Content Analysis in the Research Field of Political Coverage

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1 Introduction

Political knowledge is widely viewed as a foundation for democracy (DelliCarpini and Keeter 1996). Scholars of political communication have long argued that how citizens gain political information can only be understood by studying the media. After all, most countries have a representational form of democracy, meaning that citizens hardly interact with politics and politicians themselves, but learn about politics and its politicians through the media. This phenomenon is also known as the mediatization of politics (for excellent overviews, see Stromback 2010; Esser and Stromback 2014). Thus, scholars of political communication have developed theories and empirical strategies to demonstrate how media coverage on politics affects political attitudes and behaviour.

The coverage of politics, and more specifically policies or political issues, in news media has been particularly and abundantly studied by scholars of *agenda setting*, an approach which will be the focus of this chapter (see for example, McCombs and Shaw 1972, 1993; Baumgartner and Jones 2009, 1991; Soroka 1999; Walgrave and Van Aelst 2016; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2010; Walgrave and Van Aelst 2016; Baumgartner et al. 2006). Building on Walter Lippmann's (1922) argument of the media's ability to construct social realities in the public mind, agenda setting refers to the transfer of

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often covered topics in news media to its salience in the public agenda. McCombs and Shaw (1972) pioneered this field by surveying voters in North Carolina (USA) on the most important political issues and comparing these results to a manual media content analysis of nine local news media outlets. This has been coined the first-level agenda setting theory. Ever since the seminal study of McCombs and Shaw (1972), this finding has been replicated hundreds of times all across the world—ranging from other locations in the USA, to Europe, Asia, Latin America and Australia—for both election and non-election settings over a broad range of public issues and other aspects of political communication. Moreover, the agenda-setting theory has been extended from objects of attention to attributes, known as the second-level (McCombs 1992; McCombs and Shaw 1993; McCombs et al. 2014). From the second-level, it became apparent that "the media not only can be successful in telling us *what* to think about, they also can be successful in telling us *how* to think about it" (McCombs 2005, p. 546, emphasis in original). To find evidence for the second level of agenda setting, scholars of communication science used various forms of manual and automated forms of content analysis to uncover frames in media coverage (for an overview, see e.g. McCombs et al. 2014). In the early 2010's, the theory was extended with a third-level (Guo et al. 2012; Guo and McCombs 2011). This third level of the theory poses that news media bundle political issues and/or their attributes, and subsequently make the entire bundle of elements salient in the public's mind. This implies a network-like structure: When news media mention e.g. a political issue and a positive attribute thereof together, the audience will perceive these two elements as interconnected. The emergence of the third level went hand in hand with the upsurge in computer-assisted content analysis. In this section, we will describe the state-of-the-art of agenda-setting theory for the coverage of politics, and especially policies and political issues in media in three trends. Thereafter, we discuss the most common used research designs (pp. 5–8), and we conclude with the limitations and possible future directions of the field (pp. 8–10).

2   Trends in the Field

As briefly mentioned above, over the 50 years of the existence of agenda setting theory, the original study of McCombs and Shaw (1972) has been replicated and extended many times. The extensions and replications of the original Chapel Hill study have been mainly performed using manual content analysis. In this paragraph, the newest trends of these extensions are discussed. Nownes (2019) demonstrated that political issues are even more salient in the public minds when celebrities 'spotlight' the political issues. Additionally, following the discussion on whether there is 'news in soft news' (Prior 2003; Baum 2003; Reinemann et al. 2011), Boukes (2018) demonstrates that satire—a form of soft news—also carry out an agenda setting function. Agenda setting has also shown to impact the public's emotional state. Reporting crime news fuels fear among the public (Graziano and Percoco 2016; Burscher et al. 2015), whereas partisan reports

on economic news drives polarization (Anson 2016), and reporting on violations of the campaign finance laws, as well as other political scandals drives anger (Gaskins et al. 2018). Besides, Liu et al. (2016) demonstrate for the environmental issue, that the media's reporting on issues influences the policy solutions that are brought up. Another 'new' issue that extends the coverage of politics using agenda setting theory is looking at news coverage of demonstrations (for example, see Hutter and Vliegenthart 2016). The dynamic nature of agenda setting power not only holds for demonstrations, but also for post-referendum Brexit news coverage (Morrison 2019; McLaren et al. 2017), for political parties (Maier et al. 2017), and for consumer confidence (Vliegenthart and Damstra 2018). Next to these extensions, the theory has recently been replicated in third-wave and developing democracies. For example, Hughes and Mellado (2015) show that after the reintroduction of elections in Chile, the media performs as agenda setters. In addition, the theory has been shown to hold at local levels of politics too, such as the level of the German Federal elections (Bevan and Krewel 2015).

Another trend in this field is to extend the type of media data from traditional print media to the online environment. The rise of computational tools has allowed this type of research to blossom in the recent years. The studies discussed here rely upon both automatic and manual textual analyses. The findings of the agenda setting theory have been replicated for Google Trends data (Kalmoe 2017; Lee et al. 2015). Likewise, social media platforms have been studied. Combining Facebook data with web-tracking data (for an explanation of this design, see Common Research Designs and Results, pp. 5–8) in Spain, Cardenal et al. (2018) demonstrate that the use of Facebook as a news referral erodes the common public agenda, because it alters citizens' perceptions of the most important problems in the country. This study thereby implies that the traditional (print) media's agenda setting power has been limited by social media platfora, such as Facebook. Cardenal et al. (2018) alludes to the presence of populist leaders and populist messages being omnipresent at social media. The findings of Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés (2018) underline this idea. The authors describe that European populist leaders use social media (i.e. Twitter) to increase or decrease saliency of political issues amongst their (potential) electorate. In contrast to Cardenal et al. (2018) and Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés (2018), Feezell (2017) demonstrates experimental evidence that social media platforms as Facebook do have an agenda setting function, when participants are exposed to political information on Facebook. Moreover, the work by Kruikemeier et al. (2018) lays out that the traditional media and social media, looking at Twitter data, mutually influence each other when looking at political candidates. In a similar vein, the work by Banducci et al. (2018) also find considerable evidence of reciprocal media influence between television, newspapers and radio. A couple of years earlier, Conway et al. (2015) pioneered intra-media agenda setting using Twitter and traditional media, showing a symbiotic relationship between agendas in Twitter posts and traditional news. While traditional media follow candidates on certain topics, on other topics traditional political media coverage predicts the political agenda on Twitter. The study of Su and Borah (2019), however, brings in a new perspective on the traditional and online media

relationship by illustrating that Twitter's agenda is similar to the public opinion: Both follow the (print) media agenda. Banducci et al. (2018) results, nonetheless, indicate that inter-media agenda setting on leaders is complex and contingent, and seems to turn in part on the familiarity of the party leaders and the extent to which media coverage of them has established tropes prior to the campaign.

A third trend that can be observed in this field is to investigate how to get on the media agenda, given their immense agenda setting power. In this trend too, computational methods have found their way into the studies and allowed for both older questions to be tested using new methods as well as new questions to be answered. Carrying out an automatic content analysis of political parties' press releases and media reports in Austria using plagiarism software, Meyer et al. (2017) demonstrate that systemic media and party system agendas affect which issues make the news, while individual parties' issue strategies have limited autonomous impact. For the agenda setting theory, their finding implies that addressing issues that are important to the media and other parties help rank-and-file politicians and opposition parties, which lack the newsworthiness of their competitors in government. While Meyer et al. (2017) did not find any evidence that the media's selection of messages is driven by a party's issue profile or voters' issue concerns, Zoizner et al. (2017) found that the portrayal of the politicians does matter: Those who view themselves as a conduit of the public (delegates) are more responsive to the media than those acting on their own judgment (trustees). Also, in contrast to Meyer et al. (2017), Maier et al. (2017)—using a different analysis technique—show that Austrian parties were able to steer the media agenda on EU related issues. The same dynamic has been unfold by Jansen et al. (2018) and van der Pas et al. (2017). Looking at other organizations than political parties, Grömping (2019) demonstrates that first of all, the media institutions determine the room to manoeuvre, which is similar to the findings of Meyer et al. (2017), and second, Grömping (2019) shows that for human rights organizations individual strategies matter for their media attention, and thereby agenda setting power—i.e. in contrast to Meyer et al. (2017). This mixed bag of findings could be explained by the findings of Walgrave et al. (2017). The authors find evidence that the influence of media attention on political attention is non-linear: Agenda-setting operates differently when the media are in storm mode. That is, an explosive increase of media attention reinforces the effects of media coverage on the political agenda: When the news suddenly devotes a lot of attention to a topic, political actors go into overdrive too (e.g. increasing the number of hearings in the U.S. Congress about the topic at a much higher rate (Walgrave et al. 2017, p. 550)).

Another way to get on the media agenda has been extensively studied by scholars looking into news values (for a recent overview, see Harcup and O'neill 2017). This concept aims to capture the features of stories that are considered news, which is also called the attribute agenda in the agenda setting literature (for an overview, see e.g. McCombs et al. 2014). The seminal work on news values was written by Galtung and Ruge (1965). They pioneered the question how do events become news. To answer this question, they first embarked on a thought experiment where they imagined the world

to be an enormous set of broadcasting stations. If the emission of signals is continuous, there is a cacophony of sounds. To create a meaningful message out of this cacophony, "we have to select, and the question is what will strike our attention" (Galtung and Ruge 1965, p. 65). This metaphor of the world as a radio, where events are likened to sounds, elicited eight logical implications that are answers to the question of how events are turned into news stories. Additionally, the authors conducted a content analysis on the presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers. This resulted in four additional news values. Hence, Galtung & Ruge defined twelve characteristics that are important to categorize stories into news or not. Over the last give and take 50 years, many more scholars have developed news value criteria. The other seminal list of criteria on news values was developed by Harcup and O'Neill (2001), investigating whether or not Galtung and Ruge's criteria are still up to date in 2001. Based on a scholarly literature review and a content analysis of three UK national daily newspapers, Harcup and O'Neill concluded that some of the 12 original news values where not exclusive, overlapping or shining light on an event solely from one angle. The vast majority of the studies, investigating which (combination of) news values are present in news on politics and specific policies, apply manual content analysis in which a list of news values is defined. Later work (e.g. Trilling et al. 2017; Al-Rawi 2019) however uses a range of computational methods—such as machine learning and topic modelling, elaborated on in the next section—to automatically, sometimes even without human input, derive these news values from the news coverage.

3   Common Research Designs and Results

There has been a wide variety of research designs when it comes to analyzing political content and policies. Most studies first start with the important task of identifying content as political: This either implies taking content that is inherently political due to the sources producing it or identifying part of content as political and other as non-political. The first approach resorts to documents drawn up by parties and politicians such as party manifestos and other policy documents (as discussed in Chapter by Castro, Gessler & Majo-Vazquez). Because these documents are considered political because of the actors that created the document, scholars typically use these documents to investigate how the content is conveyed. Questions such as which topics receive more attention and how are these topics framed are key to studying news coverage of policies and politics. The second approach is mostly related to news and social media content which is not inherently political but can exert an important influence on variables such as political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. Determining whether the content in this approach is political can be challenging (see next section). To establish media effects, the field increasingly moves to innovative ways of content analysis.

4   Political News Content

Apart from analyzing content directly produced by political actors, another challenge lies in identifying political content in other domains, such as news. Here, the first question is to (1) identify political content in news as opposed to other content and (2) how to do this in a (semi-)automated way.

The first point is related to mostly theoretical considerations about what constitutes political and can be part of creating manual codebooks as well as computer assisted forms of content analysis, such as key word searches, dictionaries, coding scripts and writing classifiers. One discussion that has been going on since Tuchman (1972) is a distinction between so-called "soft news" and "hard news" to distinguish politically relevant from less relevant content. In their literature review on the soft/hard news distinction (Reinemann et al. 2011) propose that for identifying "harder news" (which is usually associated with political information) three dimensions are needed: topic, focus, and style dimension (p. 232). This stresses that identifying political news content might not only be about the topic (is it political or entertainment content) but also a matter of framing and reporting style (similar to the idea of displayed in the second level of agenda setting). Hence, Heinemann et al. (2012) argue to incorporate both the first and second level of agenda setting when analyzing news content.

The second question regarding (semi-)automation especially becomes more of an issue in a time where content is constantly produced at scale. One example of using a mix of manual and automated content analysis in a supervised machine learning approach to identify different policy issues as well as frames in news content is Burscher et al. (2015), who annotated a large dataset manually to train a classifier on it that can be applied to other datasets and time contexts. Wiedemann (2018) proposed to use active learning for those approaches to reduce the amount of manual coding needed while not compromising the quality of results.

When having identified political content, the focus of research is often to identify parties and their positions in the news (e.g. Helbling and Tresch 2011). This strand of research is mostly aiming at questions related to visibility of actors and topics and is related to agenda setting research. Another focus is also put on identifying different perspectives or frames on issues (Borah 2011). Within this complex of questions, often normative considerations play a role, evaluating whether the news media are "balanced" or "biased" regarding certain actors, topics, or perspectives. This ties in with different understandings of diversity in news media (McQuail 1992; Bozdag and van den Hoven 2015; Möller et al. 2018).

5   Effects of Political (News) Content

One core question when studying political content in news media is to not only examine what is in the media (focus of content analytical methods) but also what influence it has on people. In order to do this, one very important question is finding out what content people were exposed to since only that can have a possible influence on variables such as attitudes, knowledge, or behavior.

The standard approach for judging the effect of (political, news) media content on political variables has been survey research—using self-reported media usage or media exposure as independent variable. The amount and type (newspaper, television, online) of media usage/exposure are crucial factors for studying media effects. This approach has been questioned early on as being only a mere proxy for the influence of the content and failing to account for individual-level differences (Price and Zaller 1993). Additionally, while being a feasible approach in a media environment with limited choices, the diversifying supply of content over the last decades decreased the usability of this methodological approach according to some scholars (for an overview, see Scharkow (2019).

From the 1990's onwards, survey data was complemented by so-called linkage analyses (see e.g. Kleinnijenhuis 1991; Roessler 1999 and chapter by Castro, Gessler & Majo-Vazquez in this volume for an overview). While the issue of over-reporting of news use/exposure is not solved by the linkage analysis approach, scholars have argued that over-reports are of a systematic nature, and therefore can be dealt with statistically (see de Vreese et al. 2017 for an overview). Nevertheless, in a recent meta-analysis, Scharkow (2019) stresses that the reliability of self-reports is rather problematic and Scharkow and Bachl (2019) provide a very fine-grained description of errors in linkage analyses. Especially in a fast-paced, ever-changing (online) media environment, getting reliable and valid media exposure data remains a challenge. An important methodological development, therefore, is the usage of online trace data (e.g. browsing histories, donated data take-outs from social media accounts) with a subsequent content analysis of the collected content (Dvir-Gvirsman et al. 2014) or the usage of ad-hoc mobile surveys (Ohme et al. 2016).

6   Limitations of the Method & Future Direction of the Field

The core concepts of agenda-setting theory are an object agenda, attribute agenda—or in other theoretical traditions called news values and frames—and the transfer of salience between pairs of agendas. Especially the latter core—the transfer of salience between the pairs of agenda—has received attention recently, when the focus on causality in, especially, the field of politics, gained momentum. Sevenans (2017b) notes that there is no consensus on the exact role these media play in the agenda-setting process. This in

turn leads to diverse causal interpretations of the media's role in the central theory of agenda setting. Sevenans (2017b) identifies three controversies that hamper the causal claim that media attention leads to the importance of political issues on the public agenda. She fleshes out the potential risk of spurious relationships, possible endogeinity problems, and the lack of an integrated theory explaining why the media influence agendas.

For the latter issue, Sevenans (2017a) takes stock and shows that a piece of information gets more attention from politicians when is conveyed via the media rather than an identical piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This effect occurs largely across the board: it is not dependent on individual politician characteristics. Alluding to the same problem of lack of understanding of the media's role, Shpaizman (2018) notices that non-decisions are excluded in each study. Non-decisions refer to the pre-decisional process whereby some issues are systematically blocked by powerful actors from being placed on the formal agenda. Without looking at these, Shpaizman (2018) argues that scholars have been looking at a biased sample to test their theory.

The first two limitations hampering causal interpretation in the agenda setting theory—i.e. spurious relationships and/or possible endogeneity—as identified by Sevenans (2017b), could be the reason why some scholars have reported the media influences on mass opinion and behavior to be much weaker than commonly assumed (Greer 2019; Newton 2019). More specifically, Sciarini and Tresch (2018) show that the media's influence on the issue salience among the public mainly holds for domestic issues, not so much for Europeanised issues. This might be because people could either respond to the real-world events, about which the media also provides coverage, or entering the 'post-truth society', the (mainstream) media, might have lost (parts of) its legitimacy (Guess et al. 2020; Lischka 2017).

Issue salience, the central focus in the accumulated research on agenda setting to date, has been operationally defined in a variety of ways on both the media agenda and the public agenda (McCombs 2005). The development of new methods, as well as the availability of new types of data, have created an opportunity for scholars interested in the interaction between the media, politics, and the public. Techniques like digital-tracking data (Dvir-Gvirsman et al. 2014; Cardenal et al. 2018) or the usage of ad-hoc mobile surveys (Ohme et al. 2016) allow researchers to rely on other measures than self-reports. This is an important development, as Scharkow (2019) show that the reliability of self-reports is rather problematic in terms of reliability and accuracy of the measure. Such new insight that these new data could bring, could also lead to further develop a theory on the exact role these media play in the agenda-setting process, for which Sevenans (2017b) has made a start.

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