

Review Paper

The Agenda Setting Process and its Potential Attitudinal Effects

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Abstract

Agenda setting is a well-documented process in the media effects tradition. It has a strong impact on what issues are perceived as important by the audience. However, there are indications that agenda setting may have an indirect effect on the attitudes. The current study tested the Elaboration Likelihood Model (The ELM) as a possible mechanism of attitude change that may be present in the agenda setting process. The experimental results did not confirm the overall impact of the ELM on attitudes, but it demonstrated separate attitudinal effects of ability operationalized as knowledge. Further, it was also argued that the agenda setting process may have an indirect effect on attitudes through the peripheral route of the ELM.

Keywords

agenda setting, The Elaboration Likelihood Model (The ELM), attitudinal effects

1. Introduction

Agenda setting has been one of the dominant theories in media effects realm for over 50 years. The main tenet of this approach is that the media transfers the salience of issues they cover to how important the public perceive these issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Scholars have been exploring different aspects of agenda setting including the psychological processes involved in it. The motivational determinant of agenda setting is the Need for Orientation (the NFO) (Weaver, 1977; Weaver, 1980). The NFO consists of two subdomains, relevance and uncertainty. The combination of different degrees of these two subdomains leads to different degrees of agenda setting effects (Chernov, Valenzuela, & McCombs, 2011). Another consequential concept for agenda setting is priming. Priming may be an effect and a process. Priming is sometimes understood as an impact of agenda setting on evaluations (Kim, Han, Choy, & Kim, 2012). It may encompass activating the concepts related to a primed concept leading to scanning the broader context for these concepts. Priming creates a new information field for subsequent evaluation (Chernov, 2018). Priming comes near to evaluation process

by creating context for it. However, evaluations belong to the next stage of information processing-attitude formation and change. The link between agenda setting and attitudes was explored, but these studies were peripheral to the psychological exploration of the NFO and priming. For example, Kioussis and McCombs (2004) found significant agenda-setting effects and a significant correlation between issue salience and attitude strength. Weaver (1991) tested salience of the federal budget deficit issue in terms of its perceived importance for the survey participants and in terms of attitude strength and attitude directionality. Although this test yielded significant results, the relationship between attitudes' directionality and issue salience was much weaker than for attitude strength and perceived importance. Weaver underscored "the need for a detailed look at *how* an issue is covered by the media for making any predictions about *direction* of opinion. Simply looking at what is covered will not enable one to predict much of the direction of public opinion" (p. 61).

That makes intuitive sense as agenda setting affects the importance of issues for the public, not the evaluation directionality of these issues. Attitude change is understood as a consequence of persuasive efforts. The intent to persuade lies beyond the scope of what agenda setting theory studies. However, agenda setting relates to attitude formation and change in that it may contribute to the latter in an indirect way. What is going on in the communicative process of agenda setting has some similarity with what is going on in the persuasion process described by The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

The ELM belongs to a family of dual-process theories in attitudes and social cognition.

Petty and Cacioppo (1981) postulated that attitude change depends on two ways (called central and peripheral routes) that people process information. When individuals process a persuasive message, they may elaborate the central arguments of it provided they are highly involved in the issue under consideration, and they are able to evaluate the message's merits (the central route of information processing). However, individuals may not thoroughly elaborate the message if they are not sufficiently involved and/or do not have enough ability to evaluate the message's main argument (the peripheral route of information processing). In the latter case, the individuals may pay more attention to the source of the message, their feelings when they attend to the message, and to secondary elements of the message. Petty and Wegener (1999) confirmed that they do not identify the central route of processing with only the message variables, and peripheral routes with only context and the source variables. They contend that the characteristics of the messages can be processed when the peripheral route is used as well. This removed one of the obstacles on the way to using the ELM for explaining agenda-setting effects.

To summarize, the ELM offers a mechanism of two ways to process information; it pays a serious attention to the role of the message factor in attitude change, and it embraces both motivation and ability of the audience to process the information.

Petty, Priester and Brinol (2002) point at the link between the agenda setting approach and the ELM. They maintain that "...by setting the agenda of what is important to evaluate, the media can have important "indirect" effects on attitude change" (p. 167). The NFO has subdomains that relate to the EML in a way that relevance may have some correspondence with involvement, and uncertainty may correspond with ability. The NFO is linked to priming as it does not include its process similar to elaboration. The outcome variable for agenda setting is issue importance, and for the ELM it is attitudinal consequence. The approaches also differ in intent- mostly to inform versus mostly to persuade. However, there could be a link between the two with agenda setting playing a role of peripheral route for information processing.

The unpublished research on the role of the ELM in connection with agenda setting was a part of a larger study of agenda setting (Chernov, 2010). It will be reported in order to shed the light on the potential link of these two approaches, especially on the possibility the agenda setting attributes to serve as a peripheral route of the ELM.

The study dealt with how different attributes and experience with the issues used in the study impact the agenda setting effects. At some stage the ELM was added in order to see if there is any link between these two approaches.

2. Method

A pre-test/post-test design was employed for the main experiment. Two hundred sixty students were recruited through an invitation to the Faculty of Arts students from large undergraduate classes at the University of Regina. The treatment materials consisted of four news stories introduced as recent publications in the print media.

Independent variables included agenda setting measures such as personal experience with the issues and different types of message attributes as well as the ELM variables.

Involvement was operationalized as an index of two types of measures of the construct: cognitive and affective. Media use, or the amount the individuals are exposed to media news, is one indication of involvement, while interest, an affective element, is also closely related to the amount of media use (Roser, 1990; Salmon, 1986).

Previous knowledge is an indicator of the level of ability to comprehend the message content as it was postulated in the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), and it is operationalized according to the previous measures used in agenda-setting studies (Lee, 2005; Kioussis, 2004).

Elaboration deals with "issue-relevant" thinking in the evaluation of messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This study adopted a four-item Elaboration scale (Perse, 1990) to make multiple measures of the concept. Dependent variables were measures of issue of importance for agenda setting, and issue evaluation both taken before and after the experiment.

Media involvement, knowledge and elaboration were entered into the ANCOVA model as a set of the ELM variables to test hypotheses that the more a news article makes the reader think and reflect on an issue, the stronger the attitudinal effects are, and that the attitudinal effects will be stronger for individuals who are less knowledgeable about an issue and have less media involvement.

H1: The more knowledge one has about an issue, the less effect any single communication will have on attitude favorability toward an issue.

To test this hypothesis, the subjects were divided into three groups (high vs medium vs. low level of knowledge) using a median split as a medium level measure and the ones lower and higher than the median as high and low levels based on corresponding measures derived from the answers on questionnaire items related to knowledge.

H2: The higher the level of media involvement one has, the weaker the marginal effect of additional media exposure on attitude change.

To test this hypothesis, the participants were asked about the patterns of their media use, how much attention they pay to the news in the media, and how interested they were about the news in the media. The subjects were divided into two groups (high vs. low media involvement) using a median split based on corresponding measures derived from the answers on questionnaire items related to media involvement.

H3: The more a news article makes the reader think and reflect on an issue, the stronger attitudinal effects and higher the perceived importance of the issue.

To test this hypothesis, the subjects were divided into two groups (high vs. low level of elaboration) using a median split based on corresponding measures derived from the answers on questionnaire items related to elaboration.

An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. Two of the independent variables, media involvement, elaboration, had two levels: high and low. Another independent variable, knowledge, had three levels: high, medium and low.

3. Result

The dependent variables contained the scores on how favorable people think about different aspects of issue depictions. No significant effect of the ELM variables was found on attitude favourability change over the course of the experimental manipulations. For media involvement, ANCOVA was not significant, $F(1,230)=.085$, $MSE=.173$, $p=.77$. For elaboration, ANCOVA was not significant, $F(1,230)=.57$, $MSE=1.16$, $p=.45$. For knowledge, the ANCOVA was not significant, $F(1,230)=.19$, $MSE=.39$, $p=.66$. However, knowledge and elaboration affected the overall level of attitude. As shown in Table 1, the F-values for elaboration and knowledge are significant. For media involvement it is not significant.

Table 1. The Impact of Elaboration Likelihood Model's Variables-media Involvement, Knowledge and Elaboration-on Attitudinal Effects

	MS	F-value	Eta
Media Involvement	24.77	.91	.004
Knowledge	223.43	8.19	.034*
Elaboration	477.91	17.51	.071*

*Significance level at $p < .01$

These results indicate that two individual covariates have effects, but because there is a .455 correlation between knowledge and elaboration, a theoretical reason why knowledge would be more fundamental than elaboration to attribute to all of the variance it can explain will be discussed elsewhere.

When a separate effect of different levels of knowledge on attitude favourability toward an issue was tested, the hypothesis that the more knowledge one has about an issue, the less effect any single communication will have on attitude favourability toward an issue was confirmed. The analysis showed that there is a significant difference between participants who had different prior knowledge about an issue in how favorably they feel toward an issue after reading the stories ($F(2,234)=7.83$, $p < .001$). A post hoc Bonferroni test demonstrated that those who know less about an issue feel more favorable about the story describing this issue than those who know more prior to reading a story about this issue (mean difference=2.26, $p < .001$).

4. Discussion

The impact of involvement, knowledge and elaboration on attitude change.

The study hypothesized that the ELM variables, media involvement, knowledge and elaboration, could have a significant effect on attitude favourability with which participants evaluated the issues after reading the stories about them. Petty and Cacioppo (1981), Petty and Wegener (1999) documented findings that when individuals attend to persuasive messages and their levels of involvement, processing ability and elaboration are high, and their attitudes change significantly. Agenda-setting effects deal with media messages that are not necessarily persuasive, but they might lead to attitude change as an indirect effect of exposure to the media. Each of the factors used in the ELM have also been investigated in media effects research, but not as a set of variables that the model explicates as its operational indicators. Attention, interest, issue and media involvement, depth of processing and media exposure were used as concepts accountable for different media effects. The results were mixed, and they lacked a common theoretical framework that could explain varying and not always consistent findings.

The analysis conducted in this study showed that the ELM variables do not affect how the participants' attitudes change over the course of the experiment either directly or in conjunction with the experimental manipulations.

Two possibilities are considered in the following analysis: first, certain variables could act as suppressors. Higher level of involvement might lead to increased attitude favourability about issues with which participants have more personal experience, but greater knowledge about such issues might lead to decreased favourability. Second, agenda setting is considered to be a process that leads to media effects over time. The study testing agenda setting and attitudinal effects took only one day, and the role of the ELM variables could be stronger if the study could be extended over time.

As the hypotheses about the role of the ELM variables suggest, the effects of media involvement and elaboration, on the one hand, and knowledge on the other hand, predict effects in different directions, which might affect an overall impact in the ANCOVA analysis. To test this possibility, a mixed repeated measures the ANOVA analysis was conducted that confirmed the hypothesis that the more knowledge one has about an issue, the less of an effect any single communication will have on attitude favourability toward an issue. Prior knowledge might have a moderating effect on attitude favourability because higher level of knowledge is associated with a firm position an individual may hold on the issue, which in its turn indicates relative strength of an attitude about the issue. As Pomerantz, Chaiken, and Tordesillas (1995) stated, "...investigators have identified the amount of knowledge an individual has about an issue as a form of strength and shown that possession of ample knowledge is associated with greater resistance to social influence attempts" (p. 408). Overall, the participants demonstrated a positive shift in their attitudes, but those who knew more than the others had the smallest attitude change, while those who knew less had the largest increase in attitude favourability.

The set of the ELM variables did not affect how the participants' attitudes changed over the course of the experiment may lie in the fact that the ELM deals mostly with overtly persuasive messages that directly promote a particular position and supporting arguments in the messages that individuals attend to. Agenda setting studies the impact of media messages that are not intended to have a persuasive effect. Attitudinal effects are considered by agenda setting as indirect, and the media messages are thought to have effects on the audience over a certain period of time as a result of accumulated coverage of certain issues.

One of the most important findings of the study was that knowledge and elaboration affect overall attitude favourability. The variables are correlated. Knowledge would be more fundamental than elaboration for a theoretical explication of the results. Petty and Cacioppo (1981) contended that processing ability, which was operationalized as knowledge, is one of the antecedents alongside involvement that determine how high the level of elaboration will be. Lee (2005) specifically explored the impact of two factors, how certain people are about an issue, and how much they know about an

issue, on effort put into processing media messages. Effort as defined by the author is similar to elaboration, according to the ELM. Effort made a significant contribution on agenda-setting effects, but knowledge was one of the factors influencing it.

Because knowledge and elaboration are related to the pretest scores as well as the posttest scores, when the pretest scores are entered into the regressions as covariates in an ANCOVA design, the effects of these ELM variables will be attenuated.

These findings are important because they demonstrate not only that the agenda-setting process is accompanied by attitude change, but also that the ELM may complement priming as a mechanism facilitating this change. Less knowledgeable participants had both higher perceived issue importance and attitude favourability of issue after reading stories about them.

The study illuminated the role of the ELM in agenda-setting, but the results can also be interpreted as a reciprocal agenda-setting contribution to the ELM itself. Central routes of information processing characterized by higher involvement and knowledge lead to stronger attitude change than peripheral routes characterized by lower involvement and knowledge, according to the ELM theorists. Agenda-setting effects, however, are considered to be indirect and especially strong with subjects who are less knowledgeable and not strongly involved with issues covered by the media in the first place. Low processing ability does not necessarily lead to rather weak attitudinal effects. In the case of media effects, attitude formation and change can also be strong as they are related to societal beliefs in media credibility and professionalism. The ELM theorists rightly point at a relative instability of attitudes based on low involvement and processing ability; however, the repetitive character of many media messages about recurrent issues may facilitate both an attitude change and a stability for it. Agenda setting studies show that the media may repetitively cover some issues by often using the same attributes inside these issues' coverage with such repetitions potentially becoming a peripheral route of the ELM inducing attitude change as an indirect effect.

It is worth to further explore this link in the future considering the importance of the agenda setting in media effects, and the ELM in persuasion.

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