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Patricia Moy

University of Washington, pmoy@uw.edu

Brandon Bosch

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, bbosch2@unl.edu

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Patricia Moy and Brandon J. Bosch

16 Theories of public opinion

Abstract: While the issue of citizen competency has vexed scholars throughout history, the modern concepts of a mass public and mass media are relatively new. Beginning with the seminal works of Lippmann and Dewey, we chart the evolving theories of public opinion, from the “hypodermic needle” model of the early twentieth century to the more psychologically oriented approach to media effects of today. We argue that in addition to understanding how audiences process media content, theories of public opinion must account for how media content is constructed and disseminated, which is complicated by the ever-changing nature of our media landscape.

Keywords: Public opinion, mass media, gatekeeping, media effects

1 Introduction

Popular discourse about public opinion tends to revolve around key issues of the day. Citizens bemusedly ask themselves how the public comes to hold a particular view on a given issue. Voters anticipate how political candidates will strategize and frame an issue to garner the most support possible. And individuals consume news stories and read blogs on the internet, later taking advantage of comment boxes to share their perspectives.

Academic endeavors related to public opinion focus on the same issues. They examine the process by which information gets presented, how citizens learn about issues, and the effects of this information on attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors. However, scholarship on public opinion is not only empirical in nature: research in this area is undergirded by a strong set of normative assumptions. For example, who constitutes the public? What should the members of an ideal citizenry know about politics and how engaged should they be in the political process? Should an opinion grounded in emotion carry as much weight as an opinion based on information?

In studying the aforementioned processes, public opinion scholars inextricably link public opinion to the functioning of democratic society.¹ Given this view of public

¹ Theorists have noted that public opinion plays a major force regardless of the political system in which one finds oneself. Invoking John Locke’s law of opinion, reputation, and fashion, Noelle-Neumann (1995) specified how public opinion plays a critical role in promoting social integration. This view of public opinion as a form of social control has allowed researchers to study public opinion in small-group settings and other venues that are not ostensibly political in nature.

opinion as instrumental for democratic processes, the theories covered in this chapter encompass decades of scholarship that are based on distinctly different assumptions of the public as members of a democratic system. In addition, particularly as studied vis-à-vis communication, these theories focus on different outcomes, and as our media landscape continues to evolve, the field must reconsider the impact of each. Although the term “public opinion” was not coined until the mid-1700s (see Peters 1995 for a review), our point of departure is the early twentieth-century intellectual debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, whose differences in perspective reflected longstanding debates and would trickle down through the decades to create a rich corpus of literature. The Lippmann-Dewey debate is critical as its key concerns are reflected in the various theories of public opinion, all of which involve media effects. We review the key perspectives on media effects and public opinion theories over the past century, and end with a discussion of how these theories need to be revisited in light of an increasingly technologically oriented media environment.

2 Early twentieth-century perspectives

2.1 Views of the public: Lippmann vs. Dewey

From ancient Greece onward, citizen competence has been at the heart of many debates about the public. Questions about whether citizens were sufficiently knowledgeable to rule or whether governance should be left to Plato’s philosopher kings have emerged consistently over the years. Indeed, this remained the crux of how public intellectual Walter Lippmann and theorist John Dewey saw the public in the early 1900s.

Lippmann, in his oft-cited books *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925), painted a pejorative portrait of the public – one that was unable to process information deeply or to behave rationally. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann relied on the allegory of the cave, from Book VII of Plato’s *The Republic*. In this story, a group of men has been chained together in a cave since childhood. The chains prevent them from moving their legs or turning their heads; consequently, they are able to see only that which passes before them. And because a fire as well as the mouth of the cave are behind them, the chained men see nothing but the shadows cast upon the wall of the cave as others might walk by. The allegory ends, “And if they were able to talk with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?”

Lippmann presented another allegory in *Public Opinion*, one set in 1914 at the onset of the Great War. Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived on an island, sufficiently remote that it received mail once every two months. When the mail arrived in mid-September 1914, they learned how their respective countries had been engaged in hostilities. “For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were

friends, when in fact they were enemies” (Lippmann 1922: 3). Lippmann used these two examples to illustrate how indirectly citizens know the environment in which they live. Acknowledging how “the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance,” he contended that citizens were “not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations” (16). As a result, citizens are forced to rely on what they can to create for themselves trustworthy pictures of the world beyond their reach. Naturally, the mass media play a critical role in the construction of these pictures.

As much as citizens can use the media to learn about their unseen livespace, they inherently cannot process mediated information fully. Lippmann (1922: 30) identified several factors as limiting access to the facts:

They are the artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meager time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world, and finally the fear of facing those facts which would seem to threaten the established routine of men's lives.

Hence, his skepticism that citizens were able to contribute significantly to democratic processes.

Just as Aristotle's view of the public was antithetical to Plato's, Lippmann's perspective generated much response, most notably from philosopher and education reformer John Dewey, who expressed considerably greater optimism regarding the populace. Like Lippmann, he recognized that citizens were imperfect, but his Aristotelean perspective emphasized the supremacy of public opinion as the best safeguard to democracy (Bullert 1983). Is there potential to strengthen our citizenry, and if so, how? Dewey, in his seminal work *The Public and its Problems* (1927), argued that to help an entity “largely inchoate and unorganized” (109), structural changes were needed: “The essential need... is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public” (208). Indeed, for Dewey, it was necessary to foster “conditions under which the Great Society may become the Great Community” (147).

Dewey's thinking reflected a profound concern with improving how citizens learned and how they could reach their fullest potential. In his works (e.g., *The Logic of Inquiry*, 1938), he advocated the use of logic, supported application of the scientific method, and argued that the use of reasoning should be linked to policy and social concerns.

Though most reviews of Lippmann and Dewey tend to juxtapose them as almost diametrically opposite in thought, the two strands of thinking are aligned with each other. As Sproule (1997: 97) noted, “Their ideas fed a view that the weak-minded and dangerously neurotic public could not be trusted to take intelligent political action without formal training, supported by quantitative assessment, in how to think.” Nonetheless, this debate would transcend time and implicate the views of how researchers saw citizens being influenced by messages they received.

2.2 Media influences on public opinion

Studies that assess the extent to which messages shaped public opinion go lock-step with studies of media effects in general. The earliest conceptions of media effects were of powerful media exerting great impact on relatively passive audiences, driven by both scholarship and the applied communication studies from which the communication discipline was born. In this section, we discuss perspectives that took hold in the first half of the twentieth century.

2.2.1 All-powerful media and propaganda effects

The earliest conceptions of media effects – as having direct, powerful effects – emerged from a confluence of events. In the United States, the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* in 1906 elicited a hue and cry from the mass American public that led to the passage of federal acts and an oversight agency that ultimately would become the Food and Drug Administration. Over two decades later, in 1929, US researchers began to examine the effects of motion pictures on children and youth. These Payne Fund studies, named after the sponsoring foundation, found that young viewers emulated what they witnessed in these films (see Lowery and DeFleur 1995). And in 1938, the radio broadcast of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, telling the story of Martians landing on Earth, produced panic as many listeners believed the broadcast to reflect real-time reality (Cantril 1940).

Alongside these developments existed a growing body of research on propaganda, particularly in the context of World War I. Harold Lasswell (1927: 214), in his dissertation examining propaganda techniques used by all sides during this global struggle, contended that modern war is fought not only on military and economic fronts, but also on the propaganda front. After all, the countries at war were motivated to rouse patriotic fervor, increase citizens' commitment to the war, and portray their enemies in a negative light and demoralize them.

Lasswell's focus on propaganda highlighted as its primary goal the influencing of opinion (see Welch 2003 for a range of definitions). Indeed, both propaganda and public opinion involve phases of human behavior, with the former evoking negative connotations. Doob's (1948: 240) definition of propaganda considers it "the attempt to affect the personalities and to control the behavior of individuals toward ends considered unscientific or of doubtful value in a society at a particular time." Citing numerous channels through which propaganda can be transmitted – newspapers, radio, books, plays – Doob illustrates that it is more than just a tool for deployment in international conflicts.

Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that scholars began to gravitate toward a view of the media as omnipotent. Contemporary academic discourse tends to use different terms to describe the media power of this era – the "magic bullet" theory or the "hypodermic needle" model, the latter of which some scholars claim derived

from the notion of immunizing an audience against propaganda (Chaffee and Hochheimer 1985).

2.2.2 Two-step flow

The view of media as all-powerful lost traction as Klapper (1960: 8) summarized two decades of research, concluding that “mass communication *ordinarily* does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences.” Resonating with this view is the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research, whose studies of various communities revealed that mass media did not influence citizens’ behaviors directly, as would be posited by the hypodermic needle or magic bullet models. Rather, media exerted their influence on individuals by virtue of influencing key members of the public identified as opinion leaders, people viewed by others to be influential.

This two-step flow of communication emerged across a number of settings. In the political realm, as shown in Lazarsfeld et al.’s (1948) seminal study of citizens in Erie County, Ohio, during the 1940 election, voters who changed their minds during an election campaign or made up their minds late in the campaign were more likely to mention being influenced by others. Citizens also reported greater exposure to interpersonal discussion of politics than mediated coverage of politics. In addition, those individuals identified as opinion leaders reported greater exposure to the mass media than did their followers. Another community study based on residents of Elmira, New York during the 1948 election season led researchers to conclude that one’s social system mattered in decision-making (Berelson et al. 1954). This view would later be dubbed the “Columbia model” or sociological model of voting.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) built on the conclusions that emerged from these two community studies, focusing on how personal influence worked in non-political domains. They examined the process of influence in marketing, movie-going, and fashion decisions as well as in the domain of public affairs. However, instead of looking only at self-reports generated by disparate individuals, Katz and Lazarsfeld also studied the individuals whom opinion leaders considered *their* opinion leaders and the sociodemographic and personality traits they possessed. In the end, this study investigated the diffusion of an idea over time through the social structure of an entire community (Katz 1957). Other early studies of opinion leadership adopted innovative ways of shedding light on this concept: Merton (1949) identified as opinion leaders those individuals whom a minimum of four people had listed as shaping their opinions, and in their study of doctors, Menzel and Katz (1955) found that the diffusion of a new drug could be traced through the social structure of the medical community.

In reviewing these initial studies, Katz (1957: 72) noted that people may be more influential than the media in changing opinions as personal influence is

generally non-purposive, flexible, and trustworthy. These studies set the stage for media and interpersonal communication to be viewed as competitive channels, which others would later show to be more complementary than competitive (Chaffee 1982; Rogers 1983).

3 Contemporary theories of public opinion

Coinciding with the cognitive turn in the social sciences in the 1970s, media scholarship moved away from the so-called “minimal effects” paradigm associated with critiques made by Klapper (1960). With the advance of several new communication theories and phenomena, scholars began to gravitate toward a return to all-powerful media (primarily as individuals turned to the media to help themselves define social reality). Only later would they acknowledge the presence of contingent media effects – that powerful media effects occurred some of the time for some individuals. This section presents the key contemporary theories of media effects on public opinion.

3.1 Agenda-setting

Entirely bypassed by the earlier scholarly focus on media persuasion (Kosicki 1993: 231), agenda-setting came to light in a landmark study by McCombs and Shaw (1972), who found that the issues considered most important to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, voters were also the same issues covered by news media in Chapel Hill. Referencing the now-famous words of Bernard Cohen (1963: 13) that “the press may not be successful all the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about,” McCombs and Shaw (1972) concluded that news media are capable of influencing the political agenda of the public.

The several hundred studies of agenda-setting conducted in the four decades since the Chapel Hill study indicate considerable robustness of the phenomenon. Although studies tend to operationalize media coverage by analyzing easily accessible newspaper coverage and correlating that coverage with survey data, experimental research has shown that agenda-setting effects exist for televised content as well (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Researchers have investigated agenda-setting effects for short-term issues as well as long-term national concerns such as the 1980s War on Drugs (Gonzenbach 1996); for news processed in hard-copy format and online (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Schoenbach et al. 2005); for local and non-local issues (Palmgreen and Clarke 1977); for entertainment content (Holbrook and Hill 2005); for visual content (Coleman and Banning 2006); and across a wide array of individual countries as well as comparatively (Peter 2003).

Despite the general robustness of agenda-setting effects, research has identified a number of factors that mitigate or enhance their magnitude. Some of these factors have generated mixed findings, while others appear more consistently in the literature. For instance, interpersonal discussion can enhance agenda-setting effects (McLeod et al. 1974), dampen them (Atwater et al. 1985), or both (Wanta and Wu 1992).

Level of issue obtrusiveness, however, has over the years emerged as a generally consistent and significant moderator of the media's agenda-setting effects. Namely, media coverage of unobtrusive issues – those issues with which individuals have little or no direct experience – will have stronger agenda-setting effects as the public will need to rely more on the media for information about those issues (Zucker 1978).

Related to the level of issue obtrusiveness, agenda-setting effects can be moderated by one's need for orientation (Weaver 1977), or the extent to which individuals are driven to situate and more fully understand an issue. Need for orientation comprises two dimensions – relevance and uncertainty, with the former serving as the initial necessary condition: people who do not perceive an issue to be relevant will not need to orient themselves on this topic. However, among those who perceive an issue to be relevant to them, there is variance in their levels of uncertainty about that issue. Individuals who have all the information they need on a relevant issue (or are low in uncertainty) will be lower in their need for orientation than individuals who perceive an issue to be highly relevant yet have insufficient information (see McCombs and Reynolds 2009 for a review). These patterns do not elide the fact that even incidental exposure to media messages can have significant consequences. As McCombs (2004) illustrates, the strength of agenda-setting effects is not monotonic, increasing as media exposure increases; rather, it approaches asymptote after a certain level of exposure.

Matthes (2006) called for the study of need for orientation toward not only issues, but also facts (e.g., “I want to know many different sides about that topic”) and journalistic evaluations (e.g., “I attach great importance to commentaries on this issue”). The latter resonates with findings showing that audience members' perceptions of media credibility and knowledge can moderate agenda-setting effects (Miller and Krosnick 2000; Tsfaty 2003; Wanta 1997).

3.2 Priming

Although the theory of agenda-setting specifies a relationship between media salience of an issue and public salience of that same issue, it says very little about what individuals do with the media content to which they have been exposed. Borrowing from psychologists, who define priming as “the fact that recently and frequently activated ideas come to mind more easily than ideas that have not been

activated” (Fiske and Taylor 1984: 231), communication scholars view this concept as an extension of agenda-setting, referring to the power of media to effect “changes in the standards that people use to make [political] evaluations” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987: 63; brackets added).

Like agenda-setting, priming works because individuals tend to rely on memory-based processing of information. Rather than forming attitudes based on impressions (sometimes called on-line processing, McGraw et al. 1990), individuals tend to retrieve information that is more salient (Hastie and Park 1986). Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007: 11) succinctly juxtaposed agenda-setting and framing: “By making some issues more salient in people’s mind (agenda setting), mass media can also shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues (priming).”

Studies of priming on topics not ostensibly related to public opinion have found fertile ground in assessing media violence, sexual content in the media, racial representations, and advertisements (Carpentier 2011). However, such content has strong implications for attitudes toward censorship, stereotyping, and consumer purchase behaviors. In the public opinion domain, however, the criterion variable of interest has tended to be judgments of politicians. In their seminal study of the agenda-setting and priming effects of US television, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that the more attention paid to a specific problem, the more likely that viewers incorporated what they knew about that problem when assessing the President (see also Pan and Kosicki 1997, and for similar findings related to the governor of Hong Kong, Willnat and Zhu 1996). Looking at evaluations of presidential performance, research has found that media coverage of an issue does increase the ease with which related beliefs are accessed, but do not find priming effects. Rather, politically knowledgeable citizens in the US who trust the media more infer news coverage of that issue to reflect greater importance of that issue and therefore tend to use that issue as a standard for evaluating the President (Miller and Krosnick 2000).

The literature on priming offers many nuanced findings. For instance, unlike in studies of presidential evaluations, priming effects have not been found for interest groups (McGraw and Ling 2003). And although many priming studies assume that audiences use the dominant news agenda in their evaluations, research shows that “big-message” effects are just one part of the story: recent exposure to relevant content can generate priming effects, but *cumulative exposure* plays a greater role (Althaus and Kim 2006).

With few exceptions, such as those examining public support for military conflicts (Althaus and Coe 2011), priming research today remains focused on formal political actors, but has moved to other sites of political news. This shift is particularly important, given that political news can appear in many forms (e.g., Entman 2005). In the United States, late-night comedies such as *The Late Show with David Letterman* are found to influence which traits audiences use to evaluate presiden-

tial candidates (Moy et al. 2005), with documentaries (e.g., *Fahrenheit 9–11*, Holbert and Hansen 2006) and fictional programming such as *The West Wing* (Holbert et al. 2003) and *NYPD Blue* (Holbrook and Hill 2005) also able to shift the basis of evaluations of presidents. These findings, however, are contingent on many individual-level factors, including political ideology and political interest.

3.3 Framing

Often discussed in tandem with agenda-setting and priming, framing refers to media influences based on what media coverage of an issue includes. Despite being characterized as a “fractured paradigm” with “scattered conceptualization” (Entman 1993: 51), framing enjoys generally consistent definitions. According to Entman (1993: 52), framing highlights certain aspects of the world in a text “as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” Similarly, Gamson and Modigliani (1987: 143) define a frame as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events....The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue.” Likewise, Reese (2001: 11) sees frames as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persist over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.” In short, scholars view frames as providing meaning about social phenomena through the highlighting and packaging of information.

The bulk of research on framing effects has either identified types of frames that exist or tested their effects. On the former front, one common dichotomization involves episodic vs. thematic frames. Whereas episodic frames adopt a case-study perspective on an issue or portray just one incident, thematic frames provide greater contextualization and background, linking that particular incident to larger concerns. Not surprisingly, individuals exposed to these frames differ in their attribution of responsibility on political issues (Iyengar 1991): episodic frames lead audience members to attribute responsibility of an issue to the individual involved, while thematic frames increase the likelihood of blaming the government or society at large.

Policy vs. strategy frames constitute another common way to differentiate news frames. Usually appearing in the context of election coverage, policy frames focus on substantive issues as well as issue-based information from candidates or parties (Patterson 1993). Strategy frames, on the other hand, emphasize the sport of electoral politics (Farnsworth and Lichter 2007). Often termed “horse-race coverage” – which focuses on which candidate is winning or losing, and by how much – strategy frames are charged with undermining the electoral process by diverting citizens’ attention away from the issues that really matter (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 1993), though others claim that the drama of horse-race coverage

makes news coverage more memorable and can generate interest in a campaign (Bartels 1988).

Because framing is inherent in media coverage, the range of studies in this area is considerable (see, for example, the case studies in Reese et al. [2001] which include examinations of media frames of political correctness and those of a murder trial). Studies of individual-level framing effects, however, have examined gains vs. losses (Tversky and Kahneman 1981) and ethical vs. material frames (Domke et al. 1998); compared human interest, conflict, and personal consequence frames (Price et al. 1997); and looked at similar frames including those emphasizing attribution of responsibility or economics (Valkenburg et al. 1999). While these aforementioned experimental studies highlight the effects of a particular type of frame, other experiments test for the effects of framing of a specific incident. Notable studies include framing a Ku Klux Klan rally as a free-speech issue vs. a disruption of public order (Nelson et al. 1997) and framing the Supreme Court ruling of the 2000 U.S. presidential election as partisan and “stealing the election” vs. a principled vote based on legal considerations (Nicholson and Howard 2003). Findings show that respective levels of support for the Ku Klux Klan and Supreme Court differed depending on the frame to which study participants were exposed.

Framing influences how people understand issues, but their effects are contingent on many individual-level factors. After all, in making sense of media messages, audience members not only consider to varying degrees media content, but they also engage with each other interpersonally (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Walsh 2004) and draw on their experiential knowledge (Gamson 1996).

Beyond the *cognitive* frames that affect citizens' understanding of the specific issue at hand (Iyengar 1991; Tversky and Kahneman 1981), the media can shape audience members' understanding of related concerns by adopting *cultural* frames – frames that “don't stop with organizing one story, but invite us to...[go] beyond the immediate information” (Reese 2001: 12–13). One exemplar of a cultural frame is the “war on terrorism” frame, which “offered a way...to construct a narrative to make sense of a range of diverse stories about international security, civil wars, and global conflict” (Norris et al. 2003: 15).

Although scholars differentiate framing from agenda-setting in that they see the former as concerned with the quality and content of media coverage of an issue and the latter as concerned with only the amount of coverage, some argue that framing can be understood as another type of agenda-setting effect. In other words, agenda setting can influence the public's perception of salience of an issue as well as how it understands that issue (McCombs 2004). Whether or not framing is its own concern or another extension of agenda-setting seems to hinge on the theoretical mechanisms. Some scholars stress that agenda-setting and priming operate via accessibility, noting how exposure to media coverage about an issue increases its accessibility in one's mind, while framing effects are markedly different, relying instead on applicability effects (e.g., Price and Tewksbury 1997). In

other words, when an issue is framed in terms of meaning, cause, solution, and responsibility, “the primary effect of [that] frame is to render specific information, images, or ideas *applicable* to [that] issue” (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009: 21).

4 Conclusions

This chapter focused on key theories of public opinion as they implicate individual-level effects on citizens’ attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions. Viewing these theories through this lens suggests a singularity or simplicity that simply does not exist. Agenda-setting research has looked at how media agendas can set policy agendas (Rogers et al. 1993) or other media’s agendas (Atwater et al. 1987), and framing research has differentiated between frame-setting and frame-building (Scheufele 1999). Indeed, to truly understand public opinion, we must not only understand the nature of the public and the assumptions that undergird research efforts, but also the nature of mass media. This point was recognized early by Lippmann (1922), whose views on the individual and news media led him to reject the possibility of an informed mass public. Toward this end, we briefly review the literature on key factors that feed into the construction of news, recognizing that, as Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 251) noted, “mass media content is a socially created product, not a reflection of an objective reality” (see also Tuchman 1978).

4.1 A key caveat: the construction of media content

To begin, who determines what is news? What forces within the news media serve as gatekeepers (White 1950) and what forces will shape how content gets presented? At the most micro level, journalists who create news stories and their editors may unknowingly shape content. Their sociodemographics as well as political views and training, and their perceptions of norms all have some bearing on what and how content gets presented. For instance, newspapers with male managing editors produce more coverage of politics and national security over time, while female-led newsrooms produce more indirect leads, a practice common in the crafting of features or news features stories (Beam and DiCicco 2010). Similarly, the relationship between journalists’ partisanship and their news decisions appears not only in the United States, but also in Western Europe (Donsbach and Patterson 2004). Differences exist across countries as well, particularly in terms of professional norms: compared to British, Italian, Swedish, and German journalists, American journalists most strongly advocate for a free press, and are more likely to rely on interviews with newsmakers and citizens than on wire-service copy to cover stories (Donsbach and Patterson 2004).

Perhaps most salient as a professional norm of journalism (at least in the United States) is that of objectivity, which holds that journalists should report facts rather than values and present multiple perspectives on a story (Schudson 2001: 150). Paradoxically, this norm tends to introduce its own bias – an overreliance on officials and, coupled with a need for newsworthy sources, encourages *indexing*. Indexing occurs when the types of viewpoints presented in news media tend to be calibrated to “the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic” (Bennett 1990: 106). The indexing hypothesis has received empirical support (e.g., Livingston and Bennett 2003; Zaller and Chiu 1996), but has also been refined to account for the ability of presidential administrations to influence media coverage more than members of Congress (Entman 2004). However, other scholarship suggests that journalists are often relatively autonomous in their reporting (Althaus 2003; Patterson 1993). Notably, journalists appear to reject frames from elite politicians and interest groups in favor of framing that heightens the dramatic elements of a news story (Callaghan and Schnell 2001), highlighting the importance of ratings and economics in news production.

Indeed, economic factors need to be taken into account when considering how media content is created (Sparrow 1999). For example, the division of labor associated with the newsbeat system maximizes the efficiency of news collection, though this “news net” is typically cast around “big fish” such as prominent officials and political leaders (Tuchman 1978). To avoid costly original research, journalists rely on credible institutions and elite officials for information (Gans 1979; Sigal 1973). Put differently, the “free” information provided by elite officials and institutions essentially amounts to a subsidy to the news industry (Cook 2005; Fishman 1980). Thus in the same way that news media are dependent upon advertising for revenue, so are journalists dependent on credible sources.

Scholars have also pointed to the effects of media ownership and economics in the production of media content. The study of the political economy of news media is presaged by Marx and Engels’ (1845/2004: 64) comment that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.” Some scholars argue that since news media organizations are owned not only by wealthy individuals, but also by corporate conglomerates and dependent upon corporate advertising, news media content will tend to have a pro-corporate capitalism bias (Herman and Chomsky 1994; McChesney 2004; Parenti 1992). However, much of the evidence in support of this claim is anecdotal in nature. Moreover, a content analysis found only limited support of news media synergy bias, which occurs when news media outlets provide more favorable coverage of products and businesses owned by the parent company (Williams 2002).

In fact, outside the realm of news media, many unfavorable depictions of corporations exist in popular media. Lichter et al. (1997) find that business characters were depicted negatively more often (55%) than non-business characters (31%) on television. Whether it be linking capitalism with the murderous creature in *Alien*

(1979) and consumerism with mindless zombies in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) (Ryan and Kellner 1988), or simply depicting the mundane corporate workplace as a threat to masculinity (Hunter 2003), capitalism often is shown in a threatening light on film. Given the consistently negative depictions of labor unions in film (Christensen and Haas 2005; Puette 1992), it makes more sense to think of mass media as an arena of competing themes, rather than as articulating a single ideology (Ryan and Kellner 1988).

Although cited as a potential motivation of corporate bias, the need for profits can work to produce media critiques of capitalism. According to Kellner (1981: 40), the profit motive can trump class ideology; for instance, “the short-term economic interests of a network may lead them to broadcast news which puts in question aspects of the socioeconomic order, thus jeopardizing their long-range economic interests.” Focusing on the economic pressures facing news organizations, Hamilton (2004) argues that network news programming has more “soft” news coverage (focusing less on politics) and is liberal on social issues in order to appeal to 18–34 year-old females, who are a prime demographic for advertisers.

At the most macro level, the construction of news and media content in general can be influenced by broader cultural forces. Entman (1993: 52) notes that along with the communicator, text, and receiver, frames reside in culture. Similarly, Van Corp (2007) speaks of a “cultural stock of frames” from which both journalists and audiences draw upon to make sense of the world. However, different views exist regarding the actual influence of culture on news coverage: Hallin (1986) argues that coverage is influenced by the cultural consensus surrounding that issue, while Gans (1979) finds news content to be characterized by “enduring values” such as ethnocentrism, individualism, small-town pastoralism, and responsible capitalism. By referring to something resident in the surrounding culture, media frames have “implicit cultural roots” (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009: 23) and can resonate with audience members (Gamson and Modigliani 1989).

4.2 Some final words about the changing face of public opinion

Conceptualizations of agenda-setting, priming, and framing as media effects on public opinion emerged in an era that was relatively simple compared to today’s environment. But as citizens have turned increasingly to social media and other online tools, the field has begun to question the extent to which one can separate mass from interpersonal influences (Mutz and Young 2011) or even the directionality of effects. Agenda-building, which identifies how specific entities can shape the media’s agenda, now needs to explicitly include citizens as active newsmakers. If media content is being crafted by the individuals that previously were being told by the media what issues to think about, perhaps the theoretical premises of

agenda-setting should be refined. Similarly, groups and individuals that previously had difficulty finding voice through traditional media outlets now have the opportunity to create their own frames and bypass journalistic filters. If frame sponsorship no longer belongs only to elites, and if citizens are setting frames for the media, scholars should reconsider the extent to which hypothesizing about traditional (media-to-audience) framing effects is useful.

As our media landscape becomes more balkanized and fragmented, society has witnessed an increase in selective exposure and a shift toward what Bennett and Iyengar (2008) term “a new era of minimal effects.” Indeed, the long-held stages of media effects described here are being questioned: Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) eschew categorizing effects in terms of their power on audience members, proffering instead a six-stage model of media effects that turns on clusters of theories. According to their typology, we have been operating, since 1996, under a “new media theories” framework.

But what are new media? Today’s latest technology will likely lose novelty with the appearance of the next one, but not before it has become fully integrated into everyday politics. Information will continue to be sent for the sake of information; messages will continue to be sent to mobilize others to take action; and non-elites will continue using these technologies to join the swelling ranks of citizen-journalists (Cooper 2010). Taken together, these acts of engagement signal how the dichotomies of yore no longer hold. Social media have flattened hierarchies, and media consumers have become producers. With this increased engagement in the media, citizens can find virtually unlimited information on an issue. Unfortunately, this proliferation of media can kindle distrust in sources that espouse dissonant views from one’s own. These tensions call for a re-examination of how communication is defined. They also force a reconsideration of who is the source and who is the receiver, and more importantly, how these new communication processes will shape public opinion in a democracy.

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