

# **CRITIQUE and APPLICATION of COMMUNICATION THEORIES**

**Edited by**

**Ekeanyanwu, Nnamdi Tobechukwu, *Ph.D.***

**Ngoa, Stanley Naribo, *Ph.D.***

**Sobowale, Idowu Akanbi, *Ph.D.***

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### Agenda-setting Theory: A Reflective and Visionary Analysis

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#### Introduction

Like the ones before it, year 2011 is laden with many events competing for the attention of the public at local, national and global level. With dizzying speed, these events continue to leave indelible impression on the human race, redefining for better or for worse places as well as individual and collective destinies in many climes. What are the imports of current revolutionary happenings in the Middle East and African Arab nations? How was the 2011 Nigerian presidential election won and lost and what implications does it leave for the much-traumatized polity? Why are the Niger Delta States, Jos city of Plateau State, and Borno State of Nigeria perceived as serious security concerns that increasingly hold Nigeria's fledgling democracy by the jugular? What has differentiated Governor Babatunde Fashola's Lagos from the 'old' or 'past' Lagos? Who is Professor Attahiru Jega and why was he a sudden focus of attention among millions of people in Nigeria in the recent time?

Of course, it takes no genius to answer these posers, especially for people who are keen watchers of the tides of events incessantly rupturing the fragile social fabric in the aforementioned places since the start of the year. But do the people get to know about these issues by direct acquaintances? For the majority, the answer is no. There is no gainsaying that substantial members of the public get to know about happenings in the real world through second-hand avenues, magisterially dominated and shaped by the mass media. Essentially, it is trite that the public do not only learn about the

issues of the day via mediated communications; they are primed to attach differential weights to those issues in response to the media placements, displays and contextualization. This power of the media to narrow the focus of the public to certain issues at the expense of others is the crux of agenda-setting theory, which is the focus of this chapter.

Agenda-setting theory presupposes the correspondence between the media and public prioritization of issues that warrant the attention of a political and the social system. It is a "theory about the transfer of salience from the mass media pictures of the world to the pictures in our head" (McCombs, 2004, p. 68). According to Coleman, McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (2009, p. 147), agenda-setting is "the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others". Put in another way, the more coverage an issue receives, the more important it is to people (Coleman et al., 2009; Miller, 2005). This definition assumes a causal relationship, with the media agenda temporally preceding the public agenda in sequence. In essence, the agenda of issues warranting the attention of the public is a function of hierarchical communication of the importance of such issues at a given time by the mass media (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Miller, 2005; Sparks, 2006; Roessler, 2008).

The centrality of the mass media to the knowledge of goings-on in the society is at the heart of their influence on public's knowledge, attitudes and behavior. To catch a glimpse of happenings in the society or meet a psychic need, some read newspapers or magazines or both, while many others watch and listen to television and radio respectively. Even the apathetic members of the public use the mass media minimally or get information from those who use the media. Therefore, the mass media, according to Lowery and DeFleur (1995, p. 265), "are still the significant sources of detailed information about what is going on for very large number of people". This notion tallies with Shoemaker and Reese's (1996, p. 59) submission that "the importance of difference between media content and other sources of information about the world lies in the fact that our views of the world, and resulting actions, will be molded by our predominant source of information: the mass media". David Considine wrapped up the inevitability of media influence, positing that "the media mediate, and when we have no firsthand experience, those media messages tend to take a greater influence because we have nothing, really, to compare them to (In Baker, 2009: xi). Notions like these explained McCombs and Shaw's adventure into the resuscitation of media effects research at a point when the field was virtually comatose in response to the findings of the limited-effects scholars.

Since the publication of McCombs and Shaw (1972) seminal study, detailing Chapel Hill, North Carolina voters' perceptions of 1968 presidential election, agenda-setting research has accumulated a plethora of studies supporting and extending the

initial assumptions. Hence, the theory has been considered a robust contribution to mass communication scholarship and literature (Coleman et al., 2009; Sparks, 2006; Tai, 2009). However, most of the landmark studies reported thus far on agenda-setting theory was conducted in North and South America, Europe, Asia and the Oceania (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007).

Since universal application is one of the canons of a good theory, the absence of Africa on the list calls for concern. Besides, the new technologies that are central to contemporary audiences' news consumption are assumed to have diminishing effects on the ability of the news media to cause homogeneity of public agenda as possible with the traditional media of mass communication (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Brubaker, 2008; Delwiche, 2005; Larson, 2010). This new media regime has empowered the audience to be co-creators as well as consumers of news media products, with possibilities for the fragmentation of issues attracting attentions. In view of the above challenges, this chapter attempts a reflective and visionary review of agenda-setting, with a view to challenging scholars to extend the research frontiers, given the expanding mediaspace and the compatibility of the theory with other communication concepts and theories.

### Historical Reflection

Agenda-setting crept into mass communication literature in 1972 via the publication of the influential findings of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's Chapel Hill study in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*. However, ideas about its assumptions and mechanisms have existed in the thoughts of some quintessential scholars and communication giants for decades. Baran and Davis (2010, p. 279), for example, say that "with or without label, the idea of agenda-setting has been with us since the days of penny press". Walter Lippmann was, however, said to have scholarly signaled the notion of the media influence on the audiences' perceptions of the environment and, by extension, public opinion (Baran & Davis, 2010; Coleman et al, 2009; Griffin, 2009; Littlejohn, 2002; McCombs et al., 1997; Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

In his magnum opus, *Public Opinion*, Lippmann (1922) cautioned that people do not deal with external environment much as they deal with the 'pictures in their heads'. Stretching the reality definition function of the media further, he posited that "when public affairs are popularized in speeches, headlines, plays, moving pictures, cartoons, novel or painting, their transformation into human interest requires first abstraction from the original, and then animation of what has been abstracted; and that not being omnipresent or omniscient we cannot see much of what we have to think or talk about" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 104). In effect, agenda-setting occurs because the media select from a variety of events based on some criteria and necessity

to focus attention on the most important news (Coleman et al., 2009; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; McCombs et al., 1997).

Harold Lasswell, a pioneer in the field of communication research, extended Lippmann's thought in 1948 through his model of communication inquiry that raises the five-part posers: *who* says *what* to *whom* via *which channels* and with *what effect*? Lasswell surmised that 'surveillance' and 'correlation' are the most important function of the mass media in the society. He also "believed that the media play the critical role in directing our attention to issues" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 11). In 1963, Bernard Cohen gave the greatest impetus to the claims of above scholars by providing the field of mass communication with what is now known as the agenda-setting mantra: "the press may not be successful most of the time in telling people what to think, it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Baran & Davis, 2010; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Littlejohn, 2002; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Milburn, 1991; Miller, 2005; Rosembery & Vicker, 2009; Sparks, 2006). While all these ideas form the foundation bricks of agenda-setting theory, they could have 'lingered in obscurity' and remained mere higher-order conceptions if they were not operationalized by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (Baran & Davis, 2010).

McCombs and Shaw, to start with, were uncomfortable with the notion that mass media have limited if any effect as held by Lazarsfeld, his colleagues and other limited-effects theorists and methodologists (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Sparks, 2006). Having practiced journalism in the past and being among the earliest doctoral degree holders in mass communication, the duo combined their experiences to deduce the possibility of long-term media effects from Lippmann and Cohen's statements (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Based on the belief that the election time serves as a period of political issues learning, McCombs and Shaw (1972) sampled the opinions of a few Chapel Hill's voters about paramount issues in the 1968 U.S. Presidential Elections. Comparing the ranking of issues identified in the survey with that of a content analysis of mass media coverage of the campaign, McCombs and Shaw found a near perfect correlation and thus concluded that the media set the agenda for the public (Baran & Davis, 2010; Coleman et al., 2009; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Roessler, 2008).

Although there were claims that prior studies have found significant influence of the press on the public opinions (Roessler, 2008; Severin & Tankard, 2010; Tai, 2009), it was McCombs and Shaw commitment to a programmatic research that melded the agenda metaphor and empirical test into systemic development of agenda-setting theory (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Roessler, 2008). Incursion into causal direction and time lag for the effects to be observed began sequel to the establishment of correlations between the media and public agendas (Coleman et al., 2009; Sparks, 2006). Successive election studies, the 1972 and 1976 U.S. Presidential Elections,

based on a more elaborate design, crystallized the initial findings at the Chapel Hill by confirming the causal influence of media agenda on the public agenda (Coleman et al., 2009; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Miller, 2005). Other methods and approaches were employed to answer the question of temporal sequence of the media agenda over the public agenda. Miller (2005), for instance, writes that many methodological variations have not only supported agenda-setting hypothesis but the causal ordering also. Two studies in 1976 U.S. Presidential Elections attained a novelty value by discovering the power of the mass media in the setting of agenda of issues' attributes, thus providing a linchpin for second-level of agenda-setting (McCombs et al., 1997). Attribute agenda-setting, as this second-order analysis is called, will be examined later.

Beyond its American origin, agenda-setting effects have been established in other locales in Europe, Asia, South America and Oceania (McCombs et al., 1997; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007). In their study of 1993 Japanese general elections, Takeshita and Mikami (1995) found both first- and second-level agenda-setting effects among the voters. In the same token, King (1997) also found support for the influence of newspapers and attributes agenda on voters' perceptions in 1994 Taipei mayoral election, with candidate attributes showing stronger correlations than election issues. The findings of the Taipei mayoral election were replicated in 1995 Spanish regional and municipal elections (McCombs et al., 1997). Other election studies supporting agenda-setting effects include Golan and Wanta's (2001) study of 2000 New Hampshire Republican primary; Sebastian, Valenzuela and Teresa's (2006) Chilean presidential election and the 2006 Mexican election (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2007).

Besides its use in political communication, agenda-setting has equally proved useful in non-election studies. Coleman et al. (2009) document the application of the theory by researchers in areas such as unemployment, nuclear disaster, poverty, crime, federal budget deficit, the economy, environmental issues, health issues, including HIV/AIDS and smoking. The heuristic values of agenda-setting, coupled with its scope, parsimony, precision of prediction and accuracy of explanation has no doubt enriched and refined the field of communication studies (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997). Hence, many scholars have concluded that agenda-setting has not only commanded a revered position in the annals of mass communication research, but remains a tried and true theoretical contribution to the literature in the field (Sparks, 2006; Tai, 2009).

Extolling the virtues of agenda-setting, Zhu and Blood (1997, p. 99) conclude that "it is likely that no other theoretical hypothesis in human communication research has received as much empirical attention by so many scholars and with much diverse methods as has agenda setting".

Since 1990s, agenda-setting has been operationalized at two levels of analysis: first-level or first order agenda-setting and second-level or second order agenda-setting. Traditionally, first-level agenda setting tests the transfer of issue salience from the media to the public agenda. By telling members of the public *what* to think about (Baran and Davis, 2010, p. 282), "first-level agenda setting considers objects as the principal component in the transfer of salience from the media to the public" (Kensicki, 2000). It establishes the relationship between objects that were given priority attention in the media and those deemed important by members of the public. These objects could be public issues, public figures, candidates, organizations, countries, events, or any problem that is the focus of attention (Baran & Davis, 2010; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007).

Second-level of agenda-setting, on the other hand, expands the object's salience by incorporating the agenda of attributes defining the objects of attention. It refers to significant correspondence between saliency of issues' attributes in the media and the public (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002; Sheafer, 2007). Each object is considered to have certain characteristics that define and stand it out from the others. Through narratives and provision of contexts, therefore, mass media extend the focus on objects of news and guide the understanding of the topics under consideration. Attributes agenda defines "the very way we perceive and think about issues, political candidates, or other topics in the news, thus assigning the media an even more powerful role in political process" (McCombs et al., 1997).

At both categories of elections studies, for example, (Kings, 1997; Takeshita & Mikami, 1995; McCombs et al., 1997; Golan & Wanta, 2001) and non-election studies (for example, Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002; Shaw & Yu, 2006; Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004), the second-level of agenda-setting has equally turned in robust findings to show that the saliency of attributes of issues and political candidates in the media influences not only *what* the public think, but *how* they think about the objects in the news. While first-level agenda setting focuses attention on the issues that are given prominence; second-level agenda setting deals with how issues are presented and defined, thus redefining Cohen's agenda-setting metaphor from *what* to think about to *how* to think about issues and objects of the news (Miller, 2005; Folkerts, Lacy and Larabeo, 2008; Roessler, 2008; Baran and Davis, 2010; Severin and Tankard, 2010). These levels of analysis operate with the same independent (media agenda) and dependent (public agenda) variables (Kensicki, 2000). The model below presents the causal path between the independent variable and dependent variable:

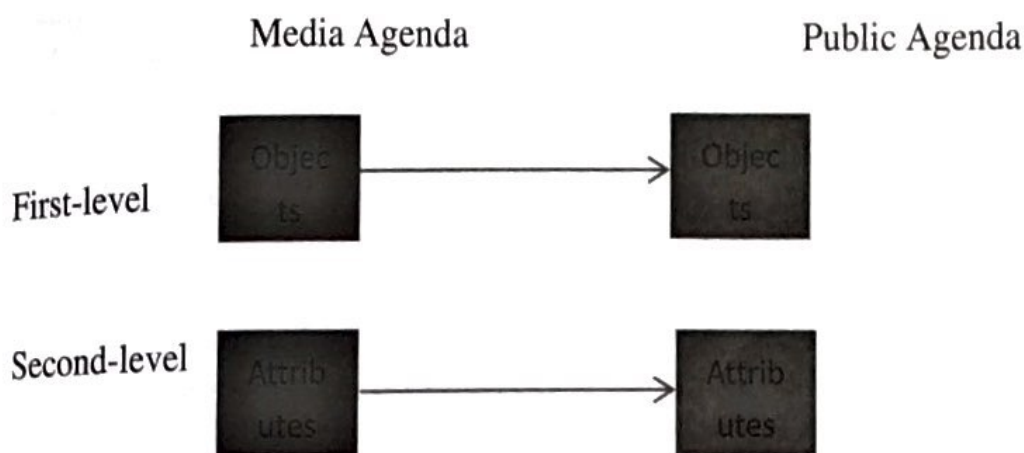


**Figure 4.1:** First- and Second-Level of Agenda-Setting Model (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997)

Research findings have expanded the realm of agenda-setting effects from its initial domain of cognitive influence to incorporate affective and behavioural influence. This claim has been fueled by questions on political and social significance of the media influence on cognitions - the so what of issues and attribute learning? One of the consequences of media agenda-setting power is the creation of consensus on issues within a political and social system. McCombs (1997), for example, contends that achievement of consensus among the members of the public is a focal point in agenda-setting theory. The press goes beyond setting agenda to suggest what community should collectively agree to discuss and perhaps act on (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; McCombs, 1997; Shaw & Martins, 1992).

In a study examining the agreement between level of media exposure and issue salience among demographics subgroups, Shaw and Martins (1992) contend that greater consensus in the public agenda among demographic subgroups corresponds to greater exposure to the mass media. They conclude that "people will be further apart cognitively if they do not share a common media agenda, and will become closer in issue agreement as a result of media exposure...demographically divergent groups tend to cognitively converge when they share news media" (pp. 904-905). Studies on consensus of agenda have been replicated in other parts of the world beyond the United States where it was first tested. Lopez-Escobar, Llamas and McCombs (1998), for example, extended the consensus of agenda to cover both the first- and second-level of agenda-setting on political candidates in 1995 Spanish

regional elections. The study yielded much support for attribute agenda of candidates' as opposed to issues agenda among different population subgroups.

Besides facilitating community consensus, agenda-setting has also been connected to behavioural outcome on the parts of the audience. Agenda-setting does not stop at impacting knowledge about political and social system on the public. Since cognitions, according to Shaw (1979), lead to behaviour, it is expected that issues receiving much attention will trigger not only cognitive and affective responses, but attitudes and behavioural effects. "The end result of the total agenda-setting process is an influence on either our cognition or actual observable behaviour as evidenced by, say, buying, or voting decision" (Shaw & Martins, 1992, p. 917).

Roberts (1992) reinforces this view, positing that "the media may not only tell us what to think about, but they influence what action we take regarding those thoughts". Similarly, Kioussis and McCombs (2003) submit that since agenda-setting is a social learning, people should leap beyond mere learning "to hold stronger, non-neutral attitude as news attention intensifies". This means that people do not learn and sit by, doing nothing with what they have learned. *Philadelphia Inquirer* (1996) documents how extensive media reporting of murder and rape contributed to a significant drop in female candidates seeking placement into University of Pennsylvania (Coleman et al., 2009).

Alexander Bloj also found that prominent stories of airplane crashes and hijacking in the *New York Times* both lower ticket sales and increase purchases of trip insurance in weeks following (Griffin, 2009). McCombs and Valenzuela's (2007) summed it up by concluding that "the apogee of media effects is in influencing the agenda of attributes, opinions, and attitude, even observable behaviour, regarding issues and political figures". The latest trend in agenda-setting studies concerning the efficacy of online news media is discussed in later section of this chapter.

While there are considerable findings supporting agenda-setting effects in many regions of the world as reported by notable scholars of the theory, little if any mention of Africa was made thus far. A bibliographic analysis of major literature detailing the contributions of agenda-setting to mass communication research reveals this concern. Lowery and DeFleur's (1995), for instance, provide extensive discussion of agenda-setting in *Milestones in Mass Communication Research* without reference to the theory's accomplishment in African scholarship. Sage's *Communication Concept 6* focusing on agenda-setting also has only one study of African origin in the over 300 works listed in its bibliography (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). A meta-analysis of 90 agenda-setting studies conducted by Wanta and Ghanem (2007) equally has no mention of Africa at all. Emphases on the locales where agenda-setting has provided robust findings equally sideline the continent of Africa (see for example McCombs, 2004; McCombs et al., 1997; Valenzuela & McCombs, 2007).

This conspicuous absence of studies of African origin in these highly referred literatures was perhaps a function of the state of the political and media system of the continent at the time agenda-setting research assumed a dominant paradigm in the field of mass communication. Most of the nations in Africa were then under authoritarian political and media regimes. These negate the requisite conditions for plausible media agenda-setting effects. McCombs et al.'s (1997), for example, hold that the widespread geographic and cultural replication of agenda-setting studies was grounded in reasonably open democratic political system with reasonably unfettered news media that characterized the societies. The massive embracement of democracy and liberalization of media regime in the continent, therefore, open new vistas for media scholars and researchers in communication studies. Aligning these developments with McCombs et al.'s (1997) challenge that "testing the theory in different countries and diverse culture is important for identifying the common ground in communication research" raises the need for emergence of landmark studies that can showcase African media effects research tradition. The burgeoning new media environment and increasing efforts at consolidating democracy in Africa thus offer promises for researchers to break new grounds in agenda-setting.

### **Explication and Operationalization**

Agenda-setting attracts and interests a number of scholars due in part to measurability of the independent and dependent variables (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). While the independent variable can be measured using a systemic content analysis of attention directing cues in the media, the dependent variable can be indexed from responses to opinion polls or specially designed questionnaire. Agenda-setting, is "a causal assertion that the priorities of the media agenda influence the priorities of the public agenda" (McCombs et al., 1997). The two major variables involved (media agenda and public agenda) have been correlated to establish influence of media agenda on the public agenda in a number of election and non-election studies at its first- and second-level in many locales across the world.

### **Media Agenda**

Media agenda, "the key independent variable in agenda-setting research" (Kioussis, 2004), are a few topics the media focus their attention on and considered newsworthy (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; Miller, 2005). Media agenda is a list of issues and/or objects ranked by frequency of their occurrence (Lasorsa, 2008, p. 17). By emphasizing some issues through volume of reports and placement, the media accord those issues prominence in the perceptions of the public (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Griffin, 2009; Hayes, 2008; Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002; Miller, 2005; Sheafer, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In effect, media agenda directs the attention of the public to certain issues, topic, persons, etc. at the expense of others.

Media agenda is usually measured by a systemic content analysis of the number of issues covered, ranked according to percentage of total news coverage (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Delwiche, 2005; Kioussis, 2004; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007). The development of software programs (e. g., General Enquirer, VB Pro) that can identify and count the frequency of words and phrases has simplified the construction of media agenda (Lasorsa, 2008). In addition to words, visuals (photograph, television video) have been found to have visual agenda-setting effects (Coleman et al, 2009). Questions as to which media to include and content to analysis (frequency, placement, size and other features) are design issues that are usually resolved by the researchers based on the study objectives (Roessler, 2008). Media agenda has also been measured in terms of media exposure, the amount of media content consumed or media coverage, the amount of emphasis placed on the issues in the news (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). In a factor analysis of media salience, Kioussis (2004) found that attention and prominence given to issues loaded on one factor of visibility, which accounts for 53% while valence, the affective and evaluative tone of the coverage, further accounts for 28% of the variance. He thus suggests that visibility and valence deserve attention when measuring media agenda.

### **Public Agenda**

According to Shaw and Martins (1992), "the press may, unconsciously, provide a limited and rotating set of public issues, around which the political and social system can engage in dialogue". Public agenda, therefore, is the position accorded to issues affecting the society, ranked according to their perceived importance by members of the public (McCombs, 2004; Miller, 2005). As the dependent variable in agenda-setting research, it reflects the salience of issues in the minds and perceptions of the audience in response to media emphasis on those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; Roberts, 1992).

Public agenda has been mostly tapped through an open-ended question, developed by George Gallup, and called Most Important Problem (MIP) facing the nation, state or community (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; King, 1997; McCombs, 1997; McCombs et al., 1997; Shaw & Martins, 1992). The aggregate responses to opinion polls on MIP provide the relative position of issues in the public agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Delwiche, 2005). Open- and close-ended questions have also been used in questionnaire survey to develop the public agenda (Roessler, 2008). To create the public agenda, responses to the most important issues and questions are summarized into percentage and ranked (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Survey responses and content analysis will thus be compared to establish significant effects of media agenda on the public agenda to validate agenda-setting effects.

## Contingencies in Agenda-Setting

To avert 'affirming the fallacy of the consequence' of taking mere correlations for causation, scholars in the field have identified factors that strengthen or weaken the influence of the media agenda on the public agenda. According to McCombs (1976a, p. 2), agenda-setting influence does not operate at all time, in all places and in all people (Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977). "The potency of agenda-setting influence is found to vary dramatically depending on certain contingent conditions of receivers of that information and the issues themselves" (Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002). A number of enhancing, modifying and mitigating factors have been identified to influence agenda-setting process. Miller (2005, p. 274) broadly classifies these contingent factors along three dimensions - audience characteristics, media characteristics and issues characteristics.

Audience characteristics as moderators of agenda-setting effects have been broadly defined in terms of need for orientation, operationalized as lower-order concepts of relevance and uncertainty (Coleman et al., 2009; Kensicki, 2000; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; Miller, 2005). Relevance deals with the interest of the audience on the subject matter based on perceived personal and social importance of the issues. Uncertainty deals with the inability of the audience to comprehend the topic; "when people do not feel they have all the information they need about the topic" (Coleman et al., 2009). Therefore, need for orientation fluctuates between high, moderate or low level in response to the interactions between relevance and uncertainty as depicted in the model below:

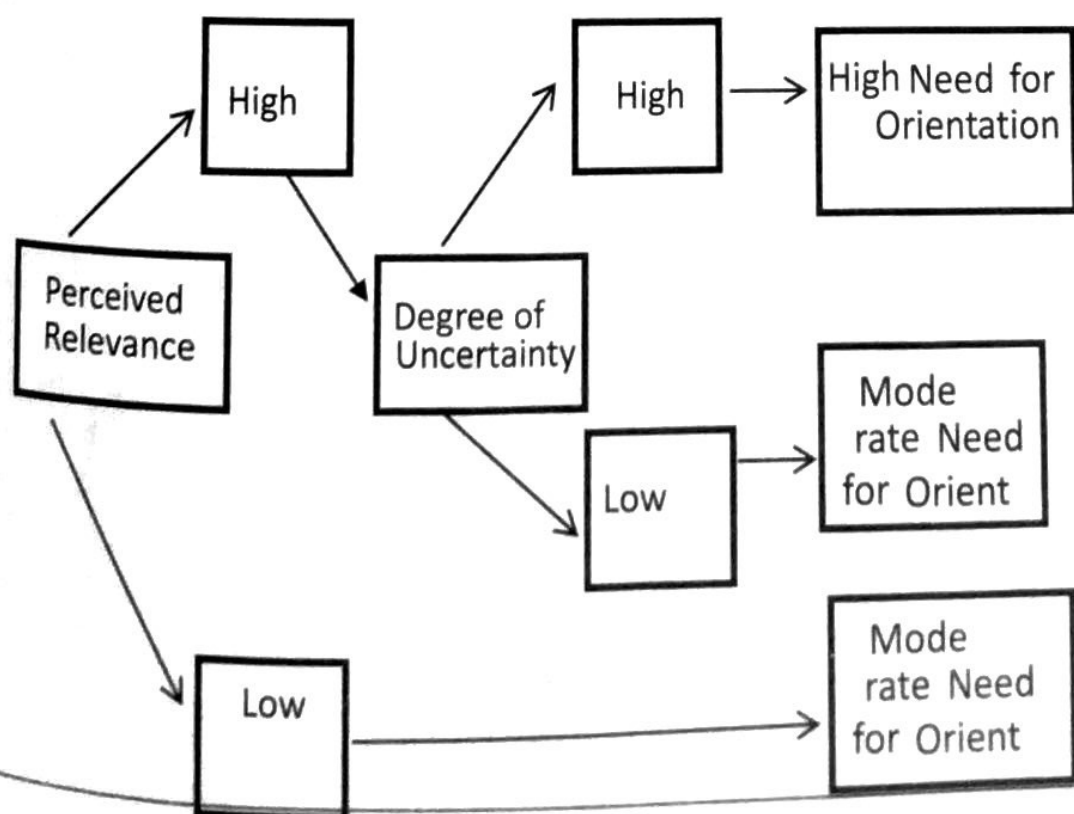


Figure 2: Relevance and Uncertainty as antecedents of need for orientation (Source: Lowery & DeFleur, 1995)

In addition to the difference in interests, which precipitates varying media use in a bid to understand situations in the society, scholars have identified other demographic variables as moderators of agenda-setting process. For example, educational level and political interest have been found to moderate the extent to which the media set the agenda for particular individuals (Kensicki, 2000; Miller, 2005). Education is found to increase audiences' cognitive complexity and thus contributes to increased need for orientation. Coleman et al. (2009) logically conclude that "higher education typically increases interest in public issues, and those with more education are more likely to mirror the media's agenda".

Besides education, perceived credibility of the media, which in turn influences reliance, and, subsequently media use, has been found to impact on the magnitude of agenda-setting effects (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Severin & Tankard, 2010; Wanta, 1997 cited in Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Amount of interpersonal communication about the issues in the news also intervenes in agenda-setting effects (Severin & Tankard, 2010). While some studies claim that interpersonal communication reduces agenda-setting effects, others find interpersonal communication as enhancing media effects on the public agenda. Hence, Weaver, Zhu and Willnat (1992) cautioned that interpersonal communication impact on agenda setting effects is inconclusive. Other alternative explanations that must be controlled are existence of real world indicators and direct experience (Sheafer, 2007). For example, an unemployed person does not need the media to know that unemployment is an important problem facing the society.

On media characteristics, emphasis is placed on the magnitude of effects from different media types. Agenda-setting effects of newspapers have been found to be profound when compared with those of television. While Lopez-Escobar et al. (1998) regard newspapers as more influential than television in setting public agenda, Millers (2005) classifies the effects in term of span. Citing a retinue of scholars, Miller says broadcast media have quicker agenda-setting effects, but also concurs that print media have long lasting effects (p. 274). Comparing traditional media with the new media. Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) affirm that readers of printed newspapers are exposed to broader issues than those who read online version of the same paper. The media, of course, are not our only source of orientation to public affairs. Personal experience, which includes communication with family, friends and co-workers, also informs us about many issues (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007).

Issues characteristics have also been found to be necessary intervening variables in agenda-setting effects. Here, abstract issues that people have little, if any

direct and personal experience, stimulate information search which eventually leads to strong agenda-setting effects. Issues that are well known to members of the public because they are parts of their daily experience are called obtrusive issues. To fathom these issues, minimal information from the media is required (Coleman et al., 2009; Littlejohn, 2002; Miller, 2005, Severin & Tankard, 2010).

For unobtrusive issues, those issues that people hardly have direct personal experience, media attention on them significantly influence their salience in the minds of the public (Coleman et al., 2009; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Severin & Tankard, 2010). Rosembery and Vicker (2009, p. 152) thus conclude that "agenda setting is more powerful in bringing issues that are unobtrusive to the public agenda". While all these are not exhaustive of possible confounding variables, it is essential for researchers to be mindful of alternative explanations in drawing causal inferences.

### **Methodological Challenges**

Quite a number of research designs and methodological advancements have been employed in testing the causal assertion that the agenda of media, at both objects and attributes levels, influence the agenda of the public (Miller, 2005; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). These designs include cross-sectional, experimental and longitudinal types. Regardless of the designs, agenda-setting studies have measured media agenda via systemic content analysis and compared it, using Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient, with the public agenda derived from polling or survey of the respondents (Coleman et al., 2009).

The first systemic research on agenda-setting, the Chapel Hill's study, utilized cross-sectional design which entails analysis of media content for a period before taking survey of the respondents (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Many other studies have been fashioned along the Chapel Hill study. Longitudinal design utilizes polls or surveys for a number of data point across a period of time (weeks, months or years). Studies in this category include the Shaw and McCombs' (1977) Charlotte survey, Winter and Eyal's (1981) public concerns for civil rights, and Weaver, McCombs, and Eyal's (1981) civil rights' study among others (Coleman et al., 2009; Severin & Tankard, 2010; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Laboratory experiments, which utilized systemic manipulations of issues shown to different viewers, have also been used at both first- and second-level of analysis. Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) most important problems and Kiouisis, Bantimaroudis and Ban's (1999) experiment on fictitious political candidates are good examples of experimental design in agenda-setting research (Coleman et al., 2009; Severin & Tankard, 2010). Although experiments document the most reliable evidences of causal effects, there is a lack of external validity (Coleman et al., 2009).

Like in any research endeavor, research designs used in agenda-setting study have varying strengths and weaknesses. However, the choice of which design is

desirable is a function of researchers' interest, objectives and type of study. A meta-analytical evaluation of ninety studies by Wanta and Ghanem (2007) found significant agenda-setting effects for studies using a variety of methodologies. They thus conclude that "methodological artifacts had little impact on the magnitude of effects found in agenda-setting research".

Of importance in the methodological challenges of agenda-setting is the issue of time-lag. Since agenda-setting is premised on the notion that media agenda influence the public agenda, it matters to know how long it takes for the media agenda to show up in the public agenda. Scholars differ on the amount of time needed for the causal influence to occur and argue that issues and media play significant role in determining the ebb and flow of the agendas between the media and the public. Some studies have shown that agenda-setting effects take few weeks to months to take place (Griffin, 2009; Severin & Tankard, 2010; Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004). Coleman et al. (2009) report a lag of one to eight weeks, with a median of three weeks. The agenda-setting effects of online media have, however, being found to be shorter, ranging from one day to one week (Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002; Atthahus & Tewksbury, 2002).

### **Expanding the Scope**

From the outset, agenda-setting has charted good scholarly paths in the field of communication. It did not only cause a paradigm shift from limited effects traditions to assert possible media effects, but also opens new frontiers in media effects research. With a life-long commitment to a programmatic tradition of research, McCombs and Shaw, in conjunction with other collaborators, have made the theory a cornerstone in media effects scholarship and research. Not a few conceptual rapporteurs have emerged from the theory. First- and second-level of agenda-setting, inter-media agenda-setting and priming are, for example, offshoot concepts that emerged along the development of the theory. Also, agenda-setting has established linkages with some other theories in the field of communication.

According to McCombs et al., (1997) "one of the strengths of agenda-setting theory that has prompted its continuing growth has been its compatibility and complementarity with a variety of other social science concepts and theories, including gatekeeping, status conferral, and the spiral of silence". The connection with other theories and concepts is, according to Lasorsa (2008), deemed to be responsible for the tremendous scholarly interest the theory has attracted.

Many of the concepts emerging from agenda-setting research tradition have yielded heuristic paths on their own, contributing to the original model of the theory. The second-level of agenda-setting, which was operationalized as agenda of attributes since mid-1990s, has been employed to take agenda-setting effects beyond cognitive to affective and even behavioural realm of effects. Similarly, priming has expanded

the cognitive perspective of original agenda-setting process. As an availability heuristics (Roessler, 2008; Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002), priming directs the audience's attention to an aspect of objects or issues under consideration at the expense of others, thus causing them to evaluate the objects or issues along the standards promoted in the news media (Baran & Davis, 2010; Roessler, 2008; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Severin & Tankard, 2010).

Linking agenda-setting and priming, Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) surmise that "by making some issues more salient in people's mind (agenda-setting), mass media can also shape the consideration that people take into account when making judgment about political candidates or issues (priming)". Based on psychological concept of availability heuristics, priming occurs because individuals do not take all information into consideration in judgment, but only those accessible at a particular point in time (Roessler, 2008). In essence, "priming refers to the effects of the content of the media on people's later behaviour or judgment" (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Klinger, Roskos-Ewoldson, 2007).

A well-established theoretical linkage between second-level agenda-setting and framing has been promoted. In addition to making issues more salient, the media present news in easy-to-understand interpretive package or frame to reduce their complexity (Kim, Sceufele & Shanahan, 2002). According to Tankard (1991) a media frame is "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggest what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (Roessler, 2008; Baran & Davis, 2010).

Drawing the line of concord between agenda-setting and framing theory, McCombs et al. (1997) enthuse that "an important part of the news agenda and its set of objects are the perspective and frames that journalists and, subsequently, members of the public employ to think and talk about each object". Roessler (2008) opines that "combining agenda-setting and framing represents the most elaborate merger of cognitive media impact and explanation for opinion formation". Justifying the affinity between agenda-setting and framing, Baran and Davis (2010, p. 282) say "McCombs argues that second-order agenda-setting and framing share common concern for attribute agenda (frame), the dynamic of agenda-setting process (framing process), and agenda-setting influence (framing effects)". Some scholars are, however, of the belief that agenda-setting and framing theory are different things entirely. Scheufele, for example, draws a linkage between agenda-setting and priming while asserting that framing is a different thing entirely (Baran & Davis, 2010, p. 282). Elaborating the difference, Scheufele (2000) asserts that:

The theoretical premises of agenda-setting and framing are different- that agenda-setting (and priming) rely on the theory of attitude accessibility by increasing the salience of issues and thus the ease with which they can be Accessed from memory

when making political judgment, whereas framing is based on prospect theory that assumes that subtle change in the description of a situation invoke interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information rather than making certain aspects of the issue more salient (in Weaver, 2007).

To the extent that second-level agenda-setting and framing are both concerned with how issues are depicted; focused on the most salient aspects of the objects of description; and concerned with the how the audience think about the object rather than what the object is, there are similarities between them even if their processes differ (Weaver, 2007).

The linkage between agenda-setting and gatekeeping theory is based on the premise that not every information coming to the knowledge of news producers make it to the public. The need to focus the news as a result of limited space, limited time and limited capacity of the audience to grapple with a vast amount of information at a given time underlies the power of the media professionals to determine what gets to the public (Coleman, et al., 2009; Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998; Shaw & Martins, 1992).

As gatekeepers of information, the news outlets have the prerogative of what to report and how to report (Littlejohn, 2002, p. 319). This of course is not an easy task as it appears. Schramm (1949a) wrote that no other aspect of communication is as impressive as the large number of selections and rejections that have to be made to form the appropriate symbol in the minds of both the communicator and the receiver (cited in Shoemaker, 1991, p. 5). The relationship between agenda-setting and gatekeeping was aptly captured by Kosicki (1993): "Media 'gatekeepers' do not merely keep watch over information, shuffling it here and there. Instead, they engage in active construction of the messages, emphasizing certain aspect of an issue and not others". Griffin (2009, p. 362) buttresses the argument, positing that three-quarter of the stories that come across a news desk never make it into the print or broadcast; the one that appears doesn't select itself. Although gatekeeping is an essential contingent in the creation of media agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Griffin, 2009; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995), it is a by-product of necessity to focus the news rather than a diabolical plan to control the minds of the public (McCombs, 2004, p. 19).

The compatibility of agenda-setting with cultivation theory of George Gerbner and his colleagues rests on the notion that they are both suitable for long-term effects analysis. Although both agenda-setting and cultivation began with a narrow focus of cumulative media effects on real-world perception of violence and political cognitions respectively, their applications to other areas of communication have been well supported. According to Lasorsa (2008) "cultivation theory deals with how television cultivates an image of a mean and dangerous world, indicating that

television may be *setting a long-term agenda* of crime, violence and corruption (emphasis, added).

Wanta and Ghanem's (2007) meta-analysis of agenda-setting research shows that longitudinal studies are more successful than cross-sectional studies, due in part to the fact that agenda-setting is more of a long-term effect that hardly shows up in one-shot survey. Establishing longitudinal analysis as the basis of agenda-setting theory's triumph over the short-term attitudinal effects tradition, Dearing and Roger (1996, pp. 14-15) argue that "agenda-setting effect is not the result of receiving one or a few messages but is due to the aggregate impact of a very large number of messages, each of which has a different content but all of which deal with the same general issue.

Agenda-setting is also a logical offshoot of status conferral concept developed by Paul Lazarsfeld. Status conferral theory, according to Lasorsa (2008), concerns "how news coverage confers status on persons, which relates to how candidates and other newsmakers land on the media agenda". Katz (2001) holds that status conferral, which dovetailed into agenda-setting, is a function of media role as an agent of conformity. Quoting Lazarsfeld and Merton (1971), Naveh (2002) raises the significance of media status conferral thus:

Communication experience as well as research testifies that the social standing of persons or social policies is raised when these command favorable attention in the mass media. The mass media bestow prestige and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status.

Status conferral is akin to second-level agenda-setting, particularly with agenda of affective attributes. By selecting some attributes of issues, objects or political candidates to create their images in the news coverage, the media contribute to the shaping of public opinions about the object of the news. The effect of frame used in describing candidates' attributes on audience perceptions was tested by Wanta and Golan (2001) in the New Hampshire's Republican Party's presidential primaries between George Bush and John McCain. It was submitted that McCain's victory in the primary may have been due to much more positive newspapers coverage he had than Bush. Valenzuela and McCombs (2007) report similar findings in 2006 Mexican presidential election. They conclude that "the more covered and favourably presented a candidate was, the higher the percentage of public support". Aside from the above, agenda-setting is equally reputed to be compatible with other theories and concepts such as bandwagon effects, the spiral of silence, social movement, propaganda analysis, the diffusion of news events, entertainment-education, media advocacy and media system dependency (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, pp. 15-16).

Agenda-setting studies have generated abundant evidences in support of the hypotheses at both issues and attribute levels. From Chapel Hill, where there was a

near perfect correlation (+.97) between the media and public agenda (Baran & Davis, 2010; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Coleman et al., 2009; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995), to other studies testing time order and causal path, significant relationships have been detected. The Charlotte study of 1972, with a correlation of +.51 of media to public and +.19 of the public to the media, resolved the criticism of the possibility of reverse causation in a procedure called cross-lagged correlations (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Severin & Tankard, 2010).

Testing consensus of agenda resulting from differential media exposures among gender, race, age, education and income subgroups, Shaw and Martins (1992) reported correlations of +.40 to +1.0. An attribute agenda-setting study of three Taiwanese candidates by King (1997) also yielded robust correlation of +.64 ( $p < .05$ ), +.71 ( $p < .01$ ) and +.54 ( $p < .05$ ), showing that the media also contribute to candidates' image perceptions among the public. McCombs (2004) also documents series of studies from Spain, Japan, Argentina and the United States with correlations ranging from +.90 to +.39.

Online agenda-setting effects have also been demonstrated in a number of studies. Roberts et al (2002), for instance, found significant correlations between online versions of traditional news media and audience online discussion for three of the four major issues in the 1996 U.S. Presidential Election. The issues include immigration (+.29,  $p < .05$ ); healthcare (+.30,  $p < .01$ ); tax (+.22,  $p < .05$ ). While Yu and Aikat (2005) found correlations of between +.51 and +.94 for online newspapers, television and news services, Lee (2004) reported correlations of +.84 and +.77 between liberal and conservative blogs respectively and mainstream media (Coleman et al., 2009). The meta-analysis conducted by Wanta and Ghanem (2007) concluded that majority of agenda-setting studies showed statistically significant findings as depicted in the table below:

**Table 4.1: Summary of meta-analysis of 90 agenda-setting studies**

| <b>Analyses<br/>correlations</b>       | <b>Mean</b> |
|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| Single issue agenda                    | .54         |
| Multiple issues agenda                 | .53         |
| Aggregate data set                     | .54         |
| Individual level data                  | .52         |
| News content as independent variable   | .53         |
| Media exposure as independent variable | .49         |
| Longitudinal                           | .56         |
| Cross-sectional studies                | .49         |

Beyond the correlational statistics, other analytical tools have been used to measure agenda-setting effects. Chi-square, T-test and regression as well as discriminant analysis have been used, with varying degree of findings in support of media agenda-setting power. Kwansah-Aidoo's (2001) qualitative agenda-setting study also supports the notion that the media influence the public agenda. He thus suggests that qualitative approach will help to "avoid some of the criticisms leveled against traditional agenda-setting methodology".

### **Envisioning the Future**

Since its emergence four decades ago, many studies have sprouted from the initial hypothesis of McCombs and Shaw (1972) that "the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes towards the political issues". Over four hundred published studies in five continents and on several issues hallmarked the robustness of agenda-setting as a paradigm in communication research (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007). Based on the assumption that individuals do not observe the reality directly, but through second-hand reality and pseudo environment created by the media, the theory has weathered the storm by justifying the causal paths, explaining the mechanism and explicating the moderating effects of confounding variables. All these have made agenda-setting to be one of the

most fruitful and enduring theories in mass communication and political communication (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Coleman et al., 2009; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Roessler, 2008).

The advancement in communication technologies that impact information gathering, storing, processing and consumption has, however, raised questions on the mechanism and magnitude of effects in the online news media environment.

With the emergence of digitally-oriented news media format comes a prediction of dwindling fortune for agenda-setting. Johnson (2009), for instance, says that the customization of news offering on the Internet that allows for 'daily me' will make agenda-setting to suffer a serious hit. This notion also echoes in the assertions of many early researchers of agenda-setting effects of online news media. Justifying the possible attenuating effects of new technologies on agenda-setting potential of the media, Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) hold that "by proving users with more content choice and control over exposure, new technologies may allow people to create personalized information environment that shut them off from larger flow of public information in a society". However, new media technologies have been found to supplement traditional media of communication. Hence, the expansion of media landscape will, no doubt, change agenda-setting (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004; Rosembery & Vicker, 2009; Takeshita, 2006), but increase in online media use will, however, not remove media agenda-setting power (Brubakar, 2008; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007).

The assumption that the changing presentation format of the media will impact on agenda-setting has triggered a number of studies, thus extending the frontiers of research. The non-linear presentation of news in the online media environment has been claimed to minimize attention directing cues that orient readers to salient issues in the news (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Schonbach, de Waal & Lauf, 2005; Mensing, 2004).

In a comparative study of agenda-setting effects of online and print version of *New York Times*, Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) found significant difference between issues learned by readers of print and online version. They conclude that relative flexibility of the online version as opposed to the linear, hierarchical presentation of the printed version accounts for the difference. The deficiency of this study, however, is that it relies on artificial environment of the laboratory and uses individual issue salience as opposed to aggregate public issue salience. Other studies that have found support for agenda-setting in the online media environment used innovative methodologies.

Using comments in American Online (AOL) bulletin board as surrogate for public agenda, Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo (2002) found significant correlations for three of the four issues between electronic bulletin boards (EBB) discussion and the content of mainstream media (*New York Times*, *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *Time*

*magazine* and CNN) in the 1996 US presidential election. They conclude therefrom that media coverage provides information for issues discussion in the electronic bulletin boards. Mesing (2004) also studied prominence of 2000 and 2004 US presidential election coverage in selected traditional and online newspapers and conclude that online newspapers widen agenda, making their audience to be equally aware of the issues in the polity.

Schonbach, de Waal and Lauf (2005) equally found support for the possibilities of online newspapers to influence the agenda of their audience. Using a representative sample of almost 1000 respondents, they argue that both formats (online and print) contribute to widening of public agenda with a caveat that online newspapers impact is more apparent among the highest educated group while print newspapers impact on those with average interest. Scharrow and Vogelgesang (2009) adopted an innovative technique of Google Insight for Search (GIFS) to measure public agenda via what they dubbed salient driven behaviour. They found substantial correlations between aggregate search query and aggregate survey data from 500 telephone interviews about a particular issue in 2005 Bundestag election in Germany.

Beyond serving as an alternative avenue for the traditional news media, the Internet provides additional options for journalistic activities dominated by bloggers. Rosembery and Vicker (2009) believe media power to set agenda may be diluted by the activities of bloggers, citizen journalists, independent media and any other Internet literate and savvy person disseminating message. But Coleman et al. (2009) punctured the argument that bloggers are threats to the traditional news media in setting agenda for the public, noting that the online environment has not much original journalism. Their poser to the operators of the blogosphere captures their claims better: are they reporting or repeating? Messner and Distaso's (2008) inter-media agenda-setting study between blogs and traditional media found that reputable media institutions like *New York Times* and *Washington Post*'s ilk sometimes use blogs as news source while 73% of the 120 bloggers in the study source their reports from the traditional media (Johnson, 2009). The symbiosis between the two news genres, as demonstrated by the above study, thus predicts a complimentary rather than a threatening relationship.

Although increase in audience power, occasioned by the new media technologies, offers great challenges to media effects researchers, findings thus far reassured that the media will continue to play significant roles in the public's perception of the ever-fleeting environment. While acknowledging the challenges of agenda-setting in the new media environment, McCombs and Valenzuela (2007) opine that attention to news on the Web still tends to be even more highly concentrated than in the print world. Available opportunities for the audience to choose from an avalanche of media have led to evolution of agenda melding, which Lasorsa (2008) defines as "the process by which audience members seek out and

blend media agendas from various communication sources to fit their individual preferences and cognitions". Agenda melding is, therefore, the combination of journalists' efforts to focus public attention and audience supplementation of journalistic offerings through other sources with a view to accommodating their established values and attitudes (Coleman et al., 2009; Lasorsa, 2008). This possibility is, however, yet to be tested empirically. Attempt at measuring the effects of a plethora of information sources on audiences' perceptions of reality will no doubt be conceptually, theoretically and methodologically fruitful.

As social media continue to mushroom and expand the public sphere, it is important to examine their effects on users' engagement in the social and political environment. The ability of various news makers to reach the audience through dedicated websites will also impinge on the hitherto sole mediating role of traditional media. These issues call for a rethinking of agenda-setting model which may avail researchers the opportunity to break new grounds in communication research.

The quantitative research design that focuses on correlational analyses of the media and public agenda would need to be expanded in view of multi-modal information avenues. Beyond controlling for the effects of moderators, researchers may have to elaborate the design in such a way to account for main and complementary predictors of public agenda. Data that could afford parametric analysis and elaboration of relationships would, therefore, be desirable. The role of audiences' responses in shaping and/or strengthening the agenda-setting power of the interactive media also requires systematic examination. For example, what roles do audiences' responses in online newspapers' bulletin boards play in audience recognition of important societal issues? Do media factor in these responses in subsequent news production? Can audiences' responses to news in interactive media environment alter the policy agenda? These and many others are worthy of being examined as the society advances into increasing online engagements.

From the outset to the contemporary time, agenda-setting has proven to be a worthy research area in the field of mass communication and political communication. As one of the theories developed by mass communication scholars, it has evolved and matured into a dominant paradigm with a plethora of fruitful studies supporting and extending its initial assumptions. Giving its compatibility with other concepts, constructs and theories in the field of mass communication, agenda-setting has found paths for advancement in media effects research. This state of affairs offers promises for the development of a robust grand theory of media effects that will be capable of explaining and predicting the relationships between source, process and effects of media content on the audience. The responsiveness of the theory to the fluidity of media milieu also signalizes its virility and holds promises for future research adventures. The dynamism of the media environment should thus be explored to advance the search in agenda-setting effects.

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