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Nicoleta CORBU*
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The Key Words Agenda: New Avenues for Agenda Setting Research

Abstract

This article seeks to expand the agenda setting theory and its later ramifications, by complementing them with the hypothesis of the articulation function of mass-media. Defined as the capacity of the media to offer people the words and expressions associated with defending specific points of view, the articulation function suggests a new ramification of the agenda setting theory, namely the *key words level of agenda setting*. Building on the third-level assumption about the transfer of issues and attributes from the media to people's agenda in bundles, we argue that each issue is in fact transferred together with a set of "key words", corresponding to the additional sub-topics related to the issue.

Keywords: articulation function of mass-media, key-words level of agenda setting, third level agenda setting, framing, priming.

Introduction

What was considered known about agenda-setting has changed gradually during the past decade, the initial homonymous theory and its conceptual ramifications have been stretched out, redefined and improved over the years. The first iteration of the agenda-setting theory claimed that media effects play a central role in shaping political reality, given their ability to transfer the salience of subjects from the media agenda to the public agenda. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 178). In the last half of century, the core theory developed into framing and priming (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), the second level (Shaw, 1977), and more recently third level agenda setting (Guo, 2014), and agenda melding (Shaw *et al.*, 1999) ramifications. Each ramification argued for a new and different way of transferring issues (first level, priming, third level, agenda melding), or attributes (second level and framing).

With all these ramifications, the assumptions behind the initial theories have changed as well. Built on an accessibility model of information processing, both agenda setting of first level and the model of priming effects rely on the salience of objects. In other words the reason behind the process of transferring objects from the media into people's minds is precisely

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their salience. Framing and the second level agenda setting, on the other hand, are explained through applicability effects, that is immediate effects of exposure to issues and attributes, which later foster salience type effects (i.e. priming). (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007)

The effects triggered by media messages over audiences' agendas could also be explained by the articulation function of mass-media (Noelle-Neumann, 1973/2004, p. 415). This function suggests that media provide the words and expression people use to articulate an opinion and express it when talking to others about a specific issue. One could, consequently, conceptualize this process as a distinct facet of media – audience transfer: key-words agenda setting. In this article we suggest that *key-words agenda setting* might be a new direction of research, which would explain how certain subjects are discussed in very specific terms by ordinary people, even when the issues do not refer to specialized matters. At the same time, this ramification of the theory might contribute to refining the third-level agenda setting, in the sense of providing arguments about how one particular topic might be transferred from the media to people's minds by means of subtopics constructed on "key-words".

From agenda setting to priming, framing, and network agenda setting

The classic definition of the agenda-setting theory remains Cohen's famous phrase: "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p. 15). McCombs and Shaw's study (1972) first hypothesized the agenda setting theory: the transfer of issue salience between media agenda and the public agenda. Since then, several studies provided support for the theory and elaborated it by adding various nuances and ramifications. Many of these studies brought to the literature a focus on particular situations and signaled problems that needed to be answered in what the research tactics were concerned (for an overview of most significant studies see McCombs, 2014; Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Bryant & Miron, 2004, Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). In this section we briefly present the ramifications of the main theories, with a focus on the third-level agenda-setting, which offers the psychological explanatory mechanisms for the key-words agenda setting.

Historically speaking, Winter and Eyal (1981) were the first to thoroughly discuss the lack of uniformity regarding the periods of time used by researchers in their studies on agenda-setting. Winter and Eyal used data stretching from several months of content analysis to several years. As a consequence, they had to confront the question of the optimal time span: is the power of the agenda-setting effect limited in time? They also asked whether it be regarded as a cumulative effect that strengthens with every news media outlet. The study showed that there was a 2 to 5 months optimal time span for a powerful media impact; the cumulative hypothesis however was not confirmed. In this manner research on agenda-setting settled on a relatively standard time frame for collecting data.

In addition to the salience of issues, McCombs and Shaw (1977) argued also for the salience of the attributes (properties associated with issues), discussing a second-level agenda setting. Later, scholars such as Ghanem (1995), McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas (2000) or Weaver (2007) discussed this "level" in relation to the concept of framing, mostly subsuming the latter to the former (Maher, 2008, p. 81).

Priming and especially framing are arguably the most studied phenomena related to the agenda setting effects (Bryant & Miron 2004). They offer insights into the mechanisms that

are fully capable of making further changes into the audience perception as a direct influence of its exposure to news media.

The concept of priming was defined by Iyengar and Kinder (1987, p. 63) as the way news influences “the standards by which government, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged”. Many other scholars have subsequently refined and explained this concept (Schleuder, White & Cameron, 1993; Mendelsohn, 1996; Scheufele, 2000; Jenkins, 2002; Brewer, Graf & Willnat, 2003; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Dillman & Carpentier, 2009, etc.) Priming is a notion which originates in cognitive psychology and derives from the associative model of memory: every new concept is stored as a node in a network and is connected to other concepts by semantic paths; the priming effect refers to the activation of a certain node in the network by an external stimulus semantically related to it. The activated node will be the interpretative filter in forming judgments or processing information. This mechanism is based on “a memory-based model of information processing, which assumes that individuals make judgments about other people or issues based on information easily available and retrievable from memory” (Scheufele, 2000, p. 299) Thus, priming has been often connected to the agenda-setting theory as an extension, as they are both based on a memory-based information processing model: people form judgments taking into account the most accessible considerations (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, pp. 63-66).

Framing on the other hand is thought to have a different theoretical conceptualization path and it differs both from agenda-setting and priming from this point of view. “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described“. (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

From Shanto Iyengar’s first studies (1987, 1991), and collaborative seminal works (Iyengar, Peters & Kinder, 1982; Iyengar & Behr 1985; Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Iyengar, Norpoth & Hahn, 2004) until today, the main assumptions behind the framing effects have been studied and further refined. The overwhelming amount of research conducted on framing related subjects made the theory “a victim of its own success” (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 3).

Framing research has largely relied on two distinct traditions, a psychological perspective, tradition inaugurated by Kahneman & Tversky (1979), in which framing is limited to “equivalence frames”, and a sociological perspective, largely embraced by communication scholars, who use mostly “emphasis frames” in their research. Equivalence frames are related to the fact that “framing refers to differential modes of presentation for the exact same piece of information.” (Sheufele & Iyengar, 2017, p. 621), whereas emphasis frames largely cover a relatively loose definition of frames encompassing different ways of presenting perspectives on an event or issue. (Sheufele & Iyengar, 2017, p. 622).

The conceptual distinction between framing and agenda setting is primarily based on the different cognitive models associated with them. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) claim that framing is significantly different from agenda setting and priming, as its cognitive mechanisms could be explained by an applicability model. Thus, in such a model the effect of a media message depends entirely on its power to resonate with the preexisting schemata (individual cognitive networks). Price and Tewksbury (1997, p. 197) argue that applicability refers to the “immediate influence of a particular message on evaluations made during (or immediately following) message processing”, whereas accessibility is related to the later occurring effects of retrieving information from memory (by activating the potential made available by the applicability mechanism).

Based on the cognitive mechanisms which are thought to explain agenda-setting effects, researchers (Guo, 2012, 2016; Guo & McCombs, 2015; Guo & Vargo, 2015) have developed a third-level agenda model (or Network Agenda Setting - NAS), that explains how the inter-connections between issues and attributes made salient by the media are responsible for the connections people make in their mind with regards to those issues.

The first and second agenda-setting theories, as well as priming and framing effects, were based on two assumptions: the first refers to the fact that human representation of reality works in a logical and linear manner. The second implies that the transfer of issue or attributes salience between agendas takes place in a discrete manner. Both of these assumptions were questioned by the Network Agenda Setting Model, or, as per above, third level of agenda setting (Vu, McCombs & Guo, 2014, p. 671).

The studies testing the NAS model have provided empirical evidence for the transfer of information in bundles, based on the assumption that human's cognitive representations do not necessarily operate linearly in perceiving the world outside, but rather more similarly to a map or diagram. The new model relies on the premise that human cognitive representation works in a network-like structure, rather than a linear one. Specifically, the model develops a version of the idea of a "cognitive map", seen as "a pivotal concept in understanding perception and thought" (Kaplan, 1973, p. 77)

The seminal study which tested the third-level agenda setting hypothesis was conducted on data gathered in a five year period (2007-2011) and analyzed aggregated data from national news media and polls. The study found significant network correlation between bundled issue salience on people's and media agendas (Vu, McCombs & Guo, 2014).

According to the NAS, media do not only tell people what and how to think about issues, they also suggest what and how to associate. (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Guo, 2013). Differently put, "the more likely the news media mention two elements in tandem, the greater chance that the audience will perceive these two elements as interconnected" (Guo, Vu & McCombs, 2012, p. 55).

In summary, the NAS model provided new insights into the psychological mechanisms behind the transfer of various types of agenda, from media to their audiences. It is in this context we suggest a further development. We argue that media perform yet another function: they provide key words and expressions for people to use in their daily conversations with others, on specific public issues. Going back to Noelle-Neumann's articulation function of the media, we claim that it is reasonable to expect a transfer of key words and expressions salience between agendas.

From the articulation function of the media to the key words agenda

The last five to ten years in agenda setting research have offered not only new insights into the main effect tested almost half a century ago, but also new ways of understanding how media cues (may they be objects, attributes, frames, etc.) are remembered and retrieved from memory. Using insights from cognitive psychology related to the mechanisms of memory activation, we propose a new avenue of investigation which we think worth exploring in research related to media effects.

A realistic modeling of memory is vital to this approach. Building on Quillian's (1962, 1967) spreading activation theory of human semantic processing, Collins and Loftus (1975)

proposed “a fairly complicated theory with enough generality to apply to results from many different experimental paradigms” (p. 427). For the purposes of this paper we focus on the tag-intersection concepts proposed by Quillian (1967) and further explained by Collins and Loftus (1975). In this view, searching for concepts in one’s memory translates into the activation of certain information nodes. From those nodes, the activation spreads to various neighboring nodes, leaving behind “tags” that “specif[y] the starting node and the immediate predecessor” (p. 408). Following intersections between nodes and tags, a path could be reconstructed in the memory activation process:

“When a concept is primed, activation tags are spread by tracing an expanding set of links in the network out to some unspecified depth. When another concept is subsequently presented, it has to make contact with one of the tags left earlier to find an intersection. One of the non-obvious implications of this view of priming is that links as well as nodes will be primed” (p. 409).

Against this background, we argue that memory about news from various media outlets is activated in bundles (as suggested by the NAS model), precisely because the topics from the media are in fact transferred to the citizens’ agenda by key words associated with them. These key words act as memory tags, making certain topics not only prominent, but also easily retrievable. At the same time, the third level agenda setting effects are not solely related to associating major issues, such as Economy, Politics, Wars, Health, etc., as tested by Vu, Guo, and McCombs (2014), but also to associating to them certain subtopics, specific to a general issue (see, for example, Buturoiu, Ștefăniță & Corbu, (2017)). These subtopics are largely associated with the key words, they might work as organizing tags within a broader topic.

From a different perspective, we argue that one of the reasons why people consume news on a daily basis is related to a long-forgotten explanation provided more than half a century ago by Berelson (1949): they need to seem informed in conversations with their peers. The *social prestige* gratification of the media was almost entirely forgotten in the last decades. Seminal work on the uses and gratifications theory has explored almost entirely different explanations, including in the current, internet era, from entertainment, pass time, relaxation, and social interaction (Ferguson & Perse, 2000), to self-development, career opportunities (Roy, 2009) or friending, identity creation and management (Dunne, Lawlor & Rowley, 2010).¹ It is only recently that this very important (in our view) reason why people follow news has been rediscovered in a slightly different form, i.e. the question why people share news on their social platforms. In this context, status-seeking has been reported as one of the gratifications of news sharing (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Ma, Lee, & Goh, 2011; Lee & Ma, 2012, etc.); in other words, “people share news to gain reputation (and/or followers), to draw people’s attention, and thus to attain status among peers or other users” (Kumpel, Karnowski, & Keyling, 2015, p. 6).

Going back to Berelson’s classic research (1949), we argue that people’s need to seem informed has to be addressed not only in the social networks environment, which is a perfect platform for “seeming” rather than actually “being”, but also in the face to face interactions. In this context, media provide the “tools” which allow for “curating” appearances when discussing the topics of the day: key words and expressions. There is here an obvious connection with the explanatory potential of the work on memory we dealt with above.

The articulation function of the media, as it was named by Noelle-Neumann (1973/2004), explains how people acquire the *semantic* tools to talk about an issue, or otherwise they would remain silent. Even though idea of the articulation function of the media was explored by