

THE AGENDA-SETTING EFFECTS OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE: AN EXAMINATION OF DIFFERING NEWS FRAMES

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ABSTRACT

The agenda-setting impact of international news was examined by comparing the coverage of 15 categories of international news in four news media (the *New York Times*, ABC, CBS, and NBC) with the level of public concern with international problems as recorded by all 41 Gallup organization's most important problem polls conducted from 1975 to 1990. The findings suggest that the way in which international news is framed in news reports may determine the magnitude of salience cues. Four categories of news coverage demonstrated the strongest agenda-setting influence: international conflicts involving the United States; terrorism involving the U.S.; crime/drugs; and military/nuclear arms. Generally, the results support previous findings which concluded that stories with high degrees of conflict and stories with concrete presentations (by including Americans in the stories) have the strongest agenda-setting impact. In addition, two news categories—international trade not involving the United States, and politics not involving the United States—correlated negatively with public concern for two of the news media. This result suggests that press coverage, besides increasing public concern with certain issues, can also decrease concern. Certain categories of news, such as stories dealing with international politics and trade, can give individuals cues that the international arena is functioning quite smoothly. These types of international news stories show individuals that international problems are not really serious problems at all.

International news stories can deal with an infinite variety of topics, from foreign trade issues to terrorism. It stands to reason that these different types of story presentations—or news frames—will have differing effects on members of the public. The agenda-setting influence of international news stories, in other words, may vary due to the type of story receiving coverage.

Since the initial agenda-setting studies (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Funkhouser, 1973; Shaw and McCombs, 1977), the vast majority of research in this area has found that members of the public learn the relative importance of issues

through the amount of coverage these issues receive in the news media. Some categories of coverage, however, should have stronger agenda-setting effects than others. It is more than likely that individuals will not increase their perceived importance of the issue of international problems if the news media increase their coverage of a national election in France, for instance, but may think international problems is a more important issue if the media increase coverage of a terrorist attack on Americans in Paris.

The location of these stories is the same, but the story frame is not. In other words, the agenda-setting influence of the mass media on the public for the issue of international problems should be contingent to a great degree upon the sub-issue, or news frame, reported. Gitlin (1980) and Tuchman (1978) both point to the fruitfulness of examining story frames, which they define as persistent patterns of presentations through which journalists organize their stories.

Numerous contingent conditions could affect the intensity of media influence. Even the early agenda-setting studies did not suggest uniform influence by the media over time or across issues. Many other variables, such as audience interests and media news values, are 'the building blocks of public issues—which cannot always be predicted' (Shaw and Clemmer, 1977, p. 39).

This study examines one potential contingent condition in the agenda-setting process: the story frame. The study examines 15 categories of international news coverage in a national newspaper (the *New York Times*) and the three national network newscasts (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and the agenda-setting influence this coverage had on public concern with international problems as the most important problem facing our nation.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

The content, structure and flow of international news has been the subject of intense study over the past decades (see, for example, Schramm, 1959; Schramm and Atwood, 1981; and Gerbner and Marvanyi, 1977). However, little research has examined how foreign news reporting influences the opinions held by members of the public. The study of the impact of international news on the opinions and attitudes of American readers and viewers provides a fertile but untilled field for the application of the concept of agenda-setting.

Much of the research into international news content and flow examines the gatekeeper function of the news media (White, 1950; Peterson, 1979). However, this function appears to offer only limited insight (Rosengren, 1977), and as a result, scholars have looked elsewhere for explanations of what types of international stories receive media coverage.

Lent (1977), for example, contends that national interests, crisis reporting, censorship and the dwindling corps of correspondents constrain international coverage in the U.S. media. A body of research (for example, Zipf, 1946; MacLean and Pinna, 1958; Rosengren, 1972) suggests a correlation between reader interest and the physical distance between countries.

In their landmark article, Galtung and Ruge (1965) suggest that distance should be conceptualized in terms of cultural distance. Hester (1971) and Zaharopoulos (1990) have refined this relationship as cultural proximity. Others (Rosengren, 1974; Schramm, 1964; Merrill, 1968; Østgaard, 1965; and Adams, 1964) have suggested that news content and flow are influenced by the political and economic dominance of a relatively small number of countries.

Other research (Hart, 1966; Dajani and Donohue, 1973; Arwood, 1987; Williams *et al.*, 1990) has explored the content of foreign news, particularly in light of the New World Information Order and the continuing accusations of First World bias in news selection and reporting (see Schiller, 1978; Haque, 1983; Giffard, 1984). These studies, in turn, suggested that distorted or imbalanced foreign news reporting affects the images that individuals may have of other nations (Boulding, 1959; McNelly and Izcay, 1986).

Enculturation also has received increasing attention recently (Pingree and Hawkins, 1981). For instance, Tan *et al.* (1987) explored how exposure to American television programs has influenced the values of Filipino high school students.

What still appears rare in mass communication research is exploration of the impact of foreign news on a domestic audience, particularly on opinion-formation. The studies on the impact of foreign news have generally focused on development of domestic audience attitudes and images of other nations. McNelly and Izcay (1986), for example, found news exposure significantly related to positive feelings toward countries and to perceptions of them as successful. However, they repeat the warning that 'evidence of content should not be taken as evidence of effect'.

Semetko *et al.* (1992), meanwhile, found that attention to foreign affairs news was a better predictor of liking a country than was simple exposure to television news or newspapers. In addition, the more visible a country was in television news, the stronger the television attention and exposure measures were as predictors of opinions about that country.

The present study argues that, by employing the theoretical tools of agenda-setting, it is possible to assess the effects of international news on domestic opinion. Though the issue of international problems has received little attention from agenda-setting researchers, international stories should produce strong agenda-setting effects, according to the argument of Zucker (1978). Zucker

believes that the news media should have a stronger agenda-setting effect for unobtrusive issues, those in which individuals have little or no personal involvement, than for obtrusive issues. Individuals must rely solely on the news media for information on unobtrusive issues, while individuals can receive additional information on obtrusive issues from their personal involvement with these issues.

International problems should be an unobtrusive issue for the vast majority of individuals in the United States, since logically members of the public should have little direct involvement with international affairs. Coverage of international problems, then, should show a strong agenda-setting influence. Different types of stories, however, should have different levels of effects on members of the public. As Gitlin (1980) argues, media frames organize the world for both journalists and media consumers. Tuchman (1978) believes news frames impose 'order and coherence on the social world'. However, message variables in general, and news frames in particular, have received relatively little attention from agenda-setting researchers. The significance of how news stories are framed was pointed out by Williams *et al.* (1983), who categorized issues covered in the 1980 election on whether or not they were given a 'campaign frame'. They conclude that voters need a frame or a point of reference for determining the campaign relevance of issues.

Recently, Yagade and Dozier (1990) argued that concrete issues—those that individuals can identify and picture in their minds, such as energy—have a stronger agenda-setting influence on the public than do abstract issues because individuals understand the significance of concrete issues as a problem. Individuals have difficulty in understanding the significance of abstract issues, such as the budget deficit, because they cannot picture in their minds billions of dollars of debt.

Categories of international news that are concrete, such as terrorist attacks on Americans, then, should have a stronger agenda-setting effect than categories that are abstract, such as international trade. Individuals would be likely to picture millions of dollars of grain being traded between countries.

MacKuen and Coombs (1981), meanwhile, found that stories with a high degree of conflict had a stronger influence on the public. Similarly, Auh (1977) concludes that conflict increases the impact of agenda-setting beyond simple frequency of coverage. International conflict stories or stories dealing with terrorism, then, should demonstrate the strongest agenda-setting effects. The stories also dramatize individuals' fears of their personal safety and danger. Stories with little conflict, such as a story involving a trade agreement, should produce weaker agenda-setting effects.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question directing this study is: What types of international news frames have the strongest agenda-setting impact on the public? Previous studies found that stories with high levels of conflict (MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; Auh, 1977) and stories dealing with concrete issues (Yagade and Dozier, 1990) produce the strongest agenda-setting effects. Therefore, some likely categories in which strong agenda-setting effects should be found are:

- international conflicts involving the United States;
- terrorism involving U.S. citizens;
- crime/drugs.

The above categories all have high degrees of conflict inherent in them. Two of the three categories are also highly concrete because they specifically involve the United States.

Categories in which weaker agenda-setting effects should be found are:

- conflicts not involving the United States;
- terrorism not involving the United States;
- general military/nuclear arms control;
- human rights;
- government corruption.

The above categories either have little conflict or do not involve the United States. Therefore, stories in these categories should not have as strong an agenda-setting impact on individuals as the previous set of categories.

Categories in which few, if any, agenda-setting effects should be found are:

- human interest;
- accidents/disasters/environment;
- U.S.—International trade;
- trade not involving the United States;
- political news involving the United States;
- political news not involving the United States;
- miscellaneous international stories.

The above categories have even less conflict than the previous sets of categories. Furthermore, some of them do not involve the United States. Therefore, stories in these categories should not have as strong an agenda-setting effect on individuals as the two previous sets of categories.

METHOD

All 41 Gallup polls from 1975 to 1990 that asked the question "What is the number one problem facing our country today?" were examined to determine the relative concern the public had with international problems. To avoid any

potential methodological problems which might occur due to the Vietnam War, the time frame examined begins after the end of the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. The percentage of respondents naming international problems as the most important problem formed the public concern variable.

Because some Gallup polls periodically differentiated between some sub-categories, all categories related to international problems were added to the totals for the public concern variable. These sub-categories included international tensions, fear of war, and foreign aid. The public concern variable ranged from 4 to 44 percent with a low in 1975 and 1990 and a peak in January of 1980. The average portion of respondents naming international problems as the number one problem facing the U.S. has been 13 percent.

The Gallup poll data, admittedly, are an imperfect device with which to measure public opinion. However, these polls have been used effectively in the past (for example, Funkhouser, 1973; Winter and Eyal, 1981) and they remain a useful measure of public opinion across long periods of time—as was the case in this study. Smith (1980), in noting the historical depth and significance of the most important problem polls, is surprised at researchers' limited use of these data.

The front pages of the *New York Times* were then examined to determine the number of stories the newspaper ran dealing with international issues in the four weeks before the Gallup polls. Four weeks was the time frame examined because Winter and Eyal (1981), who also examined front page stories in the *New York Times*, found that the optimal time-lag for agenda-setting effects to occur is four to six weeks. Zucker (1978) suggests the time-lag is two to four weeks.

The *New York Times* was chosen for the study because, besides having a national circulation, elite media such as the *Times* may have an agenda-setting effect on smaller media that could show up in survey data of a cross section of the population. Thus, while the vast majority of respondents in the Gallup polls were unlikely to have been exposed to the *Times*, they may have been exposed to other media that had taken salience cues from coverage in the *Times*.

It should be noted that including only the front pages of the *New York Times* in the coding scheme may have increased the magnitude of any potential agenda-setting effect. As Shaw and McCombs (1977) note, longer, front-page stories are commonly assumed to be more important than shorter, inside stories. Therefore, readers perceive stories to be more important from front-page news placement. However, front pages often mirror content in a newspaper's first section. McCombs *et al.* (1972), in addition, found only slightly higher agenda-setting correlations for front-page stories than for stories contained in the first section of a newspaper.

All stories filed from another country or mentioning two or more countries were included in the study. Each story on the front pages that dealt with

international news in the four weeks before the polls was coded for the way in which the story was presented. The stories were placed into one of the 15 news categories. Multiple classification was not permitted. If two or more categories appeared in a news item, the story was coded into the dominant classification in order to retain statistical independence of the category system. ABC, CBS, and NBC were similarly examined using the *Vanderbilt Archives News Abstracts*.

The 15 categories in which all stories were placed were:

- U.S.-international conflicts
- Non-U.S. conflicts
- Military/nuclear arms
- Terrorism involving the United States
- Terrorism not involving the United States
- Crime/drugs
- Government corruption
- Human rights
- Accidents/disasters/environment
- U.S.-international trade
- Non-U.S. trade
- Political involving the United States
- Political not involving the United States
- Human interest
- Miscellaneous

Approximately 10 percent of all data was double-coded. Inter-coder reliability using Scott's π was .91.

Pearson correlations were then computed comparing the number of stories in each category for each medium with the percentage of respondents who said international problems was the number one problem facing our country today, as recorded in the Gallup poll data. In other words, responses from the 41 Gallup polls were correlated with the number of stories dealing with international problems categories during the four weeks before the 41 Gallup polls. Statistically significant correlations will suggest which categories of news produced agenda-setting effects on members of the public.

The methodology employed here, then, involved an examination of a single issue across time, which has an important advantage in agenda-setting research. As McCombs (1981) points out, researchers following one issue over time can more sharply focus their analysis of the contingent conditions affecting the strength of agenda-setting effects since measurements of other variables—such as differences in story frames—can be more tightly controlled. Studies examining individual issues also have met with wide-spread success (for example, Winter and Eyal, 1981; Winter *et al.*, 1980).

TABLE 1 News emphasis on international problems
Mean number of stories run by four U.S. news media in the four weeks before the Gallup organization's most important problem polls, 1975-1990

Category	ABC	CBS	NBC	NYT
U.S.-International conflicts	6.12	6.78	7.12	8.17
Non-U.S. conflicts	18.98	20.05	19.42	19.29
Military/nuclear arms	7.61	6.24	7.00	15.32
Terrorism involving U.S.	11.81	9.95	10.49	3.68
Terrorism not involving U.S.	10.90	10.29	10.73	2.83
Crime/drugs	3.27	3.63	3.76	2.22
Government corruption	1.81	1.32	1.56	1.22
Human rights	3.32	2.93	2.88	5.56
Accidents/disasters	9.02	9.88	9.07	2.06
U.S.-International trade/economy	1.68	2.37	2.46	3.05
Non-U.S. trade	2.71	3.17	3.12	4.32
Political involving U.S.	34.66	33.24	36.49	10.10
Political not involving U.S.	42.44	47.17	44.59	18.46
Human interest	3.10	3.05	3.95	5.98
Miscellaneous	7.54	8.95	9.49	4.76
All categories	164.95	169.02	172.12	107.81

RESULTS

A total of 25,170 stories were analyzed in this study. Table 1 lists the mean number of stories that the four news media ran in the four weeks before the Gallup polls for each of the categories. Three categories of news dominated all others. Political stories not involving the United States received the most coverage, followed by political stories involving the United States and international conflicts not involving the United States. These three categories accounted for 56.2 percent of all news stories run by the three networks. Government corruption received the least amount of coverage—less than one percent, or fewer than two stories per news medium per four-week time period. Table 2 lists the results of the Pearson correlations for the three networks and the *New York Times*. Of the 15 categories of international news coverage for the four media, 17 significant correlations were found.

As MacKuen and Coombs (1981) and Auh (1977) suggest, the categories of news coverage with the highest levels of conflict correlated positively with the public concern with international problems.

The number of stories dealing with international conflicts involving the United States correlated significantly with public concern with international problems for all three networks ($r = .54$ for ABC, .59 for CBS and .61 for NBC;

TABLE 2 News coverage and public concern

Pearson correlations of public concern with international problems as the country's most important problem and coverage of international news by the three national networks and the *New York Times*, 1975-1990

Category	ABC	CBS	NBC	NYT
U.S.-International conflicts	.54***	.59***	.61***	.49***
Non-U.S. conflicts	-.09	-.05	-.01	.35*
Military/nuclear arms	.19	.17	.31*	.34*
Terrorism involving U.S.	.29*	.21	.31*	.04
Terrorism not involving U.S.	-.22	-.18	-.12	.04
Crime/drugs	.11	.29*	.26	.28*
Government corruption	-.11	-.17	-.03	-.13
Human rights	.15	.02	.32*	.21
Accidents/disasters	.06	-.10	.02	.18
U.S.-International trade/economy	-.06	.17	.02	-.05
Non-U.S. trade	-.33*	-.39**	-.14	-.07
Political involving U.S.	-.09	-.19	-.15	-.27*
Political not involving U.S.	-.33*	-.31**	-.18	-.25
Human interest	-.02	.12	-.02	.00
Miscellaneous	-.02	.01	.05	-.21
All categories	.07	.01	.23	.54***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

$p < .001$ for each) and the *New York Times* ($r = .49$, $p < .001$). Coverage of terrorism involving the United States also correlated significantly with public concern for two networks (.29 for ABC and .31 for NBC; $p < .05$ for both). The frequency of stories dealing with crime/drugs correlated significantly with public concern for the *New York Times* ($r = .28$, $p < .05$) and CBS ($r = .29$, $p < .05$).

Coverage of military/nuclear arms in the *New York Times* ($r = .34$, $p < .05$) and on NBC ($r = .31$, $p < .05$) also correlated significantly with public concern with international problems. *Times* coverage of conflicts not involving the United States ($r = .35$, $p < .05$) and NBC coverage of human rights ($r = .32$, $p < .05$) also produced significant correlations.

A few significant negative correlations were also found. Stories dealing with trade/economy not involving the United States on ABC ($r = -.33$, $p < .05$) and CBS ($r = -.39$, $p < .01$) and stories dealing with political news not involving the United States on ABC ($r = -.33$, $p < .05$) and CBS ($r = -.31$, $p < .05$) correlated negatively with public concern. Stories in the *New York Times* dealing with international politics involving the United States also correlated negatively with public concern ($r = -.27$, $p < .05$).

When all categories were combined, however, only international news coverage in the *New York Times* ($r = .54$, $p < .001$) correlated significantly with public concern with international problems.

DISCUSSION

This study compares the coverage of 15 categories of international news in four news media with the level of public concern with international problems as recorded by the Gallup organization's most important problem polls. A number of specific news frames apparently did have a stronger agenda-setting influence on the public than other categories. In addition, some categories correlated negatively with public concern. This is perhaps the most interesting finding of the study. This result points to two plausible explanations.

First, perhaps some categories of news gave the impression that coverage lowered issue salience because reports dealing with the more dramatic news frames (such as terrorism or international conflicts) were not appearing in the news media. In other words, because of limited time and space available to the news media, perhaps when terroristic acts and international conflicts were at a low point, the media devoted more coverage to less dramatic news frames, such as trade and politics. Thus, trade and politics may not have lowered issue salience as much as the reduced coverage of terrorism and conflicts did. However, if this were true, the categories that produced negative correlations with public concern would also produce negative correlations with the dramatic news categories (terrorism and conflicts). A re-analysis of the data, however, showed no such statistically significant correlations.

Second, press coverage, besides increasing concern with certain issues, may also decrease concern. Certain categories of news, such as stories dealing with international politics and trade, can give individuals cues that the international arena is functioning quite smoothly. These types of international news stories show individuals that international problems are not really problems at all. This supports the findings of Schönbach and Semetko (1992) who also found that certain stories can lower issue salience.

Moreover, the lack of U.S. involvement in two categories that correlated negatively with public concern gave additional cues that international problems were not important. Individuals may have gotten the impression that if international problems were a concern, the U.S. government would have gotten involved. This finding, then, suggests that certain types of news stories can lower issue salience within individuals. Some stories may reassure individuals that an issue is not important enough to draw their concern.

In addition, foreign trade and international politics could be classified as 'abstract' issues, since individuals should have a difficult time picturing in their

heads these two issues. Perhaps individuals cannot comprehend millions of dollars in foreign trade or an election in a foreign country. This finding, then, could support the notion of Yagade and Dozier (1990) that abstract issues will have a lesser agenda-setting influence on the public than will concrete issues that individuals can picture in their minds.

Two other important conclusions are apparent from the results here. First, the findings support the conclusion of MacKuen and Coombs (1981) and Auh (1977), who argue that stories with high levels of conflict will produce the strongest agenda-setting effects. As Table 2 shows, coverage dealing with crime and drugs, international conflicts involving the United States and terrorism involving the United States significantly correlated with public concern on international problems for at least two of the media. The high levels of conflict inherent in these stories gave salience cues to individuals that international problems was an important issue.

Second, the findings also support the conclusion of Yagade and Dozier (1990), who argue that stories involving concrete issues will produce stronger agenda-setting effects than will stories involving abstract issues. General coverage of international conflicts and terrorism did not correlate with public concern, except in the case of the *New York Times* and international conflicts. The stories needed to involve the United States before they produced agenda-setting effects.

The findings here suggest that individuals need a concrete frame of reference before they become concerned with the international problems issues. They may be able to picture in their minds conflicts and terrorism involving Americans better than these types of stories involving citizens from other countries.

This finding also supports the concept of individuals' 'need for orientation' (Weaver, 1977; McCombs and Weaver, 1985). The basis of this concept is that individuals will be more susceptible to agenda-setting effects if (1) they have high uncertainty about the issue, and (2) the issue is highly relevant to them. If news stories of international conflicts and terrorism do not involve the United States, the coverage may be perceived as less relevant to individuals. Thus, these irrelevant international stories not involving the United States have less of an agenda-setting impact than relevant international stories involving the United States.

Overall, then, the findings point to the fruitfulness of examining story frames as a variable in the agenda-setting process. Some types of international story frames apparently have a stronger agenda-setting impact on members of the public than other frames. In fact, of the four news media examined here, only the *New York Times'* coverage of all categories of international news correlated significantly with public concern with international problems. Apparently, then, the story frame contained in news stories plays an important role in the agenda-setting impact of international news coverage.

Since international news frames vary in their agenda-setting intensity, it is logical to assume that different news frames for other issues also will have varying agenda-setting impact. Unravelling what types of frames provide the strongest salience cues to the public on other issues would have important implications in public opinion research.

In addition, the findings also suggest the need to examine other types of coverage that might reassure the public and thus lower the salience of certain issues. While the basic agenda-setting hypothesis has been generally supported by a wide variety of studies, the notion that some stories can give individuals cues that issues are unimportant deserves further attention.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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HIDDEN SWEDISH
LEADERS

BY
WAYNE WANTA
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U.S. NATIONAL
SURVEY

BY
DONALD
PETERSSON
AND
ERIK
BERG

ABSTRACT

A Swedish survey in 1986 of political opinion leaders in Sweden. Both the respondents and the survey were designed to measure the impact of media on political opinion leaders. The survey was conducted by mail and telephone. The results show that political opinion leaders are not necessarily influenced by the media. Three different types of political opinion leaders were identified: (1) those who are influenced by the media, (2) those who are not influenced by the media, and (3) those who are influenced by the media but do not see themselves as political opinion leaders.

Peter

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