

Theoretical and methodological trends of agenda-setting theory

A thematic analysis of the last four decades of research

Yejin Kim, Youngju Kim and Shuhua Zhou

Central Connecticut State University / The University of Alabama /
The University of Alabama

Through a thematic meta-analysis, the current study examined theoretical, topical, and methodological trends of agenda-setting research over time from 1972 through 2015. Research trends, topics, media, methods, and utilization of other theories in agendasetting studies were discussed along with the evolution of the theoretical map of agenda-setting studies. Findings indicated that the number of agenda-setting research studies has been increasing over time, along with the expansion of research topics, media, methods, and use of other theories. This study provided a general overview of agenda-setting studies as well as new insights for future research trends and directions.

Keywords: agenda setting; thematic analysis; trends; Internet

Since McCombs and Shaw (1972) conducted their seminal study on agenda setting in Chapel Hill, North Carolina during the 1968 presidential election, a great deal of research has been generated by the theory, with some researchers conducting studies to replicate the correlations between the media agenda and the public agenda (e.g., Ghanem & Wanta, 2001; Golan & Wanta, 2001; Tedesco, 2001), others identifying contributing factors to different agendas (e.g., Fico & Freedman, 2001; Johnson, Wanta, & Boudreau, 2004; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003), some explaining the mechanisms of agenda setting (e.g., Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990; McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974; Shaw & Martin, 1992), and some formally developing, testing, and refining the theory (e.g., Kosicki, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The original agenda-setting study examined elections. However, it is safe to say that agenda-setting theory has been applied not only to elections but also to a variety of communication situations far beyond the original academic domain (McCombs, 2005; Young & McCarthy, 2009).

Geographically, agenda setting has been tested in different countries in North America, Asia, Europe, and Latin America (McCombs, 2005). Likewise, over the past several decades, the theoretical map of agenda setting has continuously evolved with the proliferation of new communication technologies and changes in the social landscape. Further, the emergence of the Internet has dramatically changed the patterns of communication with its diverse channels and applications and has opened up a new area of study for agenda-setting researchers.

However, few empirical studies have looked into the history and development of research on agenda setting. As Rogers and Dearing (1988) pointed out, agenda-setting research has a robust empirical nature, but now thorough meta-research analyses are needed. It is also necessary to identify the different stages of the theoretical and methodological developments of agenda-setting research in relation to the emergence of new communication technologies. Therefore, the goal of this study is to provide an overview by reviewing the theoretical and methodological trends of agenda-setting studies through a thematic meta-analysis of research publications. In particular, these patterns will be discussed in light of the advent of new media. By doing so, this study provides new directions for future research.

Historical development of agenda-setting theory

Although the concept of agenda setting was founded on Lippmann's (1922) idea of "the world outside and the pictures in our heads" (p. 29), McCombs and Shaw (1972) were the first to conduct an empirical study of the agenda-setting effect during the 1968 presidential election in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Since their seminal paper appeared in 1972, numerous scholars have studied the effect of agenda setting in various fields. Based on Cohen's (1963) idea that "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p. 120), McCombs and Shaw (1972) hypothesized that "the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (p. 177). By comparing the rank-ordered issues on the media agenda with the key issues of the day on the agenda of undecided voters, McCombs and Shaw found that the salience of the news agenda was highly correlated to that of the voters, thus providing evidence of agenda setting (i.e., first-level agenda setting).

As a follow-up to the Chapel Hill study, during the summer and fall of the 1972 presidential election, Shaw and McCombs (1977) introduced the concept of attribute agenda. They theorized that not only the media agenda but also object attributes have an agenda-setting effect, illustrating the influence of the attribute agenda in the news on the public's attribute agenda (i.e., second-level agenda setting). The attribute agenda contains cognitive components such as information

that describes characteristics of the object as well as affective components including tone (positive, negative, or neutral) of the agenda.

Both first-level and second-level agenda setting involved the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. However, second-level agenda setting differed from first-level agenda setting in that it focused on attribute salience, and the public's attribute agenda was regarded as one of the important variables (Shaw & McCombs, 1977; McCombs, 1981). In this regard, McCombs (2005) described second-level agenda setting as telling the audience "how to think about" in addition to "what to think about" an issue (p. 546).

Agenda setting did not have a blanket effect. Individual differences in agenda-setting effect were largely measured using the concepts of need for orientation and agenda melding (McCombs, 2005; Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, & Hamm, 1999). McCombs and Weaver (1973) and Weaver (1977) introduced the concept of "need for orientation," which explained the psychological conditions of agenda setting. They found that need for orientation significantly correlated with media use for political information, which led to stronger agenda-setting effects. Need for orientation was defined under the conditions of relevance and uncertainty (Weaver, 1980; McCombs & Weaver, 1985).

Focusing on agenda setting as a political process, Dearing and Rogers (1992) proposed an agenda-setting process, referring to "an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites" (pp. 1–2). Specifically, the agenda-setting process offers an explanation of why certain issues are salient and how they come to be on the media agenda (media agenda setting), the public agenda (public agenda setting), or the policy agenda (policy agenda setting), in addition to the interrelationship among the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Later, Shaw and his colleagues (1999) built the concept of "agenda melding" as a theoretical elaboration of the concept of "need for orientation" (p. 2). Agenda melding posited that individuals had a proclivity to belong to groups of some kind (e.g., professional and social) and tended to seek and adopt agendas of groups that they decided to join. High need for orientation led to active information seeking. Agenda melding was not limited to the mass media; rather, people could meld agendas from a variety of sources to fit their own agendas. Today, thanks to new communication technologies, people can access hundreds of media channels and other media sources so loose groups can share agendas. In sum, the research on agenda setting has focused on what individuals learn from mass media agendas, while research on agenda melding argues that individuals use a variety of media and meld their personal agendas with a group agenda. In this sense, agenda melding has been explained as a kind of reverse effect of agenda setting (Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004).

Another area of agenda-setting theory, “agenda building”, is derived from the question of “who sets the media’s agenda” (McCombs, 2004, p. 98). In the area of politics, Cobb and Elder (1971) examined how public policy issues were created and who took part in the agenda-building process. From the agenda-building perspective, national-level issue agendas were built by triggering concerns ranging from individual to collective agendas. Further, Cobb and Elder suggested that political parties and the media played significant roles as triggers to promote individuals’ interest in the issues of systemic institutional agendas. McCombs (2004) indicated that one of the important criteria to evaluate a national political leader was his or her influence in setting the national agenda.

Beyond the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda, several scholars (McCombs & Shaw, 1976; Snider, 1967) found an agenda-setting effect between types of media. Inter-media agenda setting focused on the relationships between more than two media (McCombs, 2004). Building on the findings of White’s (1947) first case study on the news selection behavior of a Midwestern wire news editor, several scholars (Hirsch, 1977; McCombs & Shaw, 1976; Snider, 1967) found significant inter-media agenda-setting effects. McCombs (2004, 2005) also claimed that inter-media agenda setting had been evident for a very long time as shown by the high correlation between agendas of the elite news media and other news media.

Revisiting agenda-setting theory with the advent of the Internet

With the emergence of the Internet, however, the agenda-setting process between the media agenda and the public agenda has become rather complicated. For example, media users are able to acquire information through various media channels according to individual differences and preferences. As noted by Kim and Lee (2006), the agenda-setting effect in cyberspace usually proceeds in a predictable fashion. First, an individual’s opinion could be disseminated through various online channels that arouse public opinion (Internet-mediated agenda rippling). Next, the agenda of online news media affects the agenda of the traditional news media as well as online publics (Internet-mediated reversed agenda setting). Finally, the agenda of the traditional news media might set the offline public agenda (agenda setting).

Guo and McCombs (2011) developed a network agenda-setting theory as the third level of agenda setting. The central hypothesis for network agenda setting was that “the salience of the interrelationships among constructs or the associative network regarding a certain topic can be transferred from the media agenda to the public agenda” (Guo & McCombs, 2011, p. 9). While the first and second

levels of agenda setting emphasize the salience of issues or attributes of the media agenda on the public agenda, the concept of network agenda setting focuses on the salience of the network agenda, which consists of forms of integrated and networked images, on the public. Furthermore, the concept of network agenda setting highlights the importance of associative networks in individuals' thinking. Similar to traditional agenda setting, network agenda setting allows the media to shape the perceived importance of an issue in the public mind. However, the concept of network agenda setting further suggests the salience of the networks of objects and attributes of media on the networks of the public. Therefore, network agenda setting involves the effects of the media agenda networks on the public agenda networks (Guo, 2012).

From traditional mass media to the Internet media environment, the application of agenda-setting theory has evolved from addressing first-level agenda setting to describing second-level agenda setting, the need for orientation, inter-media agenda setting, agenda melding, agenda building, and recently third-level agenda setting. As McCombs (2005) noted, scholars have revisited and expanded some components of the agenda-setting theory, and the new media landscape of the Internet has raised new questions and new opportunities.

McCombs (2004) recently suggested three stages of the evolution of the agenda-setting theory, noting a "Gray's Anatomy" of agenda-setting theory in various international settings. The first stage represented the growth of agenda-setting theory in five distinct phases of the communication and public opinion formation process, ranging from the first level of agenda-setting effects to attribute agenda-setting effects, individual differences in agenda-setting effects, sources of media agenda, and consequences of agenda-setting effects. The second stage is concerned with the expansion of agenda setting in other domains including politics, business, cultural norms, and sports. The third stage pertains to the elaboration of key theoretical concepts of agenda-setting theory such as salience, attributes, need for orientation, and frames.

Later, McCombs (2005) suggested two major trends in contemporary agenda-setting research – the first on the revision and expansion of the basic concepts of agenda-setting theory and the second on the revision and expansion of the theory in new settings beyond public opinion. However, in the new Internet landscape, it is important to explore the directions of research on agenda setting. The best way to do this is to explore where it has been. Hence, drawing upon McCombs' (2004, 2005) propositions of the stages and trends, this study reviews the theoretical and methodological trends of agenda-setting studies. We expect to reveal some of the trends of past agenda-setting research and to give new insights for future research on agenda setting. The following research questions are thus posed:

- RQ1: What are the prevalent theoretical trends in agenda-setting research?
RQ2: What are the topic areas most studied in agenda-setting research?
RQ3: What are the media studied most often in agenda-setting research?
RQ4: What methods are used most often in agenda-setting research?
RQ5: What other theories are used in agenda-setting research?

Method

Sample

To gather journal articles on agenda-setting research, two academic databases (*Academic Search Premier* and *Communication & Mass Media Complete*) were used. These two databases were regarded as the largest and most complete research databases in communication (Tai, 2009). Using the key word “agenda setting,” the researchers searched all of the peer-reviewed and full-text articles published by academic journals from 1972 through 2015. Articles that were not related to agenda-setting theory or effects were excluded, as well as book reviews, editorials, corrections, and commentaries. Articles not written in English were also excluded in the analysis. Finally, 512 articles were used for the analysis of the study.

Coding scheme

The unit of analysis for this study was an academic paper reporting on the various domains of agenda-setting research. The coding scheme includes the following variables:

Journal and year. The title of the journal and the publication year of the article were recorded. This category was important to identify the trend of the agenda-setting research over time. The years ranged from 1972 to 2015.

Research trend. Research trend was measured using ten research trends of agenda-setting studies modified from McCombs’ (2005) suggestion of the five distinct stages of the evolution of agenda-setting theory. When the article included more than one research trend, all of the research trends used in the study were coded. A total of 116 studies of the 512 (22.7%) included multiple research trends. The ten research trends of agenda setting included first-level agenda setting, second-level agenda setting, need for orientation, agenda melding, inter-media agenda setting, third-level (or network) agenda setting, agenda policy, agenda building, agenda setting process, and others. The ten trends were operationally defined as follows:

1. First-level agenda setting: the transfer of issue (or object) salience from the media agenda to the issue (or object) salience of the public agenda.
2. Second-level agenda setting: the transfer of attribute salience from the media agenda to the attribute salience of the public agenda.
3. Need for orientation: the degree of relevance and uncertainty as individual differences that affect issue salience of the agenda.
4. Agenda melding: a process of seeking and adopting agendas of groups in addition to any media agendas, thus “melding” various agendas.
5. Inter-media agenda setting: the transfer of the agendas of one media outlet to another media outlet.
6. Third-level (or network) agenda setting: the transfer of salience from media network agendas to the integrated and networked agendas of the public.
7. Agenda policy: the transfer of media agendas to public and policy agendas.
8. Agenda building: the transfer of agendas, including individual agendas, collective agendas, policy agendas, or national agendas to the media agenda, facilitating the role of media in the process of creating public policy agendas.
9. Agenda-setting process: the salience of an issue changes and how it influences media agendas, public agendas, or policy agendas, as well as the interrelationship among all the agendas.
10. Other research trends: all other areas not included above, for example, interpersonal communication in agenda setting, agenda-setting research trends, criterion variables in agenda-setting research, inter-candidate agenda setting, inter-party agenda setting, and agenda control.

Research topic. Research topic was measured by identifying the main topic of the articles. In cases of double topics, researchers double coded such. In addition, studies with more than three research topics were coded as “Multiple issues.” The following eight different topic categories were measured:

1. Social issues (e.g., social welfare, insurance, crime, and education)
2. Politics (e.g., elections, candidates, political corruption, and democracy)
3. Economy (e.g., jobs, marketing, corporations, and finance)
4. Environment and health (e.g., disasters, medical issues, and health-related issues such as tobacco and drugs)
5. Technology and science
6. War (e.g., terrorism and military)
7. International issues (e.g., foreign policy, and international unions and organizations)
8. Multiple issues (e.g., combination of three or more research topics)
9. Other (e.g., food, sports, and research per se)

Research methodologies. Research methodology was measured using 11 different types of methods modified from Kim and Weaver's (2002) study. Specifically, content analysis, survey, experimental design, case study, network analysis, secondary data analysis, interview, meta-analysis, critique or review, comparative methods, and other research methods including textual analysis, ethnography, and historical analysis were used for this category. The researchers also double coded when more than one research method were noted in the article. A total of 214 studies out of the 512 (41.8%) included multiple research methods.

Media (Channel). Media or channel was measured by examining which media was used for analysis or review in each article. Multiple media types were coded if they were used in the study. A total of 176 studies of the 512 (34.4%) included multiple media or channels. The following eight media were identified:

1. Newspapers (e.g., daily, weekly, and tabloid newspaper)
2. TV (e.g., network and cable television)
3. Radio
4. Magazines
5. Press releases (e.g., party release, state speech, and publication in the organization)
6. Internet websites and email
7. Mobile (e.g. smart phone)
8. Online news (e.g., online newspaper and online news)
9. Social media (e.g., blog, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter)
10. Other media (e.g., general media without noting specific media and other media not included in the categories above)

Other theories used in agenda-setting research. Theories combined with agenda-setting research were measured by examining which theory was used in addition to agenda-setting theory. Researchers coded these as open-ended answers if other theories were used in a particular study. A total of 115 studies of the 512 (22.5%) included one other theory and 9 studies (1.8%) included more than one additional theory.

Inter-coder reliability

In order to strengthen reliability of the measures, two graduate students were trained over the course of several sessions in the coding scheme and procedures prior to actual coding. For the inter-coder reliability test, the two coders coded 150 randomly-selected articles (29.3% of the final sample). The coders engaged in the coding practice independently and applied the coding schemes for the pretest.

The inter-coder reliability score using Cohen's Kappa was .795 for research trend, .835 for research topic, .748 for research method, .796 for media, and .786 for other theory use. Overall inter-coder reliability score for all variables was .792.

Results

Using the academic databases *Academic Search Premier* and *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, we collected a census of 512 agenda-setting studies dating from the seminal study of agenda setting in 1972 to present. Figure 1 presents a plot of the overall distribution of the agenda-setting research studies from 1972 through 2015. It shows that the number of agenda-setting articles has been increasing over time, with a noticeable rise from 2000 to 2010 and then a decrease from 2011 on. When we compiled agenda-setting research by decade, we found that agenda-setting research has been on the rise with each passing decade: 16 articles in the 70s (3.1%); 39 articles in the 80s (7.6%); 68 articles in the 90s (13.3%); 183 articles in the 2000s (35.7%); and 206 articles in the 2010s (40.2%). As such, more than 75% of the agenda-setting articles were published since 2000 coinciding with the rise and proliferation of the Internet.

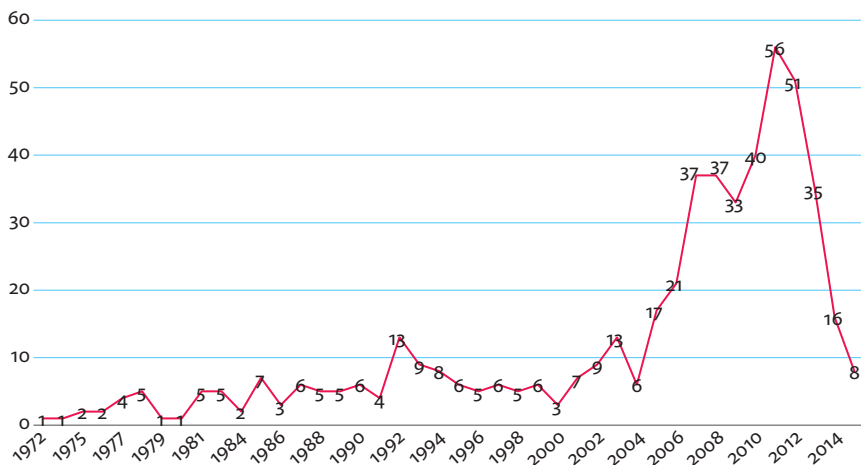


Figure 1. Number of agenda setting research studies from 1972 to 2015

In terms of theoretical trends of agenda-setting research over time, first-level agenda-setting research has been the dominant trend with 47.3% of articles focusing on first-level agenda setting (see Table 1). Following first-level agenda setting, the data revealed the following types of studies from high to low: agenda policy, second-level

agenda setting, agenda building, inter-media agenda setting, agenda-setting process, need for orientation, third-level agenda setting, and agenda melding. The “other” category comprised 2.8% of articles focusing on other types of research trends such as agenda cueing, agenda control, inter-candidate agenda setting, inter-party agenda setting, criterion variables in agenda-setting research, interpersonal communication in agenda setting, and historical trends of agenda setting studies.

While most research still focused on the first-level agenda setting, even in recent years, the trend of agenda-setting research has diversified over time. The percentage of first-level agenda-setting studies has decreased over time, while the percentage of other types of agenda-setting research trends has increased. To be more specific, agenda-setting research focused only on first- and second-level agenda setting, agenda-setting process, and need for orientation in the 1970s. However, agenda policy, agenda building, and inter-media agenda setting were included in agenda-setting research in the 1980s, while agenda melding was included in the 1990s, and third-level agenda setting was included in the 2010s.

Table 1. Theoretical trends of agenda setting by year

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010–2015	Total
First-level	16 (80%)	34 (73.9%)	46 (53.5%)	117 (41.6%)	91 (37.0%)	304 (47.3%)
Agenda policy	–	5 (10.9%)	7 (8.1%)	29 (10.3%)	43 (17.5%)	84 (13.1%)
Second-level	1 (5%)	1 (2.2%)	8 (9.3%)	42 (14.9%)	31 (12.6%)	83 (12.9%)
Agenda building	–	1 (2.2%)	8 (9.3%)	22 (7.8%)	30 (12.2%)	61 (9.5%)
Inter-media	–	2 (4.3%)	3 (3.5%)	18 (6.4%)	19 (7.7%)	42 (6.5%)
Agenda setting process	2 (10%)	1 (2.2%)	3 (3.5%)	6 (2.1%)	16 (6.5%)	28 (4.4%)
Need for orientation	1 (5%)	2 (4.3%)	4 (4.7%)	4 (1.4%)	3 (1.2%)	14 (2.2%)
Third-level	–	–	–	–	5 (2.0%)	5 (0.8%)
Agenda melding	–	–	1 (1.2%)	2 (0.7%)	1 (0.4%)	4 (0.6%)
Other	–	–	6 (7.0%)	3 (1.1%)	9 (3.7%)	18 (2.8%)
Total	20 (100%)	46 (100%)	86 (100%)	281 (100%)	246 (100%)	643 (100%)

Table 2 provides an answer to the second research question in terms of the topics studied in agenda-setting research over time. Specifically, “politics” and “multiple issues” were the most prevalent, followed by topics related to the environment and health, social issues, international issues, the economy, war, technology and science, and other issues. Political issues including elections, candidates and democracy were the focus of 26.8% of articles, and 26.0% of articles focused on multiple issues. Given that multiple issues included political issues combined with other type of topical domains, this finding revealed that political topics were dominant in agenda-setting research. Interestingly, the topical domains included in agenda-setting research have broadened over time especially since the 1990s.

Table 2. Topical domains of agenda setting research by year

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010–2015	Total
Politics	4 (25%)	3 (7.7%)	10 (15.6%)	41 (24.3%)	73 (36.5%)	131 (26.8%)
Multiple issues	8 (50%)	17 (43.6%)	22 (34.4%)	39 (23.1%)	41 (20.5%)	127 (26.0%)
Environment/Health	2 (12.5%)	8 (20.5%)	5 (7.8%)	18 (10.7%)	30 (15%)	63 (12.9%)
Social	1 (6.3%)	6 (15.4%)	8 (12.5%)	26 (15.4%)	21 (10.5%)	62 (12.7%)
International	–	4 (10.3%)	5 (7.8%)	19 (11.2%)	5 (2.5%)	33 (6.8%)
Economy	1 (6.3%)	–	8 (12.5%)	8 (4.7%)	10 (5.0%)	27 (5.5%)
War	–	–	3 (4.7%)	13 (7.7%)	5 (2.5%)	21 (4.3%)
Technology/Science	–	–	–	–	6 (3.0%)	6 (1.2%)
Other	–	1 (2.6%)	3 (4.7%)	5 (3.0%)	9 (4.5%)	18 (3.7%)
Total	16 (100%)	39 (100%)	64 (100%)	169 (100%)	200 (100%)	488 (100%)

Research Question 3 involved the media studied in agenda-setting research. As shown in Table 3, the studied media have diversified over time, with newspapers and television most examined. Newspapers were studied in 43% of agenda-setting articles, while 24.8% of articles focused on television. Press releases came in third. The focus on digital media such as the Internet websites and email, online news, social media, and mobile media has sharply increased since 2000. Although the appearances of a variety of media channels have changed the media landscape and made it more fragmented, individualized, and polarized with the advent of the Internet (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Hamilton, 2004), these findings suggest that agenda-setting research is still going strong with the advent of new communication technologies.

Table 3. Media focuses of agenda setting research by year

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010–2015	Total
Newspaper	14 (51.9%)	29 (59.2%)	39 (43.8%)	103 (43.5%)	105 (38.7%)	290 (43.1%)
TV	8 (29.6%)	13 (26.5%)	35 (39.3%)	64 (27.0%)	47 (17.3%)	167 (24.8%)
Press	1 (3.7%)	2 (4.0%)	6 (6.7%)	21 (8.9%)	36 (13.3%)	66 (9.8%)
SNS	–	–	–	8 (3.4%)	22 (8.1%)	30 (4.5%)
Internet websites/ Email	–	–	1 (1.1%)	11 (4.6%)	16 (5.9%)	28 (4.2%)
Radio	2 (7.4%)	1 (2.0%)	–	9 (3.8%)	12 (4.4%)	24 (3.6%)
Online news	–	–	–	7 (3.0%)	15 (5.5%)	22 (3.3%)
Magazine	1 (3.7%)	1 (2.0%)	5 (5.6%)	6 (2.5%)	8 (3.0%)	21 (3.1%)
Mobile	–	–	–	–	2 (0.7%)	2 (0.3%)
Other	1 (3.7%)	3 (6.1%)	3 (3.4%)	8 (3.4%)	8 (3.0%)	23 (3.4%)
Total	27 (100%)	49 (100%)	89 (100%)	237 (100%)	271 (100%)	673 (100%)

Research Question 4 examined the type of research methodology used in agenda-setting research over time. As Table 4 demonstrates, content analysis was the prevalent method in agenda-setting studies (41.7%), followed by surveys, secondary data analyses, case studies, interviews, experiments, and other methods. Out of the 512 studies, 214 studies (41.8%) used more than one method. Of the 214 studies, the combined use of content analysis and survey was the most prevalent ($N = 57$, 26.6%), followed by content analyses and secondary analyses ($N = 54$, 25.2%), content analyses and interviews ($N = 18$, 8.4%), content analyses and case studies ($N = 12$, 5.6%), content analyses and comparative analyses ($N = 9$, 4.2%), and other combinations. Interestingly, findings show that a variety of methods, in addition to traditional methodological approaches such as content analysis and survey, have been more frequently used in agenda-setting research since the 2000s than before.

Table 4. Methods used in agenda setting research by year

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010–2015	Total
Content analysis	10 (34.5%)	24 (38.7%)	39 (39.4%)	111 (42.4%)	131 (43.1%)	315 (41.7%)
Survey	5 (17.2%)	10 (16.1%)	19 (19.2%)	39 (14.9%)	27 (8.9%)	100 (13.2%)
Secondary data analysis	1 (3.4%)	7 (11.3%)	23 (23.2%)	27 (10.3%)	40 (13.2%)	98 (12.7%)
Case study	1 (3.4%)	1 (1.6%)	1 (1.0%)	24 (9.2%)	36 (11.8%)	63 (8.3%)
Interview	8 (27.6%)	5 (8.1%)	2 (2.0%)	14 (5.3%)	18 (5.9%)	47 (6.2%)
Experiment	–	6 (9.7%)	1(1.0%)	10 (3.8%)	18 (5.9%)	35 (4.6%)
Critique/review	2 (6.9%)	5 (8.1%)	7 (7.0%)	12 (4.6%)	7 (2.3%)	33 (4.4%)
Comparative analysis	–	2 (3.2%)	1 (1.0%)	8 (3.1%)	6 (2.0%)	17 (2.2%)
Panel study	2 (6.9%)	2 (3.2%)	3 (3.0%)	4 (1.5%)	4 (1.3%)	15 (2.0%)
Network analysis	–	–	–	1 (0.4%)	6 (2.0%)	7 (0.9%)
Meta analysis	–	–	1 (1.0%)	3 (1.1%)	2 (0.7%)	6 (0.8%)
Textual analysis	–	–	–	3 (1.1%)	1 (0.3%)	4 (0.5%)
Focus group	–	–	–	2 (0.8%)	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.4%)
Historical analysis	–	–	–	–	3 (1.0%)	3 (0.4%)
Ethnography	–	–	–	1 (0.4%)	–	1 (0.1%)
Other	–	–	2 (2.0%)	3 (1.1%)	4 (1.3%)	9 (1.2%)
Total	29 (100%)	62 (100%)	99 (100%)	262 (100%)	304 (100%)	756 (100%)

Research Question 5 examined whether agenda-setting research embraced other theories in its attempt to understand the phenomenon. Findings showed that framing and priming were the most commonly cited theories in agenda-setting research. As seen in Table 5, the use of other theories in agenda setting has drastically increased since the 2000s. Overall, framing (54.1%) and priming (19.8%) were the dominant theories in conjunction with agenda setting. Other theories such as uses and gratifications, spiral of silence, and cognitive dissonance were included in 7.2% of articles studying or explaining agenda-setting effects.

McCombs and Shaw (1993) noted that concepts from framing and priming theory might be able to extend agenda-setting research. In particular, attribute agenda-setting research was replete with the use of framing and media priming. Employing these concepts to explore the rich variety of attribute agendas has been helpful in integrating knowledge that the media tell us “how to think” and “what to think” in addition to “what to think about.”

Table 5. Other theories used in agenda setting research by year

	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010–2015	Total
Framing	1 (33.3%)	3 (33.3%)	27 (51.9%)	29 (61.7%)	60 (54.1%)
Priming	1 (33.3%)	1 (11.1%)	12 (23.1%)	8 (17.0%)	22 (19.8%)
Information processing	–	–	1 (1.9%)	6 (12.8%)	7 (6.3%)
Two-step flow theory	–	2 (22.2%)	1 (1.9%)	1 (2.1%)	4 (3.6%)
Gate keeping	–	–	3 (5.8%)	–	3 (2.7%)
Third-person effect	–	1 (11.1%)	2 (3.8%)	–	3 (2.7%)
Cultivation theory	–	–	1 (1.9%)	1 (2.1%)	2 (1.8%)
Social capital theory	–	–	2 (3.8%)	–	2 (1.8%)
Other	1 (33.3%)	2 (22.2%)	3 (5.8%)	2 (4.3%)	8 (7.2%)
Total	3 (100%)	9 (100%)	52 (100%)	47 (100%)	111 (100%)

Discussion and conclusion

Historically, agenda-setting theory has contributed to the renaissance of moderate effects of the media after the era of limited media effects claimed by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1944) and Klapper (1960). Indeed, McCombs and Shaw's (1972) findings of the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda stimulated scholars to re-evaluate their thinking about the relationship of the media and the public. Agenda-setting theory solidified its place with this theoretical and methodological expansion and its multi-faceted applicability in various fields such as politics, business, and culture. If a successful theory is judged by its potentials in generating new inquiries and venues of research (Conant, 1951), agenda setting clearly is one of the few in communication that has passed the muster of such tests. As McCombs and Shaw (1993) opined more than two decades ago, agenda setting had accumulated a healthy share of its literature, integrated other theories in its inquiries, and developed a number of subfields along its historical growth. The evidence from this study further confirms such claims.

Overall, the findings of this study show that the number of agenda-setting studies has increased over time. In particular, studies on all different theoretical trends of agenda-setting research including first-, second-, and third-level agenda setting, need for orientation, agenda melding, inter-media agenda setting, agenda

policy, and agenda building have increased from the 1970s to the present despite the dominant trend of considering only first-level agenda-setting trends. These findings are strong evidence that traditional agenda-setting research is still robust in the current media landscape.

This study also compared research topics, media, methods, and use of other theories over time. Agenda-setting studies on politics and general issues were the most popular but the findings also suggest that areas of agenda-setting research have expanded from political issues to various issues in the new media landscape. These findings are also consistent with McCombs' (2004, 2005) prediction that the trends in agenda-setting research would expand to a variety of fields beyond public opinion.

Most agenda-setting research still tends to focus on newspapers and TV rather than other media. However, the prevalence of new media such as the Internet and social media calls for more attention from future researchers to examine these new media channels. In particular, considering that the Internet and social media are horizontal media which provide different kinds of information to different target audiences, additional work on agenda setting remains to be done in order to further study individual differences in agenda-setting effects.

Consistent with McCombs' (2004, 2005) prediction that agenda-setting theory would expand to new contexts, the findings suggest that agenda-setting research has been conducted in many different domains. Although content analysis was predominantly used for agenda-setting studies no matter what media were studied, other research methods such as surveys, experiments, and case studies were also frequently utilized. These findings suggest that in addition to documenting agenda-setting effects, more and more studies are being conducted to understand its underlying processes and mechanism, both in terms of methods and use of other theories.

Overall, the findings indicate an evolution in agenda-setting research in terms of trends, topics, media, method, and use of other theories in various settings. Indeed, the increased agenda-setting research over time and expansion of research trends, topics, methods, and combination with other theories indicate that agenda-setting theory is still widely applicable in the era of new media. However, future work remains to be done in examining more specific processes and effects of agenda setting. The nature of a content analysis dictates that it concentrates on categories that have higher frequency of occurrences, which leaves out research areas that can't be examined in that manner. For example, this project did not account for some thought-provoking ideas regarding agenda-setting processes, including time-lag issues, dynamism of agenda setting, and the psychology of processing. Yet these lines of research can be important for the understanding of agenda-setting mechanism.

For example, both enthusiasts and critics (Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 2000) of agenda setting recognize that agenda setting is a dynamic process, and that all agendas may fluctuate at any given time. Yet, very few studies have attempted to study time lag between agendas, instead most researches focused on one time, cross-sectional documenting of agendas. Scheufele (2000) proposed a model looking at the interplay of agenda building, agenda setting and priming, but to our knowledge, no published attempt has ever surfaced after such calls. On the other hand, quite a few researchers have suggested ways to look into how agenda setting works at the personal level, by researching such areas as issue creation, issue expansion and issue consumption (Megwa & Brenner, 1988); accessibility bias (Takeshita, 2005); and the level of processing when a consumer receives information (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), for the simple reason that it is important to know how much time, in addition to whether or not, a person thinks about an issue.

There are some other caveats in this study. In particular, some publications on agenda setting may have been overlooked. To overcome this drawback, the current study included publications from the largest multidisciplinary academic databases. However, only full-text and peer-reviewed journals in English were used in the sample of this study. Thus, it is possible that some important articles were excluded by this data collection method.

In addition, future researchers are encouraged to use traditional meta-analysis techniques to quantify the effect sizes of agenda setting by taking into account different moderators to investigate whether and why agenda-setting effects are found to be strong or weak in certain contexts. The current study did not attempt to do so because reports of such effect sizes were often absent from earlier studies. However, the standardization of publication criteria, such as reporting effect sizes, would make these analyses feasible in the future.

References

- Brosius, H. B., & Kepplinger, H. M. (1990). The agenda-setting function of television news static and dynamic views. *Communication Research*, 17(2), 183–211. doi:10.1177/009365090017002003
- Chaffee, S. H., & Metzger, M. J. (2001). The end of mass communication? *Mass Communication & Society*, 4(4), 365–379. doi:10.1207/S15327825MCSo404_3
- Cobb, R. W., & Elder, C. D. (1971). The politics of agenda-building: An alternative perspective for modern democratic theory. *The Journal of Politics*, 33(4), 892–915. doi:10.2307/2128415
- Cohen, B. C. (1963). *The press and foreign policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Conant, J. B. (1951). *Science and common sense*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dearing, J. W., & Rogers, E. (1996). *Communication concept 6: Agenda-setting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications, Inc.
- Fico, F., & Freedman, E. (2001). Setting the news story agenda: Candidates and commentators in news coverage of a governor's race. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(3), 437–449. doi:10.1177/107769900107800303

- Ghanem, S. I., & Wanta, W. (2001). Agenda-setting and Spanish cable news. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 45(2), 277–289. doi:10.1207/s15506878jobem4502_5
- Golan, G., & Wanta, W. (2001). Second-level agenda setting in the New Hampshire primary: A comparison of coverage in three newspapers and public perceptions of candidates. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(2), 247–259. doi:10.1177/107769900107800203
- Guo, L. (2012). The application of social network analysis in agenda setting research: A methodological exploration. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(4), 616–631. doi:10.1080/08838151.2012.732148
- Guo, L., & McCombs, M. E. (2011). Network agenda setting: A third level of media effects. Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Boston, MA.
- Hamilton, J. (2004). *All the news that's fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. doi:10.1515/9781400841417
- Hirsch, P. M. (1977). Occupational, organizational and institutional models in mass media research: Toward an integrated framework. *Strategies for communication research*, 6, 13–42.
- Johnson, T. J., Wanta, W., & Boudreau, T. (2004). Drug peddlers: How four presidents attempted to influence media and public concern on the drug issue. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 12(4), 177–199. doi:10.1207/s15456889ajc1204_1
- Kim, S. T., & Lee, Y. H. (2006). New functions of Internet mediated agenda-setting: Agenda-rippling and reversed agenda-setting. *Korean Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies*, 50, 175–205.
- Kim, S. T., & Weaver, D. (2002). Communication research about the Internet: A thematic meta-analysis. *New Media & Society*, 4(4), 518–538. doi:10.1177/146144402321466796
- Klapper, J. T. (1960). *The effects of mass communication*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Kosicki, G. M. (1993). Problems and opportunities in agenda-setting research. *Journal of Communication*, 43(2), 100–127. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01265.x
- Kwansah-Aidoo, K. (2003). Events that matter: Specific incidents, media coverage, and agenda-setting in a Ghanaian context. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 28(1), 43–66.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential election*. New York, NY: Duell, Sloan and Pearce.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- McCombs, M. (1981). The agenda setting approach. In D. D. Nimmo, & K. R. Sanders (Eds.), *Handbook of political communication*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 121–140.
- McCombs, M. (2004). *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- McCombs, M. (2005). A look at agenda-setting: Past, present and future. *Journalism Studies*, 6(4), 543–557. doi:10.1080/14616700500250438
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. doi:10.1086/267990
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (1976). Structuring the “unseen environment.” *Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 18–22. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01374.x
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (1993). The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. *Journal of Communication*, 43(2), 58–67. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01262.x
- McCombs, M., & Weaver, D. H. (1973). Voters' need for orientation and use of mass communication. Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Montreal, Canada.

- McCombs, M., & Weaver, D. H. (1985). Toward a merger of gratifications and agenda setting research. In K. E. Rosengren., W. Erik., & P. Palmgreen (Eds.), *Media gratifications research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 95–108.
- McLeod, J. M., Becker, L. B., & Byrnes, J. E. (1974). Another look at the agenda-setting function of the press. *Communication Research*, 1(2), 131–166. doi:10.1177/009365027400100201
- Megwa, E. R., & Brenner, D. J. (1988). Toward a paradigm of media agenda-setting effect: Agenda-setting as a process. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 1(1), 39–56. doi:10.1080/10646178809359668
- Rogers, E. M., & Dearing, J. W. (1988). Agenda-setting research: Where has it been, where is it going? In J. A. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook* 11. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 555–594.
- Scheufele, D. A. (2000). Agenda-setting, priming, and framing revisited: Another look at cognitive effects of political communication. *Mass Communication & Society*, 3(2–3), 297–316. doi:10.1207/S15327825MCS0323_07
- Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of communication*, 57(1), 9–20.
- Shaw, D. L., & McCombs, M. E. (1977). *The emergence of American political issues*. St. Paul, MN: West.
- Shaw, D. L., McCombs, M., Weaver, D. H., & Hamm, B. J. (1999). Individuals, groups, and agenda melding: A theory of social dissonance. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 11(1), 2–24. doi:10.1093/ijpor/11.1.2
- Shaw, D. L., & Martin, S. E. (1992). The function of mass media agenda setting. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 69(4), 902–920. doi:10.1177/107769909206900410
- Snider, D. M. (1967). A theoretical analysis and experimental confirmation of the optimally loaded and overdriven RF power amplifier. *Electron Devices, IEEE Transactions on*, 14(12), 851–857. doi:10.1109/T-ED.1967.16120
- Tai, Z. (2009). The structure of knowledge and dynamics of scholarly communication in agenda setting research, 1996–2005. *Journal of Communication*, 59(3), 481–513. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01425.x
- Takeshita, T. (2005). Current critical problems in agenda-setting research. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 18(3), 275–296. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edh104
- Tedesco, J. C. (2001). Issue and strategy agenda-setting in the 2000 presidential primaries. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 44(12), 2048–2067. doi:10.1177/00027640121958483
- Weaver, D. H. (1977). Political issues and voter need for orientation. In D. L. Shaw & M. McCombs (Eds.), *The emergence of American political issues: The agenda-setting function of the press*. St. Paul, MN: West, 107–119.
- Weaver, D. H. (1980). Audience need for orientation and media effects. *Communication Research*, 7(3), 361–373. doi:10.1177/009365028000700305
- Weaver, D. H., McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (2004). Agenda-setting research: Issues, attributes, and in uences. In L. L. Kaid. (Ed.), *Handbook of political communication research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 257–282.
- White, P. W. (1947). *News on the air*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace.
- Young, R., & McCarthy, K. (2009). Why do municipal issues rise on the federal policy agenda in Canada? *Canadian Public Administration*, 52(3), 347–370. doi:10.1111/j.1754-7121.2009.00087.x

Authors' addresses

Yeojin Kim
Robert Vance Academic Center #31704
Central Connecticut State University
1615 Stanley Stree
New Britain, CT 06050
USA
yeojinkim@ccsu.edu

Youngju Kim
College of Communication and Information Sciences
The University of Alabama
Reese Phiifer Hall 438
Box 870172
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
USA
youngjukim83@gmail.com

Shuhua Zhou
Journalism & Creative Media
The University of Alabama
Box 870172
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
USA
szhou@ua.edu