The Powerful Role of Interpersonal Communication in Agenda Setting

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The effects of interpersonal communication in agenda setting have been consistently but inconclusively investigated since McCombs and Shaw (1972) proposed the theory. We know that the media set the agenda of those who are media reliant, but indirect effects of 2-step flow in the agenda-setting process have not been established. This study investigated whether people who rely more on interpersonal communication have the same news and public affairs agenda as people who rely more on mass media. A local random survey using a novel reliance measure was matched with an extensive media content analysis. No differences in public agenda were found between the 2 information reliance groups. The findings prompt a reconceptualization of how news and public affairs information flow through audiences and form the basis of public opinion.

Accumulated research over 30 years has led to a convergence in two major communication theories: agenda setting and two-step flow. This study attempts to ascertain whether the mass media’s influence on the public agenda is both direct and indirect. Researchers have reported considerable evidence suggesting how these two theories coalesce, but the outcomes remain ambiguous.

Specifically, it is unknown whether the agendas of the people who rely less on the mass media for public affairs information will be the same or different from the agendas of those people who rely heavily on the mass media for such information. Agenda-setting theory assumes that those who are more media reliant will have adopted the media agenda, whereas the less media reliant will have a different agenda.

However, the mass media are not the only sources from which people obtain knowledge of issues or events. Information is conveyed through direct personal

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experiences and through structured patterns of social interactions (Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992). People talk. They discuss topics—including news and public affairs issues—with friends, neighbors, family members, and coworkers. Two-step flow theory states that opinion leaders, who are more likely to attend to the media for news and public affairs, will pass this information to the less media reliant through interpersonal communication. How does this interpersonal source of information contribute to people’s knowledge of issues or perceived salience of issues? Does it contribute the same or less than do the mass media?

This study was designed to measure the agenda-setting effects of those who are more versus less media reliant. Knowing these effects will lead to a clearer understanding of the flow of information between the mass media and their audiences and among people about issues and events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda-setting theory stemmed from Lippmann’s Public Opinion (1922) idea that the mass media connect “the world outside” and “the pictures in our heads.” Later, Cohen (1963) suggested that the press tells “its readers what to think about,” and McCombs and Shaw (1972) provided empirical evidence that the mass media structure the public’s perception of issue importance, a cognitive rather than persuasive effect (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

Agenda-setting theory offered a new way of thinking about the mass media’s power. However, this view of media’s impact on what Shaw (1976) termed a “defenseless, exposed public” (p. 230) is “too simple, too mechanistic, too gross to account accurately for mass media effects” (Rogers, 1973, p. 292). Brosius and Weimann (1996) noted that the agenda-setting tradition, mostly based on aggregate data, often overlooks the individual-and-personal-network level of analysis.

Researchers studying the interpersonal network in political communication recently reported that people review and elaborate their prior understanding of issues through interpersonal communication (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), and that such “controversial discussion” promotes political participation (p. 287). Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000) found that people frequently discuss national, international, state, and local affairs at home and at work, and speculated that such informal conversations are a vital component of political life. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) noted that people usually talk with family and friends who hold similar viewpoints but are open to the influences of differently minded people. These interpersonal network studies confirm that people do discuss public affairs issues, and the studies evoke classic two-step flow tenets.

Two-step flow theory, established long before agenda setting, highlighted the role of individuals who mediate between the mass media and the public. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1968) concluded that some of their 1940 Erie County panel
members served as “opinion leaders” who knew more about the political campaign by exposing themselves heavily to the mass media. Those with lower levels of exposure, knowledge, and interest turned to the opinion leaders for information and advice (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995).

Even though the formation of two-step flow was based on explaining how media information passes to the public rather than how the public views the importance of issues, it is reasonable to believe interpersonal communication plays some role in the agenda-setting process. The findings from both types of studies suggest such a link.

Several studies of interpersonal communication looked at media use. Beinstein’s (1977) pilot study of opinion formation compared the reported impact of mass media and interpersonal sources of information among women with different social network densities. She found that the less her friends knew each other, the more likely they were to rely on the mass media, but the more they knew each other, the more likely they were to rely on each other or other interpersonal sources.

Robinson (1976) investigated interpersonal influence in election campaigns and found that opinion leaders were different from other people because of their social position or their interest in the topic. They monitored the mass media more closely and more purposely than nonleaders. Weimann (1991) tagged the group “influentials,” whom he described as concentrated in higher socioeconomic status and active across several topic areas rather than one. However, Weimann’s influentials were not necessarily more exposed to the mass media than others.

Agenda-setting researchers began investigating the link to interpersonal communication early. McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974) found that interpersonal communication played a greater role in agenda setting when newspapers declined as an information source late in a campaign. Shaw’s (1976) study of a political campaign supported the claim that interpersonal factors were good predictors of agenda setting. Specifically, the more frequent and more active one’s participation was in interpersonal networks, the closer the agreement between one’s personal agenda and that of the media. Likewise, Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980) found that interpersonal communication may increase issue salience by playing an essential role when people want to make sense of new topics reported in the media.

Ball-Rokeach (1985) recognized that individuals are situated in and affected by interpersonal networks and noted “the agenda of intrapersonal discourse is, to some extent, shaped by the message foci of the media system” (p. 502). This argument acknowledges the impact of the mass media on interpersonal discourse, implying a role for interpersonal communication in setting the public agenda.

More recently Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, and Hamm (1999) developed a model of agenda melding in which individuals adopt views about news and public affairs that lead them into social affiliations stemming from both media and interpersonal
interactions. This process of audiences joining agendas involves the commingling of media and interpersonal communication.

All of these studies suggested the tendency of interpersonal communication to enhance agenda setting, but other studies reported the exact opposite effect. Atwood, Sohn, and Sohn (1978) found that although the local newspaper may partially set the public agenda, interpersonal communication provides a variety of topics that are not likely to be reported in the media. Atwater, Salwen, and Anderson (1985) found that interpersonal discussion about environmental issues obstructed the media’s agenda-setting effect. Their less active discussion group was more likely to adopt the media’s issue salience as its own, but this agenda-setting effect was reduced in their active discussion group.

Lasorsa and Wanta (1990) found that the more an individual was exposed to political communication interpersonally, the less likely he or she would conform to the media agenda. In other words, interpersonal communication interfered with the media agenda conformity, but only modestly. Mendelsohn’s (1996) Canadian election data also showed that interpersonal communication can act as a counterbalance to the media—that is, the two can pull in opposite directions.

Other studies provided mixed results about the relationship between interpersonal communication and mass media communication. Winter (1981) summarized the point, saying some researchers reported that interpersonal discussion filtered or reduced media influence, whereas others reported that it enhanced media effects.

Wanta and Wu (1992) conducted a political opinion survey comparing media sources with personal sources. They found that interpersonal communication enhanced agenda-setting effects when the discussions dealt with issues covered in the media. However, when the discussions dealt with issues that received little coverage in the media, interpersonal communication competed with the media in agenda setting.

Weaver et al. (1992) studied the relative roles of personal experience, interpersonal communication, and mass media in agenda-setting effects of the drug abuse issue. Interpersonal communication was found to play a significant role in perception at both the personal and societal levels and served a bridging function between the two levels. However, interpersonal communication neither superseded nor was supplanted by mass media information in the social-level perception of the drug issue.

Brosius and Weimann (1996) studied interpersonal influentials but said their role in shaping the media and public agenda was still to be determined. In fact, when studies brought such varied results, researchers could conclude only that interpersonal communication influenced media effects in some way.

These supportive, nonsupportive, and mixed results call for more empirical evidence to clarify the role of interpersonal communication in agenda setting. Does interpersonal communication interfere with or enhance the influence of the media?
agenda? This study addresses that question by creating an index to identify two groups: One relies more heavily on the mass media, whereas the other relies more heavily on interpersonal communication. Correlation results compare the media-reliant group’s agenda with the media agenda and the interpersonal-reliant group’s agenda with the media agenda. Because the research literature more recently supports a negative or neutral effect for interpersonal communication in agenda setting, the following hypothesis is tested: The correlation between the public issue agenda and the mass media agenda will be significantly higher for those who rely more on the mass media than for those who rely more on interpersonal communication.

Although this hypothesis seems axiomatic, the interpersonal communication studies and some agenda-setting studies do offer support for the null hypothesis: Those who rely more on interpersonal communication exhibit the same media agenda as those who rely more on the mass media.

Two-step flow theory suggests that an interpersonal group’s public affairs agenda will be influenced by conversations with friends and relatives who rely more on the mass media. Those who are more media reliant will influence the agenda of the less media reliant through conversations. Failure to support the hypothesis in this study will lend additional support to the indirect influence of mass media agenda-setting through interpersonal communication.

One additional line of research must be mentioned, the idea of obtrusive versus unobtrusive issues in agenda setting. Stone, Singletary, and Richmond (1999) briefly summarized some of this research and said, “not all news issues are created equal.” Unobtrusive issues, such as earthquakes or terrorism, are thought to be taken directly from media because people have no other way of knowing. The public knows about obtrusive issues, such as inflation and abortion, so these are thought to be topics of interpersonal discussion. Unobtrusive issues are likely to dominate the media agenda, whereas obtrusive issues occasionally appear on the public agenda.

However, because there is no clear demarcation between unobtrusive and obtrusive issues, this study did not attempt to deal with these concepts.

**METHOD**

**Public Survey**

A local random telephone survey was combined with content analysis of the major U.S. media. The survey was done the last week of February through the first week of March 2000. Toll-free phone numbers were selected by random entry to current local telephone directory listings, screened to eliminate business phones, with last-digit replacement. This process has been used frequently in Carbondale,
Illinois, and has produced satisfactory random samples (Stone, Besser, & Lewis, 2000; Stone, O’Donnell, & Banning, 1997).

As a college community, the site offered a distinct advantage for testing the hypothesis. Residents’ wide range of education and income levels was valuable in a study of interpersonal communication versus mass media use in agenda setting. The study’s sample had almost equal numbers above and below the income mean, and education level divided into four nearly equal parts from high school to postgraduate degree.

Professional telephone surveyors were paid to administer the survey and were supervised by their employer and one of the authors. Other than the perpetual problem of being unable to reach a working phone or of getting answering machines on callbacks, no difficulties were noted during the surveying process. Working numbers that were unanswered or busy were called at least four times.

A screening question alternated male and female respondents and required that only nonstudents participate. Eliminating students met the objective of constituting a sample of traditional community adult residents. It prevented the sample from being dominated by college students with their nonrepresentative media use and interpersonal communication patterns, higher education, and lower average income and age. A total of 408 respondents, for a 64% response rate, completed the questionnaire. The sample provided a margin of error of ±5%.

The questionnaire included three items to test the hypothesis plus demographics. Setting the theme of the study, the first question focused respondents’ thinking on their source of news: “Some people rely on the mass media such as television, radio, magazines and newspapers for their news and public affairs information. Others rely more on friends and family members. Which do you rely on most for news and public affairs information: mass media or friends and family?”

**Independent Variable**

The next question asked the following: “About what percentage of your news and public affairs information do you get from: friends and family; the mass media?” This question served as the study’s independent variable. Because it was anticipated that most people would say they relied on the mass media for news and information, the percentage question was designed to divide the sample at the median of percentages given. For example, if the median response to this item was 25% interpersonal, those who registered more than 25% interpersonal would be classified as relying heavily on interpersonal communication (more heavily than the sample average). This ratio-type question permitted a near 50–50 division of the sample population, maximizing the size of both groups to test the hypothesis.
Because the question constitutes a novel approach for measuring media versus interpersonal reliance, validation is difficult. Respondents cannot be expected to accurately specify the exact point on the 0-to-100 scale their media reliance falls. At best, a person who claims 75% media reliance may be considered more media reliant than a person claiming only 60%. However, this questionnaire item elicited few objections, little hesitation, and no indication that respondents’ answers lacked authenticity. In fact, the responses ranged across the entire 100-point scale and showed construct validity when the outcome was heavily skewed toward mass media reliance, the theoretical expectation.

Reliance, as used in this survey, differs from participation and exposure measures researchers have used previously. The most commonly used measure is media exposure. For example, Wanta (1997) asked respondents how many days in the past week they read a newspaper and watched national and local television news broadcasts. Lasorsa and Wanta (1990) combined two variables to determine the media experience. Respondents were read a list of mass media and asked about how often they used each in the last month—every edition, most of the time, hardly ever, or never. Then they were asked, “How much attention do you pay to newspaper stories about national government and politics? A lot, some, not much, none at all?” Although this procedure is a more definitive method of measuring media participation and exposure, it cannot be used to assess interpersonal communication on public affairs. This study’s single-shot survey item provides a more general but equally sensible measure of interpersonal communication on public affairs issues.

The next question in this survey read as follows: “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?” This item was taken from the Gallup Poll question (Gillespie, 2000) used to assess public agendas and served the same purpose in this study. This question, with this wording, is the standard item used as the measure of public agendas in agenda-setting studies (Erbring et al., 1980; Iyengar, 1979; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981).

Content Analysis

The mass media agenda was assessed through an extensive content analysis procedure that included a time frame from January 10, 2000 (to avoid the millennium coverage) through the first week of March, when the survey ended. Thus, the time frame for the media agenda began about 6 weeks prior to and extended through the public agenda survey. The content analysis midpoint was about 3 weeks prior to the survey’s midpoint.

Researchers are ambivalent about what constitutes an appropriate time lag in agenda setting (Eyal, Winter, & DeGeorge, 1981). Older studies recommended
longer time lags. Sohn (1978) said 9 months, Stone and McCombs (1981) said 2 to 6 months, and Atwater et al. (1985) said 8 weeks. More recent studies recommend shorter time lags. Wanta and Wu (1992) said that 4 weeks might be the longest time needed. Wanta and Hu (1994) and Wanta (1997) reported a similar short time lag with television requiring less time but newspapers having a longer effect. This study’s analysis of a broad mix of newspapers, television, and magazines makes its approximate 4-week time lag reasonable.

This content analysis was more extensive than many others reported to assess the mass media agenda. Local and several national newspapers, network broadcast news, and national magazines were used to establish a national news agenda that would be compared with the public agenda questionnaire item: “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?” The media content analysis included the following media and methods:

1. Coding the first three pages of The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Chicago Tribune, and the town’s local daily newspaper; and the first five pages of The New York Times (pages 2–5 often contain full-page ads). The four major newspapers had remarkably similar public affairs agendas. Even the business-oriented Wall Street Journal correlated +.81 with The New York Times and +.95 with USA Today on the seven agenda issues used in this study.

2. Every available edition of the local daily was coded, whereas every other day’s editions of the prestige dailies were coded using an alternating pattern. The New York Times coding began January 15 and included every other day (five editions were missing); Chicago Tribune began January 16 (two missing editions); Wall Street Journal began January 15 (seven missing editions); USA Today began January 17 (one missing edition); the local daily began January 15 with no missing editions.

3. The same alternating selection procedure was used for early evening broadcasts of the national television networks based on accessing and printing scripts from the Vanderbilt Archives (2000) for ABC, NBC, and CBS. Inaccessible newscast dates were ABC, January 29; NBC, January 29, February 20; and CBS, January 16.

4. Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report were coded in alternating weeks beginning with the January 17 edition to include content from the week of January 10–15. Five editions of Time, four of Newsweek, and five of U.S. News were included, with no missing editions of news magazines.

The coding sheet for media content categories was more extensive than those reported in most agenda-setting studies. Categories followed those established by the Gallup Poll (Gillespie, 2000) with the addition of a category for “selecting new U.S. president” because of the primaries, and “airline safety” because two major airplane crashes occurred during the time frame. The topics of Y2K, the Monica Lewinsky controversy, and impeachment from the 1999 Gallup Poll were not included in this study.
With 35 categories and subcategories, intercoder reliability was a concern. Two people coded one edition of the same medium independently and then discussed their differences. Coders were then assigned to a single medium for intercoder reliability testing (e.g., each against others in the newspaper coding group). Coding agreement for each of seven coders compared on 20 decisions was: .88, .78, .82, .75, .69, .75, and .92, from which an average .80 intercoder reliability was obtained.

Although intercoder reliability was well within acceptable levels, when the 35 subcategories were collapsed to only the 10 more general headings, intercoder reliability increased dramatically to more than .95. For example, coders who did not agree if a story belonged in the subcategory “guns, gun control” versus “school shootings, school violence” did agree when both of these categories were combined into “crime” for analysis purposes.

Data Reduction

This study is not a classic agenda-setting study designed to demonstrate that the media set the public agenda. That aspect of the theory is assumed based on a generation of past findings. Instead, this study’s purpose was to test agenda-setting influences against those of two-step flow based on people’s interpersonal versus media reliance. Therefore, to increase the general correlation between the media and public agendas, three of the media agenda categories were eliminated entirely:

1. “Selecting new U.S. president” was eliminated because past studies show that the presidential primary is a media emphasis topic that just does not register on the public agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Stone & McCombs, 1981). Although this issue might have been combined with “trust in government, political leaders,” such a combination would be debatable at best.

2. “International issues, foreign affairs” was eliminated because only one previous nonwartime study (Wanta & Hu, 1993) found foreign affairs registers high enough to be included in the top 10 public agenda issues.1 The Gallup Poll for the period under study showed international issues registered below 10th place on the public agenda.

3. “Airline safety” was eliminated because the two plane crashes occurred too recently to register on the public agenda, according to studies that suggest a longer time lag (MacKuen, 1981).

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1A few representative studies that did not include international news or that discussed which issues appear on the public agenda are Brosius and Weimann (1996), Larsorsa and Wanta (1990), Golan and Wanta (2001), McCombs and Zhu (1995), and Zhu (1992).
It is worth reiterating that these topic eliminations result in a more streamlined media agenda, reducing the combined categories from 10 to the 7 most likely to register on the public agenda. Reducing media agenda categories is a common research procedure, and seven categories of economy, health, crime, social issues, trust in government, environment, and education still provide a sufficient number for analytical testing.

Table 1 shows how the 35 media agenda items coded into the Gallup Poll categories were reduced to 7 categories. The 18 categories into which the public agenda responses were originally coded were reduced to the same 7 categories. These served as the respective media and public agendas for analysis.

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**TABLE 1**

Topics Reduced to Seven Key Issues for Media and Public Agendas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda Topic</th>
<th>Media Agenda</th>
<th>Public Agenda&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy (taxes, technology, stocks, discoveries, budget surplus/prosperity,</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>national debit/deficit/budget, international trade, Internet, salaries/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jobs/retirement/security/Social Security)&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime (school shootings, drugs, guns/gangs; espionage)</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues (poverty/welfare/homelessness, race, media sex/violence,</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abortion; aliens)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (Medicare, genes, aging population)</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in government</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Deleted from the original 35 coded items were presidential primary, airline safety, and international, including divisions from Middle East, China, former Soviet Union or Russia, and active war zones.

<sup>a</sup>N = 320. <sup>b</sup>The mean is the average number of stories per edition (newspaper, broadcast, and magazine) during the coding period. <sup>c</sup>These subcategories were combined into the general category to collapse the data.

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2Wanta and Wu (1992) identified five high-coverage and five scant-coverage issues; Erbring et al. (1980) used seven issues; McCombs and Shaw (1972) classified news content into 15 categories; Atwood et al. (1978) used a set of 41 categories; McLeod et al. (1974) advocated using broader categories to capture media content over time; Golan and Wanta (2001) coded 17 media issues but used only 6 to correlate with 6 public issues; Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, and Koetzle (1998) reduced 16 issues to 12; McCombs, Escobar, and Llamas (2000) used five media and public agenda issues.
The independent variable, extent of reliance on the mass media versus interpersonal communication, was established by using the median value of reliance on interpersonal communication. As anticipated, the great majority (90%) of respondents said they relied most on the mass media for news and public affairs. However, the question asking what percentage of news and public affairs information was secured from family and friends versus the mass media was an effective distinguishing variable.

The median value for reliance on interpersonal communication was 20% ($M = 22.8$, $SD = 21.2$), which was used as the criterion variable: Those who relied on friends and family for more than 20% of their news and public affairs information formed the interpersonal group. The finding suggests that people generally rely on the mass media for about 80% of their information about news and public affairs, and they rely on interpersonal communication for only about 20%.

Although people rely on the mass media more than interpersonal sources for news and public affairs, as was expected, the independent variable still distinguishes between relatively media-dependent versus interpersonal-dependent groups. For example, most of those designated as media dependent (56% of the sample divided near the median) said they relied on media for more than 75% of their news and public affairs information. Most of those designated interpersonal dependent (44% of the sample) relied on interpersonal communication for at least 40% of their news and public affairs information.

Composition of the dependent variable, the match between public and media agendas, is shown in Table 1. Using ranks of the seven most prevalent media and public affairs items, the two lists are correlated at +.36 compared with other agenda-setting studies that report correlations ranging from +.10 to +.80.3 At least two explanations are possible for this study’s midrange correlation:

1. The approximate 6 weeks of media content analysis may be a more truncated or extended time span than is needed to set the public agenda (MacKuen, 1981; Sohn, 1978; Wanta & Hu, 1994). The education issue, for example, might have been in the news more during the months prior to the survey period and thus remained high on the public agenda. Conversely, the economy may have become the number one media issue only 2 weeks prior to the survey and did not have time to register high on the public agenda.

3 Some studies with their reported correlation levels (in ascending order) are as follows: Erbring et al. (1980) +.11; Ghanem and Wanta (2001) +.13; Weaver et al. (1981) +.16; Huckins (1999) ranges from +.41 to +.82; Iyengar (1979) +.50; McCombs et al. (2000) +.66; Winter and Eyal (1981) +.71; Funkhouser (1973) +.78; Dalton et al. (1998) +.82.
2. This study was done during a time of economic prosperity, unlike most other agenda-setting studies reported, which might explain why the economy was not one of the top three public agenda items.

Regardless of the average strength of the correlation between the two agendas, a degree of inconsistency is ideal for this study because it offers a range of variance between the two agendas. That is, if the public and media agendas matched at the +.75 or greater level, little difference would be expected between the mediareliant and the interpersonal-reliant groups because both would be likely to have the same agenda set.

Table 2 presents a demographic contrast of the two groups created using 20% as the dividing point. These data underscore much of what the past research has shown about those who attend most to the mass media versus those who attend less. The media group is significantly more likely to be male, to be higher in education, and to be older. Although higher in income, this difference between the media and interpersonal group was not statistically significant. Those more reliant on interpersonal communication were more likely to be female, lower in education, and younger.

As a further test of validity in using the 20% median break point, the table shows what percentage of respondents who answered, in response to the first questionnaire item, that they relied most on media instead of friends and family remained in each of the constructed groups. Of those who had said they relied most on media, 62%...
remained in the media-reliant group, and almost all respondents who had said they relied on friends and family were in the interpersonal group. The difference between the two groups strongly suggests that using the 20% break point is a legitimate method of distinguishing relative interpersonal from relative media reliance in this sample.

Testing the study’s single hypothesis required using the division of interpersonal- and media-reliant groups noted earlier and matching their agendas with those of the media agenda using Spearman rank-order correlations. Ordinal Spearman correlations were used because the Pearson correlations were weaker at +.11 for the media and public agenda overall, and comparably weaker for the subset comparisons. Media agenda means and public agenda percentages in Table 1 indicate that these raw data comparisons deviate substantially although the ranks of the seven items are more compatible.

The outcome shown in Table 3 differs substantially from the hypothesis prediction that the media agenda match would be significantly higher for the media-reliant group than for the interpersonal group. The media-reliant group matched

| TABLE 3
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Agenda Correlations for Interpersonal and Media-Repliant Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups created using median of 20% reliance on friends and family; correlation based on respondents who matched one of the seven media agenda items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What percent of your public affairs information comes from friends and family?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Than 21% (Media Reliant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 224)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups created using 100% level of media reliance and 50% level of friends and family reliance; respondents matching one of the seven media agenda items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top media reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top interpersonal reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What percent of your public affairs information comes from friends and family?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100% Media Reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the media agenda at +.21, whereas the interpersonal group matched the media agenda at +.61. Neither reached statistical significance, but the interpersonal group was actually a closer match than the media-reliant group. The study’s hypothesis of expected agenda differences was rejected.

Because the outcome seemed counterintuitive and at odds with the predominant past literature on agenda setting, a further analysis is shown in the bottom half of Table 3. Here the extremes in interpersonal versus media reliance were used. Respondents who said they got 100% of their news and public affairs from the media formed the highest media-dependent group. The highest interpersonal group was formed from respondents who said they got 50% or more of their news and public affairs from friends and family. Using these extreme groups separated by reliance scores of 50 percentage points, a Spearman rank-order correlation reiterated the prior results: The interpersonal group’s media agenda was the same as that of the media-reliant group.

DISCUSSION

This study has several potential disadvantages in being local rather than national, in coding media content over 8 weeks rather than a shorter (or longer) time frame, and in having been done during a presidential primary period and a time of relative national stability. Any of these peculiarities might reduce the confidence in its findings. However, advantages include the extensive amount of media coded and the survey’s percentage question devised to distinguish interpersonal from media reliance. The authors believe that the media agenda for the time frame was an accurate measure and that the survey correctly discriminated between interpersonal- and media-reliant groups.

This study shows that, contrary to the hypothesis derived from some past agenda-setting studies, those who rely on interpersonal communication match the media agenda at the same or higher level than those who rely on the mass media. Extending this finding slightly, the outcome is that people who rely more on interpersonal communication have the same media-directed agenda as those who rely heavily on the mass media.

How might such an outcome be explained? For example, it seems axiomatic that people who attend closely to the mass media will incorporate its agenda with greater fidelity than those who neglect the mass media. However, such a view of media reliance ignores the considerable body of literature on two-step flow theory. To emphasize this point in the current research, Table 4 compares the overall public agenda with that of each separate interpersonal- and media-reliant group established in the study. Using the more sophisticated Pearson, there is a high correlation between the overall public agenda and the agendas of each of the reliance subgroups in the population.
This finding means that regardless of the extent of media or interpersonal reliance, all respondents have similar agendas about “the most important problems facing the country today.” Such a view is consistent with virtually every agenda-setting study showing that the media set the public’s agenda. The finding is also very much in tune with two-step flow’s basic tenet that those who attend most to the mass media serve as conduits for media issues to those who attend less.

This study suggests that two-step flow about news and public affairs issues is a powerful influence in setting public agendas: It tells the rest of the people what to think about. Instead of the traditionally accepted view that the media reliant will have a different agenda (closer to the media agenda) than the nonmedia reliant, it may be expected that the public agenda will reflect the mass media agenda in any subsample of respondents regardless of socioeconomic status or interest in news and public affairs. Though not the preponderant outcome of past research, previous studies in agenda setting—and certainly in two-step flow—support this study’s outcome. From a media theory perspective, this powerful two-step flow finding prompts a slight reconceptualization of mass media effects and the formation of public opinion.

Most of the past research in the field draws a sharp contrast between those who do and those who do not attend to the mass media for news and public affairs information. Among characteristics, it pictures the media reliant as better educated, older, wealthier, male, White, having a higher need for orientation, more politically and socially active, and more interested in information than entertainment. This body of research is found in knowledge gap, uses and gratifications, diffusion of innovations, opinion leadership, and 50 years of readership and news viewing studies. It depicts the media reliant as model citizens, and by implication suggests that the nonmedia reliant are an uninformed and apathetic group.

This study offers a slightly different view of the uninformed and apathetic. Those who rely more on interpersonal communication may be equally aware of and as interested in the important public affairs issues of the day. However, instead of attending directly to the mass media, they seek and receive their news and public

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interpersonal Group</th>
<th>Media-Reliant Group</th>
<th>Top 50% Interpersonal</th>
<th>100% Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public agenda</td>
<td>($p = .02$)</td>
<td>($p &lt; .001$)</td>
<td>($p = .03$)</td>
<td>($p &lt; .001$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Pearson correlations are based on the percentage that answered one of the seven topics in the media agenda; ratio data provide the most sophisticated comparisons between the overall public agenda and each subgroup’s agenda.
affairs information from their more media-dependent friends and relatives. Wyatt, Kim, and Katz (2000) reported such an outcome, noting that the amount of political conversation superseded education, political trust, and newspaper use in predicting civic participation.

Because the interpersonal reliant do seek news and public affairs information, the media agenda spreads throughout the population, not just to those who attend directly to the mass media. Such a view offers a powerful rationale for the unification of the two theories, which previously seemed at least slightly incompatible. Unification suggests an even greater role for media agenda setting in which topics the media emphasize make their way through the entire population as two-step flow prescribes. Almost everyone inculcates the same media agenda either directly or through interpersonal communication.

REFERENCES


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