
THE POLITICS OF ATTENTION: AGENDA-SETTING AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES

Shweta Hooda, B. R. Ambedkar Law University, Rajasthan

ABSTRACT

In modern democracies, the power is not about who is there in the authority and making decisions, but also about deciding what the people pay attention to. Democratic systems depend upon the informed citizens, but in the contemporary environments, most information that people receive is filtered through media, social media, and other institutions. Indeed, it is incontrovertible that those who frame and control the agendas, are the ones who can influence the public debate. And if we pay attention to the contemporary society, we will notice that the media and political actors, deeply if not directly, influence what issues people should consider important. They may not tell people what to think, but they certainly influence what people think about.

This article draws upon the “Agenda-setting” theory and explores the mechanisms through which the governments and media institutions shape the public attention, conversation, and actions simultaneously through policy making, crisis narrative, and strategic communication. While agenda-setting could be an important aspect of political leadership, excessive control over the public narratives could limit the democratic aspects of the governance and weaken the meaningful debates of the society.

This article argues that the democratic accountability does not depend on the authoritative formal institutions working, but also on the transparency of all the prevailing issues in the society. Strengthening of independent media, encouraging civic awareness, and promoting a traceable political communication system have become essential in order to sustain a democratic environment in which people could remain adequately informed about the actual significant issues around them.

Keywords: Agenda-setting, Democratic accountability, Public discourse, Political communication, Media influence

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is often understood as a system of government in which the power ultimately rests with the citizens, which they exercise through elections, constitutional institutions, and the rule of law. The central to the understanding of this democratic framework is the assumption that the people are well aware and informed about the issues prevalent and hence hold the authorities accountable. However, in the digital era where the awareness of everyone is overstimulated with information and repetition of such issues which are not *indeed* significant. By leveraging social media and digital platforms, political actors and institutions have increasingly recognised that the ability to influence and capture public attention is also a form of power.

This powerful phenomenon is widely studied under the term “**agenda-setting**”¹, the concept which highlights how the media and political actors shape the public perception by emphasizing certain issues/topics over others.

This concept of “*agenda-setting*” was first developed by **Maxwell McCombs** and **Donald Shaw** during their study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.² Their research was inspired by **Walter Lippmann’s** earlier idea that the media plays a significant role in shaping the “pictures in our heads” about the world around us³. Building upon this idea McCombs and Shaw compared the issues that dominated media coverage with the issues that undecided voters considered important during the election. Their findings revealed the strong correlation between the centrality of the topic in the media and the priorities expressed by the people⁴. Put simply, the topic or the issue which is most repeated and given greater attention by the media tends to instinctively become the most important in the public perception.

In modern democracies, this process has become significant, as government and political authorities are constantly employing this to divert the attention of people from the significant issues while highlighting the other less significant ones. Citizens are not facing lack of any information; citizens are exposed to an overwhelming number of issues competing for their

¹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1922)

² Maxwell McCombs & Donald L. Shaw, *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*, 36 *Pub. Op. Q.* 176 (1972)

³ Lippmann, *supra* note 1.

⁴ Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Pub. Op.* (Polity Press 2004)

attention. Political leaders, media institutions, and communication strategies plays a significant role in deciding what the public talks about and consequently what it chooses to ignore. This dynamic, often described as agenda-setting, has important implications for democratic accountability in contemporary democracies.

The purpose of this article is to examine the intersection of agenda-setting, media influence, and democratic accountability in modern democracies. By analysing both theoretical perspectives and practical examples, the article seeks to underscore that democratic accountability depends not only on elections and formal institutions but also on the quality of public debate. Simply put, the democracies cannot be measured only by carrying on elections, and framing of public policies by those in power, but it also requires transparency and accountability in the governance system, and the awareness of the citizens regarding the issues which actually need prioritizing and discussions.

The argument advanced here is that the agenda-setting theory is inherent to the political system, but its impact on the democracies is contingent upon accountability, transparency, media independence, and civic awareness. Recognising that the power of attention management is now essential for understanding the contemporary governance and consequently promoting a meaningful engagement between the citizens and the state.

I. The Politics of Public Attention

In the contemporary democracies, the politics is not just about making decisions or framing laws, but it has also broadened its scope towards shaping what people pay attention to. In the digital era people's attention is already limited with countless issues competing to take space in the public discussions every day. In such environments, the capability and know-how to influence what issues dominate the public conversation becomes an important form of power. Those who can guide and leverage the public attention can indirectly shape the public opinion, and perception regarding governance.⁵

One common strategy is drawing the attention to policy announcement. In their public communication strategies, governments frequently emphasize on some particular schemes, initiatives, and reforms in order to shape and dominate the media narratives. While there policies or initiatives may be important, their selective over-emphasis on the media and social

⁵ McCombs, *supra* note 4.

media platforms can redirect the public attention from the more significant and long-term structural challenges that require the real attention and deeper public scrutiny.

Another tactic involves emphasizing on the symbolic and emotionally resonate issues such as the national identity, and cultural symbolisms. These stories capture the media headlines while sometimes overshadowing the more complex and noteworthy issues, that are equally, if not more, critical. It is important to note that focusing on the emotionally charged topics, political leaders could maintain their visibility and public engagement on their terms.

Crisis Narrative also plays an important role in attention management⁶. If we pay attention, we realise that even during the economic, social, or security crisis, the government often controls narrative and frames the events in such a twisted way that the headlines only focus on their response and initiatives. Media coverage for such narratives tends to amplify this understanding of the events for the public and often make the citizens to focus on the immediate concerns rather than broader systemic problem.

Eventually, such media briefings, press conferences, and official statements, serves as the primary instruments in guiding the public discussions. It is evident that the issues which are emphasised on the official channels on the regular basis, tends to automatically become the focus point for public discourse.

These dynamics highlights the centrality of attention in modern governance. It could be argued that agenda-setting is a natural feature of political leadership, however, it also has significant implications for democratic accountability. As in a democratic society the governance is supposed to be run by the citizens, and the citizens' ability to evaluate government performance and participate in the system meaningfully does not solely depend on the information they receive, but on the visibility of the issues that matter the most. Therefore, understanding the mechanics through which our attention is shaped by the political actors, media institutions, and social media platforms becomes essential to realistically analyse the functioning of contemporary democracies.

II. Agenda-Setting and Its Impact on Democratic Accountability

In a functioning democracy, the accountability of those in power depends on the ability of

⁶ Noam Chomsky & Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon Books 1988)

citizens to critically evaluate the performance. The system of election, independent institutions, and parliamentary debates are in fact designed to ensure that the government remains answerable to the public. However, these mechanisms could operate effectively only if the citizens are adequately informed about the issues that demand serious attention. But when the agenda is shaped in such a way that it disproportionately highlights certain topics, and slides off the critical concerns, the democratic accountability becomes seriously affected.

Agenda-setting play a crucial role in the dynamics where political actors consistently emphasise on certain selected issues, and these issues gradually dominate the public discourse, media coverage, and debates. While we could argue that this helps in drawing attention towards important policies or initiatives, however, it results in other significant matters receiving limited scrutiny. As we already see around us, that the real structural challenges such as economic planning, institutional reforms, or systematic governance issues, struggles to remain a part of sustained public discussion, because the political narratives are frequently redirecting it towards more immediate and attention-grabbing concerns.

Citizens often rely on media coverage, and public debates to assess the performance of any government⁷, but if certain issues receive disproportionate attention, then the public assessment is typically based on limited set of visible topics rather than a comprehensive understanding of policy outcomes. This in fact shows how the management of public attention can influence the accountability of political leaders in a democratic system.

Ultimately, a broad informational environment is required for the citizens to form their judgements and hold the formal institutions accountable. Therefore, recognising the role of agenda-setting in shaping the public debates and discourses offers an important lense to understand functioning of contemporary democratic governance.

III. Institutional Safeguards and the Role of Media

While agenda-setting could be an important aspect of political communication, the democratic systems are supposed to contain several institutional safeguards which could help ensure that the public discourse remains balance, diverse, and well-informed. Among these safeguards, **independent media institutions** plays a crucial role in maintaining the transparency in the society. A free and responsible press is something that is non-negotiable in order to examine

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT Press 1989)

governmental narratives critically, bring into highlights all the overlooked and significant issues, and bring alternative perspectives into the public discourse as well. It is the prime duty of the media to investigate and expose the institutional shortcomings, and amplify voices of the citizens, so as to counterbalance attempts of the political actors to narrow down public agenda.

Another significant safeguard lies in the presence of the **institutional structure of democratic governance itself** – Legislative bodies, Opposition parties, and Judicial institutions serves as mechanism through which the governmental actions could be questioned and reviewed. Issues that might remain outside the immediate political narrative could be brought into highlight through parliamentary debates, committee inquiries, and judicial scrutiny. These institutional mechanisms ensure that governance is not evaluated solely on the basis of public communication strategies by the political actors, but through a formal mechanism of accountability.

Meanwhile, there are both, opportunities as well as challenges when it comes to the expansion of digital media. On the one hand it has allowed citizens, journalists, and independent commentators to raise issues which are often ignored or neglected by the mainstream media. Simultaneously, on the other hand, the rapid spread of misinformation and fragmentation of media spaces could sometimes create a different form of information imbalance⁸, where certain narratives gain disproportionate attention and visibility, while others struggle to reach the wider audience.

These dynamics ultimately highlights that maintaining a healthy democratic environment demands more than just the existence of formal institutions. It depends on the active participation of multi actors of the society – journalists, scholars, civil society organisations, and the citizens themselves – in ensuring that public debates remain diverse, open, and reflective of many issues that shapes the governance.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that the institutions such as legislatures, courts, and elections, does not form the foundation of democratic governance, but the quality of public discourse through

⁸ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris & Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford Univ. Press 2018)

which citizens evaluate political authorities. In the contemporary democracies, where information circulates with such a drastic pace, the ability to shape public attention and debates has become an important dimension of political power. Agenda-setting theory highlights that the visibility of certain issues within the public debates is rarely accidental; rather is often reflects the political narrative strategies along with media coverages.

This article has examined how political actors influence and shape public attention through policy announcements, symbolic narratives, crisis communication, and structured engagement with media platforms. While we could agree that such practices form the natural part of political governance, the broader and long-term implications of these practices on the democratic accountability cannot be overlooked.

At the same time, democratic systems possess several safeguards to maintain balance in the public sphere – independent media institutions being the most significant, along with academic analytical writings, active civil society participation, and constitutional mechanisms – and make the society aware of a wide scope of issues and therefore maintaining a meaningful scrutiny of public authorities.

Ultimately, the health of democracy does not depend only on the policies and decisions made by those in power, but also on the issues which the public could see, discuss, and question.