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Research Transmutation of Agenda Setting Theory (2010-2022)—A Meta-Analysis Based on Journalism Studies

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Abstract

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the birth of Agenda Setting Theory, this paper takes the international flagship journal "Journalism Studies" as the object, and uses the Meta-Analysis method to re-count a large number of the existing empirical literature, and analyze the transmutation in Agenda Setting theory in terms of research focus, subject areas and research methods over the past 12 years by statistical indicators in the relevant literature and corresponding statistical formulas. The results show that Agenda Setting research cannot escape from seeking to establish a link between the salience of media issues and the public's perception of the importance of these issues; the thematic focus of this theoretical research goes beyond the traditional concern for public affairs and continues to spill over to the military, climate, finance, and other fields, which expand the scope of application of the theory; with the development of network science and artificial intelligence, network analysis and machine learning methods are gradually being used in Agenda Setting research, injecting new perspectives and more possibilities into this theoretical research.

Keywords

Agenda Setting, Journalism Studies, Media Agenda, Public Agenda

1. Introduction

As a classic theory of communication that inherits Plato's "allegory of the cave",

which described that a group of prisoners lived in a cave, their hands and feet bound, unable to turn around, with their backs to the entrance. There is a wall in front of them and a fire burning behind them. They see the shadows of themselves and things on the wall and think that these shadows are real (Guo, 1986), and Lippmann's "mimetic environment", the "Agenda Setting" has evolved for 50 years since Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw proposed it in 1972. Over the past 50 years, with the development and application of network science, the exploration of the relationship between media agenda and public agenda has jumped from the significant transmission of topics (the first layer) to the transmission of significant attributes (the second layer) and has gone to the third level, that is, the Network Agenda Setting. This paper takes Journalism Studies, which is the international flagship journal in the field of Journalism research and also the journal with the most articles on Agenda Setting, as the object, and uses the Mate-Analysis method to analyze the evolution of the research focus, application field, and research method of this theory in the past 12 years.

2. Literature Acquisition

This paper took "Agenda Setting" as the keyword, searched in the Web of Science, and obtained 675 papers in the field of Journalism and Communication in the past 12 years after refining. Through comparative analysis of literature sources, it is found that Journalism Studies is the journal that publishes the most articles about agenda-setting, ranking first. From 2010 to 2022, a total of 32 related papers were published, and we take 28 pieces of them as samples for analysis after removing noise. The details are shown in Table 1.

3. Research Method

Meta-Analysis is a statistical method of summarizing the results of previous empirical research, which was first applied in the field of medicine and later extended to other fields, such as psychology, pedagogy, management, etc. (Ronald et al., 2022). Meta-Analysis can process the amount of literature, is not limited by the number of studies, and greatly saves research costs and other issues. This paper uses this method to perform a statistical analysis of the literature on Agenda Setting published in Journalism Studies in the past 12 years, and the main steps are: First, forming the problem, 2010 is the time node of the birth of the third level of the Agenda Setting, so this article attempts to take the past twelve years as the research cycle; second, search literature, we focus on the research field of news and communication on the WOS platform, with "Agenda setting" as the keyword, collect literature, and then list statistics through literature sources to lock the most published journal of Journalism Studies; third, collect information from the study, and mark the literature around the dimensions of an author analysis, research focus, application field, research method, etc.; forth, assess the quality of the study and exclude some literature; finally, analyze and integrate research results.

Table 1. The details of samples.

Authors	Title
Tan, Yue; Weaver, David H.	AGENDA DIVERSITY AND AGENDA SETTING FROM 1956 TO 2004 What are the trends over time?
Santana, Arthur D.	CONTROLLING THE CONVERSATION The availability of commenting forums in online newspapers
Krovel, Roy	SETTING THE AGENDA ON ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS IN NORWAY NGOs and newspapers
Kiousis, Spiro	AGENDA-SETTING AND ATTITUDES Exploring the impact of media salience on perceived salience and public attitude strength of US presidential candidates from 1984 to 2004
Castello, Enric; Montagut, Marta	JOURNALISTS, REFRAMING AND PARTY PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTANTS Strategies in morning talk radio
Fuhlhage, Michael; Shaw	Blowing Embers: An exploration of the agenda-setting role of books
Cheung, Meily M. F.; Lam	Who Leads the IPO News: Agenda-Building and Intermedia Agenda-Setting in a Routinised and Standardised News Context
Guo, Lei	Media Agenda Diversity and Intermedia Agenda Setting in a Controlled Media Environment: A Computational Analysis of China's Online News
Ragas, Matthew W.; Tran, Hai L	MEDIA-INDUCED OR SEARCH-DRIVEN? A study of online agenda-setting effects during the BP oil disaster
Zabaleta, Inaki; Gorosarri	News Agenda in European Minority Language Online Media: Balanced Coverage, Limited World
Teresa Mercado, Maria	MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE ARGENTINEAN PRESS
Strauss, Nadine	Devil's Advocate or Agenda Setter? The Role of Journalists Covering Sustainable Finance in Europe
Guo, Lei; Mays, Kate; Wang, Jianing	Whose Story Wins on Twitter? Visualizing the South China Sea dispute
Guo, Lei; Chen, Yi-Ning Katherin	Coverage of the Iraq War in the United States, Mainland China, Taiwan and Poland A transnational network agenda-setting study
Funk, Marcus J.; McCombs, Maxwell	Strangers on a Theoretical Train: Inter-media agenda setting, community structure, and local news coverage
Feng, Mengzhe; Tsang, Nathan L. T.	Fact-Checking as Mobilization and Counter-Mobilization: The Case of the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in Hong Kong
Djerf-Pierre, Monika	THE CROWDING-OUT EFFECT Issue dynamics and attention to environmental issues in television news reporting over 30 years
Su, Yan; Hu, Jun; Lee, Danielle Ka Lai	Delineating the Transnational Network Agenda-Setting Model of Mainstream Newspapers and Twitter: A Machine-Learning Approach
Nygaard, Silje	Boundary Work: Intermedia Agenda-Setting Between Right-Wing Alternative Media and Professional Journalism
Guo, Lei; Zhang, Yiyan	Information Flow Within and Across Online Media Platforms: An Agenda-setting Analysis of Rumor Diffusion on News Websites, Weibo, and WeChat in China

Continued

Deprez, Annelore; Van Leuven, Sarah	About Pseudo Quarrels and Trustworthiness: A multi-method study of health journalism, sourcing practices and Twitter
Goyanes, Manuel; Rodriguez-Castro, Marta	Commercial pressures in Spanish newsrooms Between love, struggle and resistance
Kiousis, Spiro; Kim, Ji Young; Ragas, Matt	EXPLORING NEW FRONTIERS OF AGENDA BUILDING DURING THE 2012 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PRE-CONVENTION PERIOD Examining linkages across three levels
Buchmeier, Yosuke	Towards a Conceptualization and Operationalization of Agenda-Cutting: A Research Agenda for a Neglected Media Phenomenon
Van Aelst, Peter; Vliegenthart, Rens	STUDYING THE TANGO An analysis of parliamentary questions and press coverage in the Netherlands
Mody, Bella	How well do India's Multiple Language Dailies Provide Political Knowledge to Citizens of this Electoral Democracy?
Konieczna, Magda; Graves, Lucas	Everything Just Went Apeshit: Revisiting the Mobilization Model of Journalistic Impact
Cushion, Stephen; Kilby	Newspapers, Impartiality and Television News: Intermedia agenda-setting during the 2015 UK General Election campaign

4. Analysis and Discovery

4.1. Agenda Setting Research Continues to Be Internationalized and Globalized

In the past 12 years, young scholars have been joining this field. Although McCombs and his students are still leading the research of Agenda Setting theory, young scholars from different countries, such as Krovel in Norway, Djerf-Pierre in Switzerland, Deprez in Belgium, Goyanes in Spain, etc., have also contributed new forces. Among them, Kiousis S. has published several articles, based on the agenda-setting theory, deeply explored the relationship between political campaign information subsidies and national elite news media reports, providing firm empirical support for the three-level Agenda Setting (Kiousis et al., 2015). It reflects the important role of the new generation of researchers in the globalization and internationalization of Agenda Setting research.

4.2. The Research Focus Is Stuck in the Same Rut, and the Research Purpose Remains the Same

Agenda Setting theory initially emphasized that the media could transfer prominent issues on the media agenda to the public agenda. In 1997, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw put forward the theory of "Attribute Agenda Setting" in a paper on Spanish elections, which made the theory develop to the second level. In 1999, Agenda Setting research was extended to Agenda Melding. According to Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, in order to integrate into their group in modern society, individuals must contact the media related to that group to obtain information, so as to make their own agenda consistent with that of the

group. In 2011, as a Chinese student of McCombs, Guo Lei published an article entitled "The Application of Social Network Analysis in Agenda Setting Research", which marked the emergence of the third level of Agenda Setting, that is, issues and attributes were transferred from media network agenda to public network agenda (Guo, 2012). As shown in Table 2, in the past 12 years, the literature published in Journalism Studies shows that, as the initial focus of Agenda Setting research, the first-layer Agenda Setting has been used throughout the whole research process, with 51.85% of the literature concerned. The proportion of articles focusing on Second-level Agenda Setting was 22.22%, and the proportion of mixed studies was 7.4%. However, as the latest research on Network Agenda Setting and Agenda Melding, it is rarely discussed in Journalism Studies.

4.3. The Research Focuses on the Maternal Concept, and the New Theory Is Difficult to Stand out

A central tradition in Agenda Setting research has sought to establish a link between the salience of media issues and the public's perceived importance of those issues. In 1986, American scholars Stephen D. Reese and Lucig H. Danielian found that elite news organizations, such as the New York Times and the Associated Press, could influence the reporting agenda of other media, that is, there was an effect of the "Intermedia Agenda Setting" (the relationship between media themselves in the process of agenda-building). The focus of this theory is shifted from "who sets the public agenda" to "who sets the media agenda". Policy Agenda Setting is not usually central to the attention of communication scholars, political scientists and sociologists are primarily interested in how the public influences policy agendas, while communication scholars focus their attention on the particular role of mass media in public policy formation. As shown in Table 3, in the past 12 years, 16 articles (57.14%) published in Journalism Studies still focus on the public agenda, emphasizing the influence of media agenda on the public agenda, followed by the research on media agenda setting, accounting for 17.86%, and only 4 articles (4.29%) on policy agenda. In addition, the theoretical research focus in gradually diversified, and there are some new concepts, such as Reverse Agenda Setting (news media response to

Table 2. The research focuses on levels of agenda setting in journalism studies.

Research Focus	Proportion	Article number
first-level	51.85%	14
second-level	22.22%	6
agenda melding	0.00%	0
first & second-level	11.11%	3
first & agenda melding	3.70%	1
first & third-level	11.11%	3
All	3.70%	1

Table 3. Focuses on agenda setting research in journalism studies.

Research focuses	Proportion	Article number
public agenda	57.14%	16
intermedia agenda setting	17.86%	5
factors influenced the agenda setting	3.57%	1
public & media & policy agenda	3.57%	1
agenda cutting	3.57%	1
policy agenda	14.29%	4

search trends) (Ragas et al., 2014), Agenda Cutting (the media reduces a news item, removes an issue entirely, or removes an ongoing news item from the agenda) (Buchmeier, 2020), etc. However, under the influence of the maternal conceptual framework effect, these concepts are difficult to stand out.

4.4. Research Topic Field Spillover, New Media Agenda Setting Research Has Become the Trend and Mainstream

In terms of thematic areas, political issues in the electoral environment have been the thematic focus of Agenda Setting research since the Chapel Hill survey. As shown in Table 4, in Journalism Studies, politics is still the core area of focus for scholars, accounting for 44.44%. However, with the continuous development of the theory over the past 50 years, it has gone beyond the traditional focus on public affairs, and the research field has been constantly spilling over. Society (22.22%), military (7.41%), financial (7.41%), business (3.7%), climate (7.41%), and health (3.7%) become the new domain of Agenda Setting research. In addition, with the development of the Internet and the boom of new media, the focus of Agenda Setting research has also extended from traditional print media, radio, and television to social media such as Weibo and Twitter. Thus, in the past 12 years, the Agenda Setting of new media has attracted increasing attention. Among the articles published in Journalism Studies, the research literature on Agenda Setting of new media is the most, accounting for 53.33%, which exceeds the research on traditional media (46.67%).

4.5. With the Increase of Artificial Intelligence, Research Methods Are Becoming More Diversified

In terms of research methods, the traditional Agenda Setting studies in the United States are empirical and quantitative. As shown in Table 5, most studies follow the initial method of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (33.33%), which relates the issue of salience in media content to the issue of attention of respondents to explore the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. When using quantitative research methods, content analysis was the main method (25.93%), and about 18.52% of quantitative research used the combination of content analysis and survey. There are 2 experimental methods

Table 4. Topical domains of agenda setting research in journalism studies.

Research topic field	Proportion	Article number
society	22.22%	6
politics	44.44%	12
others	7.41%	2
military	7.41%	2
finance	7.41%	2
business	3.70%	1
climate	7.41%	2
health	3.70%	1

Table 5. Methods used in agenda setting research in journalism studies.

Methods	Proportion	Article number
survey	33.33%	9
network analysis and the Granger causality test	7.41%	2
machine learning	11.11%	3
interviews and content analysis	7.41%	2
content analysis and survey	18.52%	5
content analysis	25.93%	7

to test the causal relationship between media agenda and public agenda, accounting for 7.41%. The most remarkable thing is that with the development of network science and artificial intelligence, network analysis, and machine learning methods are gradually used in Agenda Setting research, accounting for 18.52%. For example, Suyan et al. based on the Network Agenda Setting model and used machine learning methods to analyze the relevant reports of the "anti-extradition bill" campaign in Hong Kong, mainland China, the United States, and the United Kingdom, as well as the discussions on Twitter. The article combined entity attributes and emotional attributes in the semantic network. It has enriched Network Agenda Setting literature (Su et al., 2020).

In this section, we conduct a statistical analysis of the Agenda Setting articles published in Journalism Studies in the past 12 years from five aspects to determine the evolution trend of its research. In general, the theoretical research innovation is still insufficient, showing the situation of aged vinegar in new bottles.

5. Conclusion

Taking Journalism Studies as a case study, this article analyzes the transmutation of Agenda Setting research from 2010 to 2022. In the past 12 years, theoretical research has made remarkable progress, and young scholars with international

perspectives constitute a new generation of researchers, who play an important role in the globalization and internationalization of Agenda Setting research. The resulting dynamism in Agenda Setting research will make an important contribution to global Agenda Setting research and a better understanding of media. However, the addition of new scholars does not change the stereotype of testing the relationship between media agenda and public agenda. They do not pay enough attention to the new trend of Agenda Setting theory, such as Network Agenda Setting and Agenda Melding, which reflects the conservative research purpose of scholars. However, the diversification of theoretical application fields and the application of computational research methods have injected new perspectives and more possibilities into the study of Agenda Setting.

Fund

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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