Effectively Engaging the Public

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Back in the 19th century, William James succinctly described the world of the infant as "a buzzing, blooming confusion." Here in the 21st century, this phrase coined by one of the great pioneers in psychology remains an apt description of the situation for adult citizens in the new communication environment.

To the multitude of newspapers and magazines already available in William James' time, the 20th century added radio, film, three versions of television – broadcast, cable and satellite – and the internet with its plethora of sites offering every variety of content. The contemporary public sits amid a communication environment of unparalleled richness – and unparalleled vastness. The core problem, of course, is that while the breadth and scope of this communication environment has greatly expanded, all of us still measure our lives by the same "24 hours in a day" clock that William James used in the 19th century.

As a result of this situation, members of the public frequently feel that they are in a "buzzing, blooming confusion," while concurrently it also has become more difficult for a communicator to have his voice heard among the public. In many countries, the circulations of daily newspapers – especially relative to the size of the population – and the audiences of the mainstream television news programs are shrinking. Many cable TV systems offer 100 or more channels, but most members of the audience use only a handful. The same is true for internet sites, especially the online versions of traditional news providers. A handful of sites dominate the marketplace of ideas.

Among the most prominent factors explaining these trends in how people actually use mass communication is the public's longstanding tendency to winnow out of mass communication a small subset of information that is perceived as relevant. This is the public's dominant strategy for dealing with the "buzzing, blooming confusion" of over-abundant mass media. Even in the last century when daily newspapers and national television dominated the mass media in the United States, the average article in the newspaper was read by only 20% or so of those who bought the newspaper; and an hour after viewing a TV news program, the audience already had forgotten the vast majority of the news items. Technology has made it easier to reach an audience – in the sense of providing access to your messages. But effectively reaching an audience – getting them to pay attention to your message and to comprehend its details – is as elusive as ever. Perhaps even more so. Most members of the public ruthlessly ignore the vast

majority of the mass communication messages that are readily available to them.

How then can we explain the success or failure of a communicator in his quest to effectively reach the public? In the arena of politics and public affairs, our accumulated knowledge about the agenda-setting role of the news media – and what makes for success or failure in moving an item to the public agenda – provides a useful answer to this question. Let's begin with an outline of this agenda-setting influence, which is a mark of success in effectively reaching the public, and then turn to a detailed look at the constraints imposed by the public on this influence.

Agenda-setting role of the news media

The frequently demonstrated power of the news media to focus the public's attention on a few key issues is an immense influence. People not only acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, the public often learns how much importance to attach to an issue on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news. In other words, the news media can set the agenda for the public's attention.

Newspapers provide a host of cues about the relative importance of the issues in the daily news – lead story on page one, other front page display, large headlines, and length, for example. Television news also offers numerous cues about the relative importance of these issues, including placement as the opening story on the newscast and the length of time devoted to the story. These cues repeated day after day communicate the importance that the news media attach to each issue. They define the media agenda. In other words, the agenda of each news organization is its pattern of coverage over a period of time, a week, a month, an entire year. It is important to note that the use of term "media agenda" here is purely descriptive. There is no pejorative implication that a news organization "has an agenda" in the sense of a premeditated plan of coverage. The media agenda presented to the public results from countless day-to-day decisions about the relative importance of the news of the moment.

The public agenda – the issues that are the focus of public attention – is usually assessed by public opinion polls asking, "What is the most important problem facing this country today?". Because the news agenda frequently has a substantial influence on the public's agenda of issues, the phrase "setting the agenda" has become commonplace in discussions of journalism and public opinion.

Influencing the pictures in our heads

This agenda-setting influence of the news media is not limited to this initial step of focusing public attention on a small number of issues. The media also influence the next step in the communication process, our understanding and perspective about these issues in the news. If you think about an agenda in abstract terms, the potential for a broader view of media influence on public opinion becomes very clear. In the abstract, the items that define the media agenda and the public agenda are *objects*. Most frequently, these objects are public issues, but they

could be any item or topic that you are interested in. The objects are the things on which the attention of the media and, subsequently, the attention of the public are focused.

Each of these objects, in turn, has numerous *attributes*, those characteristics and traits that describe the object. For each object on the agenda there also is an agenda of attributes because when the media and the public think and talk about an object, some attributes are emphasized, others are given less attention, and many receive no attention at all. This agenda of attributes is another aspect of the agenda-setting role of the news media.

Which attributes of an issue are covered in the news – and the relative emphasis on these various facets of the issue – makes a considerable difference in how people view that issue. The same is true for the presentation of public figures in the news. Which attributes of a person are covered in the news – and the relative emphasis on these various attributes – makes a considerable difference in how people view that person.

To sum up, there are two aspects of the agenda-setting influence of the news media. From the pattern of total news coverage, the media's agenda of objects, the public learns what the important issues are and who the prominent public figures of the day are. From the details of this coverage – the agenda of attributes presented by the news media – the public forms its images and opinions about these issues and public figures. These agenda-setting effects are measures of success in two initial steps of the communication process, gaining the attention of the public for a topic and teaching the public pertinent details about this topic.

Although this influence of the media agenda on the public often is substantial, the cues and information about the relative prominence of objects and their attributes provided by the news media are not the only determinants of the public agenda. The substantial influence of the news media has in no way overthrown the basic assumption of democracy that the public at large has sufficient wisdom to determine the course of their nation, their state, and their local communities. In particular, the public is quite able to determine the fundamental relevance of the objects and attributes advanced by the news media. The media are successful in setting the agenda only when their news stories are perceived as relevant by citizens.

The intensive news coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky sexual scandal in the United States spectacularly failed to set the public agenda and sway public opinion about Clinton's ability and right to serve as the American president. Despite its heavy play in the news media – a pattern of news coverage frequently described as "All Monica, all the time" – this unremitting scandal coverage wound up only demonstrating that the media voice has significant limitations. Overwhelmingly, the public rejected the relevance of that scandal as the basis of their evaluation of the president's success or failure at governance. Public opinion polls consistently showed that while people condemned Clinton the man, they continued to accept Clinton the president by overwhelming numbers.

Need for orientation

The presence or absence of significant agenda-setting effects among the public are explained by a basic psychological trait, the need within each individual to understand the environment around them. Whenever we find ourselves in a new and unfamiliar situation, there usually is an uncomfortable psychological feeling until we explore and mentally grasp at least the outlines of that setting. Recall your initial feeling upon moving to a new community or visiting a foreign city. This need for orientation frequently exists in the civic arena where citizens are often confronted with new and unfamiliar situations – new political faces, new issues, or new aspects of existing issues. In situations such as these, members of the public have a need for orientation, a need for some kind of mental map to provide an understanding of where they are.

The extent of an individual's need for orientation in any particular situation is defined by two factors: relevance and uncertainty. Relevance is the initial defining condition that determines the level of need for orientation for each individual. It is important to note that need for orientation is a psychological concept, which is to say, that there are large individual differences in the degree of need for orientation in any particular situation. If a public issue or other topic is perceived by an individual as low in relevance, then his or her level of need for orientation is low. Individuals who are in this situation typically pay little or no attention to news media reports about this issue or topic and, at most, demonstrate weak agenda-setting effects.

For individuals among whom the relevance of an issue or topic is high, their degree of uncertainty about the topic determines the level of need for orientation. If this uncertainty is low, that is, they feel that they basically understand the issue or topic, then the need for orientation is moderate. These individuals – for whom a situation has high relevance, but low uncertainty – will monitor the media for new developments and perhaps occasionally absorb additional background information. But these individuals are not likely to be avid consumers of news about the issue or topic. Agenda-setting effects among this group are moderate.

Finally, among those individuals for whom both the relevance and their uncertainty about a situation are high, their need for orientation will be high. These individuals typically are avid consumers of news reports about the issue or topic at hand, and strong agenda-setting effects typically are found among these individuals.

To summarize, both following public affairs in the news and the agenda-setting effects of this news steadily increase with the level of need for orientation among members of the public. There is a very important message here for communicators seeking to effectively reach the public. When the news media provide information that the public finds relevant and informative, there is a substantial audience – and there is substantial media influence on the priorities that citizens assign to the issues, public figures, and topics of the day.

Three publics for the news

The vast range of individual differences that exist among the public in their need for orientation about public affairs identifies three major publics for news. In terms of high, moderate, and low need for orientation, these three publics are *Information-seekers*, *Monitors*, and *Onlookers*.

Information-seekers, who closely resemble the idealized citizens of democratic theory, are persons to whom elections and a wide variety of public affairs are highly relevant. Typically, the members of this public make a continuing and regular effort to acquire considerable information about a wide range of public affairs because they have a high need for orientation to the civic arena. They usually are heavy readers of newspapers and heavy users of television news.

Another public consists of Monitors, those individuals who monitor or scan the ongoing stream of news, often for information that is specifically relevant to them and their lives. These individuals generally are satisfied with knowledge *of* the issues of the day rather than detailed knowledge *about* the issues of the day. However, on occasion, these monitors become avid information-seekers when an issue or other topic with immediate consequences for them moves onto the community or national agenda, something they see as a threat or an opportunity.

A third public, Onlookers, consists of those persons for whom civic life has low personal relevance. These are individuals with a low need for orientation in regard to public affairs, persons for whom the daily newspaper and television news often are more of a pleasant distraction and source of entertainment than a source of orientation to civic life. Many of these persons are registered to vote, but typically they do not appear at the polls with any regularity and frequently make their voting decisions at the last moment. The fact that Onlookers do make some use of the news media and do appear at the polls from time to time is cause for a degree of optimism. Onlookers are potentially reachable – and do become participants in public life – when and if the news agenda strikes a resonant chord.

Finding those resonant chords for all three of these publics means that journalists need to be more than just creators of interesting and compelling stories based on the traditional news values of our profession. Journalists must be communicators who are concerned about the effects – and, especially at many times, the lack of civic effects – of their stories on the public. More specifically, journalists and news organizations need to work at tailoring their messages to reach all three publics.

Civic utility of the news

Daily and hourly decisions about the media agenda – what to include and how to play it, as well as what to omit – are among the most important *ethical* questions in journalism. Is the media agenda that is constructed each day a valid effort to provide what the public really needs to know

and wants to know? One way of determining whether the media agenda does provide what the public needs and wants is to explicitly evaluate the *civic utility* of news stories.

All three publics for the news intuitively grasp the idea of civic utility, and among all three publics there are strong beliefs that much of what one finds in the daily news lacks relevance. Public opinions polls and focus groups can detail these views with considerable specificity – whether ascertaining overall evaluations of news media performance or evaluations of the coverage about individual issues, public figures, and other topics. This kind of feedback is needed on a continuing basis to measure in precise terms how effective the news media are as public communicators, to measure how relevant citizens find the content of the news media and how informative the public finds this content.

Moreover, this feedback should go beyond general descriptions of how the public responds to the daily news and measure the performance of the news media against some very specific criteria. One venerable source for these criteria is the Hutchins Commission report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, which identified five requirements for a free and responsible press in a democratic society:

- A truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of each day's events in a context that brings out the full meaning of these events. There is already enough in this initial criterion of media performance to fill a lengthy questionnaire for a public opinion poll or discussion guide for focus groups.

- A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, a requirement that advocates of public journalism, for example, contend goes considerably beyond letters to the editor and occasional news reports on public hearings, civic debates and other incidental public affairs events.

- A representative picture of the various social groups that constitute society. In the US this is a requirement that has taken on considerable significance since September 11th. But this criterion is equally important in a Europe that is experiencing considerable immigration.

- Presentation and clarification of national goals and values, a requirement inextricably linked with the previous requirement because of the increasing cultural complexity of the world as a whole as well as individual countries and cities. Noting that the mass media are "an educational instrument, perhaps the most powerful there is," the Commission also observed, "The mass media, whether or not they wish to do so, blur or clarify these ideals as they report the failings and achievements of every day."

- Facilitate citizens' full access to information about the current state of public affairs. To achieve this ambitious goal, the news media must consider the vast differences in individual citizens' degree of need for orientation and the existence of multiple publics for the day's news.

These requirements call for careful professional reflection about the choices made each day about

how to organize the media agenda. These requirements also call for continuous, explicit feedback that measures the effectiveness of journalists as public communicators who have a vital social role.

Reaching the public

Freedom of expression is one of the most valuable assets – perhaps the most valuable asset – of any society. However, the full value of this asset is realized only when it is responsibly exercised. And the audiences of the news media in democratic societies demand this linkage. They want information that is relevant to their lives as citizens.

When the news media provide this relevant information, they are highly successful in reaching the public. Agenda-setting effects are just one measure of this success. But these agenda-setting effects, which have been found in democratic societies worldwide, provide substantial evidence of success in two key initial steps in the mass communication process, gaining attention and building comprehension.

In working to achieve this success by providing relevant information, it is absolutely essential to distinguish between the public's curiosity about the world around them and the public's need for orientation to the world around them. Both curiosity and need for orientation are major aspects of human psychology. People are curious, and people seek to understand the world around them. But these are not the same thing. Many topics can briefly arouse the public's curiosity, but people are highly selective about the topics they seek to understand. In the buzzing, blooming confusion of communications bombarding the public, curiosity creates ephemeral audiences. Relevant information with significant civic utility builds enduring audiences – and it builds democratic societies.