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Why do politicians attend to particular social problems? Is it because those are the problems the public wants them to address? But why does the public conceive solving certain problems as more urgent than others? Is this because the media tells them so? And why do the media report extensively on some issues, but not on others? Because some problems are more serious than others? These kind of questions are addressed within agenda-setting research. Dearing and Rogers have set themselves to the dual task of providing an introduction to, as well as a review of the research within the agenda-setting tradition.

At any given point in time, there are a number of issues which merit attention from politicians such as unemployment, the environment and drug abuse. These issues are hierarchically ordered; that is, some issues are conceived as more important than others. This hierarchical ordering of the issues which merit attention by politicians is called the policy agenda. Space on the agenda is limited; if a new issue becomes salient, some old issue is stricken off the agenda. An important question is: how do issues get on the agenda? To answer this question, two other agendas are distinguished, namely, the public agenda and the media agenda. The public agenda refers to the public’s opinion of which problems are the most important ones. The media agenda refers to the amount of attention that is given to an issue by the media. According to the agenda-setting process, the amount of attention an issue receives in the media (media agenda) influences the extent to which the public considers the issue to be an important problem (public agenda), which in turn influences politicians in taking action to solve the problem (policy agenda).

The starting point, therefore, is the media agenda. Content analyses of different media show that the amount of attention given to an issue by different mass media is surprisingly similar. The question is who or what puts an issue on the media agenda? In the US, two institutions play an important role in this process: the White House and the New York Times. If an issue is raised by the president or receives attention by the New York Times, it receives attention by other mass media as well. Surprisingly, real-world indicators such as (statistical) figures about the size of a problem do not play an important role in this process. For instance, while the media attention for environmental problems increased, the actual pollution figures decreased. Much more important than such facts is a newsworthy trigger event. The environment reappeared on the media agenda as a result of the Exxon Valdez disaster.

Next, the public agenda is discussed. In the US, the public agenda is usually measured by a single, open-ended question as employed in the Gallup Poll: “What is the most important problem facing America today?” Several studies have shown
the public agenda to be sensitive to the media agenda: the more attention an issue receives by the media, the more likely it is to be named as the most important problem facing America. There are two ways to study the public agenda, according to Dearing and Rogers. First, one can study the hierarchical ordering of the issues at a certain moment in time, and relate this hierarchy to the amount of attention each issue receives from the media. Second, one can study the rise and fall of a single issue on the agenda. The latter approach can be fruitful when one is interested in the temporal relations between the media, the public, and the policy agenda.

Compared to the other two agendas, little is known about the policy agenda. Whereas there are agreed-upon methods to measure the media agenda (content analysis) and the public agenda (answers to open-ended questions), Dearing and Rogers contend that there is no such method with respect to the policy agenda. Research suggests that the media agenda can influence the policy agenda directly and indirectly (through the public agenda). Again, the president plays an important role in putting an issue on the policy agenda. The book concludes with a summary of generalizations based on more than 20 years of research on agenda-setting plus a list of questions they think should be addressed in future research. Next to the usual list of references, the volume contains 20 pages of suggested readings about agenda-setting.

Dearing and Rogers have succeeded in writing a readable and clear review of research on agenda-setting which can also serve as an introductory textbook to the topic. Not only do they provide an overview, but they also address questions about the methodologies used, and point to directions further research should take. Combined with the long list of suggested readings, the volume provides an excellent starting point for doing research in this field. European readers may find the topics perhaps too US-centered, but at the same time, this may generate comparative research. For instance, it would be interesting to empirically determine which agenda-setting institutions serve the same function in European countries as the New York Times and White House do in the United States.

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