media which are faster, more interactive, and full of challenges.

Keywords: Agenda Setting, Mass Media, Social Media, Public Opinion, Framing, Mass Communication, Election, COVID-19 Pandemic.

Abstrak

Teori agenda setting mengemukakan bahwa media massa memiliki kekuatan besar dalam menentukan isu-isu yang harus menjadi perhatian publik, dengan memprioritaskan topik-topik tertentu dan mempengaruhi cara masyarakat memandang isu tersebut. Seiring dengan perkembangan teknologi komunikasi, terutama munculnya media sosial, peran media dalam membentuk agenda publik mengalami perubahan signifikan. Jika sebelumnya media tradisional seperti televisi, radio, dan surat kabar memegang peranan dominan dalam menentukan isu yang penting, kini media sosial memungkinkan audiens untuk lebih aktif dalam proses distribusi dan pembentukan agenda, yang memperkenalkan dimensi baru dalam komunikasi massa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali penerapan teori agenda setting dalam konteks media tradisional dan media sosial, serta mengidentifikasi bagaimana keduanya memengaruhi pembentukan opini publik pada isu-isu kontemporer, seperti Pemilihan Presiden AS 2020 dan pandemi COVID-19.

Artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan studi kasus, di mana analisis dilakukan terhadap pemberitaan media tradisional dan percakapan di media sosial untuk mengamati pola agenda setting yang muncul selama dua peristiwa besar tersebut. Dengan menggunakan analisis isi dan framing, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana isu-isu yang diberitakan oleh media tradisional dapat dipengaruhi atau diperkuat oleh media sosial, serta bagaimana kedua jenis media tersebut berinteraksi dalam membentuk persepsi publik dan memengaruhi respons masyarakat terhadap peristiwa yang terjadi. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun media sosial menawarkan ruang lebih besar bagi partisipasi publik, media massa tradisional tetap memiliki peran utama dalam mengarahkan perhatian masyarakat pada isu-isu tertentu, meskipun dalam beberapa kasus, media sosial bisa mempercepat proses perubahan agenda. Dengan demikian, artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa teori agenda setting tetap relevan dalam memahami komunikasi massa di era digital, meskipun perlu adanya penyesuaian untuk memahami dinamika yang terjadi di media sosial yang lebih cepat, interaktif, dan penuh tantangan.

Kata Kunci: Agenda Setting, Media Massa, Media Sosial, Opini Publik, Framing, Komunikasi Massa, Pemilu, Pandemi COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

Mass communication plays a vital role in shaping public perceptions of social reality. One of the theories that explains this relationship is the Agenda-Setting Theory, first proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. This theory posits that mass media do not

merely report events but also influence the public's prioritization of certain issues. In this context, the media act as "gatekeepers," determining which issues deserve attention and which are overlooked. By selecting and emphasizing specific topics, media outlets indirectly shape audiences' perceptions of what is considered important in social, political, economic, and cultural life.

With the advancement of technology—particularly the emergence of the internet and social media—the function of agenda setting has undergone a major transformation. Whereas traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio once held a dominant role in setting the public agenda, social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok now also contribute significantly to shaping and even modifying that agenda. The digital era offers greater space for the public to act as both producers and consumers of information (prosumers), accelerating the dissemination of content, shaping public opinion, and increasing the potential for rapid shifts in the focus of public attention.

However, these changes have not been entirely positive. Media fragmentation, the spread of disinformation, and the polarization of opinions present new challenges in understanding the function of agenda setting in the modern era. Audiences are now more prone to becoming trapped in echo chambers—information environments that reinforce their existing beliefs while ignoring opposing viewpoints. As a result, the media's role in constructing collective awareness has become increasingly complex, requiring more critical analytical approaches.

This phenomenon has been particularly evident in two major global events in recent years: the 2020 United States Presidential Election and the COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, mass media and social media played central roles in shaping public perception, prioritizing issues, and even influencing public behavior. The election highlighted how media could focus attention on specific issues such as the economy, the pandemic, and racial injustice, while the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the crucial role of media framing in guiding public responses to a global health threat.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to explore the application of Agenda-Setting Theory in both traditional and digital media contexts, focusing on these two major case studies. Furthermore, it seeks to examine the theory's relevance in understanding the dynamics of public opinion amid the rapidly evolving and increasingly challenging media landscape. In doing so, this study aspires to contribute to contemporary mass communication scholarship and deepen our understanding of the relationship between media, public issues, and societal behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory was first introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their seminal 1972 study, *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*. In this research, they analyzed the 1968 United States presidential election in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and found a strong correlation between the issues highlighted by the mass media and those perceived as important by the public. This finding indicates that media do not merely reflect reality but actively shape public perceptions of that reality.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) conceptualized two levels of agenda-setting:

First-Level Agenda Setting: Focuses on what to think about, i.e., how media influence the salience of issues in the public's mind.

Second-Level Agenda Setting: Introduced in later developments, this level emphasizes how to think about those issues, employing techniques such as framing and the emphasis of particular attributes (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997).

2. Framing and Agenda Building

Further theoretical developments by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) introduced the concepts of priming and framing:

Priming refers to the way media prepare the audience to evaluate political actors or events based on the frequency and emphasis of related issues.

Framing denotes how the media structure or "frame" an issue from a specific perspective to influence public interpretation.

In parallel, the agenda-building framework (Cobb & Elder, 1971) underscores that agenda-setting is not solely the media's domain; political actors, interest groups, and civil society also play a critical role in shaping media and public agendas.

3. The Evolution of Agenda Setting in the Digital Era

The advent of the internet and social media has significantly transformed the agenda-setting process. According to Tedesco (2007), digital media empower audiences not only to consume information but also to produce and disseminate it. This dual function complicates and diversifies agenda-setting dynamics.

Bennett and Iyengar (2008) argue that media fragmentation has enabled audiences to seek information aligned with their ideological preferences, thereby reinforcing polarization and forming echo chambers. Consequently, traditional media's gatekeeping power has diminished, while social media algorithms have become central in curating the information audiences encounter.

Shao and Guo (2017) observed that, although social media create space for alternative voices, dominant agendas are still often influenced by mainstream media. In many cases, social media amplify issues already raised by traditional outlets rather than setting entirely new agendas.

4. Empirical Studies on Elections and the Pandemic

In the context of electoral politics, Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011) found that contemporary political campaigns are heavily influenced by media logic, whereby politicians tailor their messages to meet media criteria for attention and coverage. Media not only determine which issues are newsworthy but also shape their framing and public reception.

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, research by Carvalho (2008) and Chong & Druckman (2007) demonstrates that media framing of public health issues significantly influences public compliance with health policies. How media portray the threat of the virus, the effectiveness of vaccines, or the credibility of governmental responses directly affects emotional reactions and behavioral outcomes.

Cinelli et al. (2020) highlighted that during the pandemic, misinformation spread rapidly on social media, posing substantial challenges to public agenda control amid a global crisis.

5. Summary

Based on the reviewed literature, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Traditional mass media play a fundamental role in shaping public perceptions of key societal issues.

The rise of digital and social media has democratized agenda-setting processes but has also introduced challenges such as information fragmentation and opinion polarization.

In both electoral contexts and public health crises, agenda-setting remains a critical mechanism for managing public opinion. However, new actors—such as social media users and digital platform algorithms—now play increasingly significant roles.

Therefore, it is imperative to continually update and adapt the theoretical understanding of agenda-setting to remain relevant in today's rapidly evolving media ecosystem.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the application of agenda-setting theory within both traditional and digital media contexts, with a particular focus on two major global events: the 2020 United States Presidential Election and the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach was selected due to the nature of the research problem, which is closely related to social interpretation, media narratives, and public perception.

1. Research Type

This research employs an exploratory case study design aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of how agenda setting operates in real-world contexts, specifically in two global events with broad media coverage and public discussion. The selection of case studies seeks to provide empirical insight into the agenda formation process in the media and its impact on public opinion.

2. Data Collection Techniques

The study utilizes multiple data collection methods, namely:

Content Analysis: Conducted on news reports from traditional media outlets such as The New York Times, CNN, Fox News, and BBC for the 2020 U.S. presidential election, as well as COVID-19 pandemic coverage from sources like The Guardian, Reuters, and Kompas. This analysis aims to assess the frequency of issue coverage and how these issues are framed.

Social Media Observation: Monitoring public conversations on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, with a focus on trending hashtags and topics related to the election and pandemic. This observation seeks to identify how these issues are received, disseminated, or even narratively reshaped by social media users.

Documentation: Gathering and analyzing research reports, academic articles, infographics, and social media engagement statistics from reputable sources such as the Pew Research Center and Statista.

3. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using:

Thematic Analysis: Categorizing data into main emerging themes such as health, politics, economy, and social inequality, followed by evaluating how the media highlight these issues.

Framing Analysis: Examining how media frame specific events and issues, identifying dominant narrative patterns. This approach refers to Entman's (1993) framing elements: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.

Comparative Analysis: Comparing the differences in approach between traditional media and social media in shaping and prioritizing the public agenda.

4. Research Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations:

The analysis focuses exclusively on English- and Indonesian-language media, potentially omitting agenda-setting dynamics in other languages.

The observation period is limited to the intensive timeframe from March to December 2020 for the COVID-19 pandemic and August to November 2020 for the U.S. election.

No direct interviews were conducted with media practitioners or audiences, thus interpretations rely solely on textual analysis and secondary data.

Nonetheless, the combination of various analytical techniques is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of agenda-setting dynamics in the current digital media era.

DISCUSSION

1. Dominance of Traditional Media in Agenda Setting

Historically, traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio have played a central role in determining which topics are perceived as important by society. In the 2020 U.S. presidential election context, mainstream outlets such as CNN, The New York Times, Fox News, and The Washington Post prioritized coverage on key issues: COVID-19 management, racial inequality following George Floyd's death, and the economic impact of the pandemic. These issues consistently appeared across major news channels, subsequently generating extensive social media discussion and everyday conversations. This supports McCombs and Shaw's (1972) assertion that media influence public agendas by allocating greater attention to specific issues through frequency and duration of coverage.

Moreover, media framing further shapes perceptions. For example, conservative outlets tended to frame the pandemic as a local failure or individual responsibility, while liberal media emphasized governmental structural failures. Such framing differences do not merely set issue importance but also influence how audiences interpret and evaluate those issues.

2. The Role of Social Media in Shaping the Digital Agenda

The rise of social media has introduced significant changes to agenda-setting processes. Unlike traditional one-way media, social media enable audiences to be both producers and consumers (prosumers) of information. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok accelerate issue dissemination through viral mechanisms, allowing topics to rapidly become global trends.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, hashtags like #StayAtHome, #FlattenTheCurve, and #VaccineEquity mobilized global attention toward collective action. These campaigns often originated from individuals or small groups, later amplified by celebrities, public figures, and official institutions.

However, the diversity of sources and rapid dissemination also pose challenges. Misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines spread quickly, demonstrating that agenda-setting on social media does not always align with public interest. Thus, agenda-setting theory evolves beyond how major media set issues to include how society sorts and manages the overwhelming flow of information.

3. Fragmentation and Polarization of Public Opinion

A significant consequence of digital-era agenda-setting dynamics is increasing fragmentation and polarization of opinions. As Tandoc and Vos (2016) note, social media echo chambers lead audiences to interact mainly with information that reinforces their existing beliefs, strengthening confirmation bias and reducing openness to alternative perspectives.

In electoral contexts, this fragmentation results in ideologically homogeneous online communities where groups only receive information favoring particular candidates while opposing narratives circulate separately. Consequently, although mainstream media attempt to set common issues, public reception and interpretation vary markedly across groups.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, polarization is evident in divergent attitudes toward vaccines, mask usage, and social restrictions. Some online communities give conspiracy theories equal or greater attention than scientific information, posing significant challenges for media and policymakers in directing public health agendas.

4. Interaction Between Traditional and Social Media

Today, the boundaries between traditional and social media are increasingly blurred. Many major news outlets actively maintain social media accounts, disseminating news and engaging directly with audiences. Conversely, traditional media often pick up on viral social media topics for further coverage. For instance, the #BlackLivesMatter movement initially trended on Twitter and Instagram before being widely reported by international news media.

This interaction indicates that agenda-setting is a bidirectional process: traditional media set broad narrative frameworks, while social media act as public response barometers and amplifiers that accelerate issue dissemination and impact.

However, this relationship introduces new complexities, with speed prioritized sometimes at the expense of thorough information verification. Consequently, traditional media face increasing pressure to carefully select social media-originated issues to maintain credibility.

5. Implications for Agenda-Setting Theory in the Digital Era

The analysis shows that while the fundamental concepts of agenda-setting theory remain relevant, their application has transformed significantly. Agenda-setting now involves dynamic interactions among media, society, and digital platform algorithms.

Traditional media continue to play a key role in shaping overarching issue narratives.

Social media enable bottom-up emergence of alternative issues, enriching but also complicating the public agenda landscape.

Audiences are no longer passive but actively select, share, and even create their own agendas.

Future research should further explore the power of social media algorithms in foregrounding particular issues, as well as how collaborations between media, scholars, and society can foster a healthier and more constructive information ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

Agenda-setting theory remains a vital framework in mass communication studies, relevant to both traditional and social media contexts. Mass media possess the capacity to focus public attention on certain issues, prioritize significant topics, and influence societal thinking about ongoing matters. However, in today's digital era, information technology developments—particularly social media—have introduced new dynamics to the agenda-setting process.

While social media provide audiences with greater opportunities for direct engagement as both consumers and producers of information, traditional mass media still wield substantial influence in shaping public perceptions and opinions.

This study shows that despite the faster, more democratic interaction enabled by social media, phenomena like echo chambers and opinion polarization indicate that social media's agenda-setting role remains influenced by issues already present in traditional media. In the two case studies examined—the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the COVID-19 pandemic—traditional media continue to lead in steering the public agenda, while social media expedite information distribution, expand audience reach, and often reinforce mainstream media issues.

Nonetheless, the role of social media in agenda-setting cannot be disregarded. Social media provide novel mechanisms for public response, dissemination, and reframing of issue focus. Therefore, understanding how these media interact to shape the public agenda is crucial for adapting agenda-setting theory to the evolving mass communication landscape.

This also opens avenues for further research into how social media algorithms influence agenda formation and exacerbate information polarization. Despite rapid media landscape changes and new challenges posed by social media, agenda-setting theory remains relevant and useful for understanding media's role in shaping public opinion.

Further studies are needed to deepen understanding of social media's influence within this theory and to explore how digital media can be leveraged to mitigate polarization and misinformation. Amid increasingly complex communication challenges, continuous

advancement of knowledge about media's role in shaping public perceptions and actions—across political, social, and global health contexts—is essential.

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