

What is the biggest social problem in the news today? Who makes issues newsworthy and important? Why do some issues receive more attention than others? Social issues that are widely recognized on the media's agenda often demand attention on the public agenda, and in turn influence the policy agenda, creating policy changes. James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers's research on social issues that hit the top of the media agenda—e.g., the war on drugs, drunk driving, the Exxon Valdez, the Ethiopian famine, and AIDS—provides important theoretical and practical insight into the agenda-setting process and its role in effecting social change.

This reader-friendly volume introduces students to an important area of communication research and offers them direction for further inquiry. Researchers and professionals in political and mass communication, media studies, research methods, and marketing also will appreciate this volume's insightful approach to agenda-setting and policy.

Communication Concepts, Volume 6
ISBN 0-7619-0562-6 hardcover
ISBN 0-7619-0563-4 paperback



 **SAGE Publications**
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks London New Delhi

DEARING / ROGERS

AGENDA-SETTING

COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS 6

Agenda-Setting

James W. Dearing
Everett M. Rogers



COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS 6

Agenda-Setting

**James W. Dearing
Everett M. Rogers**



SAGE Publications

International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks London New Delhi

Copyright © 1996 by Sage Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information address:



SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress

ISBN 0-7619-0562-6 (c) ISBN 0-7619-0563-4 (p)

ISSN 1057-7440

96 97 98 99 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sage Production Editor: Michèle Lingre

Citation instructions:

When citing a Communication Concepts issue, please follow this reference style:

Dearing, James W., & Rogers, Everett M. (1992), *Communication Concepts 6: Agenda-Setting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Contents

Foreword	
Steven H. Chaffee	vii
Preface	ix
1. What Is Agenda-Setting?	1
<i>Agenda-Setting as a Political Process</i>	1
<i>The Media Agenda, Public Agenda, and Policy Agenda</i>	5
The Chapel Hill Study	6
<i>Salience as the Key in Agenda-Setting</i>	7
<i>History of Agenda-Setting Research</i>	8
<i>The Search for Media Effects</i>	13
<i>Three Research Traditions</i>	16
<i>Measuring Agendas</i>	17
<i>The Rise and Fall of the War on Drugs</i>	19
Summary	22
Notes	23
2. Media Agenda Studies	24
<i>Media Advocacy for Drunk Driving</i>	25
<i>Real-World Indicators and the Media Agenda</i>	28
AIDS and the Media Agenda in San Francisco	30
<i>Influencing the Media Agenda</i>	31
<i>Similarity of Media Coverage of an Issue</i>	33
<i>Measuring the Media Agenda</i>	35
The Exxon Valdez and the Environment	37
Summary	39
Notes	40
3. Public Agenda Studies: The Hierarchy Approach	40
The Issues of the 1960s	41
<i>Measuring the Public Agenda</i>	45
<i>Evidence for the Influence of the Media Agenda on the Public Agenda</i>	49

	<i>Intervening Variables in Predicting the Public Agenda</i>	50
	<i>The Role of Personal Experience With Issues</i>	52
	<i>Summary</i>	53
	<i>Notes</i>	53
4.	Public Agenda Studies: Longitudinal Approaches	54
	The Issue of AIDS in the United States	56
	<i>The Issue-Attention Cycle</i>	60
	<i>How an Issue Gets on the Public Agenda</i>	62
	<i>Experimental Research</i>	62
	A Threshold in Public Attention	64
	<i>Issue Displacement as a Zero-Sum Game</i>	66
	<i>Time in Agenda-Setting Research</i>	67
	How the Ethiopian Famine Got on the Agenda	69
	<i>Summary</i>	71
	<i>Notes</i>	71
5.	Policy Agenda Studies	72
	<i>The Media-Policy Relationship</i>	74
	Media Coverage and Decision Making in Washington	76
	<i>From the Issue of Power to the Power of Issues</i>	78
	Investigative Reporting and Policy Making in Chicago	79
	<i>Studying the Policy Agenda</i>	81
	Setting the Agenda in the U.S. Senate	84
	<i>Summary</i>	87
	<i>Notes</i>	87
6.	Studying the Agenda-Setting Process	88
	<i>Comparisons Among Agenda-Setting Approaches</i>	89
	<i>Generalizations About Agenda-Setting</i>	90
	<i>Toward Disaggregation in Agenda-Setting Research</i>	92
	<i>Research Questions for Future Study</i>	95
	<i>The Need for Multimethod Research Designs</i>	99
	<i>Agenda-Setting in Democratic Societies</i>	99
	References	101
	Suggested Readings	109
	Author Index	129
	Subject Index	133
	About the Authors	139

Foreword

Each volume in the Communication Concepts series deals at length with an idea of enduring importance to the study of human communication. Through analysis and interpretation of the scholarly literature, specialists in each area explore the uses to which a major concept has been applied and point to promising directions for future work.

Agenda-setting is that rarity, a scholarly topic that was invented within the field of mass communication research. Both the term itself and a prototypic design for its empirical study date from an original article by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1972. The phrase has become accepted in the popular literature. News analysts today take for granted that we know what they mean when they distinguish the media's agenda-setting power from more direct forms of political persuasion. More important, agenda-setting has proven highly provocative as a research concept, as the lengthy Suggested Readings section of this volume demonstrates.

James Dearing and Everett Rogers have organized this sprawling literature into major categories that, despite sharing a common name, are quite different in their purposes and in the kinds of research suggested. The authors draw a fundamental distinction between studies of the relative priorities among a set of public issues and the life history of a single issue as it competes for a high priority on the agenda. The first type of study was introduced by McCombs and Shaw, scholars with a primary interest in the role of the press in society. The second genre, typified by Rogers and Dearing's own work on public attention to AIDS, is more issue driven and theoretically akin to research on diffusion. This has become the more common approach, adapting the agenda-setting model to the work of mission-oriented agencies such as those dealing with public health problems.

These basic research formats have in turn spawned numerous offshoots, including field experiments on media effects, institutional stud-

ies of news judgments, and investigations of the role of public opinion in policy making. Dearing and Rogers provide an organized view of a lively domain of communication research, as illustrated by capsule descriptions of leading studies. We are given a close look at the scientific pursuit of an idea of both practical and theoretical import.

Steven H. Chaffee, *Series Editor*

Preface

We became involved in agenda-setting research in the mid-1980s when we carried out a critical review and synthesis of this topic, presented as a paper at the American Association for Public Opinion Research conference in 1986. We identified three main components in the agenda-setting process: (a) the media agenda, (b) the public agenda, and (c) the policy agenda. This framework was expanded into our 1988 chapter, "Agenda-Setting Research: Where Has It Been? Where Is It Going?" in *Communication Yearbook 11*. This review and critique was cited by half of the agenda-setting publications appearing since 1988 and appears to serve as a useful review for many scholars. This chapter was widely cited because it proposed that agenda-setting is best understood as a process of interaction among three types of agendas.

We then responded to one of our main criticisms of past agenda-setting studies by conducting an over-time study of the agenda-setting process for a single issue: AIDS in the United States (Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991).

We continued our research, writing several articles and chapters about agenda-setting, and then presented invited papers at anniversary sessions of the 1992 American Political Science Association conference and the 1992 American Association for Public Opinion Research conference, celebrating the beginning of agenda research 20 years earlier. Now, both of us are doing new agenda-setting research, from macro-level, cross-national comparisons to micro-level studies of communities and the issues important to them.

We are not founders of agenda-setting research, like communication scholars Max McCombs and Donald Shaw or political scientists Roger Cobb and Charles Elder. We came into this research front during its second decade of empirical investigation and, along with other scholars, helped broaden the research approaches to agenda-setting. We have led in calling for alternative approaches to agenda-setting research, such as