

Setting or chasing the agenda

Who controls the news?

The explosion of social media is changing traditional media's role as the arbiter of the daily news agenda. This research brief provides context on "agenda-setting" research and the most recent scholarship on how Twitter, Facebook and other platforms are shaping the fast-moving conversations.

By Dr. Alecia Swasy
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HIGHLIGHTS

- Journalists must tap into social media, but guard against the monsoon of Kardashian fluff while searching for useful news tips.
 - Engaging with the once-passive audience on platforms of their choosing is essential in the evolution of newsgathering.
 - Polls show only two to six issues can make up the daily "public agenda."
 - Traditional media journalists' greatest fear from listening to feedback from social media: one issue "crack pots" trying to get their opinions into the news.
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In 1968, Americans grieved after the assassination of popular presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy. Race riots erupted in the fight for civil rights following the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. Anti-war protesters marched for an end to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

With all of this unrest and an upcoming presidential election, University of North Carolina journalism scholars McCombs and Shaw set out to ask: What issues really influence voters? The answer: Whatever voters watched on TV news or read in newspapers and magazines in the weeks prior to the survey.¹

It was the first study to define the “agenda-setting” role of the news media. Simply put, the research showed how the news media decide what to cover and how they set the public agenda. Walter Lippmann’s 1922 book, “Public Opinion,” described it as the news media creating those “pictures in our heads” because the world is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” for most folks.²

But Lippmann couldn’t have predicted how the world has shrunk thanks to an explosion of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which now allow anyone with a smartphone to publish whatever they consider to be news. No longer are distant places out of sight for people. Indeed, 23 percent of those who use a social network such as Twitter or Facebook are now getting their daily news from those sites. According to Pew Research Center, nearly 1 in 10 U.S. adults gets news through Twitter.³

This paper provides an overview of agenda-setting research, starting with the seminal work of McCombs and Shaw, and highlights of the most recent scholarship on how social media is changing legacy media’s role as the arbiter of each day’s news agenda. By understanding both the history of agenda setting research and impact of fast-evolving social media conversations, journalists can learn to both guard against the flood of Kardashian fluff while integrating useful social media tips and news leads into their newsgathering routines. Taking an active role in engaging with the once-passive audience on platforms they choose

is essential for the ongoing evolution of news organizations. But this must be done without forfeiting agenda “setting” for agenda “chasing” of anything hyped on social media.

To understand agenda setting, it helps to look at some of the key studies that have been done by scholars in the decades since McCombs and Shaw developed the theory. Scholars have used the theory to study issues in the elections of the mayor in Manchida City, Japan, and the legislature in Buenos Aires, Argentina.⁴ Most studies on agenda setting focus on the relationship between media coverage and the broader public agendas. The issues covered include the environment, economy, drugs, crime and foreign policy. As McCombs wrote in his 2000 literature review of agenda-setting studies: “The power of the news media to set a nation’s agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence.”⁵ As broadcast journalist David Brinkley once said: “News is what we say it is.”⁶

One factor that comes up in agenda-setting studies is the public’s limit on how many issues can matter at any given time. When Gallup pollsters ask the “most important problem” facing the nation question, only two to six issues make up the public agenda.⁷ Depending on what’s going on in the world, foreign policy can score high, such as after world wars or the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In difficult economic times, domestic issues such as jobs rank high on the nation’s agenda.

Studies have used various combinations of newspapers, television broadcasts and magazines. Ever since the original North Carolina research on the 1968 presidential election, The New York Times has generally been viewed as playing the greatest role in the agenda-setting process as compared to any local newspaper. The influence of national television trails both the Times and local papers.⁸ But the ranking depends on the study topic and years studied. For instance, in studies of the 1976 and 1980 presidential races, national television news had a greater influence on agenda setting than any newspaper.⁹

Likewise, the onslaught of social media is now changing that dynamic, giving rise to a relatively new body of research on how agenda setting is influenced by the likes of Twitter and Facebook.

One aspect of traditional news organizations is how journalists have acted as “gatekeepers” who control what does or does not get covered in mainstream media outlets. But those gates are swinging wide open, thanks to the influence of the 24/7 nature of social media. Williams

and Dela Carpini (2004) studied the coverage of President Bill Clinton's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky to show how the new media environment threatens the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists.¹⁰ Indeed, the scandal became public because of a then-obscure, now-infamous blogger named Matt Drudge.

This was reinforced by a study by Messner and Distaso (2008). The authors did a content analysis of about 2,000 articles over a six-year period from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and found that the newspapers used blogs as credible sources.¹¹ Between 30 and 40 percent of the *Times* and *Post* articles cited blogs as sources. It is another example of how outsiders are creeping into the newsgathering process and influencing what the legacy media cover as news.

The even greater popularity of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter has opened the floodgates to anyone with a smartphone to become an agenda setter. While most folks might not feel confident enough to start their own blog, anybody can access the free platforms of Facebook and Twitter. On each platform, users can choose who and what to follow, which already gives them a role in choosing their news and entertainment versus turning on the television to see what others have chosen to air. And users are showing they have influence on programming and content. Jacobson (2013) analyzed the correlation between news coverage on "The Rachel Maddow Show" and discussions on the show's Facebook page. The author analyzed three weeks of shows during a slow news period because that eliminated the domination of coverage from a big event, such as a presidential election. The research showed that topics most frequently discussed by Facebook followers became topics for the cable news show. The results showed that Facebook users were shaping the news agenda of the show.¹²

Twitter, created in 2006, is also showing that the audience is now shaping the news agenda. Consider NBC's coverage of the 2012 presidential election. Veteran anchor and reporter Tom Brokaw provided commentary on the results and referred to voters as "schizophrenic." After a commercial break, Brokaw apologized for that remark, noting that it is a serious disease. His apology was prompted by a tweet from a viewer. Journalists have never had such instant feedback.

One of the biggest concerns about allowing social media users to influence the agenda is the accuracy and fairness of posts done by outsiders who lack the training of professional

journalists.¹³ In most news organizations, editors review reporters' work for accuracy, fairness and potential libel before publishing it. Outsiders' posts are often laced with opinions. Indeed, technology has made it quite easy to alter a video or photo, leaving editors open to getting duped. Singer (2010) found that legacy newsroom journalists' greatest concern about allowing outsiders to offer content is the "one-issue crackpots" trying to get their opinions into print.¹⁴

Grzywinska and Borden (2012) studied the Occupy Wall Street movement to answer the question: Can social media "build the agenda" for the traditional media? The authors studied the relationship between Facebook pages dedicated to the Occupy movement and coverage in The New York Times, The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. They found that activity on Facebook did prompt coverage by the traditional newspapers. One big reason: the movement considered itself leaderless, and social media was the primary way it organized its events, making it the natural source for traditional news organizations. It is a good example of how social media can supplement other sources, such as in-person interviews, especially in the early stages of such social movements.¹⁵

Twitter has become a player in setting the national agenda for coverage of politics. CNN journalist Peter Hamby (2013) interviewed more than 70 journalists and political strategists who worked on the 2012 presidential campaigns. The case study focused on Republican Nominee Mitt Romney's campaign. Hamby concluded that the instantaneous nature of social media now means any gaffe or stumble now becomes the story, sometimes within minutes. Hamby asserts that Twitter is now the central news source for the Washington-based political press corps.¹⁶

Just like the original McCombs and Shaw study of the 1968 election issues, the media coverage is setting the nation's public agenda. Only this time, the agenda is being shaped by citizens, too. Indeed, a November 2014, Pew Research Center survey of Americans showed that 41 percent say that finding out about political news before other people do is a major reason why they use social media to get their election news. In addition, 26 percent say they favor social media because it gives them "more reliable information than what is available from traditional news organizations."¹⁷ Such surveys and studies serve as a reminder for political reporters and editors to make checks of Twitter and Facebook a part of their reporting and editing routines, just like they monitor what the candidates do each day.

But there is a danger in all of this: Will professional journalists become agenda chasers instead of agenda setters? Consider how the organizers of Occupy Wall Street talk about the power of social media sustaining its activities. One of the founders said she hoped this movement becomes “one of the biggest blasts” of revolutionary fervor that we’ve seen “since 1968. If that happens, then we will have ignited a spark that will then spread into all kinds of different factions.”¹⁰ But the agenda-setting role of traditional journalists appears to be safe because Occupy Wall Street no longer occupies page one.

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- ¹ McCombs, M. and Shaw, D. The agenda-setting function of mass media, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 1972, 176-187.
- ² Lippmann, W. *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan, 1922.
- ³ Mitchell, A. (2013). Twitter news consumers: Young, mobile and educated. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://pewrsr.ch/HqSKYT>.
- ⁴ McCombs M. (2000). The agenda setting role of the mass media in the shaping of public opinion. Unpublished manuscript.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Krajicek, David J. *Scooped!: Media miss real story on crime while chasing sex, sleaze, and celebrities*. Columbia University Press, 2013.
- ⁷ McCombs, M. *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2004.
- ⁸ McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*. p. 50.
- ⁹ Ibid. p. 50.
- ¹⁰ Williams, B. and Deli Carpini, M. (2004). ‘Monica and Bill all the time and everywhere: The collapse of gatekeeping and agenda setting in the new media environment.’ *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(9), 1208-1230.
- ¹¹ Messner, M. and Distaso, M. (2008) “How Traditional Media and Weblogs Use Each Other as Sources.” *Journalism Studies*, 9: 3, 447- 463.
- ¹² Jacobson, Susan. (2013). “Does Audience Participation on Facebook Influence the News Agenda? A Case Study of The Rachel Maddow Show.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57(3), 338-355
- ¹³ Singer, J. (2010). Quality control: Perceived effects of user-generated content on newsroom norms, values and routines. *Journalism Practice*, 4(2), 127-142.
- ¹⁴ Singer (2010).
- ¹⁵ Grzywinska, I. and Borden, J. (2012) “The Impact of social media on traditional media agenda-setting theory — the case study of Occupy Wall Street.” http://www.academia.edu/7484515/The_impact_of_social_media_on_traditional_media_agenda_setting_theory_The_case_study_of_Occupy_Wall_Street_Movement_in_USA
- ¹⁶ Hamby, P. (2013). Did Twitter kill the boys on the bus? Searching for a better way to cover a campaign. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy Discussion Paper Series.
- ¹⁷ Smith, A. (2014). “Cell phones, Social Media and Campaign 2014.” Pew Research Internet Project. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/11/03/>
- ¹⁸ Grzywinska, I. and Borden, J. (2012)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. Alecia Swasy is professor and Sleeman scholar in business journalism at the College of Media and the Institute for Communications Research at the University of Illinois. She teaches classes on financial journalism and advanced reporting.

Swasy received her Ph.D. and master's degrees in journalism studies from the Missouri School of Journalism and her B.A. in journalism from Penn State University. Prior to earning her graduate degrees, Swasy worked as a reporter and editor for The Wall Street Journal, Dow Jones Newswires and the St. Petersburg Times, among other publications.

Her work at the Journal led to two books about corporate America: "Soap Opera: The Inside Story of Procter & Gamble" and "Changing Focus: Kodak and the Battle to Save a Great American Company." The Times Books division of Random House published both.

Swasy's dissertation focused on how metro newspapers are adapting and incorporating Twitter into their newsgathering routines. A five-part series on that research is available at rjionline.org/littlebirdie

Swasy is currently researching two books about rural poverty in America.





The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute works with citizens, journalists and researchers to strengthen democracy through better journalism. RJI seeks out the most exciting new ideas, tests them with real-world experiments, uses social science research to assess their effectiveness and delivers solutions that citizens and journalists can put to use in their own communities.

Randy Picht

Executive director, Reynolds Journalism Institute

Picht was named executive director of the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute in April 2012. During his tenure, the institute has restructured and expanded its cornerstone fellowship program, increased the number of industry partners and launched a weekly vodcast about innovation in the news industry. Before joining RJI, Picht worked closely with newspapers and other media outlets during a nearly 29-year career with The Associated Press.

He is a former business editor for AP and spent about half of his career working on the journalism side of the not-for-profit news cooperative and half of his time on the business side. He's a graduate of the Missouri School of Journalism and a native of Deer Park, New York.

1. Agenda-setting theory The agenda-setting theory, according to which the intensity of discussions in the media influence people's perceptions of the importance of certain events, emerged a long time ago and has gained considerable popularity among the researchers of mass communications (Dearing and Rogers 1996; McCombs 2014). However, agenda-setting hypotheses have not only been tested on a variety of empirical objects, but they have also been modified (McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 2014). Thus, as a complement to the idea of the impact of discussions in the media on the perception of the importance of issues, it was suggested to see how the emphasis on certain characteristics of a situation or a public figure would form a public opinion. Setting or chasing the agenda: who controls the news? But there is a danger in all of this: Will professional journalists become agenda chasers instead of agenda setters? Consider how the organizers of Occupy Wall Street talk about the power of social media sustaining its activities. Setting or chasing the agenda: who controls the news? The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute works with citizens, journalists and researchers to strengthen democracy through better journalism. RJI seeks out the most exciting new ideas, tests them with real-world experiments, uses social science research to assess their effectiveness and delivers solutions that citizens and journalists can put to use in their own communities. Agenda-setting theory seems quite appropriate to help us understand the pervasive role of the media --for example on political communication systems (Rogers and Dearing, 1987; McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, 2013; and (McCombs, 2014);). Bernard Cohen (1963) stated: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."