# Agenda Setting Theory And The Impact Of Technological Transformations In The Digital Environment: A Critical Review

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**Abstract:**
The significant and rapid advancements in modern technologies have led to an unprecedented scientific revolution in the field of media and communication studies. This revolution stems from the repercussions of the technological boom and the emergence of new tools and digital media platforms, which have profoundly transformed various aspects of media and communication. These transformations particularly pertain to concepts, usages, effects, and theoretical and methodological orientations. Such changes have sparked numerous research trends aimed at addressing the phenomena and shifts affecting the traditional communication environment.

This article seeks to shed light on the Agenda Setting Theory within the context of the modern digital environment. It aims to understand the phenomena accompanying the production processes of media content and the shifting roles between media outlets and audiences in prioritizing topics of interest.

Moreover, the article examines the role that this theory plays within the fields of media and communication in interpreting the mechanisms and stages involved in agenda setting. It specifically focuses on how these processes unfold in a new digital environment that has reshaped the foundations and principles of the traditional communication landscape. The study also addresses the theoretical dimension of the topic, exploring the applicability and relevance of the Agenda Setting Theory in digital media studies by analyzing its key principles in light of the changes witnessed by new media, while testing its hypotheses in the modern digital context.

## Introduction.

The fields of media and communication sciences have undergone significant transformations since their inception, shaped by the social, political, and cultural contexts of their times. Since the early 19th century, scholars have worked to establish this domain as an independent discipline, despite facing numerous epistemological and methodological challenges common to the social sciences. The rapid technological evolution, however, marked a decisive turning point for this field. Media tools expanded beyond traditional platforms, such as radio and television, to encompass more complex and impactful platforms like the internet and modern digital media.

Each stage of technological advancement served as a catalyst for reshaping media concepts, leading to the emergence of scientific theories aimed at explaining communication processes and examining their effects on audiences. This progression continued until the advent of the digital environment, or what some refer to as the "new media environment" which radically altered the structure and practices of communication. Consequently, traditional media theories have come under scrutiny, particularly concerning their adaptability to this new environment characterized by interactivity, diversity, and decentralization.

This ever-evolving digital landscape has raised critical questions about the applicability of classical theories in analyzing and framing newly emerging media phenomena. Theories developed within traditional and relatively homogenous media contexts now face significant challenges in explaining the dynamics of digital media, which is distinguished by unique features such as algorithmic dominance, personalized content curation, and the continuous flow of information.

More precisely, the digital and technological transformations of recent decades have not only advanced technical capabilities but also reshaped social, cultural, and political relationships, including the relationship between media and audiences. The digital environment has introduced new challenges for media theories, prompting questions about their relevance to the fundamental changes in communication processes.

Agenda-setting theory, for example, has provided a framework for understanding the relationship between media and audiences, particularly the media's ability to shape public concerns and prioritize issues. However, a pressing question today revolves around the capacity of agenda-setting theory, with its traditional foundations and concepts, to offer precise interpretations of communication phenomena amid the profound changes imposed by the digital environment. Furthermore, how well can it account for new technological influences that have redefined the relationship between media and audiences?

This question arises from the distinct characteristics of the digital environment, including the continuous flow of information, the overlapping and intertwining roles of message senders and receivers, and the emergence of interactive spaces. These traits challenge the theory's foundational assumption that media can determine public priorities by organizing issues in a hierarchical order within their coverage.

This study seeks to address the following key questions :

What are the intellectual and historical foundations of agenda-setting theory?

How compatible is this theory with the transformations brought about by digital media?

What challenges must the theory overcome to remain an effective tool for understanding the dynamics of digital media and its influence on audiences?

## 1- Agenda setiing theroy

Since the emergence of the theory, many scholars have discussed the concept of agenda-setting as the process through which the media highlight certain issues as the most important, positioning them at the top of the media agenda and prompting reactions from the authorities, provided that public opinion regarding the issue has been shaped by the media.

In this regard, (Zakaria, 2009, p. 09) stated that this concept is specific to the relationship between communication media and the audience. It means that the media and communication outlets determine the priorities covered in the news, assigning special significance to these topics, which in turn makes them become important priorities for the audience. Thus, the topics that editors deem important are the ones that get published, even if they do not reflect actual reality. The mere act of publishing these topics endows them with increased significance, making the audience perceive them as more important than other topics.

**1-1-    The Historical Background of the Theory.**

The theoretical origins of "Agenda Setting" studies can be traced back to Walter Lippmann's work in 1922, particularly in his book Public Opinion. Lippmann explored the role of the media in bridging the gap between external events and the images that form in our minds about these events. He argued that the media help construct mental images for the public, often presenting distorted or false representations of reality. The media, according to Lippmann, influence public opinion by emphasizing issues that are deemed significant for society (Makkawi & Al-Sayad, 1988, p. 288).

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Approximately forty years later, Lippmann's viewpoint was revived by Bernard Cohen, who argued that while the media may not always succeed in telling the public how to think, they are consistently effective in telling them what to think about (Makawi & El Abd, 2008, p. 392). This notion was echoed by researcher Said Boumaiza, who suggested that Cohen's statement, While the media do not tell us what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about, serves as the origin of the formulation of the agenda-setting theory, even though Cohen did not explicitly name it as such (Boumaiza, 2006, p. 87).

As Lang & Lang's 1966 study demonstrated, the media directs public attention toward certain issues, shapes public perceptions of politicians and leaders, and consistently presents themes that determine what the public should focus on (Dhaif, 2015, p. 11).

The credit for conducting the first empirical test of the Agenda Setting Theory goes to Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. Their main hypothesis was that, despite occasional limited effects of the media on the type or intensity of attitudes, it is believed that the media set the priorities for political campaigns and influence the intensity of public opinion on political issues. The results of their study, which examined the 1968 U.S. presidential election campaign, revealed a strong correlation between the amount of attention given to certain news in the press and the importance placed on those issues by the public after exposure to the media (Defleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1999, p. 366).

McCombs categorized agenda research into four main forms reflecting the developments of the trends in this study : (Abdelhamid, 2000, p. 344)

- Original studies that tested the fundamental assumption that the way news is covered influences the public's perception of the importance of daily issues.
- Studies on the comparative roles of newspapers and television, including psychological concepts such as the need for adaptation and the relationship between personal and mass communication.
- he third form focused on revealing the images of candidates and their key interests as an alternative agenda.
- In the 1980s, agenda research shifted from being an independent variable to a dependent one, replacing the question : Who sets the public agenda? with : Who sets the news agenda?

Despite these stages marking the historical development of agenda-setting theory, this does not imply that they are strictly historical phases in the sense that the opening of a new stage closes the previous one. All stages continue to be active areas of study and ongoing opportunities for research.

## 2-1- Hypotheses and Concepts of Agenda Setting Theory.

Agenda-setting studies examine the reciprocal relationship between the media and its audience in shaping the priorities of political, economic, and social issues within society. The theory assumes that the media cannot cover all events and issues occurring in society. Instead, it selectively highlights specific topics, dedicates intense focus to them, and controls their presentation and content. This process gradually draws the public's attention, increasing their awareness and concern for these topics. Consequently, these issues gain greater importance in the public's perception compared to those that receive little or no media coverage (Makkawi & Al-Sayad, 1988, p. 288).

If we aim to further elaborate on the concept of the theory, we can examine the factors that influence the media's selection of topics, issues, and content for inclusion in newspapers or broadcast schedules. This process involves deliberate editorial decisions that shape the positioning, space allocation, format, and various tools used to emphasize certain content. These editorial choices signify the level of importance assigned to specific news items or topics, thereby establishing editorial priorities. For instance, newspapers cannot allocate the same level of prominence to all pages or sections, nor can they provide equal space or attention to all news or issues regardless of their significance. Consequently, the organization of content reflects the media's strategic direction and policy—a process commonly referred to as the media's "agenda setting". (Abdelhamid, 2000, p. 341).

This concept is also reflected in Stephen Patterson's definition of agenda setting, where he describes it as the process through which the media highlight specific issues as important, prompting responses from both the government and the public. This attention to issues makes them significant to individuals. When exposed to a particular media outlet, a person adjusts their perception according to the importance assigned to the issues and topics of that media, aligning with its presentation and the level of attention given to them. (Hassouna, 2010, p. 02).

Mohammad Mousa Ismail succinctly encapsulated the essence of media agenda theory, stating: "There is a strong correlation between the manner in which media outlets present issues and the perceived importance of these issues by their audience". (Ismail, 2003, p. 282)".

From the above, it can be concluded that the Agenda Setting Theory is essentially the reshaping of news surrounding current events, wherein their importance is ranked by media professionals through repetition and assigning them greater space compared to other stories. This serves the direction and priorities of the media organization or those controlling it.

The ranking observed by researchers has raised several questions regarding the alignment between the media's ranking of news stories and the public's perception of these issues. How closely do the media's priorities align with those of the public ? What are the degrees of agreement or disagreement ? Is there a causal relationship between the two, suggesting that the media has an influence ? These and other questions have been central to many hypotheses in the literature surrounding agenda-setting theory. (Abdelhamid, 2000, p. 342).

The main hypothesis in various studies of agenda-setting has focused on the alignment between the media's agenda and the public's agenda regarding the perceived importance of issues and topics (Abdelhamid, 2000, p. 343). This hypothesis suggests a positive correlation between the media's attention to an issue and the audience's perception of its importance. This idea is summarized in the work of McCombs and Shaw, as previously mentioned. To test this hypothesis, the researchers conducted a content analysis of how television, newspapers, and magazines covered political topics, followed by a small survey to assess respondents' views on the relative importance of the topics covered by the media (Defleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1999, p. 366).

Bergman commented on the emergence of this hypothesis, noting that it arose from concerns prevalent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which went beyond the limited impact theories. McCombs and Shaw recognized the presence of media influence but emphasized that it was not direct. The reality is that agenda-setting theory introduces indirect, long-term influences, with other variables making media impact complex and conditional. According to this theory, media influence depends on the pre-existing attitudes of the audience (Mahna, 2002, p. 271).

In their study, McCombs and Shaw observed the following: (Mahna, 2002, pp. 97-98)

- Voters during election campaigns obtain most of their information from the media.
- This information is often new to them.
- Voters engage with new information based on the emphasis the media place on specific issues during the election campaign.

In another study by the same researchers, as cited by Saeed Boumaiza, they found statistical correlations between the extent of coverage of issues in the press during election campaigns and how voters ranked those issues, more so than television media did. This result was expected, as those who read newspapers typically choose those that align with their ideological preferences, whereas television viewers often engage in 'zapping' (switching channels) during programming (Boumaiza, 2006, p. 88).

### 3-1- Factors Affecting Agenda Setting.

The Agenda Setting Theory emerged and gained more prominence, being tested within the framework of the growing scientific interest in the complexity of media influence. Several factors intersect in shaping this phenomenon and formulating the communication processes involved, which necessitated considering agenda setting as one of the fundamental forms of media influence.

In this context, specialized studies have shown that the process of agenda setting is influenced by several variables and factors that determine its nature and dynamics. The factors affecting agenda setting can be summarized as follows:

**-The Nature of the Issues**: The nature of issues refers to whether they are tangible or abstract (untangible) to the audience, tangible issues are those that the audience has direct experience with (Makkawi & Al-Sayad, 1988, p. 293). In addition to this division of issues between concrete and abstract, there are also those who have divided them into daily and emergency issues.

Daily issues, which occur regularly, typically do not have a significant impact. In contrast, emergent issues, which only have media sources for information, have a much greater impact (Hassouna, 2010, p. 09). In other words, when an issue is close to the direct experience of the public, the ability of the media to set the public agenda for these issues decreases, leading to a lower correlation between the media's agenda and the public's agenda. On the other hand, for issues far from the direct experience of the public, media succeed in influencing the public agenda (Abdelhamid, 2000, p. 353).

**-The Importance of Issues**: This refers to the positive correlation between the audience's level of interest in an issue and its priority. A study conducted by Carter and his colleagues found that issues that provoke threat or fear, such as pollution or AIDS, attract more attention than issues that do not pose a direct threat, such as abortion or nuclear war (Makkawi & Al-Sayad, 1988, p. 294).

**-Timing of Issue Presentation**: Numerous studies have indicated that media play a more significant role in agenda setting during election periods than at other times. This includes Roberts' study on predicting voting behavior and the study by Proseas and Kibilinger on the effect of media on electoral preferences in Germany (Makkawi & Al-Sayad, 1988, p. 296).

**-Demographic Characteristics**: This refers to the importance of considering the demographic variables of the audience. Some studies related to agenda setting theory have shown a positive correlation between these demographic variables and the issues presented in the media. Studies show that demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, and geographical location, play a key role in determining how audiences respond to and are influenced by the media's agenda. Education, for example, plays an essential role in determining audience priorities regarding media-reported issues, as educated individuals tend to be more influenced by media agendas compared to those who are not educated (Hassouna, 2010, p. 10). This has been confirmed by Whitney's study, while Shaw and Martin's study found no significant correlation between demographic variables and the agenda setting process. Similarly, studies by Basyoni Hamada and Hassan Imad Makawi concluded that demographic characteristics do not play a significant role in agenda setting (Makkawi & Al-Sayad, 1988, p. 295).

**-Personal Communication**: Personal communication plays a significant role in the agenda setting process. It can either support or compete with the media in shaping the public agenda, as social interactions also influence public judgments about the importance of an issue or individual. Conversations between individuals about social issues are essential in shaping their perceptions. (Abdelhamid, 2000, p. 352)

Several studies, including Mutz's study (1987) and Weaver's (1982), support the role of personal communication in agenda setting (Makkawi & Al-Sayad, 1988, p. 295). Furthermore, Paul

Atallah confirmed that media exposure alone is not as impactful without personal communication. This is based on several studies, including Lazarsfeld's, which emphasize the critical importance of personal communication in shaping the public agenda (Tammar, 2005, p. 115). Personal communication also amplifies the media agenda regarding topics covered in depth by the media, while it may compete with the media agenda for issues covered less extensively (Abdelhamid, 2000, p. 352).

**-The Type of Medium**: Many researchers have conducted studies aimed at identifying the most effective media for agenda setting. Some findings indicate that television has a stronger ability to influence agenda setting in the short term due to its visual nature and immediate appeal. However, newspapers tend to have more lasting effects over time because they provide in-depth analysis and detailed information, allowing the audience to form deeper perceptions of the issues.

In contrast, Mahmoud Hassan Ismail argues that most studies conducted within the framework of the agenda setting theory support the dominance of print media over television in the agenda setting process (Ismail, 2003, p. 285). McCombs' study highlights that newspapers perform a stronger agenda-setting function for their readers, while television does not provide the same function for its viewers (Makawi & El Abd, 2008, p. 399).

**- The Duration of Agenda Setting**: The length of time an issue is covered by the media impacts its importance. The longer an issue remains in the media, the greater its influence on the audience's priorities (Hassouna, 2010, p. 10). Numerous studies have shown that when an issue is covered in the media over a long period, the audience becomes saturated with it, resulting in a stronger influence compared to the first few times the media covered the issue (Mahna, 2002, p. 275). Some argue that a three-week period is enough for agenda setting.

In conclusion, after presenting the main factors influencing the audience's agenda setting process based on the findings of various researchers from different societies and time periods, it can be said that these factors cannot be generalized.

Based on this, researcher Yousef Tamar argues that generalizing these variables or their order in the agenda setting hypothesis is scientifically unsubstantiated and may not yield reliable results for determining the relationship between media and public opinion according to the Agenda Setting Theory (Tammar, 2005, p. 114).

Overall, it becomes clear from the classic approach of the Agenda Setting Theory, as indicated by Davis and Robinson, that the theory focused on a single aspect of agenda setting: the extent to which the media influences what people think about. There is, however, a broader range of cognitive influences referred to by Saeed Boumaiza, as previously mentioned, including: (Boumaiza, 2006, p. 90)

**-Who do we think about?** This means the degree to which individuals or groups covered in news stories are highlighted, thereby amplifying their significance.

**-Where do we direct our thinking?** The location of an event can also affect how its importance is perceived as local news. If the location experiences many conflicts, famines, or disasters, viewers may feel a sense of relief not to be there.

**-When do we think about the news story?** The audience also pays attention to news stories when they are prioritized by the media. Many news stories have a strong seasonal or periodic element.

**-Why do we think about the news story?** The extent to which an element in news stories reaches a significant level should align with the audience's thinking about the story to an acceptable degree. Is the story being shared because it reflects a broad and significant societal change, or because it violates accepted assumptions and values about life.

## 1-1-  Types of Agenda Setting Research Strategies.

In 1992, Shaw and Martin identified four types of agenda-setting priorities measurement, which are: (Makkawi & Al-Sayad, 1988, p. 291)

• A model focusing on measuring the priorities of public interests and the priorities of media interests, based on aggregate data.

• A model focusing on a set of issues but shifts the unit of analysis from the macro level to the individual level.

• A model that studies a single issue in the media and among the public, based on the variation in influence.

• A model that studies a single issue, starting from the individual as the unit of analysis.

## 2-  Applications of Agenda-Setting Theory in the Digital Environment.

In light of continuous technological development and the emergence of the new digital environment, the communication process has undergone a profound transformation in its nature, content, media types, and mechanisms. This constantly evolving environment, with its various websites, social media platforms, blogs, and more, has become a multi-dimensional media space that allows recipients, or users, to receive and consume vast amounts of information and data, as well as participate in its production, thereby contributing to shaping the media agenda. This has raised the need for further research and new studies on the relevance of modern media theories; including the agenda-setting theory we are discussing, in order to understand its ability to explain the dynamics of media influence in this new environment and reality. This reality has introduced a new set of challenges, such as fake and misleading news, information manipulation, the expansion of the audience, its fragmentation, and the diversification of its specialties.

## 2-1-  Recent Research Trends in Agenda-Setting Studies.

The discussion of modern trends in agenda-setting research inevitably involves dividing these studies into traditional and modern categories. This division varies depending on the researchers, as well as the environment and time in which the research was conducted, since what is considered modern today may become outdated tomorrow, and so on.

Among the contributions of researchers in this area is the work of Saeed Boumaiza, who categorized agenda-setting research into traditional and modern approaches. This division marks

a transition from the initial level, which we previously reviewed regarding the hypothesis of agenda-setting proposed by researchers McCombs and Shaw. It also highlighted insights that contributed to understanding the influence of media on the audience, despite its limitations, as it focused only on answering the five traditional questions. Research that focuses on the second level expands the scope to include answering the questions of when, where, and also focusing on how (Tammar, 2005, p. 114).

At this second level, several new concepts emerged that significantly contributed to understanding the agenda-setting phenomenon. One of these concepts is framing, which refers to selecting certain aspects of an experience or idea and emphasizing them over others. This occurs when journalists choose specific elements of a perceived reality and highlight them in the media text, thus promoting a particular framing of the issue. Media framing is evident through the presence or absence of key words, news sources, and phrases that form thematic clusters. Media framing acts as a signature of power, reflecting the identity of the actors and the interests that compete to dominate the narrative. (Boumaiza, 2006, p. 91).

According to McCombs, framing involves the selection of a concept or idea through which an issue is framed within a communicative context, making it meaningful, particularly to the media, its workers, and the audience. This process facilitates the understanding and interpretation of the issue. McCombs argues that framing is an extension of agenda-setting, utilizing the second-level agenda concept to describe the effect of highlighting media coverage features on the audience's interpretation of news stories. (Mohamed, 2019, p. 47).

## 2-2- The Eloctronic Agenda : The Third Lvel of Egenda-Setting Research.

In recent years, researchers have revisited the agenda-setting theory, along with other media theories, in light of the emergence of a new communicative environment characterized by the rise of new media. This environment is frequently referred to in various studies and sources as the digital environment.

This can be considered—according to researchers—the third level of agenda-setting research, under the term "electronic agenda," as a result of the rapid and successive developments in new media, as well as the significant changes in communication models and the nature of social relations. Consequently, studies in agenda-setting have turned toward understanding the impact of new media, represented by the internet, on shaping the agenda of traditional media on one hand, and on the other hand, the agenda of the audience (Mohamed, 2019, p. 48).

Among the questions raised in this context is whether the role of mass media in shaping the audience's agenda has ended with the rise of digital media. Have the mechanisms of agenda-setting remained the same as before, especially now that we live in a digital networked environment with immense capabilities that have profoundly influenced media and communication processes, along with some of their underlying assumptions and theoretical models? (Abou El Hamam, 2020, p. 160)

With the increasing use of the internet, there is limited knowledge about the impact of the communication forms that have emerged with it, such as bloggers and social networks, on the audience's agenda. Among the issues raised by researchers in this regard is that the multiplicity of information and news sources on the internet does not facilitate consensus on specific issues.

Studies have also indicated disagreement about the role of new journalistic types in shaping the agenda (Bakhit, 2009, p. 99).

Some argue that the power to set the agenda is no longer exclusively held by the media, politicians, and investors. The audience has evolved into an active user, a meaning producer, and a participant in setting priorities, framing content, and disseminating it in a more powerful and effective way than merely being a passive receiver. This transformation has led to the development of new theoretical models for the agenda-building process, which differ from those established in the traditional media environment. The following two models illustrate this shift, which has altered the centers and hierarchy of agenda elements. (Abou El Hamam, 2020, p. 170).

The digital media environment has given rise to a new concept: interactive groups, which are constantly connected around the clock due to the interactivity inherent in digital platforms. These groups are formed based on various factors, such as shared interests or social and religious affiliations, reflecting individuals' need for belonging and guidance. Although this term was not a focal point of traditional agenda-setting theory research, it has now become closely associated with the concept of the need for guidance

urthermore, some studies have indicated that agenda integration has become more prominent in the networked environment, where individuals increasingly use a variety of media to align their personal agendas with those of the groups to which they belong, highlighting new dynamics in the formation and establishment of media priorities.

The early research focusing on agenda-setting trends turned to social media platforms, and numerous studies have been conducted in this field. One of the most notable is the study by Marques, Lopez, and Arias in 2017, which found a match between the issues raised on Donald Trump's Twitter account during the election campaign and the accounts of his supporters. This confirmed the power of the digital environment and its users in shaping their own agenda, independent of traditional media. Prior to that, a study by Conway, Kenski, and Wang in 2015 demonstrated the impact of Twitter on voters and media during the U.S. election campaign, showing how presidential candidates utilized it to present their issues to voters and compel the media to focus on them (Mohamed, 2019, p. 49).

Similarly, many other studies we have reviewed confirm that the digital environment, thanks to the interactivity and networking features of social media and other digital platforms, has played a significant role in the political field and elections. It has facilitated the discussion of issues, participation, and interaction among users, translating into the process of constructing an active audience agenda, which later impacts the media's agenda. This contrasts with the previous situation, where a unified agenda was presented by traditional communication and media to the audience.

At the same time, Fabrizio Gilardi and his colleagues, through a study on the role of social media in determining the political agenda, confirmed that cross-country comparative research could explore how party characteristics influence agenda-setting actors. For instance, a party's size, its status in government, or its ownership of specific issues could act as intermediary factors that shape political agenda-setting. While social media has become an established channel for

political communication, many aspects of its role in agenda-setting remain inadequately understood (Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli, & Muller, 2022, p. 56).

Among the key features of modern trends in agenda-setting research is what has been termed "network agenda-setting," which has been considered a third level in agenda studies. One of the latest surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017, covering the period from August 8 to 21, surveyed a sample of 4,971 individuals. The survey results showed that 67% of Americans get their information through social media, clearly demonstrating the priorities formed by the digital environment for the public, considering its unique characteristics. Compared to traditional communication and media outlets, the electronic agenda approach is not just an extension of previous agenda studies but a fundamental framework forced upon researchers by the digital environment (Mohamed, 2019, p. 51).

Other studies, such as "Coverage of the Iraq War in the U.S., China, Taiwan, and Poland" and "Issue Agendas on Twitter during the 2012 U.S. Presidential Elections," also support the theory of the third level of agenda-setting, facilitating understanding of this model's impact, while leaving room for future studies (Diéguez & Gonzalo, 2020, p. 45).

With the increasing use of social media and the shift of the traditional communicative environment to an interactive one, thanks to the advantages of the digital environment, the concept of "agenda melding" has emerged as one of the latest trends in agenda-setting research. This concept refers to the process by which the audience connects and integrates agendas to align with their values. This occurs as large numbers of the public use social media and other news sources to complete their information about events and find opinions that match their expectations. This effort by the public is called agenda melding. While media set the agenda, the audience integrates this agenda to align it with their values and characteristics. Several studies have proven that modern media, including social media, can set priorities for the issues of its users, shape their perceptions, and allow them to discuss and interact with these issues. Thus, while agenda-setting theory was previously associated with the media's influence on the audience, it now addresses the agendas of online groups and their communication tools, as these groups have formed through modern communication channels to share the same values, attitudes, opinions, and interests (Farouk & Moussa, 2017).

In a related context, many studies have confirmed that agenda-setting theory in the digital environment must be studied in light of three key variables: the changing process of agenda formation, the changing way media influence, and the environment in which this influence occurs.

In 2017, Donald Shaw conducted a study that identified three elements affecting the formation of horizontal agendas : the first element relates to media from a horizontal perspective, the second relates to media from a vertical perspective, and the third pertains to the personal experience of the audience (Mohamed, 2019, p. 50).

Overall, it can be said that the new trends in agenda-setting research are all subject to the recent changes brought by the digital environment, which has become a suitable platform for entering media and communication research through the agenda-setting theory in the digital environment.

**2-3-    The New Concepts of Agenda-Setting Theory.**

The concepts related to agenda-setting theory were initially limited to what emerged during its early developments. The agenda, as a concept before becoming a theory, was central to the early theorists' explanations of communication science from this perspective. The agenda presented by the media was adopted by the audience later on. In addition, some other concepts, such as selectivity, were also introduced by certain theorists. However, the rapid development of the digital environment and its dominance over the media and communication landscape pushed researchers and scholars to revisit and explore these concepts as the first step in re-structuring the theory according to the dynamics of the digital age.

McCombs and Shaw formed a research team to revisit the concepts of agenda-setting in order to refresh and expand its core principles. Their objective was also to identify new research directions for the theory. To achieve this, they introduced three new research approaches: Agenda Setting, Agenda Cutting, and Agenda Surfing. (Cristopher, 2016, p. 1684).

The concept of "Agenda Cutting" focuses on the interaction between the issues that emerge in the media and how they influence the audience's perception of their significance. This concept has evolved since the inception of the theory. The second concept addresses the audience's level of interest in specific issues, which may only arise when the media highlight these issues on their agenda. This is seen in situations such as health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, or in the context of recent conflicts, such as the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. The third concept examines the impact of the digital environment on the media, where media priorities are shaped by the issues the audience engages with in the digital space, prompting the media to adopt and include those issues in their agendas.

Initially, these concepts were seen as attempts to understand and expand the scope of the theory in light of recent technological transformations. However, they have now become essential components of the theory's renewal process, as the digital environment has proven the necessity of updating the traditional framework of the theory by incorporating these new concepts that align with developments in the media landscape.

In addition to the aforementioned concepts, McCombs and Shaw proposed other ideas that, while not as prominent, are likely to become foundational in studying media phenomena from the perspective of agenda-setting in the modern digital environment. Among these concepts is Agenda Melding, which refers to "the process by which individuals infer or construct their personal events after reviewing various sources of information and news in a way that aligns with their perceptions and preferences." This concept is connected to the impact of attributes or framing. In this case, the audience is not simply a passive receiver; the melding process means that the audience actively engages in selecting, inferring, or constructing their own agenda. The networked digital environment provides the ideal conditions for such activities. (Abou El Hamam, 2020, p. 10).

Another concept introduced by McCombs and Shaw, which some researchers have referred to as the "Need for Guidance," describes individual differences and the desire for direction in interpreting information and sharing the basic network of information. It emphasizes the need for opinions and event interpretations.

Overall, the concepts discussed above are fundamental in studying communicative phenomena within the digital environment. They highlight the urgent need for researchers to reconsider how these concepts are applied. The digital communication environment has led to the emergence of new phenomena related to interactive groups that remain constantly connected, facilitated by the interactive features of this environment. These groups are formed based on shared interests, social, and religious affiliations, among others. This phenomenon underscores the importance of the need for gathering and guidance, which has become an integral part of an individual's sense of belonging—an aspect that was not a primary focus in traditional agenda-setting studies but is now central to understanding the relationship between individuals and the media in the digital era. Furthermore, some studies have emphasized the increasing role of Agenda Melding in the networked environment, where individuals use a variety of digital media, leading to the blending of their personal agendas.

### 2-4-    Shifts in Agenda-Setting Theory within the Digital Environment.

The previously mentioned concepts have become central in the digital environment, necessitating researchers' focus on them to study modern communication phenomena. The digital environment has given rise to a new concept : interactive groups, which are characterized by continuous communication around the clock due to the interactive nature of this environment. These groups are formed based on various considerations, such as shared interests, social and religious affiliations, and others. These groups highlight individuals' need for belonging and guidance, which is a fundamental need that was previously absent from the concerns of traditional agenda-setting studies. However, it has become clear today that there is a strong connection between these concepts and the concept of "the need for guidance."

Furthermore, recent studies have confirmed that the phenomenon of agenda convergence has become more apparent in the digital space, where individuals rely on a variety of digital media to mix their personal agendas with the agendas of the groups to which they belong. This continuous interaction reflects the profound transformations imposed by the digital environment on agenda-setting theory, requiring new research approaches to understand these changes and assess their impact.

As previously mentioned, the audience has experienced significant transformations in the digital environment. It no longer maintains its traditional role as a passive receiver of media messages but has become an active user of the digital environment. This environment has endowed the audience with new characteristics, as users have become interactive, productive, and, importantly, participants in the process of agenda-setting. The digital environment has also contributed to the transformation of the audience from mere crowds with no clear ties to a networked audience, thanks to the networked nature that distinguishes the digital space.

This development has given the networked audience additional power and effectiveness, especially regarding its impact on setting the media agenda. The digital environment has also allowed them to exercise interactivity towards what is said, written, or broadcast across various media and digital platforms. As a result, these changes have led to the emergence of new theoretical models for agenda-setting, which differ entirely from the traditional models in the previous media environment, now taking on participatory and networked forms that reflect the nature and interactive features of the digital space.

The digital environment has affected the definition of the media audience, which has now transformed into an audience connected to the Internet, as opposed to the previous definition of the media receiver. Moreover, individuals and groups are no longer subject to the isolation conditions that characterized the previous communication environment, as long as they are able to communicate via the Internet (Abou El Hamam, 2020, p. 09).

The transformation in the audience after the emergence of the digital environment changed the centers and hierarchy of agenda-setting elements. It shifted from the hierarchical structure, with the audience as the receiver reflecting the priority-setting process in the classic theory, to a horizontal process, representing priority-setting in the digital environment, where everyone has become a participant in the agenda-setting process, including the audience. This is in contrast to the traditional view of the theory, which saw the audience as passive, receiving the agenda set by media outlets, decision-makers, and actors.

In conclusion, the circulation of certain issues via digital networks, such as social media platforms, forces media outlets to address and present them, making users of the digital environment active participants in the agenda-setting process and in determining the priorities of media outlets, even indirectly.

Moreover, the overlap of local, national, and global content has brought about a significant new element imposed by the digital environment. It has allowed new media to highlight new actors who possess a unique power granted to them by this environment, enabling them to influence or even intervene in the media agenda, sometimes even controlling it. A prime example of this is the pivotal role played by bloggers, content creators, and major social media page owners in shedding light on local issues, some of which would not have had a chance to appear on the agendas of traditional media outlets without the opportunities provided by the digital environment.

These transformations have represented a radical shift in the traditional agenda-setting theory. They have given rise to new actors outside the realm of traditional media and political decision-makers, such as bloggers and digital influencers. This has led to the emergence of a large number of local issues that were previously deemed insignificant for publication or broadcasting by traditional media. However, the digital power these new actors wield, supported by their significant following and influence, has enabled them to create their own agenda, which directly affects the traditional media agenda and forces itself into the modern media landscape.

In conclusion, as most researchers have argued, a fundamental shift has indeed occurred and continues to evolve in terms of media agenda-setting. This shift has been driven by the digital environment and the changes it has brought, directly affecting the traditional assumptions of agenda-setting theory. In light of these transformations, returning to the foundational theoretical framework is an essential necessity that cannot be overlooked. It is crucial to reanalyze and reassess communication and media phenomena with a new understanding and updated approach. This update requires keeping up with the digital and technological realities of our time, ensuring an accurate and objective reading of the changes imposed by the digital environment on the media landscape.

**3- The Digital Environment and the Challenges of Agenda-Setting and New Media.**

The digital environment has brought about significant transformations in the media landscape, reshaping the agenda-setting process. This shift moved the process from its traditional vertical path to a horizontal, participatory one, where the audience has become an active participant in the creation and design of the media agenda. These changes have forced traditional media institutions to adapt to the digital environment and bridge the gap that emerged over the past years between them and modern digital platforms.

## 3-1- Challenges and Media Strategies in the Digital Environment.

One of the most prominent challenges faced by traditional media was the need to establish alternative, multi-platforms through websites and social media, allowing them to disseminate media messages across various communication channels. This approach enabled media institutions to integrate their unified agenda across their television channels, websites, and social media pages in an effort to maintain their diverse follower base, whether TV viewers, smartphone users, or social media users.

Additionally, media institutions were forced to adapt to the new agenda imposed by the digital environment in order to remain strong competitors within the electronic agenda-setting process. This competition is evident in the timeliness of news dissemination, the use of citizen journalism to achieve news exclusivity, and providing opportunities for the audience to actively participate in prioritizing the media agenda and discussing issues of public interest. In this context, the concept of reverse agenda-setting emerged, as discussed in some academic studies, where the digital environment plays a dual role in influencing both media agendas and the public's agenda alike

## 3-2- The Challenge of Competition and Adaptation in the Digital Age.

Traditional media institutions have entered a new era, one that requires them to compete on multiple fronts. Beyond the usual competition between media outlets, a new form of rivalry has emerged within the digital environment. This competition is not only with similar media institutions but also with new actors that the digital space has produced. This includes media activists, content creators, independent news websites, bloggers, and influencers on social media platforms. Despite the varied ways in which they engage in media work, they all contribute—directly or indirectly—to shaping the audience's agenda, often in conflict with the traditional media agenda, posing a challenge for these institutions to continuously adapt and compete.

The real threat to the continuity of the priority-setting hypothesis, as we know it, stems from the existence of an active audience with the ability to enhance selective perception during the information consumption process. The core of the most significant resistance to the authority of the media agenda lies in the loss of media control as a unified actor capable of determining important issues in a comprehensive and homogeneous way. However, the multiplicity of sources does not necessarily mean the end of the inclination to prioritize issues and perspectives. Theory shows that media often prioritize issues and viewpoints from political elites and influential institutions, ensuring the continued dominance of these parties in media coverage (Arguete, 2017, p. 53).

## 3-3- New Media and the Productive Audience.

With the advent of new media, the traditional roles of the audience have undergone a profound transformation. No longer passive recipients, audiences have evolved into active producers and influencers within the media landscape. The digital environment and technological platforms have empowered individuals to select agendas that resonate with their interests, values, concerns, and principles. This shift has given rise to the concept of the electronic agenda, a dynamic framework shaped and controlled by various forms of new media. Consequently, this electronic agenda has emerged as a direct competitor to the traditional agendas adhered to by conventional media outlets.

### 3-4-   The Role of New Media in Shaping the Agenda.

The digital environment has enabled new media to influence and shape the agendas of traditional media by imposing certain issues and events. The widespread circulation of specific topics on social media often compels traditional media outlets to cover them. Consequently, users have become key partners in determining the priorities of media agendas. A prominent example of this shift is the reliance of traditional media on citizen journalists, who act as eyewitnesses to various events in the pursuit of breaking news—sometimes at the expense of professional ethics. This phenomenon highlights the growing influence of new media on traditional agendas and its significant role in shaping the electronic agenda. As a result, the electronic agenda has become a focal point for researchers and academic studies aiming to better understand contemporary communication phenomena within the context of new media.

### Conclusion

The digital environment has led to radical transformations in the concept of agenda-setting in the media, where the audience has become an essential part of the media agenda-setting process, rather than just a passive recipient of content. The audience is now an active participant in determining priorities and guiding media direction. These changes are a result of the unique characteristics of the digital environment, such as interaction and continuous participation, which have transformed the process from a one-way hierarchical model to a more interactive, networked model.

The digital environment has also impacted the communication chain in agenda-setting theory, making it more flexible and participatory, thus allowing the emergence of the electronic agenda as a competitor to the traditional agenda. As a result of this transformation, new concepts such as agenda integration have emerged, and the influence of media outlets has become more complex and diverse, reflecting the continuous interaction between the media and the audience.Thus, it can be said that the digital environment has not only affected media methods but has fundamentally changed the traditional roles between media actors and the audience, opening up new opportunities for research and exploration in this fiel.

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