
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 agen-
das, 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 suc-
cceeded in writing a readable and clear
review of research on agenda-setting
which can also serve as an introduc-
tory 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 pro-
vides 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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