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AGENDA-SETTING THEORY: EVOLUTIONARY ASPECTS AND THE ALGORITHMIC SHAPING OF ATTENTION IN THE AI ERA

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The evolution of agenda-setting theory, from its classical foundations to contemporary reinterpretations, highlights how the logic of public visibility has been reshaped by digitalization and artificial intelligence. While in the traditional paradigm media institutions and journalists acted as the main gatekeepers of news selection and prioritization, today this function is increasingly performed by digital platforms and algorithms. In algorithmically driven information flows, visibility is no longer the sole outcome of editorial decisions but the product of automated processes of personalization, micro-targeting, and "algorithmic gatekeeping". These mechanisms generate ambivalent effects. They enhance relevance for users while simultaneously fragmenting public discourse, fueling polarization, and reducing pluralism. Ethical considerations become crucial, since algorithms are not neutral and may reproduce biases, subtly shaping collective perceptions and democratic processes. The article concludes with the concept of Agenda-Setting 4.0, defined by hyperconnectivity, personalization, and algorithmic control, where the key challenge is balancing technological innovation, democratic pluralism, and communication ethics.

Keywords: *algorithms, information flow, artificial intelligence, mass media, public opinion, personalization, agenda-setting theory, visibility.*

TEORIA AGENDA-SETTING: ASPECTE EVOLUTIVE ȘI ALGORITMIZAREA ATENȚIEI ÎN ERA IA

Evoluția teoriei agenda-setting, de la conceptele clasice la reinterpretările contemporane, evidențiază modul în care logica vizibilității publice s-a transformat odată cu digitalizarea și apariția inteligenței artificiale. Dacă în paradigma tradițională instituțiile media și jurnaliștii erau principalii actori ai selecției și ierarhizării evenimentelor, astăzi această funcție este exercitată tot mai mult de platformele digitale și algoritmi. În contextul fluxurilor informaționale algoritmizate, vizibilitatea nu mai este rezultatul exclusiv al deciziilor editoriale, ci al unor procese automate de personalizare, micro-targeting și „gatekeeping algoritmic". Acestea generează efecte ambivalente: creșterea relevanței pentru utilizatori, dar și fragmentarea discursului public, polarizare și diminuarea pluralismului. Dimensiunea etică devine esențială, întrucât algoritmii nu sunt neutri și pot reproduce biasuri, influențând subtil percepțiile colective și procesele democratice. Concluzia propune conceptul de Agenda-Setting 4.0, definit prin hiperconectivitate, personalizare și control algoritmic, unde provocarea centrală rămâne găsirea unui echilibru între inovația tehnologică, pluralismul democratic și etica comunicării.

Cuvinte cheie: *algoritmi, flux informațional, inteligență artificială, mass-media, opinie publică, personalizare, teoria agenda-setting, vizibilitate.*

Introduction

Agenda-setting theory, developed in the second half of the twentieth century, represents a key reference point in the study of the mechanisms through which mass media shape public attention. In its initial phase, the central role of traditional media was to highlight events, rank issues, and influence collective perceptions. Subsequently, with technological progress and the emergence of new media, the theory has undergone reinterpretations that emphasize interactivity, hyperconnectivity, and the multiplication of information channels.

Technological advances in recent decades have fundamentally transformed communication processes. Algorithms and artificial intelligence now act as key gatekeepers in information selection and prioritization. They determine which content becomes visible, which issues capture public attention, and how information

flows through the digital sphere. This process of algorithmic attention-shaping redefines the premises of agenda-setting theory, since the visibility of issues no longer depends exclusively on editorial decisions or journalistic judgment, but also on the ways in which recommender systems personalize user experiences.

In this regard, artificial intelligence not only facilitates access to information but also amplifies public attention through complex mechanisms of filtering, prediction, and personalization. Consequently, agenda-setting theory acquires a new dimension, in which the role of AI becomes fundamental for understanding how attention is shaped and how public priorities are configured in the digital era.

Agenda-setting theory: evolutionary aspects

An important contribution to the foundation of the agenda-setting hypothesis emerged in 1958, in an article by N. Long, considered a precursor of the theory. He stated that "the newspaper is the primary factor in setting the territorial agenda, it plays an important role in determining what will be discussed, what modes of thought will prevail, and what forms of approaching problems will be adopted" [1, p. 78]. Long's assertion marked the beginning of the idea that the press does not merely transmit information but directs the course of public debate. The media thus becomes an actor that selects and organizes reality, imposing a hierarchy of social issues.

In 1959, K. Lang and G. Lang formulated a broader approach to the agenda-setting effect, arguing that "the mass media force attention to certain issues, build the public images of political figures, present events constantly, and thereby suggest what most of the public should think about, what they should know, and what they should feel concerning what is being discussed" [2, pp. 237-238]. The researchers emphasized that the influence of mass media extends beyond the level of information, entering the sphere of collective perceptions and emotions. Media shapes not only attention but also the ways in which the public interprets political and social reality.

In the same period, J. Klapper, in *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960), pointed out that mass media does not constitute a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions as an intermediary element among multiple variables involved in the communication process. This perspective opened the way toward a more complex understanding of media influence. Klapper offered an important nuance by stressing that media effects are neither direct nor automatic. Their impact depends on context and on interactions with social, cultural, and psychological factors, which complicates the relationship between message and effect.

A landmark contribution to the development of the theory was B. Cohen's 1963 assertion: "The press 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" [3, pp. 102-103]. This observation was reiterated consistently in subsequent research and became a classic formula illustrating the power of mass media to influence public attention and the directions of debate. The idea became emblematic for agenda-setting, clearly delineating the press's influence. The central role of mass media is not to form opinions per se, but to define the priority topics of discussion for society.

In 1972, M. McCombs and D. Shaw published the first systematic study on the agenda-setting effect, conducted during the 1968 presidential campaign. Their findings led to the formulation of the hypothesis that mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing how existing political issues are perceived and emphasizing their importance in the public sphere [4, pp. 145-146]. Differences in approach revealed that agenda-setting is not limited to the media sphere but also extends to the political process. An interdependent system emerges among mass media, public opinion, and political decision-makers, reinforcing the idea of circular and complex communication.

However, the notions employed by researchers differ: McCombs and Shaw focused on the role of mass media in constructing the public opinion agenda, while R. Cobb and C. Elder analyzed its function in shaping the agenda of public policies [5, p. 263]. Taken together, these perspectives outline the correlation among the media agenda, the public agenda, and the political agenda, thereby demonstrating the complex and interdependent nature of the communication process.



The „Agenda-setting” model
Source: *Developed by the author, based on the classical framework.*

The return of G. Lang and K. Lang in 1983 brought a substantial contribution to the deepening of studies on the relationship between the press and public opinion. Following investigations conducted during the Watergate crisis, they observed that the hypothesis of the agenda-setting effect could be extended into a broader and more nuanced concept – that of *agenda building* [6, p. 256]. Unlike the original formulation, this perspective proposed a more complex theoretical framework, capable of capturing the multiple interactions among social actors, mass media, and the processes of shaping public opinion.

The concept was structured into six distinct stages, each highlighting mechanisms through which the press not only reflects reality but also actively configures it: 1. Mass media select events and determine their importance; 2. The press directs public debate through tone and intensity; 3. Messages are placed within an interpretive framework; 4. Language and images shape how a problem is understood; 5. Events are associated with other issues and secondary symbols; 6. Visibility increases when public figures address the issue openly [7, p. 51].

1. **Identification and ranking of events.** Mass media select events and activities to be presented, granting them visibility and determining their level of importance in the public sphere. This process is not neutral but involves filtering and prioritization that direct collective attention.
2. **Capturing public attention.** The press seeks not only to inform but also to draw attention to specific topics, using quantitative strategies (frequency of coverage) and qualitative ones (tone, message intensity). This stage marks the beginning of consolidating an issue within public consciousness.
3. **Constructing an interpretive framework.** Events and issues in the spotlight are given a narrative structure and a set of meanings that facilitate understanding. Thus, the press does not merely transmit raw information but contextualizes and interprets it, shaping how reality is perceived.
4. **Shaping perceptions of importance.** Through the selection of images, the use of language, and the repetition of certain symbols, mass media help form a collective perception of an issue’s relevance. This stage underscores the symbolic dimension of the process, where visual and discursive presentation acquires strategic value.
5. **Creating connections and associations.** The public forms attitudes toward an issue by linking it to similar experiences or previously mediated topics. Mass media act as creators of connections, associating central events with secondary symbols, thus consolidating a network of social meanings.
6. **Accelerating the formation of the agenda.** Under certain circumstances, the agenda-building process unfolds more rapidly, particularly when public figures, political leaders, or institutions begin to address an issue openly. Their intervention amplifies the subject’s resonance and increases its likelihood of becoming a public priority.

The agenda-building process shows how mass media move beyond simply transmitting information to actively shaping public reality. Through the selection and ranking of events, the emphasis placed on specific themes, and the modalities of presentation, the press establishes the parameters of collective debate and outlines the directions of social attention. Messages are situated within an interpretive framework that provides them with multiple meanings, while language, images, and symbols enhance relevance and shape perceptions of importance. At the same time, mass media create connections among issues, associating them with secondary symbols and consolidating a network of social meanings. The legitimacy and visibility of an issue increase significantly when it is assumed by political actors or public leaders. In this sense, agenda-setting reveals the structural interdependence among media, the public, and the political sphere.

The analysis of these stages, carried out by Lang and Lang, highlights not only the active function of mass media in directing public attention but also the importance of understanding the process in relation

to the relevance of information for the individual and the degree of uncertainty associated with the issues presented. Furthermore, distortions occurring in the various phases of agenda building can produce considerable variations in collective perceptions and in the ways the public relates to reality.

The algorithmization of information flow: a new dimension of agenda-setting theory

Agenda-setting, in its original conception, represented the process through which media institutions decided which issues would enter the public agenda. The selection, filtering, and presentation of events transformed the press into an actor with the power to construct thematic hierarchies and to shape collective priorities. Technological innovations of recent decades, particularly the rise of digital platforms and the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), have structurally altered this dynamic. Recommendation and personalization algorithms have become the new actors of public visibility. Through their capacity to process and filter massive volumes of data, they configure a new type of agenda: **the algorithmic agenda** - which coexists with the traditional media agenda but surpasses it through different logics. While the classical agenda was centralized, the algorithmization of information flow produces a decentralized, fragmented agenda, tailored to the profile of each individual user.

Personalized filtering systems are adopted by media organizations to enhance user experience and increase revenues, but they also mark a fundamental transformation in news management. Manual selection of a single informational flow is replaced by the automatic selection of an unlimited number of personalized interfaces. From an editorial perspective, this transformation raises debates concerning the alignment between journalistic values and filtering systems, the biases that may occur in news exposure, and the redefined social role of the press as an agenda-setting agent and gatekeeper [8].

The role of algorithms in the digital sphere can be understood through the concept of "algorithmic gatekeeping". This process involves algorithms configuring information architecture, governing how resources and opportunities circulate in digital environments, and transferring traditional editorial control to automated systems. Unlike editorial selection, grounded in criteria of social relevance and journalistic responsibility, algorithms privilege interaction and the maximization of attention. Issue visibility now depends less on editorial decisions and more on online amplification - reactions, shares, comments, and viewing time. The "trending" phenomenon on Twitter, recommended videos on YouTube, or personalized feeds on Facebook and TikTok are concrete expressions of this logic. In this framework, algorithms not only reflect public interest but actively shape it, directing attention toward topics with viral potential [9].

The algorithmization of information flow has direct consequences for how individuals perceive reality. Content personalization, based on browsing history and declared or inferred preferences, generates **filter bubbles** (personalized information environments that limit exposure to diverse viewpoints) and **echo chambers** (spaces where similar opinions are reinforced and amplified) [10], where opinion diversity is reduced and attention is channeled toward repetitive themes. This practice reinforces the logic of the *attention economy*, in which user interest becomes a monetized resource for platforms, while algorithmic selection is oriented toward maximizing the time spent online. This creates dual effects. Algorithms facilitate access to personally relevant information, but they also fragment public discourse, increase polarization, and reduce opinion diversity. In this way, they become major agents in shaping social reality, comparable in impact to traditional media institutions.

From an ethical and social perspective, algorithms cannot be regarded as neutral, as they reflect and amplify biases embedded in training data [11]. Platform logics, oriented toward maximizing interactions, privilege polarizing or sensationalist content, thereby diminishing the visibility of socially relevant topics with lower viral potential. Moreover, micro-targeting techniques enable detailed personalization of messages, generating subtle forms of manipulation that affect democratic processes. In this context, it becomes imperative to rethink the framework of responsibility, regulation, and algorithmic control, in order to safeguard informational pluralism and protect the public interest.

Conclusions

The interaction between media, the public, and the political sphere, as described by classical agenda-

setting theory, is today complemented by algorithms and artificial intelligence as new mediators of visibility. The traditional triad has transformed into a more complex ecosystem, where information flows are constantly negotiated among journalists, digital platforms, users, and political actors. In this digital media ecosystem, the public agenda is no longer the exclusive outcome of editorial decisions, but of a hybrid interaction in which algorithms decisively shape what becomes a priority and how collective perceptions are formed. We can thus speak of **Agenda-Setting 4.0**, defined by hyperconnectivity, personalization, and algorithmic control. Within this new framework, the essential challenge lies in balancing technological benefits with the preservation of democratic pluralism, and in reconciling the optimization of information flows with the ethical imperatives of communication.

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