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Agenda-Setting Effects and Attitude Strength

Political Figures During the 1996 Presidential Election

This study examined the consequences of agenda-setting effects for attitudes toward political figures during the 1996 presidential election. In particular, guided by the literature from agenda setting, attitude strength, and the hierarchy of effects, the analysis tested hypotheses about the relationships among media coverage, public salience, and the strength of public attitudes regarding a set of 11 political figures. The findings indicate that increased media attention to political figures is correlated with higher levels of public salience and attitude strength. In addition, multivariate tests showed that one dimension of attitude strength, dispersion of opinions, mediated the relationship between media coverage and public salience. The implications of the results are also discussed.

Keywords: *agenda setting; attitude strength; salience; hierarchy of effects*

Agenda-setting research initially emphasized how mass media, policy makers, and the public interact and influence one another to affect issue salience (e.g., McCombs & Reynolds, 2002; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Rogers, Dearing, & Bregman, 1993). More recently, this paradigm also has considered how candidate images are constructed and prioritized in public opinion (e.g., King, 1997; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981), expanding the original agenda-setting model to include multiple objects and their attributes in the news. A shared quality of all these investigations has been their common convergence on people's cognitions.

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Less attention has been devoted to the attitudinal consequences of agenda setting and primarily is limited to probing how the salience of public issues influences attitudes toward political figures (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Schleuder, McCombs, & Wanta, 1991). Although this work on the priming of attitudes as a consequence of agenda setting is a significant contribution, it leaves us with an incomplete picture of news impact because it misses the key question of how sheer media attention to objects in the news affects public attitudes toward those same objects. To extend the boundaries of agenda-setting theory and provide a portion of the answer to this question, this project examined the linkages among media attention, public salience, and the strength of public attitudes regarding a set of 11 major political figures during the 1996 presidential election.

Agenda Setting

In its classical definition, agenda setting has studied how the salience of "objects" in the news is transferred from the news media to the public (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). The limited agenda-setting work examining attitudes typically scrutinizes how media coverage of various public issues primes opinions about political leaders (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). This concept of priming suggests that media attention to political issues provides the criteria for how governmental leaders are evaluated in public opinion. For example, if the media highlight the economy, politicians are more likely to be evaluated based on their performance on that issue than on any other. In those situations, reporting about strong economic performance should yield positive evaluations, whereas reporting about weak economic performance should engender negative evaluations.

Although some may view priming and agenda setting as discrete phenomena, many scholars view priming as a consequence of agenda setting, placing them under the same conceptual umbrella (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). One underdeveloped area in priming research has been empirical work investigating how media attention toward political figures themselves influences public attitudes toward those same figures—an attitudinal implication that agenda setting seems to at least tacitly imply. As Mutz (1998) noted, even the conventional question gauging the salience of issues among the public ("What is the most important problem facing this country today?") has affective overtones.

Agenda-setting theory has moved beyond object salience to also explore attribute salience, the second level of agenda setting (Golan & Wanta, 2001; McCombs & Evatt, 1995; McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Objects, in this context,

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are thought of in the same spirit as attitude objects in psychology. The basic premise behind attribute agenda setting is that objects in the news have various traits and characteristics that comprise their images. For example, political candidates, as objects, possess attributes that distinguish them from one another, such as their personality traits, issue positions, and qualifications. In this study, we extend the range of objects studied by examining general political figures (e.g., Hillary Clinton, who was not a politician during the time period analyzed) instead of focusing solely on political candidates.

It is important not to think of agenda setting as only a theory about issues. The core proposition of the theory is the transfer of salience from one agenda to another agenda. The salience of objects—issues, candidates, public figures, organizations, or whatever—is the first level of agenda setting, and the salience of attributes is the second level of agenda setting. Second-level research, in particular, has underscored the need for a more systematic perusal of the attitudinal outcomes of agenda setting. McCombs and Estrada (1997) declared that Bernard Cohen's famous summary statement of the media's power should be reformulated to state that "the media may not only tell us what to think about, they may also tell us *how and what to think about it*, and even *what to do about it*" (p. 247, emphasis added). For example, McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, and Llamas (2000) found close correspondence between the valence of media coverage (positive, neutral, and negative) surrounding candidate attributes (ideology/issue positions, biographical details, perceived qualifications, integrity, and personality and image) and the valence of audience descriptions concerning those candidates during the 1996 Spanish general election. The median correlation coefficient from 21 different comparisons of the media agenda with the voter agenda was +.72. In tracking the implications of media salience for attitudes among the public, the present study returns to the first level of agenda setting and probes the attitudinal outcomes of media salience toward objects—namely, public figures.

Attitude Strength

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of media-effects scholarship on attitudes over the years has been the primary emphasis on attitude change as the major attitudinal effect that can be attributed to news influence (e.g., Schoenbach & Weaver, 1985; Wanta, 1997), although there are exceptions (e.g., Weaver, 1991). This is not the only facet of attitudes that researchers should examine when exploring the impact of mass media, especially in the context of agenda setting, which deems the volume and prominence of coverage, not just its valence, to be critical variables behind media influence. The

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primary influence of agenda setting on attitudes may be the initial development and structuring of public opinion, and the concept of attitude strength is central to the explication of this influence.

A multidimensional construct, attitude strength is broadly defined as those features and qualities that distinguish strong attitudes from weak ones (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). These features and qualities include attitude extremity, attitude importance, attitude certainty, and prior knowledge (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993; Krosnick & Schuman, 1988). The development of stronger attitudes could manifest itself in many ways, but the two investigated here are attitude *dispersion* and attitude *polarization*. By attitude dispersion, we refer to the emergence of nonneutral attitudes or opinion holding. By attitude polarization, we mean attitudes that are highly positive or negative toward their referent objects—particularly those that are at the far ends of attitudinal scales.

Although both dispersion and polarization are concerned with attitudes that move away from the center of attitudinal scales and positions of neutrality, they represent different degrees of the broader idea of attitude extremity. For example, on a 10-point attitude scale, all the people falling between 1 and 4 and between 6 and 10 would represent dispersed attitudes, because 5 is the midpoint. Persons responding either 1 or 10 on the scale would represent polarized views.[2]

Using the concept of attitude strength, we can delineate some specific attitudinal consequences that can be ascribed to the agenda-setting process. For example, a general assumption of the theory is that audiences learn about and prioritize the information they receive from the news in proportion to the amount of attention that information is given in media content.

> Agenda setting, then, is a type of social learning. Individuals learn about the relative importance of issues in society through the amount of coverage the issues receive in news media. Thus, the more coverage an issue receives, the more concern individuals have with the issue. In other words, individuals learn how concerned they should be through the amount of coverage the issue receives. (Wanta, 1997, p. 2)

This social learning transcends mere recall of topics in the news. Benton and Frazier (1976), for instance, found that agenda setting not only shapes the salience of broad issues but also the salience of proposed solutions to those issues and the rationales behind those solutions.

If media attention results in social learning, this further suggests that people also should begin to hold stronger, nonneutral attitudes as news

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attention intensifies. Erber, Hodges, and Wilson (1995), studying attitudes toward Ronald Reagan, reported significant positive correlations between media exposure and knowledge (r = .31) and between media exposure and attitude extremity (r = .19). Sapiro and Soss (1999) found significant relationships among public attention to media coverage of the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill congressional hearings, the perceived salience of various media frames related to those hearings, and extreme attitudes toward both Hill and Thomas. Comparing the variations across five presidential elections, Kiousis (2000) found a strong correlation between the amount of coverage that the presidential candidates received and the proportion of people with an opinion about the candidates. McCombs and Reynolds (2002) referred to this as a "basic priming" effect because the salience of candidates on the media agenda primed people to express more definite opinions about them on the public agenda (paralleling what we expect to happen here for general public figures). In one of the few studies probing the attitudinal consequences of agenda setting for issues, Weaver (1991) noted that increased public salience of the federal budget deficit issue was linked to stronger opinions about the issue and a decreased likelihood in taking a neutral position on it. Finally, Zaller (1991) reported that as political awareness of the Vietnam War rose among audiences, the number of people who said they had "no opinion" about the war declined.

In addition to these studies showing media influence on strengthened attitudes, numerous investigations support the general position that any input (mass media, interpersonal communication, or whatever) that increases thinking will stimulate stronger attitudes (Elms, 1966; Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995; Watts, 1967; Zaller, 1992). Tesser, Martin, and Mendolia (1995) concluded that "thought, then, tends to make evaluations more extreme, more accessible, and more enduring" (p. 75).

Hierarchy of Effects

Although prior research documents an empirical linkage between media salience and attitude strength (e.g., Weaver, 1984, 1991), it also is important to detail an explicit theoretical framework for this relationship because it traces the role of agenda setting in the broader process of communication, particularly persuasion. A useful conceptual map of this broader process is provided by the theory of a hierarchy of effects (see Jeffres & Perloff, 1997, for an overview). Historically rooted in social learning and diffusion of innovations theory (Valente, Paredes, & Poppe, 1998), this theoretical approach posits that communication and persuasion occurs through a series of steps encompassing cognition, affect, and behavior (CAB) (Berelson, 1996; Lavidge

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& Steiner, 1961; McGuire, 1986; Severin & Tankard, 2001), although the sequence of influence has been a matter of extensive debate (Park & Mittal, 1985; Ray, 1973). Other formulations of the basic CAB model include KAB (knowledge, attitude, behavior), KAP (knowledge, attitude, practice), learn, feel, and do, and cognition, affect, and conation. The hierarchy of effects approach has been applied to a variety of mass communication settings, including advertising, public relations, health communication, and political communication (Chaffee & Roser, 1986).

Scholars also have synthesized different versions of the CAB hierarchies into single theoretical frameworks (e.g., Barry, 2002; Barry & Howard, 1990; Chaffee & Roser, 1986; Ray, 1973) in which salience and strength are often highlighted as dimensions of cognition and affect in these hybrid models. For example, Chaffee and Roser (1986) explained that as individuals move into the knowledge stage, they begin with recognition (a key aspect of salience), and as individuals move into the affect stage, they begin with attitude formation and progressively develop more intense responses (key aspects of strength). In sum, the relationship between salience and strength is an integral part of the broader theoretical relationship between cognition and affect.

In a comprehensive overview of the various CAB models, Valente et al. (1998) developed a relevant theoretical framework that accounts for all six possible combinations among the three elements: "learning" (CAB), "affinity" (ACB), "rational" (CBA), "grudging acceptance" (BCA), "dissonance" (BAC), and "emotional" (ABC). The learning model is the one traditionally assumed with agenda setting (Ha, 2003; McCombs, 2002). For example, McCombs (in press), when examining agenda setting within McGuire's (1986) learning model of persuasion, argued,

> In the theoretical context of the larger communication process, traditional agenda setting is focused on a key early step in communication, gaining attention. The appearance of an issue, political candidate, or other topic on the public agenda means that it has gained substantial public exposure and attention. Attribute agenda setting is focused on a subsequent step in the communication process, comprehension, the step that Lippmann described as the pictures in our heads.

Taking this one step further, the relationship between agenda setting and attitude strength, then, crosses into the next stage of yielding. Applied to the current study, the learning model would suggest that message dissemination would represent media salience, audience cognition would represent perceived public salience, and audience affect would represent perceived public attitude strength. Thus, we should expect that as mass media attention to

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objects rises, increases in public salience and attitude strength should follow. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are offered to test this line of reasoning:

Hypothesis 1: Media salience of public figures will be positively correlated with their public salience, the proportion of the public who recognize these public figures.

This is, of course, a statement about the traditional agenda-setting effect, the transfer of object salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. Rather than simply assume the existence of this effect, it is explicitly presented here as the necessary benchmark relationship for consideration of the attitudinal consequences of agenda setting advanced in the subsequent hypotheses. In the absence of this basic agenda-setting effect, any consideration of consequences obviously is moot.

Hypothesis 2: Media salience of public figures will be positively correlated with the proportion of the public who hold nonneutral (dispersed) attitudes about these public figures.

Hypothesis 3: Media salience of public figures will be positively correlated with the proportion of the public who hold extreme (polarized positive and negative) attitudes about those public figures.

Paths of Influence (Competing Hypotheses)

Although significant relationships among media salience, public salience, and attitude strength seem likely, a key question is: Which sequence of influence best explains these relationships? Using the learning model put forth by Valente et al.'s (1998) comprehensive explication of the hierarchy of effects, one plausible scenario is that media salience of political figures translates into higher levels of public salience for those figures, which in turn translates into stronger public attitudes about them. This sequence posits that public salience mediates the relationship between media salience and attitude strength. As noted above, agenda-setting scholars have examined the relationship between public salience and attitude strength with the assumption that salience precedes shifts in attitudes (e.g., Weaver, 1984, 1991), thereby using the learning model.

However, despite its widespread application in various arenas of mass communication, some scholars have called the learning model into question because it presumes high audience involvement and that a large amount of information is available about an attitude object (Chaffee & Roser, 1986). As a result, another possibility for this study, based on the affinity model, is that

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media salience leads to attitude strength, which in turn prompts increased public salience. Several hierarchy of effects studies indicate that the CAB sequence of influence can shift dramatically in certain situations (Ray, 1973, 1982), especially when audience involvement is low (Krugman, 1965; Valente et al., 1998). For example, Chaffee and Roser (1986) argued that "when involvement is low, then we should expect low knowledge-attitude-behavior (K-A-B) consistency" (p. 377). In addition, related research on "mere exposure" indicates that simple message repetition can produce shifts in opinion (with minimal impact on cognitions) toward low involvement attitude objects (Grush, McKeough, & Ahlering, 1978; Perloff, 1993). Our analysis of general political figures rather than political candidates may represent such a situation.

As a consequence, two competing hypotheses emerge that can be tested in our empirical analysis. To test these two models (learning versus affinity), we must first establish bivariate relationships among the key elements in Hypotheses 1 through 3 and then subsequently make multivariate comparisons to determine which of these competing perspectives offers the best description overall of the patterns in the data. The following competing hypotheses are offered to investigate the two models:

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between media salience and attitude strength is mediated by public salience.

Hypothesis 4a: The relationship between media salience and attitude dispersion is mediated by public salience.

Hypothesis 4b: The relationship between media salience and attitude polarization is mediated by public salience.

Hypothesis 5: The relationship between media salience and public salience is mediated by attitude strength.

Hypothesis 5a: The relationship between media salience and public salience is mediated by attitude dispersion.

Hypothesis 5b: The relationship between media salience and public salience is mediated by attitude polarization.

Method

To test these hypotheses about agenda-setting effects and their attitudinal consequences, we compared data on media content with public opinion data collected during the 1996 presidential election by the University of Michigan's National Election Studies (NES) pre-election poll. In particular, media content and public opinion about 11 major political figures were analyzed to

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assess the relationships among news coverage, public salience, and the strength of public attitudes. The public figures were Hillary Clinton, Pat Buchanan, Jesse Jackson, Newt Gingrich, Colin Powell, Steve Forbes, Phil Gramm, Louis Farrakhan, Lamar Alexander, Elizabeth Dole, and Pat Robertson.

News content for the study was obtained from prominent media outlets available in the Lexis-Nexis database. It was important that our content originate in major outlets because the NES survey was national in nature. It was also important to use multiple measures of media content to improve reliability and validity through replication of the analyses relevant to each hypothesis. A mix of print and broadcast news media was selected to secure a broad sample of news content. Initially, the outlets selected were the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* for newspapers; *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* for magazines; and ABC News, NBC News, and CBS News for television. NBC news was dropped from the analysis because it did not generate enough content to justify statistical testing. In the end, the remaining seven outlets supplied us with a detailed presentation of these political figures in the news. Observation of seven different news media also provided seven replications of the analysis testing each hypothesis.

Once we chose the news outlets, the next decision was when to start and stop measuring news content. Any research that attempts to isolate relationships between news content and public opinion must deal with the question of time lag. Agenda-setting work has produced mixed results with regard to the optimum time lag. For example, scholars have found effects from a few days (e.g., Wanta & Roy, 1995; Zucker, 1978) up to several months prior to public opinion surveys (e.g., Sohn, 1978; Stone & McCombs, 1981). Due to the minimal consensus concerning the time-lag question, we decided to take a conservative approach that encompassed a broad time frame. Specifically, news coverage was tallied for 5 months prior to the 1996 election (June, July, August, September, and October), similar to the time span tracked by Winter and Eyal (1981), one of the frequently cited analyses of time lag and agenda setting.

As has been the case in most agenda-setting studies, the salience in the media of each of these public figures was defined in terms of the number of stories (e.g., King, 1997; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Rogers & Chang, 1991; Zhu & Boroson, 1997). To generate enough content from television, multiple news programs were used. For example, ABC news coverage included transcripts from "World News Tonight," "Nightline," and "This Week."

Stories were selected using keyword searches in the Lexis-Nexis database. The base population of stories was identified by entering the name of the public figure into the Lexis-Nexis database. Once the initial stories were collected, an independent, trained coder reviewed all the stories and removed

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those that did not primarily focus on 1 of the 11 public figures. The total number of stories remaining for the analysis (across all seven media outlets) was 1,246. The number of news stories on each of the 11 public figures was summed across the 5 months. Appendix A reports the descriptive statistics for the media content measures used in the inquiry.

The 1996 NES poll was the source of the public opinion data for this study: the perceived salience, attitude dispersion, and attitude polarization regarding the 11 public figures.[3] Ideally, we would have measured the salience of these public figures using a direct indicator of importance or prominence, much like the widely used "What's the most important problem facing this country today?" (MIP) question. Unfortunately, no such measure existed in the NES survey. As is the case in secondary analyses, we could only use the data that were available. As an alternative, we used an indirect indicator of salience that was available in the data. This indicator, name recognition of public figures, frequently has been used as a measure of perceived salience in both academic and political campaign research (see Cover & Brumberg, 1982 for discussion). Logically, people must be able to recognize candidates in order to consider them salient. In other words, name recognition is a necessary condition for and can serve as an indirect measure of salience when other options are unavailable.

The NES items measuring attitudes toward the 11 political figures were 100-point feeling thermometers (see Appendix B for exact questions). According to Mann and Wolfinger (1980), these NES thermometer questions also are valid indicators of name recognition because "the respondents could indicate they did not recognize the name [of political figures], that they recognized the name but could not rate the person, or that they recognized and rated the person" (p. 622). Thus, the proportion of survey respondents who "did not recognize" the person about whom they were asked to give an opinion was subtracted from 100% to create the salience measure for each of the public figures. Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) used a similar measure to gauge attribute salience for issues. The range of salience scores runs from a low of 63.2% for Lamar Alexander to a high of 99.6% for Hillary Clinton.

Attitude dispersion was measured by the proportion of respondents who reported nonneutral attitudes (i.e., anywhere on the scale except at the 50-point mark). The range of dispersion scores fluctuates from a low of 53.1% for Lamar Alexander to a high of 88.9% for Hillary Clinton. Attitude polarization was measured by summing the proportions of people falling at the 0- and 100-point ends of the scale.[4] The range of polarization scores runs from a low of 2.9% for Steve Forbes to a high of 49.2% for Louis Farrakhan. In total, the number of respondents in the sample was 1,714. Appendix A also reports the descriptive statistics for the public opinion measures used in the study.

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The research design allowed us to compare the media agenda with public opinion about these political figures. For the bivariate comparisons relevant to Hypotheses 1 through 3, Spearman's rho correlations were used to measure the relationships, as has been the case in most previous agenda-setting research (e.g., McCombs & Bell, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The following example comparing media coverage and attitude dispersion illustrates the process. Assume that the number of stories in a newspaper for the entire 5-month period was 5 for Hillary Clinton, 10 for Pat Buchanan, 15 for Jesse Jackson, 20 for Newt Gingrich, 25 for Colin Powell, 30 for Steve Forbes, 35 for Phil Gramm, 40 for Louis Farrakhan, 45 for Lamar Alexander, 50 for Elizabeth Dole, and 55 for Pat Robertson. That is, the rank order for Hillary Clinton is 10th, Pat Buchanan, 9th, and so on down to Pat Robertson who ranks first in the news coverage among these 11 persons. For purposes of this illustration, also assume that the percentages of people who expressed nonneutral attitudes about these figures were 70% for Hillary Clinton, 72% for Pat Buchanan, 74% for Jesse Jackson, 76% for Newt Gingrich, 78% for Colin Powell, 80% for Steve Forbes, 82% for Phil Gramm, 84% for Louis Farrakhan, 86% for Lamar Alexander, 88% for Elizabeth Dole, and 90% for Pat Robertson, respectively. The rank order of these 11 persons based on the percentage of nonneutral attitudes is identical to the rank ordering based on the news coverage. A Spearman's rho rank order correlation calculated from these two lists would produce a coefficient of +1.00, evidence supporting Hypothesis 2 that attitudes became more dispersed as media coverage of these public figures increased.

To test the competing models specified in Hypotheses 4 and 5, partial correlations were computed. For example, in testing Hypothesis 4, if the partial correlations (media salience and attitude strength controlling for public salience) decrease to approximately zero, this is evidence for the model specified by the hypothesis that public salience is a mediating variable between media salience and attitude strength (Rosenberg, 1968).

Results

Table 1 displays the correlations between media coverage and public opinion relevant to Hypotheses 1 through 3. There are seven replications of the analysis for each hypothesis, each analysis based on the agenda of a single news medium.

Hypothesis 1 predicted positive relationships between media attention to political figures and public recognition of those figures. The data support the hypothesis. Specifically, 4 out of 7 comparisons reached statistical significance ($p < .05$), and 2 others approached statistical significance ($p < .10$). The

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Table 1
Correlations Between Media Coverage and Public Opinion of Political Figures

Media Outlet	Salience[a]	Dispersion[b]	Polarization[c]
ABC News (n = 40)	.50*	.82***	.70**
CBS News (n = 216)	.58**	.88***	.76**
Los Angeles Times (n = 227)	.70**	.78**	.71**
New York Times (n = 389)	.45*	.82***	.82***
Washington Post (n = 251)	.04	.56**	.66**
Newsweek (n = 74)	.71**	.81***	.59**
U.S. News & World Report (n = 49)	.66**	.64**	.30

Note. Total number of news stories = 1,246. Public opinion data are based on 1996 National Election Studies questions asking respondents to rate public figures on a 100-point thermometer scale. The public figures were Hillary Clinton, Pat Buchanan, Jesse Jackson, Newt Gingrich, Colin Powell, Steve Forbes, Phil Gramm, Louis Farrakhan, Lamar Alexander, Elizabeth Dole, and Pat Robertson.
a. Salience refers to the extent to which people recognize the political figures they are being questioned about. These data are converted from the amount of people who "don't recognize" the public figures they are being questioned about. Higher correlations indicate that as media coverage rises, more people recognize the public figures.
b. Dispersion refers to the extent to which public opinion moves away from non-neutral positions about political figures. Specifically, higher correlations mean that as media coverage rises, more people are moving away from the 50% category of the thermometer scales.
c. Polarization refers to the extent that public opinion moves to the far ends of the 100-point scale. Specifically, it is the summed amount of people at the 0 and 100 points on the scale. Higher correlations indicate that as media coverage rises, more people are holding polarized positions about public figures.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$. All one-tailed tests.

higher significance level of $p < .10$ is included here because of the exploratory nature of this research and because of the effects of the relatively small n (11) on the significance test for rank-order correlations. The median correlation for all 7 salience relationships is a robust +.58. Generally, more respondents recognized public figures as media coverage of those public figures increased.

Hypothesis 2 posited that attitude dispersion would increase as media salience increased. The data, which show exceedingly strong relationships, offer substantial support for this hypothesis. The correlations are statistically significant in all 7 cases, and the median correlation for all 7 dispersion relationships is +.81. Media coverage is related to the development of non-neutral attitudes.

Hypothesis 3, which predicted a positive relationship between media salience and attitude polarization, also was strongly supported by the data. Six of the 7 comparisons achieved statistical significance. The median correlation is +.70 for all 7 polarization relationships.

In general, these data suggest that the amount of media attention to political figures plays a role both in the recognition and strength of public opinion

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Table 2
Partial Correlations Between Media Coverage and Two Measures of Attitude Strength (Dispersion and Polarization) With Salience Controlled

Media Outlet	Dispersion	Polarization
ABC News	.76**	.65**
CBS News	.82**	.69**
Los Angeles Times	.62**	.63**
New York Times	.75**	.78**
Washington Post	.68**	.64**
Newsweek	.66**	.45*
U.S. News & World Report	.37	–.06

*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. All one-tailed tests.

concerning those persons. The multiple tests of the hypotheses indicate that the findings are robust.

Once these bivariate relationships were established, our next task was to explore our competing models using partial correlations. As discussed earlier, this will ascertain whether public salience mediates the relationship between media salience and attitude strength (learning model) or attitude strength mediates the relationship between media salience and public salience (affinity model). For instance, if the partial correlation values decrease to approximately zero in the tests for Hypotheses 4a or 4b, this would suggest that media salience leads to public salience, which in turn leads to strengthened attitudes. The data testing Hypotheses 4a and 4b are in Table 2, which displays the partial correlation values for media salience and attitude strength with public salience removed.

Comparing the partial correlations to the original bivariate correlations, the values of the partials dropped in all 14 comparisons (7 for dispersion and 7 for polarization). Nonetheless, 6 of the 7 partial correlations for dispersion remain significantly different from zero. Five of the partial correlations for polarization remain significantly different from zero, and 1 more approaches statistical significance. The median correlations for dispersion and polarization also remained high, +.68 and +.64, respectively. In short, there is little support for the traditional learning model of the hierarchy of effects that perceived public salience mediates the relationship between media salience and attitude strength.

Turning to the competing model of the relationships among these three elements, Hypotheses 5a and 5b predicted that the relationship between media salience and public salience is mediated by attitude strength, which is

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Table 3
Partial Correlations Between Media Coverage and Public Salience With Attitude Strength (Dispersion and Polarization) Controlled

Media Outlet	Salience (dispersion controlled)	Salience (polarization controlled)
ABC News	–.12	.22
CBS News	–.01	.36
Los Angeles Times	.43	.61**
New York Times	–.13	.15
Washington Post	–.49*	–.33
Newsweek	.30	.53*
U.S. News & World Report	.40	.60**

*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. All one-tailed tests.

measured here by attitude dispersion and polarization. Table 3 reports the relevant partial correlation values.

Strong evidence for the affinity model is found in the data for attitude dispersion intervening between media salience and public salience. In particular, none of the 7 partial correlations are significantly different from zero. The single partial correlation approaching statistical significance has a value of –.49. The original bivariate correlation for this particular news medium was a nonsignificant +.04. The median value for all 7 correlations is –.01.

In contrast, 2 of the partial correlations controlling for polarization remain significantly different from zero, and a third approaches statistical significance. The median correlation for all 7 replications is +.36. In short, the evidence supports Hypothesis 5a that media salience leads to attitude dispersion, which in turn leads to heightened public salience. The evidence for an alternative measure of attitude strength, polarization, is weak at best.

In summary, the evidence is strongest for the media salience/attitude strength/public salience (affinity) model but only in the case in which attitude dispersion is the operational definition of attitude strength.

Discussion

Strong correlations were found between the amount of attention that news media pay to political figures and both the public salience and the strength of public attitudes toward these persons. These correlations are especially noteworthy because little empirical work has documented a link between media salience and either the salience of public figures (as opposed to the traditional object of public issues) or especially holding opinions about these objects.

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Although all the relationships are strong, the correlations between media and public salience generally are weaker—a median value of +.58—than those between media salience and the strength of public attitudes—a median value of +.81 for dispersion and +.70 for polarization. This is surprising given the common view of staggered impact between cognitions and attitudes in the learning model of hierarchy of effects (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). Some of this undoubtedly is due to the sequence of influence found among the three variables, a sequence in which public salience is the third element. Furthermore, the use of name recognition to measure perceived public salience possibly contributed to this pattern. Nevertheless, the values of the correlation coefficients in this study parallel or exceed those typically found in other agenda-setting research (Wanta & Ghanem, in press).

The strength of the link between media salience and attitude strength is particularly significant and suggests that a unique opportunity exists to expand our current knowledge about agenda setting effects and public opinion. Although only observed for political figures, changes in the sheer volume of coverage may affect the salience and extremification of attitudes concerning objects in the news. In the low salience context of politics that dominates the U.S. political scene, this is a key political role. This finding is also significant because it emphasizes that investigating attitude change is too constricting for locating the attitudinal impact of news. Future researchers should consider the more expansive concept of attitude strength and scrutinize these relationships using causal designs. Some germane dimensions of strength to examine may include extremity, ambivalence, and certainty (Raden, 1985). Such research should advance persuasion theory by assessing the role of mass media compared to other factors in strengthening attitudes.

The potential for theory building when connecting media salience and attitude strength is also important because it helps position agenda setting within the broader process of communication. This enables us to develop more integrative and comprehensive models of mass communication. As noted earlier, scholars have observed empirical linkages between agenda setting and attitude strength in the past (Kiousis, 2000), prompting the need for further theoretical refinement of this relationship. The version of the traditional hierarchy of effects theory offered by Valente et al. (1998) is valuable for this explication because it includes multiple sequences among the variables and because the potential for examining behavioral relationships also exists. Evidence in this study was strongest for their affinity model and proposes what might be called a "hierarchical agenda-setting effects model."

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Nonetheless, other theoretical approaches concerned with persuasion may also be useful. The connection between agenda setting and attitude strength can serve as a catalyst for such convergence.

Replication and extension of the relationships examined here will surmount the inevitable limitations of secondary analysis for this study, especially the measure of public salience. Although it is seldom feasible to juxtapose data from national surveys with national media samples, analyses based on other news media and other settings for public opinion will strengthen our confidence in the results found here. The 7 replications of each analysis in this study are a strong opening gambit. Beyond replicating the current findings with other "objects" and in other social settings to ascertain the generalizability of the results and to probe further into the process linking media salience, public salience and attitudes, new research also should probe the relationship between attribute agenda setting and attitude strength. Beyond the examination and replication of these basic relationships, future research should follow the lead of the earlier agenda-setting research and begin to examine the contingent conditions for the strength of these relationships through the incorporation of different modifier variables, such as media use, political interest, interpersonal communication, and so forth. In this context, agenda-setting theory's most prominent contingent condition, the concept of need for orientation, is especially promising for providing a psychological explanation of why media salience is linked to attitude strength (Weaver et al., 1981). Discussing second-level agenda setting and its consequences, McCombs (in press) noted,

> There is a certain irony here in that these consequences of framing and second-level agenda setting bring us back to a consideration of the influence of mass communication on *attitudes* and *opinions*. That is where the field started in the 1940s and 1950s, and that is the area that was abandoned after Klapper (1960) and many others told us that there were few significant effects. (emphasis added)

The emergence of agenda setting and related theories has demonstrated the media's influence on cognitions. Incorporating the concept of attitude strength into agenda setting theory may complete the journey "back" to the realm of attitudes and opinions.

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Appendix A
Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Measure	Range	Mean	*SD*	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
ABC News	12	3.63	3.80	14.45	1.34	1.25
CBS News	52	19.63	21.51	463.05	0.83	–1.16
Los Angeles Times	91	20.63	25.10	630.25	2.55	7.31
New York Times	147	35.36	41.14	1,692.85	2.54	7.44
Washington Post	101	22.81	29.43	866.56	2.99	9.35
Newsweek	15	6.72	5.56	31.01	0.79	–1.25
U.S. News & World Report	12	4.45	3.90	15.27	1.28	0.80
Public salience	36.4	86.2	12.35	152.57	–0.66	–0.83
Attitude dispersion	35.8	73.44	11.93	142.48	–0.34	–1.12
Attitude polarization	36.7	13.48	10.26	105.41	1.99	4.84

Appendix B
NES Poll Questions

Feeling Thermometer:

- "I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate the person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one."
- A "don't know" response is also available to respondents. The "don't know" item includes a probe asking respondents to clarify if their "don't know" means they don't recognize the political figure or if it means they don't know where to rate him or her.

Notes

1. The authors would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their feedback on the manuscript. They would also like to acknowledge Pei Chun Ho for her research assistance on the project. Please send correspondence concerning this manuscript to Spiro Kiousis, Ph.D., APR, Assistant Professor, 2028 Weimer Hall, Department of Public Relations, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, P.O. Box 118400, Gainesville, FL 32611-8400; e-mail: skiousis@jou.ufl.edu.

2. At this stage, it is important to distinguish between particular properties of public attitudes to avoid confusion with other definitions of these terms. Although both

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dispersion and polarization are concerned with attitudes that move away from the center of affect scales, polarization deals with attitudes that flow to the far ends of scales, whereas dispersion simply refers to movement away from the center point, although not necessarily all the way to the polar ends. In this formulation, dispersion effects could become polarization effects but not in all cases. This distinction is crucial because subtle relationships between news content and public attitudes could be missed without precise explications of terms and their underpinning features.

3. Directed by Steven J. Rosenstone, Donald R. Kinder, and Warren E. Miller. National Election Studies, 1996 Pre- and Post-Election surveys. ICPSR Archive Number 6896. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies. These materials are based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Nos. SBR-9317631, SES-9209410, SES-9009379, SES-8808361, SES-8341310, SES-8207580, and SOC77-08885. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these materials are those solely of the authors. The response rate for the poll was 71%.

4. For salience measures, the percentage of all responses to the questions was used. For attitude dispersion and polarization, the percentage of those who expressed attitudes (i.e., somewhere on the 100-point scale) was used.

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