| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analysis of the Characteristics of Agenda Setting Theory in the New Media Era

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| ABSTRACT

One of the traditional theories of communication, agenda-setting theory, has seen significant growth in the context of new media along with the advancement of Internet technology. However, in the new media environment, agenda-setting theory also faces many challenges, leading to some subverted classic ideas. In this paper, the author tries to examine the agenda-setting theory and the phenomena that have led to its development and change, looking at diversified agenda-setting subjects, significant new media user counteraction, traditional mainstream media still playing a leading role, and legacy media interacting with new media. It then provides some examples to support its arguments.

1. Introduction

Since McCombs and Shaw explicitly proposed agenda-setting theory, this theory has undergone more than fifty years of development and refinement from simply studying agenda salience shift to attributing salience shift to the current salience shift of network relations. And agenda-setting theory has been playing a significant role in the field of communication, particularly during the period of legacy media time. At that time, the subject of agenda setting was the legacy of mainstream media since they were absolutely in control of the information resource. Looking into the present, with the continuous advancement of Internet communication technology and the flourishing of new media, the media discourse has been weakened while the public discourse has been strengthened; thus, the traditional agenda-setting theory has changed in many aspects and presented new characteristics. In this essay, the author tries to find out what new attributes the agenda-setting theory takes on in the new media context and attempts to clarify why these changes happened. Understanding clearly the new characteristics of agenda-setting theory will help a lot to coordinate the balance between the media and the public, maintain the status of the mainstream media in setting agendas and make the public express their opinions rationally.

2. Literature Review

In 1922, the famous American political commentator and journalist Lippmann proposed in his book "Public Opinion" that "the media" influences "the picture of reality in people's minds" and introduced the concept of a "mimetic environment". His view is often regarded as the spiritual origin of agenda-setting theory.

In 1972, American communication scholars McCombs and Shaw (1972) first explicitly proposed the agenda-setting theory in their paper "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Communication". By summarizing and analyzing the information and data that they collected in the U.S. presidential election survey in 1968, they found that the mass media could effectively influence the public's perception of important events around them through news selection and increasing the amount of coverage of specific news. After a period of time, the media agenda would be transformed into the public agenda. This stage of agenda setting theory focuses on "what to make the audience think" and emphasizes the reflection of communication effects at the cognitive level, which is the

"the first level" of agenda setting theory.

Later McCombes et al. (2006) proposed "the second level" of agenda setting, which focuses on the salient attributes of salient issues. It suggests that the specific attributes of the issue or object emphasized by the news media will have an attitudinal effect on the audience, focusing on "how to make the audience think". Guo and McCombs (2011) put forward Network Agenda Setting (NSA), which focuses on the linkage between attributes and the public's perception of the linkage. In addition to the cognitive and attitudinal effects of communication, network agenda setting also attaches great importance to the relationship between these two aspects, linking "what to make the audience think" and "how to make the audience think", ultimately producing a series of behavioral changes.

3. The New Features of Agenda Setting in the New Media Environment
3.1 Diversification of Agenda-Setting Subjects
The advancement of Internet technology and new media exerts a profound impact on the way information is now disseminated and the social discourse system, altering the order of communication and deconstructing and reconstructing the social discourse system(Hu, 2016). By allowing the general population more power and avenues to express their attitudes and beliefs, modern technology and the emergence of new media have broken the discourse monopoly held by official media or elite organizations. The general public can also become producers and disseminators of information, together with professional media, and audiences can use the new media platforms in their own way to give prominence to the issues that they care about or try to draw the attention of a wider group of people(Zhao, 2018).

On the Twitter platform, for instance, every user is able to tweet what they see and hear, express their views about current events, put forward their new points, and attach hashtags to their posts. By using keywords to search, users with related interests will locate one another and spread the word about the subject by liking, replying, retweeting, and other clicks. In this way, the general public becomes the subject of agenda setting, not just the passive receiver of information, but also the active subject of agenda setting other than professional media by actively providing topics and spreading information.

3.2 New Media Audience Reverse Agenda Setting Highlights
The flourishing development of the Internet and modern communication technology has enabled interpersonal connections to break through the limitations of time, space, class, and other constraints. Thanks to this progress, any individual or group can interact in real-time with the help of smart communication devices and new media platforms. Attitudes, opinions, and relevant discussions on a certain issue converge through the Internet to form important and prominent issues. Such public issues can often reflect social concerns, reflect public sentiment, convey the interests of the audience, or contain topics and dimensions that are not covered by traditional media. Examples include gender equality, feminism, celebrity anecdotes, etc. (Peng, 2019). These topics are firstly debated among the audience and then "snowballed", with more and more people participating in the discussion, which then spreads through new media channels and back to legacy media, drawing the attention of the officials(Li, 2021) (Zhao, 2018).

In 2017, a campaign called "Me Too" went viral online and offline, making it a hit around the world. It originated when American actress Alyssa Milano hashtagged her own tweets with #MeToo on October 15, 2017, on Twitter, so as to accuse famous producer Harvey Weinstein of sexually assaulting multiple women, appealing to all females who have been sexually assaulted or harassed to stand out bravely and speak for themselves. It was not long before this tweet got a lot of replies and retweets, arousing a constantly growing number of women, including plain citizens as well as celebrities, to enroll in and strongly advocate this feminism campaign. With this activity expanding, it showed a tendency where it nearly lost control. It was noticeable that an actress's post attracted the attention of the public and media. It was Alyssa Milano that became the subject of agenda setting and offered a large quantity of information and affected the following actions that the media would take. Gradually, some legacy mainstream media started to focus on this affair and report something related to this issue. Taking the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), which launched a series of reports named *Change By Me Too* as an example, the journalists from this program interviewed people of various occupations, different gender, and different age, trying to find out how people's lives were influenced by "Me Too".

Looking into an occurrence that happened in China Mainland, the "Kris Wu Incident" that broke out on Weibo in July 2021 began with a 19-year-old girl's revelation that she had been sexually assaulted by Wu. Because of the content of the story, which involved the "Top Stream" star and his shocking behavior, the incident quickly spread. Details of the situation were frequently searched on Weibo and widely disseminated on the Internet. The deeply negative impact of this scandal, as well as the public's general concern, aroused the attention of major media, and media organizations gathered and summarized the scattered Weibo issues to set a more macro, rational-oriented, and socially significant relevant agenda. In turn, they can achieve the effects of handling online public opinion, responding to social concerns, stabilizing social order, and regulating audience behavior.

By examining one of the major Chinese media, People's Daily's coverage of the "Kris Wu incident," it is rather noticeable that the prominent attributes of this issue are judicial progress, the condemnation of the criminal behavior of artists, and the point-by-point criticism of a large number of individuals and behaviors in the entertainment industry that are out of line. From a macro-rational perspective and with the goal of guiding and regulating, legacy media collect and integrate Weibo public issues for media agenda setting.

Reverse agenda setting changes the previous mode of transferring media agenda to public agenda, reflecting the redistribution of discourse power and the enhancement of audiences' subjective consciousness. They gain the power to express their opinions and attitudes, realizing that they can participate in social affairs by conveying their opinions, raise massively scattered and fragmented issues, trigger social heated debates and legacy media attention, and the public agenda flows into professional media in reverse, affecting media. The public agenda flows back to the professional media and influences the media's agenda setting.

3.3 Legacy Mainstream Media Still Lead in Agenda Setting

Despite the rapid development of various social media, self-media, and other new media, which play a growingly significant role in information dissemination, that cannot be underestimated legacy mainstream media still take a crucial part in providing original information and guiding attention(Zhao, 2019). In the process of news production, legacy media have strong strength and excellent professionalism to follow the progress of current affairs, collect relevant first-hand information, analyze and integrate data. And then, they release news in a timely manner. Moreover, traditional mainstream media have a deep history of development over a long period of time. The release of information is authentic and reliable with a high reference value which has also attracted a large number of audiences with high loyalty. They have been winning the general trust of the public in the social environment. In addition, as the mouthpiece of the Party and the nation, the issues concentrated and news released by such media often demonstrate the national policies, show the mainstream thinking of society and promote positive values.

The reports of traditional mainstream media tend to be macro, narrative, and the selection of its issues is more directional and generalized. The above-mentioned features can provide various new media with the direction of selecting issues and can also select the focus for a more detailed portrayal and deeper excavation in the macroscopic description.

During the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the mainstream media such as People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency chose the topic of "short track speed skating" with the prominent attributes of "teamwork", "individual struggle", "competition results," and special reports on individual athletes. It can be found that these are positive reports promoting the Olympic spirit and national spirit, showing the team as well as individual athletes' spirit. And the secondary agenda presents a kind of subjectivity and generalization, which can provide direction for the agenda-setting of social media and We media.

During the Winter Olympic Games, the daily training and routine life of short-track speed skaters received a lot of attention, and the topics related to this frequently appeared on "Weibo trending". However, this is also a full extension of the more general topics of "competition results," "teamwork," and "personal interview".

3.4 New Media and Legacy Media Agenda Setting are Interactive

New media and legacy media both have their own characteristics in agenda setting that match the nature of their media; as a result, the selected issues will be different, but this does not mean that the two are isolated and completely separated; on the contrary, new media and legacy media will also interact with each other and influence each other's agenda setting. On some important issues, legacy mainstream media such as People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, The New York Times, and BBC will become the guide of many online media, and this kind of media will usually be a delight to accept the leadership of traditional mainstream media.

Considering that new media can reflect audience concerns to a great extent, legacy media will also extract, analyze and re-publish hot topics that appear on social media and We media. With the help of their official Twitter, Facebook, or Weibo, mainstream media will reproduce the trending related posts and will add comments and attitudes to actively respond to the hot topics in society and the concerns of the general audience.

This kind of benign interaction can make the news reports of new media more objective, positive, and socially meaningful, contributing to the much higher quality of overall content to a certain extent; it can also make traditional media closer to the audience, making their reports warmer and reflecting the care of the masses.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, although agenda-setting theory is one of the classical theories in communication and has been fully developed and perfected in the past decades, many aspects of agenda-setting theory have been impacted and subverted in the new media environment, where legacy media are declining, and new media are flourishing. Consequently, agenda-setting has become a complex act with multiple participants and multi-media interaction. In terms of each individual，everyone is supposed to join in the process of agenda setting not only actively but also rationally, expressing one's idea in a proper way that obeys the laws and moral rules as well as does not harm other citizens and the entire society. The legacy media, which used to be in the exclusive position, should not exclude the general public and new media from setting the agenda. It is sane for the traditional media that integrate and interact with them, accepting the public ideas and learning the means that new media utilize to attract viewers.

The classical theory should keep pace with the times, break through the limitations and develop dynamically with the changes in technology and environment so as to continue to play its active role in the domain of news communication in the new era.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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