A-list Agenda Setters:
An Examination of New Media’s Gatekeepers

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Abstract

Traditional media gatekeepers set the agenda for print and broadcast media outlets while there exists a hegemonic force in the online realm that mediates lower echelon bloggers and their messages. This highest rank of bloggers is the new media gatekeepers and maintains their status through passive and active means.
Introduction

In 1986, basketball star Len Bias died in his college dorm room from heart complications associated with an overdose of crack cocaine. Forty-eight hours before his death he was drafted to the Boston Celtics. Chiricos (2002) claims that two major media outlets’ agendas framed crack cocaine in such a way that it created the drug panic of 1986 that drove lawmakers into action against an exaggerated foe (p. 185). From the beginning of 1985 to the summer of 1986, drugs accounted for about one percent of total news coverage tracked by the Conference on Issues and Media (p. 186). In the fourth quarter of 1986, after the drug-related death of a future star, coverage shot up five percent as the media covered the “cocaine epidemic,” which was spreading wildly throughout the nation.

The New York Times reported: “The next wave is going to be the 13- to 18-year-olds because now for five or 10 bucks they can buy the most addictive forms of cocaine, like crack, and as soon as they start smoking they become major addicts.” In reality, there was little evidence that drug-use was increasing in the general population (p. 186). Regardless, the fearful public reacted to the stories and called upon the government for action in sync with the law enforcement experts calling for similar action. In September, the president called for a crusade against drugs. On October 17, 1986, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which increased sentencing in a valiant effort to show the public that they were helping to control the raging epidemic. That year, Time recognized crack as the issue of the year.

Moral panics are often a result of a media agenda spinning wildly out of control and affecting the decisions of policy makers and the lives of the public. In 1972, Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, professors of journalism at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, published their groundbreaking agenda-setting theory. They write: “in choosing and
displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (p. 1). There are few things that imply importance of an issue than a front-page story or top headline in news broadcast, both of which are controlled by a handful of people who are considered to be the media gatekeepers. In total, 75 percent of the stories that come across a news desk are never printed or broadcast. News doesn’t select itself (p. 399). Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling wrote, “Of course, even the news wires must make some editorial judgments concerning the relative importance of stories, and thus which stories are featured relatively more or less prominently” (p. 346). As University of Wisconsin political scientist Bernard Cohen said, “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” (McComb, p. 1).

Times have changed since that first study. More people are referring to the Internet for their news and readers are not necessarily receiving news directly from a media outlet. News and blog aggregators, RSS feeds, bloggers, and logarithms such as the one powering Digg dictate what readers are thinking about. The traditional news media still produces the content, but the bloggers and citizens are the entities that provide the salience in this realm. Readers alone have the ability to decide their news sources and topics with RSS readers. Republicans can view all news through a Republican lens with their blue-leaning blog. Democrats can view all news through admitted Democratic bloggers.

The blogosphere is not a nebulous world of random comments, rather it is a structured network of online communities each ruled by an A-list hegemony that are each comparable to traditional media gatekeepers in their respective industries. These privileged voices remain
dominate because competitors must leap significant financial hurdles to start their own
successful online publications and maintain the online conversation at a dominant tone,
readership forms organically with time and skill, and a movement can’t be heard without a senior
voice to lead the charge.

**Literature Review**

Agenda-setting theory is grounded in the ability of the media, or other comparable
entities, to transfer salience from news agendas to the public agenda (Griffin, p. 2003). Some
critics will say that public agenda dictates media agenda, but McCombs and Shaw equivocally
proved in the 1972 study and several afterward that “public agenda lagged behind media
agenda.” Since the theory’s publication, it has become a staple of mass communication theory
overriding the widely held beliefs that salience transferred to an audience either by luck, like a
magic bullet, or injected into their minds, like a hypodermic needle. In the pre-television era of
the 1940s, many scholars accepted the hypodermic needle model, which implies that media
directly and explicitly influence people. Certain scholars still exist that support such an explicit
transfer of such as Ohio State University professor Gerald Kosicki who maintains that “media
‘gatekeepers’ do not merely keep watch over information, shuffling it here and there. Instead,
they engage in active construction of the messages, emphasizing certain aspects of an issue and
not others” (Griffin, 2006, p. 405). Even, McComb and Shaw conceded that it may be true to an
extent and there has been no lack of studies on the topic of salience transfer and agenda.

Weaver (2007) reported in a study that tracked trends of agenda-setting articles,
“Agenda-setting articles increased steadily from 1971–1975 to 1991–1995 (from 4 to 40), then
dropped a bit from 1996 to 2000, and went back to slightly above 40 in the 2001–2005 period”
(p. 143).
Within those timeframes, the theory has been a basis for research in disciplines such as cognitive psychology, political science, sociology and public policy. Scholars from each discipline tend to look at the parts of the theory through a different lens with slightly different terminology. Takeshita (2006) dissected salience into a two-part definition with separate applications. The first part of the definition corresponds to the idea of perceived importance, while the second is closer to the concept of accessibility (Takeshita, 2006, p. 279). Accessibility is often used in the context of cognitive psychology and refers for a subject to recall a fact and place importance on the ability to access that fact. In regards to salience and this article, the idea of importance is more highly regarded than accessibility.

*Traditional media gatekeepers*

Each set of researchers report different organizations as the media gatekeepers in their studies based on location and emphasis. McCombs and Shaw (1972) identified nine gatekeepers in their study of agenda salience transfer in the 1960 presidential election – Durham *Morning Herald*, Durham *Sun*, Raleigh *News and Observer*, Raleigh *Times*, *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the CBS and NBC evening news broadcasts (p. 178). Their goal was to localize their results by studying the mass media serving their voters (p. 178). There are several tiers of gatekeepers even within the gatekeepers. Even the smallest populations have their agenda-setters that are maintained by the smallest newspaper.

In the national arena the eight that remain consistent among different groups of researchers of the American mass media are the *Associated Press*, *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, ABC, NBC, and CBS. Specialized gatekeepers for niche topics such as fashion and sports may be considered *Vogue* or ESPN, respectively. Similarly, entertainment periodicals provide similar influence in their fields. Reliant upon the location, demographic, topic or issue,
there are different gatekeepers who are telling people not what to think, but what to think about.

**Online Hierarchies**

In a 2002 study about agenda-setting lag times in electronic bulletin boards, Wanta wrote “If the news media influence the perceived importance of issues held by the public, perhaps Internet users will take agenda-setting one step further,” (p. 132). Online forums are a reliable method by which researchers may examine the online conversation; however, it is only one way for researchers to gather public opinion online. Blogs and social networking sites can provide the same gauge of agenda salience as electronic bulletin boards. Another aspect includes the lag between publication by a media outlet and publication on an online medium. Generally, information doesn’t move in the opposite direction.

There have been instances in which bloggers have broken stories, but they are few and far between. In January 2009, one blogger received quite a bit of press when a plane experienced engine difficulties upon take off from La Guardia Airport in New York crashed into the Hudson River. A man on a nearby ferry took a photo of the passengers standing on the wings of the floating aircraft waiting to be rescued with his iPhone and uploaded it onto Flickr, a user-generated photo site. He technically published the photo first and scooped all major news agencies.

In most cases, the bloggers’ roles in relation to the news in the mass media are to add personal accounts and commentary — adding pluralism and starting dialogue. Bloggers tend to parrot the media and are considered to be an echo chamber for this reason. The Pew Internet and American Life study, *The State of Blogging*, (2005) reported that more than half of bloggers use media-originated information in their blogs and when they do they are opening up an avenue for public discourse. According to Hauser, “for citizens to collectively voice their public opinion
requires “an arena where they can individuals and groups to understand and negotiate differences autonomous of the state” (p. 338).

In February 2005, CNN’s Eason Jordan resigned after making remarks that suggested American military members were intentionally targeting journalists stemming from bloggers reacting to the comments. Buzzmachine.com blogger and former *Entertainment Weekly* magazine editor Jeff Jarvis recalled that he was shocked by the short time between statement and online outrage. “We (in the mainstream media) used to be the gatekeepers,” he said (Parker, 2005, p.143). In this case, the online agenda was unfavorable.

Approximately 70 percent of American adults have access to the Internet at home, work, or school according to another recent Pew Internet and American Life project. A blogger requires minimal technical knowledge to build a veritable online publication thanks to easily customizable sites such as Google-owned Blogger and open-source WordPress. Scholars remark that this ability for all to speak is considered to be a democratization of the Internet. Polemic author Andrew Keen writes, “Today, on a Web where everyone has an equal voice, the words of the wise man count for no more than the mutterings of a fool.” Chris Anderson, *Wired* magazine editor and author of *The Long Tail*, would concede to a degree, but would also say that not everyone has the authority or agenda-setting power of the A-list bloggers, or approximately the top 20 percent of bloggers. Just as editors are masters of what goes into their papers. Bloggers are the editors of their online publications and; therefore, are the agenda setters within their area of influence. A-list bloggers have larger areas of influence than the rest of the “long tail” in the same way that a small newspaper has less influence than a national newspaper.

The Long Tail is less a theory and more a business model. Amazon.com is generally regarded as the poster child of the Long Tail. Online ordering and decentralized warehouses have
allowed them to offer far more unique products than a brick-and-mortar store could ever offer. They deviate from a conventional business model in which a company sells relatively few products in great quantity. Instead, their profit is a result of selling many unique items rather than large quantities of a few items. The concept, also know as Power Laws or the Petroni principle, translates to blogging, partially thanks to human nature. As of May 2009, Technorati claimed it tracks more than 100 million blogs. In a realm where quite literally any subject is more than likely available, people are most likely to convene at well-known crossroads and enclaves in the expansive blogosphere. They often find the blogs through word-of-mouth, but there are also ranking and voting systems that provide further evidence of the true democratization of the Internet. Public opinion dictates that level of authority a blog maintains.

For instance, the Weblog Awards allows people to vote for their favorite blog in the categories of media, technology, sports, military, law, business, lesbian-gay-bi-transsexual, parenting, education, and science. As a blog gathers a following, it gains authority both in the traditional sense and technologically. Technorati has created a method to gauge not just popularity, but, truly, authority.

Authority is both technical and an aspect that is inherently social. Visits are important to blogs, but not as important as blog-to-blog links. Links posted to blogs from other blogs generate visits for the receiving site, which is among the primary reasons that A-list bloggers reign at the top of the blogosphere echelon. Technorati indexes a blog’s authority based on how many other bloggers link to that blog. According to Long Tail stratification, A-list bloggers must receive more than 500 links to their blog from other bloggers each month. In contrast, D-list blogs must maintain three to eight links each month.
Tracking the web of blogger interactions and stratifying them numerically has created this blogosphere hierarchy that runs on no less a democratic system than one that requires a voting system.

As with political polls, in this environment, blogs can rise as fast as they fall. Within the ranks, an A-list blogger can rocket a B-list blogger to the ruling status by simply linking to or mentioning the lower blog in a post. Essentially, it’s an invitation to the higher echelon because the lower blogger has proven himself worthy. New York Magazine in January 2006 ran an article about blogging. It recounts, “in his first two years blogging, Trent Vanegas—the 31-year-old creator of the gossip site Pink Is the New Blog—barely rated 200 visitors a day. Then in January 2005, a few medium-size New York blogs—including Ultragrrl and Thighswideshut—gave him a shout-out, and his traffic doubled. The virtuous cycle began, and today he has 1 million page views a month.”

Those one million page views were generated completely by word-of-mouth. Bloggers don’t erect billboards or even advertise online. At best, search engines may sniff out a blog based on keywords and bring it up in the search results beside a hot topic. The social aspect of the blogosphere is a key component to its success, but also its higher authority. A-list bloggers create the large oligopoly and even in a democratized Internet, there are still leaders of the pack who dictate the pecking order.

Another C-list blogger, who regularly checked Gawker, a celebrity gossip site, decided to start a similar blog. With an entertaining writing style and ability to keep up on the news, he soon found that he had a 20,000-person readership. However, that is where he hit the glass ceiling. An endorsement could have provided the last boost into the A-list, but it never happened. Just like traditional media outlets, many of the A-listers have been blogging for much longer than the
competition. One of the longest running blogs, The Drudge Report, claims to have been online for six years and receive more than $3 million per year in annual advertising revenue.

There are A-list and B-list bloggers in the structure because, though everyone seems to have something to say, only a small percentage of the population has the time, resources, and motivation to say their piece regularly. “Blogger,” released by Pew/Internet, reports that 10 percent of bloggers spend ten or more hours per week tending their blogs. Another 59 percent of bloggers report spending one to two hours a week working on their blog (Blogger). A successful blog runs on the traditional media notion that you must have it out first and have an intelligent, though short, commentary about it. However, according to Hauser they “sit irregularly between familiar modes of address, never quite addressing a person (dialogue), never quite addressing a crowd (speech, public address), never quite speaking to oneself (diary, monologue, soliloquy)” (p. 164–165).

Some bloggers maintain that it’s even more difficult than having a newspaper job because to remain on top you are probably writing dozens of posts per day. It’s easily a 60 to 80 hour per week job with few breaks. Blogs are like sharks – if they stop moving they die. People want their posts and if a blogger doesn’t provide, then too many bloggers have found the blogger-reader loyalty doesn’t run deep. They’ll move on to another blog.

Professional blogging is a huge time investment that brings in very little revenue. Skilled people who treat blogging as a job and are capable of supporting themselves with programs such as AdSense, developed by Google, which can generate online advertising revenue for the blogger. However, it depends on the blogger’s ability to provide interesting content, but much more. Organic growth of a blog requires time, strategy, and cross-site networking.
Public Opinion and Internet Communities

In the study by Wanta referenced earlier, she concluded that traditional news outlets were influencing the users of the electronic bulletin boards. If the media can gauge interest and view commentary on the issues that they report in nearly real-time, then the voices they hear most immediately are those who gather online. As always, the mass media lead and direct the discussion. However, the leading voices coming from the Internet provide a public opinion barometer from which the mass media may measure the political or cultural climates.

If this is the case, then what is the demographic of these dominant voices? The majority are white males who are between the ages of 18 and 29 with college educations who are considered digital natives because they have been online for six years or more (Blogging, 2005). According to the project report, white people are more likely to have broadband access and those with broadband access are more likely to start and maintain a blog. The same report notes that these bloggers are primarily either independent or democrats. If this is the case, then it means that old, white men run the media while young, white people dominate the online environment.

Even with an A-list blog that maintains a healthy 80,000-person daily following, the biggest gatekeeper isn’t necessarily the blogger or the media organization. It is the person himself. German sociologist and cognitive psychologist Jurgen Habermas comments that a “dispersed public interconnected almost exclusively through the electronic media can keep up to date on all kinds of issues and contributions in the mass media” (Hauser, 2007, p. 159). All forms of electronic information exchanges, such as blogging, electronic bulletin boards, or forums, are within the public sphere.

Blogs provides a much-needed voice for the public beyond letters to the editor and story comment boxes. However, Habermas said that the A-list bloggers may not be the ones of which
public officials should take note because “elite voices with access to the media can be a misleading indicator of public opinion” (Hauser, 2007, p. 165). This statement implies that not all voices are equal. Public opinion can be the loudest, most powerful voice. True public opinion can be drowned out, which then essentially becomes static below the blast of perceived public opinion. It is not only the bloggers who are challenging the agenda-setting media outlets and bloggers. Individuals play a significant, adversarial role because they have the opportunity to directly contact the agenda-setter.

The 2006 Time person of the year was You. “You” made Facebook into a small country. “You” dominated the online conversation. “You” did everything. In the celebration of “You,” there came what may have been an unsuspected consequence. “You” are now the agenda-setter. You pull and aggregate your list of blogs or news feed from which you read. You Digg it on Digg or bookmark it on Delicious.

For the dedicated personal gatekeeper there is enough information produced every minute on the Internet to provide a year’s worth of interesting, snarky bits. You choose to read Thigh Wide Shut, The Drudge Report, or the NYTimes.com blogs. Salience may come from personal interactions, but online, readers are the masters of their domain. Hearing elite voices and assuming they are public opinion can be problematic, but what better ways are there to hear the collective voice of the public?

Spiral of silence studies have shown that polled individuals are susceptible to severe swaying of their opinions based on perceived public opinion rather than their actual intents. According to Noelle-Neumann even though they can be extremely accurate in tracking spikes and dips in mood and attitude on an issue, and it can allow inferences about arguments that the sampled population support or reject (p. 334). The best way to hear the collective voice is for
policy makers and agenda setters to see it for themselves. The Internet has provided this avenue.

In the summer of 2008, Barack Obama had the opportunity to see this when he backed Bush’s domestic-spying bill. Obama’s social networking portal, MyOB, was launched to provide a direct line of contact from his campaign to voters and vice versa. A protest swiftly arose in the user-generated area of the site.

“Traditionally, unless a group convinced the media to cover their events, a candidate or representative wouldn’t necessarily know about them,” noted Sam Graham-Felsen, the Obama campaign’s official blogger. Based on visibility alone, Obama’s network can play a significant role in pushing him to address issues beyond the choices presented by the media and formal interest groups.

The online medium is not a tool to disseminate information; rather, it is a tool to communicate. Counterhegemonic groups may surface and gain a leading role in online agenda-setting; however, they’ll have to have a loyal backing to sway public opinion in their favor. In the meantime, A-list bloggers rule the upper echelons of the blogosphere boosting whomever they deem worthy to their level. The rest navigate in their wake, but in the deep water of the Internet there are social media networks and user-generated content sites for people to coalesce with common goals for common audience. Certainly an oligopoly exists within the blogosphere and mass media system with traditional gatekeepers and A-list bloggers reigning supreme. It’ll remain an oligopoly with an obvious pecking order and a very long tail, but spikes in that long tail or rapid movements toward the top 20 percent can easily draw attention to a cause and provide people access to the policy maker or agenda setter.
References


