

Applying the Agenda-Setting Theory to “Burn a Quran Day”

Austin Wolff

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Theory Description/Explanation

In the early 1970s, two journalism scholars, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, developed the agenda-setting theory to recognize the role mass media plays in the way the general public receives information and assigns it a level of importance. The theory suggests media outlets, whether they are print, radio, television or internet sources, present material in a way that conveys what they believe to be important, causing the public to form a stronger belief or opinion on the focused subject matter. Through analyzing the content of local media coverage in Chapel Hill, N.C., and conducting public opinion polls, McCombs and Shaw were able to successfully conclude that media sources have a strong influence in what the public thinks about. They found the public often holds the strongest opinions on issues in which the media have become fixated. The media accomplish this through making information about a subject more prominent and easily accessible to the public readership.

In McCombs' and Shaw's research (1972), they focused on public perceptions of political candidates and their positions on various issues. During this study, they found that people who didn't have a candidate preference, the ones most vulnerable to campaign persuasion, would often state issues they found important as issues the media covered the most frequently or granted the most urgent attention. As the field of communication has evolved, McCombs has kept up with his research. With the addition of websites and blogs as common sources for news information, the public seeking this information often turn to these places instead of the traditional newspaper, radio or television outlets.

Because of this, agenda setting research had to be conducted to include these sources in the theory (McCombs, 2005). In McCombs' and Shaw's early research, they concluded issues that were important to the public audience directly correlated to media coverage of these issues. After this research was published, one important question remained: how do media outlets determine what is important to focus on? Several scholars looked into this question and concluded that media outlets look to each other and synchronize their coverage to one-another (Yu and Aikat, 2005). Each media outlet desires to have a competitive edge over the other and does so by issue salience. These outlets also don't want to fall behind their competitors, meaning they will pick up on the highlights of their competition.

One technique the media utilizes is supplying many angles on a news topic they value as important through a process called "framing," which is included in the agenda-setting theory. Framing is used to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993) from an event. This part of the theory suggests the media do not only suggest what to think about, but they tell the public the opinions it should hold by the way they address an issue, the details that are emphasized and the context that is established.

In a study conducted on how Americans react to health pandemics in the United States (Ho, Brossard and Scheufele, 2007), the researchers made very notable discoveries of the public's relationship with mediated information. They

examined media coverage of particular illness breakouts and public action relating to these events, like getting a vaccination or washing hands more often. They concluded that people are more likely to react to a health outbreak immediately or very soon after hearing about it. After a period of time, while the outbreak may still have been happening and in some cases more intensely than when people began taking precautionary measures, the public became desensitized to the possibility of catching the illnesses. After hearing of the reoccurring illnesses for a prolonged amount of time, people slowly became apathetic toward trying to change anything in their health habits and eventually went back to living with the few precautions they had in place before their knowledge of the outbreak.

However, to some degree, the public still has a stance in what is considered a newsworthy issue. With social media outlets being utilized by a larger public than ever before, individuals fulfill an important role, proactively engaging with messages and challenging the traditional communicative framework. “Rather than simply being targeted by mediated messages, they [publics] can see themselves as protagonists of mediated narratives who actively integrate themselves into a complex media ecosystem” (Stefanone, Lackaff and Rosen, 2010). A more proactive public may lead to more activists, stronger beliefs and opinions on any issue and more attentiveness to media coverage on local, national and international scales.

Application

The “International Burn a Quran Day,” scheduled to happen in Gainesville, Florida at a small non-denominational church represents a perfect application of the agenda-setting theory. The Dove World Outreach Center created this event to happen on the ninth anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks as a public outcry of its disapproval of Islamic extremists and their actions, inviting all Christians to partake.

Within two weeks of the Dove World Outreach Center announcing the event, the National Association of Evangelicals issued a press release urging Jones to cancel (Kropp, July 29, 2010). Almost instantly after the NAE’s press release was issued, the media began forming different approaches on this story. Jones’ interview on his first international platform, CNN, caused the topic to be streamed through the media world with several affiliates and partners running the conducted interview. Since the public generally obtains its information from a media source of some variety, it is nearly impossible to think information with a large amount of national attention doesn’t deserve an individual’s attention.

The continuing media over-publicity of building a “Mosque at Ground Zero” served a major role in the amount of attention given to Jones. At a time when many Americans were beginning to recognize the need for religious tolerance and acceptance to counter the negative stigmas associated with Islam in America, Jones made a quite tactical move, scheduling “Burn a Quran Day” on a national day of remembrance for an atrocious act of terrorism. This almost guaranteed media outlets would grant the publicity he was searching for. There is

a pattern in the way the public reacts to the media. If it is timely, people become passionate about it, until it becomes one day too old. Jones made a wise move by choosing a period of time when Americans were in their most fragile reminiscent states, remembering the lives lost in the attacks. According to a Gallop public opinion poll measuring inter-religious tolerance (2010), “Americans are more than twice as likely to express negative feelings toward Muslims as they are toward Buddhists, Christians, and Jews” and “fifty-three percent of Americans say their opinion of Islam is either ‘not too favorable’ (22%) or ‘not favorable at all’ (31%). In the same poll, “sixty-three percent of Americans say they have either ‘very little knowledge’ or ‘none at all’ of Islam.” Much of this negative emotion stems from stereotypes developed in response to the September 11 attacks, and because of this, media coverage relating to Islam and Muslims is heavily prominent and easily accessible by the American public.

In the case of the “Burn a Quran Day,” there were pages created on Facebook, Twitter and MySpace and various blogs. One Facebook page, “Stop International Burn a Koran Day,” has more than 443,000 “likes” or “fans.” While this may seem insignificant, many companies, organizations and church groups struggle with establishing public activism. This means that a typically inactive national audience responded to this small church’s mediated agenda by creating a page against it and getting hundreds of thousands of people socially involved. Other social movements include international protest, with cases of burning the American flag and Jones’ picture, death threats from inside the United States and

around the globe addressed to Jones, and several peaceful and publicized movements toward global religious tolerance.

Critique

The correlation between information received by a public and its consideration of an issue as substantial is backed by McCombs' and Shaw's research. They suggest the public is issue-focused, and because of that, the media target these issues and add emphasis to the ones they want to convey as important (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). There are positives and negatives to approaching media coverage's correlation to public opinion that are addressed by further research.

During an analysis of the media's ability to promote agenda setting, (Miller, 2007), the scholar found three determinants of relevance to the public that control prioritization of issues in a public eye. These determinants are affect, or the emotional reactions a public feels from a story; inference, or stating the importance of a matter within a mediated story; and a public's personal connection to the issue at hand. In this study, the scholar concluded, "When news exposure causes people to feel sad or fearful about an issue, they will be more likely to view it as nationally important" (Miller, 2007). Jones created an international controversy "to expose Islam for what it is. It is a violent and oppressive religion that is trying to masquerade itself as a religion of peace, seeking to deceive our society" (Dove World Outreach Center, 2010). Through his efforts, Jones has managed to do the opposite from the media coverage he has received. If his goal was to legitimately "expose Islam for what it is" in his

opinion, then he has done a terrible job of making his approach appealing to the majority of the public, but if his goal was to gain a lot of publicity, to get attention from international leaders, the President and even a car dealer who offered him a new car for free if he didn't hold the Quran burning event (DeFalco, October 22, 2010), then he succeeded. Jones appears to know how to get the media to pay attention to him, but has no clue, and possibly no desire to make that coverage positive.

This particular issue held ties with many global publics. There were several different groups that held strong opinions and beliefs toward the "Burn a Quran Day," with all three determinants of relevance prevalent. Affect is present through the very radical views of Jones' actions and how the public reacted to his choices. Inference is present through the heavy coverage of Jones' event, although it was negative coverage. In any video interview with Jones, the news anchors or interviewers asked questions set up to make him sound unintelligent and careless of the damages this event was causing to the safety of the American military and all American citizens and to the relationships Christianity and Islam share. A large part of why this issue became so large is the personal connection the public holds with Islam. Insulting and stereotyping the world's second largest religion because of the actions of a small segment of the Islamic population can only end poorly for a person's public image.

If public knowledge increases because of fair media coverage of a newsworthy event, causing this public to do further research on a subject, then the correlation with its media sources is positive. When a public is persuaded by

a media source that reports issues from a slanted approach, the effects of this theory become entirely negative. While Jones holds a very radical stance toward condemning the Islamic faith, in a perfectly mediated world, the public would be able to decide how it feels toward Jones and his stance on Islam and develop its own opinions and beliefs.

With the consistent message that Jones is a radical extremist putting the lives of every American at stake being brought by the media, the public isn't given many other options than to decide that Jones is exactly that. When the Dove World Outreach Center, with a church population of 12 members, announced they were going to host this event, it reached national media coverage very quickly. Video, audio and text story packages were made, featuring interviews with pastor Terry Jones, the international tensions General David Petraeus claimed this event could cause and several other details that paint Jones as an insensitive, extremely ignorant individual. These angles, along with many others, fall under the umbrella "Burn a Quran Day" topic, supplying the public with an influx of slanted information about this relatively small event happening at an insignificantly small church. This caused the public to consider the issue a nationally significant matter. Jones and the Dove World Outreach Center used the agenda-setting theory to their advantage, gaining attention from every main news outlet in the country and from several international political leaders.

On a more individualistic level in media workplaces, reporters are given story topics to look into, develop and create packages with. When reporters are

assigned a story, they have to consider, “the intended recipients of the completed assignment, the effect the writer intends upon the audience, the ‘voice,’ or image the writer wants to communicate, the ‘coherent network of ideas’ derived from what the writer knows about the subject [and] the conventions that must be observed” (Flower and Hayes, 1980). This plays a role in how the media determine the importance of news stories. Also, in the field of journalism, there is always a focus on meeting deadlines on stories. This can become so prominent in a journalist’s thoughts that it can cause him/her to push for information from people like Jones, potentially causing people who are being focused upon to act rashly, not making the logical thought processes that they may make otherwise. The better the job done by reporters, or the better the persuasive argument of reporters to show the media that a particular subject is important, the more likely the media outlet will put a heightened focus on this subject. The public will see this subject in its sources of media more frequently, ultimately persuading it to consider the issue with high importance. This issue may not be something a public would generally consider important, but with saturated coverage, the public is offered no other choice than to accept it as such. Perhaps this is the reason for the public’s general distrust in television and print media, with only 25 percent of Americans putting confidence in these sources (Morales, 2010).

Before the “Burn a Quran Day” event was created, Westboro Baptist Church (famously known for extreme stances on homosexuality and the state of America) was burning Qurans on street corners and received no media attention. Shirley Phelps-Roper, one of Westboro Baptist’s leaders, contacted officials and

media sources across the nation in a desperate attempt to gain media coverage for the church's events because of Jones' publicity stunt. After Jones called off the Quran burning at his church, Westboro Baptist immediately decided it was going to continue the act to publicly disapprove of the Islamic faith and Muslims across the world. Very few media sources picked up on this event, so it caused little national controversy (Anderson, 2010). This is a perfect example of the influence media sources have on public opinion. The media can decide, when having two stories of a similar caliber, which story is going to become an international issue and which one goes by unnoticed.

When McCombs and Shaw developed the agenda-setting theory, they unraveled the idea that media sources act as guides to general publics on what they think should be important issues. This theory is a key consideration when exploring the communication world. "International Burn a Quran Day" is a perfect example of how the media use agenda setting to make an issue newsworthy by excessive coverage.

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