SCANDALS AND AGENDA SETTING

Sharon Meraz

Agenda setting theory has been a very influential theory in the field of political communication and political science, providing solid evidence of the role of the mass media in influencing the salience of issues and issue perspectives (Weaver, 2007). Alongside framing and gatekeeping theory, agenda setting has been a foundational theory to the field of mass communication, orienting our assessment of the mass media’s effects away from short term measurement of attitudes and behaviors and towards its impact on our cognitions and knowledge (McCombs, 2014).

As a mature theory established since the 1970s, the evolution of agenda setting theory has gone through distinct phases in its development, with two of the three phases of its maturation occurring before the widespread uptake of social media technologies post-2005. Since the first published study of the mass media’s ability to set the agenda of undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 1972 (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), there has been strong and steady statistical evidence of the ability of it to transfer its issue salience to the public’s agenda, a phenomenon known as first level agenda setting (McCombs, 2014). A second development in the agenda setting theory was the expansion of the mass media’s influence into the interpretation of issues: it was shown to have the power to transfer the salience of issue interpretations or perspectives from its agenda to the public’s agenda, a phenomenon known as attribute or second level agenda setting (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). In addition to these two distinct phases of agenda setting research, there was the awareness that not all publics are influenced by the media in the same way, and that some publics need more orientation based on the relevance of select issues and the uncertainty they feel towards knowledge of the issue (McCombs & Weaver, 1973). This psychological component to agenda setting was dubbed the “need for orientation” and was itself mediated by the nature of the issue, that is, its abstractness and obscurity. The sources that feed the media’s agenda of issues and issue perspectives also encompassed another dimension of agenda setting research, with the awareness that other societal elites like politicians and public relations practitioners have an inordinate ability to set the media’s agenda due to their offline power and influence in pre-social media environments (McCombs, 2014).

These components to agenda setting theory were developed largely before mass media’s ecology was transformed by the participatory turn in social media technologies and the growth of networked publics online in the 2000s. In 2011, the theory was extended to take account of the growth of networked publics and introduced a third level to agenda setting: network
agenda setting (NAS). NAS suggests that the mass media can transfer the salience of a networked agenda of issues and issue attributes to the public’s agenda (Guo, 2012; Guo & McCombs, 2016). Alongside these theoretical extensions there were others. Agenda melding was further developed with the acknowledgment that vertical mass media and horizontal alternative/social media can have different influences (Vargo et al., 2014).

Post-2005, what is clear is that the mass media’s capacity singularly to influence the agenda of participatory publics is now difficult to support unequivocally across all levels of agenda setting (Shehata & Stromback, 2013). With the growth of social media applications, a growing trend among emerging studies is a waning of the mass media’s capacity to dictate singularly the agenda of networked publics and alternative media outlets. The alteration of the media ecology away from one way, unidirectional flows of vertical elite to nonelite influence and towards more fluid, hybrid forms of elite and nonelite mutual interaction has altered the capacity of the mass media to utilize its power solely to dictate the news and issues that publics and alternative media outlets use to set their agendas (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). A burgeoning media supply, negating the premise of limited media supply in the past, has afforded publics an expanded repertoire of news media channels, involving a mix of alternative outlets, fake news channels, and algorithmically/automated curated news feeds. There are now more media, more actors, and more agents (including computer algorithms and software code called “bots”) that exert influence on the agenda setting process (Witschge et al., 2016).

It is within this atmosphere of a changed media ecology that media agenda setting and scandals will be investigated. The media is now expanded beyond mass media to include a range of media outlets. Scandals, the domain of investigative journalism that heightened the credibility of the press in its exposure of President Richard Nixon’s political corruption during the Watergate era, is now seeded and amplified by rumor, disinformation, fake news, conspiracies, and hoaxes (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Computational propaganda—propaganda spread by automation and algorithms (Wooley & Howard, 2016)—is now consciously pushed through nonhuman bots (chunks of software code) interacting with human agents. Publics readily self-select into homophilous or like-minded ideological enclaves online (Stroud, 2010), for the theory of homophily predicts that shared values or beliefs work as powerful undercurrents to align networks along similar viewpoints. As the relationship between partisanship and scandal cascades, it is imperative to examine how our social media architectures alter the media’s ability to investigate true scandal and to react to deliberate, false scandals which are seeded through our social media technologies.

This chapter will review the relationship between the theory of agenda setting and scandals pre-social media environments, before situating agenda setting and scandals within the altered dynamics of the new media ecology. Focus on the new media ecology will emphasize how current scandals have been seeded and gain contagion in ideological networks and how the mass media, alternative media, and networked publics play a role in viral scandal contagion. I will break down the relationship between the theory of agenda setting and scandals through an examination of three main media points: (1) pre-social media, but in the era of the Internet and the World Wide Web; (2) post-2005 and before 2014, capturing the rise of social media; and (3) post-2014 to the present, with the palpable rise of bots, algorithms, and malicious activity through computational propaganda within social media architectures. The broadening of scandals to these new zones of disinformation optimizes scandal as an orchestrated campaign designed to activate partisan, homophilous, political enclaves which are held together by partisan selective exposure (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Stroud. 2010) and partisan motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman & Cook, 2013).
Agenda setting and scandals before the growth of the Web

Investigative journalism was tangible in the 1960s and 1970s media environment (Puglisi & Snyder, 2011) and one of the earliest political scandals to be investigated for evidence of mass media agenda setting was the Watergate scandal. This scandal was exposed in 1972, forcing the US president Richard Nixon to resign the presidency in 1974 after it was revealed that “dirty tricks” were used in his presidential campaigning, including abuses of power and illegal wire-tapping (Schudson, 2004). Weaver, McCombs & Spellman (1975) found that the ability of the mass media to set the agenda of Charlotte, North Carolina voters was highest among those with a high need for orientation and a high exposure to media coverage of the Watergate scandal, which was driven by solid, investigative, media coverage and by political actors keen on utilizing the scandal for political gain (Liebes & Blum-Kulka, 2004).

The rise of the Internet in the 1990s wrought changes in the media ecology with the World Wide Web and text-box search engines. These changes compounded the already existing broadcast changes in the rise of cable news and its continuous 24/7 media monitoring. Williams and Delli Carpini (2000, 2004) record the press’s failure to set the public agenda of voters in relation to the Clinton–Lewinsky sex scandal, a tabloid scandal where President Bill Clinton was accused of having an affair with his intern Monica Lewinsky. The details of this affair, exposed by the conservative partisan site Drudge Report and independent counsel Kenneth Star, emerged after prior reporting of tabloid and mass media stories on Clinton’s relationships with many other women, including Connie Hamzey, Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, and Kathleen Willey. These authors note that the failure of the mass media to set the public’s agenda in relation to Clinton’s sexual scandals was evidence of outdated metaphors of gate and gatekeeping in the age of the Internet, which had given rise to multiple media sources and channels. Conversely, Shah et al. (2002) note that the mass media sustained widespread approval for Clinton by framing the scandal as an attack by conservatives. These authors closely examine how the mass media framed the scandal, noting that the latter was more likely to frame it in terms of (1) actions/accusations of conservative elites and (2) liberal questioning of the motives of Republican actions, both of which propelled Clinton during the scandal to some of the highest approval ratings during his time in office.

Agenda setting and scandals in the period 2005–2014

During the period in which social media burgeoned, between 2005 and 2014, it became apparent that the mass media was losing its singular influence on audience agenda setting. Audiences have now morphed into “produsers,” a term coined by Bruns (2008) to capture the hybrid activities of participatory publics that engage in a mix of production (“prod”) and consumption (“users”), as they seek both to create personal media and to select existing media to fulfill their needs. The growth of alternative media outlets, social media streams, and networked collectives online had a palpable effect on the agenda setting process (Meraz, 2012). Studies in this period found that blogs and the mass media either mutually influenced each other (Meraz, 2009; Messner & Distaso, 2008; Wallsten, 2007) or, in some cases, set the media’s agenda (Meraz, 2011a, 2011b). With the growth of social media, there was growing awareness of increased political fragmentation online among partisan blogs which appeared to network together through dense hyperlinking patterns (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Meraz, 2011a; Nahon & Hemsley, 2014). Social media applications appeared to enhance fragmentation, or at the very least, make it more likely that homophilous publics were easily capable of self-selecting into
ideological enclaves (Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2009). Among partisan alternative media, there was a complicated two-step flow process, where more elite alternative social media set the agenda for the less elite followers, thus expanding our theoretical understanding of intermedia agenda setting (Nahon & Hemsley, 2014).

Active publics could now set the scandal agenda for the media if they were in the right place at the right time. Bartender Scott Prouty secretly recorded Mitt Romney at a private Florida fundraiser saying that 47 percent of Americans were dependent on government and would not vote for him (CBS, 2013). Prouty released the video, only to set the agenda of the mass media. This recorded scandal was recirculated through the mass media and was used as strong evidence by progressives of Romney’s unsuitability for office. Mayhill Fowler of Huffington Post’s “Off the Bus” secretly recorded then US President Barack Obama at a fundraising event in April 2008 noting that working-class voters in failed manufacturing towns often “get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.” This scandal was utilized by then presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton to try to win over Democratic voters in the Pennsylvania primary (Fowler, 2008).

Examining the emergent role of the web and Google in scandal promotion during the 2004 presidential election between George Bush and John Kerry, Rojecki and Meraz (2016) coin factitious information blends (FIBS) to describe the spread of a form of scandal/disinformation that is qualitatively different from definitions of rumor, gossip, disinformation, and propaganda. FIBS are spread by elites and opinion makers, are aimed at discrediting political rivals, and are unverifiable. Utilizing time series analysis and Granger causality, Rojecki and Meraz (2016) examined two scandals during the 2004 campaign, one against Kerry (the Swift Boat Campaign) and one against George Bush (Bush AWOL from National Guard) finding that the Web alone did not have an independent impact, but that Google searches did set the agenda of traditional media newspapers and NBC coverage. Rojecki and Meraz (2016) also found a well-integrated conservative network of partisan blogs, partisan alternative media sites, and partisan well-known media sources like talk radio and Fox news, which helped to perpetuate and sustain the Kerry scandal among conservative publics. Progressive publics were less likely to engage in anti-rumor tactics, or to employ such integrated networked communication to spread the Bush scandal.

President Barack Obama became the first biracial US president through the years 2008–2016, winning two terms in office. Yet, his presidency was plagued by a pervasive scandal. The Obama birth certificate scandal, dubbed the “birther movement” or “birtherism,” was aimed at discrediting Obama’s claim to the presidency because it suggested he was not a natural born citizen, and thus could not legitimately be the US president (Pasek et al., 2015). Between 2008 and 2012, 15–45 percent of Americans believed in the birther claims in spite of Obama producing his birth certificate to prove otherwise. Pasek et al. (2015) found that publics who were partisan, conservative, and held animus against blacks were significantly more likely to have their agenda set by sources that spread the birther scandal. Obama released his birth certificate in 2008 and another long-form version in 2011; yet, the authenticity of these documents remained in question through his presidency (Howell, 2012). Recent polling in 2016 revealed that 72 percent of registered Republicans still doubt President Obama’s citizenship (Clinton & Roush, 2016), suggesting the political scandal has strong ties to political conservatism (Crawford & Bhatia, 2012).

The birther scandal highlighted the role of several partisan interest groups and offline elites in spreading this political scandal. The birthers formed an official website, WorldNetDaily.com, said to draw over 2 million visitors daily in 2009, promulgated by Joseph Farah, a conservative activist and evangelical Christian. In 2009, Farah wrote stories on the birther scandal and produced a DVD titled “A Question of Eligibility: Is Obama’s Presidency Constitutionally
Legitimate?” (Wallsten & Fiore, 2010). The birther scandal was also fueled by the Tea Party Movement (Enck-Wazner, 2011; Meraz, 2013; Skocpol & Williamson, 2013; Wiegand, 2010). Polling in 2010 revealed that as many as 30 percent of Tea Partiers believed that Obama was born in another country, alongside 32 percent of Republicans (Condon, 2010). The Tea Party movement also drove an associated “Obama is a Muslim” scandal alongside these birtherism claims. Weeks & Southwell (2010) examined this “Obama in Muslim” scandal, finding that the traditional media agenda’s attempts to dispel the rumor had an agenda setting impact on the electorate in convincing them to pay attention to the scandal. Other agenda setters of the birther scandal included Orly Taitz, a California based dentist and lawyer dubbed the “birther queen” (Mencimer, 2010), and the conservative blog FreeRepublic (Weeks & Southwell, 2010). In keeping with traditional agenda setting theory regarding the inordinate power of political elites as sources of the media’s agenda (McCombs, 2014), Donald Trump has also been accused of initiating this rumor about Obama from as far back as 2011 (Gentile, 2017). Oddly, Trump has often claimed publicly that Hillary Clinton was the instigator of the birther scandal rumor, a claim debunked by fact checking websites like Snopes, PoliFact, and FactCheck.org.

Agenda setting and scandals in the age of fake news, bots, and computational propaganda

Post-2014, the new media landscape for news and information has been dominated by five companies, dubbed the “frightful five,” the tech companies Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft, and Google (Manjoo, 2017a, 2017b). The media ecology is now characterized by hybridity and polyvocality (Chadwick, 2017) as social media applications permit a multiplicity of voices to join the network, altering the processes of mass media power to include crowd-centered logics and networked effects (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). The majority of networked publics connect to the Internet through a variety of devices within their household (Howard, 2015). As of August 2017, two-thirds of Americans report getting news from social media (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), while only 32 percent profess a great deal of faith or trust in the mass media (Bernstein, 2017). Since 2014, the majority of studies on agenda setting with social media have found that the power of the mass media has diminished considerably (Meraz, 2016; Vargo & Guo, 2016) to the point where partisan social and alternative media appear as the agenda setters in large scale, big data environments. Studies have shown that deeper involvement in online communities and greater participation in social media results in greater dependence on partisan media for agenda setting (McGregor & Vargo, 2017). It is clear that the news media landscape has been altered considerably and irrevocably.

There is now a proliferation of rumors and disinformation online (Marwick & Lewis, 2016). Rumors have been afforded an algorithmically enhanced capacity to cascade online (Garrett, 2011), resulting in a significant impact on electoral outcomes. Scholars have noted the steady proliferation of hate speech agendas online (Phillips & Milner, 2017), fueling the growth of white nationalist agendas online and offline (Salter, 2017). The burgeoning of a fake news market has further come to set the agenda of online partisan news outlets (Vargo, Guo & Amazeen, 2017). Fake news and disinformation is encountered by many but appears to impact disproportionately susceptible publics with specific epistemic beliefs. In relation to the latter, publics that view reality as a political construct with no basis in fact are more likely to have their agendas set by conspiracy theories (Garrett & Weeks, 2017). In terms of partisanship, conservative publics are also more likely to show agendas in online social media platforms that trade in speculative politics, fake news, and conspiracy theories (Benkler et al., 2017b; Meraz, 2017a, 2017b; Meraz & Yin, 2018). During the 2016 US presidential election, Twitter conservative publics shared
articles and news sources that were overtly Islamophobic and anti-immigrant, with the majority of these stories based on fake scandals invented to frame immigrants as criminals and terrorists (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Faris et al., 2016; Meraz, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

Personal scandals related to Donald Trump were prevalent, from his Access Hollywood tape where he boasted that he routinely sexually assaulted women to his liaisons with adult porn star Stormy Daniels and playboy model Karen McDougal. Not surprisingly, these stories failed to impact swaths of the electorate in terms of setting their agenda about his suitability for the job of US president (Waxman, 2018). Conservative publics, including white evangelical publics, provided Trump with immunity from these scandals (Blow, 2018; Leonhardt, 2018a, 2018b; Stanton, 2018). Hillary Clinton, however, was plagued by a series of scandals, the primary one being her usage of a private email server to conduct State Department business. Though the FBI closed the case and cleared her of wrongdoing in July 2016, James Comey of the FBI reopened the case two weeks before the November 2016 election when it was discovered that Anthony Weiner, the disgraced New York politician embroiled in a sexting scandal with an underage girl, had some of the Clinton emails (Goldman & Rappeport, 2016).

Clinton would face several additional scandals as fake news disseminators sought to paint a picture of her as corrupt and untrustworthy to the electorate. Clinton was accused of deleting 33,000 emails from her private server after being given the FBI subpoena from the Trump campaign, though Clinton noted she had deleted these well before the subpoena because they were personal and not related to the investigation (Chozick & Schmidt, 2015). In a separate network of scandals, Clinton’s foundation was accused of helping foreign entities in exchange for donations, using the State Department to help Bill Clinton, selling access to the US State Department, and accepting sketchy donations from abusive nations (Schow, 2016). Studies have revealed that these scandals set the Twitter agenda for many conservative networked publics (Meraz, 2017a, 2017b) who used these scandals to create a narrative of her unsuitability for office.

In the 2016 US presidential election, Democrats were unseated by scandal after scandal, with many of these email scandals (tantamount to cyberwarfare) breaking through the channels of social media versus the mass media. The Democratic National Committee (DNC) email accounts were hacked and published by WikiLeaks in July 2016, and these emails were said to reveal favoritism by the DNC staffers towards Clinton as opposed to presidential Democratic hopeful Bernie Sanders. This scandal, which resulted in the resignation of DNC Chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz and the appointment of Donna Brazile, continued through the campaign when it was revealed Brazile had leaked questions to Clinton ahead of the latter’s town hall forum with Donald Trump. John Podesta, Clinton’s campaign chairman, also had his emails hacked, only to have it released in daily “scandal batches” on WikiLeaks, a phenomenon which set the agenda for conservative Twitter users in relation to Twitter trending topics (Meraz, 2017a).

The mass media had a significant role to play in setting the agenda of publics towards a favorable assessment of Trump, in spite of the scandals that circulated about him. It was shown to have covered Clinton’s 2016 scandals in greater proportion than Trump’s scandals, with Trump’s coverage more focused on his positions on immigration, jobs, and trade (Benkler et al., 2017a).

Though much blame has been cast on network and cable news coverage for their framing of Trump as a celebrity businessman through the many decades of his show *The Apprentice* (Douthat, 2018), Patterson (2016) found that Trump was heavily favored among eight elite mass media, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, receiving more coverage that all Republican and Democratic challengers during the primary season. Trump’s dexterity in utilizing the Twitter platform to debase rivals and debunk the mass media’s coverage of him is
Scandals and agenda setting

also unprecedented in modern history. Trump, known as the Twitter president, has utilized the platform to build an alternative post-truth, post-news world (Ott, 2016), bypassing the authority and influence of the mass media while also using Twitter to debunk and critique the mass media as a fake news establishment (Enli, 2017). Studies have found that Trump’s daily tweets set the agenda for the news and mass media, while the latter has had no agenda setting effect on the tweets (Wells et al., 2016). Trump’s scorn and ridicule at the authority of the mass media has also set the agenda for his supportive conservative publics: studies reveal that these publics that voted for Trump were less likely to have their agenda set by mass media on social streams such as Facebook and Twitter (Meraz, 2018, 2017a, 2017b, 2017). More conservative publics than progressive publics register distrust of the mass media (Gallup, 2018). Alternatively, conservative publics were more likely to share or circulate fake/conspiratorial scandal news about Clinton on Facebook and Twitter from sources or “junk news” sites like Breitbart and Infowars (Benkler et al., 2017b; Meraz, 2018, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Narayanan et al. 2018).

The 2016 US presidential scandal agenda was also driven in large part by social bots in our social media platforms. During the 2016 US presidential election, Russia’s involvement in deploying armies of bots (Westervelt, 2017), as well as encouraging young teens from Macedonia to seed and amplify fake news with promises of payment (Silverman & Alexander, 2016), enabled fake scandals about Clinton to be amplified by the power of automation and algorithms, showing code to be a powerful agenda setting agent. The Trump–Russia scandal emerged shortly after the former’s presidential victory on January 6, 2017, as the American Intelligence Committee issued findings that Russia had intervened in the election. The scandal has already implicated Michael Flynn (Trump’s national security advisor), Paul Manafort (Trump’s campaign chairman), and George Papadopoulos (Trump’s former campaign foreign policy advisor), and has revealed surreptitious meetings between Trump campaign officials and Russian personnel in meetings at Trump tower and over email communications (Goldberg, 2018). The crisis in the media’s agenda setting authority is evidenced by the lack of resonance of this scandal’s significance with conservative partisan publics. Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee released a report in March 2018 concluding no evidence of collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign (Herb, 2018). Though mounting evidence pouring out of mass media daily reportage suggests increasing significance to this Russia scandal probe, only 25 percent of Republican publics believe there was improper contact between the Trump campaign and Russia in comparison to almost 68 percent of progressive publics (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Bots, defined as chunks of computer code that generate messages and replicate themselves (Howard, 2014), now outnumber humans on the Internet (McMillan, 2014). On a worldwide basis, scholars have found that politicians often utilize political bots for malicious campaign propaganda designed to discredit their opponents and inject supportive agendas related to their presidency in order to sway public opinion (Woolley & Howard, 2017). Evidence has been found that injecting false news stories through algorithms, automation, and human curation—known as computational propaganda—have inspired malicious political campaigning in countries such as Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Poland, Taiwan, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States, to name but a few countries (Woolley & Howard, 2017). Social bots, automated scripts designed not just to automate but interact with humans, are also on the rise on our social networking platforms (Woolley, 2016). Studies have found that as many as 66 percent of tweeted links were made by Twitter bots in 2016 (Wojcik et al., 2018), though other studies in the same year ascribe a more modest role to bots (Meraz, 2018). In a large scale study of 126,000 rumors between 2006 and 2017 on Twitter, Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) found that fake news spread faster and more rapidly on Twitter when carried out by humans and not bots. Irrespective of whether bots or humans are more responsible for spreading scandal on social
platforms, what is apparent is that the interconnected system of mass media and social media, of human and nonhuman agents, makes agenda setting a more interactive, dynamic, and hybrid process. Fake news scandals overran social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election (Silverman, 2016a, 2016b). Some of these fake news scandals included the assertion that the pope endorsed Donald Trump, that Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS, and that an FBI suspect in Clinton’s email leak was found dead in a murder-suicide. Immediately after the election, the term “pizzagate” was coined to describe the fake news narrative that a pizzeria in Washington DC was the site for a pedophile ring involving Clinton and Podesta. This fake news scandal led to a North Carolina man firing an assault rifle in the pizzeria as he sought to rescue the child sex slaves he believed were being held at the restaurant (Haag & Salam, 2017).

The mass media and its power to set the agenda on true scandals and correct on false ones stands threatened by our current divided partisan landscape, by a broad disdain for the authority, power, and credibility of the mass media among select publics, and by the ready embrace of partisan selective exposure and partisan motivated reasoning to the sacrifice of truth and fact. Our interactive media ecology has now resulted in social media platforms as prime destinations for news consumption and news distribution. In this current environment, the mass media’s ability to set the agenda on scandals—investigating true scandals and diffusing fake scandals—is weakened by the current empowerment that networked publics (human and nonhuman) have in dictating what is truth and what is fiction.

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Scandals and agenda setting


