

Agenda Setting Theory in The Age of Digital Media: An Analytical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores agenda-setting theory within digital media. It aims to evaluate changes in these paradigms due to digital platforms and their impact on mass communication theories. The discussion includes a historical overview of agenda-setting theory, grounded in foundational works and expanded by contemporary insights on user agency and information dissemination in the digital age. Using qualitative methods, the study incorporates thematic analysis, content analysis, and interviews with media professionals and users to collect comprehensive data. Key findings indicate that the traditional linear flow of information from media to the public has shifted to a multidirectional exchange influenced by user-generated content and social media dynamics. The study emphasizes the need for scholars to adapt traditional media theories to the participatory nature of modern platforms. This research enhances understanding of current media ecosystems and lays the groundwork for future studies on media influence in complex digital environments.

Keywords: agenda-setting theory, digital media, qualitative research, mass communication, user-generated content.

The genesis of agenda setting theory can be traced back to the pioneering work of Walter Lippmann in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*. Lippmann's exploration into the role of mass media in shaping public perceptions laid the groundwork for the subsequent development of agenda setting theory. According to Lippmann, the media plays a crucial role in defining the agenda for public discourse by highlighting certain issues while ignoring others (Lippmann, 1922). This notion of media influence on public perception set the stage for the more formalized theory that would emerge in the following decades. The formal conceptualization of agenda

setting theory occurred in the seminal 1968 study conducted by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. Their research during the U.S. presidential election demonstrated the correlation between media emphasis on particular issues and the importance attributed to these issues by the public. This study, often referred to as the Chapel Hill study, confirmed that the media doesn't tell people what to think, but rather what to think about (Vargo, 2018). Since its inception, agenda setting theory has undergone substantial expansion and refinement. Kim, Kim, and Zhou (2017) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of agenda setting research from 1972 to

2015, highlighting the continuous growth in the number of studies and the broadening of research topics, media, and methodologies. The authors noted that agenda setting research has increasingly incorporated other theoretical frameworks, reflecting a dynamic and evolving theoretical landscape. Further expansion is evident in the various branches of agenda setting theory, such as Network Agenda Setting (NAS) and the concept of Need for Orientation (NFO). NAS explores how inter-media agenda setting can influence public opinion by examining the relationships between different media sources. NFO, on the other hand, investigates the conditions under which individuals are more likely to be influenced by media agenda setting, often related to their uncertainty and relevance regarding certain issues (Vargo, 2018). The digital age has introduced significant shifts in the media landscape, prompting researchers to adapt and extend traditional theories to accommodate new media dynamics. The emergence of social media and other digital platforms has transformed the means through which information is disseminated and consumed. This environment fosters a more participatory and decentralized model of agenda setting, where user-generated content plays a pivotal role (Kim et al., 2017). Additionally, the application of agenda setting theory in current media practices is reinforced by research that examines its implications in high-profile cases, such as the Ferdy Sambo case, highlighting the media's role in shaping public discourse and opinion on critical issues ((Nuriyati Samatan et al., 2024), (Marleen Muskita et al., 2023)). Li (2023) case study on the Olympic Games illustrates how agenda setting theory remains pertinent in contemporary media analysis. The study underscores the ongoing relevance of traditional agenda setting mechanisms while also suggesting areas for improvement in media practices. Specifically, Li advocates for more rigorous source vetting, enhanced journalist education, and systematic news production and

evaluation processes to maintain the media's role in public opinion formation.

Purpose of the Study

The field of mass communication has experienced monumental shifts with the advent of digital media, fundamentally altering established theories and paradigms. This study seeks to explore the implications of digital media on agenda-setting theory, employing a qualitative methodology to provide an in-depth analytical perspective. Traditional media was once considered the gatekeeper of public attention and discourse, but the infiltration of digital platforms necessitates a reevaluation of this paradigm. This study analyzes agenda-setting functions in the digital era, with particular focus on the interplay between traditional media, online media, and social media platforms. The research presented in this paper delves into key qualitative insights derived from textual analysis, content analysis, and observational methods. By concentrating on specific case studies and thematic analyses, we seek to dissect the dynamics at play between various media forms. This paper examines the hypothesis that the digital age has engendered a more complex, multidirectional flow of information, contrasting with the unilateral dissemination typically seen in traditional media formats. In doing so, it challenges existing conceptualizations and highlights the need for updating classical theories to fit contemporary realities (Francisco Gomez Medina, 2024). Drawing from the seminal work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) and building upon it with contemporary studies by Neuman et al. (2014) and Tao, Boukes, and Schuck (2024), this research underscores that agenda-setting in the digital age is neither predominantly top-down nor grassroots. Instead, it is a fluid and dynamic interaction marked by real-time feedback loops and adaptive audience behavior. These findings carry significant ramifications for the broader landscape of mass communication theories, prompting a

reconsideration of long-held notions about media influence and public opinion formation (Stan Geertman, 2024).

Significance of the Study in Digital Media

The advent of digital media has dramatically reshaped the landscape of mass communication, particularly affecting agenda setting theory. Traditionally, mass media held substantial power in influencing public opinion by determining which issues were given prominence. In the digital era, this dynamic has experienced a significant shift due to the proliferation of social media platforms and the resulting audience fragmentation (Feezell, 2018). Social media has introduced new variables that traditional media theories must now contend with. This platforms role in agenda setting is paramount, given its ability to rapidly disseminate information and engage users in ways conventional media cannot. Feezell's (2018) study highlights how social media, particularly platforms like Facebook, can channel political information to users who might not actively seek it, thereby influencing their perceptions of issue importance. This incidental news exposure is particularly potent for individuals with low political interest, illustrating the unique agenda-setting capabilities of social media in the digital age. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a real-time case study on how digital media influences public and governmental agendas. Zhou and Zheng (2022) examined the interplay between public, media, and government agendas on Weibo, a popular Chinese social media platform, during the pandemic. Their findings indicated that public engagement on social media exerted significant influence over media and government agendas, a departure from traditional models where media held predominant sway. This shift underscores the evolving nature of agenda-setting dynamics in a digital context, where the public can directly impact the prioritization of issues through social platforms. Social media's role in shaping truth and disinformation is another critical aspect of its influence on agenda setting. As discussed by Petricone (2021), the

post-truth era facilitated by social media has created a complex environment where disinformation can spread unchecked, significantly impacting public discourse. The global dynamics of disinformation, illustrated through events like the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the propagation of conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate, reveal how social media can not only set agendas but also fabricate truth. This capability calls into question the reliability of information circulating on these platforms, complicating the agenda-setting process as falsehoods often gain as much traction as verified facts. McLuhan's (1964) seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* offers a foundational perspective pertinent to understanding this transformation. McLuhan posited that the medium itself influences how messages are perceived, a concept encapsulated in his famous dictum the medium is the message. In the digital age, the characteristics of social media platforms—interactivity, immediacy, and multiplicity—profoundly affect the agenda-setting function. These platforms not only disseminate information but also change the nature of public engagement and issue salience. The significance of studying agenda setting in the context of digital media becomes clear when we consider the platform's unprecedented ability to mobilize public opinion and shape political landscapes. As Feezell (2018) and Zhou and Zheng (2022) have shown, the interaction between media, public, and governmental agendas is now a more fluid and reciprocal process. Furthermore, research on the impact of digital media consumption patterns highlights the cultural phenomenon of binge-watching as a reflection of changing audience engagement (cite8). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing a comprehensive mass communication theory applicable to the digital era.

Literature Review

Agenda setting theory has been a central framework in mass communication studies, tracing its origins back to the seminal work of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw during the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Their foundational study posited that the media significantly influences the public agenda by determining which issues are perceived as important (Valenzuela, 2019). Before delving into the changes brought by digital media, it is crucial to understand the historical development of this theory and how it evolved over time, beginning with its roots in traditional media. In the early days, agenda setting was primarily studied within the realm of print and broadcast journalism. The People's Choice study by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) on voter behavior during the 1940 U.S. presidential election laid important groundwork. The researchers discovered that media did not directly alter public opinions but rather reinforced pre-existing attitudes and facilitated opinion formation by focusing on selective issues (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). This early work hinted at the medias power to shape public perception indirectly, setting the stage for later studies on agenda setting. The core premise of agenda setting is that the prominence of an issue in the media is positively correlated with its salience in public opinion (Valenzuela, 2019). McCombs and Shaw (1972) formalized this concept through their Chapel Hill study, which demonstrated a strong correlation between the issues emphasized in media coverage and those considered important by the public. This study marked the beginning of extensive research into agenda setting, capturing how the media do not tell people what to think but rather what to think about. With the advent of digital media, particularly social media platforms, the traditional dynamics of agenda setting began to change. Digital media introduced new actors and mechanisms into the agenda setting process, complicating the straightforward media-public

relationship traditionally posited by the theory. Funk's (2018) study on Reddit communities, for instance, highlighted how digital community members resist mainstream media agendas and develop their own distinct issue priorities. In this case, members of Reddit communities on Christianity actively rejected the mainstream medias portrayal of Christianity and Christians, suggesting a level of agency and resistance enabled by digital platforms (Funk, 2018). As digital platforms grew, the decentralized and interactive nature of social media networks began to challenge traditional models of agenda setting. Social media allows users to not only consume content but also produce and share it, thereby influencing the media agenda from the bottom up. This shift blurs the lines between media producers and consumers, making the agenda setting process more complex and multidirectional (Ehrenreich et al., 2021). For adolescents, digital communication plays a substantial role in their development and socialization, further highlighting the changing mechanisms through which media can influence public agendas (Ehrenreich et al., 2021). Moreover, Valenzuela (2019) noted that agenda setting has expanded to include several nuanced aspects such as the influence of media on the attributes of issues and the psychological mechanisms that underlie these effects. The development of these second-level agenda setting and attribute agenda setting theories showed the complexity within the initial hypothesis proposed by McCombs and Shaw. As digital medias autonomy and user-generated content become more prevalent, these theories must adapt to consider multiple interconnected agendas set by various decentralized actors. Particularly in coverage of unresolved conflicts, mass media news coverage can perpetuate mediated images that shape public understanding and communal memory (cite10). Since, agenda setting theory has evolved from its early foundations in voter behavior studies and traditional mass media models to encompass more complex, dynamic processes influenced by

digital media. The historical development underscores the moving target that agenda setting represents, adapting continually to changes in media landscapes and public communication technologies (citell). As we move forward, understanding and expanding the applications of agenda setting theory in the digital age will require an ongoing reassessment of its mechanisms, influenced by the growing role of interactive and participatory digital platforms.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda setting theory, a cornerstone of mass communication research, has evolved significantly in the digital age. While its core premise—that media influences what issues the public considers important—remains valid, the theory's application has become more complex and nuanced. The traditional linear model of agenda setting, where mainstream media largely dictated public discourse, has given way to a more dynamic, non-linear interaction between media, politicians, and the public. Digital platforms have democratized information dissemination, introducing multiple actors into the agenda-setting process and diluting the monopoly once held by traditional media gatekeepers. This shift is exemplified by Lampoltshammer, Luca, and Thurnays (2022) study of local elections in Lower Austria, which revealed a complex interplay of influences highly sensitive to initial conditions. Minor changes in digital discourse can now lead to significant shifts in public opinion, challenging the predictability of agenda-setting effects. The integration of social media into newsrooms has further transformed the agenda-setting landscape. David, Tandoc, and Katigbaks (2019) research in the Philippines demonstrates how news organizations now incorporate audience preferences, gleaned from social media analytics, into editorial decisions. This feedback-driven approach represents a departure from unidirectional agenda setting, giving the public a

more immediate role in shaping news agendas. However, the democratization of information has also introduced new challenges, particularly in the form of disinformation. Diaz Ruiz (2023) highlights how digital platforms monetization strategies incentivize the spread of deceptive content, creating a more adversarial and fragmented public sphere. This phenomenon compromises traditional media's agenda-setting role and manipulates public discourse for economic gains. The evolution of agenda setting theory intersects with related concepts like framing and priming. While agenda setting focuses on issue salience, framing shapes the interpretive context, and priming influences subsequent judgments based on that salience. In the digital landscape, these processes often occur simultaneously and interactively, complicating their individual effects. Moreover, the theory now operates within a context of information overload and filter bubbles. As audiences increasingly curate their own information environments, the ability of any single entity to set a universal agenda diminishes. This fragmentation challenges the theory's applicability in its original form and necessitates a more nuanced understanding of how multiple, often competing agendas coexist and interact. Additionally, the findings reported in (M. Rahmatullah, 2024) emphasize the need for improved practices in environmental journalism as an example of how specific focus areas can be overlooked in the current media landscape. Looking forward, agenda setting theory must continue to adapt to the rapidly evolving digital media ecosystem. Future research should explore how artificial intelligence, algorithmic content curation, and emerging digital platforms further reshape the dynamics of public attention and issue salience. Moreover, cross-cultural studies could provide insights into how agenda setting operates in diverse media environments and political systems, as suggested by ongoing research in this field (Devani Khansa et al., 2024). In conclusion, while the fundamental principle of agenda setting remains relevant, its

manifestation in the digital age is far more complex and multifaceted than originally conceived. Understanding these nuances is crucial for media professionals, policymakers, and researchers seeking to navigate and influence public discourse in the contemporary information landscape.

Methodology

Understanding the research methodology is central to grasping the analytical perspective on agenda setting theory in the age of digital media. This study employs a qualitative methodology, designed to explore intricate patterns and nuances in the data that might be missed by quantitative approaches. Qualitative research methods provide depth, insight, and context, enabling a rich understanding of how digital media impacts agenda setting. Qualitative research in media studies employs several methods to gather and analyze data, and this study exemplifies these practices. For instance, Snelson (2016) provides a comprehensive overview of trends in qualitative and mixed methods social media research. In her systematic literature review, Snelson identified 229 qualitative studies published from 2007 to 2013, noting that interviews, focus groups, and content analysis were among the most common methods used. This study similarly leverages these techniques, particularly content analysis and interviews, to probe deeper into the agenda setting theory within digital media contexts. The qualitative approach allows for an exploration of complex phenomena, such as how digital platforms empower audiences to set their own agendas and how they interact with traditional media. According to Faulkner and Atkinson (2023), qualitative media analysis within the traditional model—based on 20th-century observations of centralized, broadcast media systems—provides foundational context. Their work offers a detailed guide on conducting qualitative content analysis, differentiating it from textual analysis, and underscores the

importance of understanding different levels of multilevel analysis and forms of interactivity. This study builds on these principles, using qualitative content analysis to examine how digital media influences agenda setting compared to traditional media. Additionally, the study of agenda-setting dynamics in the digital environment has been refined to consider reverse and intermedia agenda-setting, highlighting the relevance of timing in agenda transfer, particularly within the context of economic news events in China (Yuzhou Tao et al., 2024). This methodological understanding undergirds the analysis presented, creating opportunities for more nuanced discussions regarding the impact of contemporary media on public discourse and educational practices (Ülkü Ulukaya Öteleş et al., 2024).

Discussion

The analysis of qualitative data collected for exploring agenda-setting theory in the age of digital media provides profound insights into how media dynamics have evolved. With the proliferation of digital platforms, the mechanisms of setting public agendas and influencing perceptions have significantly transformed. This subchapter will focus on interpreting the qualitative data gathered from various studies and interviews, highlighting key findings and their implications for agenda-setting theory in digital media. One of the critical aspects observed in the qualitative analysis is the shift in news coverage dynamics, especially concerning marginalized communities. Oliveira-Araujo (2023) conducted a comprehensive quantitative content analysis of trans issues in Spanish digital press from 2001 to 2020. The study found substantial intermedia agenda-setting (IAS) dynamics at play, with news flows typically transferring from national to local, from progressive to conservative, and from legacy to digital-native media. However, since 2016, a noticeable trend emerged where progressive and conservative media began influencing each

other's agendas. Oliveira-Araujo (2023) attributes this to the active engagement of the anti-trans rights movement, leading to a polarized media landscape on trans issues. This indicates that digital media have not only amplified the visibility of certain issues but also facilitated the creation of alternative agendas, impacting how topics are framed and perceived by the public. Similarly, Ford and Sinpeng (2024) explored the role of digital activism by Global Unions and how these organizations utilize social media to engage in social agenda-setting beyond workplace-related issues. Through an extensive analysis of 19,009 Facebook posts, the study found that Global Unions adopting crowd-focused communication styles and addressing broader social issues achieved higher engagement rates, unlike those focusing solely on workplace or organizational matters. These findings challenge existing assumptions that connective communication styles are universally the most effective in today's digital society. Instead, it underscores the necessity for organizations to adapt their messaging strategies based on the social context and audience, highlighting the evolving nature of agenda-setting in digital media environments. The importance of this adaptability is further evidenced by research conducted on media outlets like Radio Republic Indonesia Denpasar, which emphasizes their crucial role in political literacy and the challenges they face in fulfilling this duty within the digital sphere (Marleen Muskita et al., 2023). Moreover, the implications of discourse network analysis reveal that media framing can significantly influence public opinion, particularly in high-stakes cases like the Ferdy Sambo case, where framing and agenda-setting are instrumental in shaping societal discussions (Nuriyati Samatan et al., 2024).

Recommendations for Future Research

The evolving landscape of digital media provides a dynamic backdrop for agenda-setting theory, presenting myriad avenues for future

research. As established by this study, the interaction between media, information dissemination, and public opinion formation is increasingly complex and multifaceted, necessitating continued scholarly attention. The following recommendations seek to address these complexities and outline potential areas for future academic inquiry. One significant area for further research is the geographical and cultural variances in the application of agenda-setting theory within digital media contexts. For instance, the study by Nutsugah, Kuupuolo, and Peculiar (2024) highlights the fragmented nature of social media research in Ghana, which predominantly utilizes quantitative methods and focuses largely on politics. Future research could diversify methodological approaches by integrating qualitative methods to provide a more nuanced understanding of how different social media platforms impact various societal issues, beyond politics, such as health communication and education. Building on this, Muskita and Putri (2023)'s examination of Radio Republik Indonesia Denpasar underscores the challenges traditional media face in maintaining relevancy and effectively utilizing agenda-setting in the digital age. This points to the need for future research to explore the role of traditional media in digital ecosystems, particularly how they can leverage digital tools to enhance political literacy without fostering divisive public opinion. Comparisons between traditional and modern media practices in different regions could be particularly insightful, revealing potential strategies for traditional outlets to adapt and thrive. Extending the scope to disaster reporting, Yang and Zhang (2023)'s study on the 9.5 Sichuan Luding earthquake exemplifies the unique role media play in shaping public discourse during crises. Future research could examine the effectiveness of digital media strategies in disaster communication, comparing their impact on public perception and behavior with traditional media approaches. Understanding these dynamics can guide the development of more effective communication

strategies that balance immediate news delivery with ethical considerations (Yuzhou Tao et al., 2024). Moreover, the use of theoretical frameworks such as Foucauldian discourse analysis can offer deeper insights. Foucault (1977) emphasizes the interplay between power structures and knowledge dissemination, which can be pivotal in understanding digital media's role in agenda-setting. Future studies could apply Foucauldian concepts to investigate how power relations manifest within digital platforms, influencing what becomes news and how it is portrayed (Ülkü Ulukaya Öteleş et al., 2024). This perspective could uncover underlying mechanisms that dictate media agendas, especially in politically sensitive or high-stakes environments.

Conclusion

This paper centers on agenda-setting theory amidst the rise of digital media, investigating how the influx of social platforms has reshaped the established paradigms of media influence. The research question guiding the inquiry addresses the fundamental changes brought about by digital media in the mechanisms of agenda-setting. By adopting a qualitative methodology, the study highlights key findings about the nature of media influence and public engagement, revealing that the relationship between media and public perception is increasingly multifaceted. It begins by tracing the historical development of agenda-setting theory, initiated by foundational scholars like Lippmann, McCombs, and Shaw. It then articulates the ways in which these theories must evolve in response to the complexities introduced by digital platforms. As traditional

media have transitioned to less dominant roles, the research underscores how user-generated content, particularly through social media, has introduced new variables into the agenda-setting process, facilitating more interactive forms of audience engagement (Nuriyati Samatan et al., 2024). Notably, the findings reveal that the public is not merely passive consumers but active participants in shaping the media agenda, thereby challenging traditional assumptions associated with media influence (Nuriyati Samatan et al., 2024). Discussion throughout the paper emphasizes the necessity for reconceptualizing agenda-setting theory to better reflect contemporary realities. The implications point toward a media landscape marked by emergent dynamics, where disinformation compounds challenges surrounding agenda-setting. Additionally, the interaction between media outlets, audiences, and social platforms signifies a need to refine theoretical models of media influence. The essay ultimately suggests that traditional frameworks for understanding media agendas are inadequate for capturing the evolving nature of communication in digital contexts. Concluding thoughts emphasize the importance of future scholarly endeavors to explore the complexities of digital media. As the study illustrates, the interdependent relationship among traditional media, social platforms, and the public necessitates a comprehensive reevaluation of agenda-setting principles (Nuriyati Samatan et al., 2024). Engaging with these dynamics will facilitate a deeper understanding of how contemporary media functions and its implications for public opinion formation and democratic discourse in an increasingly digital world.

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