

REVERSE AGENDA-SETTING AND PROPAGANDA IN THE DIGITAL AGE

**Bernice Oluwalaanumi Sanusi¹, Dupe Sekinat Adeleke-Sola², Mayokun Josiah
Owojuyigbe³ & Lydia Oluwadunsin Adaralegbe⁴**

^{1,2,3,4}Department of Mass Communication, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria

*owojuyigbem@run.edu.ng

ABSTRACT: This paper examined the changing dynamics of the agenda-setting theory in the context of a new-media-dominated information age and the fast-evolving media audience responses to these new dynamics. The study employed an exploratory research design, using a literature review as a research instrument. Analysis of secondary data gathered from reviewed literature, Internet resources, and library materials form the basis for discussion of the changing meaning of agenda setting in light of new key players – the new media users, its attendant effect on gatekeeping, and the media audience's propensity to employ the new media as a propaganda tool. Concrete examples of how this is already playing out in society were examined, including the George Floyd-related "Black Lives Matter" movement in America and the EndSARS series of protests in Nigeria. Agenda-setting theory and Gatekeeping theory form the theoretical underpinning for this study, and recommendations that hinge on new media-specific regulations were put forward to potentially prevent the new media audience or masses from being lured by propaganda peddled by anti-state players.

Keywords: Agenda Setting, New Media, Gatekeeping, Propaganda, Regulation

INTRODUCTION

The rise of new media has disrupted traditional media and forced scholars to rethink established communication theories. Theories like the gatekeeping theory, framing theory, cultivation theory, agenda setting theory, and a host of others are now being rediscussed in a new media context where the 'all-knowing and all-powerful' media has had its monopoly on news production and dissemination stripped. The power now lies in the handheld device of the everyday new media user. As Ayo-Obiremi and Adelabu (2020) aptly observed, the once thought-to-be-passive media audience are now "gods" who need to be revered by media owners. It is not only that the media landscape is fast-evolving. Media audiences are increasingly becoming aware of their power to shape public discourse in the digital age. This paper argues that the power shift from traditional media to new media users has transformed agenda setting, empowering audiences to dictate public discourse and influence narratives. In her study of Media in Digital Society, Vartanova (2014) advances a similar idea in what she termed 'active audience,' and highlights that this audience poses a competition to professional journalists. Of the earlier mentioned theories that have come into questioning owing to the disruption to the media landscape brought on by new media, the interest in this paper lies in the agenda setting theory, which this paper seeks to review in a new dimension that puts the spotlight on the 'media power conscious' audience. However, this media

power is not aimlessly wielded in a vacuum, for as the great philosopher Aristotle noted, “man is by nature a political animal,” and it can be inferred that behind every intent to possess and wield power is a motivating political will.

In light of the foregoing, the objectives of this study are to:

- i. examine the current perception on agenda-setting theory in relevant literature;
- ii. establish the changing role of media audience from consumers to producers;
- iii. and identify societal examples of how the ‘reverse agenda setting’ concept is playing out.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed an exploratory research design, using a literature review as a research instrument. Analysis of secondary data gathered from reviewed literature, Internet resources, and library materials formed the basis for the discussion of subjects raised in this study. Journal articles pertinent to the research topic were sourced from online journals, using different combinations of the key terms in the research topic. *ResearchGate*, *Academia* and *Google Scholar* are the three databases from which these journals were primarily sourced. Relevant library materials that treat key concepts in this study were also consulted.

Agenda-Setting: Then and Now

In 1922, Walter Lippmann emphasised the importance of mass media in shaping public perception (Lippmann, 1922: 9-16). This marked the beginning of agenda-setting theory. Lippmann explains how mass media can set a specific agenda and influence public opinion, but he never mentions "agenda-setting theory" in his book. However, he established the basis for agenda-setting theory, which became widespread in the post-Lippmann era.

During the 1968 presidential election in the United States, Lippmann's insights served as the foundation for the famous Chapel Hill research (McCombs and Shaw 1972, cited in McCombs 2018), which presented the agenda-setting theory. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw proposed agenda-setting theory in 1972, which identifies particular factors in news coverage of public events and topics that shape public opinion. The fundamental notions of this theoretical metaphor are a media agenda, a public agenda, and the movement of prominence and perceived relevance of news items from the media agenda to the public agenda. The media agenda is defined as the pattern of news coverage over several weeks that leads to the establishment of a public agenda. Bernard Cohen (1963) argues that the media merely tells people what to think about, not what to think. Therefore, the mass media is accountable for the delivery of information, and not to set the opinion of the audiences.

In the new media landscape, a variety of internet channels have joined the tune of media voices, demonstrating agenda-setting effects among the public comparable to those found in newspapers and television over the years (Tran, in press). With the huge expansion and modification of the communication landscape, some observers have forecast a reduction, if not complete extinction, of agenda-setting effects on the scale that we have seen over the last half-century (Chaffee &

Metzger, 2001, cited in McCombs, 2018). The intensity of agenda-setting effects in previous decades, as well as their continued effectiveness in today's media environment, stems from persistent patterns of behaviour in the media and among the general public.

However, the new media's agenda-setting role extends beyond just transferring issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. There have been numerous agendas in recent years, and many researchers have adapted the main principle of agenda-setting theory—the shift of salience from one agenda to another—to a wide variety (Bantimaroudis et al., 2010). The internet, particularly social media, represents a significant study area in both traditional and new aspects of agenda setting. For some scholars, the availability of various channels and the freedom for individuals to pursue their own personal agendas violates a fundamental tenet of agenda setting that the media tend to share the same set of news priorities.

Assumptions of Agenda-Setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw (1972) stated that media influence is not a reflection of reality but rather a filtered and created version that favours certain topics over others. This concept emphasises the agenda-setting function of mass communication, in which media serve as gatekeepers, deciding which subjects are covered and how they are framed. Instead of presenting everything that happened in an event, the media prioritises specific issues, perspectives, and narratives, altering how audiences should see and interpret reality.

At the height of the COVID-19 epidemic, several media outlets heavily concentrated on mounting case counts, deaths, and government restrictions, generating a sense of panic and urgency. Meanwhile, other media outlets emphasised economic consequences. These different narratives influenced how different sectors of the audience saw and responded to the epidemic, from following health standards to protesting lockdowns.

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) analysis of the 1968 US presidential election found that the problems most emphasised by the media were the issues seen as most significant by the public. Agenda-setting theory holds that the more attention the media pays to specific subjects, the more likely the public will regard those concerns as critical and relevant.

In reality, agenda setting does not teach people how to think or feel about specific topics but rather what they should think about. According to Bernard Cohen (1963), "The press may not always be successful in convincing individuals what to think, but it is stunningly good in informing its readers what to think about.

The agenda-setting theory holds that the media's concentration on specific topics influences public opinion and policymaking. Lang and Lang (1981) observed that the media's focus on certain topics raises public concern, which might prompt government action. They created the assumption in an attempt to discover conceptual and methodological gaps in existing research on agenda setting.

Lang and Lang argued that the news media agenda is built rather than set and that agenda-setting research failed to provide an adequate answer to the question of what causes a political issue (Lang

& Lang, 1991). The two scholars proposed an agenda-building model, which consists of four steps detailing the process leading an issue to become an important item on media agendas.

Climate change's rise to prominence on global media and political agendas exemplifies the agenda-building approach. Climate change was initially a specialist topic, primarily debated within scientific communities. Environmental advocacy groups, scientists, and grassroots movements gradually increased awareness through reports, protests, and campaigns. These initiatives got the interest of journalists and media outlets, who began to cover the subject more extensively, portraying it as a crucial worldwide crisis. This exemplifies Lang and Lang's contention that media agendas are "built" through interactions between advocacy groups, the general public, and journalists rather than "set" by the media.

In agenda-setting theory, there are two techniques that influence how people understand media content: media priming and media framing. Their inherence in agenda setting affects even engaged media consumers who interact critically and carefully with media information. Priming is the process by which media continuously emphasises particular problems, forming brain shortcuts and elevating particular subjects. Contrarily, framing highlights some parts of a story while leaving out or downplaying others. Actively interacting with media information can encourage critical thinking, but it does not completely protect people from the priming and framing processes that set agendas.

These assumptions of agenda-setting theory highlight the media's role in shaping public opinion and influencing policymaking by prioritising certain issues above others. Media serve as gatekeepers, deliberately selecting and framing information on specific concerns. This process influences how audiences view the significance of these issues, influencing public agendas and, eventually, policy agendas. While the media does not control what people believe, it has a substantial influence on what they think about, showing its ability to set the agenda in ways that are consistent with societal, cultural, and external constraints.

Counter Agenda in the Absence of Gatekeeping

In the pre-internet era, the media enjoyed wilful control of what went in and came out as news, except where government interference played a part, that is. The normative theories of the press (Nerone, 2018) extensively explain the different extents to which this government interference or the absence of it plays a part in media activities. What the internet era has done, however, is to set up the media audience as co-producers and competitors with the media, leaving the gatekeepers with more editorial choices to make than they had in the past. Undoubtedly, this also leaves them in an endless tussle for agenda-setting power, as the media audiences now have 'endless' options of who to listen to and where to source information from.

The theory of convergence culture, which Henry Jenkins ties up with the concepts of "participatory culture" and "collective intelligence" advances the idea that "[media] consumers are fighting for the right to participate more fully" in media processes of production and consumption. He also acknowledges that "some consumers have greater abilities to participate" in the media processes than others (Jenkins, 2006). In light of this more modern theory and the far-long obsolescence of

the hypodermic needle theory, the conclusion is fit that the audiences know that the media intentionally sets (or attempts to set) the agenda for daily discourse. Stories that would have gone unpublished in the past now reach audiences directly via new media, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. What this means for the mainstream media is the agenda they seek to set can be neglected by the media audience. In addition, the audience can seek out their own daily agenda.

The content of this paper may provide nudging for an empirical study that examines the objectives to:

- a. identify current agenda-setting practices by media outlets in the face of growing competition with the new media;
- b. examine the effectiveness of agenda-setting for the 'media power conscious' audience;
- c. identify novel gatekeeping options and their relevance in maintaining the agenda-setting function of the media;
- d. examine the extent to which the audiences are making self-directed media choices that defy the media's agenda-setting role;
- e. examine the extent to which media audiences are conscious of their agenda-setting power and the extent to which they utilise this power.

Research along these lines will, among other things, shed more light on the media audience's ability to set public discourse for themselves.

The People and Their Power to Set Agenda

With the emergence of new media, the mechanics of information flow have changed, drastically altering the traditional media landscape in the digital age. The idea of "reverse agenda-setting"—in which viewers, not media organisations, decide which topics become more prominent—are among the most fascinating aspects in this change. In online settings, where social media platforms, citizen journalism, and digital activism enable people and organisations to impact public opinion and direct the agendas of mainstream media, this phenomenon is more noticeable.

The use of reverse agenda-setting is not limited to empowering the populace. According to Vos, Craft, and Ashley (2012), new media users—from political actors to interest groups and regular citizens—are increasingly using it as a "propaganda tool". They are strategically structuring narratives to control perceptions, sway attitudes, and manipulate public mood. Digital platforms' decentralised structure facilitates the quick spread of information, enabling people and groups to advance particular agendas more easily and occasionally get over traditional journalistic gatekeeping (Chadwick, 2017). According to Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018), this calls into question the ethics of agenda manipulation in the digital realm, the integrity of public debate, and audiences' vulnerability to false information.

The idea of agenda-setting has long been associated with the impact of the media on public opinion. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the media has historically been crucial in deciding which concerns are deemed significant by choosing and highlighting particular subjects over others. According to Cohen (1963), this procedure, referred to as the "agenda-setting

function," has been essential in influencing public opinion and directing political discussions. Social media and digital communication, on the other hand, have changed this dynamic by allowing people to contribute to agenda setting actively (Boulianne, 2015).

The emergence of social media platforms has caused a power shift away from traditional media, giving people direct control over the topics being discussed in public. People can now raise awareness of issues that the media might have otherwise ignored by using technologies like social media campaigns, online petitions, and hashtags (Tufekci, 2014). Given its ability to open up new channels for public participation and influence over the political and social agenda, this change in the balance of power has important ramifications for democracy (Castells, 2012).

The ability of the people to organise and mobilise around causes that are significant to them gives them the opportunity to influence the agenda. Social media platforms have enabled citizens to establish their own agendas outside the influence of established media channels by giving them the means to communicate, exchange information, and plan actions (Boulianne, 2015).

A good example of this is the #MeToo movement, which started as a Twitter hashtag and raised awareness of sexual harassment and assault widely. The movement quickly gained traction as millions of people shared their own stories of harassment and demanded that leaders and institutions take responsibility (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). This serves as a powerful demonstration of how social media can empower citizens to set the agenda and drive social change.

Democracy and public debate are significantly impacted by citizens' growing ability to determine the agenda. On the one hand, technology enables people to hold elected officials responsible for their acts and participate more actively in the democratic process (Boulianne, 2015). However, because biased or unverified content may readily be amplified through digital platforms, this change in power also raises worries about the dissemination of misinformation and the potential manipulation of public opinion (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

Promoting civic involvement, media literacy, and critical thinking are essential for maximising the advantages of citizen-driven agenda-setting. According to Franco and Menke (2019), society can better guarantee that this newly acquired power is utilised to advance the common good by giving citizens the skills they need to evaluate information critically and engage in meaningful public discourse. People's ability to shape the agenda is, therefore, a two-edged sword: either it can be used to further democratic and social change, or it can be used to subvert those very ideals (Castells, 2012).

The Concept of Propaganda

The idea of propaganda in the modern sense of the word ties it closely to "government" and "politics." The earliest version of the word was, however, linked to religion and had a positive denotation. The word can be traced back to circa 1621, where it first appeared in *Congregatio de propapanda dide* meaning "Congregation for propagating faith." By the early twentieth century, around the time of World War I, the word 'propaganda' began to define political rather than religious indoctrination, reflecting the shift in societal power from the church to state (Fellows,

1959, as cited in Fitzmaurice, 2018). Harold Lasswell's analysis of 'World War I Propaganda' and his "active participation in creating propagandistic messages as well as analysing and combating enemies' propaganda" also contributed to the modern conceptualisation of the word (Laskin, 2019).

Alternative meanings of the word 'propaganda' in dictionaries and literature shift the focus away from the "source" and define propaganda in the sense of the message itself – not the sender. That idea of propaganda as a (kind of) "message" underpins the discussions raised in this study. Propaganda is a set of "ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024). This line of thought allows for the term 'propaganda' to be viewed not solely as a government attempt to sway public opinion but also as a set of concerted messages that can originate from citizens themselves with the aim of persuading diverse other citizens (the masses). Agidi (2022) defines propaganda as a communication form that is aimed at influencing the community toward some cause or position. Propaganda is "public communication aimed at influencing an audience and furthering an agenda" (Oxford Languages, 2024).

Boycotting Government Propaganda with the Avenue of 'Media Power Consciousness'

Government propaganda uses media influence to shape public discourse, control information flow, select reporting and frame issues to fit a certain goal. Boycotting government propaganda through media power consciousness is a purposeful act of resistance against state-controlled narratives by people who understand the media's influence in affecting public opinion. The concept of rejecting government propaganda is not new. It rose to prominence during a period when state-controlled media dominated public opinion. Activists, intellectuals, and independent media organisations have long opposed propaganda by encouraging media literacy and alternative narratives. This resistance to propaganda has taken on new dimensions in the digital era, due to the emergence of social media and alternative internet platforms. However, this reveals the nature of media power where both liberation and manipulation coexist.

Media power consciousness refers to a single organisation or individual's ability to command a huge presence and impact in the media environment (Freedman 2008). Media power consciousness comprises a critical knowledge and understanding of the media's substantial influence on public opinion, cultural norms, and societal behaviour. It entails understanding how the media prioritises issues and develops agendas, crafting narratives to shape opinions while government propaganda is debunked using tools such as fact-checking, critical media literacy, crowdsourcing information, and so on. Critical media literacy is essential, since it provides individuals with the ability to assess the trustworthiness, bias, and intent of media content, as well as recognise misinformation and propaganda.

People have become info-obsessed as they are invaded with information in the form of text, audio, images, and videos via media because media plays such an important role in people's lives, media literacy is a must-have ability. In addition to media literacy, critical thinking is an essential talent for the twenty-first century. The primary goal of media literacy is to promote critical autonomy (Aufderheide, 1993, cited in Erdem 2018), which aids in resisting government propaganda.

Additionally, media power consciousness entails understanding media ownership and control, as well as how these elements influence public discourse. Individuals' technological awareness also contributes to their understanding of the impact of algorithms and digital platforms in filtering information and amplifying specific perspectives. This understanding enables people to seek out varied, independent sources of information and participate in informed discussions, promoting active citizenship and advocating for ethical media practices and openness. Finally, media power consciousness enables people to navigate the media landscape critically, avoid manipulation, and contribute to a better informed and democratic society.

There is no doubt that media power consciousness works against government propaganda by empowering individuals to critically analyse and question media content, promoting accountability, undermining propaganda's effectiveness, ensuring a free and transparent media ecosystem, and ensuring that agenda setting remains a tool for public interest rather than manipulation.

Reverse Agenda Setting and the New Media as an Enabler

The period of the EndSARS series of protests in Nigeria in 2020 was an eye-opener for the Nigerian government and citizens alike on the new media users' power to direct public discourse to the point of interest of the observing citizens, as opposed to the 'traditional' media or government agenda. Olanrewaju, Sanusi, Ajala, and Oluwasanmi (2024) isolated social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram as instrumental towards orchestrating the EndSARS movement among Nigerian youths. The study corroborated other researchers' opinions about the unique role of social media, even before 2020, in contributing to the buildup and eventual culmination of protests around the EndSARS issue. The countless calls on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for an end to SARS' extrajudicial activities led to the Nigerian government giving attention to the complaints when a lot of citizens started expressing themselves on social media platforms (Makinde, 2020, as cited in Olanrewaju, Sanusi, Ajala, & Oluwasanmi, 2024). Adedokun (2022) also drew a distinction between past protest movements in Nigeria and the EndSARS movement, noting the role of social networks across Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms in the EndSARS movement. His discussion was hinged on the Social Network Theory.

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria and the campaign months leading to the elections are another point of observation that highlights the role of the new media in facilitating reverse agenda. While social media campaign is not a novel concept in Nigerian elections, supporters of Peter Obi in the 2023 elections appeared to capitalise on it for their campaign activities. Omachi and Ezegwu (2023) submit that the social media campaigns staged by Obi's supporters (colloquially called "Obidients") "proved successful in rallying support for Peter Obi." Concerns of misinformation through social media notwithstanding, the process demonstrated that social media discourse can mount significant agenda-setting competition with the mainstream media.

Other news events where social media played a lead role in setting the public agenda include the George Floyd killing in 2020 that spurred the "Black Lives Matter" protests in America, the palliatives hoarding and looting incidents in Nigeria in the immediate post-covid era, the trial of

former Central Bank Governor, Godwin Ifeanyi Emefiele following his impeachment in 2023, and the detention of human rights activist, Dele Farotimi, following charges of defamation levied against him by Afe Babalola (SAN) in 2024. There are a host of other cases that typify social media's strength in setting public agendas outside of these few examples.

Essentially, new media technology is increasingly demonstrating itself as a veritable means for setting or 'redirecting' the public agenda. Future research is expected to help delineate the extent to which new media use is pushing the boundaries of agenda-setting to overpower the roles once played by the mainstream media.

Recommendations

Given the potential of new media-led agenda setting and propaganda peddling to upend societal structure as established by Bontridder & Poulet (2021), the government and the people alike will benefit from these recommendations to:

- i. establish guidelines specific to the role of new media in leading public discourse;
- ii. empower Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and network administrators to censor social media activities in ways consistent with a democratic state;
- iii. review the boundaries of free speech and press freedom to emphasise 'new media' social responsibility;
- iv. establish a regulatory body similar to the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to develop and implement guidelines for new media use by citizen journalists; and
- v. establish a legal system or ombudsman representation system to ensure that the recommendations contained here do not trample on the rights of citizens to free speech.

Conclusion

This study reviewed the changing dynamics of the agenda setting concept, in the context of a new media dominated information age. Through a review of relevant literature and analysis of secondary data gotten from academic journals and library materials, the propensity of new media users to employ the new media as a propaganda tool was established, and specific cases were highlighted. The observed trends in agenda setting by new media users prompted recommendations from this study that hinge on new media specific regulations that can prevent the new media audience (or masses) from being lured by propaganda peddled by anti-state players.

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