

Ewa Nowak

Agenda-setting theory and the new media

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agenda-setting theory, public opinion, new media, media impact

ABSTRACT

The current changes within media environment including new media development became the major research challenge for the agenda-setting theory these days. Taking into account the problem of validity of the theory facing new media conditions, the aim of the analysis is to answer the basic research question: considering the new media development, does the general media impact (including the old and new media types) on public opinion become weaker or stronger.

Two years ago, in 2014, the second edition of the book *Setting the agenda. The mass media and public opinion* was published. This was seen as evidence of popularity of the agenda-setting theory and of its vitality in the communication environment of new media¹. Currently, the scientific status of the agenda-setting theory is characterised by three elements: the systematically growing number of studies and publications which deal with, or employ the theory, the ability to integrate many research fields and create new directions of research². In the 1990s, some researchers considered agenda-setting studies to be a new paradigm in mass

¹ This is reflected in the number of quotations, i.e. 1,664 quotations since the first edition (March 2016, according to Google Scholar). The first study by M. McCombs and D. Shaw, published in 1972 (Chapel Hill Study), has been quoted over seven thousand times (7,297); *The agenda-setting function of mass media* "Public Opinion Quarterly", Vol. 36 (1972), no. 2, pp. 176-187.

² During the over-30-year period that has passed since the Chapel Hill Study (1972), more than 400 works on agenda-setting have been published; J. Strömbäck, S. Kioussis, *A new look at agenda-setting effects. Comparing the predictive power of overall political news consumption and specific news media consumption across different media channels and media types*, "Journal of Communication", Vol. 60 (2010), p. 271.

media research³. This opinion arose from the belief which prevailed at that time that M. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw were the first to ultimately negate the idea of the limited impact of mass media. Both West-European and American agenda-setting researchers agree that the theory has become one of the most influential and scientifically prolific paradigms in media and communication studies over the recent decades⁴. The development of the theory is geared both towards the widening of the existing object of research (taking it beyond the domain of public affairs), and deepened understanding of key findings⁵.

The unquestionable popularity of the agenda-setting theory is sometimes accompanied by criticism which stems from the inaccurate or superficial perception of the theory and its research methods. The main objection raised by certain critics of that approach is the fact that the research conducted within the scope of the theory is unable to demonstrate the causal link between the impact of media coverage and the changes in public opinion. However, those critics take into consideration only the methodology used in the Chapel Hill Study⁶. Meanwhile, later studies perfected that methodology, and the theory itself was verified once again not only in the USA, but also in Western Europe, South America and Poland⁷. In 2005, taking into account both the development of the theory and the critical approach to it, Japanese researcher Toshio Takeshita formulated three challenges for agenda-setting research. They mainly concerned the agenda-setting process (e.g. to what extent is it automatic and unconscious); the identity of the theory (e.g. its links with the framing theory), and the changes in media environment (new media and online forms of communication versus the validity and adequacy of the theory).

New media are often intuitively understood as the means of transmission that use communication via the internet, as opposed to old media (e.g. radio, television, press). It seems more precise to distinguish between three formats of media: traditional offline media,

³ J.W. Dearing, E.M. Rogers, *Agenda-setting. Communication concepts 6*, Thousand Oaks 1996, p. 9.

⁴ S. Walgrave, P. van Aelst, *The contingency of the mass media's political agenda setting power: Toward a preliminary theory*, "Journal of Communication", Vol. 56 (2006), p. 88; cf. B. Jennings, D. Miron, *Theory and research in mass communication*, "Journal of Communication", Vol. 54 (2004), pp. 662-704,

⁵ M.E. McCombs, D.L. Shaw, D.H. Weaver, *New directions in agenda-setting theory and research*, "Mass Communication and Society", Vol. 17 (2014), no. 6, p. 783.

⁶ The University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill is the oldest public university in the United States, see *The Carolina story: A virtual museum of the university history*, <https://museum.unc.edu/> [accessed: 03 July 2016]; D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego* [Mass communication theory], Warszawa 2008, pp. 501–502.

⁷ M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy. Media masowe i opinia publiczna* [Setting the agenda. The mass media and public opinion], Kraków 2008, pp. 12–16; E. Nowak, *Rola mediów informacyjnych w ustanawianiu ważności kwestii w agendzie publicznej w Polsce w latach 2009–2012* [The news media's role in shaping public agenda in Poland - setting the salience of the issues (2009-2012)], [in:] *Media i polityka. Relacje i współzależności* [Media and politics. Relationships and interdependencies], ed. M. Adamik-Szysiak, Lublin 2014, pp. 105–126.

traditional online media and social media⁸. This analysis uses the term “new media”⁹ with the meaning which is widely accepted among media researchers, i.e. to refer to traditional online media and social media, also called vertical and horizontal¹⁰ online communication channels.

The changes which take place in media environment in connection with new media pose one of the biggest research challenges for the agenda-setting theory. It may be expected that the role of the media in the setting of public agenda will either diminish due to an increased number of channels, varied content and blurred distinction between the recipients and the senders, or that the role of the media will increase if an increased number of channels broadcasts news on the same topics¹¹. Taking into account the problem of validity of the agenda-setting theory in relation to internet communication and new media, the reflections and analyses proposed in this study will seek to answer the following research question: considering the development of new media, does the general impact of media (traditional and new, or rather horizontal and vertical ones) on public opinion become stronger or weaker? The research material will consist of the outcomes of the studies conducted by researchers conceptualising and operationalising the agenda-setting approach, which focus on empirical material encompassing the structures and content of online communication. Moreover, the meta-analytical approach aims to capture the main trends and research directions which have been developing within the framework of the agenda-setting theory over the recent years.

Challenges for classic agenda-setting studies

Classic studies conducted within the agenda-setting theory are concerned with the impact exerted by the media, especially by news media (media agenda) on public opinion (public agenda). The research falling within the first level of the theory has demonstrated that the media have the ability to impose on public opinion the belief about the importance of certain topics - issues, problems. Consequently, those topics which are the most frequently covered

⁸ G. Weiman, H.B. Brosius, *New agenda for agenda-setting research in the digital era* [in:] *Political communication in the online world: Theoretical approaches and research design*, eds. G. Vowe, P. Henn, New York–London 2016, p. 28.

⁹ The literature defines new media as methods and social practices of communication, representation and expression which developed thanks to the use of computers; M. Lister at al., *New media: A critical introduction*. Second edition, London–New York 2009, p. 2; cf. L.A. Lievrouw, S. Livingstone, *Introduction to the first edition (2002). The social shaping and consequences of ICTs* [in:] *Handbook of new media. Social shaping social consequences of ICTs*. Updated student edition, eds. A. Lievrouw, S. Livingstone, London 2006, p. 21.

¹⁰ Vertical media are traditional media with a hierarchical structure, employing professional journalists, published in an online and offline version, whereas horizontal media are social media which enable combining the roles of information recipient and information author; D.L. Shaw, D.H. Weaver, *Epilogue. Media agenda-setting and audience agenda-melding* [in:] M. McCombs, *Setting the agenda. The mass media and public opinion*. Second edition, Cambridge 2014, p. 146.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

by the media are seen as the most important¹². Further observations, which led to the identification of the second level of the agenda-setting theory, have shown that those aspects - attributes of topics/issues - which are the most frequently discussed by the media become, in time, the most visible and prominent to the public¹³. The second level, i.e. the level of attributes, opened a new chapter in research on media effects because it demonstrated how news media can affect the citizens' opinions and showed that the media exert not only a cognitive impact (the learning process - first level), but also a persuasive one (how to evaluate a given issue or candidate considering that they possess specific characteristics - attributes). Linking the second level of the agenda-setting theory with the interpretive framing theory and the concept of priming¹⁴ has deepened the understanding of media effects and turned the agenda-setting theory into a comprehensive approach to studying the political, social and cultural media impact¹⁵.

Due to the changes in media environment, as well as the expansion of the internet and new media in social communication, the theoreticians of agenda-setting (the theory being based on the findings concerning mass media) are now faced with new challenges and questions about the validity of that approach in a situation when mass communication is transforming itself into multichannel media communication¹⁶.

In view of the new findings concerning media systems, especially the hybridity concept¹⁷, the agenda-setting researchers have made attempts to verify the results of the studies conducted to date within the framework of the classic agenda-setting theory¹⁸. One of the key problems was a new identification of the media agenda since, in addition to the media communication channels considered so far (press, media, television), suggestions were made to take into account three media formats: traditional offline media, traditional online media and online social networks¹⁹. Each of those formats can enter into different relationships with the public agenda and produce different effects.

¹² M.E. McCombs, D.L. Shaw, *The agenda-setting function...*, op. cit., pp. 176–187; M. McCombs, *Setting the agenda. The mass media and public opinion*. Second edition, Cambridge 2014, pp. 1-23 ff.

¹³ M. McCombs, D. Shaw, *The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas*, "Journal of Communication", Vol. 43 (1993), no. 3, p. 62 ff.

¹⁴ M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy...*, op. cit., pp. 144–146.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 109-112.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Castells, *Władza komunikacji* [Communication power], Warszawa 2013, p. 66.

¹⁷ A. Chadwick uses the terms "newer media" and "older media" which show relativity of the media; A. Chadwick, *A hybrid media system: Politics and power*, Oxford 2013, p. 4 ff.

¹⁸ P. Henn, G. Vowe, *Introduction. Political communication in the online world* [in:] *Political communication in the online world: Theoretical approaches and research design*, eds. G. Vowe, P. Henn, New York 2016, p. 2.

¹⁹ G. Weiman, H.B. Brosius, *New agenda for agenda-setting research ...*, op. cit., p. 28.

Hybridisation of media systems is mainly connected with the following factors: the changing role of the audience (the users of media content are simultaneously its authors, *producers*) and ways of using the media; changes in the structure of media senders (electronic media, press, internet media); changes in the manner (form, channels) of programme transmission; the emergence and growing popularity of media communication forms that combine various transmission channels²⁰. Old and new media are constantly evolving, adapting to new situations and entering into interactions. One can observe the antithetic processes of mixing the old and new channels and forms of media functioning, among which the old, new and renewed ones can be distinguished²¹. Traditional media - press, radio and television - still constitute the mainstream, occupy the central position in the media system, but the mainstream also undergoes changes. New media are growing in popularity and some of their components are becoming part of the mainstream. Certain trends within the media system compete with each other, while others cooperate, but all of them contribute to the system's hybridity.

According to some researchers, classic theories of communication, including the agenda-setting theory, may become to some extent obsolete in the new media environment: "The key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about"²². This idea reverses the roles of senders and recipients. Its authors predict that the media will not be able to set the public agenda, but rather will be forced to submit to it.

The main causes of those changes are the hybridisation process and the commercialisation of media content. Evolution of the media market towards oligopolies alongside tough competition are the reasons why media senders are primarily focused on satisfying the needs of the recipients. This is illustrated by, e.g., the fact that news media tend to provide a greater amount of soft news instead of hard news concerning public policies. The situation poses a challenge for the agenda-setting theory because the growing sensitivity to the needs of media content recipients means that the selection of topics to be included in the media agenda is determined by the viewers, readers, or users' preferences, rather than by

²⁰ Ibidem; A. Bruns, *The future is user-led: The path towards widespread produsage*, "The Fibreculture Journal", Vol. 11, 2008, <http://eleven.fibreculturejournal.org.fibreculture.han.bg.umcs.edu.pl/fcj-066-the-future-is-user-led-the-path-towards-widespread-produsage/> [accessed: 21 April 2016].

²¹ Ibidem, p. 24.

²² G. Weimann et. al., *Reevaluating 'The end of mass communication'*, "Mass Communication and Society", Vol. 17 (2014), p. 808.

journalists or publishers. Under those circumstances, great importance is placed on increasing the audience figures and gaining advertisers²³.

The answer to the question whether and to what extent the agenda-setting theory remains valid should be sought among the new directions for research pursued by agenda-setting scholars.

New directions for agenda-setting research

Looking at the most popular directions for agenda-setting research conducted in the leading Western research centres, several highly promising and dynamic trends can be identified. Firstly, the research develops most rapidly in the area of comparative studies and studies concerning the effect of agenda-setting on various regions, countries and political systems²⁴. Secondly, the research is increasingly concerned not only with the relationships between the media agenda and the public agenda, but also between the media agenda and the political agenda. Agenda-setting studies take into account “national agendas”, including the subject-matter of the decisions made by national institutions, as well as the mutual influence of various agendas taking place between the national (or state), local and international institutions (e.g. the European Parliament)²⁵. Another approach is the so-called reverse agenda-setting which involves investigating whether and to what extent the public agenda affects the media agenda²⁶. This is connected with the already mentioned problem of reversing the roles of media content senders and recipients. The phenomenon of reverse agenda-setting is fostered by the new media environment which facilitates the publishing and obtaining of users’ feedback to professional journalistic content, as well as monitoring this feedback. Media organisations monitor internet portals, social networks, search engines and other internet areas of user activity in search of new ideas for news and other publications²⁷. In this way, the hierarchy of issues popular among the public affects the subject of interest and hierarchy of issues in the media agenda. An important role in this process belongs to

²³ P.J. Boczkowski, M. Peer, *The choice gap: The divergent online news preferences of journalists and consumers*, “Journal of Communication”, Vol. 61 (2011), pp. 857-876,

²⁴ R. Eissler, A. Russel, B.D. Jones, *New avenues for the study of agenda-setting*, “Policy Studies Journal”, Vol. 42 (2014), p. 71.

²⁵ S. Princen, *Agenda-setting in the European Union: A theoretical exploration and agenda for research*, “Journal of European Public Policy”, Vol. 14 (2007), no. 1, pp. 21-38; R. Eissler, A. Russel, B.D. Jones, *New avenues for the study of agenda-setting*, op. cit., pp. 76-77.

²⁶ G. Weiman, H.B. Brosius, *New agenda for agenda-setting research ...*, op. cit., p. 30; M. Tomaszewski, J.M. Proffitt, S. McClung, *Exploring the political blogosphere: Perceptions of political bloggers about their sphere*, “Atlantic Journal of Communication”, Vol. 17 (2009), p. 77.

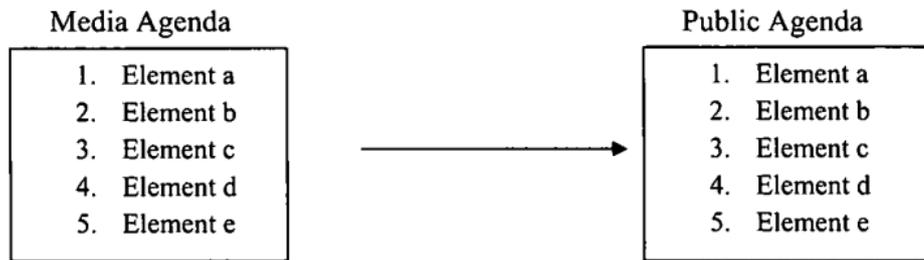
²⁷ M.W. Ragas, H.L. Tran, J.A. Martin, *edia-induced or search driven? A study of online agenda-setting effects during the BP oil disaster*, “Journalism Studies”, Vol. 15 (2014), no. 1, p. 52.

bloggers who perform the function of early recognisers (a kind of an early warning system) and leaders of the public opinion mediated through the media. The issues or attributes to which they pay their attention are later undertaken by professional journalists.

Moreover, the new directions of research introduce new types of agendas and relationships between them as well as new levels of agenda-setting. The network agenda-setting model, also referred to as the third level of agenda-setting, was proposed by McCombs and his co-workers in the publication of 2014. The level goes one step further than the first and second level of the theory because it assumes that the media agenda can transfer into the public agenda not only the salience of issues and their attributes, but also the sets of attributes (bundles), sets of related attributes and issues, or bundles of several issues²⁸. For example, if a candidate is usually depicted by news media “in the company” of his or her specific feature (e.g. an incompetent and weak presidential candidate), they will be associated with those features and evaluated through the prism of those attributes by the public. The more frequently news media report on one or two objects or features at the same time, the greater the chance that the link will also become fixed in the recipients’ minds. The conceptualisation of the differences between the first, second and third level of agenda-setting was depicted in Figure 1.

²⁸ H.T. Vu, L. Guo, M.E. McCombs, *Exploring ‘the world outside and the pictures in our heads’: A network agenda-setting study*, “Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly”, Vol. 91 (2014), no. 4, pp. 669-686.

Traditional Agenda Setting Approach



Network Agenda Setting Model

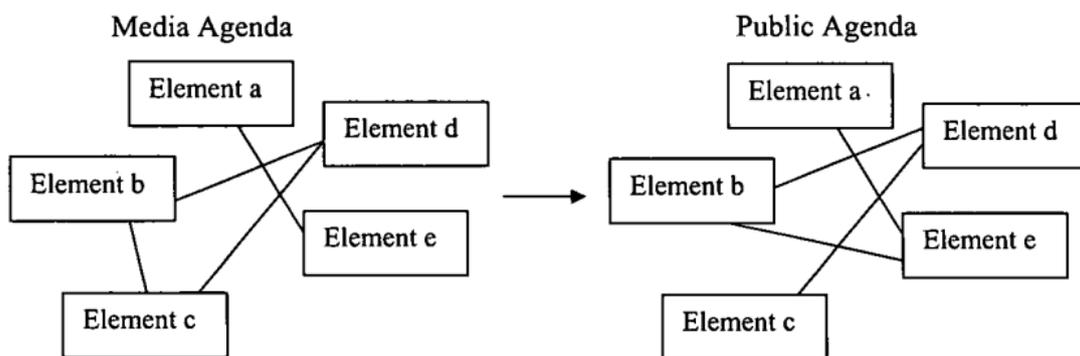


Fig. 1. Agenda-setting - traditional approach and network approach

Source: L. Guo, *The application of social network analysis in agenda-setting research: A methodological exploration*, "Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media", Vol. 56 (2012), no. 4, p. 619.

The method of analysing the agenda-setting effect proposed by this new model is different from the methods used so far because the studies based on that approach demonstrate that issues and objects can move between agendas not only individually (separately), but also simultaneously and as groups: "[...] not only can the news media tell us what to think about and how to think about it, they are also capable of telling us what and how to associate²⁹.

Figures 2 and 3 present the results of the studies conducted by Hong Tien Vu, Lai Guo and McCombs which cover the network links prepared on the basis of the values of correlation coefficients recorded for particular issues. The strong connections between the elements - issues (e.g. politics -social disorder -wars - national security) indicate a higher frequency with which they are associated with each other in media coverage (Fig. 2), which contributes to creating similar associations in the minds of media recipients (Fig. 3).

²⁹ L.H.T. Vu, L. Guo, M.E. McCombs, *Exploring 'the world outside...*, op. cit., p. 669.

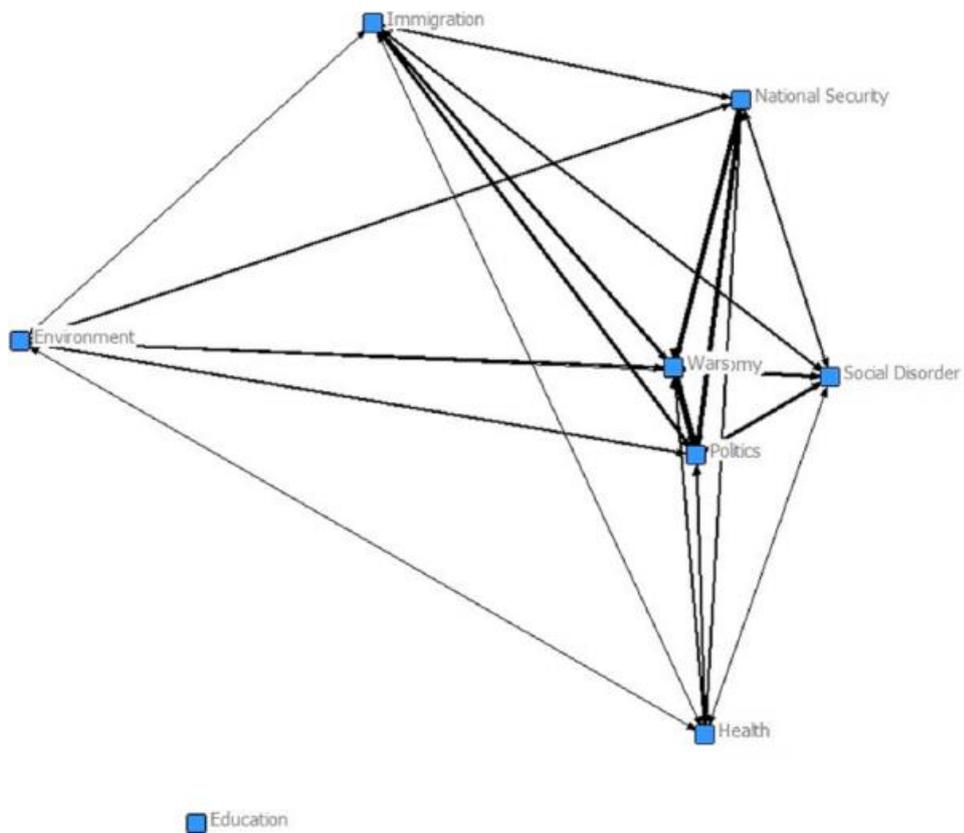


Fig. 2. Network of objects - the media agenda

Source: J.H.T. Vu, L. Guo, M.E. McCombs, *Exploring 'the world outside and the pictures in our heads': A network agenda-setting study*, "Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly", Vol. 91 (2014), no. 4, p. 679.

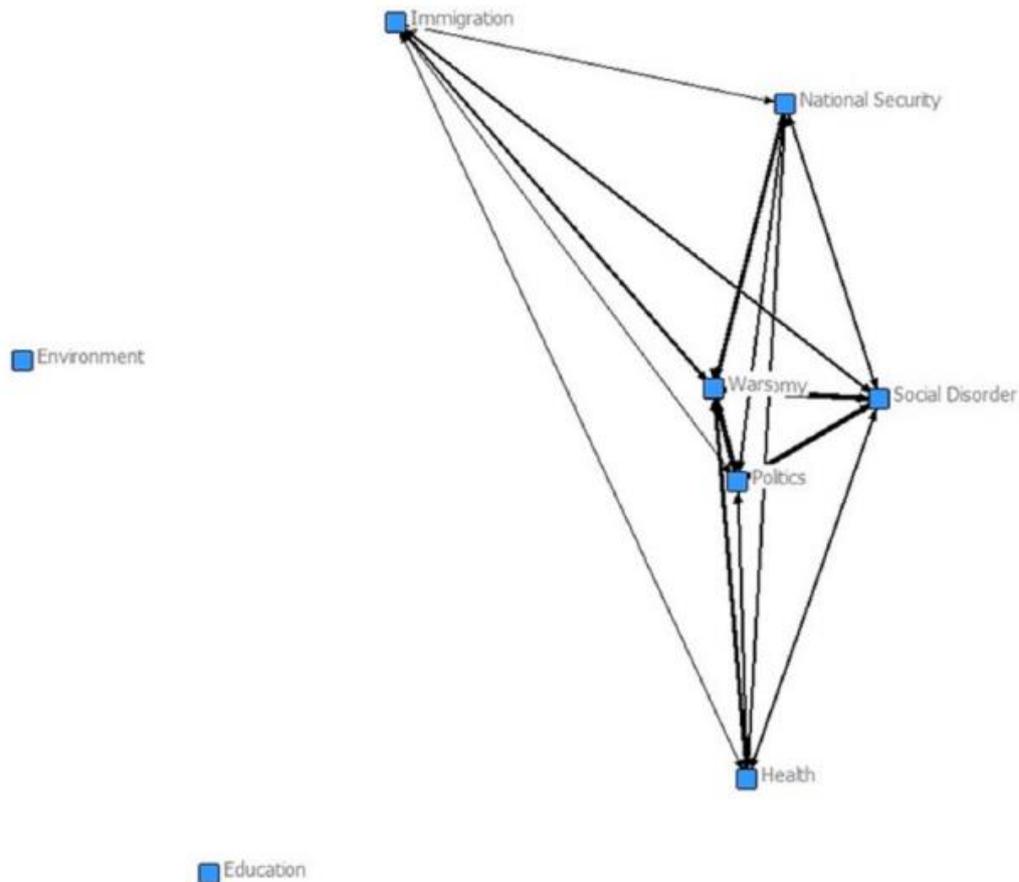


Fig. 3. Network of objects - the public agenda

Source: L.H.T. Vu, L. Guo, M.E. McCombs, *Exploring 'the world outside and the pictures in our heads': A network agenda-setting study*, "Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly", Vol. 91 (2014), no. 4, p. 680.

The idea of third level arose from the research on cognitive processes which assumes that we perceive the world in terms of a network, rather than in a linear manner. The cognitive network created by media recipients also originates from the fact that in the process of absorbing new information, we refer it to and link it with the information already stored in our long-term memory. Moreover, the findings made by McCombs and his co-workers (data for 2007-2011) suggest that network agenda-setting takes place also between media agendas (inter-media network agenda-setting), because, as was discovered, various media channels (TV, radio, press, internet portals) propose similar sets - bundles of issues and attributes describing public issues. It should be noted that the conclusions drawn from those studies enriched the previous findings concerning the ability of the media to suggest/impose the interpretations - comprehensive visions of the world - on political elites and public opinion.

As previously mentioned, the development of the agenda-setting theory led to the identification of new types of agendas, which enables a better understanding of the processes

occurring in the mediatising reality. They include: the real world agenda, the blogs' agenda, the search agenda. The real world agenda is a set of major issues - problems in the surrounding reality - which should be recognised as being the most important based on the economic and social indicators (e.g. the issue of unemployment, social inequalities, climate change, etc.)³⁰. A comparison of the set of really important problems with the media or public agenda usually reveals a considerable scale of agenda-cutting, i.e. leaving the key local, national or global problems out of media coverage (which is the basis for shaping the public opinion). Researchers point out that new media have, to a certain extent, reduced the scale of agenda-cutting, and consequently also of omitting important issues by news media (the process of agenda-revealing can be observed), although the process develops slowly due to the dominant role still played by mainstream media³¹. This trend also provides some reflections on the relationship between the problems of the real world and the political elites who decide about public policies, as well as the role of the media as mediators of information in those relationships³².

The dynamic development of new media resulted in blogs and bloggers being introduced into the media space as important participants of the news sphere. The role of bloggers is perceived in different ways. They can be regarded not only as the representatives of the public, but also as the representatives of the media or political agenda (blogs run by ordinary citizens, journalists and politicians). Agenda-setting researchers suggest that bloggers should be seen as mediators between the media agenda and the public agenda, fulfilling the previously mentioned role of early recognisers³³. The studies carried out from 2002 to 2003 concerning the most popular blog topics in the world and the most commonly discussed topics in the world media (the media agenda based on the information from the Associated Press Agency) showed that the blogs' agenda (at the first level, i.e. the level of issues) may significantly differ from the traditional media agenda (journalists' agenda). It was found that bloggers are relatively independent of professional journalists in their choice of topics³⁴. Certain results of empirical studies (conducted e.g. by Asian researchers) identified cases where social networks, including bloggers, were able to influence the

³⁰ S.N. Soroka, *Agenda-setting dynamics in Canada*, Vancouver 2002, p. 11 ff.

³¹ F. Fahmy, *J-blogging and the 'agenda-cutting' phenomenon in Egypt* [in:] *Online Journalism in Africa*, eds. H.M. Mabweazara, O.F. Mudhai, J. Whittaker, New York–London 2014, p. 181.

³² S. Soroka, *The gatekeeping function: Distributions of information in media and the real world*, "Journal of Politics", Vol. 74 (2012), no. 2, pp. 514-528.

³³ G. Weimann et al., *The end of mass communication...*, op. cit. p. 809.

³⁴ G. Weimann et al., *Reevaluating...*, op.cit., p. 810; A. Delwiche, *Agenda-setting, opinion leadership and the world of web logs*, "First Monday", Vol. 10 (2005), no. 12, <http://ojs-prod-lib.cc.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1300/1220> [accessed: 08 April 2016].

mainstream agenda, but those were exceptions rather than the rule. The findings made by Gabriel Weimann (and his team) reveal a certain pattern in blogs' agenda: blogs are less likely to set agenda at the first level and more likely to set agenda at the second level, i.e. the level of attributes. They perform the function of "resuscitators" of old or previously unpopular news and introduce it into the mainstream agenda³⁵. Bloggers can also fulfil the role of reframers by changing the interpretive frames suggested by traditional media³⁶.

Due to the growing role of blogs in public communication, certain researchers question the function of journalists as gatekeepers. The reason for this is that journalists are required to select information on the basis of professional criteria, while bloggers and social media content writers do not need to follow those principles and are therefore able to acquire more information. At the same time, journalists use blog content, as a result of which they have currently less "gatekeeping power". Gatekeeping is, to a certain extent, turning into gatewatching which involves monitoring the content of blogs or social media³⁷, and subsequently publishing information, e.g. as a quotation, without professional verification of its accuracy. As a result, producers, i.e. the users of media content who are simultaneously unprofessional creators of this content, have increasingly greater power over the media agenda.

One of the new types of agenda is the search agenda, i.e. the agenda of the topics searched through search engines. The few studies conducted so far on this subject suggest that the media agenda (composed of both online and offline media) affects the search agenda, and the other way round - the search agenda affects the media agenda, which results in the phenomenon of reverse agenda-setting that was already discussed in this article³⁸. The search agenda is regarded as the set of issues which is more relevant for the public opinion because the behaviour associated with searching is more natural and ideologically independent than the use of other media with a specific thematic profile³⁹. Since users use search engines in an individual and essentially anonymous manner, this type of agenda may reflect the state of the

³⁵ G. Weimann et al., *Reevaluating...*, op.cit., p. 810 ff.

³⁶ G. Weiman, H.B. Brosius, *New agenda for agenda-setting research...*, op. cit., p. 28.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 30.

³⁸ Ibidem

³⁹ M.W. Ragas, H.L. Tran, J.A. Martin, *Media-induced or search driven? A study of online agenda-setting effects during the BP oil disaster*, "Journalism Studies", Vol. 15(2014), no. 1, p. 50; according to researchers, one of the advantages of the search agenda is the fact that it not only reflects the cognitive interest in an issue, but also depicts media behaviours which, in a way, constitute evidence of salience of that issue; in other words, if a user searches the Internet for an issue about which they only just learned from news media, their behaviour proves that this issue is really important to them; M. Scharnow, J. Vogelgesang, *Measuring the public agenda using search engine queries*, "International Journal of Public Opinion Research", Vol. 23 (2011), no. 1, pp. 104-105.

public mind more accurately than the studies conducted by pollsters. The social range of internet access poses certain limitations here. However, the role of those limitations systematically declines.

Intermedia agenda-setting and agenda-melding

Recently, there has been great interest in agenda-setting studies which deal with the broadly understood transformations related to the process and effects of agenda-setting in a situation of expansion of the internet and new media⁴⁰. The main questions to be answered here are as follows: what is the significance of technological changes for the relationship between the traditional and the new media channels, which of those channels plays the dominant role in public agenda-setting; as well as whether and how the effects of agenda-setting differ depending on the media type - the type of media channel⁴¹.

The relationship between professional news media and new, participatory media is characterised by three types of phenomena: competition, complementarity and integration⁴². Complementarity plays the dominant role since producers are generally not so much concerned with major issues, as they are with highlighting certain aspects of those issues. Integration takes place through the mutual use of media coverage as the source of information (also through mutual influences). Competition involves the rivalry for popularity and advertisers, which translates into efforts to become attractive to the audience. It could therefore be concluded that new media and citizen journalism do not really replace, but rather complement professional coverage.

Under these new circumstances, the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda cannot, on the one hand, be measured without distinguishing between different media channels (different media agendas may produce different effects)⁴³ and, on the other hand, there is ample evidence that despite the diversification of media channels, the phenomena of intermedia agenda-setting and homogenisation of various types of media agenda still occur⁴⁴. As a result, the thematic content of various media channels may differ only to a slight degree.

⁴⁰ See e.g. M. McCombs, *Setting the agenda...*, op. cit., p. 17 ff.; G. Weiman, H.B. Brosius, *New agenda for agenda-setting research...*, op. cit., p. 26 ff.

⁴¹ J. Strömbäck, S. Kioussis, *A new look at agenda-setting effects...*, op. cit., p. 273.

⁴² C. Neuberger, C. Nuernbergk, *Competition, complementarity or integration? The relationship between professional and participatory media*, "Journalism Practice", Vol. 4 (2010), no. 3, p. 319.

⁴³ R. Eissler, A. Russel, B.D. Jones, *New avenues for the study of agenda-setting*, "Policy Studies Journal", Vol. 42 (2014), p. 80.

⁴⁴ J. Groshek, *Homogenous agendas, disparate frames: CNN and CNN international coverage online*, "Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media", Vol. 52 (2008), no. 1, p. 52; M.L. Atkinson, J. Lovet, F.R. Baumgartner, *Measuring the media agenda*, "Political Communication", Vol. 31 (2014), no. 2, p. 355.

Various types of media present the same super news because it has the highest informational value and attracts the largest audience.

The observations concerning agenda-building, i.e. the creation of traditional and new media agendas (based on various sources and principles, e.g. the criteria of a news item), suggest that the process of media agenda-building has changed as a result of new technologies, but they also reveal that the differences between internet portals and traditional media are not that significant as might be expected. A study carried out in the USA, based on empirical material consisting of 3,900 news items, demonstrated that traditional media and news websites offered coverage of almost identical, most popular topics. However, the agendas of blogs and social media were considerably different from those of traditional media⁴⁵. Other studies point to the phenomenon of intermedia agenda-setting which occurs between the traditional media agenda and the agenda of blogs (devoted to politics). Intermediate agenda-setting means that journalists from traditional media use blogs as serious sources of information (they legitimise it), whereas bloggers rely on traditional media as information sources⁴⁶. Marcus Messner, Marcia W. DiStaso present the relationships between traditional media and new media in the form of a “news source cycle”⁴⁷. It is based on the observation that news content can be passed from one medium to another and back, along the following path: 1) traditional media report on an issue - 2) the issue is taken up by bloggers - 3) bloggers popularise the issue by stirring media attention (making the issue fashionable) - 4) the attention received by the issue on the internet (the fashion) makes traditional media return to the topic (or only its selected aspects - attributes) - 5) the way in which the issue is covered by traditional media once more evokes interest from blogosphere, etc.

The diagnosis of the relations between traditional and new media is slightly different when the researchers focus their attention on the second level of agenda-setting, i.e. the level of attributes. While new and old media do not usually differ significantly in terms of the topics covered, there are considerable differences with respect to the agenda of attributes and interpretive frames⁴⁸. Different media often use interpretive frames which are different from

⁴⁵ S. Maier, *All the news fit to post? Comparing news content on the web to newspapers, television and radio*, “Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly”, Vol. 87 (2010), pp. 548-562,

⁴⁶ M. Messner, M.W. DiStaso, *The source cycle. How traditional media and weblogs use each other as sources*, “Journalism Studies”, Vol. 9 (2008), no. 3, p. 447.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 459.

⁴⁸ V. Campbell et al., *News blogs, mainstream news, and news agendas* [in:] *Web journalism: A new form of citizenship*, eds. S. Tunney, G. Monaghan, Eastbourne 2009, p. 20; cf. K.D. Sweetser, G.J. Golan, W. Wanta, *Intermedia agenda setting in television, advertising, and blogs during the 2004 Election*, “Mass Communication and Society”, Vol. 11 (2008), pp. 197-216,

those employed by their rival channels, or attract attention to other attributes⁴⁹. This means that the phenomenon of intermedia agenda-setting is probably more intense with respect to the agenda of topics and less intense with respect to the set of attributes which are selected and presented by different media channels in a more independent way (the same event or topic, but different aspects). In this regard, bloggers and users of new media play the role of reframers, which means they pay attention to different aspects of issues, different features of political actors, and different interpretive frames than professional journalists.

Similar assumptions concerning the different roles of new and old media at various levels of agenda-setting have provided the basis for the concept of agenda-melding⁵⁰. The concept is one of the responses to current research challenges and a sign of flexibility of old theories in a new environment. Agenda-melding involves combining the elements of various agendas under the recipient's personal agenda or under the collective agenda of a given communication and political community, which enables constructing one's own image of the world. The process of agenda-melding and its components are shown in Fig. 4.

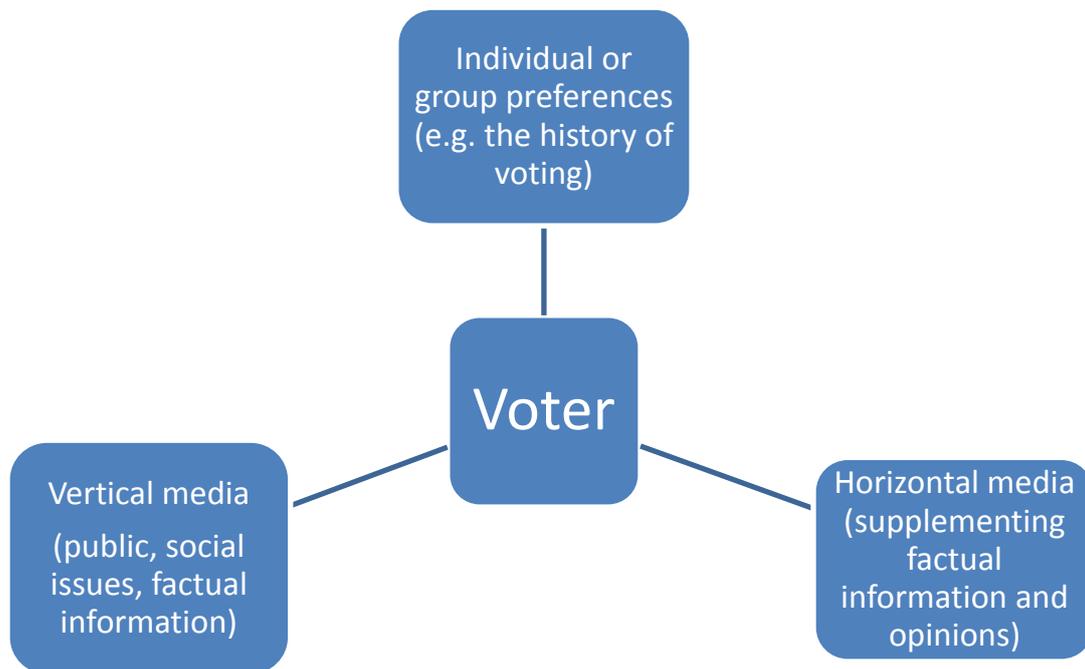


Fig. 4. Agenda-melding - sources and the process

Source: D.L. Shaw, D.H. Weaver, *Epilogue. Media agenda-setting and audience agenda-melding* [in:] M. McCombs, *Setting the agenda. The mass media and public opinion*. Second edition, Cambridge 2014, p. 146.

⁴⁹ J. Groshek, *Homogenous agendas...*, op. cit., p. 65.

⁵⁰ D.L. Shaw, D.H. Weaver, *Epilogue...*, op. cit., p. 145.

Agenda-melding does not replace the agenda-setting effect which exists in a changed scope and form. However, the concept of agenda-melding explains why and how the agenda-setting effect differs depending on the analysed media channel, group of recipients and selected individuals. Attention is drawn to the different way of functioning of the media known as vertical (with a traditional, institutionalised, hierarchical structure) and those known as horizontal (more democratised - civic and social in their nature). According to Donald Shaw and David H. Weaver, vertical media provide the basic agenda of news concerning the public life, while horizontal media provide supplementary information. Another element determining the composition of the individual or group agenda of a particular person or community are their views and socio-political preferences to date (e.g. their voting history). Based on the content of the vertical and horizontal media agenda and one's own agenda of preferences, the content of the individual agenda of a particular person or group is created. Horizontal media usually reflect the key topics of the mainstream agenda, although new media are often able to make traditional media interested in a niche, attractive topic. However, the studies conducted by the above-mentioned researchers demonstrate that there is a significant correspondence between the agenda of vertical, traditional media, and the agenda of horizontal, new media. The correlation coefficient reached 0.52, which confirms the existence of the intermedia agenda-setting process. Moreover, it was found that both vertical media (a coefficient of 0.87) and horizontal media (a coefficient of 0.39) are able to set the public agenda, although the agenda-setting capability of vertical media is still significantly higher than that of horizontal media.

Summary

Referring to the research question posed at the beginning of the article - whether the general impact of (traditional and new) media on public opinion becomes stronger or weaker as a result of the growing popularity of new media - it is worthwhile looking at the findings arising from the presented directions of research. The following studies point to the weakening of traditional media influence on public opinion:

- reverse agenda-setting - a situation where the hierarchy of issues that are popular among the online public affects the subject of interest and the hierarchy of issues in the media agenda;
- a change in the role of journalists from gatekeeping to gatewatching which involves checking what kind of topics appear in blogs or social media and including them in the traditional media agenda;

- search agenda - it affects the media agenda, but a reverse process also takes place here;
- if we consider bloggers to be representatives of public opinion, their activity contributes to reducing the impact of traditional media on public opinion because they fulfil the role of “early recognisers” and are able to affect the mainstream agenda, although this is not a common situation and they are more likely to set agenda at the second level than at the first one.

The following research directions suggest that the impact of traditional media on public opinion is growing stronger:

- intermedia agenda-setting and agenda-melding - the mutual impact of media agendas, the mixing of agendas and mutual complementation of their content contributes to the strengthening of mainstream media coverage and increasing its coherence, although it is important to note that the intermedia agenda-setting process is probably more intense in relation to the agenda of topics and less intense with respect to the set of attributes.
- network agenda-setting model - indicates an increased ability of the media to suggest/impose the interpretations of world-views on the public; new media can amplify this effect because they offer a greater possibility of identifying and combining issues and attributes corresponding to the recipients’ preferences;
- real world agenda - owing to new media, the scale of “agenda cutting” and, consequently, of omitting important issues by news media, is smaller than before - a wider visibility of the real world in the media enables the media to exert influence on a greater number of issues; however, account should also be taken of the fact that social media signal the presence of problems which are “cut out” by traditional media and in this context, the impact of traditional media on public opinion is weaker.

This meta-analysis was conducted on the basis of existing theories and results of empirical studies. It shows that we are currently witnessing a transformation of the relations between the media sphere and the public sphere. The voice of new media in the media sphere is increasingly stronger. In the light of the studies carried out so far, it is not possible to unequivocally conclude that online and social media contribute to the strengthening of the media agenda-setting power in relation to public opinion, but it seems that there are strong arguments to support that view. They primarily include: the third level of agenda-setting, intermedia agenda-setting and agenda-melding. Taking into consideration the arguments (in

favour of the weakened media impact on the public) arising from the agenda of blogs, reverse agenda-setting, search agenda or reduced scope of “agenda cutting”, it should be noted that those phenomena and processes are to, a certain extent, balanced out by the influence of traditional media on the new media agenda and the public agenda (e.g. the search agenda is only partly a public agenda, and partly a direct reaction to the content of old media, similar to the agenda of blogs). It seems therefore legitimate to say that the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda was not significantly weakened as a result of the development of new media. Rather, the strength of that influence remains at the same level in a situation where new forms of information flow between senders and recipients are used.