

# What's in a name?

## Policy and Media agenda setting

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The careful reader may notice that one of the authors here, Annelise Russell, is also the associate editor of the journal. Note that this manuscript went through the blind review process.

Scholars of political science, public policy, political communication, and journalism are equally familiar with the concept of agenda-setting, but the precise meaning of that term is a lot more complicated. Agenda-setting encompasses a wide-array of research – a quick Google Scholar search will return more than 350,000 citations. Students across these disciplines would likely associate agenda-setting theory with key concepts like attention, salience, and framing, but who is paying attention and for whom an issue is salient are two of the fundamental questions, and have different answers depending on the discipline, highlighting the divisions in the research agendas. For communication scholars, agenda setting is about the media's ability to influence public salience; however, for policy research, the key relationship is how dynamic attention by political institutions leads to public policy outputs.

These disparate conceptualizations of agenda setting are not necessarily in conflict – we argue they are actually quite compatible and have, at times, evolved in similar ways. But the evolution of agenda-setting theory within policy and communications communities has traditionally been siloed and self-sustaining and, in response, we amplify the call for an integrated approach to these commonly disconnected disciplines that speaks to both what issues get considered across variable governing systems and different media climates. Specifically, we raise attention to scholars that have adopted a complex systems approach to understand what shapes “the pictures in our heads” (Lippman, 1922). Media and policy agendas – as we will distinguish these two fields – have a window of opportunity to foster promising research that marries the best of both fields by understanding the mechanisms that lead to agenda change. Media agenda studies provide a rich literature on the effects of journalism norms, media dynamics, and digital shifts that shape public issues, while policy scholars have analyzed the information flows that contribute to agenda change and policy outputs, often with

less regard for public inputs. We argue that while both subfields have flourished and shaped decades of rich scholarship, there is outstanding potential to better integrate ideas from media and policy scholarship, relative to what is evidenced by the corpus of both literatures (Wolfe, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2013).

In this paper, we explain how these two veins of research have both become integral subfields within their respective disciplines – fostering decades of research that asks similar questions with dissimilar variables of interests. The constraints and contributions of media and policy agendas actually mirror one another in many ways. The expansion of agenda-setting work into comparative perspectives and the limitations of causal explanations for political priorities are two traits that extend across both research trajectories. The division between behavioral studies of public attention and institutional studies of policy outputs leads to a complex meaning for these academic homonyms; however, we offer a way forward that takes advantage of the “best of both worlds” by studying the complex systems that shape our political process. While we recognize that the interdisciplinary nature of our call is easier said than done, we offer a new research agenda that bridges the gap between media and policy research in a way that values the comprehensive analysis of the policy process, while at the same time, considers how media dynamics and journalism shape both political institutions and public attention. Political institutions and media institutions both provide structure and stability for the political process within a complex world, and we argue that complexity is better captured in a research climate that appreciates both internal system dynamics, as well as external outputs that shape both elite and public attention.

## **Two distinct origins and definitions**

In order to understand the current state of the relationship between agenda setting in the media and communications literatures and agenda setting in the policy literature, it is critical that we understand how agenda setting is defined in each of these literatures. The term agenda setting has been used extensively in both literatures, but with slightly different meanings. In the media and communications literature, agenda setting is often defined in terms of the public agenda; that is, what issues the public are paying attention to and how they come to be paying attention to them (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In a 2014 interview, preeminent communication scholar Max McCombs explained agenda-setting as a process in which “elements that are prominent in the media frequently become prominent in the

public mind.”<sup>1</sup> Those elements could be topics or attributes like tone, but the key relationship is between the media and the public. In the traditional media agenda-setting literature, policymakers are typically positioned among the routine news sources that contribute to the news agenda. This perspective places the public's attention at the center of the study and conceptualizes the media as an important actor shaping the focus of the public by providing clear signals about what issues are important. The goal of many of these studies is to understand how the media's actions shapes public attention and opinion.

Contrast that definition with similarly influential policy scholars who note that “fundamental to all studies of agenda-setting is a focus on the dynamics by which new ideas, new policy proposals, and new understandings of problems meet resistance from the prevailing political arrangements, but sometimes break through to create dramatic policy changes” (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, & Jones, 2006). In the policy process literature, studies of agenda setting are focused much more on the priorities of the actors in and adjacent to government. Kingdon defines the agenda quite simply as the list of subjects to which political actors are paying attention (1995). This means that for the policy process literature, agenda setting is the creation of the list. Unique policy subsystems – addressing the environment, health care, or nuclear power – have their own agenda while also helping set the broader, systemic agenda, which can influence institutions. In this literature, the common foundational idea is that agenda setting is about what it is that government is paying attention to and is about understanding the forces that shape the agenda, as a necessary prerequisite to policy change is inclusion of that issue on the agenda (Schattschneider, 1950).

Even with these definitions, it can be helpful to highlight the similarities and differences between the conceptualization of agenda setting. One similarity between these concepts is that in both cases the agenda is understood as being shaped by elite actors. Whether we are looking at agenda setting from the media studies literature, where the agenda is coming from the media as an institution, or we are looking at policy process literature where the agenda is formulated by political elites, agendas are the product of those with power via institutions. This is an important fundamental because it means that regardless of which literature we are examining, agenda setting is an activity that not all can engage in; instead it is an activity reserved to those in power. This is important as change can only come about once people are paying attention to an issue. As attention is a necessary prerequisite to change, who generates the agenda is critical.

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1. “Agenda-Setting by Maxwell McCombs” video created by Universidad de Navarre. Uploaded on 10/21/2014. Accessible at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcutEe\\_\\_P\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcutEe__P_8) (Date accessed 09/08/2020)

Yet there are some important differences that shape the research around these two types of agenda setting. First and foremost, the literatures are focused on different outputs. In the media and communications literature, agenda setting was initially conceptualized to understand public attention. This conceptualization sees the public as important because of the electoral connection between the public and politicians (Mayhew, 1974). But the public doesn't get most of their information from politicians directly, instead getting much of their information from the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This mediating relationship means that the choices of news organizations of what issues to cover has profound impacts on the public and, through elections, on government.

The policy process literature, on the other hand, conceptualizes agenda setting as something that policymakers do, by and large, to influence the set of issues on the institutional agenda. Rather than placing the public at the center, policy agenda setting sees elites in and adjacent to government as influential forces on the agenda. The policy process literature focuses on agenda setting by and for elites, noting that while public input via elections is important, the policy agenda will experience non-incremental changes completely divorced from electoral shifts (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). Instead, agenda setting in the policy process literature is the result of a disproportionate information process, where cognitive and emotional limitations lead decision makers to process information differently depending on their biases and beliefs, rather than the differing nature of the information alone (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

Given these definitions and these fundamental similarities and differences, it is important to recognize how these literatures are not static. Over time, some scholars have done work that tries to bridge the two approaches to agenda setting; however, the literatures have largely stayed in their separate silos, focusing on their own approaches and understandings of agenda setting. For example, both policy and media agenda research consider framing effects, but media agenda work on framing is largely focused on the public's understanding of issues, while policy process literature focuses on variable attention among elites (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Boydston, 2013; Boydston, Hardy, & Walgrave, 2014; Sevenans, Walgrave, & Epping, 2016). In the media literature, the public is at the center of many studies, considering how the media shapes what the public is thinking about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the policy process literature, the public is much less central, prioritizing what the governing system is paying attention to. Although scholars, such as Soroka and Wlezien (2010), have identified feedback processes between government and public opinion relating to policy, that work does not explicitly identify the public as part of the agenda-setting process. Instead, the public plays a more pivotal role in shaping policy once it is already on the governing agenda.

This difference in the focus of framing effects illustrates the behavioral vs. institutional divide between media and policy agenda setting. We suggest there is ample potential to examine framing affects in a more global, interactive way, which could help bridge the divide between the literatures.

## Diverging fields and parallel progress

The two different research agendas have led to two, mostly isolated, subfields of scholarship. Yet, we must also emphasize how policy and media agenda studies have independently developed similar contributions and constraints. Agenda research by policy and communication studies have both been spurred by the expansion of research outside of its original setting of the United States, particularly when it comes to assessments of media influence on policymakers and political processes. While policy scholars were initially skeptical of such applicability, comparative studies that assess media influence on both public and elite attention offer some of the richest contributions to the field in the last two decades (Eissler & Russell, 2016). As both fields have expanded their breadth of study, neither field has adapted methodologically to foster causal inference research. Aside from some notable exceptions within media agenda research, the structure of the data and preponderance of content analysis used in both policy and media studies have led to limited applications of casual research. These contributions and constraints highlight how both these agenda-setting perspectives have independently situated themselves in somewhat similar positions within their respective fields of study.

### Comparative expansion

Traditional studies of agenda setting have focused on research within the U.S. federal government or among American voters; however, these studies are now augmented by a broader examination of agenda-setting dynamics across governing systems. Comparative studies of policy outputs and policy attention highlights the viability of policy process models in non-American settings, exploring how information, media, and policy actors operate similarly within different political systems. Much of this work is due to the development of tools for making cross-country assessments, relying on rich sources of policy information like the Comparative Agendas Project (<http://www.comparativeagendas.info/>) or the Manifesto Project Database (<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu>). The Comparative Agendas Project, which grew out of the work of the U.S. Policy Agendas Project, is a network of public policy projects, each of which offers data on policy outputs

and policy change over time. Each country project has adopted a common policy content coding system that gives scholars the ability to study agenda change over time, across issues, and across countries (Eissler, Russell, & Jones, 2014).

Comparative policy agenda research appears to have answered the clarion call for comparative scholars to move beyond election and party analyses to studies of policy dynamics that shape agenda-setting practices across political systems (Baumgartner, Jones, & Wilkerson, 2011). The expansion of policy agenda-setting research benefits greatly from shared resources like the Comparative Agendas Project, particularly the contribution of global studies on the effects of media on policymakers and the political process. Single country studies in the Netherlands and Belgium illustrate how the media shapes the priorities of policymakers and how media coverage can shape political outputs (Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012). Vliegenthart et al. (2016) push those findings even further with a seven-country study of European countries that highlights how the media can inspire political action and how government parties reach to the media.

The extension of media agenda-setting from a U.S. domestic measure to a generalizable theory across governing systems highlights how this vein of research, too, is further grounded by its reach into different political contexts and countries. Media agenda setting has no comparable CAP-level project, which is one reason why international media agenda research has yet to expand to the scale of policy agendas. Media coverage and news flow can be very U.S. centric – or at least capturing the purview of the world's wealthiest countries (Guo & Vargo, 2017) – but studies of media dynamics have occurred across governing systems of variable size and stature.

While there is no comparative project to foster cross-national research, the scholarly understanding of news media's agenda-setting influence on the public has been developed by hundreds of studies worldwide, studying press effects both during election campaigns and in non-election periods (McCombs, 2004). Similar to policy studies that have expanded both on the local level and internationally, media agenda research is buttressed by macro-level studies worldwide that examine the impact of media on both a national and local scale. For example, research by Strömbäck and Kiousis (2010) measures the impact of daily news during the 2006 Swedish national election and found that attention to political news exerts a strong influence on the public's perceived issue salience. In Argentina, print media mentions of the president positively influence the public's reported confidence in the government (Cuestas, Freille, & O'Gorman, 2009).

There has also been an effort to understand attribute salience in a non-U.S. context. Attributes capture the perspectives or frames that journalists and the public use to think about an object (Ghanem, 1997). In other words, the press

is accentuating certain elements over others – similar to the concept of framing. One of the earliest non-U.S. investigations of attribute salience analyzes the 1996 Spanish election, ranking orders of candidate attributes and correlating that ranking with voter descriptions of the candidates (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000). Similar studies in Israel during the 2006 national election and in Switzerland during a referendum on political asylum show strong attribute agenda setting effects (Guo & McCombs, 2014; Balmas & Sheaffer, 2010; Wirth, Matthes, Schemer, Wettstein, & Friemel, 2010). As media agendas are explored on a global scale, cross-countries studies are one venue for increased research and assessment of underlying agenda-setting dynamics.

### Causal limitations

Just as the international expansion has created a cascade of research among agenda-setting scholars, the manner in which it has expanded has also been somewhat similarly constrained in terms of methodology. A critique of policy process and media studies that rely on archival research or content analysis is the limited contribution toward studies of causality. Causal inference is the process where scholars make claims about causal relationships, referring work that tries to establish that one set of events causes another (Keele, 2015). The causal inference movement within social science research has spurred political science and communication scholars to think more rigorously about research design and the associated choices that allow for causal stories (Schickler, 2019). The rise in causal research has “transformed how many political scientists conduct their research,” (Schickler, 2019), but so far this increasingly common language is largely absent from agenda setting studies. Studies of the media’s effect on the policy process have often relied on a limited set of methods that use temporality to infer causality (Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014). The number of time-series cross-sectional studies across multiple countries with similar results offers some confidence of causality, supposing that the media can lead to political attention, but this is admittedly not precise (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2016). Randomized experiments are often considered the gold standard for causal studies, but agenda setting studies are more often based on surveys, content analysis, or work with archival data. Without a strong tradition of experiments within either policy or media agenda-setting research, this may be one reason why agenda setting has not fully embraced this conceptual shift. Agenda-setting research prizes large-scale time series analyses that make precise causal identification a challenge (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2016). In media agenda studies, reverse causality and endogeneity make causal interpretations difficult. For instance, the media covers topics the public sees as important, shaping both coverage and the media agenda (Lau, Rogers, & Love, 2020).

Research by Sevenans (2018) discusses the struggle of disentangling media effects in the context of how news media can shape policymakers' attention. Causal assessment is difficult due to potential spurious relationships, endogeneity, and generalizable theory that can be put into practice (Sevenans, 2018). Additional constraints stem from agenda-setting's external validity; however, some research has tried to address these concerns. For example, Feezell (2018) attempts to overcome those data constraints by leveraging a longitudinal, individual-level experiment, conducted through Facebook using a randomized controlled design, to compare groups exposed to political information in a realistic treatment utilizing the Facebook News Feed.

Solutions for integrating causal inference into studies of media and policy agendas include shifting the level of analysis to the individual, rather than the system or the institution, and incorporating experimental methods. By studying the agendas of individuals, we are able to see more nuanced examination of changes in attention, as in individual level studies, scholars may be better able to identify the cause and effect dynamics that lead to changes in the agenda. In systemic or institutional agendas, isolating influences on the agenda can be tricky, as multiple influences may be at play across actors central to agenda formation, making it difficult to untangle cause and effect. The individual-level agenda is perhaps more readily untangle-able as experimental designs that focus on the individual-level agenda, allow researchers to be able to more closely link changes in attention to experimental treatments, thus being able to better illustrate the process of individual agenda formation (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2016). An example of this type of work is Sevenans, Walgrave, and Vos (2015), which questioned how MPs react to media stories. This study utilizes experimental methods that have the ability to allow researchers to isolate causal mechanisms; however, it is still the exception to the type of research being conducted by policy agenda-setting scholars, as direct access to politicians and policymakers is rare and challenging. Experiments linking media coverage and public attention offer some of the most compelling evidence, which make it important for scholars to pursue them, even when they are difficult to conduct. Well-known experiments of agenda-setting began more than 30 years ago, by observing significant increases in participants' perceived importance of treated issues in the media (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Melek & Ulucay, 2019; Wanta, 1988). These experiments offer causal evidence for a media agenda-setting hypothesis, although there is room to debate whether these findings may shift outside of a controlled experiment (Lau et al., 2020).



## Media dynamics and information seeking

Media and policy agenda setting have benefited from extensions of the work into new venues, and while that expansion has been similar in many respects, the research trajectories have taken these two fields in different directions. Media agenda research has developed a wealth of research on the norms of the media; focusing on not only how those norms shape public attention, but also how norms shape the behavior of other journalists and news sources. The peer-to-peer agenda-setting among the media offers nuanced information about what gets covered and why – with the potential to shape but public and elite attention. Policy scholars have also provided nuanced findings about the micro-foundations of agendas through the inclusion of information as a source of agenda stability. The amount of information and the sources of that information shape both which policies get heard and how those policies are implemented.

### Inter-Media dynamics

Both in title and in practice, the media agenda's focus on the dynamics of media practice has given rise to a valuable understanding of the media – both as an explanatory variable for public agendas, as well as a dependent variable that captures the differences in what shapes media agendas. Policy agendas consider the media as a policy actor – to varying degrees – but the dynamics of how and when the media pay attention to things has largely been the work of political communication and media scholarship. Policy studies emphasize how elite actors set their collective attention to one issue at the expense of another, but unlike communication research, the media is often seen as merely a moderator, rather than an active participant.

One example of understanding the media agenda as valuable and dynamic is imbedded in the concept of inter-media agenda setting – exploring the way in which individual media actors can shape the agendas of one another (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). Just as the media influences the public's agenda, media institutions can influence the attention of other media (Nygaard, 2020; Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Intermedia agenda setting refers to the relay of salience across media sources (McCombs, 2004; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Reese & Danielian, 1989). Intermedia agenda-setting research considers the relationships between news agencies and daily newspapers – for example, the role that the New York Times plays in signaling important issues for other journalists and news outlets across the nation (McCombs & Shaw, 1976; Gilbert, Eyal, McCombs, & Nicholas, 1980). Many studies have considered the agendas across television and print media (Protess & McCombs, 1991), and increasingly,

the role that social media and digital journalism play to provide another layer to this growing field of study (Harder, Sevenans, & Van Aelst, 2017; Meraz, 2011; Russell Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, & Bae, 2014). This vein of media-to-media agenda setting studies began in the 1980s, but continues today with robust research that captures how media fragmentation and digital platforms shape traditional news and, in turn, the public agenda.

This sort of cue-taking and cascading behavior is also a characteristic of policy studies (see Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 1984), but has been formalized and integrated into studies of the media and its role in shaping both elite and public attention. Just as policy scholars study the norms of policymakers and political institutions in the agenda setting process, journalists' norms shape that process, along with training and newsroom values that shape what they cover and how (Harder et al., 2017). Many describe inter-media agenda setting as a vehicle for shaping news within the journalism community and providing validation for what gets reported (Nygaard, 2020). Additionally, this type of agenda-setting behavior reflects the constraints on the media industry, both in terms of human and fiscal capital, as certain types of events and stories are more valued than others, which can reinforce ideas of what is newsworthy (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008).

As the media has become more diversified and fragmented, the relationship between different media outlets has the potential to influence both elite and public agendas, but too often policy studies give less consideration to these kinds of media dynamics. One way that policy scholars could benefit from collaborative studies across fields is simply to understand the power of the media as an informal political institution. While some early policy agenda studies gave little consideration to the media (Kingdon, 1995), it is becoming increasingly clear how the media can spur policy change in some circumstances, while also acting as facilitator for the status quo in others. Exceptions to this norm of low media attention in the policy process literature include research by Walgrave and Vliegenthart that considers how the media shapes the agendas of policymakers and how the dynamics of the media's signal shapes the policy process (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008; Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2010). The media is a political institution characterized by incentives, such as attending to elite actor and consumer demands, and those incentives shape the policy process (Russell, Dwidar, & Jones, 2016; Boydston, 2013).

To understand larger systemic processes, we need to understand the individuals within those institutions. Similarly to how we understand the micro foundations of the policy process, we must understand the foundations of those institutions, which include individual-level agenda setting behaviors. One example of this is intermedia agenda-setting, where the influence is not only from the

New York Times to CNN, but rather from the tweets of policy and political elites to the front pages of news (Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017). Policy studies would benefit from examining political and media realities where one actor can shape an entire institution or policy process. This type of analysis has been done in the United States where individual lawmakers in the Senate are considered the pivot point on lawmaking agendas, but in a world where one tweet or one meme can disrupt the political or media agenda (Russell, 2018, 2020), the influence of individuals and the power of the individual-level agenda is even more important to consider in broader agenda-setting research.

### Supply of information

Policy agenda research has recognized how the nature of information shapes the policy process in a way that the media and electoral studies of public priorities have not. Public policy research de-emphasizes the strategic manipulation of actors through elections and sheds additional light on how new information can disrupt and alter agenda-setting patterns. Baumgartner and Jones (2015) argue that governments are complex and adaptive systems are designed to address the over-supply of information and the challenges of processing that information in policy-making. Public policy has broadened the concept of stability and change in policymaking to consider how information shapes the decision-making process. For example, legislative hearings illustrate the dynamics of policymakers' attention during the process of information collection. From a comparative perspective, Lohmann (1994) describes how the transmission of new information about the regime sparked interest and mass demonstrations just before the Berlin Wall fell.

Policy agenda-setting emphasizes the role of information in a policymaking system because the way that information is processed affects how problems are collected, interpreted, and prioritized for the legislative or executive agenda (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, 2012). Policy learning – enduring changes in policy actors' understanding or intentions – is a key step in the policy process, highlighted most prominently by the Advocacy Coalition Framework, and fundamental to that learning is understanding that the flow of information can be both uncertain and ambiguous (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). The agenda-setting process is intertwined with the flow of information because information must be attended to and interpreted, before it can become actionable by policymakers.

Jones and Baumgartner (2005) offer the concept of disproportionate information processing, the idea that information is integrated in an uneven way, that stems from excess information about policy problems, contrasted with a limited ability to focus on multiple information streams – forces policy makers to engage

in prioritization and disparate policy attention. Prioritizing information of some problems, rather than others, can lead to distorted responses. One example of this is policy bubbles, where there is long-term over investment in a policy due to out-sized attention, relative to nature of the problem (Jones, Thomas, & Wolfe, 2014).

The idea that information is a source of stability – or instability – in the agenda-setting process is not unique to policy agenda studies, but media studies have often tied information to information news flows (Guo & Vargo, 2017). Information moves through the media, but there is a larger discussion about news patterns and practices that does not touch on the nature of information itself.

### **Foraging a new path: A complex systems approach to agendas**

One way that these two conceptualizations of agenda setting have the potential to grow together is through a more expanded view of agenda setting that takes a complex systems approach to understanding the dynamics of attention. Complex systems approaches focus on studying not just the parts of a system, but also their relationships to each other as a way to understand how the system itself is more than just the sum of its parts (Bar-Yam, 2002). This is an approach that has cut across all disciplines and fields, as researchers readjust their perspective on understanding the world. For generations, scientists have attempted to understand physical and social phenomenon by breaking them down into smaller and smaller parts. For example, the physical sciences have moved from understanding the world as made up of molecules; to atoms; to protons, neutrons, and electrons; and to quarks. The complex systems approach relies on our understanding of all of those smaller components in order to build back up to a higher level and understand the broader system.

Consequently, the fundamental benefit of the complex systems approach for understanding agenda setting is that it conceptualizes the agenda as not merely a series of micro-level effects that sum to the macro-level effect (Wolfe et al., 2013), but the result of the relationships between many different actors. Here is an analogy: a tree is made up of hundreds of millions of individual cells, yet a tree, as we understand it, is not recognizable from studying those individual cells. The different types of individual cells work together to create something bigger. This way of understanding agenda setting is helpful for bringing the policy and media literatures together, as it is a way to zoom out from the particularities of the policy and media worlds to focus on the bigger picture of how these different players interact. We argue that the agendas of the media, policy makers, and the public can be mapped in similar terms, affording the opportunity to study all three simultaneously. When we do that, our understanding of agenda setting becomes much

more interactive and focused on understanding the specific dynamics of the policy area, the particular institutions involved, and the amount of attention at play.

The media serves as an important part of a complex systems approach to agenda setting because of the way the media, as an institution, has relationships with so many other actors in the political process. In many ways, the media binds together the public and elite players in the political process, as they are both an agenda setting actor in their own right and a source of information regarding the agendas of other actors in the political process. If we think about the media as a part of the complex information-processing system that influences the public policy process, then we must understand that the influence of the medias' relationships with other actors is greater than the sum of its parts (Russell et al., 2016; Jones & Wolfe, 2010). So, even as important as it is to understanding the media as a formal institution within the policy process, we should try to understand the effects of media actors' interaction within that policy-making and agenda-setting process. Third-level or network agenda-setting by media scholars makes this effort to consider the media's centrality to multiple or pair-wise agendas, but reinforcing this network approach across media and policy agendas would take that existing framework one step further.

There is an intuitive aspect to the complex systems approach that has emerged in work focused on how agendas are created. Agenda-building literature explores the ways in which issues emerge and command attention (Cobb & Elder, 1971). In this perspective, issues don't just arise from the ether; an issue captures the attention of one political actor, who then works, either consciously or unconsciously, to get other actors to pay attention to that issue. Consequently, agenda building is a product of reciprocal influence, where the media agenda, policy agenda, and public agenda are influencing one another (Denham, 2010). In many ways, understanding the broader systemic agenda requires understanding that the agendas of political, media, and policy actors are dependent on each other (Lang & Lang, 1983). In their work on the dynamics at play during Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, Lang and Lang examined how the presence of the issue on one agenda, whether policy actors, media, or the public at large, resulted in the presence of the issue emerging on other agendas (1983). Taken a step further, this provides but one example of how a complex systems approach can better help us to understand the dynamics of agenda setting, as in this case, it is only when considering all actors that a true appreciation of the agenda could be developed. While a number of scholars have conducted work on reciprocal influence and agenda setting amongst a variety of media and policy actors (e.g. Edwards & Wood, 1999; Johnson et al., 1996), the focus on the influence of individual actors within the systems downplays the simultaneous impacts that they are all having on each other.

This approach also highlights the interconnected nature of agendas at different levels. Cobb and Elder (1971) define the systemic agenda as “a general set of political controversies that will be viewed as falling within the range of legitimate concerns meriting the attention of the polity” (905), which is different from the institutional agenda, “a set of concrete items scheduled for active and serious consideration by a particular institutional decision-making body” (906). It does not take considerable creativity to see the link between these two different agendas and how the presence of an issue in the systemic agenda may lead it to become a part of an institutional agenda, or vice versa. Additionally, the systemic agenda and institutional agendas are developed as a result of the collective attention of individuals. A critical component of understanding the nature of agenda setting is recognizing the push-pull nature of attention; as individuals begin to pay attention to an issue, it can influence the broader polity, resulting in an issue being placed on a systemic agenda, but an issue emerging on the systemic agenda or on a particular institutional agenda can also result in greater attention being paid by individual people. The different levels of agendas can have powerful influences on the formation of the agenda at another level. While scholars of agenda building, whether actor-focused or level-focused, are missing the explicit language of the complex systems approach, many of these scholars highlight the influence of other agendas, which is a pre-requisite to understanding agenda setting in a dynamic way.

Yet there are also a number of scholars who have begun to develop an explicit complex systems approach to understanding the role of the media. An excellent example of using a complex systems framework to understand the role of the media is in Wolfe’s work on the relationship between the news media and the speed at which a bill becomes a law (2012). Rather than assume that the media has the same role in all cases, Wolfe explored whether the level of media attention resulted in different outcomes for the legislative process. She found that those bills that received higher levels of media attention took a significantly longer amount of time to become law, relative to those bills that received little media attention. An important aspect of this finding, however, was that the level of media attention did not affect the likelihood of whether or not a bill became a law. These results, which show that there are two different types of effects that the media has on the legislative process, highlight the need to embrace the complexity of agenda setting. In this kind of complex systems approach, the media agenda and the policy agenda are clearly intertwined with multiple types of feedback effects, rather than simple causality (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Jones, Sulkin, & Larsen, 2003).

The work of Stuart Soroka is another example of research trying to take a more complex systems approach to understanding agenda setting dynamics. Soroka makes use of how the different literatures address attention to issues on the

governmental agenda, the media agenda, and the public agenda, as a way to conceptualize the interrelated nature of agenda setting, calling this effort expanded agenda setting (2002). This effort forms a framework to examine agenda setting dynamics, both theoretically and empirically, across these different conceptualizations of agenda setting. This work focuses on the fact that all types of agenda setting are interested in what issues are salient and recognizes that these perceptions of issue salience may be influenced by the salience of an issue on another's agenda, as at the heart of agenda setting is signaling regarding "what to think about" (Cohen, 1963). This approach allows for the idea that there can be both agenda-setting effects between the different agendas (i.e., that as the salience of an issue rises on one agenda, it may cause the salience of that issue to rise on other agendas) and that there can be exogenous forces that cause an issue to rise in salience simultaneously across all agendas (Soroka, 2002; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). Similarly, research by Son and Weaver (2006) offers more nuance and detail about how news coverage, polls, and public documents work in concert with one another to shape attribute agendas in presidential elections – offering no limit on the number of strata that can be examined as influential aspects of the agenda-setting process.

Yet these are not the only scholars adopting this approach. A number of scholars are adopting research agendas that capture the dynamism in the political system and embrace the complexity of the agenda-setting process. For example, Vliegthart and Walgrave (2012) argue that protest movements have complex and multi-staged effects on the policy process and their research proposes a causal structure that captures the array of actors and issues up for debate. Their research also highlights the simultaneous nature of multiple agendas that exist, rather than conceptualizing a monolith "government" or "public" agenda. Media coverage of nuanced issues, like climate change, offer an additional opportunity to embrace the complex and dynamic effects of framing and the non-linear relationship between information and behavior (Anderson, 2009; Dunwoody, 2007). A number of other scholars have started embracing this complexity and feedback in their work, attempting to model the real-world dynamics of the agenda-setting process (Belchior, 2020; de Azevedo Almeida & Corrêa Gomes, 2020; Cavari & Freedman, 2019; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Jones & Wolfe, 2010; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009).

## Conclusion

In this article, we argue that agenda-setting by policy and communication scholars has fostered two, disparate research trajectories that, while expansive, fail to

reach their full potential without an integrated or complex approach to agenda research. Communication studies highlight the relationship between the media and the public, yet too often ignore potential effects on the policymaking agenda (Wolfe et al., 2013). Media agenda setting has furthered the role of the media in political life, but the central figures in these studies are media actors and their effects on the public, each other, and less so, but equally important, policymakers. Policy scholars question policy determinants, including the media, but generally have paid less attention to the effects of journalism norms. In this case, the media is just one of many informal actors that can influence the agenda setting process, rather than the primary actor across agenda-setting studies. Policy agendas are linked to policy outputs that result from organized attention, but give less consideration to the role of the public or public opinion, as these studies primarily focus on institutional rules and norms, rather than behavior. Media agenda setting, on the other hand seems to turn in the opposite direction, focusing on the public and public opinion. Both have contributed to the evolution of each field and what began as studies of American political behavior now have expanded across governing systems, belief systems, and internationally across a multitude of contexts. But while these two research agendas have gained traction within their own fields, they seldom speak to one another. What is really miraculous is the growth of these two fields, that in many ways parallel each other, without speaking the same language.

How we conceptualize agenda setting and what that means has profound impacts, not only on the theorizing we do, but also the professional impacts within each discipline. The culture of research and collaboration directly impacts both the scope of research and the potential for scholarly collaboration. Foraging a new path ahead that considers a broad-based purview for agenda setting gives scholars, particularly younger scholars and graduate students, more opportunities for research development and publication. In far too many instances, the silo effect of these two agenda-setting literatures means that research agendas are narrowed such that potential collaborators, reviewers, and mentors are more limited than otherwise necessary. One concrete example is in the publishing process, where the potential pool of reviewers is limited by the different conceptualizations of agenda setting. Additionally, the likelihood of a favorable, critical and useful review is jeopardized by a researcher who lacks the understanding of agenda-setting research outside of his or her immediate field. As an editor, seeking out agenda-setting scholars is complicated by the disparate notions about what are meaningful research questions and what role the media should be understood as playing when developing hypotheses about either policy or media agendas. By bridging the gap between media and policy agenda studies, we not only seek analyses that more accurately represent the complex world of agenda-setting,



attention, and framing, but also, create a more diverse and richer network of scholars that provides opportunities for collaboration.

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