

Agenda Setting

I am one of those who believe that at least in America the press rules the country; it rules its politics, its religion, its social practices.
—Edward Willis Scripps, from *Damned Old Crank* (1951)

Does the news tell us what to think as a society? Or, in an oft-quoted remark by a communication scholar, is it “stunningly successful” in telling us “what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13)? The strong link between the importance that news media place on particular issues and the importance that the public places on those same issues demonstrates a type of communication effect called **agenda setting**.

Numerous studies have shown that news media do set the public agenda, but only in recent years have media effects researchers been able to solve empirical problems that had made it difficult for them to address agenda-setting issues in compelling ways. For years, critics of agenda setting pointed out that the methods employed in agenda-setting research only indicated that a relationship existed between the media agenda and the public agenda. **The causal direction, they said, could not be established.** Do the media always set the agenda for the public, they asked, **or does the public sometimes set the media agenda?** This led to ongoing research that asks the question: Who sets the agenda?

Using precise statistical methods, causal directions are now much clearer. **Agenda-setting effects are clearly indicated only when researchers are able to measure public opinion before and after media coverage of specific issues and to control or account for additional factors.** For this reason, election campaigns have been popular among researchers because of their periodicity and other characteristics that make them suitable for agenda-setting research designs.

Initially, agenda-setting research examined in fairly global terms the influence of news media in shaping people’s perceptions of varied issues and events. **Since the seminal study of public issues in the 1968 presidential campaign**

(McCombs & Shaw, 1972), studies have confirmed the strong correspondence between news stories and the salience of issues covered to the public.

In recent years, agenda-setting research has expanded to ask the question: "Who sets the media agenda?" Each day, hundreds of news stories occur around the world, throughout the nation, in individual regions and states, and at local levels. News professionals cannot possibly examine, organize, and pass along to the public *all* the news of the day. Space and time limitations preclude doing that. Instead, journalists and news editors must decide which stories to cover, which to run, and which to ignore. In making such decisions, news professionals invariably *set the agenda* for news consumers. They gauge the value of news on the basis of their perceptions of its importance to their readers and viewers.

Control over the flow of news information by media professionals is an important function called **gatekeeping**. Simply put, journalists, editors, and broadcasters allow a certain amount of news to pass through to the public each day, but time and space constraints force them to shut the gates and stop the flow of most information to news consumers. Scholars have been aware of this powerful gatekeeping function for many years, but only recently have they begun to examine the many factors that influence the gatekeeping process.

More recent research has identified a **second level of agenda setting** called **attribute agenda setting** (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). This research strongly resembles framing research in many ways (see Chapter 7). Researchers study the attributes of different elements related to media stories—such as the attributes of issue coverage, attributes of candidates, or of their images. Studies have shown that people tend to attribute to candidates that which the press tells them to attribute (Becker & McCombs, 1978; Kim & McCombs, 2007; King, 1997; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000). The way the press covers attributes of issues has also been found to influence voters. In one Japanese study, the media emphasized the importance of traditional government mechanisms in initiating political reforms, and the more people used the media, the more they cited this as an issue of importance (Takeshita & Mikami, 1995).

Attributes can be *cognitive* in nature, meaning that the media user thinks about the issues or candidates and their attributes, or attributes can be *affective* in nature, meaning that the media user notices the tone in which the attributes are portrayed. If the media portray candidates or issues in negative or positive tones, they can actually influence what voters think, rather than simply what they think about.

This makes **framing** of a news story very important. Journalists can use particular viewpoints from various sources or even particular word choices to "frame" a story in a particular light. Frames "invite people to think about an issue in a particular way" (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 19).

This chapter identifies the conceptual foundations of agenda setting and provides a brief history of the agenda-setting research tradition. It also takes a look at recent trends in agenda-setting research, such as attribute agenda setting, and studies that examine who sets the media agenda, including inter-media agenda setting. It examines the scholarly controversy over agenda setting, framing, and priming, noting similarities and differences in these three related areas of media effects research.

Conceptual Roots

Bernard Cohen (1963) was not the first to describe the notion of the press setting the public agenda. The concept can be traced to Walter Lippmann, a famous newspaper columnist and social commentator of the early 20th century. Lippmann's book, *Public Opinion* (1922), has been called the most influential, nonscholarly work in the history of the academic study of mass communication (Carey, 1996). Lippmann wrote about how the news media are responsible for shaping the public's perception of the world. He emphasized that the pictures of reality created by the news media were merely *reflections* of actual reality and therefore were sometimes distorted. Lippmann said that the news-media projections of the world create a **pseudo-environment** for each news consumer. The pseudo-environment exists in addition to the *actual* environment, and people react to this pseudo-environment that media create. "For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for a direct acquaintance" (p. 16).

Other scholars also described the concept of agenda setting in their writings prior to empirical assessment of the concept in the early 1970s. In 1958 Norton Long wrote:

In a sense, the newspaper is the prime mover in setting the territorial agenda. It has a great part in determining what most people will be talking about, what most people will think the facts are, and what most people will regard as the way problems are to be dealt with. (p. 260)

The following year, Kurt and Gladys Lang wrote: "The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about" (1959, p. 232).

The Cognitive Paradigm

According to Kosicki (1993), agenda-setting research evolved into its present form for several reasons. During the 1960s and 1970s, researchers rejected using the persuasion paradigm to explain agenda-setting effects, and began taking notice of the emerging cognitive paradigm.

Agenda setting, with its apparently simple, easy-to-explain, and intuitively appealing hypothesis, seemed right for the time. On its face it is a rejection of persuasion, a "reframing" of the basic research question from "telling people what to think" to "telling them what to think about" (Cohen, 1963). This seemingly small, but clever, twist of phrase focuses attention away from persuasion and onto something new. The freshness of the model has obvious appeal. It signals not only a move away from persuasion toward other cognitive factors (Becker & Kosicki, 1991), but a move toward a particular kind of cognitive factor: an agenda of issues. (Kosicki, 1993, p. 231)

In the cognitive paradigm, three primary factors influence each other bidirectionally: a person's behavior, a person's cognitive abilities, and environmen-

tal events to which a person is exposed. "Reciprocal causation provides people with opportunities to exercise some control over events in their lives, as well as set limits of self-direction. Because of the bidirectionality of influence, people are both products and producers of their environment" (Bandura, 1994, p. 61).

The need for orientation, for example, is based upon the idea of cognitive mapping, in which people strive to orient themselves whenever they find themselves in unfamiliar settings. Agenda-setting researchers have found that voters with high need for orientation (a high degree of interest in the election and a high degree of uncertainty about key issues) are more likely to be influenced by media messages. According to McCombs and Reynolds (2009), "The concept of need for orientation provides a richer psychological explanation for variability in agenda-setting effects than simply classifying issues along the obtrusive/unobtrusive continuum" (p. 8).

Priming

Priming is another strong conceptual basis for the agenda-setting phenomenon, as it is considered by researchers to be one of the outcomes of agenda setting (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009; see Chapter 5). When the news media report on particular attributes of certain issues or emphasize particular characteristics of political candidates, for example, news consumers are "primed" to associate those characteristics with those candidates or identify certain attributes to particular issues.

"By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news [as well as other news media] influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63).

Research Tradition

The first empirical test of Lippmann's ideas about agenda setting was published in 1972 by two University of North Carolina researchers, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, in what came to be known as the Chapel Hill study.

In 1968 the Vietnam conflict raged, African Americans struggled for civil rights, the country's youth rebelled against authority, and drug abuse became a serious problem. Robert F. Kennedy's bid for the presidency ended tragically when an assassin gunned him down in California. Hubert H. Humphrey emerged as the Democratic nominee instead, challenging Republican Richard M. Nixon and the independent candidate, George C. Wallace.

In this tempestuous social climate, as the nation prepared to select a new chief executive, McCombs and Shaw designed a study to test the influence of campaign coverage on public perceptions of the importance of several crucial social issues. Prior to the election, they asked Chapel Hill voters: "What are you most concerned about these days? That is, regardless of what politicians say, what are the two or three main things which you think the government should



The first agenda-setting study was conducted in the tempestuous social climate of 1968.

concentrate on doing something about?" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 178). The issues that respondents identified—foreign policy, law and order, fiscal policy, civil rights, and public welfare—were ranked according to the percentage of respondents identifying them.

The actual content of local news media served as a measured independent variable in the Chapel Hill study, and the dependent variable, issue salience, was compared to topic coverage. The researchers analyzed the contents of local newspapers, television, and radio stations for three weeks during the campaign to identify issues that were receiving the most media attention. When McCombs and Shaw compared these results to the public responses, they found almost identical "agendas" on the part of the public and the news media. They named this "transfer of salience" of issues from the media to the public "the agenda-setting influence of mass communication" (McCombs & Bell, 1996, p. 96).

After this groundbreaking study, it might be said that agenda-setting research caught fire among communication investigators, with hundreds of studies being conducted throughout the ensuing decades. McCombs and Shaw (1993) reviewed the abundant research findings and identified four phases of growth in agenda-setting research: (1) publication of their original study in 1972, (2) replication and examination of contingent conditions, (3) an expansion of the original idea of agenda setting into the areas of candidate characteristics and other political aspects, and (4) a focus upon the sources of the media agenda.

In 1973, G. Ray Funkhouser replicated the Chapel Hill study and identified a strong correspondence between public opinion trends in the 1960s and coverage of issues in the news media during that period. Funkhouser assessed public

opinion using answers to a Gallup Poll question regarding the most significant problem in the nation. He analyzed the content of issues of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* to determine the media agenda. He then compared these findings with official statistics (e.g., the actual number of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, number of demonstrations on campus or on behalf of civil rights) to gauge congruence between actual reality and perceptions of reality on the part of the public and the media. He found a strong correlation between the amount of media coverage of an issue and the public's perceived importance of that issue; moreover, he also found that media coverage did not always represent the actual reality of issues and situations (Funkhouser, 1973).

McCombs and Shaw's second study (Shaw & McCombs, 1977) examined the causal directions for agenda-setting effects and contingent conditions for such effects during the 1972 presidential election campaign. Voters in Charlotte, North Carolina, were surveyed before and after the election to reveal short-term agenda-setting effects. The researchers found that voters with a greater need for orientation to their world and voters who used the mass media more frequently than others were more likely to have agendas that corresponded to the news media agenda. As for causation, the researchers claimed to find evidence to support the agenda-setting influence of the press, but the evidence was not overwhelming (1977; Westley, 1978).

In an attempt to provide stronger evidence for causal direction, the next major study of agenda setting was conducted in a laboratory setting where the researchers manipulated videotaped network television newscasts to vary the placement and emphasis given to the stories (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982). Each day for a week, research participants viewed the altered newscasts, which were presented to them as actual and unaltered. Participants were divided into two groups. One group was shown newscasts that emphasized the weak nature of U.S. military defenses; the other group saw newscasts that did not contain these particular stories. The researchers surveyed participants before and after the weeklong experiment and found statistically significant agenda-setting effects. At the end of the week, the group that had seen the "weak defense" stories rated the issue of military defense significantly higher than the group that had not been shown the stories (Iyengar et al., 1982). Follow-up experiments provided additional empirical evidence for the agenda-setting effects of mass media (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Wanta, 1988).

Another phase of agenda-setting research began during the 1976 presidential campaign when the agenda of candidate characteristics and the alternative agenda of political interest were examined (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). The researchers analyzed the dynamics of how voters perceived candidate characteristics and the images of candidates portrayed in the media (McCombs, 1992). Voters in six locations—three sites in the Northeast and three in the Midwest—participated in the longitudinal study to assess contingent factors at work in the agenda-setting process. The voters' occupations, education levels, and geographic locations were found to affect the degree to which the media were responsible for setting their issue agendas at various times during the election campaign.

Agenda-Setting Research

Four Phases at a Glance

Phase 1: Initial Study

Chapel Hill Study (1972), McCombs & Shaw.

Findings: The issues considered important by the news media were also considered important by the general public.

Phase 2: Replication

Charlotte Voter Study (1977), Shaw & McCombs.

Findings: Voters with greater orientation needs and those who used mass media more often than others were more likely to have agendas (issue salience) that matched the media agenda.

Laboratory Study (1982), Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder.

Findings: Research participants who viewed stories about the weak nature of United States defense capabilities rated the issue significantly higher than those who did not see the stories.

Phase 3: Contingent Factors

1976 Candidate Study (1981), Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal.

Findings: Dynamics of voters' perceptions of candidates and their images as portrayed by news media were examined. Contingent factors were found to affect the agenda-setting process. Voters' occupations, education levels, and their geographic locations played a part in determining whether voters' issue agendas matched the media agenda.

Phase 4: Who Sets The Media Agenda?

Media Agenda Sources (1991), Shoemaker & Reese.

Findings: Many influences are at work creating the media agenda each day. These include, for example, sociological factors related to the news organization and external organizations, ideological factors, individual differences among reporters and editors, and the routine of media work.

A fourth phase began in the 1980s when researchers began investigating sources of the media agenda. A number of influences that create the media agenda each day were identified (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). These included sociological factors related to the news organization and external organizations, the routine of media work, ideological concerns, and individual differences between reporters and editors.

Recent Research

The current state of agenda-setting research expands on all four phases, but many recent studies have focused on attribute agenda setting and who sets the media agenda. There has been an explosion of framing studies in recent years, along with the argument that framing should be considered a separate area of

media effects research; consequently, we have provided a separate chapter on framing in this volume.

McCombs and Reynolds noted in 2009 that since the Chapel Hill study, “more than 425 empirical studies on the agenda-setting influence of the news media” have been conducted by researchers (p. 2). This section will examine several studies conducted since the turn of the century.

One avenue that agenda-setting researchers have begun exploring is the various effects of Internet news coverage. Wang (2000) conducted an experiment in which certain groups were shown an online newspaper containing articles on racism, and other groups were shown online newspapers not containing the racism articles. The groups who read the racism articles subsequently identified racism as an important public issue.

In 2003, Ku, Kaid, and Pfau published a study that looked at the importance of website campaigning on both public opinion and setting the traditional media agendas. They noted that “there is strong evidence of a convergence of the public’s attention to the issues on the Web sites,” and that the candidate websites had a “direct agenda-setting impact on the public” (p. 544).

Another study of agenda setting tested readers of the online version of *The New York Times* (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). For five days, some readers examined the print version of the newspaper whereas others examined the online version. Both experienced agenda-setting effects, and their perceptions of important issues were different, corresponding to the differing issues of importance in the print and online versions.

Attribute Agenda Setting and Framing

Hester and Gibson (2003) used a content analysis and a time-series analysis to study second-level agenda-setting effects of news about the economy and its influence on people’s perceptions and actual economic conditions. They found that negative economic news was much more likely to occur than positive news, and that the negative news coverage had no effect on individuals’ evaluations of *present* economic predictions. Instead, people seem to rely more on “day-to-day personal experiences with the economy and real-world economic indicators when making assessments of current economic conditions” (p. 85). The researchers did find that the negative news coverage was a strong factor in shaping opinions of the public regarding *future* economic conditions. In the words of the researchers, “Increased unfavorable news coverage of the economy was related to lowered evaluations of future economic performance” (p. 85). They noted that time-series analysis allowed them to confidently say that the media influenced people’s evaluations and not the other way around.

An attribute agenda setting study conducted by Kim and McCombs (2007) found that media portrayal of candidates’ attributes had a strong influence on voters in the 2002 elections for Texas governor and U.S. senator. These researchers content analyzed a daily newspaper in Austin, Texas, and identified attributes that were strongly covered in the press, including “general political descriptions, specific issue positions, personal qualifications and character, biographical information, campaign conduct, and support and endorsements” (p. 303). Then they

Research Spotlight

News Story Descriptions and the Public's Opinions of Political Candidates

Kihan Kim and Maxwell McCombs (2007)

Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 84(2), 299-314

In this 2007 study, the researchers combined a content analysis of the local daily newspaper in Austin, Texas, with a telephone survey of Austin residents during the 2002 elections for Texas governor and U.S. senator to discover agenda-setting effects. "Correlation and regression analyses support the central proposition of attribute agenda setting and indicate that attributes positively or negatively covered in the news are related to opinions about each candidate. Attributes receiving extensive media attention were more likely to affect attitudinal judgments for heavy newspaper readers than for light newspaper readers" (p. 299).

The Hypotheses

H1: The public's attribute agenda for a political candidate reflects the media's attribute agenda. These attribute agendas are defined in terms of two dimensions, the substantive attributes on the agenda and the affective tone of each substantive attribute.

H2: The affective tone of the attributes in the public's mind for a candidate predicts opinions about the candidates.

H3: The substantive and affective aspects of attributes emphasized in the media are significant elements in the public's attitudinal judgments.

The Content Analysis

The content analysis focused on news stories, editorials, and opinion articles that asserted various attributes for four candidates (Rick Perry and Tony Sanchez for governor and John Cornyn and Ron Kirk for U.S. senator) during a four-week period in September 2002. They identified 298 assertions that included 83 specific or discrete attributes. The 83 attributes fell under six major attribute categories:

- General political descriptions
- Specific issue positions
- Personal qualifications and character
- Biographical information
- Campaign conduct
- Support and endorsements

Of the six, the personal qualifications and character category accounted for 42.1% of all the assertions. This category included 11 specific attributes:

- Leadership
- Experience
- Competence
- Credibility
- Morality
- Caring about people
- Communication skills
- Pride in family/background, roots, and race/ethnicity

(continued)

- Nonpolitician
- Style and personality
- Other comments about the candidate's personal qualifications and character

The researchers further coded the tone of the attributes, noting if they were positive, negative, or neutral.

The Survey

A telephone survey was conducted between September 26 and October 11, 2002, with 417 adults, randomly selected from the Austin metropolitan area. Students were trained to conduct the interviews via the telephone. Of the 417 randomly selected, 45% completed the survey.

Among those who completed the survey, 47% were male and 35% were between the ages of 18 and 34; 27% were between 35 and 44; 22% were between 44 and 54, and 16% were 55 or older. Whites accounted for 78% of respondents, African Americans, 7%, and Hispanics, 15%. Half of the sample reported annual incomes of \$50,000 or higher and 60% of the sample had at least some college education or a college degree.

Variables of major interest included the public's attribute agenda for each of the four candidates and attitude toward each of the four candidates. Respondents were asked the following question to measure attribute agenda:

"Suppose that one of your friends has been away a long time and knows nothing about the candidates for governor of Texas and U.S. Senator from Texas. What would you tell your friend about (Cornyn, Kirk, Perry, and Sanchez)?"

Descriptions of the candidates were dominated by assertions about personal qualifications and character, ranging from 70% to 72% of the attributes.

To measure respondents' attitudes toward each of the candidates, they were asked:

"How do you feel about Rick Perry (Sanchez, Kirk, and Cornyn)?" They were offered a five-point scale ranging from "strongly favorable" to "strongly unfavorable."

The researchers measured three control variables: age, party identification (Republican, Democrat, and Independent) and ideological orientation (conservative, moderate, and liberal). They measured frequency of newspaper reading on a five-point scale from "never read the newspaper" to "read the newspaper every day." Respondents were asked which newspaper they read.

The Findings

The most visible candidates were described in most detail, and descriptions of all candidates focused on comments about their personal qualifications and character. The media's attribute agenda and the public's attribute agenda were found to correspond significantly, and thus hypothesis 1 was supported.

Regression analysis was used to test hypothesis 2. The positive attributes predicted attitude toward each candidate in positive directions, and negative attributes predicted attitude toward each candidate in negative directions, above and beyond the effects of political identity, ideology, age, and frequency of newspaper reading. The findings supported hypothesis 2.

To test hypothesis 3, regression analysis was used again, but this time respondents were divided into two groups of heavy and light newspaper readers. Party identification, ideological orientation, and age served as control variables. Results supported hypothesis 3, with heavy newspaper readers more likely to have attitudes toward candidates predicted by the tone emphasized in the media, whereas light newspaper readers were less likely.

conducted telephone interviews of a sample of residents in the area. Those people who read the newspaper were found to be more likely to have their judgments affected by what they read in the press regarding the attributes of the candidates.

Wu and Coleman's 2009 study of the two levels of agenda setting focused on the 2004 presidential election. The researchers found that the attributes describing the candidates had a strong influence on voter perceptions of the candidates and actually predicted their voting intentions. The study also confirmed that negative media coverage of a candidate's image influences the public more than does positive coverage.

Ha (2011), Rhee (1997), and Shen (2004) found that people's existing attitudes influence the impact of news framing. Ha found that a person's level of political sophistication was the key to understanding agenda-setting effects of campaign news coverage. The least politically sophisticated and most politically sophisticated audience members were less likely to accept the news agendas than were the moderately politically sophisticated. Shen (2004) tested research participants to see if they had preexisting beliefs and attitudes about the economic and environmental dimensions of two types of news stories, one on stem cell research and the other on oil drilling in Alaska. The participants who already had existing beliefs and attitudes on the topics were more likely than non-predisposed participants to accept new constructs that applied to the issues at hand.

The Media Agenda

Investigation of news sources that may set the media agenda has continued to interest scholars (Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, & McCombs, 1989). Several recent studies have focused on the influence of a particular U.S. president on the news media agenda. In particular, these studies have identified issues covered prominently in the news media a month before and after the President's State of the Union Address to determine any influence the speech may have had.

Wanta and Foote (1994) examined presidential documents related to various issues, then employed a time-series analysis to compare news coverage of those issues on the three national networks. The researchers identified 16 issues that they categorized into four groups: international problems, the economy, social problems, and social issues. They found significant correlations between media coverage and presidential emphasis on the issues in all categories except that of the economy.

Another important finding of the Wanta and Foote (1994) study was that media coverage was most often influenced by the president. In other words, the president's issue agenda strongly influenced the media agenda. The news media appeared to influence the president on only 3 of the 16 issues examined: East-West relations, crime and drugs, and environmental concerns.

Agenda-setting researchers have often used the metaphor of peeling an onion to describe the process of setting the media agenda, with the different layers representing different influences. These layers range from "prevailing social ideology to the beliefs and psychology of an individual journalist" (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009).

In addition to the president of the United States, other public officials and individuals have been found to influence the media agenda—even media outlets themselves, such as *The New York Times* (Mazur, 1987; Ploughman, 1984; Reese & Danielian, 1989). Public relations news releases, political advertisements, and websites have also been shown to set the agenda for other news outlets (Boyle, 2001).

Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming

The most recent debate among mass communication scholars has to do with the similarities and differences of agenda setting, framing, and priming. Some say framing and priming should be included beneath the heading of agenda setting (Ghanem, 1997), whereas others argue that these three areas of research should be distinct from one another (Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele, 2004; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Framing studies have escalated in recent years, but more research needs to be done to make the distinctions between framing and agenda setting clearer. Weaver (2007) wrote of agenda setting and framing: “Both are concerned with ways of thinking rather than objects of thinking. But framing does seem to include a broader range of cognitive processes—such as moral evaluations, causal reasoning, appeals to principles, and recommendations for treatment of problems—than does second-level agenda setting (the salience of attributes of an object)” (p. 146).

Framing studies are focused not only on media frames of particular issues or objects, but on the way that audience members receive and interpret those frames or develop a “schema” that can be stored in memory and activated for later judgment. Schemata are related to mental models in the way they are formed, activated, and stored (Scheufele, 2004).

Part of the problem that scholars have not addressed may have to do with semantics. Priming and agenda setting are phrases that denote active influence of one thing on another, or a media effect. The mere word *framing* suggests the activity of putting something in a particular light or saying it in a particular way, but “framing” in and of itself does not suggest an effect of any kind, even though most framing studies test for effects of the news frame. In other words, people can be “primed” and their agendas can be “set” by mass media, but a mass media consumer cannot be “framed” (except for a crime). The name does not suggest an effect, only a preliminary activity.

Summary

Agenda setting is often described in Cohen’s quote that 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*.” Recent research has identified “second-level agenda-setting effects” that reveal mass media are also successful in telling people what to think.

One serious problem that agenda-setting researchers have faced is the control of extraneous variables. Agenda-setting effects are clearly indicated only when researchers are able to measure public opinion before and after media coverage of specific issues. Strong and reliable statistical tools have helped media researchers identify the direction of the agenda-setting influence.

Initially, agenda-setting research examined the influence of news media in shaping people's perceptions of the world. In recent years, agenda-setting research has expanded to ask: Who sets the media agenda? Control over the flow of news information by media professionals is an important function called gatekeeping.

Walter Lippmann was the first to describe the agenda-setting process in *Public Opinion* (1922). He wrote about the news media's responsibility for shaping the public's perception of the world and creating a pseudo-environment for each news consumer.

The first empirical test of Lippmann's ideas about agenda-setting was Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's Chapel Hill study (1972), which tested the influence of campaign coverage on public perceptions of issue importance.

Hundreds of agenda-setting studies were conducted in the years following the Chapel Hill study. The growth in the research tradition has been divided into four phases: (1) publication of the Chapel Hill study, (2) replication and examination of contingent conditions, (3) an expansion of the original idea of agenda setting into the areas of candidate characteristics and other political aspects, and (4) a focus on the sources of the media agenda.

Scholars are divided on whether agenda setting, priming, and framing should be considered different areas of media effects research.