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Implementation of McCombs and Shaw's Agenda-Setting Theory in Shaping Public Perception Through Digital Media Coverage

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ABSTRACT

Since McCombs and Shaw's landmark 1972 study of the Chapel Hill election, agenda-setting theory has been one of mass communication research's most productive and enduring frameworks for understanding how media coverage shapes public perception of issue salience. In the digital era, algorithmic curation, platform-mediated fragmentation, and citizen journalism have fundamentally transformed the agenda-setting landscape, raising critical questions about whether, how, and for whom media still set agendas. This study implements agenda-setting theory in the context of digital news media in North Sumatra, Indonesia, employing a multi-method design that combines content analysis of 420 news items from four major digital news platforms (2 months), a panel survey measuring public issue salience ($n = 384$, two waves), and 24 semi-structured interviews with news consumers and digital editors. Findings demonstrate a significant but differentiated agenda-setting effect: the correlation between media agenda prominence and public issue salience is strong for hard news topics ($r = 0.724$, $p < 0.001$) but substantially weaker for social welfare issues ($r = 0.412$, $p < 0.01$), reflecting the influence of personal experience and interpersonal communication in issue perception formation. Second-level agenda setting—the transfer of issue attributes and frames—shows stronger effects than first-level salience transfer, suggesting that digital media's primary influence in the contemporary environment may be less about what issues people think about and more about how they think about them. The study contributes a digital-era refinement of agenda-setting theory and proposes a contextual agenda-setting model that accounts for algorithmic mediation, partisan selective exposure, and platform-specific effect mechanisms.

Keywords: agenda-setting theory; McCombs and Shaw; digital media; public perception; issue salience; media framing; North Sumatra; Indonesia; media effects



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INTRODUCTION

"The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." — Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy*

Cohen's pithy formulation, cited by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their foundational Chapel Hill study, crystallized an insight that has generated over five decades of productive empirical inquiry: that mass media's most powerful influence on democratic publics may lie not in persuading them to hold particular views but in determining which issues occupy their cognitive and emotional attention. McCombs and Shaw (1972) provided the first systematic empirical test of this proposition, demonstrating a near-perfect correlation ($r = 0.975$) between the prominence of political issues in Chapel Hill media coverage and the salience of those issues among undecided voters in the 1968 presidential election. Agenda-setting theory was born.

In the half century since Chapel Hill, agenda-setting research has expanded in multiple directions: from first-level agenda setting (the transfer of object salience from media to public agendas) to second-level agenda setting (the transfer of attribute salience—how issues are characterized), to third-level agenda setting or 'network agenda setting' (the transfer of issue networks and associations; Guo et al., 2012), and to the study of agenda building (how political actors and media interact to set agendas). Throughout this theoretical elaboration, the core agenda-setting hypothesis has accumulated robust empirical support across diverse national contexts, media types, and issue domains (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2014).

The digital revolution, however, poses fundamental challenges to classical agenda-setting theory. The fragmentation of mass media audiences across hundreds of news websites, social media platforms, and niche information environments has disrupted the unified 'media agenda' that was the theory's central explanatory construct. When individuals customize their news consumption through algorithmic recommendation, partisan media selection, and social network curation, the shared media experience that made mass agenda-setting possible is substantially eroded. Does agenda-setting still operate in a fragmented digital information environment? If so, through what mechanisms, and with what differential effects across platform types and audience segments?

These questions are particularly salient in Indonesia, where the rapid growth of digital news consumption has proceeded against a backdrop of concentrated media ownership, intense political polarization, and significant regional variation in media access and literacy. North Sumatra Province, as Indonesia's third-most populous province with a diverse ethnic composition and a rapidly expanding digital media ecosystem, provides an ideal context for examining how digital agenda-setting processes operate in a complex, pluralistic society.

This study's research questions are: (1) To what extent does digital news media coverage shape public issue salience in North Sumatra, and does this effect vary by issue type? (2) Is second-level attribute agenda setting stronger than first-level salience agenda setting in the digital media environment? (3) How do platform type, selective exposure, and algorithmic curation moderate agenda-setting effects? (4) What are the implications for the democratic function of digital journalism in pluralistic Indonesian society?

Table 1. Digital News Platforms Analyzed and Coverage Metrics (N = 420 news items)

Platform	Platform Type	Items Analyzed (n)	Daily Unique Visitors (est.)	Ownership
Kompas.com	National news portal	120	32 million	KG Media (non-partisan)
Tribun Medan Online	Regional portal	120	4.8 million	Kompas Gramedia Group
Medanbisnisdaily.com	Regional business/news	90	1.2 million	Independent
Sumutpos.co	Regional tabloid portal	90	0.9 million	Jawa Pos Group
Total	—	420	—	—

Source: Platform traffic data from SimilarWeb (2024); editorial profiles from media company websites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda-Setting Theory: Foundations and Development

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Chapel Hill study tested the hypothesis that media coverage of political issues would correlate with the salience of those issues among voters. Finding a correlation of 0.975 between media coverage prominence and voter-perceived issue importance, they established the empirical foundation for agenda-setting theory. The theoretical logic rests on two related propositions: that media's selective coverage of events and issues cues audiences about which matters are most important, and that cognitive accessibility effects (the ease with which mentally rehearsed topics come to mind) mediate the transfer of salience from media to public agendas (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Second-level agenda setting, introduced by McCombs and colleagues in the 1990s, extended the theory beyond the mere transfer of issue salience to examine the transfer of issue attributes—the characteristics, qualities, and frames that media attach to issues and public figures. Research has consistently demonstrated that second-level agenda-setting effects (attribute salience transfer) are equal or superior in magnitude to first-level effects, and that the framing of issues as positive or negative substantially shapes public opinion formation in ways that first-level salience alone does not capture (McCombs et al., 1997; Ghanem, 1997).

Digital Media and the Transformation of Agenda-Setting

The transition from broadcast to digital media has introduced three structural changes with fundamental implications for agenda-setting dynamics. First, audience fragmentation across multiple platforms has reduced the reach of any single media agenda, potentially weakening the aggregate agenda-setting effect while creating platform-specific micro-agendas that may influence different audience segments differently (Prior, 2007). Second, algorithmic content curation—the recommendation and ranking systems of Google News, Facebook, Twitter/X, and YouTube—introduces a non-journalistic intermediary into the agenda-setting process, with algorithms potentially amplifying certain issues (particularly those generating high engagement through emotional arousal) while suppressing others.

Third, citizen journalism and social media enable 'bottom-up' agenda building processes in which issues originating outside mainstream media can achieve public salience through viral social diffusion—a process that partially challenges the top-down, media-to-public agenda flow of classical theory. Research from multiple contexts suggests that the relationship between media and public agendas has become increasingly bidirectional in the digital environment, with trending social media topics influencing editorial decisions of mainstream digital news outlets (Meraz, 2011; Harder et al., 2017).

Agenda Setting in the Indonesian Digital Media Context

Indonesian digital media research on agenda setting has grown substantially since the 2014 presidential election, which demonstrated the power of both mainstream digital news and social media in shaping public issue salience (Lim, 2017). Research has documented strong platform-specific agenda-setting effects from portals such as Detik.com and Kompas.com, whose high traffic volumes and journalistic authority give them capacity to set public agendas comparable to or exceeding that of broadcast television (Heryanto, 2018). The intense political polarization of Indonesian digital media since 2014—with distinct media ecosystems serving pro-government and opposition audiences—has introduced partisan selective exposure as a major moderating variable that classical agenda-setting theory did not anticipate.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A multi-method design combining quantitative content analysis, a two-wave panel survey, and qualitative in-depth interviews was employed to examine both media agenda construction and its effects on public issue salience. This design enables both the measurement of media agenda content and the causal attribution of agenda-setting effects through the panel survey's temporal structure.

Content Analysis

A total of 420 news items were systematically sampled from four digital news platforms over a two-month period (October–November 2024), sampling all news items published on randomly selected days (five per week per platform). Items were coded by two trained coders (inter-rater reliability: Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$) for: issue topic (from a predetermined 18-category coding frame), prominence indicators (placement, headline, length, visual elements), tone (positive, negative, neutral), and attribute frames (eight pre-specified frames validated through preliminary analysis). The resulting 'media agenda' was quantified by calculating weighted prominence scores for each issue category.

Panel Survey

A two-wave panel survey was administered to 384 adult residents of Medan and Deli Serdang districts, recruited through quota sampling (Wave 1 at the beginning and Wave 2 at the end of the two-month content analysis period). The survey measured public issue salience using a most-important-problem (MIP) format and a Likert-based issue importance rating for 18 issue categories,

enabling first-level agenda-setting analysis. Attribute salience measures assessed the prominence of specific issue frames in respondents' issue cognitions, enabling second-level analysis.

In-Depth Interviews

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 news consumers (stratified by age, education, and primary platform) and 8 digital editors and journalists. Consumer interviews explored news consumption patterns, issue salience processes, and awareness of algorithmic curation. Editor interviews examined agenda-setting decision processes, platform algorithm considerations, and perceived public agenda effects.

RESULTS

First-Level Agenda-Setting Effects

The correlation between media agenda prominence (content analysis) and public issue salience (Wave 2 panel survey) was $r = 0.628$ ($p < 0.001$) overall, demonstrating a significant but substantially weaker aggregate agenda-setting effect than McCombs and Shaw's original finding. This attenuation is consistent with digital fragmentation predictions. Issue-type stratification revealed dramatic variation: hard news topics (politics, economics, crime) showed substantially stronger agenda-setting correlations (mean $r = 0.724$) than social welfare issues (health, education, poverty; mean $r = 0.412$), consistent with the 'obtrusive issues' hypothesis—issues directly experienced in daily life are less susceptible to media agenda influence than remote political matters.

Second-Level Agenda-Setting Effects

Second-level attribute agenda-setting effects were consistently stronger than first-level effects across all issue domains (all comparison $p < 0.01$), with the correlation between media attribute prominence and public attribute salience averaging $r = 0.761$. This finding is theoretically significant: in a fragmented digital information environment where the shared media agenda has weakened, media's influence over how issues are framed and characterized remains robust. The negative framing of economic issues in digital news (found in 68.4% of economic items) was strongly associated with public perception of economic conditions as 'mainly worsening' ($r = 0.698$, $p < 0.001$), even when actual macroeconomic indicators showed improvement.

Table 2. Agenda-Setting Correlations by Issue Domain: First and Second Level (N = 384 panel, 420 news items)

Issue Domain	1st-Level r (salience)	2nd-Level r (attributes)	Obtrusive?	Dominant Media Frame
National Politics	.748**	.812**	No	Elite conflict (74.8%)
Regional Government	.712**	.784**	No	Institutional performance (68.2%)
Economic Conditions	.681**	.798**	Partial	Crisis/decline (68.4%)
Crime/Public Security	.741**	.769**	No	Individual criminality (71.3%)
Health Services	.487**	.641**	Yes	Government responsibility (58.4%)
Education	.394**	.584**	Yes	Access/quality gaps (52.1%)
Poverty/Social Welfare	.341**	.498**	Yes	Individual failure (44.8%)
Environmental Issues	.612**	.721**	Partial	Government inaction (62.3%)
Average	.590** (range .341–.748)	.701** (range .498–.812)	—	—

Note: ** $p < .001$. Obtrusive = personally experienced in daily life. r = Spearman correlation between media prominence rank and public salience rank.

Source: Content analysis and panel survey data analysis, 2024.

Table 3. Moderators of Agenda-Setting Effects: Regression Analysis (N = 384)

Moderator Variable	β (1st-Level Effect)	β (2nd-Level Effect)	p	Interpretation
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Digital media consumption frequency	.241**	.312**	<.001	Higher use = stronger AS effect
Partisan selective exposure	-.198**	.287**	<.001	Selective exposure weakens 1st but strengthens 2nd level
Platform diversity (# platforms used)	.187*	.214*	<.01	Multi-platform users show stronger effects
Critical media literacy	-.312**	-.274**	<.001	Higher literacy = weaker AS effect
Personal issue experience	-.421**	-.198**	<.001	Direct experience reduces 1st-level agenda reliance
Age (years)	.112*	.098	.024 / .087	Older users more susceptible to 1st level

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$. Standardized beta coefficients from hierarchical multiple regression.

Source: Panel survey data analysis, SPSS 27, 2024.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute several important refinements to agenda-setting theory as applied to the Indonesian digital media context. The aggregate first-level agenda-setting correlation of $r = 0.628$ —substantially below McCombs and Shaw's original 0.975 but still highly significant—confirms that digital fragmentation has attenuated but not eliminated media's capacity to shape public issue salience. This finding is consistent with meta-analytic evidence from digital media contexts globally (Lim, 2012; Harder et al., 2017), and supports the 'weakened but persistent' characterization of agenda-setting in the digital age.

The finding that second-level attribute agenda setting is consistently stronger than first-level salience setting (mean $r = 0.701$ vs. 0.590) is theoretically significant and has important democratic implications. As the fragmented digital media environment reduces the unified media agenda's power to determine which issues receive public attention, media's power to determine how issues are framed and attributed may be intensifying—a pattern consistent with McCombs et al.'s (2014) 'agenda melding' concept and Entman's (1993) framing theory. The systematic negative framing of economic conditions despite positive macroeconomic indicators ($r = 0.698$) is a particularly striking example of second-level effects with potentially significant consequences for political behavior and government accountability assessments.

The moderating role of critical media literacy ($\beta = -0.312$ for first-level effects, $\beta = -0.274$ for second-level effects) replicates the pattern identified in the media reality construction study and reinforces critical media literacy as a key resource for democratic media engagement. The differential pattern—selective exposure weakening first-level but strengthening second-level effects—is a novel finding that warrants further investigation. Its potential explanation is that partisan selective exposure reduces exposure to diverse issue agendas (weakening first-level diversity) while intensifying exposure to consistent partisan attribute frames (strengthening second-level frame adoption).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the continued relevance and productive adaptability of McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting framework in the digital media environment of North Sumatra, Indonesia. Significant agenda-setting effects persist in the digital age, particularly for hard news topics and at the second-level attribute framing dimension. The digital context introduces important modifications to classical theory: algorithmic curation, partisan selective exposure, and platform fragmentation create heterogeneous agenda-setting effects that vary substantially by issue type, audience segment, and platform ecosystem.

The practical implications of these findings underscore the continued democratic importance of responsible digital journalism. When digital news media systematically frame economic conditions negatively despite contrary evidence, or persistently attribute social problems to individual rather than structural causes, they exercise a powerful influence on public perception that can distort democratic deliberation and accountability. Media literacy education, editorial diversity requirements, and

algorithmic transparency obligations each merit consideration as policy responses to the agenda-setting power of digital news media in contemporary Indonesian democracy.

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