

## Agenda-Setting Creating The 'Trial Of The Century'

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## **Introduction**

The influence the media can have on society is apparent everywhere. What products we think are necessary, what stories we should know, what we should support even what we should fear are just a few of the ways mass media can persuade our opinions, sway our interests, influence our behaviors and even create a hierarchy of what we consider important and not. This case study will focus on the creation, maintenance and influence of this hierarchy of salient topics designed and delivered by mass media outlets, specifically during the OJ Simpson trial. This hierarchy is not focused on telling society what to think but what to think about. The concept dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and was later theorized and tested as the “agenda-setting theory,” a theory highly applicable to the coverage of the “trail of the century” in the media.

## **Agenda-Setting Theory**

In 1922, a newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann described the early concept of agenda-setting without placing a title on it. In his first book *Public Opinion*, Lippmann states in the chapter “The World Outside And The Pictures in Our Head” that the people in society trusted and reacted to the “image in their heads” instead of actual events and these images were absorbed by the environment around them. With the emergence of mass media (in Lippmann’s case the rise of the press and newspaper), it became clear that these images could be placed in the minds of the people by the media (Sanchez, 2002)..

This concept was later adapted, theorized and tested by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw under the name “agenda-setting theory.” Much of the research done before McCombs & Shaw in 1968 was focused the influence mass media have on what people thought

and their opinions and attitudes or focused on behaviors, also known as the “persuasion paradigm.” Instead, they wanted to theorize and test the ability of mass media to influence what people thought about us Lippmann’s work, the persuasion paradigm, and the selective exposure theory (people tend to favor information that reinforces pre-existing views while avoiding contradictory information) as a foundation for their research. McCombs and Shaw used the election of 1968 as the focus of their study, specifically testing “the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual content of the media messages used during the [campaign](#)” in Chapel hill, NC (Sanchez, 2002). Their results supported their theory that the media can influence the “public agenda” and the level of importance people place on topics based on the quantity of information released by mass media outlets and the amount of focus they place on said topic, ultimately creating a “media agenda.” These agendas, defined as “issues or events that are viewed at a point in time as ranked in a hierarchy of [importance](#),” do in fact have a strong relationship where the media agenda has much influence over the public agenda (Rogers, Dearing, 1988). More importance placed on a subject by the news, the more importance the audience attributes to said subject. This concept that mass media can influence what we consider salient news and not can also be further applied to what specific issues, subjects, and topics about the salient event are considered important. This is shown through the quantity of coverage time spent discussing these specific issues and topics, directly influencing what topics and issues the public should deem salient and discuss. McCombs and Shaw state that:

"This impact of mass media - the ability to effect cognitive change among individuals, to structure their thinking - has been labeled the agenda-setting function of mass

communication. Here may lie the most important effect of mass communication, its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us. In short, the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about” (McCombs and Shaw, 5).

Agenda-setting continued to be the focus of McCombs and Shaw’s main focus of research for years to follow and remained a hot topic to test and apply to politics, sales and overall mass media effect studies. Agenda-setting can be clearly seen in today’s society by the recurrence of stories we see covered by all mass media outlets for the purpose of making public agenda align with the media agenda and place these stories as the most salient topics discussed and thought about. The 1997 criteria for scientific theories ultimately supported the validity of the agenda setting theory due to its explanatory power in the sense that it explains why most people prioritize similar issues. It also has predictive power in the sense that if people are exposure to similar media then they will consider the same issues as important (1997). Although mass media cannot directly influence and persuade society’s perceptions, opinions or behaviors, McCombs and Shaw showed mass media can truly determine what they think, talk, and create opinions about since they are perceived as salient topics.

### **“The Trial of The Century”**

Just after midnight on Monday June 13, 1994, the ex-wife of OJ Simpson, Nicole Brown Simpson, was found dead along with Ron Goldman in Los Angeles. OJ Simpson was a highly-esteemed retired football player with much national support and attention even before the murders. OJ was asked to turn himself in four days after discovering the bodies and as the

media gathered to cover this event, their attention was diverted to the car chase that followed as the California State Police followed the Bronco that Simpson was driving recklessly. A note was found by Rob Kardashian, friend and lawyer of OJ, showing suicidal thoughts and this news was instantly shared in the media along with the nine hours of a car chase. This case was covered on every news station for every second up until he was eventually captured and arrested.

Simpson's trial began three days after this infamous chase and became the center point of all news coverage until a verdict was decided 470 days later. The case seemed to be a simple decision based on evidence but the defense made the case not simply about the evidence, but the ever-growing tensions between the police and African-Americans, stating the LAPD was falsely accusing OJ to fit their agenda and did so with sloppy police work done by contaminating DNA evidence. The "dream team" hired by OJ as his defense worked endlessly to make this case about a black man receiving a fair trial and progressively gained support for this by fellow African-Americans and OJ's previous fans. The main focus of the dream team, specifically Johnnie Cochran, was to make the LAPD seem as racist as possible and did so using Officer Fuhrman as the perfect example of the deeply-seeded racism found in the LAPD. As the trial came to a conclusion, growing concern that riots would erupt in LA and across the nation just like the riots following the verdict of the Rodney King trial.

The verdict was decided after only four hours of deliberation by the trial and released the next day to the public stating that due to reasonable doubt and the insufficient evidence supporting OJ's involvement he should be found not guilty. The verdict resulted in a wide spectrum of reactions by society ranging from extreme happiness that a black man received a

fair trial to high levels of grief that OJ was getting away with murder. No matter what opinion an individual had, every individual had an opinion. This shows the direct power and influence agenda-setting can have on society.

### **Agenda-Setting (Before &) During The Trial**

When looking at this trial, it is clear that the media played a role in making it the “trail of the century.” Strictly looking at the crimes committed, there were over 40,840 cases of murder and aggravated assault in the city of Los Angeles. What made this single trial so important? More importantly, *who* decided this case was so important? The later question is a direct result of agenda-setting theory. News about crime is highly valued by mass media outlets due to the fact that it is both entertaining and informative about current issues. Celebrities have always been a focus of mass media because of the public agenda is constantly interested in these people. Pirtchard and Hughes state that age, race and gender of those involved in a homicide directly influence what media outlets consider worth discussing in the news (1997). If we use this as our framework to decide if the OJ trial is truly newsworthy, most would consider it not during the 1990s. With the combination of a hot topic such as murder and OJ’s celebrity status, this story becomes a part of the news agenda and labeled as salient.

Agenda-setting is clearly exemplified throughout the OJ Simpson trial. Most cases about domestic violence between an African-American ex-husband and Caucasian ex-wife eventually leading to the murder of the wife are not considered newsworthy. During this time, there were over 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis massacred by Rwandan Hutu, yet the public rarely heard about it (Lafferty, 2010). Instead, the media agenda shifted focus on OJ. Every newspaper, TV station

and magazine in the United States focused on every aspect of the OJ trial, starting with simply covering the murder, chase, arrest and preliminary trial. Once the trial began, agenda-setting theory had already taken effect. Every American knew about the story due to the high level of saliency placed on the trial by the gatekeepers, or mass media outlets. Specifically, there were few news outlets that provided much of the factual information the population received such as Time Magazine, Newsweek, CNN and a few others. These gatekeepers quickly realized this case was not just news, but entertainment. Because of this, the case became the most talked about topic for months on end.

Due to the high level of entertainment this case provided, every aspect of the trial was investigated, analyzed, and discussed by the mass media. Once the trial became a salient topic, the media began to discuss specific issues, rumors, and perspectives during airtime. With the emergence of 24-hour news coverage and the fact that most of the trial was available on live television provided around the clock access for viewers to keep up-to-date on the latest “news.” No matter how outrageous the rumor was or how false a claim was, it was absorbed and released to the public for discussion. The media chased after it like a bee does to honey. Reporters often discussed what was going through a witness’s or lawyer’s mind, things they had no ability of knowing but discussed just to keep the audience enticed. As the trial became less about evidence and more about race, the media began to focus all of their coverage on these racial topics, feeding into the defense’s argument that there was reasonable doubt about the involvement of OJ in the murders. This led the public to begin to discuss, analyze and form personal opinions on the involvement of race, allowing the snowball to continue to grow. Since

the case involved the murder of a white woman by a black man, opinions became evident in every member of society.

A perfect example of a specific news outlet using agenda-setting during the trial is when Time Magazine edited the photo of OJ to make him darker and more sinister. As the involvement of race became more and more evident, small details like this can persuade what society considers an important aspect to the case. Another way to show the clear use of agenda setting by the media is that, if not all, cases about domestic abuse or violence rarely made the news. As OJ's consistent abuse of his ex-wife became a part of the trial, the media immediately began to cover this aspect of the trial, discussing the frequency, causes, and effects of domestic violence for the first time on a national stage (Lafferty, 2010). This showed that the newsworthiness of this violence is not dependent upon the prevalence or the danger of such violence; instead, the press's current agenda and routine news practices determine its newsworthiness" (Lafferty, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The agenda-setting perspective suggests that the amount and the kind of news coverage that an issue receives can affect the salience that the public ascribes to that issue and although the media seldom determine our attitudes and opinions and tell us what to think, they frequently tell us what to think about (Shaw & McCombs, 1989, pp. 114-115), (McCombs & Shaw, [1972](#)). Our social reality of what is important and not is directly influenced by what mass media considers important and when this event is covered, specific aspects, issues and characteristics of the event are discussed in more detail compared to others, deeming those the most important for society to discuss, analyze and create opinions on. In the trial of OJ

Simpson, what may be considered a typical crime in LA became the "Trial Of The Century" due to the enormous amount of focus and coverage done on the event by the media. Without this large amount of coverage, the trial may have never become a national topic of discussion, specifically about the involvement of race when arrests are made and trials take place. The result of the media placing high importance on this subject matter is nearly 100 million viewers tuned in to watch the verdict, more than the superbowl in 1995.