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AGENDA SETTING THEORY REVISITED: EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The way information is processed and consumed by active users' on social networking sites is constantly changing. This has severely impacted well established media theories such as gatekeeping and agenda setting theory. The research paper aim is to discuss theoretical changes in agenda setting theory due to popularity of social media among the masses. The study will cite past empirical studies between agenda setting theory and social media. Interviews with were conducted with Indian journalists in media organizations on the latest trends on agenda setting. The objective of the research paper is to understand the changes in practical construct of agenda building from journalists use of social media for news production and to study the consequences of social networking sites on agenda setting effects. The research paper further concludes with new phenomena of agenda blending.

Keywords: Agenda setting, user generated content, internet, new media.

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INTRODUCTION

Individuals across the globe utilize media to gain information. The information presented by the media may be agenda centric in nature. The type of news and presentation of news in television, newspapers or even radio acts as determinants to decide what is included in agenda and how many minutes or space in newspaper is allotted to the piece of news. Thus, media determines what to think and feel towards the news. However, in past few decades the ecosystem of media has faced a 180-degree turn. Technological advancements and social media have enabled individuals to communicate in an interactive environment. The new media platforms emerged when traditional media outlets struggled through economic difficulties, furthermore, it allowed individuals to collect and share information from alternative sources. The individuals need not rely on journalists or professionals who set out information routes (Shaw, Hamm & Knott, 2000).

Presently, social networking sites are utilized for information gathering, dissemination and consumption. Social networking sites allow users to include links to web content from bloggers, retailers, politicians, news media etc. The messages in the social media sphere posted by a user, may receive instant feedback from its followers. Ample empirical research is found in past four decades wherein news media sets the public agenda (Coleman et al., 2009). However, with the age of social media does news media still set the public agenda? The study attempts to show how social media has affected media agendas. If social media is instrumental in setting public agenda, one can conclude that the public set the agenda for themselves on social media. In the content of this study, it is found social media plays an important role for formation of general and special agenda of society.

OVERVIEW OF AGENDA SETTING THEORY

Agenda setting research was first mentioned in a book known as public opinion in year 1922 by Walter Lippman. The book stated that people perception of the world is affected by the news media. It was in year 1972, this statement was tested by McCombs and Shaw and they termed it as agenda setting. The study showcased that there is a strong correlation between issues covered by the news media and issues that were considered as important by the general public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Another element in agenda setting theory was need for orientation and issue salience, this was known as first level agenda setting.

The agenda setting theory stated that mass media sets the agenda for public opinion by bringing forth specific issues. Agenda setting is concept that transfers salience from media (agenda primers) to consumers (agenda adopters) (Ghorparde, 1986). Past research on agenda setting have highlighted a correlation between what media deems important and what people think are important. The foundation of public opinion stems from agenda setting (Rogers and Dearing, 1988). Agenda setting notion relied on transfer of issues highlighted in media to public. The agenda setting theory explains correlation between media coverage of issue and what people think about issue. It is note that correlation occurs frequently. Furthermore, it is believed that the theory occurs because of media nature of showcasing news selectively. The media act as gatekeepers of information and the issue public considered important is product of media gatekeeping. It is said that agenda setting is a three-part function process, first is media agenda (issues discussed by media); second is public agenda (issues discussed and relevant to public) and third is policy agenda (issue that policy maker think is important).

The agenda setting in 90s focused more on priming, next, the problem of second level agenda setting was identified. In second level agenda setting, the media has effect on two grounds, one, it affects what public think and second, it also affects how the audience should think about the issue. People perceive certain issues when media assigns attributes to the event that can be cognitive or affective (McCombs et al., 1997). The concept of time lag is important in first level agenda and second level agenda setting. Time lag is time that the issue media covers before the audience thinks its important. Academicians would focus their research on the duration of specific issue and this lead to description of time frame (Wanta & Hu, 1994). The optimal effect span varied from 4 to 6 weeks (Winter & Eyal, 1981) to 3-4 months (Shoemaker, Wanta, & Leggett, 1989) to lag of 3 weeks. However, the optimal effect span was reduced considerably once the academicians in research analysed the online news media.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA & ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Social media is commonly used as one of the most important mass communication tool in the current age. Social media is a representation of services, vehicles and implementation, social media provide interaction by using users' network technology. Social media is said to be a process which is inclusive of views, approaches, ideas, at the same time due to specific vehicles and methods, it becomes more interactive in nature (Kahraman, 2010). The social media environment have lead to a rapid diffusion with shared information, content and increased number of people joining social media. This rapid diffusion is possible due to constant interaction between people or groups. Social media play an important role in determining social agenda. The social media may be divided into three major

components. These components are blogs, wikis and social networks.

Social networking sites are defined as data-based service online that enable users' to create their own profile, list other users' profile in their own and follow other individuals on internet. These networking sites create a virtual group that act together in aspects of idea sharing, solution finding and similar activities. Users' may form their own social group and share every written and visual material on social network. These implantations are free of charge. Among the number of different social networks, Facebook and Twitter appear to be the most active sites of current new media (Gunduz & Pembecioglu, 2013). Facebook and twitter function as online social platforms that allows users' to organize social activity, share information, ideas, form their own groups based on their own interests (Boyd & Ellison, 2012). Twitter allows registered users' to send and read character text messages called as tweets. The registered users' are allowed to create, share and read tweets; the unregistered users are only allowed to read. It is said to be one of the fastest growing networks. Twitter transfers the events of daily life in the virtual environment; thus, it has a chance to carry the real agenda of society into social media.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The rapid growth of social networking sites has influenced academic research in mass communication and journalism. As stated before, social networking sites are said to be similar to other genres of communities online that support communications which are computer mediated and are different due to the specific features (Boyd, 2010). On the basis of literature review, key characteristics have been identified, they are: a) user may create profiles, b) availability of tools for communication in

social networking sites and social media, c) status update tools d) likes and e) share for distributing information (Boyd, 2010). The high interactivity provided by social networking sites is free from time and space limitations, it brings forth the possibility of creator and receiver switching roles and possibility of reaction within the context of message. Social networking sites allow receiver to know the message creator and the way they are connected (Jenkins, 2006). Social networking sites allow the old and new media penetrate each other. It is important to understand the characteristics of social media and examine in relation to agenda setting theory.

RELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND AGENDA

Since the inception of social media, it has gained more popularity than traditional media outlets in past few years. Social media aids in determination of agenda of other social groups. Journalist in Indian media organization stated that 'A user generated content or published event may be turned into an important agenda on social media due to fast dissemination. Any UGC or published event once shared on social network site such as twitter or Facebook, it can be shared, liked or retweeted instantly, thus, it is disseminated to large user base at a short period of time. The tools in social networking sites enabled users' to comment, retweet on top trending subject for the day'. News values doesn't take precedence among users' because if the subject is attractive it gains popularity among users'. However, subjects published by the press on social network sites may form daily agenda on the virtual environment. Many a times already published news items are discussed among users' on social networking sites and reshape the agenda.

AGENDA SETTING THEORY IN NETWORKED ENVIRONMENT.

The agenda setting theory was first proposed in 1970s, however, with emergence of social networking sites there is growing amount of research among scholars. In year 2005, McCombs acknowledged that internet has changed the communication landscape with multiple new channels (McCombs, 2005). McCombs introduced five stages of agenda setting and examined in correspondence with new communication landscape. Based on the literature review and interviews, few focused on the challenges posed by the social media on agenda setting effect.

The news media sets the agenda for the public, wherein the media highlights few issues that are more important. However, in social networking sites age the information received by the public is through pages they follow or receive posts shared by their friends. Hence, the users adopt the role of primary sources for information. Journalist stated that they find The most common news interaction in social networking sites with users is distribution through repost or sharing stories, images, videos. The users' set the issues that are important by sharing it with other users'. Users' personal network and social networking sites algorithm create an impact on agenda setting at one level, this in turn effects the messages that the users' receive. Another journalist highlighted that the Traditional news media outlets utilize social networking sites to distribute their content and attract users'. The reason for this trend is that social networking sites are biggest source of traffic on web. They generate more clicks on links than other website (Dash, 2010). Hence, journalist stated that the traditional media outlets still are primary content providers but users' determine what is more important and what is less.

Journalists stated that 'the distinction between producers and consumers help to

identify who sets the agenda and the medium that is to be used'. This forms the second basis for agenda setting effect (McCombs, 2005). In the interview conducted, one journalists stated that 'the tools provided by social networking sites helps to lower the access barriers for users', thus, the traditional gatekeepers role has been changing. The users' at times adopt the role as information producers thus, the actual information producers (i.e., journalists or editors) are losing monopoly over information. The audience that consumes news has changed from passive too active, wherein the users' filter information from traditional and non-traditional outlets. This was labelled as gate-watching (Bruns, 2005). The phenomena where users' utilize social networking sites to redistribute content is called as audience gatekeeping (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009).

The changes in phenomenon challenge the two step flow communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). One assumption of agenda setting is the amount of time taken for agenda to be transferred from media to agenda. However, the emergence of social networking sites has questioned the existence of time lag. Past studies have highlighted that the effects of agenda setting are in decline as the day progresses (Weeks & Southwell, 2010). Furthermore, the number of likes and shares determine the importance of message. The more shares and likes a message receives more the probability of the sharing in future (Sunstein, 2009). The information spreads in the network from one user to next, this is known as the network effect. This effect challenges the primary assumption of agenda setting theory, that agenda set by the media and it spreads through network, however, the less important news might gain more traction among users' than the original agenda set by media. As a result, different social networking sites have different agendas. There is greater media fragmentation on social networking sites, to support this, Pew Research center

released a new media index weekly, which highlighted different trending stories on twitter and Facebook (Guskin & Tan, 2012).

MEDIA AGENDA SOURCES IN NETWORKED ENVIRONMENT

One part of agenda setting theory focused on what or who influence traditional media agenda. For media, at times, other media outlets agenda may be source of their own. This phenomenon is known as inter media agenda setting (McCombs, 2005). Past studies have showcased how different online platforms could become media agenda sources. Past scholars have analysed the relationships between traditional media agendas and blog agendas. The result highlighted that journalists are impacted by the bloggers (Messner & Distaso, 2008). Journalists in Indian media organization believe that 'the social networking sites are now proving to be source of media agenda only if it complies with organizations editorial policies'. Empirical studies conducted concluded that social networking sites are source for media agenda (Jacobs, 2013). Few research study highlighted that agenda setting effects is strong in traditional media which keep online communities within social networking sites.

USAGE OF TWITTER AND WEBLOGS: JOURNALISM ROUTINES USED FOR AGENDA BUILDING

The social networking sites have been studied by scholars in past to understand their influence in public opinion and its instrumental role in politics. Studied have been conducted if social networking sites challenged the journalism practice and routine in agenda building. The goal is to measure on basis of several studies, if traditional media journalism routines and

standards have been reviewed and challenged.

A study concluded that weblogs have brought about potential changes to the products generated in news room and have challenged journalism on transparency, accountability, role as gatekeeper and nonpartisanship (Singer, 2005). Unlimited amount of sources available online in social media has lead to reconceptualizing of term gatekeeper as gatewatcher, wherein users', re edit, re filter and create media content. Furthermore, there are less gates through information must be passed, though, weblogs formats may be considered as a potential place for production of content outside newsrooms, journalists in current day and age still prefer to stick to old gatekeeping roles (Singer, 2005). Journalists agree that 'Mass media initially showcased no mechanisms to audience in matters of production of information'. But, weblogs, provided a potential towards greater accountability and transparency in journalists professional routines. The weblogs showcased information with links to provide back up information which traditional media outlets fail to do (Lasorsa et al., 2012).

In news production process, journalists agree that they are avid users' of twitter, Twitter acts as a gateway for journalists to give them sources, stories and ideas (Farhi, 2009). Journalists agree that 'twitter is the most commonly used platform in Indian media organizations. Twitter is utilized to source out new stories and understand the mindset of the users towards specific news items'. However, journalists are able to externalize tasks through open distribution and this new phenomenon is known as crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is defined as a function hat is externalized by the journalist and distributed to a group (i.e. undefined) which may perform the job. It can be collaboratively or individually (Howe, 2006). Journalists raised their doubts about the social networking site,

Twitter and agree that not only pose challenges to journalists as their role as gatekeeper but also offers them to expand transparency and accountability (Lasorsa et al. 2012). A study was conducted along similar lines and concluded that journalists tend to stay loyal towards the news organization by normalizing their accounts. Journalists in traditional media outlets in India utilize social media to promote published articles providing an option to share, repost or make article viral via twitter. However, journalists in traditional media outlets such as newspapers are still reluctant to accept contributions given by readers (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012). The capacity to expand the information traffic by users' has challenged the centralized role of mass media and has impacted the newsmakers when agenda building, the consequences on agenda setting theory is explained in following section.

EFFECT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON AGENDA SETTING

In the study of agenda setting effects, there are three consequences: opinion formation, opinion priming about public figures and shaping the public opinion by stressing about specific issues and its attributes (McCombs, 2005). The emergence of social networking sites has led to study and investigation of the agenda setting consequences with SNS. Furthermore, there is a new phenomenon known as reverse agenda setting effects. In reverse agenda setting, the public utilizes social networking sites to tell the media what to think. The users' are adopting the role of mass media in communicating the attributes of an issue to public.

In matters of opinion formation, social networking sites has challenged the traditional media outlets in multiple ways. Social networking sites allow users' to find news on their own, thus, its more difficult for them to form a new opinion. This is defined as homophily effect. In this

effect similarity means a connection. The result of homophily effect is a homogenous connection networks in respect to demographic, social or behavioural characteristics. This effect in relation to social networking sites led to creation of communities who are like-minded. Social networking sites allow the users' to find other individuals and communities who have same views and opinions. Once users' join the like-minded communities, they join the community's agenda, which leads to agenda melding and it strengthen their pre-existing opinions and form a group identity (Bakshy et al., 2012; McPherson et al., 2001).

The second consequence of agenda setting effect is opinion priming about public figures. The social networking sites allow politicians to directly be engaged with users' and eliminate media as only communication means (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). Additionally users' can use social networking sites to influence politicians about a specific issue, this might lead to reverse agenda setting effects (Castells, 2012, Harlow, 2012, Lim, 2012).

Lastly, social networking sites may also influence users' on how to think about a specific issue. Additionally, social networking sites, has led to more fragmentation and individualization in agenda setting due to the homophily effect. A negative consequence of it would be public agenda being polarized and partial information exposure among the users.

CONCLUSION

This research paper attempts to understand the emergence of social networking sites, its usage and how pattern changes in consumption, production and distribution of news has impacted the agenda setting theory. The research paper provided use of both interview and a brief over view of social media and its characteristics such as content sharing with friends network,

personalization of content, high interactivity led to new effects such as network and homophily and information diffusion speed have challenged the effect of agenda setting in today's day and age.

Journalists agree that 'the social networking sites has simply modified the agenda setting theory and changed the role of traditional media. The role of traditional media is decentralized in nature rather than centralized role'. The agenda setting power hasn't diminished but it has gained a new channel (Sayre et al., 2010). Social media platforms allow news to be transmitted to public and is simply a new medium for traditional media outlets. However, more empirical study is required in this field. Another aspect the social networking theory challenge is the research methods, the methods utilized by scholars to examine the agenda setting effects in relation to new media. The environment of social networking sites allow introduction of new methods and tools such as discourse analysis, social network analysis (Guo, 2012) or even qualitative content analysis (Firdaus, 2012). The research paper attempted to explore dynamics of information created by social networking sites in relation to twitter and weblogs, and how it has changed the journalism routines in agenda building. Additionally, the journalists have a non-critical role as a gatewatcher rather than gatekeeper. Studies concluded that journalists in elite media use social networking sites to normalize tools and are less likely to give up gatekeeping role or provide accountability and transparency.

Lastly, with the existence of active users', there is a threat to viability of agenda setting theory. Furthermore, the power of media agenda is no longer monolithic and there is a significant resistance by active users'. It is important to note that the source multiplicity doesn't destroy perspectives and indexing topics as per the theory media prioritize those institutes in power, political elites that still maintain

media coverage. There is a democratized information flow with the inclusion of blogs, social media accounts of political leaders and think tanks. It is important to observe the context in which media sets the agenda both in traditional and social media setting. It is important to note that news messages may no longer be studied in isolation of context in which they are produced.

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