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Civic Osmosis: The Social Impact of Media

Key words: *Civic osmosis, agenda-setting, Internet, Social Media*

We swim in a vast sea of news and information, a gestalt of communication channels where the whole is indeed much greater than the sum of its parts. In this process of learning about the world around us through a continuous process of civic osmosis, the Internet and a growing host of electronic devices add dynamic and major channels to this gestalt. However, in the scholarly examination of communication effects, there is a tendency to emphasize individual media more than the communication media collectively as a system. To mix metaphors –to analyze the trees, but not to admire the forest.

Individual media, especially the growing array of new channels in the communication landscape, are intriguing and important. But that is not all the story. The impact of individual media on individuals and society often are highly situational. For example, this particularly can be the case in elections where the mix of candidates and concerns of the day create a vastly different political communication culture from election to election. To cite two American examples from the early days of agenda setting research, in the Charlotte study of the 1972 U.S. presidential election, newspapers demonstrated stronger agenda setting effects than television news¹. However, in the 1976 U.S. presidential election study of three cities, television was the dominant agenda setter². Sometimes a particular medium holds center stage. More often, the media collectively share center stage.

¹ SHAW, Donald, and McCOMBS, Maxwell, eds., *The Emergence of American Political Issues*. St. Paul, MN.: West, 1977.

² WEAVER, David, GRABER, Doris, McCOMBS, Maxwell, and EYAL, Chaim, *Media Agenda Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images and Interest*. Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1981.

If we were to construct a web site for agenda-setting theory and research, a prominent FAQ –to use the contemporary jargon of the Internet– would be whether newspapers or television are the stronger agenda-setter. And the answer to this question is telling. About half the time, there is no discernible difference in the agenda-setting influence of newspapers and television news. The other half of the time newspapers have the edge by a ratio of roughly two to one. Sometimes a particular medium holds center stage. More frequently, the communication media collectively hold center stage.

The perspective and approach to agenda-setting research outlined here, civic osmosis, emphasizes the collective role of the communication media. And the proliferation of new media adds a rich variety of dynamic channels to this communication gestalt. Increasingly, we swim in a vast sea of diversity, and we need to understand the currents in this sea, both those that enhance communication across our communities and nations and those currents that pollute the sea. But above all, we need to understand the sea as whole and how it changes and shifts over time.

1. Going back to the beginning

There is an abundance of empirical evidence regarding the inter-related nature of communication sources used by citizens for information about public affairs, evidence about the absorption of news and information from a communication media sea that dates from the earliest days of our field to the present era of the Internet.

In the benchmark 1940 Erie County study, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues found a substantial overlap in people's use of the various mass media. Comparing exposure to newspapers, radio and magazines, the primary media of that time, they concluded:

People highly exposed to one medium of communication also tend to be highly exposed to other media. There are relatively few who are highly exposed to one medium and little exposed to the other³.

Years later in a graduate school research paper, I replicated this finding at a time when television had become a primary medium for news.

³ LAZARFELD, Paul, BERELSON, Bernard and GAUDET, Helen, *The People's Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1944, p. 122.

On the content side of the equation, the benchmark Chapel Hill study of the agenda-setting role of the news media found a high degree of overlap in the issue agendas of the nine news media used by undecided voters during the 1968 presidential election. Across widely diverse news media – local and national newspapers, national television news, and news magazines – comparisons of all the agendas yielded a median correlation of $+0.71$. The outcome of these homogenous media agendas was that the match of the undecided voters' issue agenda with the consolidated media agenda was a highly robust $+0.97$ ⁴.

Although in response to survey questions, people can readily name a particular news medium as their primary source –the newspaper that they read most mornings, the radio or TV news that they tune to with some regularity– people are far from immune to the larger news environment. In the 1996 Spanish national election, McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, and Llamas found a high degree of similarity in the strength of agreement among the primary audience for each of six news media with their primary medium's agenda in comparison to their correlation with the agenda of the primary medium's principal competitor⁵. For example, among voters who identified *Diario de Navarra* as their primary news source, the agenda-setting correlation was $+0.62$. Their level of agreement with the competing local newspaper was $+0.57$. Across 18 comparisons, the median difference in the correlations is only $.09$. Media share agendas; we share agendas.

Leo Bogart found fascinating evidence about the intertwined nature, and loyalty, of the public's use of news media during the 1978 New York City newspaper strike. Common sense would suggest that with the three major dailies not publishing– the *Daily News*, *New York Times* and *Post* –the public might well turn in even greater numbers to television, particularly as a source of local news. However, examination of the ratings for local TV news during the month-long strike indicated that:

in the absence of the major newspapers, the public did not turn in massive numbers to TV news as a substitute. It could be inferred, to the contrary, that the unavailability of the newspapers may have desensitized normal interests⁶.

⁴ McCOMBS, Maxwell, and SHAW, Donald, "The agenda-setting function of mass media", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 1972, pp. 176-187.

⁵ McCOMBS, Maxwell, LOPEZ-ESCOBAR, Esteban and LLAMAS, Juan Pablo, "Setting the agenda of attributes in the 1996 Spanish general election", *Journal of Communication*, 50, 2000, pp. 77-92.

⁶ BOGART, Leo, *Press and Public*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, 1981, p. 189.

Now fast forward to the present. Media use patterns among different generations diverge at least somewhat because of the Internet and the proliferation of new communication devices. As a consequence, some predict the end of the agenda-setting role of the news media. However, drawing upon statewide surveys in North Carolina and Louisiana, Coleman & McCombs compared agenda setting effects among the generations and found little difference:

... despite evidence that the youngest generation is not exposed to traditional media as frequently as the older generations, and does use the Internet significantly more, there is little support for the intuitive idea that diversity of media will lead to the end of a common public agenda as we have known it. Rather, different media use among the young did not seem to influence the agenda-setting effect much at all⁷.

Particularly compelling is the comparison in the Louisiana data of the issue agenda of low and high internet users with the issue agenda of the state's major newspapers. There is a difference, but hardly an awesome one. For low internet users the correlation with the newspaper agendas is +.90. For high internet users, who still seemed shaped by newspaper agendas, the correlation is +.70.

Few persons are totally oblivious to the news. An extensive survey of exposure to nearly 50 news sources by more than 2,000 Dutch citizens, from age 13 and up, found that:

Two out of three people (67%) obtain a news overview of what is going on in the world every single day in a typical week. In contrast, only 12% use no information channel at all for finding out what is going on in a typical week. The others use on average 2.5 overview sources per day. Per week, it is even 4.1⁸.

The percentage of isolates, those who are not exposed to the news (12%), and their demographics (younger and less educated) in The Netherlands are

⁷ COLEMAN, Renita and McCOMBS, Maxwell, "The young and agenda-less? Age-related differences in agenda-setting on the youngest generation, baby boomers, and the civic generation", *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 84, 2007, p. 503.

⁸ TRILLING, Damian, and SCHOENBACH, Klaus, *Keeping up with current affairs: The users of online and offline news*, Research report, Institute for Journalism and Communication, University of Vienna, 2011, p. 9.

highly similar to Poindexter's earlier surveys of non-readers of daily newspapers in the United States⁹.

Finally Strombach & Kiouisis' investigation of the 2006 Swedish national election, which measured the impact of daily news use across nine major news media –newspapers, television and radio, found that:

...attention to *political news* exerts a significant and rather strong influence on perceived issue salience and that attention to *political news* matters more than attention to various specific news shows on television and in radio, or to different newspapers¹⁰.

This finding does not deny that there are powerful and influential newspapers, broadcast stations, and Web sites. However, zooming out for a broader look, the vast gestalt of media voices – this vast sea of information -- are the core of our social fabric.

2. *Patterns of media exposure and attention*

More often than not, the major social effects of communication result from the collective impact of the media and the diversity of ways in which individuals come into contact with the media in their daily lives. As Figure 1 illustrates, contact with the messages of the media range from highly casual and incidental exposure to carefully planned and deliberate exposure. For most individuals, their cumulative exposure to the media over the course of a day –and almost certainly over the course of a week– includes a variety of these types of contact.

In today's vast media landscape, communication channels are ubiquitous. It is virtually impossible not to have incidental contact with some of them. Television and radio broadcasts seem to be available just about everywhere. For most internet services, the home page that comes up when you sign on contains a summary of the top news of the day. At a minimum, just about

⁹ POINDEXTER, Paula, "Daily newspaper non-readers: Why they don't read", *Journalism Quarterly*, 56, 1976, pp. 64-770.

¹⁰ STROMBACK, Jesper, and KIOUSIS, Spiro, "A new look at agenda-setting effects –Comparing the predictive power of overall political news consumption and specific news media consumption across different media channels and media types", *Journal of Communication*, 60, 2010, p. 288, emphasis in original.

everyone knows at least the major events and issues of the moment even if their detailed knowledge is sketchy.

Beyond this incidental exposure, many people routinely spend some time each day reading a newspaper. Some read more than one newspaper. And some of these people –plus many others– routinely tune in the evening news on television. Some tune in other news reports on TV and radio during the day, or they go *online* for the latest news. Habitual exposure to the news through one or more channels is part of daily life for a considerable portion of the population.

Other segments of the population take a strategic approach to the news. Monitorial citizens tend to routinely scan the news, but only spend considerable time with the details once they detect a topic or issue of high personal interest¹¹. In many ways, this strategy of media exposure and attention overlaps with other patterns of focused information-seeking in the media. This includes a strategy of selective exposure to the media –usually thought of in terms of reinforcing political positions and beliefs– and agenda-setting theory’s concept of need for orientation in which attention to the messages of the media is determined by the level of relevance and level of desire for more information about the topics of those messages¹².

And as noted, over the course of a week or so, most citizens engage in a number of these approaches to the media.

3. *Opportunity and Challenge*

There now exists the most massive array of communication channels that we have ever known. At the end of the 19th century, the communication media were predominantly newspapers supplemented by magazines and books. In the course of the 20th century, there was a steady expansion of channels –film, radio, and especially broadcast television. But this expansion pales in comparison to the media explosion of the past 30 years– cable television, first with a dozen or so channels, now hundreds of channels, and its parallel service, satellite TV; email and the vast proliferation of internet sites; and

¹¹ SCHUDSON, Michael, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999.

¹² WEAVER David, “Political issues and voter need for orientation, in SHAW, Donald, and McCOMBS, Maxwell, eds., *The Emergence of American Political Issues*. St. Paul, MN.: West, 1977, Chapter 7.

now the essentially continuous expansion of social and personal media, such as Twitter, Facebook, ipods, and more and more.

For scholars of communication, this is a mother lode of research opportunities vastly exceeding anything that existed in the previous decades of our field. The challenge presented by these vast opportunities is far more than to map the social roles and impact of each of these new channels. The challenge is to understand in detail what this vast gestalt of communication channels adds up to. How are individuals, communities, and entire societies, including the global society, impacted by all this? How has this communication gestalt changed our lives and our environment?

Studying the impact of these individual channels is important. However, it is also extremely important to understand these channels collective impact, the process of civic osmosis.

Figure 1. Exposure & Attention to the media

Incidental \leftarrow \rightarrow Deliberate exposure

Civic duty

Information-seeking

Selective exposure

Need for orientation

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