

Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting Theory states that media content sets the agenda for public discussion.

Introduction

The things we see in newspapers and the things we hear on the radio are things that people all over the country are talking about. The Agenda Setting Theory is based on the premise that we are given our “agenda” of daily information for discussion based on what the media wants us to be talking about. Agenda Setting was an early theory given to us by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz. These two men believed that media content set the agenda for public discussions (Wilcox, et al, 2003, p.213). These men both believed that the media did not specifically tell us what to think about a particular subject, just which subjects we should be forming an opinion of. This theory is one of deep consequences to many companies that are in the limelight. It can also be very detrimental to politicians and other public figures. Sometimes the media plays a more vital role in society other than just reporting the news. It gives us serious topics that are put under our noses on a daily basis. The information is put there for a reason whether most people are aware of it or not. The Agenda Setting theory is positive for society because it puts the information out there. However, the down side is

that the information we are getting is biased and doesn't allow for us to select what we feel is important.

Positive Effects of Agenda Setting Theory

There are many important news items that are reported on a regular basis. These items can be weather, violence, politics and local information. As members of this society, we read these stories and then go about our lives to discuss them with our friends, family, co-workers and neighbors. Sometimes, we talk about the same story day after day not realizing that the reason it is still a hot topic of conversation is because it was once again on the front page of the paper. As a society, we need to feel we know what is going on around us. The media gives us information that is going on in our local communities and across the globe. We read these stories to know more about situations concerning our loved ones, the well-being of our freedom and to gather general information.

Maxwell McCombs along with Donald Shaw developed the term agenda-setting in 1968. Since that time over 350 studies have been done on agenda setting around the world. McCombs has taken his research a step further than determining if the media decides which topics we discuss as a society. Maxwell's original theory was just looking to prove that the media did select our topics. He has taken that a step further in recent years to determine if the media control what we think about and

how we think about it (McCombs). The media keeps us informed and gives us topics of interest without us realizing that they are giving us topics.

Negative Effects of Agenda Setting Theory

It seems to be harmless for the media to set the agenda of what is out there for public consumption. However, it depends on how you look at the situation. The biggest news story that comes to mind is the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Would this have been so talked about if it wasn't on the front page of every paper, every day for many days in a row, probably not? The Newsweek online site lists a chronological time line of the events that took place during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and the most notable remark made regarding the incident was, "Newsweek will have full coverage of this entire story in its next issue, on newsstands Monday, January 26. But because Newsweek and others have been able to confirm further details of the investigation –and because the magazine has developed exclusive reporting on the nature of the evidence –the editors of Newsweek have decided to publish this chronology of events on Newsweek Interactive on AOL" (Isikoff, 1998). The information was out there and it was going to be leaked and basically Newsweek didn't want to miss out on having it out there first so they put the information on the website. The public was also mesmerized by the O.J. Simpson trial a few years ago. That was a hot

topic of conversation for many months. This was something that was watched every day and more average people knew more about the trial because media depicted every single moment of the case live. Another example of how media can affect society in a negative way is the war with Iraq. I would not have wanted to be one of the parents that saw their child captured by Iraqi soldiers on television. I can't imagine what those poor mothers and fathers thought as they sat down to dinner to view that. The media gives us a great deal of information but sometimes it is just too much.

Politics play too big of a role in what is presented to the public. It seems too often that politicians generally share the background, worldview and financial status as the owners and managers of the dominant media outlets (Official Agendas, 2002). This has to have a huge impact on what information the public is given. The media moguls tend to give large donations to political campaigns and the politicians determine which networks they choose to run political advertisements. It seems to be a combination that has to be detrimental in what we are allowed to see as members of this society.

Conclusion

The media does set the agenda of what is discussed around the world on a daily basis. The media chooses the stories and the public reviews them on a regular basis. It doesn't seem that many people really

are aware that there is someone picking out our information for us, but that is exactly what goes on every single day. There are pros and cons to someone selecting the stories we receive for processing. However, we are receiving it and that is what makes our country so great. We do get to have an opinion about the information we receive. We are also allowed to voice that opinion in many different forms, whether it is verbally or written. Freedom of speech has been around for quite some time, but is it really being used or is the media just dominated by the government? Regardless, we are allowed to receive information that is newsworthy and we are allowed to process that without the dominance of our government. I feel that we are lucky in that sense because we could be living in a country that chooses to only give us what they want us to know about instead of what is actually happening.

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