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AGENDA SETTING

Agenda setting is a theory of mass communication that describes the way in which the mass media interacts with and affects the public it targets. At the core of the theory is the notion that mass media forms the primary interface between the public and the world around them. While individuals can learn about their immediate world through personal observation, they rely on the external proxy of the media to learn about the world beyond their geographic borders. For example, few on Earth have physically stepped foot on the Moon or passed beyond the outer edges of the atmosphere. The popular conception of these spaces is thus provided solely through what is available in the media. The media therefore wield considerable control over the public's perception of the world around them. This control takes the form not only of *what to think about*, but also *how to think about it*. The arguments made by agenda setting have a profound impact on societal-level communication and the role of media as a communicative transit.

The Magic Bullet Model and its Rejection

Motion pictures burst upon the national conscious with the release of the first narrative film, *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903. In the following two decades, movies became a national pastime and were especially popular with the youth, who flocked to theaters in large numbers. The visual narrative capacity of a movie went far beyond the capacity of the textual novel, and great concern developed throughout the 1920's and early 1930's regarding the impact that movies were having on the educational and societal development of children who watched them. To study this phenomenon, a private foundation known as the Payne Fund commissioned a series of studies beginning in 1929 to explore how movies shaped the behavior and views of children. Propaganda's role as a weapon of persuasion in World War One was still fresh on the nation's collective mind, and the country was undergoing a period of domestic transition. The Payne Fund Studies were the first to systematically attempt to characterize mass media's effects on such a broad scale outside of war, and the methodologies developed became the basis of a new view of communications research.

Unfortunately, one of the outcomes of the Payne Fund Studies was the model of media as a "magic bullet" that could be "fired" into an audience to instantly convert them to a specific point of view. Similar to the Ministry of Truth in the famous novel 1984, the mass media could be used to cohesively direct the viewpoints of a public at large. Since the media is the only information source available to the majority of the public, it becomes the "reality" for those individuals. Under the magic bullet model, the public is viewed as a passive audience into which a message can be introduced that will induce a new world view into the audience, regardless of previous conceptions.

The magic bullet model happened to arrive at an ideal time in which the power of technology and new forms of communication to influence were widely touted. However, once the literature began to more closely examine the notion of an all-persuasive mass media, a troublesome fact emerged: some messages worked on some audiences, while they failed on others. Humor is an example of this non-homogeneity: a joke that brings the house down with one particular audience might be met with deafening silence or boos in front of another. It became clear that the model of a "universal message" that worked the same on everyone was flawed: somehow contextual cues were influencing the way in which individuals internalized the message.

This led to the rejection of the magic bullet model during the early 1940's, as it was realized that attributes such as "cultural background" and "experience" had significant impacts on the persuasive level of a message. Individuals self-select into homogeneous groups by virtue of the collective background knowledge they acquire over time, and messages must be tailored for each of these groups. Sending the wrong message to a given group will simply reinforce preexisting views, not uniformly convert the receivers to the new viewpoint.

Propaganda and the Second World War

Perhaps one of the greatest reasons for the discrediting of the magic bullet movement lies in the recognition of the role of propaganda in the First World War. Just a few years after the Payne Fund Studies were published, the country found itself in the early stages of a second war. Lasswell's 1927 book, along with a series of other studies, had shown the influential role of propaganda during wartime, and the late 1930's, the United States began to mobilize an infrastructure to both monitor and respond to this new wartime tactic.

Propaganda was viewed as a tool for inoculating one's citizens against the messages of the enemy, while at the same time, convincing the enemy that his cause was lost and it was best to surrender and avoid further bloodshed. Media was viewed by many as an all-powerful force in this period: "Public opinion no longer is formulated by the slow process of what Professor John Dewey calls shared experience…in our time public opinion is primarily a response to propaganda stimuli." (Lavine & Wechsler, 1940) Yet, as the war progressed, the model of agenda setting was continually refined to integrate the developing case studies from the field regarding message targeting. Axis shortwave broadcasts became models of how propaganda could be wielded when it broke its audience into subgenres and took into account issues such as cultural background or preexisting viewpoints of each. (Childs & Whitton, 1942). Works such as Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) explored the dynamics of group cohesion and how individuals self-select into particular communicative blocks and the impact those grouping decisions have on how messages must be targeted to them.

During the Second World War, the media was viewed as a supremely powerful asset for shaping foreign opinion. There were a limited number of media outlets, radio was the

only method of getting news about the warfront in a timely fashion, and the war had largely divided the world into Axis and Allied broadcasters. The going theory of the day was that if the Allies could simply drown out Axis broadcasters with their propaganda, Axis troops could be convinced they were on the wrong side and they might capitulate, or at least be demoralized. This period is of critical importance, as it really shaped popular opinion of the media as such a powerful outlet, and set the stage for our current conceptualization of it.

In Politics

After the war, research in agenda setting continued, but it was McCombs and Shaw's 1972 paper exploring its effect on the political sphere that really catapulted the field to its current stature. By suggesting that there was a strong correlation between the contents of local news media in a North Caroline city and the prominence placed on issues by voters in a presidential campaign, agenda setting suddenly offered up the mass media as the ultimate arbitrators of national politics. At the same time, international media scholars such as Gerbner (1977) were showing the processes and interplay of the state itself and the media. Agenda setting theory suggested that the media could influence an election by offering one candidate preferential treatment, such as tripling the volume of coverage about him (coverage bias), painting his candidate in a consistently negative light (statement bias), or not reporting key events involving his opposition (gatekeeping bias). Furthermore, as the primary source of information about the election, the media could chose which issues to report on, effectively channeling the public to view the election along the dimensions most favorable to the media's chosen candidate.

Priming and Framing

Agenda setting is traditionally grouped with the concepts of priming and framing. Priming enables agenda setting by influencing an individual to evaluate an issue along a particular dimension favorable to the viewpoint being suggested. Framing is its complement, and refers to the association of a viewpoint with other specific viewpoints, such that an individual hearing of the given viewpoint will automatically recall the other viewpoints. Tewksbury & Dietram (2007) conceptualize the two topics in terms of *accessibility* and *applicability*. Priming falls under the category of accessibility, defining and constraining the available dimensions of discourse for a topic. Additional dimensions of a subject simply cease to exist if the media refuses to cover them. Applicability refers to framing, in which other related topics are grouped with the chosen viewpoint to make the application areas of those topics become affiliated with the given viewpoint.