

**Being Blind to Agenda-Setting:
A Reporter's Journey**

A Master's thesis presented to the faculty of the
Communicating Arts Department at the University of Wisconsin-Superior

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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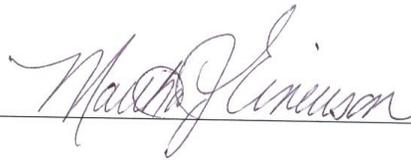
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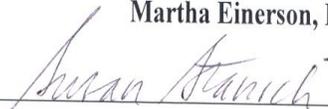
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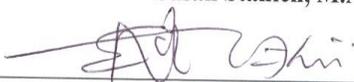
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Abstract

Various studies have shown that the news media can set the agenda for what issues the public thinks about, along with how they should think about them, which could lead to significant consequences in both positive and negative ways. To help shed more light on this issue, I used an autoethnographical and grounded theory approach to look at whether I participated in the process in a negative way when I covered the Lake Superior School District as a reporter at the *Lake County News-Chronicle* in Two Harbors, Minnesota. While doing this research, I found I did partake in the negative style of agenda-setting. This has led me to develop a plan of action, through the use of autoethnography, for how other journalists can avoid it to an extent in the future by being more conscious of their own biases. Through this process, I also advance a strategy teachers can use to educate journalism students about how to cope with negative agenda-setting: by using more self-reflections when writing journalistic articles. Problems related to the application of agenda-setting theory are also brought forth.

Keywords: agenda-setting, framing, news media, autoethnography

Dedication

This is dedicated to everyone who has helped me along this journey including Mom, Dad, Bill, and Will. Thank you so much for all your support during this project and serving as inspirations for me.

During my career in journalism, I have worked with many interesting people. I would like to thank all of you as well because I wouldn't be the journalist I am today without your help. In special recognition, I would like to thank Jana, Susan, and Forrest for guiding me along and teaching me what journalism can be.

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Chapter 1: Being Blind to Agenda-Setting: A Reporter's Journey

Background

In January of 2004, I wasn't sure which direction my life was headed. I had just started my first semester at the University of Minnesota-Duluth in the pre-medicine program after completing my general education requirements at Lake Superior College, a community college in Duluth. I thought, "I guess I'll try and become a doctor." However, one day on the way to school I had a revelation. Many of the courses I was taking for the pre-med program focused on facts and figures, with a set way of doing things. I wondered if this was what medicine would be like – a black-and-white picture without any of my own thoughts involved in the process?

I never did learn whether that was the case, because shortly after my epiphany I switched all my classes into the philosophy and journalism departments. It was a dramatic shift that I made with a quick decision – something I rarely do, for normally I contemplate almost everything to the nth degree. Perhaps I was able to change directions quickly because I must have known I was never going to be a doctor even before I had that "aha" moment. I wanted to put my focus in an area that involved my own thoughts to a greater degree, while having a chance to change the world through my writing – something I enjoyed a great deal. What could be a better fit to fulfill my needs than philosophy and journalism?

Flash forward a few years: I had my degree with a major in philosophy and a minor in journalism. Since no one was hiring philosophers at the time, and I wasn't interested in going to law school or into a doctoral program in philosophy right then, I decided to try my hand at journalism.

Shortly after graduating I got a job working at a weekly, the *Duluth Budgeteer News*, as a news clerk and reporter. On the clerk side, I wrote up summaries for various community events

and death notices (shorter versions of obituaries). As a reporter I covered sports, food, and education – an odd assortment of beats, but that’s the way weekly newspapers work. This rather large workload didn’t bother me in the least. I enjoyed the people I worked with and I was just happy to have a job in journalism, considering how hard it was to get employment in that field.

During my time there I was given ample opportunity to write and rewrite what I had written. I rarely received complaints about biased or unbalanced coverage while I was at the *Budgeteer*. In this environment, I was given the chance to help the public with my articles without using much spin, if any. I had attained my goal of making a difference the world. Sadly, due to layoffs my position at the *Budgeteer News* lasted only a few years.

A few months later, a reporting position opened up at the *Lake County News-Chronicle* in Two Harbors, my home town. My beats there were much different from those at the *Budgeteer*. My job was to cover the Lake Superior School District, the Lake County Board, the Two Harbors City Council, the Silver Bay City Council, almost the entire city of Silver Bay, sports, food, and breaking news. The workload was huge – one of the reasons I eventually left the newspaper – and in addition I was building up some angst in connection with some of the municipal groups I covered. This angst could have led to a lack of balance in my stories in the *News-Chronicle*.

Theory

News outlets can tell citizens what news items they should think about, along with how they should think about them. This is done through a process called “agenda-setting” (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Gitlin, 1980). This research shows that the news media can work to tell the public which news stories are important, which creates a world where some issues are discussed at length, while others are rarely discussed, if at all. After the news media

identify which stories are important, they use a litany of different mechanisms which can sway public opinion through a process called framing (Gitlin, 1980). This in turn can affect society in vast ways, including which governmental policies are supported and which are not (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

This is not to say that the agenda-setting and framing process can't lead to positive results. Imagine the situation during the Holocaust. If reporters covered it using non-agenda-setting tactics, it could have led to more sympathy being bestowed upon the Nazis (carefully "balanced" reporting would have led to this). In this instance, reporting that might appear to be "unbalanced" is a must, due to the atrocities Nazis were involved in.

**Note: From this point forward, when agenda-setting is discussed, it will be talked about in regards to slanted coverage which leads to the public not getting a more truthful story about a particular issue. All of the literature reviewed (Chapter 2) focuses on that aspect of it. Previous research on agenda-setting rarely, if ever, showed any positives coming from it.*

Purpose of Study/Justification

The research on agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1993) forced me to ask if I, as a newspaper reporter at the *Lake County News-Chronicle*, set the agenda for how and what the public talked about in a negative way. I was aware of the concept of negative agenda-setting when I worked as a journalist – it was mentioned in my classes as an undergraduate. The term "agenda-setting" was never specifically used, but the concept was discussed in different terms; mainly being fair and balanced, versus being biased. Yet negative agenda-setting could have appeared in various articles I have written, especially when it came to my extensive coverage of Lake Superior School District issues – a topic I covered heavily.

Using autoethnography and grounded theory, I discovered that I had taken part in it. This

response also led to understanding how and why I did it. From that, I devised a method for how other journalists can avoid it based upon my own experiences as well as a plan of action that could be adopted by journalism instructors.

Even though agenda-setting may be talked about in journalism classes, it doesn't appear to be explained to the extent that it should be – maybe because agenda-setting research focuses almost entirely on whether or not it happens. I've found very few studies that examine how their research can be implemented, which means much of past research might have been done in vain. I wanted this to be righted: I believe my research is a step in that direction.

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on my participation in the negative agenda-setting process while working at the *News-Chronicle*. It is limited to the two-year period when I covered the Lake Superior School District. To get more precise results I would need to look further into all of my coverage related to the time I spent at the *News-Chronicle* to get a further understanding of agenda-setting in relation to my journalistic endeavors at that newspaper. This could lead to even more answers for how negative agenda-setting can be avoided.

I also used an autoethnographic and grounded theory approach for my data analysis. The use of autoethnography in the analysis means that verifying the results is done by one person: me. To extend the scope of this study, other journalists would have to follow along the same path, which could lead to more generalized results for how negative agenda-setting can be avoided.

In order to get more concrete outcomes (rather than purely theoretical) for what direct effects agenda-setting had on the community of Two Harbors, as well as why the public allowed for it to occur, I would need to further investigate the citizens there. This study does not look into

them in great detail, but it's worth looking into in the future.

Definitions of Key Terms

Agenda-Setting: News outlets tell the public what they should and shouldn't think about, along with how they should think about issues, based on the coverage they put forth. It can affect people in negative ways, giving the public the wrong picture of the world. It can also affect people positively because it could identify stories the public may not be familiar with, but should be. **Note: When agenda-setting is discussed, it will be talked about in regards to its negative connotation, unless mentioned otherwise.*

Autoethnography: Using one's own thoughts and experiences to figure out solutions to comprehensive research questions.

Framing: News outlets characterize issues a particular way, which causes its viewers to think about a particular subject a certain way. **Note: For the purposes of this study, agenda-setting and framing will fit under the same definition of agenda-setting.*

Grounded Theory: Data is combined into categories which lead to a theory.

Press/news media: Refers to all news outlets including television, newspapers, radio, blogs, and websites.

Public: People commonly referred to as citizens. This definition does not include corporations, government organizations, or journalists.

Outline

In the next sections of this paper I will burrow into the world of agenda-setting and framing looking at where these theories came from, why they should be combined, and criticisms they face (Chapter 2). Within that chapter I will also look at research questions I developed from the theory. From there I will go further into my research methodology (autoethnography and

grounded theory), and describe why it's important to use those methods for this study (Chapter 3). Results of my study will then be presented (Chapter 4). A discussion of those results will then ensue (Chapter 5) followed by a conclusion of where agenda-setting is headed, and questions that remain for future agenda-setting researchers (Chapter 6).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The agenda-setting model has proven to cross over a vast array of subjects (McCombs & Shaw, 1993), but it all began with a simple assertion from Walter Lippmann in 1922:

For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations, and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it. To traverse the world men must have maps of the world. (para. 22)

From this assertion one can surmise that Lippmann believes that the world is a complex place and the public uses the news media to tell us more about it. The press' role is then determined to be that of a cartographer of sorts, where the public has them draw out a map of various issues because they have no other way to handle them. From this development, the public gives the news media great power.

Fifty years after Lippmann, McCombs and Shaw (1972) released their agenda-setting model for how the news media works, which was based on a study involving the 1968 presidential election. They show that the public learns about various issues through the press, and in turn, the press says how important those issues should be to the public, based on how much information is given about an issue. That then leads to the news media telling people what to think about, which is based on the original contention made by Cohen (1963).

In order for this to happen, various dominos must fall into place. Rogers and Dearing (1996) said that the news media first prioritizes what issues it wants to cover based on a variety of factors, including what other news outlets are covering and what politicians want placed in the news. Sometimes advocates also win their battle to have an issue covered to a greater extent than

when it was covered before. Once the news media's agenda is set up through these various routes, it uses a process called "priming," which leads to the press continually discussing certain issues while failing to talk about others (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010).

By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged. (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010, p. 63)

From that point, the public then develops its own "agenda," which is really the news media's agenda. That in turn leads to the public talking with policymakers about the issues that the press has told the public to talk about. Then the policymakers make decisions based on what the public tells them, even though the news media is really telling the public what to think about. "In the theory's simplest and most direct version, then, the media agenda affects the public agenda, and the public agenda affects the policy agenda" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 342).

Framing

Another theory related to agenda-setting is framing. "Framing differs significantly from these accessibility-based models. It is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). For example Gitlin (1980) found that the news media used framing to direct the way the public understood a 1960s group who protested against the Vietnam War. Due to the fact that the press only covered violence related to the Students for a Democratic Society, the public assumed the group was malevolent. Since the news media only covered violent events that came from the SDS, or an offshoot of it, members of the organization committed more aggressive acts because that's all the press would cover. In this case, the framing the press did led to a partial reality of what the group became.

One of the main ways the news media frame a subject like the SDS is through its use of language. Lakoff (2005) believes every word someone uses brings about some sort of frame in our brain. He uses the word “elephant” as an example of this. When someone says “elephant,” we get a picture in our heads of the animal and all that comes with it. Even when someone tells us not to think about a frame – “Don’t think about an elephant!” – it still brings forth a mental image of an elephant. “Every time a neural circuit is activated, it is strengthened” (2005, p. 1). In other words, every time our idea of an elephant is brought forth, it strengthens our own concept of what it is.

The news media can play a big part in this process according to Poole (2006), who believes the press loves picking up small sound bites which can carry a lot of meaning. One example Poole uses is the phrase “War on Terror.” He said that when politicians use this phrase and the press picks up on it, it can become engrained in the public’s mind. This leads to the news media shaping how a war should be understood by the public, even though it could be framed in a much different way. The same mechanism can be applied to a variety of other issues the news media reports on, according to Poole. In essence, the press and politicians can work together to frame the public’s opinion about various issues through the use of language.

To further this argument, Jackson and Hall-Jamieson (2007) believe that the news media no longer tries to fight the spin politicians try to put on various news items, which was evident during the 2004 presidential election campaign. News outlets were doing what they call “fact checks” (p. 23) about what was going on politically at the time. Yet once the campaigning was done and a new president was elected they stopped doing these “fact checks.” That could mean the news media only checks up on the “facts” during election times, even though their job is to do it all the time.

These authors further surmised:

The hard reality is that the public is exposed to enormous amounts of deception that go unchallenged by government regulators, the courts, or the news media. We voters and consumers must pretty much fend for ourselves if we know what's good for us. (p. 23)

In order for the public to get out of this situation they must be more pro-active in their consumption of the news media, according to Jackson and Hall-Jamieson, and realize that they are constantly bombarded with spin, often with the way words are used as Lakoff presented (2005). The public would need to stop glossing over the information being presented to them from the press, but rather be critical of it by asking questions and seeking out more clues to what is actually true (Jackson & Hall-Jamieson, 2007). Once the public does this, they would take power from the news media and the politicians – those responsible for spinning information a certain direction. If they don't do this, the problems this nation continues to deal with will grow even larger, because they won't be dealt with in a proper manner which means, “the solutions become even more painful, or the problems overwhelm us entirely” (p. 8).

Agenda-Setting and Framing Combined

The further one goes along the path of framing, the more clearly one can see that it fits in with agenda-setting. Not everyone agrees, however. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) have argued that there might be differences between the two:

The primary difference on the psychological level between agenda-setting and priming, on the one hand, and framing, on the other hand, is therefore the difference between whether we think about an issue and how we think about it. (p. 14)

McCombs (2004) asserts that framing and agenda-setting belong under one theory, because framing is a polished version of agenda-setting. In other words, framing can be found in

agenda-setting when you zoom in on the latter with a microscope – it’s commonly referred to as second-level agenda-setting. Either way, agenda-setting and framing work together to strengthen each other’s assumptions. For the purpose of this study, I fit framing underneath agenda-setting, as proposed by McCombs (2004).

Why Does Agenda-Setting Happen?

In order to understand why agenda-setting happens, I must first look at how the news media gained so much power in the first place.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. (U.S. Const. amend. I)

The Bill of Rights passed in 1791, which included this “First Amendment,” carried with it the public’s hope for a free press which could help them. The original intent of it was to give the news media the power of watching over the government. In other words, the public needs help in keeping the government they elected from turning into a tyranny as Thomas Jefferson suggested in a letter to Edward Carrington, a colonel in the Continental Army, in 1787:

The people are the only censors of their governors: and even their errors will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution. To punish these errors too severely would be to suppress the only safeguard of the public liberty. The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people is to give them full information of their affairs thro’ the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people. The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we

should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.

One reason the public may turn to the news media, rather than someone else, to interpret ideas for them is because they believe the press is objective, and therefore trustworthy. Ward (2009) said that modern journalism has been built on a foundation of truth and objectivity. This idea could fit in with Palmgreen's expectancy-value theory (1984), which proposes that the gratifications people want from the news media are determined by someone's attitudes toward it. Under this theory, if people had an attitude of the news media being honest and objective, it would be satisfying their need for "accurate" information.

Problems develop when the public expects objectivity from a free press. Generally speaking when people think of objectivity and journalism, they may think of it as a situation where information they receive is based on facts instead of a reporter's opinions. This may not be possible. Wien (2005) said that journalists have to put the information they receive into a particular context. When that occurs, they have to make a choice about how they should go about doing this. When that choice is made, agenda-setting comes into play because now the reporter is directing the way a story will go. This is impossible to avoid; journalists must be connected to a story in order to write about it. Whether they choose to spin something in a negative agenda-setting manner could be up to them. Even with these criticisms of objectivity, the public may still believe the news media is objective, which is why they have allowed journalists to interpret information for them.

A reason people want to know about issues and events is because of a "need for orientation" (Camaj & Weaver, 2013; McCombs, 2010). This need for orientation (NFO) provides the motivation to pay attention to the news (Camaj & Weaver, 2013). Once people have

this need, the news media has a hold on the public, which means it has the power to shape what society thinks and talks about:

Relevance refers to a person's interest in a subject matter. Uncertainty exists when people do not feel they have all the information they need about a topic. Under conditions of high uncertainty and high relevance, NFO is high, and first-level media agenda-setting effects tend to be strong. The more people feel that something is of interest and that they do not know enough about it, especially to make an important decision such as voting, the more attention they pay to news stories about that topic. (Camaj & Weaver, 2013, p. 1444).

Takeshita (1993) expands on this idea, explaining that when a topic has low relevance and people do not have much uncertainty about a subject, that leads to orientation being low and the theory of agenda-setting has less relevancy. Regardless, the public has a need orientation for certain issues because they may have no other way of figuring them out themselves, as Lippmann (1922) believed.

The news media then grabs hold of this idea, which has been evident in voting patterns, as DellaVigna & Kaplan found (2007). Their study showed that the more access people have to Fox News, the more likely they are to vote for a Republican. That may be a goal of Fox News. According to the 2004 documentary film *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, Fox News claims to be fair and balanced, but in reality it is heavily influenced by guests coming from the Republican Party, conservative pundits, right-wing hosts/anchors, and its financial bottom-line. In this case, Fox News takes advantage of the public's need for information about certain issues, and spins that need to meet their ideology for various reasons including profit.

This idea about Fox News, which could be applied to many other major news outlets, fits

under Chomsky's and Herman's (1988) model about how the news media operates. Under their theory the press serves up information that will make them the most money. This means that they use agenda-setting for their own gains as their news services would be used to help their profits rather than the public.

No matter how agenda-setting occurs, there's no denying its existence under a broad spectrum of news media. That doesn't mean the public can't do something about it. Van Dijk (1995) said users of the news media can resist its glaring eye by being aware of its control. Once the public becomes more aware of this, then the press' stronghold on the public's mind will start to subside – if of course that's a good thing. The public does need to know information about events in the world, and without the news media, where else would they get that knowledge from? Maybe all citizens would seek it out, but that seems unlikely considering how dependent the public seems to be on the press in the first place.

Some news media organizations are actually trying to rid the world of the negative aspects of agenda-setting. An example of this is the non-profit FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting), launched in 1986. According to its website's "What's FAIR?" page:

We work to invigorate the First Amendment by advocating for greater diversity in the press and by scrutinizing media practices that marginalize public interest, minority and dissenting viewpoints. As an anti-censorship organization, we expose neglected news stories and defend working journalists when they are muzzled. (para. 1, n.d.)

One example of their work is the recent national coverage of Nelson Mandela's death December 5, 2013 (Hart, 2013). FAIR pointed out that the U.S. coverage has focused on America's support of Mandela and his fight against apartheid. In fact, however, the CIA apparently played a role in capturing Mandela, a communist, which is contradictory to how most

news media organizations covered Mandela's relationship with the U.S. at the time of his death. This means the press was telling the public to think of the U.S.'s relationship with Mandela as positive, when in fact it wasn't. If the press hadn't put a positive spin on the relationship at the time of his death, it would appear that the U.S. didn't support all good things Mandela did for the world during his life. This type of situation – choosing patriotism over truth – could be lessened if more news organizations like FAIR tried to fight agenda-setting.

Criticism

The agenda-setting theory has received various levels of support through the years, with many different studies supporting its assumptions. That doesn't mean that it's void of all criticism. McCombs and Shaw (1972) tried to head off some of this criticism early on:

It might also be argued that the high correlations indicate that the media simply were successful in matching their messages to audience interests. Yet since numerous studies indicate a sharp divergence between the news values of professional journalists and their audiences, it would be remarkable to find a near perfect fit in this one case. (p. 185)

I know from my own journalistic experience that matching the wants of the public to what is published is an impossible task. It is simply not possible to cover every issue, because there is a limited supply of resources to do it well. This leads to journalists picking and choosing stories which they feel fit in with the readers' interest. Sometimes this method is off base. Many times during my journalistic experience I felt I was covering an issue that was important for the public to know, but later on the public questioned why I covered certain subjects.

Despite having an answer to the most obvious criticism of agenda-setting, McCombs and Shaw still face other arguments against their theory. Littlejohn and Foss (2011) argue that even though the press affects the public's agenda, "it is still unclear whether the public agenda also

affects the media agenda. The relationship may be one of mutual rather than linear causation. Further, it appears that actual events have some impact on both media agenda and the public agenda” (p. 342). Communication by definition is a two-way process so it would make sense that the news media would act in the same fashion, meaning they could be influenced by the public.

To go further along this line of thinking, Siune and Borre discovered in 1975 three different types of the agenda-setting phenomenon (specifically found during the Danish election). They learned that the news media can show the public agenda, have no effect on the public’s agenda, or can affect the public’s agenda. This suggests the news media isn’t as powerful as McCombs and Shaw (1972) have asserted.

According to a study by Klapper in 1948, other variables could also come into play when it comes to whether the audience is truly affected by the news media a great deal. He said that the press could already reinforce beliefs that one already has, rather than just shaping what people believe. For example, if someone believed that abortion should be illegal, they would only read and watch programs that support that issue, which further influences their view, making their views even stronger. In this case, a person’s views are simply reinforced by the news media, not shaped by them.

New technology could also be changing the way the world interacts by creating a broader web of knowledge (Lévy, 2001). This leads into a discussion about how the public currently collaborates with the press through user-generated content, “where citizens can publish their own comments, photos, videos, and more online” (p. Hermida & Thurman, 2008, p. 2). In some cases major news outlets use content from the public to further their own journalistic packages. An example of this was the BBC’s use of material coming from the public for stories about the bombings in London in 2005, according to Hermida and Thurman. This is similar to what many

other news stations do currently when they publish comments they received from users of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, on their broadcast or in their newspaper. Sometimes they even get story ideas from the public through these routes – I have made this observation through my own experience in journalism. One could argue that this is nothing new – I have experienced newspapers use focus groups, letters to the editor, and polls to decide what type of coverage a news outlet should use. With the advent of the Internet, however, news agencies can be in touch with more than a select group of people. They can be in touch with every reader at any given time. With this happening it could mean agenda-setting is losing some of its validity because the public would be helping shape what the news media covers to a much greater degree than ever before.

Another criticism of agenda setting comes from its simplicity:

Agenda setting's key proponents have worked hard to expand its boundaries and scope, struggling valiantly to overcome the underspecified and constrained stimulus-response approach to media effects contained in agenda setting's original conceptualization.

Researchers have amassed a large body of empirical generalizations, but they have had trouble developing the ties to clear theories of society, news work, and human psychology that would allow the perspective to become truly useful as a theory accounting for issue evolution in society. (Kosicki, 1993, p. 100)

To go further along this line of thinking, Littlejohn & Foss (2011) said that the news media's influence on the public can involve many different factors that should be taken into account, such as the credibility of the press on certain issues at certain times, whether the public shares the same values the news media does at a certain times, and whether the public needs direction on certain issues. Any one of these variables could change the direction of an agenda-

setting study, while also making it more difficult to generalize a studies result. Agenda-setting studies should do a better job of taking these factors into account.

I understand the logic that McCombs and Shaw (1972) and other agenda-setting researchers use, but there are flaws in it that contribute to my own criticism of agenda-setting: Is it necessarily a bad thing? If journalists just covered what the public wants, what would happen? Would the news be all fluff and no substance? This could lead to more fluff in the news (who celebrities are dating), rather than substantial issues that affect people. This assertion suggests that the news media should set the agenda for what the public talks about, because without that tool, many important issues may be ignored under a public-driven press.

These criticisms seem to contradict what many of these theories say about how the news should operate. Despite these affirmations, agenda-setting can affect society in a negative way. I won't deny that. There is more, however, that can be discussed about why agenda-setting research continually focuses on the negatives of the news media, rather than the positives (getting the public information).

Research Questions

After reviewing various topics related to agenda-setting, including how and why it happens, questions still remained that led me to want to further explore the relationship between myself and the phenomenon based on my experience as a newspaper reporter. Questions that flowed from this included:

RQ1: Did I use the negative process of agenda-setting during my time as a newspaper reporter at the *Lake County News-Chronicle*, and if so, how, when, and where?

RQ2: Was I aware that I was setting the citizens' agenda in a negative way, and if so, why did I do it?

RQ3: What are ways a journalist can avoid setting the agenda for citizens (in a negative way) based on my experience?

RQ4: How can a journalism teacher or instructor educate young journalists about the risk of negative agenda-setting based on my experience?

These issues needed to be studied now because answering these questions in relation to my own experience could help future journalists avoid negative agenda-setting.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Before going further into methodology, I would first like to give an explanation as to why two different styles of method were used. I saw no way to answer questions RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, other than through my own experience – autoethnography. However RQ1 was answered using a combination of grounded theory and autoethnography, because those answers were more reliant on raw data as well as my own experiences.

Autoethnography

My approach to this study was to dig deep into my own journalistic experiences and find some answers as to whether I set the agenda for the citizens of Lake County in a negative way when I worked in that community as a newspaper reporter. When this was answered in the affirmative, I was then able to identify ways to avoid negative agenda-setting in the future. This study also results in a learning tool for how other journalists can sidestep negative agenda-setting.

This style of study conforms to the autoethnographical approach to research described by Ellis (2004): researchers describe and analyze their own personal experience to get to an understanding of a cultural norm. In other words, scholars use their own thoughts to figure out problems and issues. This fits in perfectly with what I wanted to do.

Another reason for my use of autoethnography as a research method:

Many of these scholars turned to autoethnography because they were seeking a positive response to critiques of canonical ideas about what research is and how research should be done. (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011, para. 3)

Much of past research on agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1993) has focused on an outsider's view of articles written about a variety of topics, from which researchers identified a

negative style of agenda-setting. I did not doubt the validity of their research or their methods, but I felt more research should be done on the journalists they are actually researching. If researchers focused on the journalists' own experience more, and how they ended up writing an article the way they did, both researchers and journalists would have an even better understanding of why agenda-setting takes place.

For this project, I served as both a researcher and a journalist, which gave me the opportunity to use self-reflexivity to discover more about the agenda-setting phenomenon. One might think it was difficult for me to see my own agenda-setting practices, because its negative connotations might lead me to distort my reflections. However, the very reason I did this study is because I had an inkling that I may have taken part in the negative agenda-setting. I was already a step ahead of the criticism. Plus, autoethnography allowed for my own emotions to come into play when doing research. Instead of hiding from them, I was able to embrace them and talk about them in my research.

Connecting autoethnography with agenda-setting to learn more about it has been used before. For example Waymer (2009) discovered, through his own experiences, what effect the media's coverage of criminal activity can have on minorities who don't live in the area where a supposed high level of crime has been committed – it can make them feel uneasy in the neighborhoods that were framed as being dreadful. This discovery could change how journalists cover these “bad” neighborhoods in the future; instead of focusing only on crime, they could cover the entire panorama of neighborhood life – school programs, church activities, businesses, community meetings, protests, accidents, and neighborhood leaders.

Hermes (2013) discovered, through a process of autoethnography, that social media can help make reporters seem more human because viewers are able to interact with them at a much

higher rate than ever before, while it can also set the agenda for what the public talks about. An example he used involving his own experience in journalism, dealt with a weather anchor whose pregnancy wasn't progressing normally. She shared updates about the pregnancy through Facebook, which garnered much public support and also set the agenda for what the public should be concerned about: the health of the baby and mother. In this case, autoethnography revealed the positives (connection with journalists) and negatives (agenda-setting) that social media can have on the public when it is attached to the news media.

These examples show that autoethnography is suitable for agenda-setting research.

Criticism of Autoethnography

Despite these affirmative assertions of autoethnography, that doesn't mean it's without criticism. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) believe that:

Many quantitative researchers regard the empirical materials produced by interpretive methods as unreliable, impressionistic, and not objective. (p.16)

In other words, critics believe that autoethnography is not as scientific as other research because too many emotions are involved in the process (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). To get around this concern, autoethnographers look at who is actually doing the research and why that is so important. Ellis (1991) said that there can be no better subjects than the researchers themselves, because they are the ones trying to figure out the problem in the first place. Researchers then have more invested in their projects than academic acclaim. They are putting themselves on the line by using their own self-reflections.

Using self-reflexivity – the main aspect of autoethnography – goes against many other types of research processes that rely on more objective requirements (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). These authors further surmise:

Consequently, autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and

accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist. (para. 3)

This could lead non-autoethnographic researchers to believe their results are more valid than an autoethnographer's because they may think their research involves only "facts." The problem with this argument is that non-autoethnographers believe they live an objective world (Waymer, 2009). The question ends up being whether one believes they can keep emotions out of their research. According to Foltz and Griffin (1996), researchers, like everyone else (including journalists) are emotional beings, which means scholars' own emotions will play a part in their research. This means that autoethnography could be an even stronger form of research because they don't pretend to deny that they have emotions when it comes to their academic work. It could lead to their results being more believable.

It's not as though autoethnography doesn't have its problems (as seen above), but I believe that the arguments made for its use in academic research are strong. I believe it's impossible to take opinion out of research, as humans are not infallible. Allowing this idea to come to the forefront in research, suggests that autoethnography is a valid form of academic work.

Sample

When deciding what type of sample should be used in a study, researchers must first look back at the initial purpose of the study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In my case, it was to learn whether I helped set the public's agenda negatively during my time as a journalist at the *Lake County News-Chronicle* in Two Harbors.

For this assessment, I analyzed a sample of 81 articles. The sample included any *News-Chronicle* articles written about the Lake Superior School District between 2009 and 2011. The

reason I selected the school district is because out of all my beats at the *News-Chronicle*, the school district one offered the best chance of finding agenda-setting, because I covered it the entire time I worked in Lake County.

Although I gathered all the school district articles from my time at the *News-Chronicle*, this 81-story sample included only “hard news” items. Hard news is generally news that deals with specific timely issues or “breaking” news events that have an immediate impact on people – stories in which agenda-setting is more likely to take place. “Soft news” is about people and their accomplishments, along with trends, and events. Based on my experience in journalism, this type of news usually has a smaller impact on readers other than giving them a laugh or a warm feeling inside.

Grounded Theory: Analyzing the Data

My first goal for this study was to find out whether I participated in the negative style of agenda-setting, as well as how, when, and where I did it – if I did (RQ1). The best way to learn this was by using the constant comparative method, also known as grounded theory (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The purpose of this method is to “identify patterns in the data and discover relationships between ideas or concepts” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 125). Under this method, “theory is ‘grounded in’ the relationships between data and the categories into which they are coded” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 250). Theory then comes from the data collected, rather than using data to try to support a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

This analytic method also lets researchers combine similar categories to formulate general answers for their research questions, while also relying on saturation of results to get their answers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Glaser (1965), one of those who first articulated this theory, further explained that since this theory reduces terminology and continuously generalizes

through comparisons, researchers will start to reach two critical points of theory: parsimony (the simplest possible explanation) and scope (the general application).

This approach was suitable for my project: RQ1 was answered with raw data (and my own autoethnographic analysis about the stories) which lead me to a theory – not the other way around. As noted in my literature review, negative agenda-setting can be quite pervasive and has been found in various media formats. I never declared that I have participated in negative agenda-setting myself; that is what the research was for.

Under the grounded theory model (Glaser, 1965; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), I examined the school district articles from the sample I collected. From that point forward, I coded the stories under various categories, depending on whether I felt they would fall under the agenda-setting phenomenon within each category (yes or no). I coded based on *word usage, positive or negative connotations, story structure, what a story is about, headlines*, where the articles were *placed* in the paper, and my own *reflections* on whether I participated in negative agenda-setting.

One could argue that the data I looked at was shaped by an editor, and therefore it would not be possible to know for sure who actually created the agenda-setting scenario. In the case of my experience at the understaffed *News-Chronicle*, however, I played a larger-than-usual role when it came to deciding the first four categories and whether an article took part in agenda-setting. When it came to headlines and placement in the paper, my role was smaller but still evident – especially because the way I wrote an article could determine where it went in the paper.

The above categories were chosen because I felt that when combined, they could give a clear indicator of whether agenda-setting took place:

- *Placement* tells the reader whether an article should be seen as something that is important to read (Harrower, 2010).

- *Headlines* give the reader an initial impression of what an article will be about, along with what they should think about that issue in some cases (Harrower, 2010).

- *Word usage and positive/negative connotations* give an even clearer picture whether agenda-setting has occurred. For example, in choosing “murdered” instead of the more neutral “died,” the reporter is telling readers how to think about a certain issue (Lakoff, 2005; Poole, 2006).

- *Structure* also plays a key role in agenda-setting. For example, if all the positives about a group were mentioned first in an article, and negatives about the group were buried deeper, the story would be configured in a way that could lead a reader to read only the positives. Many people often read only the beginning section of an article (Stamm & Jacobovitch, 1980).

- *What a story is about* tells me whether I focused on some issues while ignoring others.

- *Self-reflections (autoethnography)* relates to how I felt when I read the article, along with what effects I recall an article had on the public.

Based on my responses from the analysis of my articles, patterns began to emerge when all the data was collected and categorized under the different criteria mentioned above. From these patterns some generalized conclusions for whether or not I participated in agenda-setting, along with how, where, and when I did it (RQ1), came forward. Answering RQ2 (Was I aware and why?), RQ3 (How could it have been avoided?), and RQ4 (How can a journalism instructor teach about agenda-setting avoidance?), was then dependent on my answer to RQ1. When RQ1 was answered in the affirmative, then it was time to start looking at RQ2. That question was answered when I read through my articles, which caused me to reflect back on my thoughts at

the time of writing them, which determined whether I knew I was setting the agenda for the public (and why I did it). RQ3 was answered once I had answers for RQ1 and RQ2. By rehashing the time frame when I wrote these articles about the Lake Superior School District, the reasons for writing a particular article started to take shape. Those reasons, which reflected agenda-setting, were then used as lessons for how journalism instructors (RQ4) could teach students how to avoid agenda-setting. As seen above, the answer for RQ1 is more dependent on grounded theory while answers to RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 are more reliant on autoethnography.

Using grounded theory and autoethnography to answer questions like RQ1 is not new, even though it seems a bit counterintuitive. On the one hand, autoethnography involves the opinion of the researcher a great deal; while on the other hand, grounded theory involves much more raw data analysis, which comes into contradiction with autoethnography. Duncan (2004) successfully used this type of method to look into how she went about creating multimedia education apparatuses. During her study she analyzed journal entries that she wrote using grounded theory, thus combining autoethnography and the constant comparative method (Pace, 2012). She discovered that multimedia educational materials should be designed one way for those who previously have used the framework (less self-direction) and another way for those who haven't (more self-direction).

Another example that combined autoethnography and grounded theory involved a military nurse specializing in the mental health of British soldiers (Whybrow, 2013). The nurse had worked as a liaison between soldiers and the upper echelon of military; she kept the superior officers up-to-date on the psychological state of soldiers and whether they could be effective in the field. During this time, she wrote self-reflections in a journal about her experience and then coded this information to find conclusions – a move connected closely with grounded theory.

Through this process, she found a better way to act as liaison, for she was able to understand how her social anxieties and personality affected the way she did her job.

These examples, along with my research, suggest that grounded theory and autoethnography can be connected, even though they seem to go in opposite directions.

Criticism of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory has received much support over the years (Glaser, 1965; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), but with that comes criticism. Thomas and James (2006) set forth on a journey pointing out some of the key flaws:

First, that grounded theory oversimplifies complex meanings and interrelationships in data; second, that it constrains analysis, putting the cart (procedure) before the horse (interpretation), and third that it depends upon inappropriate models of induction and asserts from them equally inappropriate claims to explanation and prediction. (p. 3)

These ideas could pose problems for grounded theory, but I don't think they are as valid as Thomas and James believe. First, if data were never simplified down to something tenable, theory wouldn't exist. Therefore, if scholars took issue with "over" simplification, then it would be very difficult to create any theory to begin with – something they are likely doing when they critique grounded theory in the first place.

The second argument can also be countered. Putting the chicken before the egg, or the egg before the chicken, boils down to one idea. If one produces the other in some form or fashion, what difference does it make how it comes about? In the end one (procedure) can't exist without the other (interpretation), as they are mutually connected. This is a possible solution to that criticism (Thomas & James, 2006).

The third argument about induction is harder to grapple with than the other two. It does

feel like having data go toward a theory is a simplistic approach to method (namely induction). It could be argued that the amount of rigor used (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) for a study involving grounded theory could be a way around the induction problem, especially with the use of saturation of results (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Once a saturation of results occurs, which means a researcher is not getting any more new information from data analysis, then theory is less likely to fall under the problems with inductive reasoning because there is much more evidence to support the ideas produced by grounded theory, rather than just a few different instances.

The arguments made against using grounded theory do hold weight. I didn't believe they hold enough of it, though, to deter me from using it. I believe it's a viable form of research which can be used in correlation with autoethnography and the agenda-setting phenomenon.

Chapter 4: Discovery

When I started on this journey to find out whether I participated in the negative version of agenda-setting, at times I felt like I didn't want to know the answer to my own research question. I thought, What if I had? Will this shatter my own confidence as a journalist? Will it make me unhirable? Will other journalists mistrust what I report because I was searching my own journalistic practices? These questions lingered in my mind for a while. By the time I had found the conclusions to all my research questions, however, those original fears started to fade, which I will explain later.

Summary of Results

From researching various "hard news" articles I had written about the Lake Superior School District between 2009 and 2011, using grounded theory and autoethnography, I found I did take part in negative agenda-setting when it came to my coverage of that organization (RQ1). All of my stories that I researched indicated I used at least one mechanism in each one of my articles to do this including: using a provocative headline in favor of the district; having an imbalance of words and connotations that worked to the district's benefit; structuring a story so negatives against the district were buried; and placing a story that was positive for the district in more favorable position compared with a negative one. I also covered certain stories much more frequently than others, which leads the public to think about only certain issues related to the school district. On some occasions, agenda-setting worked in the opposite direction, meaning I worked to put the school district in a negative light. These instances were few and far between, however, which means they don't have much value for my study. Even if that was the case, negative agenda-setting was still in play.

These results were startling to me. Not that I took part in it, but rather the fact that *all* my

articles indicated this. To say that I was disappointed in myself is an understatement. I had to move on from this realization though. No matter what these results show, I know they will help me in my future journalistic ventures.

Following are many examples of analysis that indicated I took part in negative agenda-setting. Not all stories that I analyzed are within this timeline, but the stories used here give the clearest picture of how I took part in it.

2009

**Note: Throughout most of 2009, my stories focused one of two issues: budget cuts and the H1N1 outbreak.*

The first article I had ever written about the school board, from May 22, 2009, titled “Schools Face Budget Woes,” showed negative agenda-setting. Reading through this front-page story I became overwhelmed with a feeling that the public should feel bad for the school board – meaning they are facing hard times like everybody else, and the public should sympathize with the tough decisions the board will have to make to keep the budget in line (the headline also played this up). The piece painted them in a positive light; it made them appear to be doing what’s best for the community, while the Minnesota Legislature was not holding up its end of the bargain. The story made it sound like the school board was working hard and battling for the people against the legislature, while it did not point to any reasons why the district’s financial difficulties could have been their own fault. That was a possibility, but I never brought that up in my initial article or any subsequent stories to a high degree. This piece also followed along the path of one particular meeting without interviewing other sources outside the school district. I was letting district officials blow their own horn, without ever trying to mute it myself.

A week later, this continued to play out in the page 2A story, “Board Delays Staff

Reductions” (Suoja, 2009b). This story made the board look favorable, as the headline played into the theme that they make excellent decisions: Who wouldn’t like delaying staff cuts? Interestingly though, the delay in staff reductions was just a tourniquet for the problem of declining funding. To deal with this problem, the board began talking about going to a four-day week, something that may have made the district appear bad. However, the negatives of the district doing this were buried near the bottom of the piece; thus the school district may have continued to look exceptional, because people generally don’t read an entire article (Stamm & Jacobovitch, 1980). If that information were higher up in the story, it may have given the public a different opinion of the school board and the district’s administrators. In essence, I was trying to make the school district look better than it should.

The following week, this slight hint of negativeness directed at the school board was all but erased with the front-page piece “School Board Avoids Most Layoffs” (Suoja, 2009c). This story drove home the idea that district officials knew what they were doing because with a cut in funding, they pulled off something of a miracle – they had few staff cuts – which made them look superb, showing they are on top of things. The headline was also intriguing. It could have just as easily have said “School Board Lays Off Some Employees,” which would have given the article an entirely different spin, making the board appear dreadful. From the way the way I wrote this story, however, it was clear to me I was building up the reputation of the school board as being good, honest, and trustworthy.

This idea was shot down somewhat later in the year in the story “Shorter School Week?” (Suoja, 2009g). In this piece, district officials talked about going to a four-day school week to conform to budget restraints. Students would still be required to attend school the same number of hours per week, but their days would be longer. This could be concerning as young people’s

attention spans are shorter. Some employees would also have seen a cut in hours. One school board member did question the district's position, mentioning that the four-day week wasn't the only option; he asked why other districts aren't doing the same. During this process, it felt like he was investigating the board's own ideas and authority, something I and the public rarely did. The structure of this story also indicated that board members were in some disagreement about what they should do to avoid a budget cut, which put them in a negative light. In this instance I was not upholding what I started when it comes to agenda-setting. Instead of making them look like they were unflappable, as I did in most of the articles, they are shown to be somewhat confused in this story. Near the end of the article, however, this argument was reversed where a commentary was made about how well another district is doing with the four-day week, thus I played up the district's ideas as positive (although less so in this article).

Among the rest of my stories about the district, however, this type of piece was a rarity. It was also less likely to be read, because it was placed in the back of the paper, which means the negative attention attached to the school board in this case could have been ignored by the public.

H1N1

During the H1N1 scare (Suoja, 2009d; Suoja, 2009e) I continued to make school officials look good. My reporting on this front-page issue was favorable toward how the school district handled the situation. One of my first reports (2009d) made it seem as though the district was doing everything possible in trying to come up with a plan to handle an H1N1 outbreak. This was a noble effort. Of course the question of why they didn't do this earlier – which would have made them appear ineffective– was never brought up. About a month later guidelines were passed by the school board that could have led to the reduction of H1N1 at the schools (Suoja,

2009e). Among the regulations they passed included measures for when they should shut down schools, which was dependent on how many students were out sick. I made the board seem even more responsible – although this might not have been the case. Buried deep in this story was a side note from the school board meeting where plans for an H1N1 outbreak were passed. This note briefly discussed the district failing to heed the American with Disabilities Act because of a poorly designed trail on school grounds. The note made the district seem less responsible than previously mentioned; however, due to where this information was located in the story, it was unlikely to be read.

Later in the year, in a page 3A story, I continued to try to reflect the responsibility of district officials regarding H1N1 (Suoja, 2009f), even making the nursing staff at the schools seem all-powerful with a comment on which vaccine should be taken to combat the virus – despite news to the contrary. Now, I was letting district staff provide medical advice for an entire community, making them an even larger authority figure. In the years ahead, similar agenda-setting tools were used to give the public an idea of how to think about school district officials: Their decisions could be trusted, because they were always the right ones.

2010

**Note: In 2010 my articles continually focused on the district battling a tight budget, which could have been dealt with using an increase in property taxes – something the public would have had to vote on. Stories also focused on the district contemplating going to a four-day school week. I did cover a few other themes during this year, but these ones dominated my coverage.*

The new year started out with an agenda-setting bang with the article “District Enters Federal Program” (Suoja, 2010a). This story discussed the district joining the “Race to the Top”

program. This federal act awarded schools money if they met certain standards for reform and innovation. At first glance my piece made it sound like the district was doing something positive for the members of the community by entering the program, but there was a caveat: It could eventually lead to teachers having their performance ranked by student's performance on particular tests. Depending at how one looks at this, this could have been considered a poor way to judge teacher performance and thus the program wasn't as good as it sounded; therefore, the district conceivably should not have entered into it. This information was in my story, but I buried it at the end. This means readers might not have read that section, and glanced only at the positives about the program that appear in the beginning. Once again I was making the district look satisfactory by burying the adverse effects of the "Race to the Top" initiative they decided to enter into. If I had started out with the negatives of the "Race to the Top" program at the beginning of the story, the district wouldn't have appeared nearly as acceptable in my reporting. This article may not have had as much agenda-setting effects as other stories, however, because it was farther back in the paper.

In February, my agenda-setting practices really started to pick up steam with the story "Operating Levy Discussed With Public" (Suoja, 2010d). This story dealt with district officials trying to sell the public on voting "yes" for an increase in property taxes so the district could have a stronger budget, which could possibly have led to the district remaining on a five-day school week. This story started out saying the district was in some "dire financial situations" and something needed to happen to get them out of it. The superintendent then discussed all the items the district had done to cut spending; but I never verified the information he was telling the public. This made the district seem like a responsible entity, but there was no way to know if it were true if I didn't dig deeper. This means that I was trying to show the public that the district

was responsible, without knowing for sure, which led me to set the agenda for the public. Of course it could be argued that agenda-setting was not prominent in this article due to its poor placement (page 6A-7A).

This authority and responsibility theme continued in the March 12 story “District Targets Critics’ Voices” (Suoja, 2010g). In this piece, the school board went after their critics at one of their meetings, talking about how their decision was the correct one. In the story I continually called those who were against the district’s views “others,” while real names were used for officials of the district. This set up a tone that the voices coming from the district mattered, while the “others’” views didn’t count as much. If they did, they would have had their own individual names. This story may not have set up an agenda as strong as I intended, however, because of its placement near the back of the paper. Nonetheless, this idea did continue to play out in subsequent reports about the district trying to impose an operating levy and possibly having the schools go to a four-day week.

In the coming weeks, district officials tried to spin the four-day week as something that could be positive (Suoja, 2010i) pointing out all the good things that come from it and the opportunities it would create. This occurred despite the fact the administrators admitted that the four-day week was the last option for them (Suoja, 2010h). I didn’t grill them in either of these articles about why other districts facing similar circumstances weren’t doing the same thing, albeit these stories were buried in the paper. Even so, questions were never asked that should have been, which led me to make district authorities appear better than they should have.

School officials continued to have an air of authority that their decisions were correct in the page 1A article “Levy Ballot has its Quirks” (Suoja, 2010j). This story, published about a month later, was about a mail-in ballot the public would use to vote on a property tax increase.

This referendum was crucial for the school district, because if the property tax levy was voted down it could have led to the school board voting to go to a four-day week or cutting staff. At first thought I did not see agenda-setting in this story, but the more I looked into it, it was easy to see. My piece went into detail about what people should expect when reading through the ballot. It sounded as though I was talking to the public as children; thus the school district continued to teach them, even though they were adults. Once again district officials were painted with the brush of authority. In this case, the public were the students while the school board was the teacher – and who wants to talk back to the teacher?

Once these ballots were passed out, voters had their say on the district's hope for a levy increase. The increase was voted down in May and the school board voted to go to a four-day week, which led to my two biggest front-page stories of the year, "School Levy Fails" (Suoja, 2010k) and "Four-Day School Week Voted In" (2010l). I made the school board look excellent in both pieces, even though they were making school days longer for students who may have very short attention spans, while they also failed to convince members of the community to pass an increase in property taxes which would have helped students. The ones painted in a bad light were the public, making it seem like they failed the community.

This theme was reversed briefly in the next week's front page (Suoja, 2010m). In this article the district looked awful (a sign of negative agenda-setting, but going against the district). Much of the information at the beginning criticized district officials for going to a four-day week, while the positives of the four-day week were buried deeper in the article. I also reversed back this negative attention directed at the district in the same issue of the paper (Suoja, 2010n; Suoja, 2010o). These two stories, buried in the back of the paper, showed that the four-day school week was the right decision. I based these assumptions on information from the local

school board and other districts in the state that followed a similar path. This issue of the paper showed both sides of the four-day week debate – the school districts and the public’s. I think the district won out in this case, because much more space was used to support their views.

Throughout the summer and into the fall many of my stories made the school board look like they had made the right decision. These included various articles in mixed locations in the paper, such as “Teachers Taking Four-Day Week in Stride” (Suoja, 2010p), “Off School Day Options in Air” (Suoja, 2010q), “Four-Day Changes Swirling” (Suoja, 2010t), “Fifth Day Options Get Detailed” (Suoja, 2010u), and “New Year, Plenty of Change” (Suoja, 2010v). They were all unbalanced, making it sound like a four-day school week was better, despite the negatives of going to such a schedule. Once again, I made the district officials’ decision-making seem favorable, while giving them an air of being all-knowing about what the future may hold for students. The peak of this came in the late fall with the front-page piece “Students Scatter on First Friday Off” (Suoja, 2010w). In this story, I built up a picture of how the four-day week will be “good” for students. This entire article reinforced the idea that the district should be looked to as an authority figure that always knows what they’re doing. There were no negatives at all in the story about the four-day week, as it made district officials seem like they could do no wrong. A similar article, buried in the paper, also ran in October (Suoja, 2010x), while a front-pager ran in November (Suoja, 2010y) with a similar tone. The summer was not all strawberries and cream for the district.

Officials did make a mistake on their application for the four-day week (Suoja, 2010r) which eventually got approved by the state so they could continue on the four-day path (Suoja, 2010s). Even though the district made this error, I continually wrote as though they were trustworthy and free of mistakes. I painted the state’s Department of Education as being an

incompetent organization in this situation, even though the school district was the organization that messed up. This tells me that I was trying very hard to make district officials look great, despite their mistakes.

The year 2010 was a big year for the district and my coverage of them. This was the year I spent the most time writing about the organization at great length, which gave me the biggest opportunity to set the agenda for them. Going into 2011, the agenda-setting machine that I apparently set forth was now fluid.

2011

**Note: In 2011, various articles I had written focused on the four-day week, budget restraints, enrollment changes, and a disagreement between the district and the city of Two Harbors over a land deal. This differentiation in coverage is slightly different from previous years, but it was still highly focused on just a few main topics as in previous years.*

In the new year I gave the public the same expectations they should have for school district officials: Their decisions could be trusted, because they were doing what was best for the community. One of the first articles published about the district, featured on page 3A, was “Four-day Week Gets Mostly Gold Stars” (Suoja, 2011a). This story is permeated with agenda-setting. Almost every comment was positive toward the four-day week, including the headline. What I was doing was telling the public the four-day week was good, and that those who spoke against it were in the minority.

During the same week, the front page article “County Buoyed by Fiber Share Plan” (Creger & Suoja, 2011b) made the district look even better. This story focused mostly on the county board and their fight to get community-wide broadband Internet access. The article also included an important tidbit of information: The school district was joining this effort. Sure, this

sounds great. It could help students in the future by providing more educational tools for them. Many questions, however, were not asked when it came to the district's stance on this, such as: "Are they financially stable enough to do this?" Since I did not ask this question, it made district officials seem more responsible than they might have been. I point out only the positives, ignoring the possibility that the change might burden the community financially. Once again, I made district authorities appear superb in this article when they could have easily appeared bad or neutral on the subject.

In February a very interesting brief I had written popped up in the paper: "School District Budget Forecast Not as Dire as Predicted" (Suoja, 2011c). In this article I could have easily have exposed the school board for not being on the up-and-up when it came to their financial situation. Throughout 2010, the district held various public meetings about what a mess their finances would be in during the coming years, due to a shortfall in funding from the state government. Now it appeared their forecasts were a little off and they were not expected to lose as much money as once thought. This would have given me a perfect opportunity to make district officials seem less responsible that I had portrayed them. What did I do? I wrote a very short brief (168 words) and buried it in the back of the newspaper. Why? Maybe I didn't want officials to look irresponsible, which sits at the crux of agenda-setting. I further elevated the district by quoting the superintendent describing what a good job the district did to get to this point in maneuvering the four-day school week. What? Sure, the four-day week helped, but they implemented it based on incorrect information. I should have pointed that out in the article to make officials seems less authoritative and correct, but I did not because I must have wanted to keep the district appearing positive in the public's eyes.

In March a similar scenario played out in the article "Enrollment Changes Perplex

District” (Suoja, 2011d). This piece told the tale of the school board being astonished by enrollment numbers suddenly being down – they originally thought they were up. The board looked somewhat confused in this story, which also called into question some of their analytical skills. At first glance, it appeared I was actually writing in a way that made them look less powerful and authoritative. The location of this article, however, still kept my original agenda-setting theme in play, because it was buried in the back of the paper.

The next week, the district emerged as being wonderful once again in the front page article “Four-Day School Week Passes First Test” (Suoja, 2011e). In this story I discussed how the district’s state-subsidized test scores have improved, even though the district went to a four-day week. In this case, the school board’s decision to go to a four-day week couldn’t look any better, because it appeared that students were getting even smarter as a result. I do recall that after the school board meeting that prompted the story, I went up to the superintendent to ask him questions about the results. He said they were not as accurate as they seemed. He elaborated with a very complex answer, and I didn’t quite understand what he was talking about. So I went with the initial figures the district gave me, which made officials seem better than they should have.

At the end of March and into April, the school district and Two Harbors City Council were battling it out over a land deal involving an old football field in Two Harbors (Suoja, 2011f; Suoja, 2011g). In both articles, one appearing on the front page and the other buried, I made it seem that the district was on the correct side in their contract negotiations with the city. When reading this story, it felt like I was taking the side of the school board in each case, even though I should have been trying to make the story seem as balanced as possible. The reason may be that I wanted to continue supporting the theme that district officials were all-knowing, their decisions

were always sound, and they should not be questioned. Shortly after these two articles were published I left the *News-Chronicle*, and my time for telling the public what to think about when it came to school district was over.

Agenda-Setting Against the School District

Negative agenda-setting in most instances through my research made the district look good, but in some instances it made them appear off-putting. One example dealt with the arrest of a school district employee who was later convicted of stealing \$65,000 (Creger & Suoja, 2010b). In this front-page story, I portrayed the school district as irresponsible, because it fixed responsibility on the officials for not knowing an employee was embezzling money for two years. The article could have directed readers to look at how hard the district may have worked to catch the thief, but I didn't do that. This could mean I was setting a new agenda for the public – that district officials aren't very responsible. A few weeks later, however, this new agenda was quashed on page 3A (Suoja, 2010c), where the district is shown taking action so this type of scenario doesn't happen again. The old agenda – one of responsible school authorities – could be taking hold of the public's mind once again.

Another example of this came in the February article “Four-Day School Week Draws a Crowd” (Suoja, 2010e). In this page 1A story, I drew a picture that the district's idea of going to a four-day school week wasn't as good as they thought. Most of the comments in the article pointed to the negatives of the four-day week rather than the positives, which could lead the public to believe the four-day week wasn't a great idea (and school officials were wrong in their decision making). This theme was extinguished later on at a school board meeting, however, when they backtracked from previous assumptions of all the positives of the four-day week (Suoja, 2010f). This made them seem more open to new ideas which made them look positive in

the public's eyes. In this article I also deflect responsibility of going to the four-day week to state legislators, which takes the district out of the fire. This article was in the back of the paper, however, which could mean it had less of an effect on the public.

The articles mentioned above do point to me trying to counterbalancing the previous themes I created, but I believe these stories weren't enough to reverse what I had started. There are just too many stories that I had written that reinforce the idea of school officials being good, honest, trustworthy, and always right.

Getting the Public to Talk About What I Wanted

From all of this analysis, it's easy for me to see that my coverage of the school district led the public to develop a certain perspective about it. Most of my coverage focused on the four-day school week implementation; district officials trying to convince the public to vote for an increase in property taxes; and other budget issues such as staff cuts and reducing the expenditures on other items. I found that about 60 percent of my stories were dedicated to these topics, which meant I ignored other issues. Thus, the public was more likely to be concerned with the information I did cover, because that's what I was making them the most familiar with. I created this atmosphere of longing to hear about certain issues by continually reporting on an issue at length – all the while limiting their knowledge base about other school district issues.

Can this be proven? From my own experience, generally whenever someone came up to me in public to talk about school district affairs, usually they would discuss the four-day week and the possibility of property taxes going up, along with the other issues I wrote about at length, and in terms of how I portrayed them. If I continually wrote about another topic, possibly in a way that was negative toward school district officials, wouldn't they have wanted to talk to me about that?

One reason I believe this is the case is because, other than by reading my stories, readers couldn't have known about the issues. They rarely attended meetings, relying instead on my coverage to learn what the school board was doing.

Agenda-Setting Effects

It's difficult to say what effects agenda-setting had on the public in Lake County without doing further research into the community members there. It's possible that the public was immune to what I had tried to do.

Big indicators of whether or not agenda-setting took place, however, could be seen through voting records in Lake County. Members of the community did overwhelmingly vote down a measure from the district for an increase in property taxes, even though I played that up in the *News-Chronicle* from time to time in my coverage. I made it appear that passing the measure was wise. This vote may have indicated that my use of agenda-setting didn't work.

On the other hand, however, when members of the public voted down the property tax increase, they were saying they supported the four-day week (another item I played up as a positive). This indicates that the way I framed the four-day week – as something good – could have affected readers, because they didn't seem to have a problem with it as seen in their overwhelming rejection of more taxes (knowing that would lead to a four-day week). The public may not have seen that as a major issue and were probably comfortable with that situation because of the way I portrayed it.

Also no one was voted out of office, which tells me the public followed along with what I said about the legislature being bad, while the school board was good because I didn't make the budget issues their fault even though they may have been to some extent. Either way, agenda-setting may have affected the public in some way. How much did they affect the public? Further

research into the values community members hold would need to be done to determine that.

Of course it could also be argued that in some instances my agenda-setting practices affected the public in a positive way. I was making them aware of issues that they may not have known about if it weren't for my reporting. Even though my practices were not sound and balanced, at least I was making known what issues school officials were considering. Without my reporting, readers likely wouldn't have known much of anything other than rumors, due to the lack of attendance at the meetings. Certainly I glossed over issues that should have been covered more, but at least there was coverage of something.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Summary of Study

I have found that I took part in agenda-setting in a negative way when it came to my coverage of the Lake Superior School District. I placed the district officials in a positive light using the agenda-setting mechanism; a majority of my stories reflected this. I also ignored certain issues that would have made the district look less than perfect. Some pieces did show agenda-setting going the opposite direction, meaning I painted the district in a poor light. This was a rarity, however, which tells me those instances were anomalies and did not have a significant effect on my results.

These results were discovered through using a combination of autoethnography and grounded theory. During that process, I looked through 81 different hard news articles I had written about the school district and coded them using various elements: placement, headlines, word usage – positive/negative connotations – structures, self-reflections, and subject content. These results led me the finding that I did partake in negative agenda-setting; where it happened (in the school district articles); how (the above-mentioned elements and limiting the focus of my coverage to a few key issues); and when it happened (throughout the two years I worked at the *News-Chronicle*).

These results affirm what previous scholars (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Gitlin, 1980; Poole, 2006; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010) have theorized about the news media: The press can tell the public what issues to think about and how to think about them, through the use of some kind of tactic. The results that emerged in my study offer further support for that theory.

There are some limitations to my study. All of the information I coded was boiled down

to whether I thought I participated in agenda-setting in negative way. In order for my results and conclusions to carry more weight, other researchers would need to look at my work to determine its accuracy. There is strength in numbers and the more that could verify my own research and conclusions, the stronger it will get. In order to get more precise results I would also need to look at all the stories I wrote at the *News-Chronicle* to get a further understanding of how I participated in agenda-setting during my time at that newspaper. From this, I could get even more answers for how negative agenda-setting could be avoided.

Another limitation to this study deals with why exactly the public allowed agenda-setting to occur. Previous scholars have looked at some reasons. Ward (2009) said it happens because the press has an aura of being objective, and therefore the public doesn't question it. Need for orientation in deciphering the world may be another reason why the public lets the press shape issues (Camaj & Weaver, 2013; McCombs, 2010).

I don't have an answer to these assertions when it comes to my study, as it would involve more research into Lake County community members and the attitudes they have toward the news media. Maybe they do have these feelings, which helped me shape the agenda for them in a negative way. I will only know that answer, however, if I do further research.

Other questions still remain about what effects my use of agenda-setting had on the members of the community; but obviously it had some kind of an effect due to the fact that voters did not vote anyone out of office when they could have easily (due to the turmoil the district was facing). The public, however, didn't vote for a property tax increase – another item I agenda set – which could be an indicator that my use of negative agenda-setting didn't work. With their refusal to pass the levy, something else came to fruition: a four-day school week. In a roundabout way, the citizens showed they supported that style of education, which indicates that

the positives I laid forth about the four-day week did have an effect on the public (I ignored the negatives that go along with the shorter week). How much of an impact, however, can still be called into question on this issue and those previously mentioned, because I have no way of judging the actual impact, other than the following:

Whenever readers talked to me about school district issues, they would usually use my portrayal of the district – that the school officials were doing the right thing on behalf of the people – as a context for the conversation. This scenario, however, only applies to a small sample of people who I talked to. To get better results, I would need to speak with more community members to see just how far the effects of my agenda-setting went.

Why Did It Happen?

Wading through the articles I had written about the school district left me wondering if I knew at the time that I was setting the agenda for the public (RQ2), using different tactics such as being unbalanced which led to some issues being discussed at length (those which made district officials look good), while others may have been ignored because they made them look bad. It's a tough question to answer, which made me look back at my relationship with the school board through a process of self-reflection.

After considering these, I must admit that I don't recall a time thinking: "I hope this article makes the district look good." It was never my intention to do that, but that's what most of my stories ended up portraying. It was not as though I had no negative comments from sources about what the school district was doing. I even wrote entire stories that made the board look bad (a rarity, I admit). Often, however, viewpoints that were divergent from the board's either never made it into an article, or were placed at the bottom. What I should have done was interchange negative and positive comments throughout a story, which would have given it more

balance. I should also have had more articles that were more critical of the school district.

But why didn't I do that? I think unconsciously I wanted to build up a good relationship with at least one of the governmental organizations I was covering as a *News-Chronicle* reporter. In prior dealings with other government groups in the community, I discovered they were not fans of my work – most likely because I did not make them into something they weren't. For example, I continually hounded the Two Harbors City Council about whether they were following open meeting laws. On top of that, an editorial (Creger, 2010) was written by my editor lambasting the council about their alleged ineptitude. This led to some very uncomfortable situations with the council. These tensions played out with other organizations I covered as well. I may not have been going after these other organizations for violating open meeting laws, but I was still pursuing other issues that could have made them look bad.

When I didn't become an organization's cheerleader, a lot of heat came down on me from most of the groups I covered. This made it uncomfortable for me at times, especially when my integrity was attacked. Verbal potshots were even taken at my family, and shots were taken at me through my family. I was called a "sensualist," a "liar," and a "piece of shit." I was even threatened with lawsuits. No school officials acted this way, most likely because I made them look better than they were.

Not being as harsh with the school district gave me a break from all the other work I was doing. Rather than lamenting going to their meetings, I looked forward to them. I thought, "At least no one is going to rip me a new one at this meeting." In many instances, which can be seen through my data analysis, I let them off the hook and didn't ask them some tougher questions. I was working with them to make them look positive, rather than remaining neutral (Poole, 2006). I believe I did this because I was sick and tired of being constantly lampooned by every other

organization I covered. This bashing started to wear on me and I think I wanted a break from that sort of atmosphere.

So what made this government body different from the others, which prompted me to go easy on them? Honestly, school district officials seemed to be nicer to me from the get-go. I think they were just happy to see someone at the meeting (from what I heard, the coverage of the school district had been lacking in the past). They also complained to me about the coverage from previous years, and I think that got the wheels churning in my head that I wanted to be looked upon with more fondness than previous reporters covering the beat.

Another reason I believe agenda-setting took place is because I would usually follow along the same path a school board meeting went – where they played up the positives about themselves – for my articles. I would sit in the back of a conference room next to a person from public access television who filmed the meetings. I took notes and wrote down comments from the board and the public. I would then go back to the office and write my article without really questioning what went on beyond the meeting. Once in a while I would go up to the superintendent after a meeting and ask him for clarification about certain topics so I could be accurate. I went to the superintendent instead of other board members, because they would usually refer questions to him because he was their spokesman. In any case, I rarely pushed a story further than writing down what they said at a meeting. I wasn't more critical of their decisions because I was more focused on the feelings the district had toward me as a reporter than on the stories I wrote.

Another reason agenda-setting took place in my articles is because the public rarely attended meetings; district officials could blow their horn all they wanted without interruption or opposition. If citizens had been involved, there may have been lively discussion and probably

some opposition voiced. From that point, a cycle began. As I continued to publish articles making the district look great because they are supposedly making sound decisions, there was no need for the public to attend meetings; and thus agenda-setting took full effect. Of course I didn't seek out opinions against the school district because it would shape my articles in a negative way. This reaffirms my previous conclusion about trying to create a positive atmosphere with district officials which would make my life easier.

Another possible reason why agenda-setting could have taken place is because I wanted to keep the *News-Chronicle* in good shape financially (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). The school district paid to have its meeting minutes run in the paper, and if they didn't like what I wrote, they might move their business to a competitor. That may have actually happened with a few other groups I was covering: the Lake County Board and Silver Bay City Council. I don't know for sure whether they moved their meeting minutes to another paper for that reason – they would generally say they transitioned to another news organization because it was cheaper – but that's definitely a possibility.

Did this weigh on my mind? Absolutely not. There was never a time I even thought about the paper's bottom line. That was the advertising department's concern – not mine. Nor was it ever suggested that I should write an article in a way that would make money for the paper. I was always told to report the news and nothing else, and that's what I believe I did. In the end the agenda-setting that I allowed to happen with the school district was entirely my doing.

How Can Journalists Avoid Agenda-Setting?

There's no simple way to avoid the negative side of agenda-setting (RQ3). Based on my experience, I think the most important thing journalists can do to weather the agenda-setting storm is to be more conscious of their own bias when they are reporting, especially when it

comes to the structure of a story, wording, balance of quotes, and a balance of articles. This strategy may sound difficult to employ, but it's something we all know innately. Who doesn't know how they feel, after all? For example, before I wrote a story on the school board going to a four-day week, I should have asked myself whether I believed their decision was a good idea. If I had found that I agreed with their decision, I would have guarded against that bias while writing my story. I should have also thought about whether I was ignoring certain issues while playing up other ones in my coverage that made the district look good. If I discovered that I had, then that too would have led to more matters being brought to the public's attention which would have given them a wider scope of knowledge related to school district affairs.

Even if I followed this path when reporting on the school district, agenda-setting would have still appeared in the articles that I had written due to the idea of choice. When reporting on anything, I must pick and choose which facts get put in, while leaving other comments out. During this time, I must also put information into context which means I am making a subjective choice when I report the news (Wien, 2005). This implies that reporters are not purveyors of objective journalism, but rather disseminators of information based on their own interpretation of it (based on their emotions toward a subject).

In essence, it's simply not possible to be unfettered when reporting because everyone brings some type of experience to the table when covering issues. Thus journalism can never be completely based on facts which means bias will be found in all news coverage. This is not something one can avoid; however, in my case it could have been controlled more than it was.

How Should Journalism be Taught?

Journalism education is not easy to dissect (RQ4). The subject is not clear-cut and there are many gray areas where different rules can be applied to different situations (Harrower, 2010).

In my experience, a lot of the rules are based on a journalist's own gut-instinct, which is based on previous experiences. With that gut, comes an expectation to be fair and balanced. Now as I previously discussed, being fair and balanced is not easy, given that whenever someone works on anything in any field, they bring themselves into their work. They cannot detach themselves.

I too have fallen victim to this as I unknowingly attached my own pain toward my coverage of the Lake Superior School District which led me to setting the agenda for the public in a negative way. In this case I took my feelings related to other groups I covered like the Two Harbors City Council, which caused me great discomfort, and brought them into my workings with the school board which led to bias popping out in my coverage of them.

Is something like this impossible to avoid? As the Society of Professional Journalists (1996, para. 14) state in their code of ethics: "Examine [your] own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others." This is far easier said than done and should be more of a focus in journalism classes. It's of utmost importance that journalists understand that their biases influence the way stories are written (it's not something that can be avoided due to the emotional factors involved with being human, but it can be controlled to a greater degree). This is true even for stories that journalists aren't interested in. Consider the example of the four-day school week, which I wrote about ad nauseam for the good part of two years during my time at the *News-Chronicle*. I don't have any children, and if the public voted for a property tax increase to avoid the four-day week, it wouldn't have affected me in the least. Therefore I shouldn't have had a bias in my coverage, because whatever the school district and the public decided my life wouldn't have changed drastically. The only thing that would have changed for me is what I wrote about. Yet bias appeared in my coverage.

The first solution I see for this problem is teaching students to be more aware of their

own bias when covering events and issues, as discussed previously. To do this, I have developed a plan of action journalists can use when they report the news. Before they sit down and write or produce a story, they should make a list of all the things they like and don't like about a particular issue. From that point they should be able to see their own bias when it comes to the coverage of whatever they are working on. Let's say I created a list of questions concerning possible bias I could have had about the four-day week before I had written my article. It could have looked something like this:

- The school board decisions seem sound. Will that be present in my coverage? Why do I think they are sound?

- I seemed to have developed a good relationship with the school board. Will that affect my coverage?

- Is there anything I'm missing that may make the district look bad?

- Do I have a goal in mind when choosing what will be presented in my articles?

- Am I avoiding talking about certain things in the story because it will make my life difficult if I do talk about them?

- What bias do I have when reporting on these issues?

Once I had this list written down and reflected on my responses to these questions, I should be able to write more balanced stories, while being more inclusive of issues that may be critical of the district – it would have made my overall coverage of the district more rounded as well. That's not to say that it would completely take away subjectivity from my coverage, but it would be a good start.

Another method journalists could be taught is to be more aware of their own past experiences when reporting on issues. For example, I was a student in the Lake Superior School

District for all my lower levels of education. In order to prevent bias, I should have looked back on that time in my life and figured out if that experience (good or bad) was evident in my stories. In simpler terms, once I become aware of my previous experiences, it should lead me to figure out how that could create a bias in my own mind which shaped coverage. If a reporter does this, it could reduce the effect of negative agenda-setting. On a side note, for the purpose of this study, I don't believe my experience as a pupil in that school district affected my stories one way or another; as my experience there was neither good nor bad.

Using self-reflection to rid a reporter's news coverage of bias has never been presented to me in any journalism class I've taken, but I suggest it should be. I think the reason it hasn't been introduced is because from the very beginning of my journalism career, I was told to be objective in my reportage while being fair and balanced. Those ideas were engrained in my mind, but what wasn't mentioned is that bias is going to seep into news coverage no matter what: Journalists, being human, are always connected emotionally with a story. This should be taught to journalists so they are more apt to use self-reflections.

Bias will also be found in every journalist's work because they are limited in the amount of time they have to write a story, while they also have a limited knowledge about the topics they are covering. For example, unless I worked for the school district, there's no way for me to know all the intricacies for how the district operated. What I and other journalists see is the surface action (unless we have time for deep investigations). This also needs to be explained to journalists so they understand what they are truly doing: interpreting information.

No matter what method a journalism teacher uses, these ideas suggested above, are simply that: suggestions. I'm not indicating that journalism teachers aren't doing a good job with their instruction of students. What I am saying is there is room for improvement, just like any

other profession. When these ideas are implemented, however, I do believe it could lead to less negative agenda-setting happening because future journalists would be more conscious of their own bias when they are reporting the news.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

There's no question agenda-setting has an impact on the public in a variety of ways. It can have a negative impact (as can be seen in my Literature Review and my own experience). In extreme cases it can get a person to believe something that is not true. It could even lead to someone voting against their own interests.

Agenda-setting also has a positive effect on people. It can help the public think about important issues and events in the world. The public may not even know about these topics if it weren't for journalists choosing stories to cover. If there weren't agenda-setting, there would be no journalism. Agenda-setting is needed in order to weed out the garbage and focus on news items that are important. Certainly this method can be off base at times (e.g. coverage of celebrities), but many times it can be dead on, revealing human rights violations, secrecy in government, etc. That's why the press is protected so unequivocally by the First Amendment: To keep citizens informed so they can make the best choices in a democracy.

Elsewhere in this thesis, I make mention of coverage of the Holocaust. If an agenda-setting researcher delved into that era of news coverage, they could hypothetically say: "Look there, the news media is telling us what to think about and how to think about it when it comes to the Nazis." Is that a bad thing? It certainly isn't; it led to the world learning the atrocities of Nazism.

Therein lies the problem with agenda-setting theory. Human emotions and the differences between right and wrong are not taken into account. Keeping this in mind, journalists are part of their own coverage – there is no way around this. It can't be avoided, but it can be limited to a degree by looking further inside one's self, which will hopefully help us realize how our feelings affect our coverage. Once journalists start thinking on this level, does it mean bias will

disappear? No, but it would certainly give news a different look as more truth could be discerned from some of the fiction that is being spewed by a few different major media outlets.

Further Study

In the process of doing this study, it became clear that much more research can be conducted when it comes to agenda-setting. The results I found apply only to my own situation. It would be interesting to learn what other journalists' thoughts and emotions were during their reporting, and whether or not that led them to the negative aspects of agenda-setting. If it did, they could add to my study by coming up with even more suggestions about how a journalist could avoid having their emotions become a major part of coverage.

Further research could also be done on the accuracy of past agenda-setting studies. One question that might be asked of past agenda-setting researchers is why they decided to research it in the first place (particularly if they had never been involved with journalism before). Did they have an ax to grind against the news media? Were they once burned by agenda-setting? If any of these questions were answered in the affirmative, their studies would lose much of their validity. It is strange how most, if not all, agenda-setting research paints the press in a negative light, when clearly it is much more than that. Journalists are out on the front lines trying to get information to help people understand the world, as Lippmann (1922) believed. It's a noble profession and should be given more credit. In my own journalistic experience and in that of the numerous journalists I have worked with, there's no question that we are trying to do right by the public. If something comes across as incorrect or biased, it may be because of our human condition. We all shouldn't be lumped together with a group of reporters like those at the national level of Fox News, whose agendas appear to be set intentionally.

The news audience should also be looked at more thoroughly by agenda-setting

researchers. It's not a proven fact that the negative style of agenda-setting is one-hundred-percent accurate when it comes to the effects it has on the public (Klapper, 1948; Siune & Borre, 1975; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). From this it can be understood that the theory is just too simple in its explanation of the news media's effects on the public (Kosicki, 1993; Littlejohn & Foss 2011). Other factors could also be coming into play when it comes to these effects, including: the level of trust the public has with the press at a given time; whether the public holds the same values as a particular news agency; and if the public needs orientation on certain issues (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

Agenda-setting supporters also need to further address whether the media is as powerful as it used to be due to the new wave of content created by the public through user-generated content, which can sway media coverage (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). If it is found that it does have as strong of an influence as the aforementioned researchers believe, then clearly the traditional news media wouldn't be the only ones shaping the public's views – the public would be shaping it for themselves to an extent. These questions and observations need to be addressed by agenda-setting researchers regarding the news media.

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