NAVIGATING THE MASS MEDIA'S POLITICAL AGENDA SETTING ROLE: A CASE STUDY OF GHANA

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Abstract

The role of the mass media in establishing political agendas is examined in the paper along with its advantages and disadvantages. A small case study of Ghana is used to examine how radio affects election agenda-setting. It has been observed that the mass media has a substantial influence on agenda-setting, and that influence is crucial for bringing to the public's attention urgent developmental issues. The media can set the agenda for the public on pressing issues that deserve attention through agenda-setting. Aside from this, agenda-setting has grown over time to include important topics like the environment, education, health, and risk communication in addition to its basic focus on political communication. Thus, agenda-setting plays a part in a wide range of societal developments. The agenda-setting theory's initial claim about traditional media, however, is being contested. The challenge is caused by the introduction of new media forms. Because of this, the general population is now exposed to a variety of information sources, not just a few media providers. Due to the widespread availability of a variety of media, the conventional media's initial function has been significantly diminished. Therefore, it is important to consider how the general public shapes the media's agenda through interactions on various digital channels, like social media.

Keywords: Agenda Setting, Mass Media, Propaganda, Politics, Traditional Media, Social Media

Introduction

The paper examines the agenda-setting role of the mass media, looking at its strengths and weaknesses. This looks at the political agenda-setting role of the mass media, considering the agenda-setting role of the radio during elections in Ghana. The paper seeks to understand the mass media's role in agenda setting, especially political communication, and its relations with changing media patterns. In Ghana and many other African countries, the radio is seen as an important medium of mass communication due to its contributions to information dissemination and awareness creation (Abdulai et al., 2020). Also, periods before, during, and after elections are significant periods across the world, and in the case of Ghana, the use of radio as a medium for agenda-setting continues to occupy an essential role in politics and overall development (Abdulai et al., 2020; Owusu, 2012).

The agenda-setting theory is a significant model within the broad umbrella of communication studies and the larger development discourse. According to Ireri et al. (2017), agenda setting encompasses the prominent influence that the media has and employs in determining the kind of issues or topics that people may think about and the degree of saliency attached to such issues. A major underpinning of the theory is that "the media may not necessarily come out as successful, with regards to determining what people think, however, the media influences in terms of the topics that people think about" (Ireri et al., 2017). Shaw & Martin (1992) make a point that relates to this by arguing that the media, in an actual sense, does not teach or inform people on what to do and what not to do, or the issues or topics to believe in, but plays a key role in suggesting certain topics, which the public will collectively agree on discussing and may end up acting on it.

Going back in time, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) proposed the agenda-setting hypothesis to comprehend the media's functions and influence in educating and influencing electorates' voting patterns during the United States' 1968 presidential elections. However, agenda-setting has broadened to include other development areas, such as business, communication, human rights, and healthcare (Zhou et al., 2016). Therefore, scholars have employed agenda setting and its effects on people and the larger society in diverse fields. This has led to many people, institutions, and agencies embracing agenda-setting.

Setting the agenda is crucial to political communication and communication research in general. This is due to the important role it plays in understanding how the media contributes to the emphasis it places on problems it deems through its coverage to be important when establishing the agenda for the public, audiences, and electorates within a political system (Abdulai et al., 2020). However, the media's agenda-setting function can also have a detrimental impact on the public or viewers by fostering an atmosphere of hatred or aggressiveness, for example, during election seasons when agendas are set in a certain language style to favor one party or candidate over the other (Adebayor, 2016). Consequently, it is crucial to explore agenda setting, considering the various underpinnings and interrelated concepts that encompass it. In the next section, we examine the theoretical premises of agenda setting.

The Theoretical Premises of Agenda Setting

Understanding the theoretical foundations of agenda setting becomes important for exploring how the theory has emerged and been applied in research over the years. The theoretical premise that characterizes agenda setting and priming dates to the psychological framework captured within priming- concerning the cognitive processes of semantic information and messaging (Collins & Loftus, 1975). Priming in this regard "is a situation where news content recommends to news consumers that they should use particular concerns as benchmarks for assessing the performance of leaders and parties" (Scheufele et al., 2007, p.11). "Since agenda setting and priming effect models are both based on memory-based information processing, scholars have mostly regarded priming as an extension of agenda setting, which is temporal" (Hastie & Park, 1986). That is, audiences, in most cases, are observed to form a sort of attitude based on the important conditions that are available and accessible during a decision-making period (Scheufele et al., 2007, p.11). Also, framing, which is sometimes linked with agenda setting and priming, is explained differently from the two and, as such, is seen as being premised on the argument that "the way a topic is characterized within the media may have an impact on the understanding that people give to it" (Scheufele et al., 2007, p.11). Hence, the three models, although related in some ways, should not be seen as one but should be explained differently based on their approaches and application within media effects.

Collins & Loftus (1975) have argued that "while receiving information, and the steps that follow in the processing of information, people are found to be developing memory traces or tags of activation". Thus, while receiving and processing information, the discussion topics are seen to be primed and, for that matter, made accessible within people's memory. In this way, memory traces impact the subsequent processing of the information (Salancik, 1974). Therefore, "when a topic of attention is being primed, the memory traces are spread across, as other topics or concepts become subsequently presented" (Zhou et al., 2016). With regards to this, Collins & Loftus (1975, p.409) posit that there is the need for contact within one of the tags, which is left earlier to identify an intersection.

The metaphor that characterizes the activation memory traces, as noted by Iyengar (1990), was substituted by the construct of accessibility. The point of accessibility is explained based on a model of memory-based information processing that suggests that "people will be making judgments on certain topics based on the available and retrieval information within their memory at the very time an issue is raised" (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Iyengar, 1990). From this, a judgment formed from a memory-based model suggests that attitude formation is in a way correlated and linked directly, in terms of how certain instances can easily be made available to the mind. Furthermore, research on accessibility, to a large extent, encompasses two main aspects (Hastie & Park, 1986). The first has to do with the test on a memory-based information processing model, as against an online processing model, which states that attitudes are formed as initial information is processed (Hastie & Park, 1986). In line with this, Lodge et al. (1989) have noted that "within an online model, the attitudes are characterized to be stored in the memory based on what is referred to as the judgment tallies". Wyer & Srull (1986) refers to it as "information integrators". From this, new impressions about the information follow processing, integrated into a moving tally that shapes people's current attitudes.

Despite the point that the attitudes are altered based on the integrated process, the cognition that originally changed the attitude or the judgment tally is gradually left and forgotten (Zhou et al., 2016). Other studies on cognition, attitudes, and how impressions are informed within the agenda-setting framework have looked at cognitive processes, including affective priming (Petty & Jarvis, 1996) and rationalization (Rahn et al., 1994). These have mostly been based on "the memory-based information processing model and is premised on the assumptions of attitude accessibility" (Petty & Jarvis, 1996). Within this, attitude accessibility is expressed as being constructed on a cognitive structure or on a behavioral pattern (Zhou et al., 2016).

In addition, several attempts have emerged over the years to measure attitude accessibility more directly. For instance, it has been argued by Bassili (1995) that "providing an operationalization on attitudes accessibility, within a variable of a continuous nature, could involve measuring the time that a person uses to respond to a question or issue at hand". The point is that the more time it takes to respond to a question, the less the accessibility of the evoked cognition (Bassili, 1995). Huckfeldt Sprague (1997) makes a significant point about this by arguing that accessibility is seen with regards to an associational strength within memory, as well as measured on the metric response that comes with time. On this, agenda-setting and priming can be built on the attitude accessibility assumption and, more specifically, on memory-based information processing (Asghar et al., 2015; Asif et al., 2023; Bassili, 1995; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

In relating this in a way of explanation, the mass media could impact the importance of some topics as people perceive them. This concerns the ease at which a topic in question is retrieved from the memory (Zhou et al., 2016). It could be emphasized that the mass media, with its strategies of agenda setting, can

influence and shape how people and the general public may see and judge public policies, candidates for public positions, and the government (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). Thus, the socio-economic and political topics, which are more accessible and important within people's memories, are more likely to impact their perceptions and judgments on public officials, political actors, and pertaining issues that affect the larger society. The next section examines the key underpinnings of agenda setting.

Main Underpinnings of the Agenda Setting Theory in the Mass Media

The agenda-setting theory stems from the idea that the mass media, with its choice of message and information, greatly impacts audiences through the decisions and choices that they make about the kind of topics to cover, as well as the space and prominence, which are given to it (Scheufele, 2000; Nisbet, 2008; Walgrave et al., 2008). Thus, the central theme within agenda setting that lies in the media can transfer their preferred agenda into the public domain and ensure that the topics and stories they present become a major priority for people. The introduction of agenda setting by Shaw and McCombs (1977) was presented as a correlation between the rate at which the mass media prioritize and give attention to an issue and how significant the issue was perceived. This brings attention to three key structures that characterize the agenda-setting process- the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda (Zhou et al., 2016, p. 568; McCombs, 2004).

The three structures within agenda setting are represented as a process because they are interrelated, work hand in hand, and influence one another during their operations. In most cases, the first two structures, namely the media agenda and the public agenda, are often used and applied together, compared to the policy agenda, which comes as an outcome of the two (Zhou et al., 2016, p. 568). The third structure is also prominent in sociology and political science. The media agenda considers the topics covered by media sources, while the public agenda represents the issues considered salient in the public domain (Zhou et al., 2016). According to Hopman et al. (2012), the mass media's role in news coverage can easily impact the salience attached to stories in the public agenda. Coleman and McCombs (2007) have argued that the mass media's influence on the public agenda has remained the same but continues to grow despite the emergence and spread of new forms of media.

Agenda setting has continued to be instrumental in various areas, including political communication, health, and the environment. In the field of politics, for instance, Zhou et al. (2016) have noted that, in the United States, the media's agenda-setting in politics and political communication at large is very vibrant. This is realized in areas of politics, such as electioneering campaigns and patterns of voting (Zhou et al., 2016). Research carried out by Latimer (1987) pointed out that the media possess a strong capacity to affect voting patterns and switch voting topics within the public or about certain policies. The media's coverage can also change the behavior of people regarding their intention to vote for a particular candidate or not. Similarly, Miller & Wanta (1996) undertook a study, which was given the heading "the sources of the public agenda" to investigate a relationship that was termed the "president/press/public relationship". In this research, they argued that the president or government may be powerful regarding the public agenda, however, the media with their significant news coverage represent the strongest force regarding the public agenda (Miller & Wanta, 1996).

Thus, when the media and the president or government considered a topic significant in the public domain, maximum power was realized in the public agenda setting (Walgrave et al., 2008; Krcmar et al., 2016). Nevertheless, on an individual level, the public is seen to be more swayed by the direction of the media on what is salient in the public agenda (Walgrave et al., 2008). An example that can be considered here is the case of the Iraq War. With the Iraq War, it could be emphasized that public opinion stood very low when the media wrote little positive stories on the War (Zhou et al., 2016). According to Christie (2006), the spin of the White House on the Iraq War was very low and not that powerful when compared with the media's position on the War. This explains how the media is powerful, and its abilities and strengths in directing issues that are considered salient in the public.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Agenda-Setting Paradigm

The early days of communication saw the conceptualization of the mass media as encompassing significant effects, especially the prevailing linkages with thoughts (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Zhou et al., 2016: 566). During this, the claims that characterized minimal effects became dominant, taking over the debates on media effects following the failure of scholars to provide clear documentation of often-focused behavioral effects, including changes in people's voting behavior (Zhou et al., 2016, p. 566). Thus, during this time, the media was seen to have many behavioral effects, including its effects on cognition, attitudes, perception, and affection. This significantly facilitated a reconsideration of media effects.

Agenda setting, thus, became a significant theory during this time, occupying a much prominent position within media effects, political communication, and the diversified facets of communication studies (Viegenthart & Walgrave, 2011; Hopeman et al., 2012). Agenda setting, therefore, holds a solid role and foundation within communication research, politics, environment, and development at large (Zhou et al., 2016, p. 566; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2020). In other words, agenda setting has developed essentially as a growing phenomenon employed in media and its effects on audiences and continues to take a substantial shape in important areas of our society, such as politics and sustainable development.

Furthermore, the strengths of agenda setting are evident in its development from being a hypothesis to a much more theoretical model (Krcmar et al., 2016). This theorization is prominent in the growth of agenda-setting theory from politics toward its continued extension in relevant areas of contemporary society, including environment, climate change, and health. This confirms an assertion by Yun et al. (2016) that the theoretical facets of agenda setting over the years have developed and evolved continuously, even with the emergence of newer communication tools, including social media and the internet. Similarly, Kim et al. (2015) have noted that agenda setting has witnessed an expansion of its scope and application over time, using and incorporating other related models, such as agenda building, agenda melding, intermedia agenda setting, and orientation. In other words, the agenda-setting theory has, over the years, embraced a meta-theoretical approach, giving room for other concepts to be used in relation to communication.

In addition, agenda setting with its application in diverse areas of society, provides a positive promising view regarding media use, topics, trends, methods, and its use and interrelations with other models within communication (Zhou et al., 2016, p. 567). This has been significant for enhancing agenda-setting's predictive roles and power, notwithstanding concerns that have been raised that the theory, to an extent, could lose its importance about the fragmentations that are visible in contemporary media patterns (Funk &

McCombs, 2017). Even with the numerous strengths of agenda setting, the theory comes with many challenges, which are evident in the modern media landscape. It becomes important to look at the challenges critically.

Over the last few decades, the agenda-setting theory in the mass media has been burdened with significant challenges in the face of contemporary media (Nkrumah & Hassan, 2021). In other words, "the relations within agenda setting and contemporary news media are not very clear when compared to the theory of agenda setting that emerged at a time when the public depended mostly on a small number of media choices for their understanding" (Tewksbury & Sheufele, 2020). Thus, considering new forms of media, the agenda-setting role of mainstream media is affected by modern platforms of communication. This confirms an assertion by McCombs (2004) that the new media structures pose a great deal of threat to the agenda-setting role of mainstream media. With the continued growth of new media platforms, the mass media agenda-setting role is different from what was evident in the early years of its development, but it must compete for space.

Furthermore, a key challenge of agenda setting of the mass media is seen in the idea that the common public and common news agenda is, to a large extent, not compatible in terms of the emergence of the contemporary media spaces (Brubaker, 2008; Nkrumah & Hassan, 2021). Considering the roots of agenda setting, it could be seen that the theory was employed in explaining not just how topics of concern become news items of public attention but also the ways through which the news agenda of the media also influenced the priorities of the public (Nkrumah & Hassan, 2021). This view on agenda-setting needs to be shown more adequately in contemporary times, considering its limitations in the face of modern media and how this threatens the hegemony of mainstream media's agenda-setting role.

In addition, a wide range of developments has tended to mark a distinction between the contemporary forms of media systems (Chafee & Metzger, 2001). This is evident in its feature of providing more information to the public, the availability, and the faster speed at which information is gathered, processed, and disseminated (Williams & Caprini, 2004). This allowed media audiences to have a great deal of exposure and decentralization. According to Chafee & Metzger (2001), this has led to numerous questions from scholars and the public on agenda setting in contemporary times. The changing role of the media in the light of modern media systems, therefore, raises questions about the capacities of mainstream media in setting the public agenda through its use of repeated coverage in enhancing the importance attached in the public to issues in the past years. The key challenge of the mass media agenda setting will now focus more on the topics the public provides to the media that they would like to hear and talk about, not necessarily the topics the media provides for the public (Zhou et al., 2016).

Another challenge to the traditional agenda-setting theory in the news media is its failure to explore and give maximum attention to how the public could also alter and influence the media's agenda-setting (Walgrave et al., 2008; Nkrumah & Hassan, 2021). Thus, earlier studies by scholars, including McCombs & Shaw (1972), explored mostly how the public's exposure to the news media could influence the agenda of the public, but little attention was placed on how the public could also influence the media's agenda setting. This led to and continues to witness new studies by scholars towards a reverse side of the traditional media's agenda-setting role by exploring how the public could influence the media's agenda-setting (Hopeman et al., 2012; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2020). This could be done through interactive media spaces, including blogs and social media. Wallsten (2007) has argued that, during the 2004 presidential elections in the US, blog posts

significantly influenced the topics covered and given salience in various newspapers and news media, such as the New York Times. It is clear from this that agenda setting has changed its dynamics, considering how the new forms of media have given space for the public to determine the agenda setting of the media.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the role of the traditional media in agenda setting may be changing but could also be different across different geographical areas. As such, it becomes important to consider the geographical setting when studying the agenda-setting role of the mass media. In view of this, the next part of the paper looks at a briefcase of the role of the mass media, particularly the radio in setting the agenda during elections in Ghana.

The Agenda-Setting Role of the Radio during Elections in Ghana

With Ghana's transition to a liberal democratic government in 1992, the media has been mandated to operate independently, enjoying an atmosphere that is, to an extent, characterized by a free press (Gyampo, 2017). Arguably, elections are seen to be credible when there exists the practice and adherence to democratic principles (Abdulai et al., 2020, p. 255). Given this, it becomes necessary to ensure an enabling space for information dissemination towards expression and discussion of issues on the media by both electorates and political actors. This brings attention to the need for open media space that allows for transparent discussion on issues on elections and other development concerns (UNDP, 2014: 1). It further draws attention to the role of the media in providing news information during elections. The media plays a key role in setting the agenda during elections, and in the case of Ghana, the mass media, particularly the radio, plays an essential role during elections in providing information for electorates on processes of elections, policies, and programs of different political parties and candidates (Abdulai et al., 2020, p. 255).

The radio in Ghana is the most predominant mass media used by political actors, electorates, and the general public for their sources of information on politics, elections, and development issues (Gyampo, 2017; Abdulai et al., 2020). Radio's coverage in the country is very high compared to other mass media systems, regarding it's affordable and ease of access (Abdulai et al., 2020, p. 256). The radio therefore plays a significant role in setting the agenda before, during, and after elections in the country.

However, the roles of the mass media, including the radio, "has been characterized with a function, which is a conundrum in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, including Ghana" (Abdulai et al., 2020). This, according to Abdulai et al. (2020: 255), is seen in the ways through which the media performs its role, "in acting in the way of proxy, coming between conflicting political parties, and in their sowing of elements of hate speech and sometimes divisiveness among political opponents". Hence, the roles played by the radio in setting the agenda during elections could stand to create an atmosphere of peace or could, on the contrary, lead to confrontations, depending on how the agenda is set. The radio's role in agenda-setting in Ghana and other African countries, thus, must be considered. Yankem (2015) has noted that, during the 2013 elections in Kenya, the radio was instrumental in political mobilization. He further argues that over 76% of voters who listened to news from the radio were seen to have a clear exposure in terms of political processes, mostly through agenda on issues considered salient by radio reporters on political shows (Yankem, 2015).

Abdulai et al. (2020: 262–263) have noted that in Ghana, the radio occupies a powerful position in setting the agenda during elections, concentrating on issues that tend to draw voters' attention. In so doing, the radio, through its agenda setting, is seen to perform a mobilizing role of voters with regards to electoral

processes of political parties, particularly the two main parties, the incumbent, New Patriotic Party (NPP), and the major opposition, National Democratic Congress (NDC) (Abdulai et al., 2020). This points to understanding the effects of the traditional media's agenda-setting on users, as identified by (Zhou et al., 2016). In addition, it brings to attention an argument by Lippmann (1992) on the metaphor of the mass media's role of constructing a kind of "pseudo-environment" consumed by the mediated-end users of the media messages. Thus, with the dependency link observed between the media and the public, the electorates in Ghana are seen to consume and make informed decisions on issues.

Even with the radio's role in setting the agenda and making electoral information available for voters in Ghana, Abdulai et al. (2020) have maintained that the radio could and does, in some cases, set the agenda to favor their interest and position. According to them, this creates tensions and disagreements among political opponents (Abdulai et al., 2020). The prestigious role occupied by the radio in Ghana makes the public have a strong belief in the information shared during elections, and as such, regards it mostly as authentic. As a result, framing the radio's agenda setting on elections, if done with a biased interest, creates an environment of tension among opposing parties (Abdulai et al., 2020; Gyampo, 2017).

Furthermore, regarding the freedom given to the radio to discuss issues in Ghana, it has been observed that many radio presenters, through their language use, in setting the agenda, could either create an environment of peace or cause aggression during elections (Abdulai et al., 2020, p. 265). This argument is in line with the report by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) (2013) which indicated that using indecent language in setting the agenda during elections in Africa is very common, facilitating electoral aggressions. During the 2012 elections in Ghana, indecent language used to set the political agenda on the radio increased by 14% to 16 % (MFWA, 2013; Abdulai et al., 2016: 265). This explains why radio and other traditional media's role in setting the agenda can cause political aggression despite their significant role in educating the public.

This leads us to radio ownership in Ghana and how its relations with agenda-setting can be a space for creating aggression. In Ghana, there are public and private radio stations. Politicians own most private radio stations and, therefore, take advantage of their ownership in setting their agenda during elections (Abdulai et al., 2020, pp. 265-266). During elections, politicians who own radio stations attempt to set the agenda and, in most cases, use their radio platforms to spread false information (Abdulai et al., 2020: 256; Owusu, 2012). This creates various disputes among opposing parties (Owusu, 2012). Political actors and government must ensure that the media's agenda-setting is devoid of hate speech that stands to create aggression among opposing political fronts.

Conclusion and Implications

The paper has examined the agenda-setting paradigm of the mass media, considering its strengths and weaknesses. It has also looked at a briefcase of Ghana, examining the role of the radio in setting the agenda during elections. It has been seen that the mass media plays a significant role in agenda-setting. Therefore, the media's role in agenda setting is important in alerting the public to pressing developmental issues. Through agenda setting, the media can set the agenda for the public regarding issues of saliency that people should be concerned about. In addition, agenda setting has expanded over the years from its original concentration on

political communication to encompass other significant areas, such as environment, education, health, and risk communication. Thus, the role of agenda-setting is seen in a diverse array of societal development.

Nonetheless, the original assertion of the agenda-setting theory regarding the traditional media is, to an extent, under challenge. The challenge stems from the emergence of new forms of media. Given this, the public is now exposed to diverse sources of information, and not from a few media sources. The original role of the traditional media is now limited, as people have access to many different media sources. Hence, considering how the public influences the media's agenda-setting through interactions on various digital platforms, such as social media, becomes significant.

It is important to consider the diversity of geographical areas and jurisdictions when examining the agenda-setting role of the traditional mass media. The role of the radio in setting the agenda during elections in Ghana has shown that the mass media, and with regards to this, the radio still plays an important role in setting the agenda during elections. With its prestigious position as a wide-reaching mass media tool, the radio industry in Ghana performs a role through its agenda-setting in educating the public on topics that aim at fostering free and fair elections. This is significant in sustaining the country's democracy. However, it has also been seen that in Ghana, some radio stations that influential political actors own try to set the agenda to favor their political parties and, in so doing, create an atmosphere of disagreements. With the use of indecent language and statements in setting the agenda, politically biased radio stations stand to create hate speech and misinformation, which go a long way to affect democracy. Moving forward, promoting a democratically driven radio broadcast, devoid of bias and partisan agenda setting, will help ensure an effective role of the radio. This will require collective and willing effort from political actors, civil society, and media practitioners to widen the agenda-setting scope and sustain democracy effectively.

Acknowledgment

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