

# MAXWELL MCCOMBS, 35 YEARS OF A LIMITLESS THEORY:

## A profile

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### ABSTRACT

This paper intends to draw a profile of 35 years of agenda-setting theory continuous development, as well as to present a parallel with its creator, Professor Maxwell McCombs. The approach adopted is to contextualize the agenda-setting theory with some trends that had influence on its appearance and development during the last three decades. This profile also documents some statements of Professor McCombs' participation in his first visit to Brazil, including his opening session speech at the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Brazilian Society of Journalism Researchers – SBPJOR – and the lecture he gave in the Postgraduate Program of Communication Studies at the Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil. Both events occurred in November 2007. Until now, this is the first and only visit by Professor McCombs to Brazil

**Key-Words:** McCombs; agenda- setting; journalism; evolution

VERY FEW RESEARCHERS IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES CAN BE linked as clearly as Maxwell McCombs to Agenda-Setting Theory. In the last 35 years, after presentation of the theory, professor McCombs became internationally recognized due to the innovative perspective of his research on the agenda-setting role in contemporary societies and the impacts of mass communication on the shaping of public opinion.

Since the 1968 original study in Chapel Hill, with Donald Shaw, the term “agenda-setting” has been present in more than 400 studies worldwide. In its continuous development, agenda-setting has become a very powerful tool among other theoretical paradigms for understanding the media agenda and the sets of issues addressed by sources to set up a public agenda. In order to present some of these strengths, the theory, due to its explanatory potential, explains why most people prioritize the same issues as important; likewise it has a predictive aspect because it

predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will feel that the same issues are important.

The impacts of agenda-setting theory can be understood also because its meta-theoretical assumptions are balanced on the scientific side, laying the groundwork for further research on existing media effects.

The theory is based on the idea of correlation between the rate at which the media cover a story and the extent to which people think that this story is important. This correlation, according to agenda-setting, has repeatedly been shown to occur. To frame the beginning of agenda-setting, the theory was derived from a study that took place in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1968, during the presidential campaign. This initial empirical test investigated which issues were prominent on the news agenda and on the public agenda. The theory of agenda-setting is a metaphor using the idea of an agenda and it is concerned with the relationship between the media agenda and the society agenda. To determine the media agenda of issues, McCombs and Shaw checked the news coverage of public issues. The hypothesis was “If you keep your favorite newspaper for two or three weeks and during an afternoon you go through the front pages, you will have a notion of which agenda that newspaper followed during that time. Some issues will be on the front page many, many times; others, from time to time. Obviously, many issues will not even be there. The media agenda simply is a matter of describing news coverage”, said McCombs in his visit to Brazil in November 2007.

The conclusions the researchers obtained matched their hypothesis: The mass media positioned the agenda for public opinion by emphasizing specific topics. In a glance, media news attracts great public interest, and key aspects of the news frequently become prominent in the public mind. The origins of this idea about media effects that can be called the agenda-setting role of the news media are in Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, published in 1922. Lippmann begins his classical book with a chapter entitled “The world outside and the images in our heads”. His thesis is that the media are the bridge between our minds and the vast external world of public affairs. In Lippmann, the main hypothesis concerns people’s answers which are not directly mirrored in the facts of real life, but, on the contrary, people live in an environment, and the media as a whole and journalism specifically play important roles in generating these “images”, as well as setting-up the environment itself.

From Lippmann to McCombs and Shaw, the agenda-setting theory passes, as well, through Bernard Cohen’s formulations (1963), in which “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what

to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". This attenuation, in a comparative parallel with Lipmann's perspective, leads to a scenario in which the readers, or public opinion as a whole, establish a more general and social everyday living agenda of issues within the media environment.

The Chapel Hill study found out that the most important issues in the media, those that were covered the most, corresponded almost perfectly to what the public said were the most important issues. This is the basic agenda-setting effect: The rank order of issues on the news agenda corresponds very closely to the rank order of issues on the public agenda. The focus of public attention on the most important issues of the day is closely related to the pattern of news coverage in the preceding weeks. Despite the fact that this initial research was done during the U.S. presidential election, similar effects have been found in many non-election settings. Today there are a substantial number of agenda-setting studies with this focus in Europe, particularly in Spain and in Germany, and in East Asia in Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong. In more recent years, agenda-setting effects have been found in South America, particularly in Brazil, Chile and Argentina. This theory of the agenda-setting role of the news media describes media effects in many cultures, with the same effects in many countries. This is not an unlimited media effect.

The perspective of McCombs leads us to consider the contingent conditions for these effects. Under what conditions are these media effects strong? Under what conditions are these media effects weak? A key idea for answering these questions is the concept of Need for Orientation. This psychological concept is based on our need to understand the world around us. Maybe the first time you came to a campus, for instance, you felt a need for orientation. All of us think: how can I enroll? And in an election, the people also have this need for orientation with relation to the candidates and maybe even a greater need with regard to election-related issues. The need for orientation suggests that individuals vary in their own needs. The need for orientation is a combination of the individual's interest in the topic and uncertainty regarding the issue. The higher levels of interest and uncertainty produce higher levels of the need for orientation. Therefore the individual would quite likely be influenced by the media stories, and this is the psychological aspect of the theory.

In accordance with this concept, the need for orientation consists of two components: the first one is relevance and the second is certainty. If a person does not consider an issue relevant, obviously he/she will not feel any need for orientation. However, if the topic is relevant, people need to

ask themselves what level of information they have about that subject. If the topic is relevant and the person already knows enough about it, the need for orientation is no more than moderate. But if the topic is relevant and he/she knows little about it, the need for orientation is very high. The greater the need for orientation, the stronger the agenda-setting effect is. The agenda-setting effect is not simply connected with exposure. Obviously, some news exposure is necessary. However, different people with the same exposure level may demonstrate very different effects, depending on the level of their need for orientation.

In addition, there are other contingent conditions, but the most significant of all are an individual need for orientation and the organization that owns the media. Another aspect of the agenda-setting theory is called attribute agenda-setting effects or just the second level of agenda-setting. In order to understand the differences between basic agenda-setting effects and attribute agenda-setting effects, agenda-setting can be abstractly understood as involving some subjects on the agenda. When approaching the basic agenda-setting, attention is given by the media to certain subjects. These subjects also have certain characteristics. When the media discuss a certain subject, they describe it in a certain way. Therefore the media tell us about some attributes. In this sense, not only the subjects which the media tell us about, but also the features of those subjects which are being talked about may be measured very precisely. The best example of an attribute agenda would be about political candidates. And these attribute agendas will be the pattern of what is said about these candidates. This may be the candidate's biography, his/her past, personal features, etc. The relevance of this aspect is reinforced by McCombs in 1999:

"The pictures in people's minds about the outside world are significantly influenced by the mass media, both what those pictures are about and what those pictures are. The agenda-setting effects of the mass media also have significant implications beyond the pictures created in people's heads. In the original, traditional domain of agenda-setting, the salience of public issues, there is considerable evidence that the shifting salience of issues on the media agenda often are the basis for public opinion about the overall performance in office of a public leader. In turn, the salience of a leader in the news also is linked with whether an individual holds any opinion at all. At the second level of agenda-setting, the salience of affective attributes intertwined with the public's cognitive pictures of these leaders represents the convergence of attribute agenda-setting with opinion formation and change. Beyond attitudes and opinions, the pictures of reality created by the mass media have implications for personal behaviors".

One important fact is that this agenda analysis for the second level of agenda-setting is the same as for the basic agenda effect. The ranking of these attributes on the media agenda and on the public agenda can be compared. And the research in many countries around the world also has found strong correlations between attribution agendas.

The key to understanding this effect is a relationship between attribution agendas and the concept of frames. Framing, in brief, is a process of selective control over media content or public communication. Framing defines how a certain piece of media content is packaged so it will influence particular interpretations. This is accomplished through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. In many instances the media agenda and the public agenda are identical because there are many frame definitions. In some of them there is a relationship, but they are not identical. In other instances, there is no relationship at all. It depends entirely on the frame definition.

Another important aspect of agenda-setting theory deals with where the media agenda comes from, and, of course, there are many influences that shape this media agenda. This is a kind of correlation that can be understood as a process in consecutive layers. The first layer would be the news sources, which bring information to the media. They may be public relations agencies, government press officials or people interviewed by journalists. The second layer is composed of the news media themselves. This influence layer is called intermedia agenda-setting (agenda-setting between different mass media). This area of research is becoming a very important topic in terms of agenda-setting.

Finally, the fifth aspect of this theory concerns the consequences of the agenda-setting effects. Increasingly, in McCombs ongoing work, these effects have been identified. Research has returned to the questions of the earliest period of communication research – the media influence on attitudes and public opinions – but researching it in a more detailed way and indicating under which circumstances it may be found.

One of the more interesting unfolding aspects of agenda-setting goes beyond public affairs to many other areas in which the effects can be studied. In many countries, agenda-setting theory has been used to study companies' images in the news media and with the public. And in much of this research, there is a strong relationship between the image of these companies and the price of their shares. The conclusion, after 35 years of agenda-setting theory history is that the only limits for applying agenda-setting theory are imagination and creativity. There are lots of agendas in contemporary society.

In retrospect, McCombs' and Shaw's theory on the formation of agenda-setting providing evidence for the cause-and-effect chain of influence has been debated by critics in the field. In general terms, the study of agenda-setting demonstrates a cause-and-effect relationship between media agenda and public agenda, in which the agenda-setting function has multiple components:

1. Media Agenda - issues discussed in the media (newspapers, television, radio)
2. Public Agenda - issues discussed and personally relevant to members of the public
3. Policy Agenda - issues that policy makers consider important (legislators)
4. Corporate Agenda - issues that big businesses and corporations consider important (corporate)

These four agendas are interrelated. At the same time, two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) The press and the media do not reflect reality, but they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.

In his most recent book, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*, published in 2004, McCombs makes an effort to organize the vast literature on agenda setting into five ongoing phases of research, making this book an anatomy of agenda-setting theory and development. As agenda-setting is a theory in continuous expansion, its current combination with new dynamics, such as digital and network technologies, for instance, provides new perspectives that can be relevant to this expansion. McCombs devotes attention to this, especially to the intermedia agenda-setting between blogs and newspapers, in which the clearest evidence at the first agenda-setting level, the attention level, according to him, indicates that newspapers influence blogs and blogs tend to discuss what was divulged in the newspapers that day. The evidence is less clear regarding the attribute agendas in which blogs can be successful when they introduce new attributes. In addition, McCombs says that another aspect about the blogs is their limited link to the public in general. "There the pattern is very clear. When a recent survey asked people how often they read blogs, two thirds of the survey respondents asked: "What is a blog?" Blogs are primarily part of the intermedia aspect of agenda-setting, and, of course, due to the large number of existing blogs, it is a great challenge to researchers to identify which ones may have influence.

One of the relevant aspects regarding this is: in the electronic era, media largely define who the primary news distributors are. As McCombs observes,

“There are lots of studies about dialogues which identify that what people talk about are things mentioned by the news. They tend to talk about what the press comes up with. Another area that could be examined is popular music and entertainment. There are not many agenda-setting studies in this field. So, this could become an interesting area, particularly popular music diffusion”.

The theory seems to face nowadays a very complex frame for applying theoretical approaches capable of attaining, in the same proportion, the extremely diversified forms of access, distribution and consumption of media and contents. Internet applications, for instance, seem to McCombs to be a unique real limit to the new technologies:

“The ability of measuring these agendas (...) and page by page, even traditional TV is more difficult. When you discuss the individual media, like what people have on their ipods or what kinds of files they have, or what they talk about on the phone, this becomes difficult in terms of measurement and more precise methods”.

In a contemporary view, the need to keep agenda-setting theory itself updated reflects some theoretical limits on research procedures, mainly if one considers the much diversified horizon involving content of consumer profiles. In other words, media users may not be as ideal as agenda-setting theory assumes. First, because people in general may not be well-informed or deeply concerned with public issues present on the agenda. Second, in the post-massive media consumption context, consumers are in a scenario of multiplicity, in which they may access or pay for only a casual and specific slice of content, instead paying full attention to public affairs, and may remain unaware of the rest of the details of the public agenda. For people who have made up their minds in a complex, fluid and circumstantial environment, the agenda-setting effect is weakened by this multiplicity. News media cannot create or conceal problems; they may only alter the awareness, priorities and salience people attach to a set of problems.

Anyway, as agenda-setting theory keeps moving through different social scenarios, technology-embedded context raises new challenges to the theory's framework. There is a certain pressure according to which the more the civil society attains power, the greater is the possibility of inverting this order. In other words, the effect of the public agenda

influences the media agenda. As McCombs says:

“(...) the difficulty in the relationship between the public and the media is obviously the lack of access of many public members to original information about the key topics discussed each day. So, the principal flow of information is from the media to the public. But in terms of feedback, they (the public) do in a general sense vote daily on the media agendas and say whether it is relevant or not (...) However, there are few news media organizations which are able to evaluate the answers systematically. I believe that what we must have in mind as journalists, one of the most important ethical matters, is which topics we place on this agenda, because there is a limited space on the agenda. And not only the topic we place on the agenda, but which aspects of the topic, which attributes of that topic are also inserted on the agenda”.

The outstanding value of agenda-setting theory can be ascertained not only by the theory itself, but also by the value of its analysis and hypothesis that make a theoretical framework for communication research. Agenda-setting helps to form, directly or indirectly, an entire group of new theories that have an agenda effect as a basis, even if not clearly mentioned. Newsmaking and gatekeeping theories, for instance, grew and helped in the understanding, under the agenda-setting enlightenment, of some key aspects of public opinion shaping, such as the routines of news production and selection process and news criteria which journalism is evolved in.

Another important theory, the Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence, approaches agenda-setting theory in a counterpoint or complementary way, concentrating efforts on understanding how the idea of non-agenda creates silence on important issues in the media environment. Accordingly, both McCombs’ theory and the Spiral of Silence, although they seem very different, have in fact a common link in the psychological aspect. The terms used are very different, but both theories discuss people’s sensitiveness in relation to the environment around them. Sometimes, McCombs clarifies the link between these ideas using a metaphor for comparison: Both theories are riding on a train. Agenda-setting is on the left side, saying what it sees through the window, and the Spiral of Silence is on the right, but psychologically it is the same aspect.

McCombs, however, continues directing his attention to the effect of the media and constantly perfecting the theory. His more recent books, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*, published in 2004; and *The Two W’s of Journalism: The Why and What of Public Affairs*



*Reporting*, published in 2000, provide a deeper analysis of the theory, involving media not restricted to the more traditional ones, such as newspapers and television.

On the Internet, for instance, agenda-setting now moves closer to the Chris Anderson “long tail” theory. In this formulation, the most popular web contents are those that form the “head”; the amount of subjects and issues in dispute is relatively small in comparison to the possibilities of time and space of the worldwide web, while social matters seem gradually to lose more space on the public agenda.

Blogs, for instance, from McCombs’ point of view, reproduce the periodicals, which reproduce facts of television and other media. The periodicals, in turn, set the agenda for blogs and in this infinite chain the same subjects appear strengthening and reaffirming the agenda-setting relevance.

Moreover, on the web, online media make the link between social matters and people, and the tendency is to establish a more direct communication, in a more direct and participative way. However, the decision regarding whether a story will appear on the first page, at the top of the site, on the thirtieth page or in a footnote, still essentially involves a journalistic or publishing task to mediate the content. All these problems show that the agenda-setting theory is not static and therefore is open to many research works and knowledge areas, still offering a long road to be traveled.

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