

mass media serving as a go-between, was being questioned. Later, political analysts like Key and Lippmann provided a new view of the democratic process: Elected political elites decide upon policies for the public, and the public can make itself heard through political parties, which serve to link policymakers with their constituents.

Many scholars now see omnipotent mass media systems as the mechanism linking the public with political policymakers. The media have usurped the linking function of political parties in the United States, creating what can now be thought of as a "media democracy" (Linsky, 1986). One method for understanding modern democracy is to concentrate upon mass media, public, and policy agendas, defined as issues or events that are viewed at a point in time as ranked in a hierarchy of importance. Agenda research, concerned with investigating and explaining societal influence, has two main research traditions that have often been referred to as (1) *agenda-setting*, a process through which the mass media communicate the relative importance of various issues and events to the public (an approach mainly pursued by mass communication researchers), and (2) *agenda-building*, a process through which the policy agendas of political elites are influenced by a variety of factors, including media agendas and public agendas. The agenda-setting tradition is concerned with how the media agenda influences the public agenda, while the agenda-building tradition studies how the public agenda and other factors, and occasionally the media agenda, influence the policy agenda.

AN OVERVIEW

In the present chapter, we prefer to utilize the terminology of *media agenda-setting*, *public agenda-setting*, and *policy agenda-setting*. We refer to the entire process that includes these three components as the *agenda-setting process* (Figure 1). We call the first research tradition *media agenda-setting* because its main dependent variable is the mass media news agenda. We call the second research tradition *public agenda-setting* because its main dependent variable is the content and order of topics in the public agenda. We call the third research tradition *policy agenda-setting* because the distinctive aspect of this tradition is its concern with policy as, in part, a response to both the media agenda and the public agenda.

The present chapter has two objectives: (1) to analyze past research on agenda-setting in order to learn where the work reported in this literature is deficient and where it is robust; and (2) to synthesize this research literature with a view toward learning important and methodological lessons for future agenda-setting research.

Although recent years have seen an outpouring of research publications about agenda-setting, this research front has numerous critics. For example, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) state:

Although research on agenda-setting has proliferated over the last decade, so far, unfortunately, the results add up to rather little. With a few important exceptions, agenda-setting research has been theoretically naive, methodologically primitive, both confused and confusing. . . . Agenda-setting may be an apt metaphor, but it is no theory.

Other analysts have described the triviality of research questions and findings. Such criticisms imply a present need for an academic stock-taking of agenda-setting research.

Media Agenda-Setting

The issue of the homogenization of the news into a set of topics addressed by all members of the news media was raised early by the Hutchins Report (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). This set of topics was recognized as the media agenda. The question of who sets the media agenda and the implications of that influence for society were initially explored by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948). Lazarsfeld and Merton conceived of the media issue agenda as a result of the influence that powerful groups, notably organized business, exerted as a subtle form of social control. "Big business finances the production and distribution of mass media. And, all intent aside,

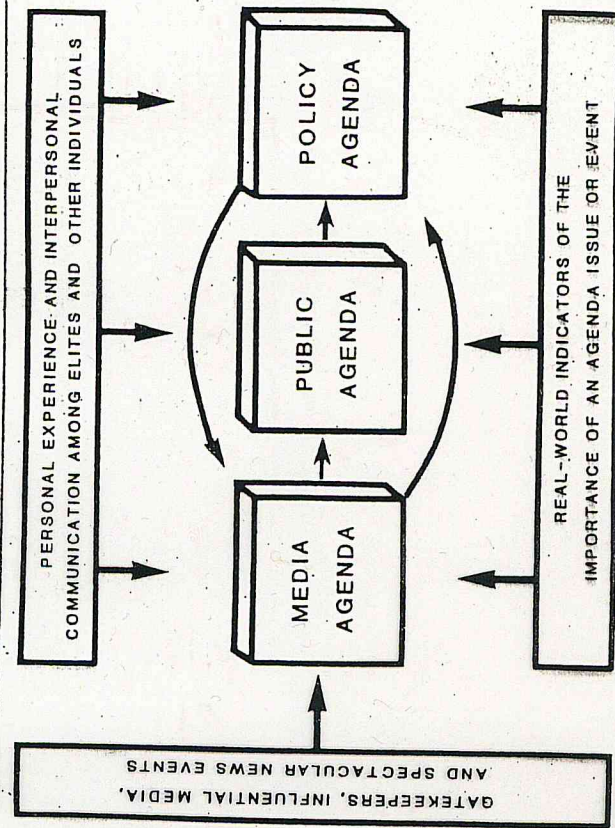


Figure 1. Three main components of the agenda-setting process: media agenda, public agenda, and policy agenda.