

Nova obra discute o terceiro nível da teoria Agenda-Setting

Maxwell McCombs e Lei Guo lançam ainda este ano *The Power of Information Networks: New Directions for Agenda Setting*, um estudo empírico em diferentes países da Europa, América do Sul e Ásia, além dos Estados Unidos¹

Entrevista com Maxwell McCombs
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A Revista Pauta Geral apresenta, de forma inédita, entrevista com o professor da Maxwell McCombs (Universidade do Texas), responsável pela elaboração da teoria do Agenda-setting. Nesta entrevista, além de atualizar as reflexões em torno da teoria e suas aplicações, ele recupera as origens da hipótese até se tornar um dos mais fortes conceitos aplicados aos estudos da formação da opinião pública pela mídia.

Mesmo de forma tardia – trata-se da segunda entrevista de McCombs dada a revistas brasileiras sobre o assunto-, a presença da teoria do Agenda-setting na literatura nacional tem se consolidado como uma das principais propostas de reflexão em torno dos efeitos da mídia em sociedades.

1 Entrevista realizada pelos professores do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Jornalismo da Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa (UEPG) Cíntia Xavier, Marcelo Bronosky e Paula Melani Rocha e pelos mestrados do mesmo programa Cléber Moletta e Elaine Schmitt.

Com esta entrevista, esperamos contribuir com os estudos a respeito do jornalismo brasileiro e sua participação na formação da opinião pública. Desejamos que ela sirva de estímulo no sentido de aperfeiçoar nossa compreensão sobre a mídia brasileira, tão limitada por interesses particulares.



Photo: Rebecca Scoggin McEntee

PautaGeral- Since 1972, researchers have been using Agenda Setting in their studies. Sometimes, they are utilizing it as a hypothesis, as you showed in your study in Chapel Hill. Nonetheless, after this study in Chapel Hill, you utilized agenda setting like a theory in your discussions. What are the aspects

that transformed Agenda setting into a theory, in your opinion?

McCombs: Agenda setting began with a small study of undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, during the 1968 U.S. presidential election. This seminal study tested the hypothesis that the prominence of various public issues in the news media – their salience on the media agenda – influences the salience of those issues among members of the public. In subsequent studies, that hypothesis has been expanded to include media and public agendas defined by many other objects, such as public figures, institutions, and even countries. Research on this expanded hypothesis ranging across a wide variety of objects is now referred to as the First-level of Agenda setting, and remains a very active area.

Subsequent researches in the decades since Chapel Hill have identified five additional aspects of Agenda setting. In other words, what began as a simple hypothesis has evolved into a detailed theory with six distinct theoretical aspects. All six

of these continue to be active arenas of research.

In 1972, the next presidential election after the Chapel Hill study, our research introduced a second aspect of the agenda-setting process, the psychology of Agenda setting. Our perspective was that the media did not have unlimited power in focusing public attention on certain issues and other objects. Agenda setting was not a return to earlier theories, such as the hypodermic theory. We believed that there were constraints on media influence, and in the 1972 Charlotte study we began to define what those constraints are. A key aspect of the agenda setting process is the psychological concept of need for orientation. The core psychological idea here is that people feel a need to understand their surroundings, that is, in new or unfamiliar settings they have a need for orientation. An individual's level of need for orientation is defined by the relevance of a topic and the level of uncertainty about that topic. People turn to the news media for information about various topics they consider relevant and about which they desire additional information. The greater an individual's need for orientation is, the greater the agenda setting influence of the media on that topic.

An additional aspect of what had become a theory of agenda setting appeared in 1976. The Chapel Hill and similar subsequent studies analyzed agendas of objects. But, in turn, these objects have a variety of characteristics, various attributes that define them. When the media talk about some object, they don't just name the object, they describe it in some fashion. And this is the second-level of agenda setting, attribute agenda setting. The basic research model is the same: to determine if there is a high degree of correspondence between the public and media agenda.

The intellectual father of agenda setting is Walter Lippmann, whose 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, began with a chapter titled, "The world outside and the pictures in our heads." His thesis was that the media are the bridge between the world outside and the pictures in our heads. Using his phrase "the pictures in our heads," the first level of agenda setting asks: What are the pictures about? The second level of agenda setting asks: What are the dominant features of these pictures?

And once we ask these two questions, there is an obvious follow up question: What are the consequences of these pictures? This brings us to the fourth aspect of agenda-setting theory, where we

return to considerations of media effects on attitudes and opinions. When we began agenda setting research in 1968, many people were convinced that there were little or no media effects on attitudes and opinions. So we went off in a different direction to look at media effects, the impact of the media on the salience of objects and attributes. But now we have come back to the question of media effects on attitudes and opinions, but now looking at it in a much more nuanced way. We don't expect all of the content of the media to have an impact on people's attitudes and opinions, only those aspects of the content that people pay attention to in order to fulfill their need for orientation. The consequences of first and second level agenda setting for attitudes and opinions are a fourth aspect of the theory.

A fifth aspect of agenda-setting theory is concerned with the sources of the media agenda. Here, the media agenda, which has been an independent variable, becomes a dependent variable. In the 1980s scholars began to ask: If the public agenda is set by the media agenda, who sets the media agenda? The layers of influence identified by this aspect of agenda setting include external sources of news, such as public relations, and the professional values and traditions of journalism,

including especially the influence of news organizations on each other. This latter area is now referred to as intermedia agenda setting.

The sixth, and most recent aspect of agenda-setting theory is network agenda setting. Some psychologists and philosophers hold that people's mental representations operate pictorially, diagrammatically or cartographically. In other words, audiences map out objects and attributes as network-like pictures according to the interrelationships among these elements. From this perspective, the news media transfer the salience of relationships among a set of elements to the public.

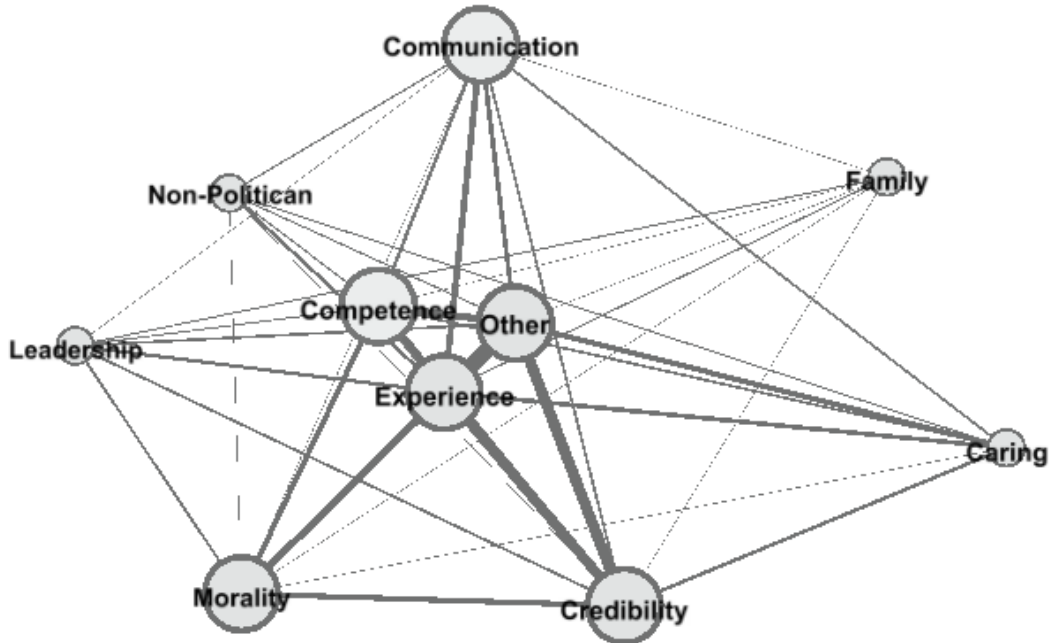
These sets of elements could be the objects on the media and public agendas, the attributes on the media and public agendas, or a combination of objects and attributes, which is to say, a fully integrated set of objects and their attributes. These sets of relationships among elements of the media and public agendas are the third level of agenda setting.

Initial exploration of the hypothesis that the news media can transfer the salience of relationships among a set of elements to the public focused on the transfer of the salience of the relationships among a set of attributes from the media to the public.

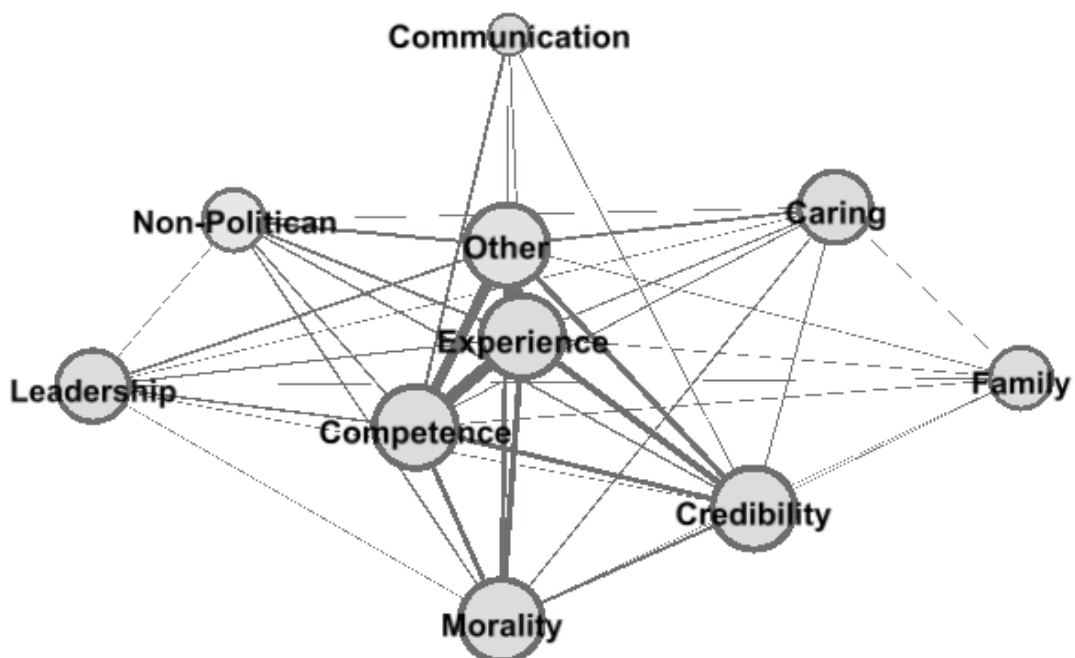
To afford a comparison with traditional attribute agenda setting, this pilot study conducted network analyses on datasets initially

MEDIA AND PUBLIC ATTRIBUTE NETWORKS (Kim & McCombs, 2007)

Media attribute agenda



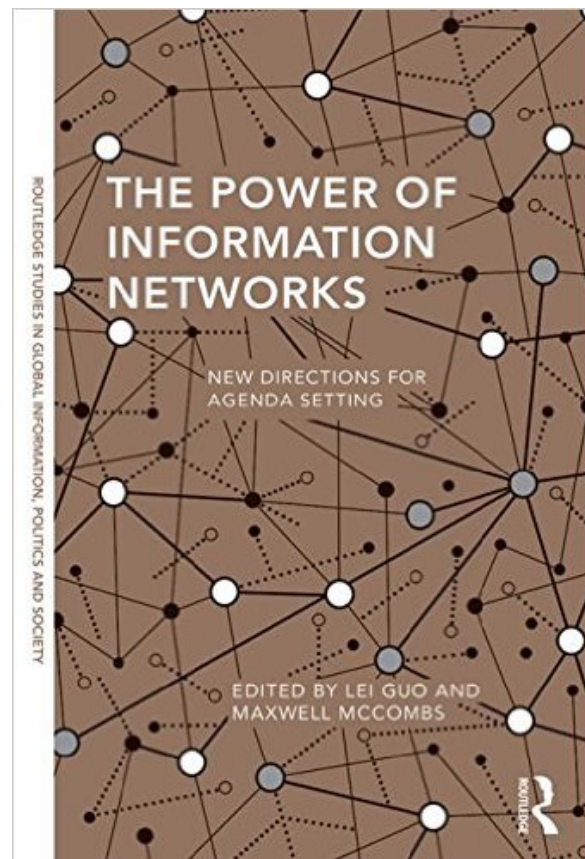
Public Attribute Agenda



collected by Kim and McCombs (2007). Studying candidates for Texas governor and US Senator, Kim and McCombs found strong attribute agenda-setting effects in analyses of each candidate separately and for all four candidates combined. Attributes salient in the news coverage of the candidates also were salient in voters' descriptions of these candidates. Reanalysis of these data found significant network agenda-setting effects consistent with the attribute agenda-setting effects in the original study. For example, the overall correlation between the media and public attribute agendas in Kim and McCombs (+0.65) corresponds with the correlation (+0.67) between the media and public network agendas. The graphic presentation of these two networks are presented in the figure.

Theoretically and analytically, first and second-level agenda setting treat objects and their attributes as separate and distinct disaggregated elements. Of course, in reality objects and their attributes are bundled together in media messages and in public thought and conversation. Our forthcoming book, *The Power of Information Networks* (Lei Guo & Maxwell McCombs, editors. New York: Routledge), discusses the theory and methodology of network agenda

setting and presents 13 empirical third-level studies from the United States, Europe, South America and Asia. This is an exciting new frontier in agenda setting research.



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PG - More than 450 studies have explored the agenda-setting hypothesis. Did you expect this proportion of studies when Shaw and you analyzed the first study of agenda setting, in Chapel Hill?

McCombs: Back in 1968, Don and I definitely were not clairvoyant about the future of agenda setting research. As noted in the discussion

of Q1, we tested a straight forward hypothesis about the effects of media coverage of public issues on the public's perception of the importance of these issues. In the years since the scope of agenda setting has expanded tremendously thanks to the insights and creativity of scholars around the world.

PG - The agenda-setting theory anchors some researches in communication and journalism in Brazil. In the debate about journalism specificities in relationship with other fields of knowledge, we defend that agenda setting is a journalism theory. Are there any debates about the specificities in Communication and Journalism, among American researchers?

McCombs: The boundary line in the academic world between journalism and communication is frequently a blurred one. The vast majority of the 400-plus studies of agenda setting to date involve the agenda of the news media. In this regard, agenda setting is a media-centric journalism theory. However, the contemporary version of agenda setting theory, which was discussed in some detail in Question 1, also is very much a communication theory because it incorporate the full sweep of mass communication from the origins of the media agenda to the

consequences of agenda-setting effects for attitudes and opinions.

As I note in Chapter 8 of *Setting the Agenda*:

"Beginning with the Chapel Hill study and continuing to this day, the dominant domain of agenda-setting research is public affairs, particularly public issues. A very different set of domains with a significant literature dating from the past decade or so has been reviewed in this chapter. These civic and cultural domains range from educational and religious institutions to a society's collective memory of its past, contemporary museum visits in Greece and global interest in professional basketball." (p.142, 2nd edition)

In short, a significant portion of recent agenda-setting research is communication research, but not journalism research. I don't think it is particularly productive to spend time looking for a line of demarcation between journalism and communication. Scholars should design their agenda-setting studies in terms of their specific interests and not worry about whether they are journalism studies or communication studies.

For journalism and communication programs in the U.S., the boundary line is somewhat arbitrary and varies from campus to campus. The Chapel Hill study was conducted in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At that time, courses were offered in both journalism and advertising. Today the school also offers courses in public relations, strategic communication, and a host of other journalism and communication specialties. I moved from Chapel Hill to Syracuse University, whose Newhouse School is intensely focused on the training of professional journalists. However, the full name of the school is the Newhouse School of Public Communication. Here also in addition to various journalism specialties are courses in advertising and public relations. Here at the University of Texas at Austin, the School of Journalism where I am on the faculty is one of five units in the College of Communication. The other units are the School of Advertising, Department of Communication Studies, Department of Radio, Television & Film, and the Department of Speech and Hearing Disorders.

While my background and research interests center on journalism, I have

found it stimulating to be on these three faculties that encompass a variety of perspectives on journalism and communication.

PG- The internet enabled an increase in communication and visibility of the third sector. There are news sites, some exploring different devices and providing the public information about some companies, such as NGOs, associations, social movements etc. How can this practice be investigated from the perspective of agenda setting?

McCombs: The internet has introduced a vast new array of communication channels. From an agenda setting perspective, there are now many new agendas to investigate. Some of these fall in the traditional domain of agenda-setting research, public affairs. But as the discussion of Questions 3 & 4 noted, recent agenda-setting research has expanded into a variety of new civic and cultural domains.

To fully understand the expanding scope of agenda setting, particularly with the appearance of the internet, it is useful to distinguish between the concepts, domains, and settings of agenda setting. The core concepts of agenda-setting theory are an object or topic agenda, an attribute agenda, and the transfer of salience between agendas. This theoretical core also should include the

concept of need for orientation, which is one of the key contingent conditions for the strength of these agenda-setting effects.

These theoretical concepts can be studied in many different domains and settings. Beginning with the Chapel Hill study and continuing to this day, the dominant domain of agenda-setting research is public affairs, particularly public issues. But as we just noted above, a variety of new domains have been explored in recent decades.

Within each of these diverse domains, agenda setting can be studied in a wide variety of settings. That is to say, the operational definitions of the core concepts of agenda-setting theory can be particular aspects of many different domains. In the traditional domain of public affairs – indeed, in most of these domains – the most studied setting is the media agenda-public agenda dyad. But also found among the many different settings in the research literature are the links among the various media themselves, links between sources and the news media, and the influence of personal conversations on the public agenda. Finally, use of the concepts of agenda-setting theory to investigate these various domains has taken place in a wide variety of geographic settings worldwide at many historic points in time.

Moreover, the appearance in recent decades of the internet and a kaleidoscopic mix of new technologies has blurred the traditional boundaries between the various communication media and their content. Mass communication once meant the large-scale distribution of identical messages, particularly through newspapers, television, and radio. The new communication channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, are mass in that large proportions of society use them, but the messages flowing through these channels are individualized. These new channels redefine mass communication and greatly enlarge its range of settings.

Separating the core concepts of agenda-setting theory from their operational definitions across a variety of domains and settings, enables us to see the past more clearly and to envision the directions of new research. This distinction between core concepts and operational definitions also clarifies the various – and sometimes confusing – definitions of agenda-setting proffered by various scholars. Hewing to the original domain and settings of agenda-setting research, some narrowly define agenda setting as the transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. A broader definition that I frequently cite, but still hewing rather close to the original domain and its settings, states that elements prominent on

the media agenda frequently become prominent on the public agenda. Both definitions are correct, but neither encompasses the full range of agenda setting theory and research that exists today and that will be added to the literature in the near future. Recognizing the distinction between concepts, domains and settings provides a useful context for defining and for understanding the broad range of agenda-setting phenomena.

In this expanded communication landscape, news media channels – now greatly expanded in number – continue to play a major role. With the transformation of the communication landscape some observers predicted the diminution, if not the disappearance, of agenda-setting effects on the scale that we have observed them over the past half century. Despite the popularity of speculation on this possibility, the overwhelming preponderance of the evidence to date suggests that the agenda-setting role of the news media endures.

An extensive longitudinal analysis of the agenda setting influence of *New York Times*' coverage on the public's responses to the Gallup Poll's 'most important problem facing the country' question from 1956 to 2004 found variations in the strength of these effects, but no discernible trend over time (Tan & Weaver, 2014). Although media use patterns among different generations do

diverge in the new communication environment, state-wide surveys in North Carolina and Louisiana found little difference in agenda-setting effects among the younger, middle, and older generations. Greater attention to the internet and much less attention to traditional media among young adults had little impact on the magnitude of agenda-setting effects (Coleman & McCombs, 2007).

Both the strength of agenda-setting effects in past decades and their continuing strength in contemporary settings result from longstanding patterns of behavior in the media and among the public. The high degree of homogeneity among media agendas found in the original Chapel Hill study continues in contemporary settings. Boczkowski (2010) not only found a high level of homogeneity among the news agendas of the major print and online newspapers in Buenos Aires, but also noted the increasing similarity of these news agendas from 1995 to 2005, a trend that he attributes to the facilitation of journalists' long-standing habit of monitoring the competition by the plethora of news now available on the internet and television.

Among the public, strong agenda-setting effects result from civic osmosis, the continuous exposure to a vast sea of information from many channels of communication (McCombs, 2012). Applying network

analysis to Nielsen data on TV and internet use from March 2009 collected from over 1,000 homes, Webster and Ksiazek (2012, p.39) noted, "We find extremely high levels of audience duplication across 236 media outlets, suggesting overlapping patterns of public attention rather than isolated groups of audience loyalists."

During the 2006 Swedish national election, Stromback and Kiouisis (2010) measured the impact of daily news use across nine major news media – a mix of newspapers, television and radio – and found that:

"... attention to *political news* exerts a significant and rather strong influence on perceived issue salience and that attention to *political news* matters more than attention to various specific news shows on television and in radio, or to different newspapers." [p.288]

This finding does not deny that there are powerful and influential newspapers, broadcast stations, and web sites. However, zooming out for a broader look, it is the vast gestalt of communication voices that defines our social fabric. More often than not, the major effects of communication result from the collective impact of the media and a continuous process of civic osmosis.

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