

1-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Rai, Aneesha; Raya, Racha; Hajjar, Mitri; and Koshy, Swapna: Public opinion and Agenda Setting in the UAE National News: A quantitative content analysis 2017, 273-286.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/dubaipapers/938>

Public opinion and Agenda Setting in the UAE National News: A quantitative content analysis

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study focuses on the media theory of agenda setting and its application to the UAE national news. The content of two major English dailies– *The Gulf News* and *The Khaleej Times* has been analysed to identify topics focused on, print space allocated for each topic and source of the news. A survey of the public has also been conducted to determine what readers view as important issues to see if they match the agenda of the newspapers. The study finds that public opinion is not reflected accurately in newspaper agenda. As only a small percent of news from the government agency WAM is published in the dailies analysed it can be assumed that the government does not set the agenda for newspapers. These interesting results warrant the need for an elaborate study analysing online news sources too.

Keywords: Agenda setting theory, public opinion, newspaper agenda, government's agenda setting

INTRODUCTION

Agenda setting according to Wu and Coleman (2009, p.776) is a “phenomenon of the mass media selecting certain issues and portraying them frequently and prominently, which leads people to perceive those issues as more important than others.” This idea was postulated by McCombs and Shaw; based on the principles outlined by Walter Lippmann in his 1922 study called ‘Public Opinion.’ McCombs went on to explain that the ideal method to identify agenda setting is through recognising a “pattern of coverage” (McCombs 1972, p.2). There are two basic types of agenda setting, one focuses on the amount of coverage and the second focuses on what is being covered. This paper looks at the coverage of news in two leading UAE based English dailies- *The Khaleej Times* and *The Gulf News*. A comparison of the content and focus of the two newspapers with topics that interest the public helps to determine if the two agendas match.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media agenda and public opinion

The hypothesis that the media agenda and the public opinion are interrelated has been proven time and again. The preliminary study analysing this co-relation was the Chapel Hill study on the 1968 U.S. Presidential election performed by Walter Lippmann, which found a positive co-relation between the audience’s opinion and the agenda set by the media (McCombs 1972, p.3). Another instance is a study done in Pamplona, Spain, where the audience polls revealed that there was a high degree of correspondence between their concerns (unemployment and urban congestion in this case) to the local news coverage. These studies have proven that the media does in fact influence public opinion. Another question that needs to be asked is whether the public influences media. This also has been held true in certain cases such as the study on the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal (McCombs 2003, p.8-9).

Agenda setting – early theorists

Walter Lippmann (1922) sketched the principal outlines of this theory in 1922, in his book titled Public Opinion. According to the book’s first chapter the news is “a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs; a world that he describes is for most citizens out of reach, out of sight, and out of mind” (Lippmann 1922, p.3). From here comes the idea that what we know about the world, or these “pictures in our heads” are largely based on what the media decides to tell us. Another early researcher who contributed to studies on agenda setting was Bernard Cohen, who in 1963 stated 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” (Cohen 1963, p.13). In later years, while acknowledging and expanding on previous studies, Dr. Maxwell McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw formally developed what today is known as the agenda-setting theory.

The Chapel Hill study

McCombs and Shaw conducted a study of voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina during the 1968 presidential campaign. They were able to demonstrate a strong correlation between what 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, thought was the most important election issue and what the local and national news gave prominence to or reported was the most important issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The study established a link between the content of the news agenda and the public agenda and also tried to determine a relationship between media and the public

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regarding acceptance of media messages and finally provided a methodological ground for the agenda setting research (Riaz 2008). Since that initial study, a reasonable number of studies have been conducted on the agenda setting theory and one can find over 300 publications documenting this influence of the news media (McCombs 2002, p.3).

Priming and Framing

The agenda setting theory occurs at two levels. The first level of agenda setting focuses on “the amount of coverage of an issue, suggesting that the media decide what issues the public will be aware of.” (Wu & Coleman 2009, p.776). The second level of agenda setting “instead focuses on perceived importance of attributes or issues” (Freeland 2012, p5). The first level is all about the media telling people “what to think about,” and the second level on “how to think about” that particular issue or object. ‘Priming’ follows agenda setting or is an extension of it. It occurs when “news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments,”(Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007, p.11). Through Priming media creates influence among people to make a judgment or a decision. While agenda setting brings out the importance of an issue, priming offers explanations on how the information from media is stored in the human mind and how it influences in the decision-making process of audiences.

‘Framing’ deals with the media telling us “how to think about” an issue or object when it promotes a particular way to think about it in their news stories. “It is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences,” (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007, p.11). A clearer definition of framing is the way media content is packaged at its final stage so that it will influence particular interpretations on its audience. Scheufele’s studies state that mass media is the one responsible for actively setting the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events.

Agenda-setting effects

On the first level of agenda setting the effects are directly reflected or focused on the attention of the people. While on the second level of agenda setting the effects are more on comprehension. The media in playing a story frequently and prominently around the news can make certain issues or aspects of issues more easily recalled (in their memories) for audiences. Ultimately influencing the way people form their attitudes or conclusions about different subjects. Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder tested this in 1987 when they surveyed people about what they feel are the most important problems the country (USA) faces. Respondents then replied with issues that the media were focusing on during that particular period (Iyengar & Kinder 1987). However, some depending conditions may increase or reduce the influence of the agenda setting of news media on an individual. Like for example the psychological concept of need for orientation (Riaz 2008).

Noting that the degree to which we are influenced by our interpersonal interactions differs from issue to issue McCombs (2004, p. 60) commented: “Some issues are obtrusive, that is, they obtrude into our daily lives and are directly experienced. Other issues are unobtrusive. We encounter them only in the news, not directly in our daily lives.” Accordingly when faced with obtrusive issues, an individual can assess the

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information based on similar and past experiences. The result is a low need for orientation and low dependence on the media for information in regards to the topic. When faced with unobtrusive issues the audience will resort to mass media for information that helps shed light on these issues. McCombs (2004, p. 61) observes that, “there is a high degree of correspondence between public opinion and news coverage for unobtrusive issues and little correspondence for obtrusive issues”.

<div style="border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; vertical-align: middle;"></div> Agenda-setting effects for obtrusive and unobtrusive issues (natural history perspective)		
OBTRUSIVE	UNOBTRUSIVE	
<i>Canada*</i>		
Inflation +0.28	Unemployment +0.67	National unity +0.96
<i>United States**</i>		
Crime +0.19	Unemployment +0.60	Pollution +0.79
Cost of living +0.20		Drug abuse +0.80
		Energy +0.71

*Source: James Winter, Chaim Eyal and Ann Rogers, 'Issue-specific agenda setting: the whole as less than the sum of the parts', *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 8, 2 (1982), pp. 1-10.
 **Source: Harold Zucker, 'The variable nature of news media influence', in *Communication Yearbook 2*, ed. Brent Ruben (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1978), pp. 225-40.

Table 1
 Agenda setting for obtrusive and non-obtrusive issues

The above table illustrates the degree of correlation, made between certain obtrusive and unobtrusive issues, and the resulting agenda setting effects it has on public opinion. ‘Obtrusive’ issues such as inflation, crime and cost of living, are primarily not impacted by the media’s constant coverage. This can be attributed to the probability that personal experience (which includes interaction with peers) acts as the predominant source of information in these cases. ‘Unobtrusive’ issues such as drug abuse, energy, pollution and national unity, are all issues that we may not encounter in our daily lives, meaning we have no first-hand experience with these issues. Consequently, public perception of these issues can be manipulated through the mass media’s filtering and shaping of information in regards to these issues. (McCombs 2004, p. 61) Similarly another factor explored in assessing the agenda-setting effects of the media was found in Stroman’s (1978) research. This study observed found a co-relation between agenda setting effects and so called ‘short-term’ issues, such as campus unrest and race relations, compared to ‘long term’ issues such as health, taxes

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and unemployment (Winter, Eyal & Rogers 1982, p. 2).

Types of Agenda Setting

Agenda setting can be of different kinds depending on the priorities of policy makers, media and the general public. Rogers and Dearing (1988) referred to three types of agenda setting:

1. **Public Agenda setting:** where the public's agenda or priorities are treated as the dependent variable as per the traditional hypothesis. Most of the studies focus on this type.
2. **Media Agenda setting:** where media's agenda is treated as the dependent variable, some researchers call it agenda building and they consider it the most effective type.
3. **Policy Agenda setting:** where the elite's policy maker's agendas are treated as the dependent variable. Political scientists did most of the research on this subject matter, which was not the focus of mass communication researchers.

Factors that determine types of Agenda Setting

The "Zero-Sum theory," introduced by Jain-Hua Zhu, states that building the agenda is a screening and selecting process where new stories covered by the media works by removing old ones. He also defined the factors affecting each type of agenda setting, as mentioned below:

Public Agenda Setting

- 1- **Time:** Which is one of the prominent factors in determining media setting effect relies on the aspect of, when people access the news source to get information and how much time they spend on it. The time spent on a certain news source will automatically decrease time that could have been spent on another. This by default limits the number of sources that an individual can browse (Zhu, 1992, p. 827).
- 2- **Ability:** Due to the enormous amount of information available, people are unable to deal with information with clarity, remembering and selecting what to retain. As such, they deal with information overload by adopting two strategies. Either they stop receiving information or they retain the new and discard old topics (Zhu, 1992, p. 827).
- 3- **The psychological situation:** Sensitive cases that affect the emotional level of individuals, drives them to place certain issues as top priorities, while ignoring irrelevant issues (Zhu, 1992, p. 828).

Moreover, personal and social interactions have an enormous effect on public agenda setting because it affects people's judgments. Due to the sensitivity and relevance of certain cases, no matter how much the media tries to influence public perception, personal convictions are stronger, which minimizes the effects of agenda setting.

Media Agenda Setting:

The filtering of issues that become prominent and frequent is based on the same "filters" set forth by the propaganda model (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

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1. The ownership of the medium.
2. Funding of media outlets.
3. Different methods of sourcing.
4. Preservation of the interests of business organizations.

This concludes, that external filters mentioned in the propaganda model influence the media's agenda setting. An additional influence on the media's agenda setting is the six characteristics of news: proximity, timeliness, prominence, novelty, conflict and human interest. These factors allow the public to impose certain influences on what gets covered in the media and as such play a role in accentuating the media's agenda setting.

Policy Agenda Setting

According to the University of Chicago press books (2014), when political actors and parties design an agenda, their aim is to place certain issues at the center of political attention, such as immigration and health care. This is done before making significant policy decisions. Highlighting problems attracts the attention of the government as well. In general, policy agenda setting is affected by the view and the ideology of political parties who impose it.

Which type has the most impact?

There is no conclusive evidence that suggests, which type of agenda setting is most influential. The nature and definition of agenda setting gives the impression that media and policy agenda setting are the most effective in determining what the public will think about. Policy makers and political groups have greater influence on the public's agenda, which allows them to implement their own ideology and requirements. This is because they are considered as guardians of the public agenda. On the other hand they are able to influence the media, because of the media's need for reliable information and newsworthiness. This gives them more influence and importance on the Media's Agenda setting (Cobb & Elder 1971). And this is clearly depicted in our current day situation where we see policy makers become media stars; an example of this is the American president Barack Obama.

Despite all that, and in order to better illustrate the connection between policy, media and public agenda, we should not underestimate the effect that the public has on the agenda setting process. The media's function is to interact and cover the audience's most sensitive and relevant issues, this ensures that the public will heavily depend on the media as a reliable source of information. The same applies to democratic political systems that take the will of the people into consideration and cater to the public in order to ensure their success in the elections.

The influence of the public on agenda setting increased the explosion of new media such as social media, blogs and websites. Because those tools give the audience more contribution in reporting news and building public opinion around the world, this influence obligates policy makers to respond even in a totalitarian regime.

Which form of mass media is most effective in Agenda setting?

There is no conclusive study about the most effective medium used for implementing the media's agenda setting. But research is skewed towards television and newspapers

as being the most influential sources. Research hints that newspapers are possibly most effective in building local agenda, because it has the ability to highlight details that interest the audience. Television on the other hand focuses on general issues and entertainment even though it can organize news material in a more engaging manner.

Agenda Setting studies in the Arab World

The studies that centre on agenda setting in the Arab world are limited and there are none pertaining significantly to the UAE. Marin (2011, p.166-167) has studied the existence of powerful agenda setting during the Iraq conflict and found that “agenda-setting took place only when specific frames were used massively by the media.” Bashri (2008, p.1) analysed the effect of Al Jazeera on the Arab world as well as the rest of the globe in terms of news coverage. She claims in her study, citing various sources that Al Jazeera remains the most watched media in the Arab world and one of the only sources Arab nationalities reach out for their news for both regional and international information. Bashri (2008, p.2) explains that a large number of media critics believe that Al Jazeera’s agenda actually is starting to shape public opinion. Bashri’s (2009, p.29) conclusions included the fact that the culture helped define Al Jazeera’s agenda, along with factors such as content and personal experience. Bashri deduced that there was a relation between the public and media’s agendas.

In terms of audience perception, Al Jaber (2012,p.1) in his study reveals that Arab audiences in particular rank both Al Jazeera and BBC Arabic as their top credible sources. There is limited information for similar studies done in print though the UAE’s press and news publications commenced in the 1960s (Al Jaber 2012, p.47). Mohamed & Gunter (2009) studied the print media and agenda setting in Egypt, a country that has a more mature press system in comparison to the UAE. Even though Egypt is viewed as a third world country, the study involved used two main research approaches that will be replicated in this study: a content analysis and a questionnaire-based survey research. The study revealed a positive correlation between both media and public agendas at an aggregate level (Mohamed & Gunter 2009, p.135).

METHODOLOGY

Primary data has been collected through quantitative content analysis of the main papers of two leading English dailies The Gulf News and The Khaleej Times for a period of 7 days. The content was analysed for type of topic, repetition of topic and source of news. A comparative analysis of both newspapers was also conducted. A survey using an instrument developed to gauge respondents’ expectations of news content was also administered. Secondary data has been collected from journals and books.

Hypothesis 1: Public opinion is reflected in the agenda setting of UAE newspapers

Hypothesis 2: Newspaper agenda in the UAE is set by the government.

The Gulf News

The Gulf News one of the oldest English newspapers in circulation in the UAE was established in 1978 and is now owned by Al Nisr Publishing LLC. According to The Arab Media Outlook survey from 2011 to 2015, Gulf News is the most read newspaper in English and Arabic languages (Gulf News History, 2014). In 2015, Gulf News has around 23 million page views, 7.2 million visits and 3.3 million

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unique visitors (Platform, 2015) . It has a daily circulation of 109,905 in print alone.

The Khaleej Times

The Khaleej Times has been in circulation for as long as *the Gulf News* has been. It was also initiated in 1978 and boasts a multinational readership of 450,000. The company forms part of the Galadari Printing and Publishing Company (Khaleej Times 2015). Galadari Printing and Publishing Company forms a part of the much larger Galadari Brothers conglomerate, with interests in engineering, hospitality, automobiles, and technology amongst others (Galadari Group 2015).

Newspaper analysis

The UAE national news from both *The Gulf News* and *The Khaleej Times* was observed between 3rd and 10th December 2015. The analysis is done on the basis of the following broad topics:

- National and international politics
- Local crimes
- Local health issues
- Societal issues
- Weather
- Education
- Terrorism – strictly pertaining to those with local impact
- Government announcements
- Economy
- Real estate
- Community events
- Sports

In addition to this, analysis of print space dedicated to each type of news is done to see how the space is utilised in certain stories. Print space was measured by columns and half or full pages to determine the importance of the news.

Another aspect studied is the source of the news in terms of the frequency of attributed publications. A comparative analysis has been done between the two English dailies to see if they carry different agendas.

RESULTS

I. Gulf News

a) Focus on topics

Topic	Average frequency of stories per issue	Ranking
Local crimes	3.2	1
Education	3.0	2
Community events	3.0	2
Social issues	2.8	3
Government announcements	2.4	4
National/international politics	1.5	5
Real estate	1.5	5

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Health	1.3	6
Economy	1.2	7
Weather	1.0	8
Terrorism	1.0	8
Sports	0	

The national news theme primarily featured on the front page was the government's involvement in both national and international politics throughout the week.

b) Dedicated Print space

In terms of the print space dedicated, the following rankings were revealed. The data was based on an observation of the columns the story occupies. The following trends were observed.

- i) Government involvement in national/international politics
50% of the news related to the government involvement in national/international politics covered about three columns per story, most of which featured on the first page of the newspaper.
- ii) Local crimes
83% of all the crime stories were evenly distributed between one column and two column stories. 30% of these stories primarily featured on page 7 of the newspaper.
- iii) Social issues/ problems
43.4% of the Social issues and problems were expressed via three column stories. The issues are equally expressed in pages 4 and 16 in the newspaper.
- iv) Government announcements
62.5% of the government's official announcements are expressed in two column stories. 40% of the issues are expressed in pages 4 and 7 of the newspaper.
- v) Health
90% of health issue stories are usually covered in either one column or 3 column stories, 57% of which are expressed in pages 4 and 16.
- vi) Weather
Weather was only covered once in the whole week between 3rd and 10th December 2015. This covered three columns in the paper when it came out and occupied half a page on page 13.
- vii) Sports
The local sports were not covered at all in the UAE national news during the week between 3rd and 10th December 2015.
- viii) Education

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45% of educational news is usually covered in one column, but it is one of the only two themes that have been featured on three full pages during the week. 28.5% of the educational news.

- ix) **Economy**
37.5% of all news on the UAE economy is covered in three column stories. The stories about the economy are scattered; no trend was spotted here.
- x) **Real estate**
Real estate stories regarding the UAE are scattered throughout the paper, so a pattern couldn't be determined.
- xi) **Community events**
29% of the community events covered feature on the 7th page of the paper. 42% of these stories cover one and two columns of the paper.
- xii) **Terrorism**
There was only one instance of local terrorism spotted during the week, and the story covered two columns.

c) Attribution

The only newswire services used were from WAM, the government press agency. The weekly analysis revealed that there were an average of two WAM stories featured per issue.

Date	No of stories
3-Dec	0
4-Dec	3
5-Dec	3
6-Dec	3
7-Dec	1
8-Dec	1
9-Dec	4
10-Dec	1

II. Khaleej Times

a) Focus on topics

Topic	Average frequency of stories per issue	Ranking
Social issues/problems	3.63	1
Government announcements	3.33	2
Education	2.50	3
Local crimes	2.20	4
Community events	2.17	5

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Economy	1.75	6
Health	1.25	7
Government involvement in national/international politics	1.20	8
Weather	1.00	9
Sports	1.00	9
Terrorism	1.00	9
Real estate	1.00	9

The above is the indication of how often these themes have been presented throughout the papers. *The Khaleej Times* did not feature a predominant theme for its front pages during the week the themes were analysed.

b) Dedicated Print space

- i) National/international politics
57% of the news related to the government involvement in national/international politics covered about one and three columns per story, most of which featured on the first page of the newspaper. 40% of the stories relating to government involvement in national/international politics was covered on the second page.
- ii) Local crimes
38% of all the crime stories were placed in stories with 3 columns. 40% of these stories primarily featured on page 6 of the newspaper.
- iii) Social issues
42% of the social issues and problems were expressed via three column stories. The issues are equally expressed in pages 4 and 16 in the newspaper.
- iv) Government announcements
62.5% of the government's announcements are expressed in two column stories. 31% of the issues are expressed in page 4 of the newspaper.
- v) Health
67% of health issue stories are usually covered in either one column or 3 column stories, 40% of which are expressed on page 5.
- vi) Weather
Weather was only covered once in the whole week between 3rd and 10th December 2015. This covered three columns of the paper.
- vii) Sports
One sports story was covered in the UAE national news during the week between 3rd and 10th December 2015, occupying 2 columns.
- viii) Education

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37.5% of educational news is usually covered in one column, 40% of which was covered usually on page 3.

- ix) **Economy**
50% of all news on the UAE economy is covered in three column stories, split evenly between pages 5 and 8.
- x) **Real estate**
Real estate stories regarding the UAE are scattered throughout the paper, though 50% of the stories feature as they feature as a 3 column story.
- xi) **Community events**
21% of the community events covered feature on the 7th page of the paper. 38% of these stories cover three columns of the paper.
- xii) **Terrorism**
There was only one instance of local terrorism spotted during the week, and the story covered two columns.

c) Attribution

The only newswire services used were from WAM, the government press agency. The weekly analysis revealed that there were an average of 1.87 WAM stories featured per issue.

Date	No of stories
3-Dec	0
4-Dec	3
5-Dec	2
6-Dec	2
7-Dec	0
8-Dec	3
9-Dec	3
10-Dec	2

Audience survey results

a) Demographics

55% of respondents were from the ages 25 to 34; 70% were female; 83% were Indians; followed by 4% Emiratis. A 2004 Readership survey by Gulf News (Rahman, 2004) found that majority of their readers were Indian, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Western expatriates and others. This finding validates that Indian expats are the major readers of both English newspapers.

b) News sources

Over 86.6% of the respondents looked to social media as a source of news. Online news sites came in at a close second, at 84.06%. This was followed by information received from friends, family or colleagues at 42.03%, then newspapers at 40.58%. The remaining claimed they referred to blogs, television and radio.

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In terms of online sites, McCombs (2005, p.3) claims that online news sites largely match those of the print agendas. It was observed in the study called 'Body found on Twitter: The role of alternative sources in social media agenda setting (2012,p.4-5)' that Combs in his later papers claims that "widely available alternate media sources could weaken the influence of mainstream media on the public agenda, fragment interests, and lead to a multitude of media and personal agendas."

c)Public agenda

Survey respondents were asked to pick up to 3 issues they thought was most important. Over 65% of the respondents listed societal issues as an issue they would want to read about. This was followed by government involvement in national and international politics (47.83%), local crimes (46.38%), economy (33.3%), government announcements (24.64%), health (21.74%), terrorism (18.84%), community events (13.04%), education (11.59%), sports (5.8%), real estate (4.35%), and weather (1.45%).

Top ranked topics	Public opinion	The Gulf News	The Khaleej Times
1	Societal issues	Local crimes	Social issues
2	National and international politics	Education	Government announcements
3	Local crimes	Community events	Education
4	Economy	Social issues	Local crimes
5	Government announcements	Government announcements	Community events

Social issues are the top ranked topics for the public; *The Khaleej Times* public expectation here while for *The Gulf News* it is fourth on the list. The public agenda would like to focus more on national and international politics but this is not a top priority for both newspapers studied. Both *The Gulf News* and *The Khaleej Times* put more or less equal emphasis on local crimes, but the public opinion seems to prioritize it higher than community events and government announcements. The public ranked news about the national economy quite high at 33.33%, but this did not feature in the top five topics covered by either newspapers. Since both newspapers do not primarily publish only news by WAM – the government agency - it can be concluded that the government does not set the agenda for both newspapers.

LIMITATIONS

Murdock (1975, p.8-9) criticises certain aspects of the agenda setting model. He argues that effects hypothesis part of the model where the public is influenced by the presence of media unconsciously is not adequately defended. In fact, he states some recent researches have proven this hypothesis to be false.

The extent of the newspapers analysis is additionally only a week and might not be enough to subjugate the hypothesis that agenda setting actually does work, especially because it is probably rare that topics get repeated within one week of news coverage. In addition to this, there were only 69 respondents to the survey; perhaps a more skewed result would occur for a larger number of respondents.

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Due to time constraints, the survey was conducted purely online, which has probably skewed the results in terms of the source of where people get the news, the influence of the mass media agenda on the public now appears to be diminishing.

It is also unclear who exactly sets the agenda here; the government or the publication due to the nature of the attributions that often feature in the newspapers from newswire services and government announcements.

CONCLUSION

Public opinion meets the newspapers' agendas to a certain extent. The agenda setting hypothesis does not seem to be effective because of social media and the Internet. It would be interesting to take this study further and examine online media and see if the agenda setting model has an effect. The government does not appear to significantly set the newspapers' agenda here. With an average overall of 2 media stories per issue coming from WAM, it seems like these two newspapers set the agenda for themselves, though they might not reflect what the public wants to read. The public appears put a stronger emphasis on information regarding the government's national and international politics. However, this pilot study has thrown light on research worthy observations and warrants a large scale study to verify the findings.

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