

Rather than actually trying this challenging adventure, simply think about what might happen IF the class were to tackle this agenda-setting assignment. Think of agenda-setting as the mass media's inability to tell people *what* to think, but their stunning success at being able to tell people what to think *about*.¹

Measure media agenda

First, find out which issues are most important today as determined by the amount of coverage they receive in the national news media.² This might seem like a massive undertaking that would include monitoring the network television news, radio, a variety of newspapers across the country and news magazines. Actually, a good approximation of the week's national news content can be made by counting the number of news stories on each topic carried in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* (see Content Analysis chapter).

If the stories in the three weekly news magazines were counted for two months, or 10 issues each of the magazines, the list of national topics derived would mirror a list of topics taken from the much wider range of mass media.³ In the United States, two items are likely to be on the list of six or seven important issues: 1) the economy and 2) crime. Other topics might be **issues** such as health or employment, or **events** such as wars, airline crashes, political scandals, etc.⁴ Regardless of the issues, the first task is accomplished: a list of the media's most important issues. This list is called the **media agenda**, and it's the first step in agenda-setting research.

Measure public agenda

Task No. 2 is to determine the public agenda of important issues today. To assess public opinion about which national issues in the news are most important, a survey is needed. The essential question is: "What are the most important problems facing the United States today?" The survey might be of college students on a single campus, a community's general population or a national random sample survey. Obviously, the more generalizable the survey, the more likely it will tap public opinion and produce the most plausible list of issues the public perceives as most important. This list of half a dozen or so issues is the **public agenda**.

The public agenda cannot be expected to exactly mirror the media agenda. For example, crime might be the No. 5 issue on the media agenda, but it might be No. 3 on the public agenda. Why this happens is a topic of debate among communication researchers. Some suggest that the issues are mediated by public cognitions⁵ such as, "The national economy is in bad shape, but my brother-in-law is unemployed, and that's worse." Others explain that news media coverage of an issue is couched in broad terms, often in a positive or negative context, and that the public perception of issues is subtle rather than just saying one issue is more important than another.⁶ An example of this **priming** effect is, "I may not know where Bosnia is, but having our troops there is important to show the world that America cares about liberty."

The impact of interpersonal communication is another explanation of why the two agendas don't exactly match. People talk about issues, and their conversations

can increase their perceived importance of an issue.⁷ Other influences include the **need for orientation**, or a psychological attribute that relates to why certain people attend closely to the mass media,⁸ the values people hold or their access to other communication channels. Regardless of why the two agendas aren't exact, most studies do find a high correlation between the media and public agenda: a close fit.

Measure cause and effect

The third task is to determine whether the media agenda influenced or caused the public agenda, which is what agenda-setting theory propounds. The alternative is that the public agenda causes the media agenda. If the latter proposition were correct, then the media would begin covering issues because people think they are important. Almost everyone who learns about the agenda-setting theory toys with this idea: That media, in their haste to capture larger audiences, respond to what interests the public by giving those topics greater coverage.

Of course, either or both of the agendas might be caused by some factor: They are similar agendas without being causative. One suggestion is that both are reacting to "real-world indicators," or actual events that the media and the public perceive at the same time but independently.⁹ Another suggestion is a symbiotic relationship between the two agendas, that media personnel and public opinion gravitate to the same interest topics that merge over time. But whether the two agendas are independent or mutually interactive is a lesser debate.¹⁰ Almost all agenda-setting researchers believe the two are related, and that one causes the other.

How might cause and effect be shown? The normal method is to see which comes first. If the public agenda is formed first, and the media agenda forms later, then the public is setting the media agenda. Several studies of the relationship dash this possibility. McCombs used cross-lagged analysis to show that the media's

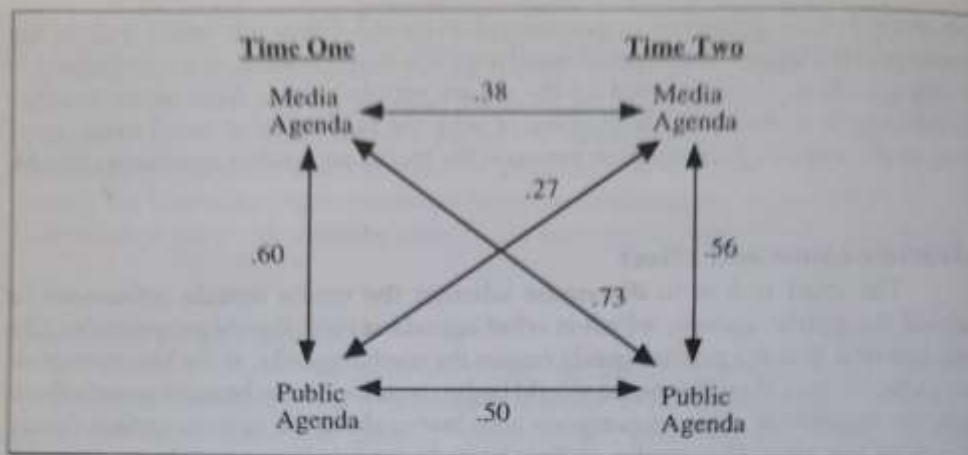


Figure 1: Cross-lagged analysis in agenda-setting

agenda sets the public agenda.¹¹ Cross-lagged analysis tests the strength of correlations between the two agendas at two points in time, checking associations in all directions. The Figure 1 example shows that all of the correlations are positive, as would be true in two measures of media and public agendas taken in the same six-month period. But the key figures, those in the "X," indicate that the association between the **media agenda at time one** and the **public agenda at time two** is far stronger (.73) than the association between the public agenda at time one and the media agenda at time two (.27). Thus, the media agenda precedes the public agenda.

If this evidence is not enough, consider intuition: How could an event such as a terrorist bombing or the discovery of a new cancer-fighting drug register on the public agenda unless the mass media placed it there? And if a true skeptic is still not persuaded, several researchers have studied the agenda-setting effect over time.¹² Their results were rather consistent in confirming that it takes from about one to four months for the media agenda to set the public agenda.

11. Maxwell E. McCombs (1977). "Newspapers versus television: Mass communication effects across time," in *The emergence of American political issues: The agenda-setting function of the press*, op. cit., pp. 89-105.

12. James P. Winter and Chaim H. Eyal (1981). "Agenda setting for the civil rights issue," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45(3):376-383. See also: Gerald C. Stone and Maxwell E. McCombs (1981), op. cit.; Chaim H. Eyal, James P. Winter and William P. DeGeorge (1981). "The concept of time frame in agenda-setting," in G. Cleveland Wilhoit and Harold de Bock, eds. *Mass communication review yearbook Vol. 2*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, pp. 212-218; Pamela J. Shoemaker, Wayne Wanta and Dawn Leggett (1989). "Drug coverage and public opinion, 1972-1986," in Pamela J. Shoemaker, ed. *Communication campaigns about drugs: Government, media, and the public*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; Michael B. Salwen (1986). "Time in agenda-setting: The accumulation of media coverage on audience issue salience." Paper presented at the International Communication Association, Chicago.

One of the problems in agenda-setting research is that not all news issues are created equal. The lightning-rod items, such as train wrecks and earthquakes, are **unobtrusive** because the public doesn't learn about these events until the media report them. Slow-boiling issues, such as inflation and abortion, are **obtrusive** because the public knows about them. Some research shows that the unobtrusive are brought to the public agenda by the media, but the obtrusive ones might go from building public concern to become a media coverage topic.¹³ Still, for most news issues, it is generally conceded that the media set the public agenda.

Ref: Clarifying communication theories

The press and foreign policy

Tracing the time lag in agenda-setting