The Freedom to Choose a Personal Agenda:
Removing Our Reliance on the Media Agenda

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Agenda setting states that media audiences determine the salience of issues based on the media coverage provided. During the past decade, audiences have been given a substantial amount of freedom in their quest for political information as the Internet has become a popular medium for news consumption. Therefore, it is necessary to see how changes in media consumption affect agenda setting. This study found that television users, Internet users, and the public possessed common agendas that differed significantly from the agenda the media showed them. These findings fail to support agenda setting, implying that the media are not powerful in setting the public agenda.

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During the past decade, the media environment has changed. This new media environment suggests that the influence of the mass media is also changing. There is no longer a single medium of national political integration; instead, the new digital media environment includes hundreds of cable channels, several of them 24-hour news channels, satellite, cell phone text messaging, email, and the endlessness of the Internet and has fragmented and segmented the media audience. Individuals are given much more freedom in their quest for information. The digital environment provides users a freedom from the reliance on a media provided agenda. In particular, an increase in Internet use may violate the basic assumptions of the agenda-setting theoretical model (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Individuals are no longer reliant on the media to provide them with an agenda of important issues. Rather, they are provided the tools to form an agenda relevant to them. Therefore, agenda-setting's assumption that people are receiving a common agenda, and thus possessing a common public agenda, falls into question in a new media environment.

Interactive communication media sources weaken the traditional editorial and critical roles and functions of the news media (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). People now have more freedom in their search for political material and other news information. Media consumers are no longer forced to rely solely on the news and information provided to them by the big media conglomerates (Neuman, 1991). Kerbel and Bloom (2005) argue that blogs are a prime example of how the Internet has the potential to counteract the negative effects that television has on the political process. This transference of roles is leading to a complex media system. Poindexter and McCombs (2001) described the new media environment as "anything but simple with its mixture of traditional and new news media available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week" (p. 123).

The percentage of people with Internet access in the U.S. increased from 9% in 1995 to 68% in 2005 (CIA World Factbook, 2007; Harris Poll, 2004a; Pew, 2003). As the Internet grows as a medium, it also grows as a source of political information. Between summer 2000 and the 2002 midterm election, the number of people who used the Internet as a source for political information increased 39%, from 33 million to 46 million users. The 2004 election was a "breakout for the Internet" (Pew, 2005), with 52% of online U.S. adults, and 38% of all U.S. adults, reporting they relied *some* or *a lot* on the Internet for political information (Harris, 2004b).

Candidates and advocacy groups used the Internet to bring people into the political process and to allow their voices to be expressed. Existing aspects of online politics, such as news, advocacy sites, email, and discussion, grew, and many aspects were "wholly new, from the flood of online campaign contributions to the rise of bloggers, from Meetups to streaming JibJab" (McGann, 2005). Pew (2005) reported that 43 million people discussed politics via email, and 13 million people used the Internet to donate money to campaigns, volunteer, or learn about political events to attend during the 2004 presidential election campaign. The Internet was a powerful information tool, and its fundraising activity was "nothing short of remarkable" (DiGuido, 2004). DiGuido reported that millions of dollars were raised for national campaigns in the U.S. via the Internet in only weeks. Pew reported 52% of political news consumers felt the Internet gave them information that helped them decide how to vote, 27% found information

online that prompted them to decide for or against a candidate, and 23% said their use of the Internet for political information encouraged them to vote in the 2004 election. In the 2006 midterm election season, 26 million Americans logged on for news or information about the campaign on a typical day, which was the highest such figure recorded (Pew, 2006).

During the 2008 presidential primary season, a record-breaking 46% of Americans have used new media – the Internet, email, and text messaging – to get news about the campaign and network with others (Pew, 2008). Pew (2008) reported three online activities that have become prominent during this election season: watching political videos, social networking sites, and donating online. Thirty-five percent of Americans have watched online videos – a number that has tripled since 2004; 10% of Americans – mostly those under 30 – have used social networking sites for information gathering or to become involved; and 6% of Americans have made donations online during the primary season alone – triple the number in the entire 2004 election (Pew, 2008).

New media's increased content choices and greater control over exposure provide individuals the freedom to create more personalized information environments. This may separate them from media's traditional public information agenda (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). Individual media environments are personalized in the medium used and information sought. Media users can choose to visit candidates' own websites for information or either informational and/or entertainment-oriented third-party websites.

For example, in the 2008 presidential election, a vast array of political resources is available on the Internet. YouTube users can watch videos for and sponsored by both Democratic nominee Barack Obama and Republican nominee John McCain, speeches given by the candidates, such as both Obama's and McCain's speeches to mark the beginning of the general election season, and videos made by supporters or opponents, such as the well-known Obama girl and a McCain supporter's response to her.

In addition, both YouTube and Yahoo! have hosted different types of "debates" in an effort to inform voters on the candidates and issues. Voters are then able to verify the information they hear from the candidates and the media with watchdog websites devoted to political fact checking and rumor clarifying. Thanks to digital freedom, voters can not only expose themselves to information in which they are interested, but they can also use the Internet to determine which candidate best fits their own issue positions by using a variety of candidate calculators.

New technology allows voters to form pseudo-friendships with the candidates. Voters can easily find out about upcoming candidate events to attend and can feel as if they are at these events by viewing photos of the candidates' experiences on Flickr. Individuals can keep up with the candidates' likes and dislikes through social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter aimed at younger voters and Eons aimed at Baby Boomers, as well as interact with other supporters.

This vast array of digital resources allows users to create their own personalized media environments rather than relying on the one traditionally provided by mainstream media.

According to Pew (2008), 28% of online Americans reported that the Internet makes them feel personally connected to campaign 2008 and 22% reported that they would not be as involved if not for the Internet. The goal of this study was to determine if agenda setting is applicable in the new media environment by ascertaining whether individuals' agendas reflected the media's agenda as posited by agenda setting theory.

Literature Review

Agenda setting is based on the idea that the media form the public agenda through the amount of coverage devoted to particular issues and events. An agenda is a list of current events and public issues which are viewed in a hierarchy of importance at a particular point in time (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). The set of topics addressed by all members of the news media is referred to as the media agenda (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). As media coverage increases, the issue's salience to the audience increases, and the item moves higher in the public's agenda hierarchy. Those issues that receive prominent attention are the problems that the public views as the nation's most important (Breen, 1997).

Cohen (1963) stated that the mass media "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" (p.13). McCombs and Shaw (1972) built on this statement with their seminal work stemming from a study in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and created the theory of agenda setting. Agenda setting emphasizes the media's effect on the public agenda. The media determine the important political issues and, therefore, set the public's agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Audiences learn both about given issues and how much importance to attach to the issues by the amount of information provided by the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting is an effects theory that places the media in the powerful position of determining the salience of issues on the public agenda.

Agenda setting posits that media do not mirror public opinion as much as they influence (Ader, 1995). McCombs and Shaw (1972) argued that the media influence issue salience among audience members through the amount of news coverage provided. By choosing which issues and events to cover, the media shape their audience's reality. Readers and viewers learn about issues and about how much importance to attach to these issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This does not imply that everyone thinks the same way; just that more people begin to think about the same issues (Stone & McCombs, 1981).

The vast amount of information available on the Internet makes this medium of active, goal-directed learning ideal for searching for specific information (Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001). Users actively seek out political information and are not passive recipients of the media agenda as suggested by traditional agenda setting. Internet users are able to select the information they wish to receive, avoid what they do not want, and access information not provided by the traditional media (Paletz, 2002). The Internet has caused alterations in traditional political communication as new media join traditional media in forming a new public sphere (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Dearing and Rogers (1996) contended that the growth of Internet use may violate this basic assumption of the agenda-setting theoretical model. In response to the changes in political communication, changes in mass communication theories must occur.

Several conclusions emerge from the literature. First, both traditional and new media sources exist and compete for attention in the search for political information. Second, new media sources allow the user to create an individualized environment. Third, the amount of media coverage provided to political issues is related to the importance of those issues to the audience. Based on this information, agenda setting would benefit from research that accounts for an increased use of the Internet for political information. Further, this information can guide future research into the relevance of traditional mass communication theories, such as agenda setting, in this new media environment.

Increased use of online sources is not removing a media agenda. Rather, the Internet allows audiences to be free from relying on the media agenda (Paletz, 2002). The variety of sources available on the Internet, in addition to traditional media, can lead to greater fragmentation of the audience. Media consumers are no longer receiving the same media agenda and, therefore, depending on their individual characteristics and motives leading them to choose their information sources, citizens will have differing perceptions of the issues that are important. Thus, the first hypothesis addresses this difference and the agenda-setting effect of the media.

H1a: Television users will possess a common agenda of important public affairs issues.
H1b: Internet users will possess a heterogeneous agenda of important public affairs issues.
H1c: Media users will possess a common agenda of important public affairs issues.

The second hypothesis is derived from the central premise of agenda setting theory as described in McCombs and Shaw's (1972) seminal work and supported for the last three decades.

H2a: Television users' agenda will reflect the television agenda.
H2b: Internet users' agenda will reflect the Internet agenda.
H2c: The public agenda will reflect the media agenda.

Method

Sample

Undergraduate students at a large Carnegie II research institution were solicited to serve as research assistants to assist with data gathering during the spring of 2005. The student assistants were instructed to gather data from a wide range of media consumers. Each student assistant was given a quota with gender and age categories for questionnaire completion: male and female; ages 18-25, 26-35, 36-49, 50-64, and 65 and over. Assistants were instructed to ask respondents about their level of media use for public affairs information. Students who agreed to participate in data collection as research assistants were trained by the investigator in the research procedures and in the research ethics. Accuracy of the assistants' efforts was checked by confirmation of respondents' participation through random follow-up phone calls and emails by the investigator. The final sample included 268 participants. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 84 years old ($M = 41.40$, $SD = 18.82$). In addition to age, participants were asked to include

gender, education level, and income information. Gender was scored as 0 for male and 1 for female. Fifteen participants did not include income data. For those participants, mean substitution was used. Table 1 summarizes the demographic data.

Questionnaire

     Political media exposure. The study asked participants about their *political media exposure* for both television and the Internet. The mean time for television news programming was 93.78 minutes per day ($SD = 95.07$) in this study. The mean time for Internet use for news was 19.70 minutes per day ($SD = 27.70$). In this study, 76 participants (28.4%) reported they

Table 1 *Demographic Data*

	Age				
	18-25	26-35	36-49	50-64	65+
Number of Participants	75	47	49	52	45
Percentage of Sample	28	17.5	18.3	19.4	16.8

	Gender				
	Male	Female			
Number of Participants	124	144			
Percentage of Sample	46.3	53.7			

	Education Level				
	< H.S.	H.S	Some College	Bachelor's	Graduate
Number of Participants	5	73	96	64	28
Percentage of Sample	1.9	27.2	35.8	23.9	10.4

	Income				
	<$10K	$10K-39,999	$40K-69,999	$70K-99,999	$100K+
Number of Participants	15	63	78	40	57
Percentage of Sample	5.6	23.5	29.1	14.9	21.3

have never used the Internet for political information, 89 participants (33.2%) reported having used the Internet only a few times, 40 participants (14.9%) reported using it once every few weeks, 29 (10.8%) participants reported using it 1 or 2 days per week, 18 participants (6.7%) reported using it 3 to 5 days per week, and 16 participants (6.0%) reported using the Internet every day for political information.

     Participants were divided into four groups labeled television users or Internet users based on their use of television and the Internet for political information. Television users were those whose television use for news information was greater than 0 minutes per day and whose Internet use for news information was 0 minutes per day. Eighty-five participants (31.7%) were classified as television users. Internet users were those whose Internet use for news was greater than the mean, 20 minutes per day, and whose television use for news was less than the mean, 90 minutes per day. Seventy-three participants (27.2%) were classified as Internet users. The other

two groups were those who used no media and those whose media use was mixed without a predominant medium. Ten participants (3.7%) used no media, and 99 participants (36.9%) were mixed in their media use. One participant (0.4%) did not provide media use information.

     Public affairs issues. The survey also included questions about recent public affairs issues. The study included a measure of important public affairs issues adapted from Roberts (1992). Participants were provided a list and asked to rank each of 11 issues in order of importance. This list was compiled from a 1-week content analysis immediately before data collection; it was considered the media agenda.

     Both a television media agenda and an Internet media agenda were established, drawing from five television stations in Cleveland, Ohio: three local affiliates, CBS affiliate WOIO, ABC affiliate WEWS, NBC affiliate WKYC, and two national cable channels, CNN, and FoxNews, and five websites: cnn.com, foxnews.com, nytimes.com, msnbc.com, and yahoo.com. The content analysis tool used in this study was based on both Roberts' (1992) and Shaw and McCombs' (1977) agenda-setting research.

     For up to 10 issues on television, coders recorded the news story, its prominence in the broadcast, and the time allotted to the story. The 10 stories that had the most time devoted to them were the issues considered to be the most important. Using the time and prominence information, coders ranked the issues in order of importance for each broadcast and overall. This ranked list was considered the television agenda. The coders agreed on the placement of all 11 items on the television agenda (100% agreement).

     Similarly, for up to 10 issues on the Internet, coders recorded the news story, its prominence on the web page, the space allotted to the story (i.e., number of paragraphs), as well as if it included pictures, video, and/or links to additional material. The 10 stories that had the most space devoted to them were the issues considered to be the most important. Using the space, video, picture, and link information, coders ranked the issues in order of importance for each web page and overall. This ranked list was considered the Internet agenda. Coders agreed on the placement of 9 of 11 issues on the Internet agenda (81.8% agreement).

     The television and Internet agendas had nine issues in common; however, each medium had a different tenth issue. Therefore, the survey included all 11 issues and asked participants to rank them from *most important* (1) to *least important* (11). Table 2 includes the three agendas of important public affairs issues.

Table 2 Agendas of Important Public Affairs Issues
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Television Agenda
1. Terri Schiavo
2. School Shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota
3. Ailing Pope John Paul II
4. War in Iraq
5. Michael Jackson Trial
6. Uprising in Kyrgyzstan

7. BP Oil Refinery Blast in Texas
8. Social Security Reform
9. Troops in Afghanistan
10. Rising Oil Prices
11. Increasing Interest and Mortgage Rates

Internet Agenda
1. Terri Schiavo
2. War in Iraq
3. Uprising Kyrgyzstan
4. Ailing Pope John Paul II
5. BP Oil Refinery Blast in Texas
6. Michael Jackson Trial
7. School Shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota
8. Social Security Reform
9. Increasing Interest and Mortgage Rates
10. Troops in Afghanistan
11. Rising Oil Prices

Media Agenda

1. Terri Schiavo
2. War in Iraq
3. Ailing Pope John Paul II
4. Uprising Kyrgyzstan
5. School Shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota
6. Michael Jackson Trial
7. BP Oil Refinery Blast in Texas
8. Social Security Reform
9. Troops in Afghanistan
10. Increasing Interest and Mortgage Rate
11. Rising Oil Prices

Results

       H1a, H1b, and H1c examined the rankings of important public affairs issues on the public agenda. The first part, H1a, predicted that television users would possess a common agenda of important public affairs issues. The second part, H1b, predicted that Internet users will possess a heterogeneous agenda of important public affairs issues. The third part, H1c, predicted that the public (all media users) will possess a common agenda of important public affairs issues. Nonparametric analysis of variance statistics, the Friedman test and Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance, W, were used to analyze the rankings. There was significant agreement in the rankings of the issues by television users ($\chi^2 [10, N = 84] = 428.31$, $W = .51$, $p < .001$), Internet users ($\chi^2 [10, N = 73] = 411.48$, $W = .56$, $p < .001$), and the public ($\chi^2 [10, N = 265] = 1370.39$, $W = .52$, $p < .001$). This means that there is significant agreement among the ranked agendas of important issues of both television and Internet users, as well as significant agreement among the

ranked agendas of important issues of media users overall, or the public. Each of these groups possessed a common agenda of important public affairs issues. Therefore, H1a and H1c were supported, but H1b was not supported.

H2a, H2b, and H2c tested the central premise of agenda setting to see if the agendas of Internet users, television users, or the public reflected the media agenda. Paired *t*-tests were calculated to examine the relationship between each of the user group's agendas and their medium's agenda. The *t*-tests compared the participant's mean ranking of each issue to the mean rank of the issue by the medium they used most (i.e., television or the Internet). For example, television users' mean rank of the war in Iraq issue was compared to the television agenda's ranking of the war in Iraq.

Significant differences existed in the rankings of 10 of the 11 political issues between television users and the television agenda: Terri Schiavo case, social security reform, Michael Jackson trial, uprising in Kyrgyzstan, war in Iraq, school shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota, ailing Pope John Paul II, increasing interest and mortgage rates, troops in Afghanistan, and increasing oil prices. Table 3 summarizes the results of this *t*-test.

Table 3 Paired t-tests Between Television Users and Television's Agenda Rankings of Important Public Affairs Issues

Public Affairs Issue	M	t	df	p
Terri Schiavo Case	7.26	27.93	84	.001
Social Security Reform	-4.35	-16.66	84	.001
Michael Jackson Trial	4.89	22.09	83	.001
Uprising in Kyrgyzstan	1.99	8.71	83	.001
War in Iraq	-1.71	-8.81	84	.001
School Shooting	4.31	17.69	83	.001
BP Oil Refinery Blast	0.33	1.67	83	.100
Ailing Pope John Paul II	3.20	10.02	84	.001
Increasing Rates	-4.92	-17.66	83	.001
Troops in Afghanistan	-5.11	-23.06	83	.001
Increasing Oil Prices	-6.31	-29.73	83	.001

Significant differences also existed in 9 of the 11 issues between Internet users and the Internet agenda: Terri Schiavo case, social security reform, Michael Jackson trial, uprising in Kyrgyzstan, BP oil refinery blast, ailing Pope John Paul II, increasing interest and mortgage rates, troops in Afghanistan, increasing oil prices. Table 4 summarizes the results of this *t*-test.

Table 4 Paired t-tests Between Internet Users and Internet's Agenda Rankings of Important Public Affairs Issues

Public Affairs Issue	M	t	df	p

Terri Schiavo Case	7.62	33.16	84	.001
Social Security Reform	-4.49	-17.51	84	.001
Michael Jackson Trial	4.26	24.41	83	.001
Uprising in Kyrgyzstan	4.23	16.06	83	.001
War in Iraq	0.15	0.70	84	.490
School Shooting	-0.16	-0.68	83	.500
BP Oil Refinery Blast	1.45	5.83	83	.001
Ailing Pope John Paul II	3.37	10.94	84	.001
Increasing Rates	-2.63	-8.26	83	.001
Troops in Afghanistan	-6.25	-30.56	83	.001
Increasing Oil Prices	-7.55	-36.39	83	.001

Significant differences also existed in 10 of the 11 issues between all media users and the media agenda: Terri Schiavo case, social security reform, Michael Jackson trial, uprising in Kyrgyzstan, war in Iraq, school shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota, ailing Pope John Paul II, increasing interest and mortgage rates, troops in Afghanistan, and increasing oil prices. Table 5 summarizes the results of this *t*-test.

Table 5 *Paired t-tests Between Media Users and Media's Agenda Rankings of Important Public Affairs Issues*

Public Affairs Issue	*M*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Terri Schiavo Case	7.44	51.76	265	.001
Social Security Reform	-4.34	-30.03	265	.001
Michael Jackson Trial	4.06	35.80	264	.001
Uprising in Kyrgyzstan	3.42	25.95	264	.001
War in Iraq	0.25	2.24	265	.026
School Shooting	1.52	11.21	264	.001
BP Oil Refinery Blast	-0.12	-0.86	264	.393
Ailing Pope John Paul II	3.89	23.07	265	.001
Increasing Rates	-3.75	-23.91	264	.001
Troops in Afghanistan	-5.16	-40.51	264	.001
Increasing Oil Prices	-7.43	-63.23	264	.001

Therefore, each of the media, television and Internet, and the media as a whole ranked almost all of the issues in a significantly different order of importance than the users of each medium and the general audience. In addition, the study examined the commonalities and differences between the agendas of important public affairs issues of television and Internet users, as well as the commonalities and differences between the public and media agendas. Although both television users and Internet users possessed common agendas of important public affairs issues, significant differences existed between their agendas and the media's agenda. Therefore, the media did not appear to have an agenda-setting effect.

Discussion

This study addressed the changing agenda-setting process in the new media environment and the role the Internet plays in forming the public's agenda of important public affairs issues. There were two significant findings of the study. First, each medium's users and the public possessed a common agenda of important public affairs issues. Second, the agendas they possessed significantly differed from the agenda the television news and Internet web sites showed them. These findings fail to support an agenda-setting function of the media.

In this study, based on a content analysis, 11 public affairs issues were presented to both television and Internet users. The public agendas of television users and Internet users were virtually identical for 8 of the 11 issues, which, initially, would appear to support agenda setting. Television and Internet users ranked 3 of 11 issues differently on their agendas of important public affairs issues. There was significant agreement among the ranked agendas of important issues of television users, and significant agreement among the ranked agendas of important issues of Internet users. Each of the two groups possessed a common agenda of important public affairs issues.

However, the common agendas possessed by both television and Internet users did not reflect the agendas presented by their respective media. The ranked agendas of each medium, television and Internet, differed significantly from the ranked agendas of their users. Television users ranked 10 of the 11 public affairs issues significantly different than presented by television. Internet users ranked 9 of the 11 public affairs issues significantly different than presented by the Internet. The overall general media audience ranked 10 or the 11 public affairs issues significantly different than presented by the media.

Although each medium's users possessed a common agenda of important public affairs issues, the agenda they possessed significantly differed from the agenda that medium was showing them. These findings imply that the media are not powerful in setting the agenda of important public affairs or political issues. People have particular issues they feel are important, regardless of what the media present.

This has tremendous implications for political communication, particularly in election campaigns. Candidates may try to use the media to direct attention to particular issues; however, voters do not lose sight of the really important issues. For example, a presidential candidate may try to use the media to focus on a current hot topic because it plays well in the media. However, when it comes to voting for a particular candidate, people do not rank that issue high on their agenda and, therefore, do not base their voting decision on it. Although the media spend a lot of time and energy covering the hot election issues (e.g., a scandal of some sort), issues upon which people are really concerned about, such as war, interest rates, and oil prices, will be the ones on which people base their voting decisions. This could have negative implications because, if certain issues are not the ones being covered by the media, people need to seek information from alternative sources so they may be fully informed on the issues. Unfortunately, many people will not go the extra step and use alternative sources. Instead, they will remain uninformed. It also implies that it is not enough just to put information out and have it covered by the media. Instead,

political campaigns need to establish the implications of certain issues to build importance in voters' minds. Campaigns might do this by creating issues and by spinning issues in their favor.

It is possible that the common agenda reflects the times in which we live. A war in Iraq, U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan, social security reform, rising interest rates, and oil prices were hot topics on many people's minds when this study was conducted. These issues, although not sexy issues for the media to cover, are at the top of many people's agendas. The sexy issues are the hot topics of the day (e.g., the Terri Schiavo life-support case, the Michael Jackson child-molestation trial). These are the stories that get ratings and website hits. However, regardless of the medium they use, people do not see those issues as having the importance of war, terrorism, and financial security in a troubled world. In this study, the top issues were the war in Iraq, social security reform, troops in Afghanistan, and increasing oil prices. Although they may watch or read the other stories, when asked, people realize what the important issues are and rank their agendas accordingly. This would suggest that it is more of a combination of factors in addition to the media-presented agenda, rather than just the media, that set the public agenda.

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