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Fake News: Agenda setting and Gatekeeping in the media

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Fake News:

Agenda setting and Gatekeeping in the media

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Abstract

This piece will examine the ideas of agenda setting and gatekeeping theories, as well as how they affect modern media coverage. Agenda setting theory is the idea that the media sets the agenda by selecting the topics that it covers. Gatekeeping refers to the idea that too many events occur for the media to cover all of them, so it must therefore choose which ones to specifically cover. It will review multiple studies and events in which the theories have played a part in the outcome. Particularly, it will analyze how campaign coverage has been found to influence voters in the past.

Meanwhile, it will analyze the concept of 'fake news,' particularly in regard to the Russian ads purchased leading up to the 2016 United States presidential election, as well as the effect that this occurrence may have had on the results of the election.

Another issue discussed is the concept of pre-trial prejudice, in which the news media may influence possible jurors when it covers a court case before the legal proceedings. This phenomenon is an example of agenda setting.

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Agenda Setting in the Modern World: How the Public Perceives News

Walter Lippman (1921) discussed the idea of people living based solely on the environment around them and what they understood to be true in his work, *Public Opinion.* He raised the idea that in terms of historical happenings, "We insist, because of our superior hindsight, that the world as they needed to know it, and the world as they did know it, were often two quite contradictory things." (p. 4) The researcher believed that people create an atmosphere based on what they believe to be true, even if it leaves out crucial information from the outside world.

Lippman (1921) goes on to use examples such as the Salem Witch Trials, in which people "diagnosed evil and hanged old women" (p. 2). While the individuals involved in the trials were likely intending to solve what they perceived to be the problem in their world, they created another one, perhaps due not only to their limited knowledge at the time, but also the culture of which they were a part.

Lippman (1921) also mentions the monk Cosmas, who wrote about his perception of the earth based on Scripture, his faith, and his knowledge of science. Cosmas describes a flat earth with the edges of the sky glued to it. He also believed that the earth was surrounded by the ocean, which was then encircled by another ocean, which he believed men were forbidden to seek. As he goes on to explain, Cosmas and those who believed in his representation of the world would have strongly disagreed with the desires of the explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to explore the ocean and what lay beyond it. The theory of agenda setting can be seen as an extension of Lippman's ideas. Agenda setting builds upon the idea of people creating beliefs and ideals based on their own situations. However, the

theory involves the influence of the media, relating it to today's world with constant access to news media from the internet, television, and newspaper. The theory suggests that audiences will determine the level of importance of an event or issue based on how it is presented in the media. While these elements do make agenda setting seem a more modern concept, it acts similarly to the way that Cosmas' description of the world would have for its original audience. Cosmas presented an idea, similar to the way the media do. The viewers then had the chance to form their own opinions based on his beliefs, either positive, negative, or somewhere in between.

While Lippman's book displays similar ideas, the theory of agenda setting itself was not developed until 50 years after the release of *Public Opinion*.

In the summer of 1972, the work of two journalism professors from the University of North Carolina was published in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*. The periodical explained the theory that the two had developed regarding the effects of media on the way people perceive issues. The theory, called Agenda Setting, explained that the type of news covered by media sources ultimately swayed the opinion of the public, stating "information in the mass media becomes the only interaction many have with politics," (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176).

While the authors went on to explain that the level of dependence on information from the media varied by factors such as education and interest in politics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176), they also emphasized the opinion of previous researchers Lang and Lang, who declared, "mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly

presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about…" (as cited by McCombs & Shaw 1972, p. 177).

Cohen agenda setting argues that "the media influence what people are interested in, even if they have less impact in determining the content of opinions," (as cited by Beck & Dalton, 1998, p. 464). This idea highlights the concept behind the agenda setting theory that the media simply tends to emphasize certain issues within a campaign, which then makes them seem more prominent to candidates and voters. However, the opinion that each voter forms based on each issue is still up to the individual.

It has even been speculated that "observers, commentators and interpreters of campaigns [may] drown out the candidates themselves…" (Fico & Freedman, 2001, p. 438). There is also the issue that journalists may frame their articles in certain ways based on the "context" that their lead sets for the rest of the article, which could possibly be based on analysis rather than fact.

According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), they conducted an experiment through interviews with voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina who had not yet chosen a candidate for the 1968 presidential election. The subjects were asked what they considered to be the most important elements of the upcoming election (p. 178). Their answers were compared to the concerns of the possible candidates, as well as the issues most often discussed in the news media. The sources of news media examined included newspapers, such as Raleigh's *The News and Observer* and *New York Times*, as well as TV news stations, such as CBS and NBC (p. 178). Based on the

results of their interviews, the researchers determined that "the political world is reproduced imperfectly by individual news media" (p. 184).

According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the three parties on which news coverage focused for the election were Republican (Nixon and Agnew), Democrat (Humphrey and Muskie), and American (Wallace and Lemay). The experiment broke down the varying ways that each party and candidate were covered by the news media, as well as the issues that were made to seem most prominent for each. Despite being asked to rank issues regardless of the views of the candidates, most of those surveyed gave opinions indicating that the major issues were those discussed more often in the media, usually broken down by the party affiliation of the voter (p. 180).

Despite the trend of voters being influenced by the issues of their parties, the majority of the results of the experiment indicated that the views of the voters mainly aligned with the topics most discussed in the media. "This suggests that voters pay some attention to all the political news regardless of whether it is from, or about, any particular favored candidate," (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 181).

Meanwhile, though voters that showed preference to a particular candidate when surveyed tended to gravitate more toward the issues favored by their party, their opinions aligned even more drastically toward the issues most heavily discussed in the news (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 182).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) determined that there were two distinct trends. "Selective perception" indicates that voters would be more likely to align their opinions with those most commonly discussed by their respective parties. "Agenda

setting," meanwhile, reflects on the voters that form their opinions based on all of the issues covered in the news. The challenge, according to the researchers, is to determine which influence is strongest (p. 182). According to their research, the results of their experiment do not necessarily prove the existence of agenda setting, but do contain the conditions necessary for such a situation to occur. The agenda setting trend has been apparent in more recent cases, as well. In the 1996 presidential election, statistics show that candidate Bill Clinton received more positive media attention throughout his campaign than did opponent Bob Dole. The affirming coverage drawn by President Clinton may have ultimately had an effect on him in the polls, leading to his election (Fico & Freedman, 2001, p. 438).

President George W. Bush utilized agenda setting for his 2003 State of the Union address (Nather, 2003, para. 3). Because of the amount of power that Bush and the Republican Party held in 2003, including a Republican control of Congress and support for the war in Iraq, Bush had the chance to use agenda setting to his advantage based on the points that he chose to make to his audience. Meanwhile, he was also aware of the issues on which he needed to concentrate, and created his agenda of the time based on an outline of those, including: the war on terrorism, tax cuts, Medicare, and healthcare (Nather, 2003, para. 5). According to the researcher, Bush had resolved his platform in a way that he would be able to influence a large part of the public. Another example of the use of agenda setting exists in an article featured in the *Charlotte Observer* in 2000 (Moscowitz, 2002). The article discussed efforts to help the homeless in the area. However, instead of merely covering the event, the article directed readers to the ministry, while encouraging them to donate

(p. 62). This story illustrates the *Charlotte Observer's* method of civic journalism, a form of agenda setting used to attract the attention of readers to a specific cause for their support. While the effectiveness of civic journalism is widely recognized, its morality has occasionally been called into question (p. 63).

The more recent research by Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw have raised the possibility of priming and framing being subsets of agenda setting (as cited by Scheufele, 2000). In this model, priming acts as a part of agenda setting in that it reflects the effect of voters' opinions based on the main criteria used to assess them. Framing, meanwhile, is related to agenda setting in that is the method by which the points of evaluation for candidates or other aspects of news are chosen (para. 2).

However, there are some that argue that agenda setting is not as powerful as some research shows, but instead "a transaction process in which elites, the media, and the public converge to a common set of salient issues that define a campaign" (Beck & Dalton, 1998, para. 1).

In their research about the 1992 presidential election, Beck & Dalton (1998) found that successful candidates manage to persuade voters that their own views most closely resemble those of the people (para. 2). Meanwhile, candidates that struggle in their campaigns have trouble integrating their messages with the will of the voters. Beck and Dalton (1998) also acknowledge the possibility of liberal journalism being the source of views projected onto the public from media sources. Alternatively, there is the idea that large corporations owning many media sources could result in more conservative views. Beck and Dalton (1998) argue that the inconsistency between these two opinions makes each suspicious. Lastly, there is the

possibility that media outlets are looking for the stories that will sell the most effectively, regardless of the views with which each aligns.

Additionally, some researchers feel that the issues covered by the news media must compete for the public's regard (Gordon & Henry, 2001, para. 2). According to this idea, the way in which the public opinion values news items may be limited by levels of education, attention, and compassion. However, the amount of media coverage also contributes to the formula, according to Neuman, "interest is a function of time as well as media coverage, individual characteristics, and elite responses, static measurements may or may not capture the effects of change depending upon the timing of the administration of the surveys" (as cited by Gordon & Henry, 2001, p. 158). As part of this theory, it has been suggested that studies of agenda setting have not examined it thoroughly enough to account for the role that time plays in the coverage of issues and the public's views on them (para. 1).

Another study on agenda setting concentrated on more specific details connected to the relationship between the Hispanic population in McAllen, Texas and the Spanish-language cable news available to them. The researchers focused on this area because of its large number of Spanish-speaking individuals in order to determine if Spanish broadcasting had the same agenda setting effect as observed in English-speaking populations. "Despite the booming growth in population, relatively few mass communication researchers have examined Hispanics and their media use patterns," (Ghanem & Wanta, 2001, p. 277).

Though researchers had not picked up on the trend as quickly, marketers were quick to take it to their advantage. Avila states "Hispanic advertising budgets

are estimated at $640 million and $1.2 billion are spent annually on all Hispanic media outlets" (as cited by Ghanem & Wanta, 2001, p. 278), Because of the influence of the Spanish-speaking community, the researchers chose to study the population in order to determine how the viewers were in turn being influenced by the programming catered to them.

The data for this study was collected through a phone survey aimed toward a largely Hispanic population. According to Ghanem and Wanta (2001), their study investigates whether or not the topics discussed on Spanish cable news shows affected Spanish-speaking community's perception of current events.

The researchers took many elements into consideration, including the possibility that not all Hispanics speak Spanish and therefore might not be interested in watching TV programming in Spanish. In similar studies from Turner and Allen, the differences between Hispanic and mainstream newspapers were taken into account (as cited by Ghanem & Wanta, 2001). The differences in ages of the population were noted as well, as older subjects sometimes answered the interview questions in Spanish and preferred Spanish broadcasting, while younger, more educated individuals often favored English programming (Dunn, 1975).

In this case, it was also important for researchers to take into consideration that Spanish speakers have fewer options available for news networks compared to their English-speaking counterparts. According to Ghanem and Wanta (2001), at the time of this study, the area surveyed had only one network, Univision, available in Spanish (p. 279). Because of this discrepancy, there was also the chance that this network's viewers would have a limited source for information, leading to more

uniformity among the issues they consider important. Meanwhile, the trend sometimes exists for native Spanish speakers to learn more about the culture of America. This factor could lead to a greater instance of agenda setting in the population (p. 280).

With all of these factors taken into account, the results of the telephone survey by Ghanem and Wanta (2001) seemed to indicate that the influence of agenda setting based on media exposure was present in the Hispanic community surveyed.

Since the development of the agenda setting theory in 1972, it has undergone several changes and improvements. It is now in its third level, the Network Agenda Setting Model (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014). In its current form, the idea:

> ...theorizes that objects and attributes can also be transferred simultaneously in bundles between the agendas...not only can the news media tell us what to think about and how to think about it, they are also capable of telling us what and how to associate... (p. 669)

In a study by Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, and Moody (2011), the researchers examined the possibility for agenda setting to lead to mobilization for a cause. Micromobilization occurs when individuals and small groups mobilize other individuals and small groups, often using communications networks to achieve the type of political mobilization that was traditionally owned by organizations in the centre of the political system. (p. 210).

In this case, the agenda setting effect comes from media influences acting on the audience to impress upon its importance and to convince them to become active

in support of it. For example, Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, and Moody (2011) describe an instance in which school children in the Netherlands joined together to rebel against a policy regarding the number of hours they attended school. The internet seemed to have been a large motivation behind this event, particularly YouTube and MSN.

Each of these websites allows users to interact with each other on a greater basis than the previously discussed news sources. Social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and Tumblr could have similar effects on their users, perhaps young users in particular. Each of these platforms gives its users the opportunity to share their thoughts and perhaps frustrations about world events. When the "friends" or "followers" of these users see what their peers have to say, it can lead to them taking an interest in some of the same social issues. The news then has the chance to be spread among more users as it is "liked" or "shared." During this process, a greater audience has the chance to form personal opinions about the events currently affecting the world around them based on their coverage on social media. Ultimately, this attention could lead to a mobilization such as the one in which the school children participated, but on a much greater scale.

Similar to how "the media are more likely to report on surprising and unexpected occurrences than they are to pay attention to unsurprising or expected occurrences," (Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, & Moody, 2011, p. 211), social media users tend to gravitate toward unique or even peculiar news items, therefore focusing the attention of others on such types of news. While many experts seem to believe in the power of agenda setting to influence audiences in various instances such as

elections, social movements, and other world events covered in the news or social media, there are also those that argue that more research taking into consideration other key variables needs to exist to accurately prove its influence.

Figure 1. The media spoon-feeding audiences. (Don Addis, Sanghi, 2018)

While the theory of agenda setting suggests that the public forms its own opinions based on the topics discussed in the news media, this sketch (*Figure 1*) by cartoonist Don Addis portrays a more negative conception of the idea.

This piece also agrees with the danger of 'fake news,' as it illustrates the possibility of the public being subjected to broadcasts that are intentionally bent to sway viewers' opinions.

Gatekeeping Theory

In his 1963 book *The Press and Foreign Policy,* Bernard Cohen discussed the idea that one of the essential functions of the press is to provide the people with the information they need to make every day decisions. He stated: "Today and every day the American people must make decisions on which their whole survival may depend. To make sound decisions the people must be informed" (Cohen, 1963, p. 5). This passage not only argues the need for a free press, but also emphasizes the idea that citizens rely on the media for information.

Cohen (1963) goes on to mention the evolution of the way news has been written. He highlights that news was once 'brief and technical' because of the limited, specialized audience it was written for. Previously, people were willing to let a smaller group of people be the news gatherers and to then disseminate information to the public, particularly in the case of foreign news. Now, however the news is written for a broader audience to read and understand.

Cohen (1963) refers to the press as a map for its readers, as it provides for them the issues they consider. As for the role of the press, he quotes a reporter from his study of press correspondents: "The reporter is the eyes and ears of the public, and... if he cannot translate what he sees and finds out in popular terms, then the whole purpose of the reportorial process is lost" (p. 23).

Despite the expectation that reporters for the press fulfill these responsibilities, there is still a limit to the number and extent to which items can be covered.

Lippman (1923) states: "All the reporters in the world working all the hours of the day could not witness all the happenings in the world," (p. 214). This quote

emphasizes the idea behind gatekeeping theory: it would be impossible for the news media to accurately cover every item of newsworthiness. Though coverage has improved since the author's time with the advent of television and internet news, it still applies in that various news outlets must choose what events they will report about. Therefore, the power that media outlets hold when choosing stories to cover allows them to 'screen' the events of which the public may be informed.

As defined by Shoemaker, "Gatekeeping theory argues that there are forces that constrain or enable the movement of information through news production channels... After an event occurs, information about it is then chosen by a journalist and entered into media channels; then, as it passes through the gates and is affected by multiple levels of influence, a frame and a story is crafted." (Ferrucci and Tanduc, p. 103).

However, according to Lippman (1923), journalists do look out for stories from official places like police stations or the White House. Because of this awareness, the media may become aware of more details regarding an issue once the main event occurs.

Meanwhile, gatekeeping can be intentional as well. For example, it has been reported that Japanese school children are not taught about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Meanwhile, Americans are thought to have an unjustly positive view of Christopher Columbus, despite the cruelty and slavery he forced on the people of the 'New World' (Werner & Tankard, 1992, p. 139).
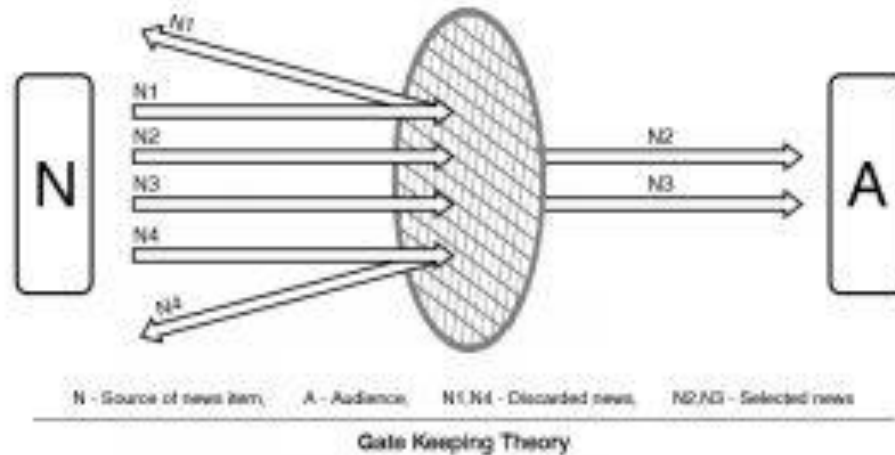
Figure with labels:

N — Source of news item, A - Audience, N1,N4 - Discarded news, N2,N3 - Selected news

Gate Keeping Theory

Figure 2. Model representing the flow of information in the gatekeeping theory.

This model illustrates the theory of gatekeeping. The 'N' news events are 'screened' by the news media. Because of the abundance of events, the media cannot cover them all, and must instead be selective about what makes its way through.

Only a couple of the numerous 'N' variables make it through the filter to 'A' the audience in this example, and the rest are deflected into relative obscurity. The audience will not hear about these events unless they check multiple news sources or search for information independently.

Credibility

Akter, Andaleeb, Gulshan, Rahman & Rajeb (2012), describe a study that took place in 2009 to determine the perception of credibility of TV news in Bangladesh, where television use has rapidly expanded since the mid-1990s. Since news stations have been the most popular programming, the predominance of TV news as an information source is particularly important in a nation where much of the population is unable to read or write. Meanwhile, the stations have recently changed from government to privately owned, likely allowing for the broadcast of more independent perspectives.

The study aimed to determine how credible the people of Bangladesh find the various TV channels available, as well as what factors they find important when considering credibility. According to research cited, one's view of credibility can be determined by expertness, reliability, intentions, dynamism and personal attraction. Other important facts include bias, individual interest, concern for community, separation of fact and opinion and respect for privacy.

In relation to the independency of the news stations, one channel was found to produce stories primarily biased in favor of the government. This trend is suspected to be due to the relationships that many news stations still hold with political officials, despite the changes in ownership. This connection is interesting to consider, since it may seem otherwise that stations strongly influenced by the government would be more common in countries with dictatorships or other harsh forms of government.

Objectivity was another factor closely analyzed for the TV news market. Objective news is defined in the case as "undistorted by personal prejudice." The question of credibility in news is very common, even in the United States, with rivalry among some of the major networks (Akter, Andaleeb, Gulshan, Rahman & Rajeb, 2012).

Pre-Trial Prejudice

The effects of agenda setting must be also be taken into consideration regarding criminal court cases. Extensive press coverage of a crime prior to trial can lead to pre-trial judicial prejudice. If the circumstances of a local court case are widely covered in the media, jurors may become aware of the details ahead of time. In this situation, juries must be carefully selected based on geographical area, or the case may have to be delayed so that media coverage decreases.

The 1961 *Irvin v. Dowd* case involved a suspect labelled as 'Mad Dog' Irvin, the suspect was accused of multiple murders and the case was covered at length by the media. The case was permitted a change of venue, but only to a nearby county. Irvin's confession to the murders had also been publicized, so many of his potential jurors were prejudiced against him (Tedford & Herbeck, 2009).

The *Rideau v. Louisiana* case in 1963 emphasized the expansion of broadcast television news. Rideau, who had been accused of robbery and murder, confessed to the crimes during an 'interview' from prison within hours of his arrest. The film was broadcast repeatedly, so a change of venue was ultimately requested. While it was denied, the court later ruled that the change of venue should have been allowed (Justia: US Supreme Court).

The 1966 *Sheppard v. Maxwell* case also highlighted the influence of media coverage. Samuel Sheppard of Ohio, who was accused of murdering his wife, insisted upon his innocence throughout the trial process. He later claimed that the judicial system did not make enough effort to protect him from the media attention that surrounded his case, leading to pretrial judicial prejudice. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled that Sheppard had not received the fair trial he was guaranteed due to the involvement of media coverage.

Figure 3. News clippings from the Sheppard v. Maxwell case

These local news clippings contemporary to the time of the *Sheppard v. Maxwell* trial illustrate the heavy media coverage that influenced the jury's decision in the case.

'**Fake News'**

'Fake news' has been compared to the sensationalism that dominated headlines and reporting in the early 1900s (Murphy, 2018, p. 21). However, the concept has existed throughout human history.

In his analysis, Murphy (2018) describes an event in the 15th century in which the Jewish population was blamed for the disappearance of a young boy in Italy. The accusation led to the arrest of the entirety of the Jewish community, after which many were burned at the stake. According to Murphy, this historical event contributed to lasting anti-Semitism in the present day, illustrating the power of 'fake news' and its variants (p. 21).

Another early example of 'fake news' cited by Murphy (2018) comes from early in United States history. In 1782, Benjamin Franklin created a forged copy of the *Independent Chronicle*. It contained an article alleging that Native Americans connected to King George had scalped hundreds of New Yorkers. The story soon ran in real newspapers. While the ploy did little to affect the Revolution as Franklin planned, it did have a negative impact on American perception of Native American populations (p. 21).

The term 'yellow journalism' came about at the turn of the 20th century with the success of news giants such as William Randolph Hearst (*New York Journal)* and Joseph Pulitzer (New York World). Though the stories released in these publications were often based on a real occurrence, the facts were dramatized to increase readership and sales. Current magazines such as *The National Enquirer* and *Weekly World News* have been compared to these historical examples (Murphy, 2018, p. 21).

'Clickbait' is also a modern equivalent, in which web sites use domains similar to official news outlets in order to attract readers. These sites are often based outside the United States, and managed to create numerous stories during the 2016 presidential election. The owners of these sites made money via Google AdSense as their content garnered views (Murphy, 2018, p. 22).

Researchers emphasize the influence of confirmation bias on the spread of fake news. "It's human nature to look for stories that confirm our own preconceptions... when a sensationalized headline pops up on social media that confirms one's preconceived notions, it's natural instinct to click on it, check it out, and share it on social media" (Murphy, 2018, p. 22).

While the term 'fake news' has different connotations, including its use to refer to the satire created by parody shows such as Saturday Night Live, it also describes fictitious news stories that pass for real news (Ordway, 2017). The phenomenon of fake news has gained more recognition in the past several years as the internet allows for its spread.

According to a 2016 survey by the Pew Research Center, 23 percent of Americans admitted to previously sharing a 'fake news' story, whether they had identified it as such at the time or not. Officials have raised concerns about the effect of fake news on politics in the United States (Barthel, Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016).

A result in the same survey revealed that many Americans believe that 'made-up news' is impacting public understanding: "About two-in-three U.S. adults (64%) say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events" (Barthel, Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016 para. 2).

This graphic shows the results of the Pew Research Center's survey of more than 1,000 adults in the United States of differing incomes, educational backgrounds and political ties. While 64 percent claim that fake news articles cause a 'great deal of confusion,' a total of 88 percent of those surveyed believe that they cause at least some confusion.

Figure 4. Graphic from the Pew Research Center indicating how survey participants described the effects of fake news.

Meanwhile, the majority of those surveyed said they felt at least a degree of confidence regarding their ability to decipher between fake news stories and legitimate. About 39 percent claimed that they felt 'very confident' in spotting fake news, while 45 percent said they were 'somewhat confident (Barthel, Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016, para. 3). However, this statistic still leaves a fair number of American citizens and voters susceptible to fake news sources that may ultimately influence their opinions and decisions.

Beginning in 2017, it was revealed that Russian involvement in U.S. media likely affected the results of the 2016 presidential election. Their influence affected social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Tumblr.

By creating headlines and propaganda speaking against opposing candidates, Russian media influence may have contributed to voter's decisions in the election, allowing for Donald Trump's win. Some of these articles ran as paid advertisements on common American social media networks.

Russia Today's (RT) YouTube channel has grown exponentially since its development – becoming one of the first news organizations to gain one billion views. Until 2017, it was among Google's list of preferred news networks. However, since evidence was found that RT consistently published incorrect stories about Hillary Clinton, Google, the owner of YouTube, has severed ties with the media outlet. (Wakabayashi & Confessore, 2017, para. 18).

Figure 5. Graphic for Russia Today, a YouTube channel accused of spreading fake information via YouTube ahead of the 2016 presidential election

In March 2018, popular blogging website Tumblr revealed that it had deleted 84 accounts attached to the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA). According to the Huffington Post, the accounts were used as part of a 'disinformation campaign' before the 2016 presidential election. The effort was in collaboration with the Department of Justice, and 13 individuals that worked for the IRA were charged for their involvement (Amatulli, 2018, para. 4).

Also in March 2018, a video was created syncing the broadcasts of numerous news stations owned by Sinclair Broadcasting Group. The conservative media group required affiliated anchors to record a statement warning against the "the troubling trend of irresponsible, one-sided news stories plaguing our country." The company owns 173 local television stations, making it the largest in the United States (Rosenberg, 2018, para. 2). According to NPR, the special promotions claim that

"some members of the media use their platforms to push their own personal bias and agenda to control 'exactly what people think.'" (Domonoske, 2018, para. 4.)

While Sinclair claims that it intends to caution its audiences of the threat of fake news spread via social media, critics see different intentions (NPR, 2018, para. 5). In an analysis for CNN, David Rothkopf of John Hopkins University insists that the speech reflects Trump's rhetoric about fake news, comparing it to propaganda campaigns (Rothkopf, 2018, para. 1).

Trump has since come to Sinclair's defense over Twitter, stating: "Sinclair is far superior to CNN and even more Fake NBC, which is a total joke," (Rosenberg, 2018, para. 11).

The released statement has reinforced the idea of limited news sources amid media conglomerates. According to the *Washington Post*, Sinclair intends to purchase 42 more stations if it successfully buys out Tribune Media, for which it is awaiting legal approval. Some fear that this move would increase the company's reach and influence (Rosenberg, 2018, para. 14).

However, some Sinclair stations objected to the broadcast effort. WMSN in Madison Wisconsin refrained from airing the statement, according to its Twitter page. Instead, the station chose to use its regular news lineup and sources. (Rosenberg, 2018, para. 13).

Figure 6. A still from the video showing 36 news correspondents reciting the message provided by Sinclair

This screenshot from the compilation video released by Deadspin (Burke, 2018, para. 1.) highlights the numerous audiences that heard this message through the use of local news anchors across the nation. By using familiar faces the viewers trust, Sinclair was able to send identical information to a large number of viewers. The script Sinclair used is just one example of the influence that a media company with a large ownership can have.

Post Truth

In recent years, the concept of post-truth has been discussed among political excerpts analyzing various campaigns and movements. Oxford Dictionary even chose 'post-truth' as its 2016 word of the year. According to the same dictionary, the term post-truth is used "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are

less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Al-Rodhan, 2017, para. 1-2).

This idea allows for the concept of 'post-truth politics,' which describes the use of arguments that seem correct, but are not based on factual evidence (Al-Rodhan, 2017).

According to Al-Rodhan (2017), claims such as these often remain neither confirmed nor denied. However, even if the argument is exposed as untrue, the individual who made it may not be held accountable. 'Post-truth politics' also has strong ties to fake news. During Trump's campaign and presidency, he referred to substantiated news from established outlets as 'fake news'. As a result, some of his followers have adapted this assessment (para. 5).

The influence of 'post-truth politics' has also been claimed in regard to the 2016 Brexit movement. According to a *New York Times* article by William Davies, those in favor of the referendum advertised that membership in the European Union was costing Britain 350 million pounds a week. However, no mention was made of the funds the nation received in return (Davies, 2017, para. 3).

This international example and those suggested based on the United States presidential election illustrate the trend that experts have observed in political events.

However, in a piece for the Poynter Institute, Mantzarlis (2016) argued that these happenings do not reveal a new trend. The researcher refers to circumstances such as those proceeding the Iran-Contra Affair in 1986 when Ronald Reagan revealed the truth about trading weapons with Iran. In his apology, he stated that:

"my heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and evidence tell me it is not" (para. 4). This attitude reflected not a 'post-truth era,' but instead a movement that has been building for decades.

'Post-truth' contributes to the likelihood of false information being circulated among United States citizens, as well as those worldwide. The remarks that politicians make are often broadcast or printed among major news outlets. Even with context, such news items can contribute to confusion and misinformation if the public trusts the source the information comes from. Even with follow-up analysis from experts, the false information may not be corrected in the minds of the public or the source criticized for its conception.

However, Mantzarlis (2016) cites a study from 2012 which showed that state politicians were less likely to make illegitimate claims if informed they would be fact checked. This study suggests that such 'fake news' from public individuals can be prevented, but precautionary measures may need to be in place beforehand.

Conclusion

Agenda setting and gatekeeping function together to control the flow of items in the news media. As news reporting has changed over time, the number of gatekeepers have reduced due to factors such as social media. Access to numerous news sources via the internet allows users to be their own gatekeepers.

Due to the prevalence of fake news and biased reporting, an individual must be conscientious when absorbing news information. One should rely on numerous sources for a variety of news coverage. When one relies on one news station or company for all of his information, it is much more likely that this information will be based on a limited perspective or slant.

By checking a variety of news sources, audiences have the opportunity to gain more well-rounded information about more events and topics with a greater number of perspectives.

While theories such as agenda setting allow for news sources to provide the topics that audiences think about, it does not necessarily consider the chance that viewers may also base their own thoughts on what the media publishes about the topic. Because of this chance for influence, viewing a wealth of news media prepares viewers to form an educated opinion of an issue once they have gathered the facts necessary.

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