

# TV AGENDA-SETTING AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this research is to find out if the television agenda-setting is even more shaping the Romanian public opinion, in terms of the economic recession in the country, all the more that it has struck also the media. Chances are people are furthermore hoping to find out useful news concerning their future, or, on the other hand, to distract them from the long-term pessimism regarding the end of the world economic crisis. The agenda-setting influence of the news media on the public has been studied even since the beginning of the 20th century, the 20's, that is. Walter Lippmann has sketched it in his work „Public Opinion”, in 1922. Since then, many scientific researchers have studied the way media influences the public opinion. Iyengar and Kinder, in „News That Matters”, have determined a certain link between the news media and the political priorities of the American public. As for this work, I intend to check if the agenda-setting theory is sustained as far as the Romanian media and public are involved, and, furthermore, whether “news that sells” leads to solid changes in people’s minds.*

Key words: agenda-setting, public agenda, economic crisis, public opinion, news media.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of works have already been written on agenda-setting, stressing the immense influence mass-media have on the public. The first ever to have noticed the behavior according to “pictures in our heads” was Walter Lippmann. “The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event.”<sup>1</sup> Even more important, Lippmann points out that “We shall assume that what each man does is based not on direct and certain

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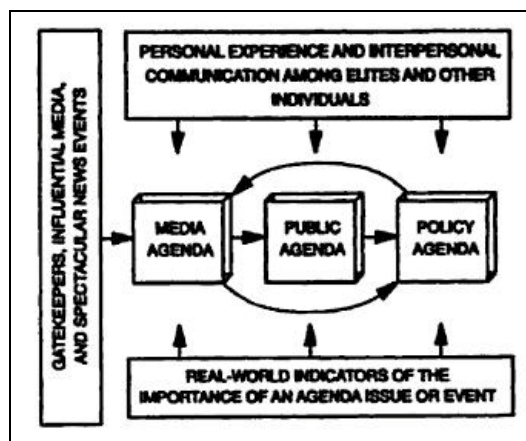
<sup>1</sup> Lippmann, W., Public Opinion, p. 13

knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, Cassirer talks, in his “An Essay on Man”<sup>3</sup>, about the human beings as “symbolic animals”, with systems of signs or even systems of expression as an interface between them and the world.

The paradigm “agenda-setting” was introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, in 1972<sup>4</sup>, when they studied the role of the mass media in the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, NC, U.S.A. Nine mass media and 100 undecided voters were studied, by content analysis and surveys, respectively. The results showed a very close correlation between the first five issues on the media agenda and the same first five issues on the public agenda. Briefly, the conclusion drawn by McCombs and Shaw was that the mass media “set” the agenda for the public.

24 years later, James Dearing and Everett Rogers<sup>5</sup> develop a model for the agenda-setting, showing the influence between the three types of agenda: media, public, and policy.

Figure 1. Rogers&Dearing 1988 agenda-setting model



We can see how the three types of agenda-setting influence one another. First of all, the media agenda-setting has as main variable the ranking of the issues depicted in mass media agenda. Then, the public agenda-setting works with setting the importance of issues on the public agenda. Last, but not least, the policy agenda-setting regards policy actions concerning a certain issue, sometimes reactions following media and/or public agenda.

<sup>2</sup> Lippmann, W., *Public Opinion*, p. 25

<sup>3</sup> Cassirer, E., *An Essay on Man*, p. 43

<sup>4</sup> McCombs, M.E., & Shaw, D.L., *The agenda-setting function of mass media*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 1972, pp. 176-187.

<sup>5</sup> Dearing, J., Rogers, E., *Agenda-Setting*, p. 5

The change in agenda-setting correlations and influences as a consequence of the world economic crisis and its repercussions in Romania is the purpose of this work. The relationship between the three types of agenda-setting (media, public, policy) seems not to be so close anymore, due to different priorities.

## **2. INFORMATION**

The world economic crisis has eventually struck also Romania, in spite of some political leaders who were, at that time, thinking it will not affect our country. In May 2009, the Romanian president, Traian Basescu considered a loan from the IMF as a “safety belt”, adding that no VAT increase, no flat tax amount change, no wages or pensions cuts will occur. Since then, almost all of his predictions were proven false, as the crisis has been wreaked havoc in Romania.

The reason for this brief recent history is to emphasize the beginning of the downfall of what we can call a “calm economy”. The crisis brought an awful lot of dramatic changes in the media market, political scene and mainly in the public opinion. We do not intend to stress on the political side, but there are certain connections between the three components of the agenda-setting phenomenon.

The media industry had suffered a major hit. The advertising market almost collapsed, many professionals were fired by media owners unable to keep up with major costs and much less income. But this was not the only reason. Some media conglomerates were transparently focused on campaigning against the then candidate, now re-elected president. This is why the media agenda-setting, as far as those media were concerned, followed a certain “path”, sometimes disregarding the main issues other media have had identified. Moreover, the polarized media have managed to induce polarized audience. Once the presidential campaign over, given the fact that the effects of the economic crisis were increasing, the polarization of the public opinion was still unchanged.

A significant period of nine months, namely January-September 2009, was the left-right alliance, between former (and actual) political enemies, the social-democrats and the democrat-liberals. It is really significant because, despite a comfortable 74% majority in Parliament, the laws promoted by this alliance could not pass the vote of the legislative! Of course, mass media has extensively covered all aspects of what was intended to be similar to the left-right alliance in Germany. The way mass media covered this was not meant to diminish the tensions inside the alliance, so that it was only a question of time till it was over.

Shortly after the presidential campaign, some newspapers were closed, also radio and TV stations had to fire many of its journalists. Wages went significantly down, while some of the renowned talk show hosts eventually left their jobs only to be hired by the competitors in what we can call “horserace” after ratings.

In fact, as opposed to the cultural television of the 50's, the actual composition of the TV shows, news included, is mainly ratings addicted. All the more that economic crisis, as we mentioned above, had massively cut the former huge incomes of some mass media. The decline of the written press just added to the lack of expensive commercial ads inside the newspapers, therefore some of the then top ranking daily newspapers in readers' opinion have been closed. What happened was that nowadays, many highly qualified journalists are jobless, with grim

perspectives in terms of finding a job in mass media. As for the remaining journalists, they have to face the massive cut of their wages, according (or not, but this is another matter altogether) to the decrease in the media institution income. Besides, the ones who are still willing to work even being 40%, in some cases, less paid are not always the best professionals. Consequently, they will not be able to oppose to the merely economic interest of the media owner, or even another sort of interest, namely political one. Of course, one could say this is a real filter for separating the good from the not so good journalists. We do not argue with that, only we have to remind that the huge economic pressure put on the media institutions transforms the journalists into mercenaries and their products into a desperate race for the “scoop”<sup>6</sup>.

As a matter of fact, in this race between media competitors, we get, more often than not, to see one media institution watching its rival, being meanwhile watched back by the latter. Therefore we can say one TV station sets its agenda according to its competitor’s one, only not to let the other be the only one to disseminate a certain piece of information. In this mutual and harsh match, the more important but less “rewarding” in terms of sensationalism news are omitted on purpose. This is why we can watch the same news story all over the press. And the lead story is, in so many cases, the sensational one.

Here, too, one can reply that newspapers are, because of the much greater space and the time for the written press journalists to be well documented, supposed to have another agenda-setting, if we agree that the ordinary citizen does not have the physical time to get to be informed in person over all aspects he has interest in learning. Indeed, the journalists in written press are reputed for a deep documented, thorough analysis, follow-up media products. But, in the same fierce fight for survival, and in order for some of these journalists to fulfill their needs for reputation, some of them “cross the line” and become “professional” debates guests. Of course there is a price to be paid, and this is the obligation to have an answer to almost any issue no matter the domain, only because they are on their way to celebrity, on duty at so many talk shows. The viewers are, thus, missing the real experts’ opinion, which is put away for the sake of the show. In his “On Television”<sup>7</sup> work, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out that “these writers for non-writers and philosophers for non-philosophers and so forth will have a mark on TV, a journalistic ‘weight’ which is not at all equivalent with the ‘weight’ they have within their specific universe”. Therefore, viewers cannot rely anymore on the quality and correctness of the information they receive.

But do they bother? Do they want to hear, to see the truth, the real thing? Again, more often than not, the TV audience is gathered near talk show hosts who seem to be “one of them”, who look as if they know two times better all about themes taken into consideration during the shows. The questions asked, the issues put on the table and, for that matter, the whole attitude of the “spokesperson” of the audience at large make everybody happy. Viewers have many times been satisfied if a political leader was hit by the “poisoned” questions coming from the TV anchor,

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<sup>6</sup> information especially of immediate interest (Merriam-Webster Dictionary); a (sensational) news story reported in one newspaper before all the others; an exclusive (thefreedictionary.com)

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, P., *Despre televiziune*, Bucuresti, p. 99

even if the main issue, the real (?) reason for the talk show is, in fact, put aside. But, on the other hand, political actors in such situations tolerate this kind of approach, in their race for getting notorious at any price. In fact, sometimes we can talk about some sort of complicity. Both parts play their role; everybody wins, except, maybe, for some viewers who really need the issue involved to be cleared out for them. But, then again, the main rule is there are ratings to be achieved, no matter what.

Getting back to policy agenda-setting, one could notice that sometimes, the issues our MPs are dealing with seem far away from the real problems the country has to cope with. Days on end have been dedicated to designation of the Public Radio and Television boards, with extensive coverage on media of the scandals and accusations on both Power and Opposition in the Parliament, while VAT increase by 5% and wages cut of 25% for state-employees were dealt with by blaming the present or the former governments for the actual crisis in Romania.

We could expect that the real big economic issues our country faces nowadays would be approached with professionalism, with experts able to analyze and to come with possible solutions as alternatives to alleged bad initiatives the government seems to have. Instead, conflicts are fueling mass media coverage; everybody blames everybody for everything, while people look for keeping their jobs, their wages, a real fight for life.

Meanwhile, messages coming from the Executive as “we will enforce this law, we shall eventually see the effects it will have over the economy”, or, “the law we have enforced last year showed its efficiency” letting people think the economic measures taken by the government do not foresee a certain result, coming from a thorough analysis according to which that law is to be enforced. Chances seem to be that the law will be useless, if not harmful for the economy. The minimum tax for companies, introduced a year ago, which led to closing over 100.000 companies, will be eliminated come fall, once proving its efficiency, according to the Romanian prime-minister. We do not talk here if this was a good or a bad initiative, but the way it has been delivered to the population at large might need some adjustments.

Economic provisions are real hard to be made, the Romanian economy depends on the way the world economy will shape up, and this is not an easy thing to foresee. Still, media stresses on different initiatives, as for example the proposal to cut 15% from all pensions. Added to the 25% salary decrease for state-owned companies' workers, this led to a massive downfall in polls for the ruling party, and also for the president in office. Again, media coverage on so-called “wings” inside the majority, but also within the parties in Opposition is extensive. All this for rating, but there is yet another side of this. Voters are now facing the result of their choice both on general and presidential campaigns, and they can now decide if their choice was proven good or bad. That is, if they choose to gather information from more than one source, just so they can judge knowing all sides of the problem. Mass media, though, tends to turn into ad-hoc courts. Hosts and guests, together, pronounce sentences or give verdicts for the viewers, in the name of the alleged competence of the above mentioned “one size fits all” guests who are, indeed, spontaneous, always ready to have something to say whatever the issue.

The rhetoric question we raise is whether the viewer is satisfied with someone else thinking for him and giving him the result of the competent thinking, or he wants to be judge for himself instead. Somehow, we think the answer has already been given above, when we talked about the journalists turned into

“spokespersons” for the millions of viewers. The reasons for this comfortableness or maybe confidence in the media’s capability to provide the best answers are not to be detailed here. We only remind our reader that what we call public agenda cannot be a result of a personal inquiry of each and every person. Journalists have the means, the expertise, the habit, sometimes the intuition to build the agenda according to professional standards and criteria. That is, of course, the case when the media owners do not think otherwise.

While checking the media agenda-setting for the last couple of months, with sensational issues shadowing almost every other major problems the population has to cope with, we realize, once more, that economic purposes of the media institutions are dramatically influencing the journalistic field. The airplane crash at Smolensk, in which the Polish President, together with many other leaders, lost his life, was covered to the full by Romanian media. Although 22 people lost their lives, while 7.000 got homeless, we did not hear anybody requesting for a day of national mourning. Instead, another sad event, the suicide of a renowned pop female singer got all possible coverage and even substantial fines coming from the Audiovisual National Council<sup>8</sup>, amounting some 10,000 Euros in all for as many as five TV stations, among which the public television, TVR, while other five were summoned for the way they broadcasted the death and its circumstances. Many deontological journalistic rules have been deliberately broken for the benefit of audience at all cost. The case in itself can be a very good opportunity for a separate case study, in order to show to what extent mass media decides to side-slip only to be able to gather as many viewers as possible.

Yet another morbid example, but a solid one as far as the alleged correlation media-public agenda-setting is concerned, is the disinterment, after more than 20 years, of the Ceausescu couple. Again, a full coverage of the event has been assured by media, together with newscasts, debates, talk shows dedicated to this matter.

Meanwhile, prices are increasing as result of the VAT increase; people are getting their brand new cut wages, teachers are threatened with gaining the salary they used to have some four years ago, another billion Euros loan from the IMF is on its way, but media institutions have to survive. At all cost. And, at least for now, sensationalism seems to be the right answer to their problem. As for the public, its agenda looks much different.

Therefore, as a possible conclusion, we can say the media agenda-setting is highly dependent on the economic pressure the institutions are facing these days because of the extended economic crisis, thus sometimes skidding off the same road we could expect it should take together with the public agenda-setting. The public opinion is thus biased by the endeavors media institutions have to implement in order to live. As for the policy agenda-setting, it shapes up according to the former two, if no inner fights are in sight.

The hypothesis Iyengar and Kinder<sup>9</sup> fully proved the sustainability only makes it clearer for the reader: “... those problems that receive prominent attention on the national news become the problems the viewing public regards as the nation’s most important.”

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cna.ro/-Decizii-de-sanc-ionare-.html>

<sup>9</sup> Iyengar, S., Kinder, D., *News That Matters; Television and American Opinion*, p. 16

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