

# A brief look on Agenda-setting theory nowadays

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Professor Maxwell McCombs began his career as a journalist in the 1960s, as a reporter for the *New Orleans Times*. A decade later, McCombs, in partnership with Donald Shaw, developed one of his major theories - the agenda-setting hypothesis, now considered a theory, which reflects on the influence of the mass media in relation to public affairs. In the 1980s, McCombs became a professor in the Journalism Department at the University of Texas. In this interview, we seek to recover the basis of the Agenda-setting theory and confront the initial hypothesis with the contemporary scenario and the advent of the internet, contextualizing particularities of Brazilian politics and electoral process and seeking to reflect on the possibility of scheduling different media, especially TV. McCombs was emphatic in saying that the media agenda plays an important ethical role "to use time and space for important topics and not fun topics".

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**Pauta Geral (PG):** The agenda setting theory was formulated as a test of Lippmann's ideas on public opinion. There are still difficulties in the conceptualization related to the subject. In times of internet and digital convergence, how do you evaluate the media schedule? And how should we understand this agenda effect in a context of change of concepts and, at the same time, the return to the theory formulated by you?

**MMC:** It remains possible to content analyze the various media agendas, whether they are from print media, television, or various internet channels. For example, for online news sites, there are computer programs that will sample a site at set intervals to capture the agenda. In some instances, such as Twitter, it is possible to capture vast quantities. Research across a wide array of channels also is facilitated by the homogeneity of the media agenda across most channels. Recent research investigating both the traditional media and the new social media continues to find agenda-setting effects. This is explained in the new edition of *Setting the Agenda*.

**Pauta Geral (PG):** Brazil has a different political context when its compared to the United States, with regard to elections. An example is the requirement to vote. This element - the requirement - would be a key issue that points to a greater need to study the behavior of the media and also the agenda effect before, during and after the elections?

**MMC:** The existence of a requirement to vote suggests that more citizens have a high need for orientation (NFO). Numerous studies show that the strength of agenda-setting effects increase with higher need for orientation.

The ideal design would examine NFO well before election day and then follow voters use of the media and finally measure the agenda-setting effects on election day or immediately after.

**Pauta Geral (PG):** In Brazil we also have free time for political advertising (HGPE) which is organized by the Superior Electoral Court. What are the differences between the political advertising agenda (HGPE) and the agenda of newspapers and TV news?

**MMC:** The "master list" of issues and topics must include any issue or topic

appearing on any of the agendas. Measures of the public agenda should cover the salience of all of these issues among citizens. Likewise, the salience of all these issues should be included in the measure of each media agenda. If there are vast differences in the issues in the advertising and news media, many of the issues and topics will be coded 0 for a particular medium. This will result in lower agenda-setting effects.

You may find our study of the 1996 Spanish national election of interest because Spain also guarantees all the political parties time on TV in proportion to their strength in the parliament. As it turned out, these TV messages had weak agenda-setting effects in comparison to the other media.

**Pauta Geral (PG): In the teaching of communication in Brazil, just a few questions are seen on the advertising schedule. Incidentally, the theory of agenda-setting figure as a specific theory of journalism. However, the practical or empirical analysis points to a correlation between the agendas of news and advertising. How do you evaluate this correlation? Are there ongoing studies about it?**

**MMC:** There is an extensive literature on the agenda-setting effects of political advertising. A number of these studies are cited in Chapter 7 of the 2004 edition of *Setting the Agenda*. The Portuguese translation is **A Teoria da Agenda - A mídia e a opinião pública**. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes, 2010.

**Pauta Geral (PG): There are methodological discussions about the correlation between the theory formulated by you and the newsmaking theory. Apparently, it is possible to make an association.**

**MMC:** A major aspect of agenda-setting theory focuses on the origins of the media agenda. Here agenda-setting theory converges with the sociology of news.

**Pauta Geral (PG): Methodological guidelines represent an initial difficulty for the hypothesis that became theory. Under the methodological perspective, how it was overcome?**

**MMC:** The Chapel Hill study devised a master list of major campaign issues in order to compare the results of the

content analysis – how much emphasis did the media place on each of the major issues of the campaign – and the results of the survey – what was the degree of emphasis among the voters for these issues. For each of these agendas, the issues can be rank-ordered: which receives the most emphasis, which the second most, etc. Once we have these two sets of rank-orders for the issues, it is possible to calculate a rank-order correlation.

Similar procedures have been carried out in both election and non-election studies around the world. Wanta & Ghanem's meta-analysis of agenda-setting studies found that the average correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda is 53.

**Pauta Geral (PG): If you could make a stopover on the stages of the agenda-setting theory in relation to the media (print, television, radio and internet), what is the scale? There are significant productions about?**

**MMC:** In terms of the different media, a recent working paper at the University of Alabama identified 451 agenda-setting studies. I have attached a copy of that paper. By far, the largest number of studies has examined newspapers and

TV. There are few studies of radio, whose importance as a news medium varies greatly from country to country. And, of course, the internet is very recent. But the number of studies is increasing rapidly.

**Pauta Geral (PG): When you do not schedule one subject, the media, or perhaps the news was not contributing to the consolidation of popular participation, the production of more public policies dialogued with citizens?**

**MMC:** In most cases, the consequence of agenda-cutting is that the vast majority of the public are unaware of the issue (the law in this case). Furthermore, the media are not carrying out two of the functions of mass media identified by Harold Lasswell decades ago: surveillance of the environment and building public consensus.

**Pauta Geral (PG): The Brazilian television broadcasters invest heavily in research to know what are the subjects that matter to the public. They include in these surveys formats, standards and quality parameters. Can it be said that in this case there is an intrinsic relationship between the**

**media scheduling and what the public want to see on television?**

**MMC:** This is ultimately an empirical question. To what extent do the topics identified by these measures of public interest employed by the media correlate with the media agenda subsequently presented to the public.

A strong correlation between the two suggests a highly problematic situation. The public cannot express any interest in topics that it knows little or nothing about. The agenda-setting role of the news media identifies a major ethic – the responsibility of the media to use its time and space for important topics, not entertaining topics. The media need to distinguish between what is relevant for the public and what simply satisfies curiosity.

**Pauta Geral (PG): Studies conducted in different levels in Brazil point to a relief on the issue of violence, especially on television. To what extent do the media contribute to the construction of citizenship or reaches largely blistering these themes that operates with a negative effect for citizenship?**

**MMC:** I interpret these as examples of the media playing to public curiosity and not focusing on the relevance of these events (or others competing for coverage at the same time).

**Pauta Geral (PG): Finally, what is the state of the art in scheduling? In addition to his published and translated book Theory of Agenda - Media and Public Opinion, are there more recent studies that update the book?**

**MMC:** As noted above, a new edition of my book was published at the beginning of this year: **Setting the Agenda: The mass media and public opinion, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.** Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2014. In the new edition, I added 85 agenda-setting studies conducted since the publication of the original edition in 2004. This is only a sampling of the new research.