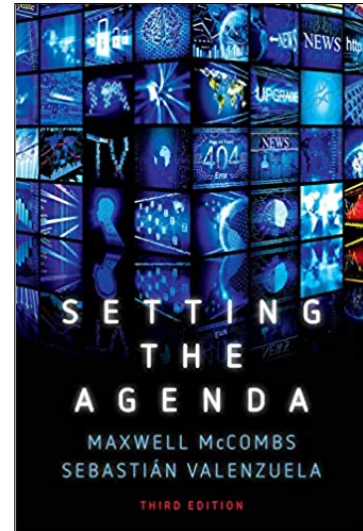


Maxwell McCombs and Sebastián Valenzuela, **Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion** (3rd ed.), Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021, 248 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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As one of the fundamental theories of political communication, agenda setting tackles the complex association between media coverage and public opinions, arguing and justifying the role of media in setting the public agenda in the past 50 years. **Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion**, since its first edition was printed in 2004, has become one of the most important textbooks on agenda-setting research. Now in its third edition, the book, written by authors Maxwell McCombs and Sebastián Valenzuela, provides a cutting-edge presentation of agenda-setting theory, with an extension on the relationships between media and public network agendas and an updated discussion on the phenomenon of agenda melding. This important work also covers topics such as the agenda-setting effects of social media and agenda setting within different contexts and cultures. This book is especially useful for faculty and students who are interested in research and teaching on mass communication, political science, and journalism studies.



The third edition of this book includes nine chapters, except for a preface written by Maxwell McCombs, the theoretical founding father of agenda setting, and a foreword written by Donald L. Shaw and David H. Weaver, as cofounders of agenda setting. Chapters 1–3 first present the first and second levels of agenda-setting theories. Chapter 1 focuses on the first-level of agenda setting, which illustrates the transmission of issue or objective salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. Several significant studies in the United States, the UK, and Germany are presented as well, and recent agenda-setting research found that entertainment media such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* could play a significant role in shaping public opinion.

Chapter 2 focuses on reality and the news. Echoing Lippmann’s idea of the pseudo-environment in 1922, the agenda-setting theory was first empirically tested in an election study in Chapel Hill and has been continuously tested through diversified methods such as experiment, survey, and content analysis toward a mix of issues such as drugs in 1980, environmental problems such as air and water pollution in the 1970s–1990s, crime problems in the 2000s, and recent issues concerning fake news in the 2010s. In this chapter, the longitudinal review of agenda-setting research also offers readers a clear picture of the origins—past and present discussion—of a crucial topic: how media coverage is influencing “the reality” in the public’s mind.

Chapter 3 emphasizes second-level agenda setting, describing how attributes prominent in the mass media tend to become prominent in the public’s mind. It discusses the connections between agenda setting and other communication theories such as the spiral of silence and framing theories. It also mentions the concept of compelling arguments, referring to the impact of attributes in the news coverage on the salience of objectives in the public agenda. The authors provide several examples on the evidence of compelling arguments, such as

the negative relationship identified between the positive tone of news coverage and issue salience within the public agenda on the issue of German integration. Chapter 4 introduces a newly developed third level of agenda setting, also called network agenda setting. Based on assumptions that people could cognitively connect issues, values, or attributes of objectives within a network in their minds, this new approach argues that issues or attributes within the media network agenda can significantly influence those in the public network agenda. This chapter also summarizes very recent research on the third-level agenda-setting effects using network analysis, and demonstrates empirical evidence from different regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Poland (Cheng, 2016; Guo et al., 2015; Wu & Guo, 2017) and contexts such as corporate crises (Etter & Vestergaard, 2015) or social movements (Cheng & Chan, 2015).

Chapters 5–7 continue to extend the discussion on why and how agenda setting works, and who sets the media agenda. Chapter 5, for instance, describes how major contingent factors such as issue obtrusiveness, personal experience, uncertainty, and the need for orientation can enhance or constrain the strength of agenda-setting effects. For instance, voters have different reasons for turning to the news media for orientation before they make voting decisions during elections. Such a psychological desire for background information or orienting cues would positively influence agenda-setting effects. Chapter 6 explains the agenda-setting process and the transfer of salience. In particular, it mentions the timeframe for effects and points out that such effects depend on diverse issues. Time lags between news coverage and public salience generally range from four to eight weeks for traditional media and can occur within a shortened time for social media.

Chapter 7 elaborates on who sets the media's agenda. This chapter illustrates origins of the media agenda and its three key elements, such as major sources for news stories, news organizations, and journalism's norms and traditions. In addition, it tackles the topic of intermedia agenda setting, referring to how a variety of traditional or social media may join in the communication process and transfer salience from one media agenda to another.

Chapter 8 delineates the consequences of agenda setting. Specifically, it introduces the impact of the first level of agenda setting on the shifting salience of issues on public opinion, the convergence of attribute agenda-setting and opinion formation at the second level, and indirect effects on behavioral outcomes. Chapter 9 addresses the continuing evolution of agenda-setting theory in communication and society. Beyond applications in political communication and public affairs, the authors list several implications of agenda setting on diverse domains within an international setting, suggesting that this theory has been adopted to understand social consensus and the transmission of culture, such as religion, civic culture, or personal culture. For example, during the 1992 presidential campaign, a case study found that the religious agenda played a significant role in setting the public agenda on the issue of abortion (Huckins, 1999). School textbooks and curriculum also shape collective memories among the public and provide instruction on the education of the next generation.

In summary, this book contains clear theoretical frameworks, introduces diversified research methods to test media effects, and conveys interesting discussions on the applications of agenda setting in a variety of contexts. Compared to other academic books such as Dearing and Rogers (1996) and Johnson (2015), this book offers a comprehensive description of the origins, development, and recent research on agenda-setting theories. Most important, Maxwell McCombs, as an extraordinarily gifted scholar and a highly supportive mentor for students, demonstrates the brilliance, persistence, and diligence in establishing and expanding this crucial

communication theory, together with his best friends and long-term research partners. This groundbreaking work is the best choice for students in the fields of communications, media, journalism, or politics.

As an expert overview of agenda-setting theory, merits of this book also include exploring the complex associations between social media and public agenda, as situated within a broader political, cultural, and technological context. Future studies may enhance the current work and explore how artificial intelligence (AI)-powered robots or chatbots may blur the role of traditional media and influence the public agenda. The content demonstrated by AI news anchors, for example, may attract a large audience and form a unique and competing agenda to influence the public's mind. Future scholarship could also continue exploring new technologies such as artificial intelligence and its impact on agenda-setting effects.

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