

## AGENDA SETTING IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES: ASSESSING THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION FRAMING

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examined the role of the media in agenda setting. It considered the assumptions of agenda setting theory especially the issue of salience and prominence. These concepts bring to the fore the issue of priming and framing of stories by the press for them to become agenda. The discourse showed that the press are not the only one who set agenda after all; but also government which comprises politicians, elites and business conglomerates, who, by their comparative positions, access and control the media, and thereby make their views news agenda by all means. The theories of agenda-setting and gate-keeping are seen to be interwoven. In setting agenda, the discourse revealed that the issue of political economy and political communication, the controllers who are the elites (political actors, business moguls) in this era of digital convergence need visibility and publicity which they want to exchange and bargain with the press in whatever means, while the press too, need them for survival. Likewise, around the corner are the citizen journalists (amateur) who cover stories through their cell phones as witnesses have considerably taken over the role of the press in setting agenda with no string attached. Even professional journalists receive stories from them through their cell phones. The media organisations woo these amateurs to send in their stories decided by the amateurs themselves. This paper concluded that agenda setting is not the sole right of the press. Nevertheless, this paper capped the conclusion that no matter the situation, professionalism, ethics and the standard of the press must not be sacrificed at the altar of tabloidization and trivialisation but be upheld.*

**Keywords:** Agenda Setting, Priming, Framing, News Sources, Press

### **Introduction**

The media has generally been seen as setting agenda in the public sphere as regards issues and events especially on political discourse. At the core of agenda setting propositions is the notion that the media do not actually tell us what to think, but what to think about based on the prominence and frequency of projection given to issues and events. In the same breath, it is pertinent to consider whose agenda the media is setting for public consumption. If the media is believed to have influence on public opinion and decision on issues and happenings in the polity; the media on the other hand report and analysis those issues and events as relayed to them by influential political and economic stakeholders within the society whose interests are mostly protected by the mainstream media. The new media has also liberalized the media terrain with citizen journalism empowering individuals with access to smartphone and internet to produce and circulate information contents design to achieve varied objectives. Members of the public are often deceived by the volumes of fake news, misinformation and disinformation available on the internet as information and news bloggers are continuously setting agenda on issues and event with the slant of their message. Therefore, the argument of who the real agenda setters are rages on just as ethical consideration for journalistic practice in the agenda setting battle becomes imperative.

Agenda setting theory as disclosed by Balnaves, Donald and Shoosmith (2009) came into existence when the diffusion theory was adopted into the media profession. They further revealed that, arising from the study of Defleur and Larson (1958) of dropping information leaflets on communities in the event of a civil emergency, it was discovered that the rate of repetition and distribution of leaflets accelerated the diffusion in spreading of information around the communities. In a way, this is similar to the pattern of agenda setting which is formed through news treatment by the media through the following norms listed by Folarin (1998:68) as frequency of reporting, prominence accorded reports through headline, pictures and so on, the degree of conflict generated in the reports, and cumulative media – specific effect over time.

All these propositions were supported by Anaeto, Onabajo, and Osifeso (2008) while reiterating that those with exposure to the same media will set in context same issues promoted on that media. The early postulation of McCombs (1972) on agenda setting corroborates this position that news organisation's agenda is seen through its style of reporting public issues over a duration of time. During this period, a small number of issues are given priority, while some others receive petite reportage, and many are barely or not in

the least voiced. Agenda of the news media as used is mainly illustrative to picture the pattern of shaping issues by journalists and their superiors in their everyday business of information gathering and dissemination; hence, it does not imply that there is unrelenting and deliberate objective being pursued (McCombs, 1972).

From observation and giving it an in-depth consideration, the gate-keeping theory too, has an effect and role to play on the press considerably on issues to be salient for it to be given as news. The 'gate' so to say, which stands between the news source and the audience, presupposes that the source (press) can shape, display, tune, repeat as wish the news to determine how important and weighty it is (Folarin, 1998). Likewise, this is similar to the role of the press in framing and priming news stories to make them be the talk (agenda) for a certain period for the public (Balnaves et al 2009; McCombs, 1972). The fact here is that at any point in time, from observation, there are communication cues, stories of people, places and events spanning into politics and public lives. Therefore, the table is set (agenda kind of). It is now the onus of the news professionals to now pick (gate-keep) out of what is on the ground to use as news; depending on the kind of salience it is given. It then makes the issue worthy of "news".

### **Sources of News Making**

The philosophy of news is that, it is very relative. What is news to individual is different and based also on certain parameter. Thus, news is qualified by accessibility, nature of news and interest to the individuals. Therefore, some theoretical frameworks are considerable in this context, which are the uses and gratification, the selectivity, the gate-keeping, innovation, diffusion and the agenda setting itself, as the bone of contention. Thus, as regards the making of news at a particular time or over a period of time, from observation, as pointed out by Aina (2003) that the press, the government (political arena) and the public can be regarded as agenda setters, news makers and sources. However, it is pertinent to observe that intentional sources such as propagandists tend to include their view concealed within news with the intention to gain free publicity (McQuail, 2010).

### **The Press as News Makers and Agenda Setters**

The press or the media generally have always been at the peak of agenda-setting. In fact, for many years, the media have been regarded by some as the sole agenda setters. However, the protagonist(s) themselves do not totally agree with this premise. Balnaves et al (2009:67) while quoting McCombs, aver that media role as agenda setters is not a universal influence: some issues are more susceptible than others to the press influence."

In making news therefore, mass media can provide cues about issues or topic but have the right because of their selectivity in the light of all the attributes of gate-keeping influence tend to make news stories out of them. From observation, some of these gate-keeping elements are personal and selfish to the news organisations involved. Some are commercial oriented, while some are political. It is not all facet of an individual, matter, idea, or happening captured in the news that is reckoned as newsworthy (Belnaves et al, 2009). From observation, this is an anecdote in the situation of a non-democratic polity, where only political issues are heralded because of limited chance for public opinions and participation.

The power of the media is linked to having both the technological wherewithal and professional prowess to echo issues, place, people, events as communication cues which the government and public (individuals) do not possess. No wonder therefore, that the two other sects, government (politicians) and individuals (businessmen / conglomerates) are now in control of the mass media. Hence, they, the three (press, government, and the public) are three-in-one so to say.

The press tend to increase their energy on the salience of an issue, and also increase its persuasive activities for it to be an agenda, then thereby preventing arguments or conflicts so as to make such issue 'hot' and newsworthy. This is also reinforced by the prominence, amplification, shaping and treatment given to such issue in the newsprint or broadcast programme. This treatment is what has been termed as framing and priming as expressly presented and argued by Belnaves et al (2009) and Scheufele (2002) among others.

### **Press Role of Framing and Priming**

In the course of setting agenda for public discourse as news by the press, framing and priming have been observed as the main thing the press do most times on issues in the pipeline, boiling down to news and communication cues. And not that most times the press formulate or conceptualise issues as news for the public to debate or as information. This has however been proved right by "citizen (amateur journalism)" which beats the professional journalists to it on news making and sourcing to the extent that in the modern trend, the latter now beg for news from the former for distinction, as argued by Scheufele (2002) who says priming is the offshoot of agenda setting, while both are hinged on the same assumption. Scheufele further argues and disagrees with McCombs (1997) who theorises that framing and agenda-setting operate on different proposition. On his own part, Balnaves et al (2009) citing Entman

(1993:52-53) contend that selection and salience are basically what framing entails. Framing is the selection of certain observed actualities and making them more notable through accommodating text and satiation or identifying them with culturally common symbols.

Balnaves et al (2009:67-68), while differentiating priming from framing citing Mendelsohn (1996:113) reveal that “media priming provokes an opinion or a behavioural change by altering the relative weight people give to various considerations that make up the ultimate evaluation.” Thus, to further explicate the two concepts which are found to be related, Belnaves et al (2009) give the empirical examples citing Entman’s (2001) description of a news incident in which a former Soviet Union aircraft had a civilian aircraft shot down as a ‘tragedy’ but when in a related scenario, an American aircraft shot down an Iranian airplane, he called it an ‘attack’. Therefore, in Belnaves et al (2009:68), reacting to the two aircraft scenarios comment that “framing makes certain information in a news story salient and depresses the significance of other information.” Along these lines, just as in the first (‘tragedy’) scenario, as regard priming, they further noted that “priming and the spread of activation are the mechanisms through which news frames stimulate thought processes and emotional reactions.” This, from observation, is the regards of the second aircraft ‘attack’ scenario. Thus, it is in this vein that Walter Hippmann (1922) cited by McCombs (1972:2) reveals that the press are the primal channel of creating those images in our minds about the bigger world of public affair and it is a world that is out of grip for many individuals. What the media choose to transmit to us essentially forms our view about the world. The crux of the mediated world is that public preference is actively shaped by the predilection of the media.

From observation, therefore, in this regard, it is not only the press as relating to news dissemination that engages in this act. The same goes for other media programmes of entertainment and film (drama), which run afoul of the local cultural norms and values in regard to the spoken language (vulgarism), dressing culture, obscurities and violence of various sorts, are the pictures in publics' mind. Thus because of the arrogated power and opportunities generally open to the mass media, the assumptions of the theories of selectivity and uses and gratification are forcefully subsumed in the minds of the audience who are seen as the ‘dumps’ for media priorities so as to superintendent over the control of access to the media and make money. From observation, this sums up to the question of ethics and morality in media practice. It is in this vein that Kayode (2014:279) reacting to the fairness in support of journalists as regards ethics in the course of discharging their duties (agenda setting anyway), when he cites Grevisse (1999), Laitila (1993) as cited by Keeble (2001) that fairness; sifting fact from opinion; necessity for precision with the burden to fix inaccuracy;

denouncing calculated misrepresentation and suppression of information are disparaged with a duty to uphold the dignity and acts done with love, motive, jealousy, sex, attraction, and etc.

Kayode (2014:282) concluding and warning while citing Coling Postman (1985) that a nation is at risk of experiencing the death of culture when people are engrossed with trivialities with barrage of entertainment reinventing cultural life, while crucial discourses of social well-being are not given deserved attention. It is also in this regard that McQuail (2010) citing Connel (1998) terms the situation as tabloidization whereby news has taken the term to mean 'Sensationalist' news discourses rather than 'rationalists' discourses. News has become more of narrative. Also further citing Bird (1998) that American news is more of personalisation and dramatisation, just as Brant (1998) and McQuail (2010) terms news as infotainment. This situation of people reacting to the sensationalism and tabloidization of the media has created a kind of spiral silence for the protagonists of local cultural norms and values and perhaps ethics in the practice. Balnaves et al (2009:68) citing Noelle-Neumann (1977) that the issue of agenda setting by the press creating a scenario of public opinion tends to engender fear of "solution among people who judge that views are out of what the press has set as agenda or public talk. This Noelle-Neumann contends that it leads to spiral silence and that such people who think they represent minority view, keep quiet in public debates; while those in the majority keep their views on. Thus, this is borne out of the agenda set by the press and perhaps taking or supported by the majority whether wrong or right.

This is the essence of priming as agenda-setting by the press. This issue of more salience and given more prominence than others attracts the value by which governments, presidents, candidates for public positions and so on, pitch tents with. Iyengar and Simon (1993) studying the effects of priming during the Gulf War as cited by Scheufele (2002) have it that foreign issues were reported with more intensity than local issues with reference to the comprehensive coverage of the Gulf War that that was superimposed on media assessment of presidential performance in United States.

Whereas, framing to (Gamson and Modigham, 1987) as disclosed by Scheufele (2002:306) is "a central organising idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of the events... The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue." Thus, from observation, news frames are like habitual professional activity in journalism. Framing allows the press to immediately identify and form information and it is a kind of packaging / treatment. The press give a story to make it newsworthy to their audience. At the same time, Entman (1993) in Schefe (2000) sees audience frame as a web of ideas that is stored in

individual's repertoire of knowledge as a guide to information processing. This, in a way, leaves the individual to decipher what uses, gratification and selectivity in terms of perception, attention, retention and recall is preferred. This takes this discourse to the respect of public (individuals) as setters of agenda too as regards news, public opinion on people, places and events, especially in this era of new media convergence.

### **Public as Agenda Setters**

The public agenda is usually fostered and generated by public opinion. This may arise from opinion polls to test electioneering campaign of political candidature or government policies such as in the past in Nigeria during the Babangida military era when the public was asked to debate whether Nigeria should obtain IMF loan or not. This issue then at that point in the life of Nigeria as a nation became an agenda and of course the outcome was a public agenda echoed by the press. Thus, the press in this regard became the channel or window through which the agenda of the public set was covered and became the talk of the nation.

However, McCombs (1972) reveals that in comparison, media agenda measures more than public agenda in the news media when he cites the empirical study of the Chapel Hill, North Carolina voters' responses that the patterns of news coverage were gotten from newspapers, network television news and news magazines available to them. Likewise during the 1968 U.S. presidential election McCombs (1972:3) goes further to reveal that more than 300 published studies worldwide had it that news media influenced agenda setting. Nevertheless, McCombs (1972) contends that in a democratic set-up, the media do not sufficiently determine the agenda because the people at large possess adequate sapience to decide on the advancement of their nation, state and communities; therefore, the mass media set the agenda as long as members of the public consider their news reports as germane.

### **Citizen Journalism**

This is regarded as practice by non-professionals or 'amateurs' in playing an important and active role in journalistic routine of news gathering, reporting and even analysing by making inference on issues in the course of dissemination. Anaeto (2010:2) citing Bowman and Wills (2000) and Wikipedia (2009), reveals that the objective of citizen journalism is to supply free, dependable, factual, all-inclusive and pertinent information. Thus, it is to keep people abreast of almost everything about people, places and event, especially within their localities and report back to such people through various media especially electronic media; internet inclusive. It is in this regard that Anaeto (2010:3) makes reference to an online site - <http://ahmedbilal.com>, thus:

*Citizen journalism fills in the gaps that traditional media cannot or will not fill. News that mainstream media won't cover because it doesn't 'sell' - citizen journalism has got it, because of various reasons (won't sell, don't have smart enough analysis etc.) - citizen journalism has it.*

This, therefore, brings to the fore that setting agenda that is said to be the sole function or right of the mainstream media has become a sharing factor with the involvement of citizen journalism and all its attempts. From observation, citizen journalism is a confirmation of the gradation of the position of the public under libertarian theory that the media platform is meant for those who have something to say. That is leaving room for freedom of the press which transforms to public opinion on any issue of interest to the public without any molestation. Anaeto (2010) contends that citizen journalism tends to confirm the assumptions of selective perception theory that the media audience are not passive but active because they decide what media to expose themselves to, what part of the message to pay attention to and what to retain and recall. Media audience do not take what is given to them hook, line and sinker.

From observation too, citizen journalism has created and avail opportunities to individuals to be agenda setters by sharing what they have collected as happenings in their environment with mainstream media organisations. These organisations nowadays even 'beg' and clamour for stories of various sorts from individual 'amateur' journalists to send to their websites, u-tube, to mention but a few. This brings to the fore, the fact that the professionals (press) do not see themselves as the main or sole agenda setters again, more so that the question of gate-keeping principles do not matter again. The super highways (satellite) have opened various ways for people who are able to afford the cheap gadgets to get involved in the news gathering, reporting, even shaping, priming and framing depending on who the citizen journalist is and on what circumstances and for what purpose.

### **On-line Influence (New Media)**

The breakthrough of Information and Communication Technology (I.C.T.) and its attending and resultant attributes such as internet and telecommunication have changed the faces and phases of news processing the world over. The professional journalists of the mainstream media fame have gradually lost their relevance in the process (gathering and reporting) of news. Thus, from observation, with the internet bringing all transactions 'on-line', the speed at which information and messages, news inclusive, travels nowadays is wonderful and very cost-effective and cost-efficient. Therefore, the traditional press have lost their right in terms of discriminating information and message to all and sundry. It is in this vein, that Udeoba



(2012), enumerating the benefits and challenges new media have brought to traditional journalists, contends that the media have made journalists compilers of news in place of being writers of news.

Udeoba (2012) reveals that the new media have made unqualified to be qualified journalists because of the opportunities available to them through the various online platforms like social media, blogs, website, to mention but a few. The introduction and advancement of I.C.T. has brought about digitalisation. This has also occasioned the convergence of news platforms which are changing the business dictates for both electronic (television) and print (newspapers) (Bock, 2012). This multiplicity of media in the view of Droyer (2005) as cited by Odetoyinbo (2012) is about creating a dialogue with your audience and delivering content in a multitude of platforms from the internet and digital radio, to a mobile phone or wireless.

This situation has helped to give rise and thereby empower individuals as members of the public to help set agenda because of the telecommunication gadgets they possess. On the various websites and social media avenues, many topics in form of opinions about what goes around in politics, economic, social and so on are thrown for public debates and contributions. From observation, some of the topics and issues for agenda for public consumption as news stories, features and commentaries. In other words, “the involvement of the public at large in the process of making news as citizen journalists has made them too watchdogs on both government and private businesses (Anaeto:2010). Thus, this is a challenge on the supremacy and hegemony of the media as regards agenda setting through news stories and commentaries.

Therefore, citizen journalism can be likened to what is referred to as video journalism, if going by this definition of the latter as given by Bock (2012) that it is the practice of video news production whereby one person shots, writes, and edits news stories, using digital technologies to be disseminated via broadcasting or broadband internet. This definition in practice fits the characteristics and the attributes of a citizen journalist. Most occasions, the coverage is for his/her immediate environment and about the issues usually of development in the communities. It is a feat, which even helps and limits the burden in the professional journalists and their media organisations in searching for news especially community news. This is a kind of convergence which the mainstream media organisations have come to accept and live with for them to be relevant in this era of digitalisation.

### **Actors in Governance**

The theories of agenda setting and gate-keeping in reality tend to influence each other in the struggle of access and control of the media. It is this background that Oso (2014:202) contends that:

*Access to the mass media has become more important and crucial to social and political actors than before. The news media do not just provide information. They are a cultural institution providing people with meaning... The power to define issues, set agenda and promote a particular frame and meaning has, without doubt, shifted to the control of media space by contending social actors.*

These actors then decide what news will be transmitted through the media. More so, in this era of global democracy, actors in governance have come to realise that free and fair participation in politics which is enhanced and of course requires free media practice is inevitable. If the citizen must be appropriately and very well informed and educated by the polity and the political process, the mass media for communication cues and meanings must be well accepted and controlled.

From observation, politics is the struggle for power. It is the power to instil authority to allocate and control wealth in governance. This tends to override all other facets of life, more so if it is enhanced through democratic process. This therefore, has brought about the hegemony in the business of mass media of communication qualified by the media convergence brought about by the I.C.T., internet and digitalisation. This has affected the ownership and proprietorship factors of gate-keeping theory will eventually affect too agenda-setting. The saying, "he who pays the piper dictates the tune" has become the order of the day in the media business. It is in this vein that Thuss (1998), describing the modern world of media control, asserts that the virtual empires of the electronic age do not depend on territorial conquest on gunboat diplomacy or on ideas of materialism or racial difference, but to persuade consumers, through their global electronic networks to use their media.

Thus the capitalists' lives have become a global phenomenon. Looking at the situation in its in-depth nature, democracy has given it a kind of legitimisation, under the pretext that they are the choice of the majority who are not only poor generation but less opportune to own the required wealth to become known. Thus, those actors in governance and the rich business individuals want to be relevant, visible and be publicised, hence their control and access to the media. Due to their opportunities and control of the political economy and political communication, they tend to set the agenda for the media. Corroborating this position, Seib (2008:19) reveals that:

*They are broadcasting stations funded by royal families and blogs based in tiny apartments. They are sophisticated websites and casual e-mail networks. They feature carefully crafted documentaries and cell phone video shot on the run. Some of their proprietors take bow on the world stage, while other live in fear of being raided by the police. Some have built global audiences.... No precise definition encompasses all the manifestations of new information and communication technologies, but already some paradigms have emerged. One of the most prominent of these is Al-Jazeera.*

The implication of this is that money and power determine what goes on air. News and programmes generally have now become commodities to be negotiated for. The highest bidder has the day. Oso (2004) opines, citing Herman and Chomsky that money and power filter out news qualified to be printed, and hence government and private individuals do this to have their interest transmitted to members of the public. More so, if those in governments in their various arms and armed with the business of the day, will always want them covered and used as Grade 'A' news stories. It is in this vein that Cook et al (1983) cited by Walgrave et al (2004) in Odetoynbo (2014) referring to their conclusion of an innovative experimental design which found out that viewership of television news by policy makers has impact on them and they regarded reported issues as salient, and perceiving that government effort is imperative after exposure to such programmes than before watching it.

Aina (2003) corroborates the agenda setting power of those in government as they are having the exclusive right of mass media in political communication. He further asserts that ruling regime played prominent role in media agenda setting. The government is the source for a greater percentage of items on news agenda amidst other forces with mass media as direct channel of information dissemination playing a greater role than non-mass media sources. It has been observed that the professionals in the quest to survive and keep their jobs have intentionally and unintentionally legalise the concerns and interest of the elites (Oso, 2014).

### **Conclusions**

The media because of their comparative advantage as it concerns organisational clout, reputation and structure, equipment and facilities wise, will ever be joggled and scrambled for by all and sundry, no matter what. Frankling (2003) cited in Oso (2014:206) that the exchange theory is of the view that "information possessed by the source is traded for coverage in the news media by journalists." This exchange is towards getting the message in form of agenda-setting to members of the public depending on the priming and framing given such news story. Likewise, it is because of the inevitable functional dispositions of the media or press

that the capitalists who have formed themselves into conglomerate so as to access and control the press.

The media convergence enhanced by digitalisation looking at it critically does not give the right to agenda setting and even gate-keeping of the media activities to a particular group considered in this discourse - the press (media) the public (citizen journalist/video journalist) and the actors of political economy and political communication.

What should be the bone of contention is a virile and ethical media practice. Thus, professionalism and standard should be upheld rather than sacrificing it on the altar of new media technologies, tabloidisation and the trivialisation of the media (Kayode, 2014). It therefore becomes imperative for pluralistic media to be encouraged and given a favorable environment to thrive. Ethically responsible and regulated journalistic practice should be encouraged to cater for varied and wider interest of different strata of the public, rather than mainly that of the political and economic brokers whose ideology and position are superimposed on what media transmit.

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