

"Truths" in communication research

The agenda-setting research provides an opportune departure to consider some "truths" obtained during the 60 or so years history of communication study. Sixty years is a very short existence for any academic discipline, and brevity alone may justify critics' lamentation that communication has provided few if any real "truths," and certainly no encompassing theories about how communication works.

Agenda-setting begins to resemble an encompassing theoretical perspective. The concept is about 30 years old with nearly 300 studies that focus directly on the topic,¹⁷ including agenda-setting studies in a dozen different countries. Although there is no pretext that all of the research supports the concept as originally described, many of the studies suggest a number of "truths" worth noting:

1) The mass media are organizations whose product is information and entertainment. Those who operate the media are conditioned to seek out news and to disseminate it widely. This increases audiences and revenues. Reporters are adept at interacting with sources, many of whom are part of society's power elite (politicians, business and civic leaders). This exchange of information between sources and the media, and the process of disseminating it is called **gatekeeping**.

One type of information the media process is breaking-news stories, or events the public can only learn about through the mass media, such as oil spills or a treaty signed with another nation. Another type of information the media process is

continuing stories, or issues that build slowly and might be known by the public, such as problems in the state auto license bureau. Members of the public would recognize there is a problem if it takes a month to get new license plates. With breaking stories, the media locate new sources and rely on known sources for confirmation and official responses. With continuing stories, the media rely more on known sources among the public, many of whom share information with reporters on a continuing basis.¹⁸ For example, a deputy in the state auto license bureau may tell a reporter about computer problems in the renewal division.

2) Information ebbs and flows among the media, but a few important issues remain high on the media agenda, the topics that continue to have news value and about which the public seems interested. Coverage of these issues increases, and members of the mass audience who attend to the news media most will know more about the issues, including more details. These individuals are the **opinion leaders**, each of whom is an early recognizer of information that is pertinent to that person. Opinion leaders have larger networks for interpersonal communication and may be among the first to tell others the information, a **two-step flow** precept.¹⁹

3) But opinion leaders may not be the first to provide information because the media serve this function directly in most instances. Audience attention to media messages will depend on people's interest in a topic and their use of the mass media, a **uses and gratifications** precept. With major issues, such as the top several media agenda issues, the flow of information will be so intense or so prolonged that most of the population will know about the issues, an **information diffusion** precept.

4) Once the information registers on the public agenda, people begin talking about the issues and merging media information with information gained from **interpersonal communication** sources.²⁰ Information from non-media sources

may alter the public agenda and make it less like the media agenda, but it is more likely that discussion will help focus the public agenda and make it a closer match to the media agenda.

What happens then is less a certainty or "truth," as the term is being used here. Some studies suggest that the public, or the opinion leaders, provide **feedback** to the media. This may occur as audiences turn to other media sources when issues cease to hold their interest, by letters to the editor or by members of the power elite providing direct feedback to their reporter colleagues. Some suggest that the feedback becomes input that alters the media agenda and begins a new, circular process.