the shift from hierarchy studies of the public agenda to longitudinal investigations of one or a few issues. Any scholarly paradigm experiences a successive winnowing of investigative scope as scholars seek to explain and predict particular phenomena. Yet we think that a broader perspective about agenda-setting is most in keeping with the insightful perspectives of the forerunners of agenda-setting research: Walter Lippmann, Robert E. Park, Harold D. Lasswell, Herbert Blumer, Gabriel Almond, Daniel Boorstin, James Davis, E. E. Schattschneider, and Bernard Cohen.

Our students at Michigan State University and at the University of New Mexico are interested in the agenda-setting process as a means of understanding social change. Yet, despite the more than 350 publications about agenda-setting, there is no clear starting place for the student who wants a holistic introduction to this important topic. Here we provide a means to get acquainted with this growing and diverse literature about an exciting scholarly topic that offers explanations of how social change occurs.

Many scholars and students contributed to our perspective on the agenda-setting process, especially Maxwell McCombs, an anonymous reviewer, and the editor of this series, Steven H. Chaffee. We thank our colleagues Soonbum Chang, Dorine Bregman, Xiaoxing Fei, Wen-Ying Liu, and Judy Berkowitz for their help with our agenda-setting research over the past decade.

COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS 6

AGENDA-SETTING

JAMES W. DEARING
EVERETT M. ROGERS

1. What Is Agenda-Setting?

> The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*.
>
> Bernard Cohen (1963, p. 13)

> The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power.
>
> E. E. Schattschneider (1960, p. 68)

Every social system must have an agenda if it is to prioritize the problems facing it, so that it can decide where to start work. Such prioritization is necessary for a community and for a society. The purpose of this book is to help readers understand the agenda-setting process, its conceptual distinctions, and how to carry out agenda-setting research.

Agenda-Setting as a Political Process

What is agenda-setting? The *agenda-setting process* is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media

professionals, the public, and policy elites. Agenda-setting offers an explanation of why information about certain issues, and not other issues, is available to the public in a democracy; how public opinion is shaped; and why certain issues are addressed through policy actions while other issues are not. The study of agenda-setting is the study of social change and of social stability.

What is an agenda, and how is one formed? An *agenda* is a set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point in time. Political scientists Roger Cobb and Charles Elder (1972/1983) defined an *agenda* in political terms as "a general set of political controversies that will be viewed at any point in time as falling within the range of legitimate concerns meriting the attention of the polity" (p. 14). Although we conceptualize an agenda as existing at a point in time, clearly agendas are the result of a dynamic interplay. As different issues rise and fall in importance over time, agendas provide snapshots of this fluidity.

Cobb and Elder (1972/1983) defined an *issue* as "a conflict between two or more identifiable groups over procedural or substantive matters relating to the distribution of positions or resources" (p. 32). That is, an issue is whatever is in contention (Lang & Lang, 1981). This two-sided nature of an issue is important in understanding why and how an issue climbs up an agenda. The potentially conflictual nature of an issue helps make it newsworthy as proponents and opponents of the issue battle it out in the shared "public arena," which, in modern society, is the mass media. The issues actually studied by agenda-setting scholars and reported in this volume, however, display the two-sided nature claimed by Cobb and Elder (1972/1983) only to a certain degree. For example, the abortion and gun-control issues seem to be definitely two-sided and conflictual. Certain other issues, such as the environment or drug abuse, seem to be more one-sided in that no one takes a public stand in favor of pollution or greater use of drugs. Even for these issues, however, issue opponents do exist who actively campaign for less attention and funding being given to an issue such as cancer prevention so that greater resources can be given to another issue that they are promoting on the national agenda. Yet there is another important aspect of an issue in addition to conflict. There are many social problems that never *become* issues even though proponents and opponents exist. Problems require exposure—coverage in the mass media—before they can be considered "public" issues.

Thus, we define an *issue* as a social problem, often conflictual, that has received mass media coverage. Issues have value because they can be used to political advantage (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). Although conflict is often what makes a social problem a public issue, as in the case of abortion, *valence issues* only have one legitimate side, such as drug abuse or child abuse (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Nelson, 1984). No one is publicly in favor of child abuse. For valence issues, proponents battle over how to solve the agreed-upon social problem and not whether a social problem exists.

The perspective of Cobb and Elder (1972/1983) and Lang and Lang (1981) that an issue is two-sided and involves conflict reminds us that agenda-setting is inherently a political process. At stake is the relative attention given by the media, the public, and policymakers to some issues *and not to others* (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). We can think of issues as "rising or falling" on the agenda or "competing with one another" for attention. *Issue proponents*, individuals or groups of people who advocate for attention to be given to an issue, help determine the position of an issue on the agenda, sometimes at the cost of another issue or issues. Agenda-setting can be a "zero-sum game" because space and time on the media agenda are scarce resources (Zhu, 1992a). But sometimes, a hot issue does not supplant coverage of other issues, especially related issues (Hertog, Finnegan, & Kahn, 1994).

An issue proponent might be a newsperson covering a famine in an African nation who shoots a spectacular 3½-minute news story in a refugee camp that is broadcast on U.S. evening television news. Because of the investment of time, effort, and firsthand experience, the reporter becomes a proponent of the famine as an important issue worthy of news attention and public concern. Attention to an issue, whether by media personnel, members of the public, or policymakers, represents power by some individuals or organizations to influence the decision process. The reporter covering the famine may have been influenced to shoot the story from a certain perspective because of discussions with a foreign government official who was frustrated with his or her country's lack of response to the famine. The visual power of the video footage, in turn, may influence an editor's decision about the relative importance of the famine news story in relation to other possible news stories. The news, when broadcast, influences millions of people in a variety of ways. Thousands of television viewers call an 800 telephone number to donate money and food. Some viewers work to change U.S. foreign policy about

disaster relief to the African nation. A Senate staff member drafts legislation in the name of her boss. Hundreds of newspaper editors and other media gatekeepers decide that the famine deserves prominent news coverage. Several newspaper readers write letters to the editor to protest U.S. government food aid in the face of poverty in America. Thus, the famine becomes a two-sided issue. Within a few weeks, the very real but little-known famine problem is transformed into the "famine issue" and climbs to the top of the media agenda in the United States. The reporter gets a promotion.

The famine may continue to attract attention or it may not, depending on (a) competition from other issues, each of which has its proponents, and (b) the ability of proponents of the famine issue to generate new information about the famine so as to maintain its newsworthiness. So, whether we study television producers, interest group activists, or actions by U.S. senators, the process of influence, competition, and negotiation *as carried out by issue proponents* is a dynamic driving the agenda-setting process. Most communication scholars have not conceptualized agenda-setting as a political process. A better understanding of the agenda-setting process lies at the intersection of mass communication research and political science. Agenda-setting can directly affect policy.

The issue of cigarette smoking is a dramatic example of the agenda-setting process. Prior to 1970, smoking was a major social problem in America, with millions of people dying of cancer. It was not, however, an important public issue. Then, over the next 25 years, 30 million Americans quit smoking! How did this problem become an issue? The antismoking issue got on public agendas (for instance, citizens groups lobbied for legislation to force the airline industry to ban smoking on all flights), on media agendas (fewer characters, both heroes and villains, now smoke in prime-time television shows), and on policy agendas (the city of Los Angeles pioneered in banning all smoking in restaurants, a policy that spread to other cities). The social norm against smoking became accepted as a result of *media advocacy*, the strategic use of the mass media for advancing a public policy initiative (Wallack, 1990). Issues previously perceived to be the problems of individuals ("I don't like it when people smoke while I am eating") are redefined as a public problem requiring governmental remediation ("Restaurants should be required to offer nonsmoking sections"). Successful media advocacy essentially puts a specific problem, framed in a certain way, on the media agenda. Exposure through the mass media allows a social problem to be transformed into a public issue.

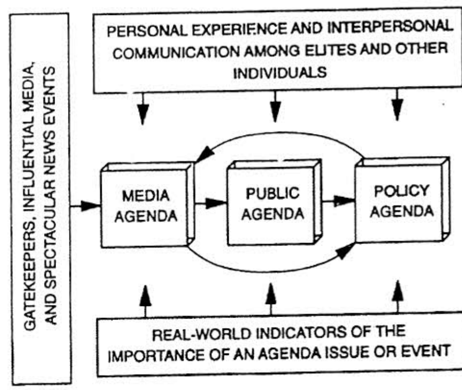

Figure 1.1. Three Main Components of the Agenda-Setting Process: The Media Agenda, Public Agenda, and Policy Agenda
SOURCE: Rogers and Dearing (1988).

Media personalities and organizations engage in issue advocacy. For example, will the aggressive overseas marketing by U.S. cigarette manufacturers (that has led to more young smokers in Third World countries) become a public issue in the United States? Purposive attempts at agenda-setting by media personalities and organizations are often unsuccessful. Members of the U.S. media audience frequently reject the media's agenda of important issues. People "co-construct" what they see, read, and hear from the media with information drawn from their own lives (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992) to create a meaning for some issue.

The Media Agenda, Public Agenda, and Policy Agenda

The agenda-setting process is composed of the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda, and the interrelationships among these three elements (Figure 1.1). A research tradition exists for each of these three types of agendas. The first research tradition is called *media agenda-setting* because its main dependent variable is the importance of

an issue on the mass media agenda. The second research tradition is called *public agenda-setting* because its main dependent variable is the importance of a set of issues on the public agenda. The third research tradition is called *policy agenda-setting* because the distinctive aspect of this scholarly tradition is its concern with policy actions regarding an issue, in part as a response to the media agenda and the public agenda.

So, the agenda-setting process is an ongoing competition among the proponents of a set of issues to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites. But agenda-setting was not originally conceptualized in this way.

The Chapel Hill Study[1]

The term *agenda-setting* first appeared in an influential article by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972. These scholars at the University of North Carolina studied the role of the mass media in the 1968 presidential campaign in the university town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For their study, they selected 100 undecided voters because these voters were "presumably those most open or susceptible to campaign information." These respondents were personally interviewed in a 3-week period during September and October 1968, just prior to the election. The voters' public agenda of campaign issues was measured by aggregating their responses to a survey question: "What are you *most* concerned about these days? That is, regardless of what politicians say, what are the two or three *main* things that you think the government *should* concentrate on doing something about?" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Five main campaign issues (foreign policy, law and order, fiscal policy, public welfare, and civil rights) were mentioned most frequently by the 100 undecided voters, thus measuring the public agenda.

The media agenda was measured by counting the number of news articles, editorials, and broadcast stories in the nine mass media that served Chapel Hill. McCombs and Shaw found an almost perfect correlation between the rank order of (a) the five issues on the media agenda (measured by their content analysis of the media coverage of the election campaign) and (b) the same five issues on the public agenda (measured by their survey of the 100 undecided voters). For instance, foreign policy was ranked as the most important issue by the public, and this issue was given the most attention by the media in the period leading up to the election.

McCombs and Shaw concluded from their analysis that the mass media "set" the agenda for the public.[2] Presumably, the public agenda was important in the presidential election because it determined who one voted for, although McCombs and Shaw did not investigate any behavioral consequence of the public agenda.

What was the special contribution of the Chapel Hill study of agenda-setting? The methodologies for measuring the two conceptual variables were not new: Both (a) content analysis of mass media messages and (b) surveys of public opinion about an issue were by then common in mass communication research. McCombs and Shaw's linking of the two methodologies to test public agenda-setting was not a new contribution either. Twenty years earlier, F. James Davis (1952) had combined content analysis, survey research, and "real-world" indicators in testing the public agenda-setting hypothesis (although Davis had not called the process "agenda-setting"). A *real-world indicator* is a variable that measures more or less objectively the degree of severity or risk of a social problem. McCombs and Shaw's contribution was in clearly laying out the agenda-setting hypothesis, in calling the media-public agenda relationship "agenda-setting," in suggesting a paradigm for further research, and in training many excellent students who went on to carry out agenda-setting research of their own.

Salience as the Key in Agenda-Setting

Abortion is a highly charged, very emotional public issue in the United States. Should abortion be a legal option for pregnant women? Or should abortion be illegal? Many scholars study public attitudes about abortion by surveying a sample of people. Other scholars study portrayals of abortion on television news to determine whether media coverage favors one viewpoint over another. But an agenda-setting scholar studying the abortion issue in the U.S. media would ask, "*How*

important is the abortion issue on television news?" "That is, how does the abortion issue compare with other issues in the amount of news coverage that it receives?" "Why is the abortion issue in the news?" "Why now?" A scholar might also ask individuals in a public opinion survey: "What is the most important problem facing the United States today? How about abortion?"

Salience is the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important. The heart of the agenda-setting process is when the salience of an issue changes on the media agenda, the public agenda, or the policy agenda. The task of the scholar of agenda-setting is to measure how the salience of an issue changes, and why this change occurs.

Rather than focusing on positive or negative attitudes toward an issue, as most public opinion research does, agenda-setting scholars focus on the salience of an issue. This salience on the media agenda tells viewers, readers, and listeners "what issues to think about." Research on the agenda-setting process suggests that the relative salience of an issue on the media agenda determines how the public agenda is formed, which in turn influences which issues policymakers consider. Control of the choices available for action is a manifestation of power. Policymakers only act on those issues that reach the top of the policy agenda.

History of Agenda-Setting Research

Thomas Kuhn's (1962/1970) book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* provides one means for understanding the background of agenda-setting research. Our focus is on how the paradigm for agenda-setting research was formed and the time sequence in which the main components of this paradigm were introduced as conceptual innovations (Table 1.1).

Kuhn argues that the model of the development of a scientific specialty begins when scientists in a field are attracted to a new paradigm as a focus for their research. A *paradigm* is a scientific conceptualization that provides model problems and solutions to a community of scholars (Kuhn, 1962/1970, p. viii; Rogers, 1983, p. 43). Kuhn says that a scientific specialty does not advance in a series of small incremental steps as hypotheses are proposed, tested, and then revised, thus furthering knowledge. Instead, science moves forward in major jumps and starts. Pronounced discontinuities occur as a revolutionary paradigm is proposed; it offers an entirely new way of looking at some scientific problem.

Table 1.1 Development of the Paradigm for Research on the Agenda-Setting Process

Theoretical and Methodological Innovations in Studying the Agenda-Setting Process	*Publication First Reporting the Scholarly Innovation*
1. Postulating a relationship between the mass media agenda and the public agenda	Walter Lippmann (1922)
2. Identifying the status-conferral function of the media, in which salience is given to issues	Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton (1948/1964)
3. Stating the metaphor of agenda-setting	Bernard C. Cohen (1963)
4. Giving a name to the agenda-setting process	Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972)
5. Investigating the public agenda-setting process for a hierarchy of issues	Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972)
6. Explicating a model of the policy agenda-setting process	Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder (1972/1983)
7. Initiating the over-time study of public-agenda-setting at a macro level of analysis, and investigating the relationship of real-world indicators to the media agenda	G. Ray Funkhouser (1973a)
8. Experimentally investigating public agenda-setting at a micro level of analysis	Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder (1987)

Famous examples are Copernicus's solar-centered universe, Einstein's relativity theory, Darwinian evolution, and Freud's psychoanalytic theory (most scientific paradigms are much less noteworthy than these examples).

Each new paradigm initially attracts a furious amount of intellectual activity as scientists seek to test the new conceptualization, either to advance the new theory or to disprove it. Gradually, over a period of time, an intellectual consensus about the new paradigm develops among scientists in a field through a verification process. Then, scientific interest declines as fewer findings of an exciting nature are reported. Kuhn (1962/1970) calls this stage "normal science." Research becomes a kind of mopping-up operation. Eventually, a yet newer paradigm may be proposed, setting off another scientific revolution, when anomalies in the existing paradigm are recognized by the "invisible college"[3] of

Table 1.2 The Rise and Fall of the Paradigm for Agenda-Setting Research

Stages in Kuhn's (1962/1970) Development of a Scientific Paradigm	*Main Events in the Development of the Paradigm for Agenda-Setting Research*
1. Preparadigmatic work appears.	Robert E. Park's (1922) *The Immigrant Press and Its Control,* Walter Lippmann's (1922) *Public Opinion,* and Bernard Cohen's (1963) *The Press and Foreign Policy*
2. The paradigm for agenda-setting research appears.	Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) create the paradigm in their Chapel Hill study, which McCombs then follows up with further research over future years.
3. Normal science: An invisible college forms around the paradigm.	Some 357 publications about agenda-setting appear from 1972 through 1994, in which the paradigm is supported and, in recent years, expanded in scope.
4. A decline in scholarly interest begins as the major research problems are solved, anomalies appear, and scientific controversy occurs.	This stage has not yet occurred for agenda-setting research.
5. Exhaustion, as scientific interest in the paradigm shifts to the newer paradigm that replaces it.	This stage has not yet occurred.

scholars investigating the scientific problem of study. Table 1.2 lists the paradigmatic history of agenda-setting research.

Robert E. Park, a sociologist at the University of Chicago from 1915 to 1935, and perhaps the first scholar of mass communication, conceived of media gatekeeping and implied what is today called the agenda-setting process:

> Out of all the events that happened and are recorded every day by correspondents, reporters, and the news agencies, the editor chooses certain items for publication which he regards as more important or more interesting than others. The remainder he condemns to oblivion and the waste basket. There is an enormous amount of news "killed" every day. (Park, 1922, p. 328)

Park was distinguishing between problems that become public issues and those that don't.

Walter Lippmann was a scholar of propaganda and public opinion who pioneered early thinking about agenda-setting. Among academics, this influential newspaper columnist and longtime presidential adviser is best known for his 1922 book *Public Opinion,* in which Lippmann wrote of "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." He argued that the mass media are the principal connection between (a) events that occur in the world and (b) the images of these events in our minds.

Lippmann did not earn a graduate degree at a university (although he did study at Harvard), he never taught a university class, and he never adopted the research methods or the theoretical perspectives of social science. Yet he was the single most influential writer about the role of the mass media in shaping public opinion, eventually setting off the research tradition on agenda-setting. Lippmann did not use the term agenda-setting, however (see Table 1.1); nor did he think that research was needed on this process.

Harold D. Lasswell, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, was one of the forefathers of communication study in the United States (Rogers, 1994). In a seminal 1948 chapter, Lasswell posed a five-part question that became a model for communication inquiry: *Who* says *what* to *whom* via *which channels* and with *what effect?* According to Lasswell, two of the most important functions that the mass media have in society are "surveillance" and "correlation." The surveillance function occurs when media newspeople scan their constantly changing information environment (alerted by police reports, announcements of local events, press releases, and such other sources as the Associated Press wire service) and decide which events should receive news attention. This weeding of potential stories via surveillance is now known as editorial gatekeeping (Shoemaker, 1991).

Lasswell's (1948) notion of the "correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment" (p. 38) describes communication performing the vital function of enabling a living organism like a society to synchronize the importance accorded to an issue by its constituent parts (such as the mass media, attentive public groups, and elected officials). Lasswell (1948) wrote that mass media, public groups, and policymakers each have discrete "attention frames" or periods of time during which they pay attention to certain issues. Lasswell believed that the media play the critical role in directing our attention to issues. The result, he suggested, was a correlation of attention on certain issues at

the same time by the media, the public, and policymakers. This idea was seized upon by McCombs and Shaw (1972) as the "agenda-setting function of the mass media."

Forty years after publication of Lippmann's *Public Opinion* and 15 years after Lasswell's seminal chapter, a political scientist, Bernard Cohen, inspired by the work of Schattschneider (1960), further advanced the conceptualization of agenda-setting. Cohen (1963) observed, as we noted at the top of this chapter, that the press

> may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think*, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about*. . . . The world will look different to different people, depending . . . on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the [news]paper they read. (p. 13, italics added)

Cohen thus expressed the metaphor that led to agenda-setting research (see Table 1.1).

Agenda-setting was, however, still simply a theoretical idea, yet unnamed. The 1972 study by McCombs and Shaw set off a research paradigm that was adopted mainly by mass communication scholars, and to a lesser extent by political scientists, sociologists, and other scholars. The paradigm offered a new way to think about the power of the mass media. Prior to 1972, the dominant scholarly approach in mass communication research was to look for the direct effects of media messages in changing the attitudes of individuals in the audience. However, few such directional media effects were found. Many early mass communication scholars (a number of whom had been newspaper journalists before they earned PhDs) believed that the mass media affected the public in important ways, but the empirical research findings of that time only indicated minimal media effects and did not support their personal convictions. This anomaly led to dismay with the paradigm of directional media effects and, as Kuhn (1962/1970) would predict (see Table 1.2), led to a search for a new paradigm.

The McCombs and Shaw article, with a spectacularly high rank-order correlation of +.98 between the salience of the five issues on the media agenda and their corresponding salience on the public agenda, provided empirical evidence that matched the scholars' beliefs about the power of the mass media. The media effects were cognitive rather than persuasive (which seemed reasonable to communication scholars with media experience, as newspapers should inform, giving both sides of an issue, rather than seek to persuade individuals in the audience of one position).

The McCombs and Shaw (1972) article is by far the most widely cited publication by agenda-setting scholars. Agenda-setting is one of the most popular topics in mass communication research, with about a dozen publications appearing each year for the past several decades. The paradigmatic study by McCombs and Shaw provided one means of empirically testing the media agenda-public agenda relationship, and thus of exploring an alternative paradigm to that of directional media effects. Their seminal article led not only to a proliferation of agenda-setting studies but to a wide variety of conceptual and methodological approaches. For the first 15 years or so after 1972, the invisible college of agenda-setting scholars were in Kuhn's "normal science" phase, in which most empirical studies build incrementally on previous work. In the 1970s, however, agenda-setting scholars began to break out of their rather stereotyped mold of conducting one-point-in-time content analyses of the media agenda and audience surveys of the public agenda (Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). Later, some scholars traced a single issue (drug abuse or the environment) over time as a time-ordered process. Other scholars (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) conducted laboratory experiments of the public agenda-setting process at the micro level of the individual (see Table 1.1). Respondents viewed doctored videos of evening television news broadcasts in which extra material was spliced in about a particular issue. As a result, the respondents subsequently ranked that issue higher on their agenda.

The Search for Media Effects

What attracts scholars to investigate agenda-setting? One main reason for the interest of mass communication researchers is that the agenda-setting paradigm appeared to offer an alternative to the scholarly search for directional media effects on individual attitudes and overt behavior change. Earlier mass communication research had found only limited media effects, which seemed counterintuitive to many mass communication researchers, especially to those who had previously worked in the mass media (Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw had both been newspaper reporters). Further, the early mass communication PhD graduates felt that the purpose of the media was mainly to inform

rather than to persuade. So they looked for cognitive effects, like the agenda-setting process, in which people are primed concerning what issues to think about. Many of the agenda-setting publications by mass communication researchers stated their main justification as an attempt to overcome the limited-effects findings of past mass communication research. For example, Maxwell McCombs (1981a) stated in an overview:

> Its [agenda-setting's] initial empirical exploration was fortuitously timed. It came at that time in the history of mass communication research when disenchantment both with attitudes and opinions as dependent variables, and with the limited-effects model as an adequate intellectual summary, was leading scholars to look elsewhere. (p. 121)

Many mass communication scholars were initially attracted to agenda-setting research as an alternative to looking for individual-level directional media effects, which had often been found to be minimal. Essentially, public agenda-setting research investigates an *indirect* effect ("what to think about") rather than a direct media effect ("what to think"). So the agenda-setting paradigm came along just when mass communication scholars were dismayed with their previous model of direct media effects, exactly as Thomas Kuhn (1962/1970) predicted should happen in a scientific revolution. The new paradigm sent mass communication researchers in the direction of studying how media news coverage affected an issue's salience, rather than directional media effects.

Recently, the contribution of agenda-setting research to understanding mass media effects was assessed:

> Despite important shortcomings, the agenda-setting approach has contributed to a more advanced understanding of the media's role in society. . . . It has helped to change the emphasis of mass communication research away from the study of short-term attitudinal effects to a more longitudinal analysis of social impact. This is no small contribution. (Carragee, Rosenblatt, & Michaud, 1987, p. 42)

The agenda-setting effect is not the result of receiving one or a few messages but is due to the aggregate impact of a very large number of messages, each of which has a different content but all of which deal

with the same general issue. For example, for 4 years after the first AIDS cases were reported in the United States (in 1981), the mass media carried very few news stories about the epidemic. The issue of AIDS was not yet on the media agenda, nor was the U.S. public very fully aware of the AIDS issue, so national poll results indicated. Then, in mid-1985, two news events (movie actor Rock Hudson's death from AIDS, and the refusal by the schools of Kokomo, Indiana, to allow a young boy with AIDS, Ryan White, to attend classes) suddenly led to a massive increase in media coverage of the AIDS issue. For example, six major media in the United States dramatically increased their coverage of AIDS from an average of 4 news stories per month to 15 news stories. The issue of AIDS climbed near the top of the national media agenda in early fall 1985. Almost immediately, public awareness of the epidemic increased until, in a few months, 95% of U.S. adults knew about AIDS and understood its means of transmission (Rogers et al., 1991).

In addition to the directional media effects tradition out of which it grew as an alternative, public agenda-setting research is related to the following research fronts:

1. Bandwagon effects (O'Gorman, 1975), through which knowledge of the public's opinion about some issue influences other individuals toward that opinion
2. The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), through which the perception of majority opinion about an issue mutes the expression of alternative opinions
3. Social movements (Blumer, 1971; Gamson, 1992), through which people act collectively to see that solutions to social problems emerge and eventually are implemented
4. Propaganda analysis (e.g., Lasswell, 1927), through which persuasive messages shape public opinion
5. The diffusion of news events (DeFleur, 1987; Deutschmann & Danielson, 1960), the process through which an important news event such as the 1986 *Challenger* disaster or Magic Johnson's announcement that he had contracted HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus) is communicated to the public—usually such spectacular news events spread very rapidly to the public
6. Entertainment-education and Hollywood lobbying strategies (Montgomery, 1989, 1993; Shefner & Rogers, 1992), through which an educational issue such as drunk driving or the environment is purposively placed in entertainment messages within prime-time television shows or popular music

7. Media advocacy (Wallack, 1990), through which media coverage of a prosocial issue, such as the health threat of cigarette smoking, is purposively promoted
8. Media gatekeeping (Shoemaker, 1991), the process through which an individual controls the flow of messages through a communication channel (examples of media gatekeepers are a newspaper editor and a television news director)
9. Media-system dependency (Ball-Rokeach, 1985), in which mass media organizations are influenced by the environment of other organizations and institutions, thus affecting the messages that are communicated through the media

Intellectual boundaries are necessary for researchers to make sense of a topic of study and for a cumulative advance in understanding a research problem. Intellectual boundaries also inhibit learning between scholars working in different paradigms. The intellectual boundaries around the agenda-setting tradition should be broken down for a more comprehensive understanding of how social change occurs. Conflict, controversy, and negotiation (concepts that political scientists and international relations scholars use in understanding policy agenda-setting) could advance our grasp of the role of proponents on media, public, and policy agendas. Media agenda research demonstrates the interrelationships of a particular media organization with events in the larger social system of which it is a part. To influence the issues that get on a media organization's news agenda is to exercise *power*, the use of social influence. Understanding how democracy works can be better achieved by studying the power of issues rather than the issue of power. Thus, agenda-setting investigations have mainly been conducted by scholars of mass communication and of political science.

Three Research Traditions

Scholarly work on the agenda-setting process has evolved over the past 20 years as two distinct research fronts. One dealt mainly with *public* agenda-setting. The 1972 study by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw set off this research tradition, which has been mainly conducted by mass communication scholars. More than 100 publications report empirical investigations of the relationship between the media agenda and its corresponding public agenda.

Generally unrelated to this stream of mass communication research on public agenda-setting is a research tradition on *policy* agenda-setting, mainly carried forward by political scientists and sociologists. Here the key question for political scientists such as John Kingdon (1984) is, "How does an issue get on the policy agenda?" and for sociologists such as Herbert Blumer (1971), "How does collective behavior coalesce around social problems?" Occasionally, they explicitly focus on the mass media by asking, "How may the mass media directly influence the policy agenda?" (Linsky, 1986). Because they recognize the role of networks of people who are linked together through concern about common issues, sociologists and political scientists have increasingly focused on the mobilization of resources by groups of people to affect policy change (Gamson, 1975; Lipsky, 1968; McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

How the *media* agenda is set has only been investigated in fairly recent years. Our review shows fewer than 20 such publications. "Agenda-setting research has consistently accepted the media agenda as a given without considering the process by which the agenda is constructed" (Carragee et al., 1987, p. 43). A variety of factors, including personality characteristics, news values, organizational norms and politics, and external sources affect the decision on "what's news" (Gans, 1979). Recent investigations show that (a) the *New York Times*, (b) the White House, (c) scientific journals, and (d) public opinion polling results play a particularly important role in putting an issue on the U.S. media agenda. These influential agenda-setters function to keep issues off the national agenda by ignoring them.

Measuring Agendas

Public, media, and policy agendas, and real-world indicators, are typically measured as follows:

1. The public agenda is usually measured by public opinion surveys in which a sample of individuals is asked a question originally designed by George Gallup: "What is the most important problem facing this country today?" The aggregated responses to such an MIP (most important problem) question indicate the relative position of an issue on the public agenda. For example, in 1989, 54% of a national sample of Americans said that drugs were the most important issue facing Amer-

ica; 2 years later, this number dropped to only 4%, as the "War on Drugs" was pushed down the agenda by other issues.

2. The media agenda is usually indexed by a content analysis of the news media to determine the number of news stories about an issue or issues of study (e.g., the War on Drugs). The *number* of news stories measures the relative salience of an issue of study on the media agenda. Audience individuals presumably judge the relative importance of an issue on the basis of the number of media messages about the issue to which they are exposed. Historically, the public agenda was measured first (the MIP question was first asked by George Gallup in 1935). The content analysis measure of the media agenda was derived by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and Funkhouser (1973a) as a parallel to the MIP measure of the public agenda, focusing similarly on issues.

3. The policy agenda for an issue or issues is measured by such policy actions as the introduction of laws about an issue, by budget appropriations, and by the amount of time given to debate of an issue in the U.S. Congress. Measures of the policy agenda vary from study to study much more than do measures of the media agenda or of the public agenda, which are fairly standard.

4. Real-world indicators are often conceptualized by agenda-setting scholars as a single-variable indicator, such as the number of drug-related deaths per year or the unemployment rate. Such real-world indicators are commonly accepted indexes of the severity of a social problem. Certain scholars constructed a composite real-world indicator made up of several component measures of an issue's severity. An example is Ader's (1993) real-world indicator for the environmental issue in the United States, which included variables for air pollution, oil spills, and solid waste (this study is reviewed in Chapter 2).

Certain agenda-setting studies seek to understand the temporal dynamics of the agenda-setting process by analyzing the relationships between the media agenda, the public agenda, the policy agenda, and real-world indicators over time rather than cross-sectionally (at one point in time). In such longitudinal studies, a qualitative over-time method such as participant observation or a quantitative over-time method such as time-series analysis may be used. Several different data-gathering methods may be used in conjunction to ensure that measures are (a) valid (i.e., the scholar is really measuring what he or she intends to measure) and (b) reliable (the same conclusions would be

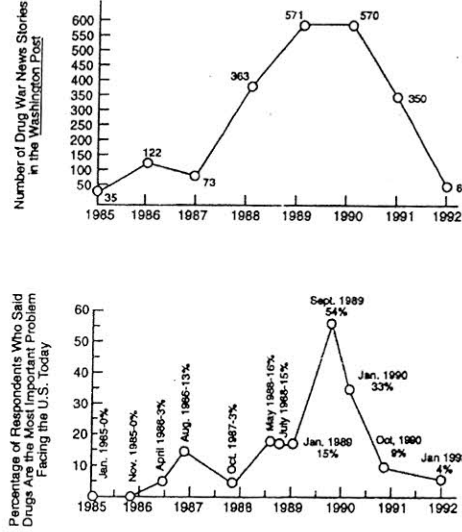

Figure 1.2. The Drug Issue on the U.S. Media Agenda (above) and on the Public Agenda (below)
SOURCE: Based on various sources.

reached with other methods or by other scholars). Such multiple measurement of concepts is called *triangulation*, a topic to which we shall return as multimethod research (see Chapter 6).

The Rise and Fall of the War on Drugs[4]

The issue of drug abuse rose gradually on the media agenda and the public agenda in the United States during the mid-1980s, with the drug-related death of basketball star Len Bias in 1986 and First Lady Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign propelling the drug issue up the national agenda (Danielian & Reese, 1989). Education about drug abuse prevention became a $2 billion a year "industry," with much of the funding coming from the federal government.

The "real-world indicator" of the number of drug-related deaths per year, however, actually *decreased* during the 1980s (Kerr, 1986)! Nevertheless, the drug issue peaked on the public agenda in September 1989, when the *New York Times*-CBS News Poll found that 54% of the U.S. public said that drug abuse was the most important problem facing the nation (Figure 1.2). By January 1992, 28 months later, only 4% of the U.S. public felt that drugs were the number one problem facing the nation. What explains this rapid rise and fall of the drug issue on the public agenda?

The media were reacting in part to a particular type of "real-world indicator": The use of cocaine in dangerous forms such as crack (Shoemaker, 1989, p. 4). Crack is smoked instead of snorted, creating a more immediate and more intense effect on the individual user. Crack cocaine is more addictive. Although crack had been used by some individuals in the United States for several years prior to 1986, it became more widely used in 1986.

Adam Weisman (1986), a Washington, D.C. journalist, in a *New Republic* article titled, "I Was a Drug-Hype Junkie," wrote: "For a reporter at a national news organization in 1986, the drug crisis in America is more than a story, it's an addiction—and a dangerous one" (p. 14). Why and how did the drug problem suddenly command so much media attention in 1986? Both the *New York Times* and the White House helped set the media agenda for the drug issue. The *New York Times* assigned a reporter to cover illegal drugs full-time in November 1985, shortly after the Reverend Jesse Jackson visited Abe Rosenthal, then the newspaper's executive director, to stress the drug problem. The *Times* carried its first front-page story about crack cocaine on November 29, 1985 (Kerr, 1986). When the *Times* considers an issue newsworthy, other U.S. media are influenced to follow suit.

The death of All-American basketball star Len Bias on June 19, 1986, had a strong impact on the national agenda because he played for the University of Maryland: "The death of the young basketball player, in particular, had a startling impact on the nation's capital, where Maryland is virtually a home team" (Kerr, 1986, p. 1). On the day of his death, Bias had signed a professional contract with the Boston Celtics for $6 million. The death of such a promising young basketball player humanized the drug issue.

The media responded to the death of Len Bias and to White House influences with a "crack attack": Much of the media coverage dealt with the new, more dangerous way of ingesting cocaine.

Media coverage of crack cocaine increased sharply in 1986. *Time* magazine devoted five 1986 cover stories to the crack crisis. CBS News with Dan Rather broadcast a dramatic two-hour documentary, "48 Hours on Crack Street." The media used words like *crisis, plague,* and *epidemic* to describe the drug problem in America. The Associated Press annual survey of editors rated the drug problem as the ninth most important news story of 1986.

Did the extensive and sensationalistic media coverage of the drug problem influence public opinion? Shoemaker, Wanta, and Leggett (1989) found that the percentage of the American public saying that drugs was "the most important problem facing America today" in 43 Gallup Polls from 1972 to 1986 was positively correlated with the amount of media coverage given to the drug issue a few months prior to each poll. An April 1986 national poll sponsored by the *New York Times* and CBS News found that 3% of American adults considered drugs to be the nation's most important problem. Five months later, in August 1986, following the intense media coverage of the death of Len Bias and the public campaigns organized by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (including its "Just Say No" campaign led by First Lady Nancy Reagan), 13% of American adults said that drugs were the nation's most important problem (Kerr, 1986). Three years later, in September 1989, 54% of the public rated drugs as the number one problem facing America (see Figure 1.2).

The intense media coverage of drugs influenced both public opinion and policy decisions. From 1981 to 1987, federal funding for antidrug law enforcement tripled, from $1 billion to $3 billion. An additional $5 billion was spent in 1987 by state and local law enforcement agencies, about one-fifth of their total budget. Federal funding for drug abuse prevention programs increased through the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA), the Office of Substance Abuse Prevention (OSAP), the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice (to local police departments for D.A.R.E. training—5 million schoolchildren were trained in these drug abuse prevention programs by 1990).

So the agenda-setting process for the drug issue in the mid- to late 1980s can be characterized as one in which the issue climbed to a high priority on the media agenda, then shot up the public agenda, and finally climbed the policy agenda, without any increase in the real-world indicator of the overall drug problem in the United States. Although an increase occurred in the abuse of one cocaine derivative, crack, other, equally harmful types of drug abuse declined.

Why did the drug issue drop down the public agenda after 1989? Media overexposure may be one reason; the heavy media coverage of the drug issue may have led the public to think that the problem was being handled by the government. Also, drugs were pushed down the national agenda by other issues, especially America's economic difficulties in the 1980s and the 1991 Gulf War.

The rise and fall of the drug issue on the national agenda in the late 1980s suggests that the agenda-setting process for this issue was a social construction, bearing little relationship to the objective indicator of deaths due to drugs in the United States. This social construction of the drug issue was mainly driven by the mass media.

Summary

The *agenda-setting process* is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites. An *issue* is a social problem, often conflictual, that has received media coverage. Agenda-setting can be a zero-sum game in that space on the agenda is a scarce resource, and so a new issue must push another issue down the agenda to come to attention. We see agenda-setting as a political process in which the mass media play a crucial role in enabling social problems to become acknowledged as public issues.

Our model of the agenda-setting process consists of three main components: (a) the media agenda, which influences (b) the public agenda, which in turn may influence (c) the policy agenda. *Salience* is the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important. The key question for agenda-setting scholars is why the salience of an issue on the media agenda, public agenda, and policy agenda increases or decreases. The public agenda is often measured by public opinion surveys in which individuals are asked what the most important question facing the nation is, and less often by studying the over-time activities of social movements, grassroots organizing, and consumer groups. The media agenda is usually measured by a content analysis of media news coverage of an issue or issues. The policy agenda is measured by such policy actions as the introduction of new laws about an issue, budget appropriations, and other legislative decisions.

A fourth variable has often been studied in agenda-setting investigations: a *real-world indicator*, defined as a variable that measures more or less objectively the degree of severity or risk of a social problem. Such objective indicators as the number of annual traffic deaths or the rate of inflation have generally been found to be relatively unimportant in putting an issue on the media agenda. Salience on the media agenda usually boosts an issue on the public agenda, as people take cues from the amount of media coverage to judge the salience of an issue (the public agenda).

Notes

1. This case illustration is based on Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972).
2. However, two immediate retests of the media agenda-public agenda hypothesis using different research designs from McCombs and Shaw found only moderate support (McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974; Tipton, Haney, & Baseheart, 1975). Our meta-research of 92 empirical studies of the media agenda-public agenda relationship found support for the McCombs-Shaw hypothesis in 59 studies, about two thirds of the investigations.
3. An *invisible college* is the informal network of scholars who are often spatially dispersed but who investigate the same paradigm (Crane, 1972; Price, 1961).
4. This case illustration is adapted from a variety of sources but draws especially on the book edited by Pamela J. Shoemaker (1989).

2. Media Agenda Studies

The mass media *confer* status on public issues, persons, organizations and social movements.

Paul F. Lazarsfeld and
Robert K. Merton (1948/1964, p. 101)

As the above quotation from Lazarsfeld and Merton states, the media confer attention on both people and issues. Communication scholars since 1948 have given most attention to status conferred by the media to people. For example, introductory textbooks in mass communication frequently provide the example of how appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine confers star status on an individual. But the other status-conferral function of the media, calling attention to an *issue,* is much more important in understanding how American democracy works. This can happen in roundabout ways. For example, in November 1995, CBS lawyers prohibited Mike Wallace of *60 Minutes* from airing an interview with a tobacco industry whistle-blower. The corporation's action led to a flurry of news stories by other mass media organizations, all of which raised the problem (of risk-averse decision making in mass media organizations due to the influence of corporate lawyers) to "issue status."

The agenda-setting process begins with an issue climbing the media agenda. What puts an issue on the media agenda? In the first decade or so of agenda-setting research, this question was relatively unexplored by communication scientists. Scholars took the media agenda as a given as they investigated the media agenda-public agenda relationship. Then, at the 1980 International Communication Association meeting, Steve Chaffee pointed to the important question of how the media agenda was set. Shortly, communication research began on this topic, especially in the new single-issue studies of agenda-setting that emerged in the 1980s (see Chapter 4).

Understanding the wide array of influences on mass media decision makers as media agenda-setting is attractive to scholars because of the theoretical rationale that agenda-setting brings to other paradigms that

have evolved for studying influence, such as the role of salience cues and responses to them by media gatekeepers, the sociology of work in news organizations, and how news and entertainment sources seek to appeal to the values and practices of mass media personnel to gain attention. The sources of news are (as we suggested in Chapter 1) issue proponents, for the purpose of pushing a cause, promoting a vision or value system, or publicizing an organization. Benefits of getting on mass media agendas also accrue to individuals through recognition and reward.

Research also has shown that the U.S. president and the *New York Times* are important in setting the media agenda for national issues, Congress is able to set the media agenda to a lesser degree (Goodman, 1994), and real-world indicators are often not important. Do these research findings mean that media advocacy is futile, or that media advocates can only push an issue up the media agenda by influencing the chief executive to give a speech about the issue or to get a news story about the issue on the front page of the *New York Times?* Not for the issue of drunk driving, as the following case illustration of the Harvard Alcohol Project shows.

Media Advocacy for Drunk Driving[1]

Jay A. Winsten is Professor of Public Health in the Center for Health Communication of the Harvard School of Public Health. In the mid-1980s, Winsten traveled to Stockholm to study Sweden's drunk driving policies. He became especially interested in the idea of the "designated driver": When several Swedes go out drinking together, they select one of their number to serve as their nondrinking chauffeur.

Soon thereafter, a popular Boston television news anchor was killed by a drunk driver, leaving a wife and young child as survivors. An outpouring of grief at the funeral, attended by many Boston-area newspersons, led Winsten to launch a media campaign in Boston for the designated driver concept. A couple of years later, in 1987, Winsten asked Frank Stanton, former president of CBS and an adviser to Harvard's Center for Health Communication, to telephone Grant Tinker, a former NBC network execu-