

AGENDA-SETTING RESEARCH

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Özet

Gündem oluşturma, herhangi bir konu hakkındaki izlenimlerimizin medya, halk, veya politika elitleri tarafından şekillendirilerek, beyinlerde önem kazandığı süreç olarak tanımlanır. Kitle iletişim araçlarının bu konuda başlıca rolü oynadığı yıllar geçtikçe kanıtlanmıştır. Gündem oluşturma araştırması, 1922 yılında Walter Lippmann ile başlamıştır. Lippmann, o dönemlerde medyanın gündem oluşturma konusunda güçlü etkileri olduğunu savunmuştur. 1960'li yıllarda yapılan araştırmalar, kişilerarası iletişimin gündem oluşturmadaki önemini kanıtlayarak, medyanın bu konuda sadece sınırlı etkileri olduğunu vurgulamıştır. Gündem oluşturma araştırmaları, 1968'den sonraki 30 yıl içinde 350 makalenin konusu olmuştur ve bugün iletişim alanındaki en popüler araştırma konularından biri olarak kabul edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gündem Oluşturma, Kamuoyunu Şekillendirme, Kitle İletişim Araçları

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Agenda-setting generally refers to the process in which the perceptions of a given issue are shaped by the mass media, the public, or policy elites and gains importance in our minds. It has been long argued that the mass media plays a primary role in shaping the public opinion.

Agenda-setting research began with Walter Lippmann and the first chapter of his influential book *Public Opinion*, "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads," in which he discussed that the mass media build a connection between an event in the real world and the images of this event in our minds (Rogers 1997: 237). According to his notion, "the media create symbolic images in our minds that may be quite different from the world that we experience outside" (Rogers 1997: 242). Although he did not specifically name it as agenda-setting, Lippmann, in 1922, noted that the news media play a major role in defining the world beyond our immediate experiences.

While Lippmann claimed the powerful effects of the media in his studies in the 1920s, empirical studies of earlier models and theories in mass communication explored the strength of interpersonal communication, by shifting the attention to the limited models of media effects in the 1960s. Under this perspective, it was argued that "the audience not only learns some facts from exposure to the news media, but that it also learns about the importance of topics in the news from the emphasis placed on them by the news media" (Bryant and Zillman 1994: 2). This idea found its prominent meaning from the statement given by the political scientist Bernard Cohen, who noted that "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*....The world will look different to different people, depending...on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read" (Rogers 1997: 238). By pointing out the important indirect effects ("telling people what to think about") of the mass media, Cohen, here, described the metaphor that led to agenda-setting research (Rogers 1997: 238). But until McCombs and Shaw's research on 1968 presidential election campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and its publication in 1972, agenda- setting was just a theoretical and unnamed idea.

In their classic study, McCombs and Shaw empirically tested the relationship between the media agenda and public agenda. They used content analysis in their measurement of the media agenda and surveyed 100 undecided voters in their measurement of the public agenda. Then they correlated these two agendas and at the end, they found perfect relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda (Rogers 1997: 238). Their findings later were confirmed by other researchers such as Funkhouser (1973), who found substantial correspondence between public opinion and news coverage (Bryant and Zillman 1994: 5).

Agenda-setting has been heavily researched with 350 research articles in 30 years after the McCombs and Shaw's study of 1968 presidential election campaign and became one of the most popular research topics in the mass communication field. In 1972, McCombs and Shaw investigated the contingent conditions that can influence agenda-setting effects of the news

media with their three-wave longitudinal study among the general population of voters in Charlotte, North Carolina. This new focus in the agenda-setting research led to scholars to find out the conditions that enhance or limit agenda-setting effects. Although these studies found various variables such as exposure to the news; age, education level or income of an individuals; or frequency of interpersonal discussions as contingent conditions, two variables emerged as significant to influence the strength of the agenda-setting effects: need for orientation and obtrusiveness / unobtrusiveness (Bryant and Zillman 1994: 7).

Obtrusive issues refer to the issues that individuals can experience directly. Inflation can be a good example for that. On these issues, we don't need the media to tell us how important these issues are. On the other hand, about unobtrusive issues, we don't have a chance to experience them directly and we are dependent on the news media for our knowledge of these issues. For example, Middle East crisis causing rapidly rising price of gasoline is an unobtrusive issue for the public (Bryant and Zillman 1994: 7). Unobtrusive and obtrusive issues affect the extent of agenda-setting influence. Researchers found that there are strong agenda-setting effects of the media on unobtrusive issues and no effects on obtrusive issues (Bryant and Zillman 1994: 8).

The need for orientation is described as a concept, which recognizes that individuals who are in unfamiliar settings will try to orient themselves until they feel comfortable. There are two important components to define the person's level of need for orientation: level of interest and degree of uncertainty. People who have high interest and a less degree of certainty about the

issues are more likely to feel the need for orientation and thus, they are more open to agenda-setting influence of the news media. On the other hand, people who have low need for orientation are exposed themselves less to the media, and therefore, they are less likely to be affected by the media agenda (Bryant and Zillman 1994: 8).

Other significant agenda-setting studies such as the one conducted by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) tried to reveal agenda setting effects of the news media in the laboratory with experiments and verified this phenomenon. Brosius and Kepplinger (1990) applied a different methodology and conducted cross sectional and longitudinal study which compared a content analysis of the West German television news programs with public opinion polls on the issues considered most important by West Germans. At the end, they found strong agenda-setting effects for five issues: energy, East-West relations, defense, the environment, and European Community politics. As a result of the Iyengar and Kinder's experimental study and the Brosius and Kepplinger's field study, television news were found to have strong agenda-setting effects, contrary to McCombs and Shaw's findings (1977) which indicated that television news has weaker agenda setting effects than newspapers (Bryant and Zillman 1994: 6).

Until the recent years, researchers focused on what shapes the public agenda and treated the media agenda as an independent variable in that process. Scholars recently have started to make some studies focusing on who and what shapes the news agenda and have taken the media agenda as a

dependent variable. They have found variety of internal and external influences that affect the news agenda. The President, public information officers, public relations specialists, interest groups, press releases and press conferences emerged as external sources who and which have influence on the news content. On the other hand, long-term journalistic traditions, practices, values and gatekeeping function existed as major internal factors who sets the media agenda (Bryant and Zillman 1994: 10, 11).

Usefulness and Strengths of Agenda-Setting Research:

Research on agenda-setting have emphasized the importance of the news media in shaping the perceptions of what is important in our minds. Agenda-setting research established a positive causal link between the media agenda and the public agenda and offered some explanations regarding the indirect effects of the media in our lives, by suggesting what to think about. "The mass media are less capable of changing directly attitudes and opinions, but they can tell us what to think about. This agenda setting effect is not the result of receiving one or few messages but rather is due to the aggregate impact of a very large number of messages, each of which has a different content but all of which deal with the same general issue" (Rogers 1997: 240). From this perspective, the agenda-setting effect of the media is cumulative. In addition to that, agenda-setting effects occur over time. The media agenda transfers to the public agenda over time. Thus, the media has a long-term cumulative impact on the public agenda. Issues

that take place in the media agenda gain salience in the public agenda over time.

Agenda-setting research have not proposed monolithic media influence and have indicated the existence of contingent conditions that can increase or decrease the agenda-setting effects of the news media. Under this setting, the characteristics of individuals, their level of exposure to the news, their need for orientation and the nature of issues such as obtrusiveness and unobtrusiveness have been discussed.

Agenda-setting is not simply a matter of presentation of media stories. Media members select the news stories that will be presented to the public from a lot of different alternatives. By doing that, they frame the issues and limit the alternatives that they will present to the public. With this aspect, agenda-setting research involves other communication theories such as priming and framing, spiral of silence and provides conceptual parallels for their explanations.

Agenda-setting is also an interdisciplinary phenomenon that communicates with other communication subfields and is used and tested in the other social sciences, such as political science, psychology, and sociology.

With their agenda-setting power, the media can motivate policy makers to look at the issues and problems that most of the public is interested in and can force them to take precautions about them. On the other hand, by setting the agenda about the wrongdoings of policymakers, the media can activate the public and sometimes can change the political scene totally as they did in the Watergate scandal.

Weaknesses of Agenda-Setting: Agenda setting research have offered explanations for how the media sets the agenda. But it stopped there. It did not go so far to explain the subsequent behavior of individuals. It couldn't establish the connection between agenda-setting and its behavioral consequences. The reason for this may be that humans are complex and complicated, and it is hard to explain their behaviors by depending only on agenda- setting effects of the media. Since there are almost always some other factors that cannot be explained, to depend on only one factor in the explanation of human behavior may produce wrong results.

The research on agenda-setting has tended to focus on political and social issues. There is an especially heavy amount of work that has investigated elections and the agenda-setting effect of the news media on voters. By limiting itself especially to these particular issues, agenda-setting research couldn't make generalizations of their findings.

Another weakness of the agenda-setting can stem from the decline in the readership and in watching the news media. That means we are talking about small percentages of people as a sample in agenda setting studies. This result also negatively affects the generalizability and reliability of agenda-setting findings.

Suggestions for Future Research: Previous research about agenda- setting suggested the correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda. To increase the reliability and generalizability of agenda-setting research findings, agenda

setting can widen its arrays by focusing on different and various issues beyond political and social ones.

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