

## Media Agenda-setting and Framing in the Construction of Public Discourse

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### Abstract

*This paper analyzes the roles that Agenda-setting and Framing theories play in influencing public perception and interpretation of social and political issues through the lens of mass media. Agenda-setting Theory describes the ability the news media has to shape the public agenda by creating a certain opinion or interpretation, which suggests that the media can shape public priorities and interpretation by determining which issues receive greater attention and prominence in news coverage. By consistently highlighting certain topics, the media increase their perceived importance among audiences. Framing theory further explains how a presentation (or frame) of information influences how the audience interprets and makes decisions about it, focusing on how something is said rather than just what is said, by emphasizing certain aspects, simplifying messages, and adding meaning to shape the public action and perception, especially the media, politics and government. Using theoretical analysis and relevant literature, this study explores how both theories complement each other in explaining media influence on public discourse. The paper argues that the media may not only direct public attention toward particular issues but also shape the opinions and interpretation attached to them, thereby playing a crucial role in the formation of public opinion and societal narratives.*

### Keywords

Agenda setting, framing theory mass media, interpretation, public opinion, societal narratives, media influence



## I. Introduction

In contemporary society, the media functions as a central intermediary between events in the world and public perception, exerting profound influence over societal understanding, discourse, and decision-making. Far from being a passive conduit of information, the media plays an active role in shaping public consciousness, determining which issues are deemed important, and influencing how these issues are interpreted and discussed. Within communication studies, the theories of agenda-setting and framing have emerged as fundamental frameworks for understanding this influence. Agenda-setting theory posits that the media does not directly tell audiences what to think; rather, it determines which issues occupy public attention by highlighting certain events, topics, or narratives while downplaying others.

This selective prioritization establishes a hierarchy of salience, subtly guiding public focus and, by extension, shaping political debates, policy formulation, and societal priorities (Msughter et al., 2023). Framing theory complements this perspective by addressing how the media presents these issues, emphasizing particular interpretations, narratives, or dimensions that influence audience perception and understanding. Together, these theories suggest that the media simultaneously guides the public in terms of both “what to think about” and “how to think about it,” revealing the intertwined mechanisms of attention and interpretation in public discourse.

In the Nigerian context, where mass media—including newspapers, radio, television, and increasingly digital and social media platforms—remains a primary source of information for millions of citizens, the dynamics of agenda-setting and framing are especially consequential. Nigerian media organizations, operating within a complex socio-

political landscape, exercise considerable power in shaping public discourse on issues such as governance, political participation, social justice, national development, and security (Msughter et al., 2021). The prioritization of news stories, the placement of headlines, the depth of coverage, and the use of visual and linguistic cues all contribute to the construction of a perceived hierarchy of issues.

For example, a news report given prominent coverage on national television or front-page placement in a leading newspaper signals to the public that the issue is of high significance. Conversely, the omission or marginalization of certain topics may result in the public perceiving them as less important, regardless of their actual societal impact. This process demonstrates how media institutions act as gatekeepers, influencing the collective agenda and shaping the flow of public information in ways that resonate with existing power structures, audience expectations, and societal norms.

Framing further amplifies this influence by determining how the public interprets and evaluates the highlighted issues. Through the strategic use of language, imagery, and narrative structures, media outlets can construct particular understandings of events, whether emphasizing conflict, progress, threat, or opportunity (Ukonu, 2013). For instance, coverage of political protests may be framed as a legitimate expression of democratic participation or, alternatively, as a disruption of social order, with each frame eliciting distinct public reactions and interpretations. In Nigeria, where issues such as elections, security challenges, economic policy, and social development are often contested and highly politicized, the framing of news content can profoundly influence public opinion, civic engagement, and even policy outcomes (Taiwo et al., 2024). By shaping both the prominence of issues and the interpretive lens through which they are viewed, agenda-setting and framing work synergistically to construct public discourse, influence societal debates, and guide collective decision-making.

Understanding these mechanisms is essential for comprehending the dynamics of opinion formation, media influence, and the construction of collective consciousness in Nigeria. Scholars and practitioners recognize that media coverage is not neutral or purely informational; it reflects choices, priorities, and ideological orientations that affect how audiences perceive reality. In a society marked by diverse ethnic, religious, and political constituencies, the selective highlighting and framing of issues can reinforce particular narratives, shape societal expectations, and contribute to public debates on governance, development, and social cohesion (Msughter & Idris, 2023). Media studies focusing on agenda-setting and framing provide critical insights into these processes, highlighting the importance of examining both the salience of issues and the interpretive frames that guide public understanding (Oso, 2012).

This paper, therefore, investigates the collaborative influence of media agenda-setting and framing in Nigeria, examining how media institutions determine which societal issues gain prominence and how these issues are presented to shape public interpretation. By exploring this dual function of the media, the study emphasizes that media influence extends far beyond reporting events—it actively constructs social reality, shaping both public attention and the lens through which societal phenomena are understood. In doing so, it underscores the pivotal role of media in democratic governance, civic engagement, and the broader formation of collective consciousness in contemporary Nigerian society.

## II. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Theoretical Discuss

Agenda-Setting Theory is a foundational concept in communication studies that examines the powerful role of the media in shaping public perception and prioritization of issues. First introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the 1970s, the theory argues that the media does not tell people what to think, but is highly effective in telling the public what to think about. By selectively emphasizing certain topics, events, or issues, the media creates a hierarchy of salience that guides public attention and concern.

The theory operates at multiple levels. The first level focuses on the salience of issues in the media and how this shapes public perception of which topics are important. For example, extensive media coverage of political corruption can lead the public to view it as a pressing national concern. The second level, often called attribute agenda-setting, goes beyond issue prominence to emphasize specific aspects or characteristics of those issues, thereby influencing how the public interprets and evaluates them. Intermedia agenda-setting further explains how different media platforms influence each other in establishing the public agenda, such as traditional news outlets guiding discussions on social media (Msughter et al., 2022).

Agenda-setting is significant because it demonstrates how media, as a gatekeeper of information, shapes societal priorities and public discourse. In contexts like Nigeria, where mass media—including newspapers, radio, television, and digital platforms—plays a critical role in information dissemination, the theory helps explain how media coverage can affect political debates, policy focus, and public opinion formation. Essentially, agenda-setting shows that while the media may not control what people think, it powerfully guides what people pay attention to, thereby influencing the broader construction of social reality.

The influence of the media affects the presentation of the reports and issues made in the news that affects the public mind (Obasi et al., 2025). The news reports make it in a way that when a particular news report is given more importance and attention than other news the audience will automatically perceive it as the most important news and information given to them. The priorities of which news comes first and then the next are set by the media according to how people think and how much influence it will have among the audience. Further, it emphasizes that the frequency and prominence of media coverage shape the salience of issues in the public agenda (McCombs, 2004). Subsequent research shows the theory has extended to second-level agenda setting, or attribute agenda setting, which examines how media not only highlight issues but also emphasizes specific attributes of those issues, influencing how the public evaluates them (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001).

### 2.2 Framing Theory

Framing Theory is a central concept in communication and media studies that examines how media not only highlights certain issues but also shapes the way these issues are interpreted and understood by the public. Originating from the works of Erving Goffman in the 1970s and later applied to media studies by scholars such as Robert Entman, the theory posits that the media frames events, topics, or issues by emphasizing particular angles, narratives, or attributes. Through framing, media influences the lens through which the audience perceives reality, effectively guiding interpretations, judgments, and opinions.

Framing works by selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in communication. This process affects how individuals understand social, political, or economic phenomena. For instance, media coverage of a health crisis can frame it either as a public safety emergency, a governmental failure, or a personal responsibility issue, and each framing leads to different public interpretations and responses. Unlike

agenda-setting, which highlights what issues are important, framing determines how these issues are presented and understood, shaping perception, attitudes, and ultimately, public discourse (Nwuneli, 1986).

In contemporary media environments, particularly in countries like Nigeria where traditional and digital media coexist, framing plays a critical role in constructing narratives around political events, social conflicts, economic developments, and public health matters (Vitalis et al., 2023). By shaping interpretations, media frames influence public debate, social norms, and collective understanding. Therefore, framing theory complements agenda-setting by not only guiding attention to issues but also structuring the ways in which these issues are discussed and comprehended in society (Ekeanyanwu, 2007).

Framing theory complements Agenda setting theory by addressing how issues are presented and interpreted in the media. Originally conceptualized by Goffman (1974) This theory explains how a presentation (or frame) of information influences how the audience interprets and makes decisions about it, focusing on how something is said rather than just what is said, by emphasizing certain aspects, simplifying messages, and adding meaning to shape the public action and perception, especially the media, politics and government. Framing theory influences public opinion by shaping audience interpretations and attitudes toward social and political issues. Studies have distinguished between episodic framing, which focuses on individual cases, and thematic framing, which emphasizes broader social contexts (Iyengar, 1991; Vitalis et al., 2025).

### **III. ResearchMethods**

#### **3.1 Relationship Between Agenda-Setting and Framing**

The relationship between Agenda-Setting and Framing theories is both complementary and synergistic, offering a deeper understanding of how media shapes public discourse. While agenda-setting primarily concerns the media's ability to influence the salience of issues—determining what the public perceives as important—framing extends this influence by shaping how those issues are understood and interpreted. In essence, agenda-setting guides attention to specific topics, while framing constructs the narrative lens through which the audience interprets those topics. Together, these theories demonstrate that media influence operates not only in highlighting societal priorities but also in defining the parameters and perspectives of public debate.

Research indicates that the two processes often occur simultaneously in media coverage. For example, when the media reports extensively on climate change, agenda-setting ensures that the issue appears as a priority on the public and policy agenda. At the same time, framing determines whether climate change is perceived primarily as an environmental disaster, an economic challenge, or a political controversy. The public's understanding, concern, and subsequent engagement with the issue are thus a product of both the prominence given to the topic and the specific framing strategies employed by media outlets (Oreoluwa et al., 2024).

The relationship between these theories is particularly significant in the digital media era, where news consumption is fragmented across social media, blogs, and traditional platforms. Digital media not only accelerates agenda-setting by rapidly circulating trending topics but also introduces diverse framing perspectives, allowing multiple interpretations of the same issue to compete for public attention. In contexts like Nigeria, this interplay is evident in coverage of political elections, security crises, or public health emergencies, where media selection of issues and framing of narratives collectively shapes public perception, opinion, and even behavior.

Theoretically, some scholars argue that framing can be seen as an extension of agenda-setting: after the media establishes which issues are salient, framing guides how these issues are cognitively and emotionally processed by audiences. Both theories underscore the media's gatekeeping function, but while agenda-setting emphasizes issue selection and priority, framing emphasizes meaning construction and interpretive guidance (Maiwada et al., 2025). This integrated perspective provides a robust framework for analyzing media influence, revealing how public discourse is not merely a reflection of events but a constructed reality shaped by media attention and interpretive framing.

The relationship between agenda-setting and framing highlights a dual mechanism of media influence. By determining both what the public thinks about and how they think about it, the media plays a pivotal role in constructing public discourse, shaping societal priorities, and influencing collective understanding and action. Recognizing this interplay is essential for scholars, policymakers, and media practitioners who seek to comprehend or harness media influence in contemporary society (Aondover et al., 2025).

### **3.2 Relevance of the Theories to the Paper**

The theories of Agenda-Setting and Framing are highly relevant to the study of media and the construction of public discourse, providing both conceptual clarity and analytical tools for understanding media influence. Agenda-setting theory is particularly pertinent because it explains how media coverage prioritizes certain issues, shaping public awareness and influencing societal focus. In the context of this paper, which examines how media constructs public discourse, agenda-setting helps illuminate the mechanisms through which specific topics—such as political events, social crises, or public health concerns—become prominent in public debate, while other issues may be marginalized or ignored. This relevance is crucial in understanding the power of media to guide collective attention in society (Berlo, 1960).

Framing theory complements this perspective by addressing the interpretive dimension of media influence. While agenda-setting determines what issues receive attention, framing elucidates how those issues are presented and how audiences interpret them. This allows the paper to critically examine not only the prominence of issues in Nigerian media coverage but also the narratives, perspectives, and language used to shape public understanding. By integrating framing into the analysis, the paper can explore how media coverage constructs meanings, evokes emotions, and influences opinions, providing a more nuanced understanding of public discourse (Aondover et al., 2024).

These theories provide a robust framework for analyzing the dynamic relationship between media content and audience perception. They enable the paper to interrogate both the selection of issues and the construction of narratives, offering insights into the dual processes through which media shapes public awareness, opinion, and engagement. In contemporary Nigeria, where media platforms are diverse and audiences are increasingly active, the combined application of agenda-setting and framing theories is particularly relevant for understanding how public discourse is constructed, contested, and disseminated across traditional and digital media environments (Aondover et al., 2024).

The theories are not only instrumental for theoretical grounding but also for practical analysis, guiding the study in identifying patterns of media influence, understanding audience responses, and situating public discourse within broader socio-political and cultural contexts. Agenda-setting theory focuses on the visibility of an issue, while framing focuses on the interpretation of an issue. Agenda-setting and framing theories provide an applicable structure for analyzing media coverage of selected issues in this study. Agenda-setting explains how the media gives more attention to certain issues, more likely the public can give more importance to those topics than the other issues that have been raised. While framing

explains how the media narratives shape audience understanding and interpretation. The incorporation of both theories allows for well detailed analysis of how much the media can influence public interpretation and perception.

### 3.3 Examples of Agenda setting Theory by the media

#### 1. #EndSARS Movement# (2020)

Nigerian media outlets and social media platforms repeatedly highlighted police brutality by SARS.

- a. Continuous coverage by TV, radio, newspapers, and Twitter/X made police reform a national issue.
- b. Result: Public attention shifted strongly toward police accountability and human rights.  
Agenda set: Police brutality and security sector reform.

#### 2. Fuel Subsidy Removal

Whenever the government discusses or implements fuel subsidy removal, Nigerian media gives it heavy coverage, which are:

- a. Headlines focus on fuel prices, cost of living, and protests.
- b. This pushes citizens to prioritize economic hardship discussions.  
Agenda set: Economic policy and high cost of living and maintenance.

#### 3. Insecurity and Banditry

The media makes frequent reports on:

- a. Boko Haram insurgency
- b. Bandit/Fulani Herds men attacks in the North
- c. Kidnappings across the country

This constant media attention makes insecurity the most important national concern.

Agenda set: National security and safety.

#### 4. Elections and INEC Activities

Before and during elections, media coverage centers on:

- a. INEC preparations
- b. Political campaigns
- c. Election violence and results

## IV. Conclusion

Agenda Setting and Framing theories remain central to understanding the influence of mass media on public interpretation of social and political issues. Agenda Setting Theory describes the ability the news media has to shape the public agenda by creating a certain opinion or interpretation, which suggests that the media can shape public priorities and interpretation by determining which issues receive greater attention and prominence in news coverage. By consistently highlighting certain topics, the media increase their perceived importance among audiences.

Framing theory further explains how a presentation (or frame) of information influences how the audience interprets and makes decisions about it, focusing on how something is said rather than just what is said, by emphasizing certain aspects, simplifying messages, and adding meaning to shape the public action and perception, especially the media, politics and government. These theories can provide a complementary framework for analyzing both “what to think about” and “how to think about it.” Despite their significance, both theories have limitations, including assumptions of passive audiences, challenges in measuring effects, and reduced applicability in the digital and social media era.

Nevertheless, they continue to offer valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and media practitioners, helping to explore the relationship between media coverage, public

discourse, and societal priorities. Applying these theories in research enhances our ability to critically assess media influence, public opinion formation, and the role of communication in shaping social and political realities.

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