

Print Media Paper: Newspapers and Agenda Setting Theory

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Print media reaches millions of people around the world and in the United States every day. A major aspect of print media is the Newspaper. The majority of Americans are familiar with the look, texture and smell of the "paper". Almost every community has a local paper as well as easy access to regional and national print media such as the New York Times, Washington Post, and USA Today. These papers produce content that is selected by individuals to catch the eye of the reader, and influence their idea of relevant content. Communication scholars and analysts have developed a number of theories that apply to mass media and its effects on a society. McCombs and Shaw's agenda setting theory helps one to understand the seemingly transparent power of the media and its effects on public perception through the use of priming, framing, and gate keeping. This theory can be applied to print media to show that newspapers do not tell readers what to think, but what to think about, as well as influence salience in the mind of the consumer resulting in adverse effects on society's perception of high profile criminal cases.

On September 23rd 2007 the New York Times published the story about OJ Simpson's release from jail after being charge with 10 felonies including armed robbery. In this paper I will discuss how the agenda setting theory applies to this story and how gatekeepers utilize priming and framing to influence public perception.

Newspapers play a major part in the agenda setting theory and mass communication in general. They serve as a major source of information and have a large spectrum depending on the circulation. Newspapers also influence other media outlets including other newspapers. In fact, newspapers have been shown to be the prime agenda setting faction in media. Inter-media agenda setting is defined as the news agenda of one medium follows that of another. Atwater, Fico, and Pizante (1987) point out that studies have shown that newspapers were more likely to

set the agenda in general for electronic and other forms of print media. Benton and Frazier (1976) note that agenda setting operates at 3 levels, awareness of general issues, awareness of proposed solutions, specific knowledge about the proposals. They also found that newspapers set the primary agenda for all media users. This reinforces Atwater et al.'s findings and further illustrates the influence print media has on consumer's perceptions of what news is relevant. It is suggested by Atwater et al. (1987) that the agenda of network television news is heavily influenced by coverage of elite newspapers like the New York Times and the Washington Post. If newspapers are often the first agenda setters in the chain of events, then we must look at who is responsible within the newspaper for selecting the content and the frame in which it is printed. This task is that of the "gatekeeper". The gatekeeper(s) in papers with a large circulation like the "New York Times" or "USA Today" can often be a group of individuals in high-powered positions that exert control over the content. However, in a situation such as the one in article thirteen discussed in class from Shapiro (2007) it can be one individual with his or her own ideas about what readers should think. In this case it was Bill Hannah of the Mesabi Daily News. Whether it's one person or a team of people, gatekeepers often get their news through news wires and decide what is to be printed and in what style. In a study conducted by Whitney and Becker (1982) the results showed that news editors select categories such as disaster, crime, etc the same way wire services do. In addition the study showed that the newspaper editors proportionate the news according to cues given by the wire service. This study suggests that the "media are influenced by the judgment of a relatively few editors operating at the regional, national, and international bureaus of the wire service; the agenda being presented by media audiences is influenced by the news gathering procedures of the media and the relationship among the media." (Whitney & Becker, 1982)

Another way the print media effects public perception is through priming. The OJ Simpson armed robbery article is a clear example of this. Priming, in reference to the agenda setting theory refers to enhancing the effects of the media by offering the audience a prior context, which will be used to interpret subsequent communication (<http://www.utwente.nl>). In other words, using people's memories about the story to enhance the salience. In the case of the OJ Simpson article, the New York Times utilized the prior context and made use of Simpson's past trial experiences and the controversial acquittal in the murder case of his wife in which many people believe he is guilty. "Here we go again" as the headline is a useful phrase in triggering memories about a prominent individual. The result is the reader being influenced what to think about in a way that has an impact on their opinion. In addition, this lays the groundwork and sets the stage for future stories that involve celebrities and alleged criminal activity. In reality, armed robberies happen every day, but this story is not about an armed robbery. In the New York Times, this story is about a celebrity who has had prior negative publicity, allegedly committing a crime. The media in this case is priming readers to think about celebrity adherence to the law and trigger another court of public opinion so they can keep readers on the hook and continue to sell papers as in the previous 1995 Simpson controversy.

An additional factor in relation to how media attach salience to an issue is through the use of framing, which refers to the modes of presentation journalists use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience (shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In the case of the OJ Simpson article, the story is placed under the headline "hear we go again". This "sets up" the reader and triggers preconceptions about the story and works in unison with the priming of the story by helping to remind readers of Simpson's past. The New York Times framed the story by stating that the "ex football player had lived a relatively quiet life in

suburban Miami since being acquitted of the 1995 murder of his ex wife and her friend. Now Mr. Simpson, 60, faces another court fight that could send him to prison for the rest of his life." In addition the New York Times left out information such as the fact that witnesses and authorities said that Simpson did not have a gun. The paper used exclusion to help frame the story in a more incriminating manner. However, non-incriminating facts that relate to the story can be found with a simple search of the Internet. The story could have been framed in a completely different way by elaborating on the lack of evidence or witness testimony about the absence of a firearm which directly contradicts the charges against him. The newspaper could have even taken the frame a step further by utilizing remedy promotions. According to Entman (1993, 2004) fully developed frames perform four functions, problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgment, and remedy promotion. In essence, framing utilizes priming to alter audience member's interpretations and preferences. Regardless of the functions performed by the framing of the story, the information is not presented in a manner that includes all the facts.

The story of OJ Simpson appearing in the New York Times supplements the position that agenda setting in print media has an adverse affect on society. Although we rely on media for entertainment and information, we must also hold them to a high standard of fairness and ethical standards. When the agenda setting theory is applied to print media such as newspapers it is evident that the results can be a false sense of reality and misconceptions about the actions and patterns of behavior in other citizens such as OJ Simpson. This is important in the armed robbery case because a man may be on trial for his life. Through the use of priming and framing the New York Times encouraged people to think about Simpson's past murder trial and the evidence against him for his current charges. In America, public opinion is a powerful tool. People must be notified of an issue to be concerned about it. The fact that the media can influence public

opinion through discrete methods such as agenda setting is a stunning reality. At its root function, agenda setting is public manipulation based on factual information presented at the discretion of gatekeepers. The importance an individual or society places on an issue can influence their decision about the issue. If the media tells us that OJ Simpson is important, we spend time thinking about his alleged crimes and our opinions change about the individual. The importance that society places on his case will influence whether or not the charges are pursued as well as the outcome of the sentencing hearing should he be convicted. In America individuals should be tried based on evidence and not on the speculation of how the public will react to an acquittal or conviction. The agenda setting theory can place pressure on judiciary officials to act in a manner consistent with public opinion therefore diminishing the chances of a fair trial for high profile cases, which is an adverse effect on society.

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