2022

Agenda-Setting: What a Media Effects Theory Can Add to Information Literacy Instruction

Nate Floyd

Jaclyn Spraetz

AGENDA-SETTING: WHAT A MEDIA EFFECTS THEORY CAN ADD TO INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION

NATE FLOYD AND JACLYN SPRAETZ

INTRODUCTION

While fake news remains an important issue, it often overshadows the more subtle ways news media influence its audience. In this paper, the authors address this oversight by introducing the agenda-setting theory of mass communication as a classroom activity for information literacy instruction. Agenda-setting helps explain the relationship between the presentation of the news and public opinion. It suggests the media do not tell us what to think but do tell us what to think about. This paper presents the value of teaching media effects theories in information literacy classes and outlines a lesson plan on agenda-setting. The ultimate goal of this lesson is to empower students to think critically about the news media ecosystem.

SUMMER OF THE SHARK

Summer of the Shark began with an 8-year-old boy who was attacked by a shark in July of 2001. Perhaps this story gained so much media attention because of its gruesome details. Jesse Arbogast was standing in shallow water when a 200-pound bull shark attacked. Arbogast suffered horrific injuries. The attack sparked a media firestorm and led the news media to focus on shark attacks for the rest of the summer. The summer of 2001 became known as the Summer of the Shark when media coverage of shark attacks became the third most covered news story on ABC, NBC, and CBS until the September 11th attacks (Eisman, 2003).

While the news made many people fearful of sharks and left a lasting impression, it was a typical year in terms of shark attacks. According to the International Shark Attack File, there were fewer attacks in 2001 than there were in 2000 worldwide--76 attacks in 2001 compared to 89 in 2000. In hindsight, Summer of the Shark has been criticized as an example of fear mongering and exaggeration (Stossel & Jaquez, 2007; Broad, 2001). It illustrates how legitimate news can misinform its audience, causing the public to believe an issue is more important than it actually is.

FAKE NEWS VS. REAL NEWS

Despite many examples of legitimate media organizations sensationalizing the news, media and information literacy efforts continue to focus on the harm of fake news. We argue that not enough attention is paid to how real news can misinform its audience. Research suggests that Americans do not read as much fake news as suspected and it is only a small fraction of their total media consumption (Nyhan, 2020). Through analyzing Twitter data, Grinberg et al. (2019) found that 1% of users were exposed to 80% of fake news and that only .1% of users were responsible for sharing 80% of fake news. Additionally, Americans' consumption of fake news has declined since the 2016 election and, according to recent data, fake news made up only 0.7% of their total news diet (Guess et al., 2018, p. 3). In fact, more misperceptions occur due to political figures and elites sharing misinformation in mainstream news than through blatant fake news (Nyhan, 2020, p. 227).

Often, being misinformed can be attributed to intuitive thinking rather than analytical thinking (Nyhan, 2020, p. 225). For example, the media's focus on shark attacks during the summer of 2001 was so effective because many of us have an inherent fear of sharks. Individuals inherently afraid of sharks who relied on their intuition when trying to make sense of the risk of shark attacks were easily led astray. In our lesson on agenda-setting, we aim to get students to think analytically when encountering news stories.

While librarians direct students to use mainstream news for research projects, we often do not provide them with specific tools to read news stories analytically. Media effects offer a solution to this problem by providing students with a specific resource to use when reading news stories.

MEDIA EFFECTS

Walter Lippmann suggested the power of media effects in his 1922 book, *Public Opinion*. Lippmann was a prolific writer and public intellectual in the inter-war period. In his book, he considered the disconnect between what he called the world outside and the pictures in our head. How do we know what we think we know about the world, he wondered. Lippmann knew that the real world was too complex and too remote for us to manage. He argued that the media helped create the pictures in our heads. Years later, in the aftermath of World War II, scholars in psychology, sociology, and political science developed the field of mass communication and set out to study and document the effects of media messages. Media effects are "social or psychological responses occurring in individuals as a result of exposure to or processing of or otherwise acting on media messages" (Tsfati, 2011). These effects can be intended or unintended on the part of the message producer.

Perse and Lambe (2016) outline three important types of media effects in their book *Media Effects and Society*. They describe affective media effects, behavioral media effects, and cognitive media effects. Affective media effects are concerned with the "formation of attitudes, or positive or negative evaluations about something" (Perse and Lambe, 2016, p. 3). In the context of marketing, scholars might ask questions about the audience's emotional reaction to an advertising campaign. Behavioral media effects are concerned with documenting a link between behavior and exposure to media messages (Perse and Lambe, 2016). In the context of video games, scholars might ask questions about a link between violent behavior and exposure to violent video games. Cognitive media effects are concerned with "the acquisition of information—what people learn, how much do they learn, how needs for information are satisfied or not" (Perse and Lambe, 2016, p. 3). In the context of health communication, researchers might ask whether an anti-smoking campaign adequately informs the public. In the context of political communication, researchers might ask whether or how news stories can influence public opinion.

MEDIA EFFECTS: AGENDA-SETTING THEORY OF MASS COMMUNICATION

Agenda-setting is a cognitive media effect that helps explain the relationship between the presentation of news content and public opinion (McQuail, 2010). It is concerned with how we learn, and what we learn about political issues. Agenda-setting addresses the disconnect between the world outside and the pictures in our heads that Walter Lippmann discussed. Max McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) built on Lippmann's ideas in their 1968 study of voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. McCombs and Shaw demonstrated that journalists prioritize issues for voters by presenting the news in a way that the audience attaches importance to some issues, but not others.

Agenda-setting suggests the media indicate to the public the main issues of the day through the presentation of news. When readers look at a news source, they learn not only about a given issue, but also "how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and the position of the news story" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). The issues appearing most frequently and receiving the most space or attention are characterized as the media agenda. The media's ability to dictate which issues are most important is at the heart of agenda-setting theory.

To determine the media agenda for a specific publication, or a collection of publications, researchers use content analysis to count and quantify the issues as they appear in the media. The issues can be rank-ordered based on how much information is given about an issue, and where it is positioned in the newspaper or broadcast. Researchers expect to see some level of correspondence between the order of importance given in the media to issues (media agenda) and the order of significance attached to the same issues by individuals (public agenda. Agenda-setting's big idea is that the media do not tell you what to think, but they do tell you what to think about (McQuail, 2010).

THE LESSON PLAN

The purpose of the agenda-setting lesson plan is to help students look at how news stories are prioritized by different sources. The lesson allows students to reflect on their media usage and how media effects impact them, including both reflective and active learning activities to help students make connections between their own personal use of news media as well as the production of news.

At the beginning of the lesson students will independently answer the questions, "What are the issues that are most important to you?" and "What are your top news sources?" Once students have had time to answer these questions, they will respond on a Padlet with the top 3-5 news stories they believe are the most important current issues. Once students have shared their responses they will be asked why they believe the issues they wrote down are the most important issues.

After the group discussion, the librarian will do a mini-lecture on agenda-setting, providing a definition as well as examples of agenda-setting in different contexts, such as broadcast news, news feeds, and news websites.

In the next part of the lesson, students will have the opportunity to practice looking at agenda-setting in groups and reflect on their personal news feeds. During the first activity, students will look at positioning and space that news stories take up on newspaper front pages that we will provide to them using sources like *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Tribune*. Depending on if the session is in-person or online, students will use colored pencils or an online tool to outline the space devoted to various news stories on the newspapers' front pages. After looking at the position and space of news stories, students will do a think, pair, share to compare what the prominent issues look like in their newspapers.

In the second activity, students will be asked to look at the news sources or news feeds they typically go to and count the topics presented. Students' choice in this activity is important since we want students to reflect on where they find their news and what topics are prioritized. It is also important to show that agenda-setting does not just happen in newspapers but is present in all news media. After students count their top news stories they will compare them with the newspaper front pages shared in the first activity. This activity will help students reflect on what news they typically see and what news stories may be missing in their news feeds. At the end of this lesson, students will reflect on the activities by reflecting on how their knowledge of agenda-setting can help them read news in the future.

STUDENT LEARNING GOALS

The learning outcomes for the lesson include: 1) Students will be able to explain agenda-setting and how they can apply their knowledge of agenda-setting when consulting news sources; and 2) Students will be able to articulate how news stories influence them personally. It is important that students gain knowledge of agenda-setting, but we also want them to understand media effects in general and how readers are influenced by the news. This lesson benefits from active learning and helping students practice analytical thinking rather than intuitive thinking, guides students to reflect on their media diets, and adds nuance to a complex issue. Our ultimate goal is to give students a real tool they can use to critically read and engage with news stories.

CONCLUSION

Although fighting fake news remains an important issue, we argue that library teachers need to do more to help students understand the media effects of mainstream news. Our lesson plan on agenda-setting introduces the basics of content analysis, a methodological tool that offers students a way to critically engage with news stories. Looking at the amount of space devoted to a news story as well as how it is positioned can help determine the priorities of a particular news source. To borrow from Walter Lippmann, we want students to get to "the world outside" and understand that news sources prioritize issues differently. Introducing students to agenda-setting theory and teaching them how to apply it when interacting with news stories pushes students to reflect on how they consume news. It emboldens them to do the cognitive work of understanding how news stories are produced and disseminated.

REFERENCES

Broad, W. J. (2001). Scientists say frenzy over shark attacks is unwarranted. *New York Times*.
https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/05/us/scientists-say-frenzy-over-shark-attacks-is-unwarranted.html

Eisman, A. (2003). The media of manipulation: Patriotism and propaganda – Mainstream news in the United States in the weeks following September 11. *Critical Quarterly*, *45*(1-2), 55-72.

Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election." *Science*, *363*(6425), 374–78. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau2706

Guess, A., Lyons, B., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2018). Fake news, Facebook ads, and misperceptions: Assessing information quality in the 2018 U.S. midterm election campaign. http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2018.pdf

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *36*(2), 176-187. https://doi.org/10.1086/267990

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. SAGE Publications.

Nyhan, B. (2020). Facts and myths about misperceptions. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 34*(3). https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.34.3.220

Perse, E. M., & Lambe, J. (2016). *Media Effects and Society*. Routledge.

Stossel, J., & Jaquez, N. D. (2007). The 'fear industrial complex.' *ABC News*. https://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=2898636&page=1

Tsfati, Y. (2011, February 23). *Media effects*. Oxford Bibliographies. Retrieved March 30, 2021, from https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0081.xml.

University of Florida International Shark Attack File. (2021). Number of unprovoked shark attacks worldwide from 2000 to 2020. *Statista*. https://www-statista-com.proxy.lib.miamioh.edu/statistics/268324/number-of-shark-attacks-worldwide/