

## 2006 – International Symposium on Online Journalism

### Saturday – Keynote Speaker

*Internet: The New Frontier for Agenda-Setting Effects*

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#### **Speaker:**

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**MAXWELL McCOMBS:** We've made it through the technology barrier. OK. One always wonders, when you come up to speak.

Well, I'll try to live up to that introduction that Rod gave me, and - I'm really delighted to have this opportunity to spend some time with you this morning, talking about agenda-setting research, particularly as regards the Internet, both some of the things that are going on at the present time, and also the opportunities that lie ahead of us for research and exploration in these areas. As Rod suggested, agenda-setting theory has continued to expand over the year - years - some of you are familiar with the history of this research, some of you are not, so I'll kind of begin with a quick sketch, and then we'll kind of look at where it is today in regard to the Internet.

This research - the origins, the intellectual origins go all the way back to ancient times, or at least in the view of my students, ancient times - that is, Walter Lippman's 1922 book on public opinion. They regard that as very ancient times - you know, coming just after the Greeks and the Romans. [laughter] But Walter Lippman began his book, *Public Opinion*, with a chapter titled "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." And it was his thesis that it was the news media, mostly newspapers in his day, that were the link between the world outside and the pictures that we had in our heads of that world. And his important point was that our behavior was a response not to the world, but to those pictures in our heads - to the world as we imagine it - imagined it to be, correct or incorrect.

Well, in 1968, Don Shaw and I, who were both at the University of North Carolina at the time, at Chapel Hill, undertook to do a rather precise mapping of this idea during the 1968 presidential election. And so we looked at the pattern of news coverage of public issues in the major news media that voters in Chapel Hill used for information to see what was what we call "the media agenda" - that is, what was the pattern of coverage, and it's important to put a footnote in here (professors often speak in footnotes); when we use the term "agenda," we're using it in a neutral, descriptive term, not in the pejorative sense of "to have an agenda" - a premeditated set of ideas or goals that you're going to foist off on someone. So we began by looking at the "media agenda" - what were the issues that were prominent in the news? And then we conducted a public opinion survey to see what voters in Chapel Hill thought were the important issues. And Rod's already alluded to this linkage, and then indeed we found a near-perfect correspondence in the pattern of issues on the public agenda, the array of issues - the issues the public thought was most important, the one they thought second-most important, et cetera. That the lineup of issues on the

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public agenda was very similar to the lineup of issues that was in the new coverage of the previous month.

This was the first stage of agenda-setting research; it's since expanded into five distinct stages, and we'll touch briefly on all of those this morning. The longer version takes 15 weeks this semester, but I don't think we have quite that much time this morning. So the first stage of agenda-setting theory, then, is this relationship between the media agenda - the prominence of issues in the media - and perceptions of the importance of those among the public. And this remains, to this day, the core area of agenda-setting. But by the very next presidential election, 1972, we were already beginning to expand into a second stage - that is, we were not saying that this was an unfounded influence that the media had, or that it was an influence that swept across every member of the population. That is, it was very much limited by a psychological state or condition that we called "need for orientation." That is, different people have different levels of interest, say, in elections, and in other aspects of public affairs. People are - vary tremendously in how much they already know about specific issues, specific aspects of public affairs. This is captured in the concept of "need for orientation" - the idea that if people are in an unfamiliar situation, they feel this "need for orientation" - in the case of elections, in many other aspects of public affairs, they turn to the news media to orient themselves. And, not surprisingly then, the degree of influence that the media exerts on their perceptions of issue accordance, the strengths of these agenda-setting effects, varies directly with the level of "need for orientation." If a person is already highly knowledgeable, then the media is not going to have very much influence. On the other hand, if the person is very interested in a particular area, but knows little about it, they will have a high "need for orientation" - and there, for instance, we find very strong agenda-setting effects.

So the second stage of agenda-setting theory, that appeared fairly rapidly after the initial work, was to look at the constraints on these effects, the psychological conditions under which this influence worked. And by the third presidential election that we were involved in as researchers, 1976, we were expanding this concept of the agenda-setting influence of the media, and the best way to think about that is to be rather abstract for a moment. That is, the basic idea of an agenda-setting influence of the media on issues can be translated into more abstract terms as "we are dealing with an agenda of some set of objects."

In most of the agenda-setting research, the objects are, indeed, public issues. But in the primary season of a political year, you could also think about a set of candidates. And, indeed, the research - not just in agenda-setting, but in political communication generally - shows that the prominence of candidates in the public mind, how aware the public are of various candidates, how much they know about them, also depends a great deal on how much attention the media have paid to them. This is, of course, primarily in the news. Candidates can also, of course, gain some attention by paying for advertising, but of course there's a high correlation between their prominence in the news and how much money they're even able to raise to pay for the advertising.

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So we can think of the basic stage of agenda-setting theory, the sort of thing we looked at in Chapel Hill, as dealing with object salience, or the prominence of objects: public issues, political candidates, other public figures. It could be any set of objects that you might be interested in. Most of the research is in a political context, but increasingly people are taking this into very different arenas. The advantage of thinking about the first level - that Chapel Hill kind of study - as a set of objects, and the prominence of those objects, is that objects have attributes. They have certain characteristics. When the news tells you about some issue, or person, or some other object, they also tell you some of the characteristics of that object. And this can, of course, vary tremendously; it depends on the election, the person, et cetera. One of my favorite stories about the attribute agenda... well, let me add one other thing.

So, just as there is an agenda of objects that you can discern in the media, and that you can also go out and measure among the public, for each of those objects, there is an agenda of attributes, and you can in fact array those attributes in rank order - you can look at the - very easily, in the newspaper, and say, "Ah, the attribute most emphasized for this person or this issue is this, and this is second, and this is third, et cetera." And we found that we could also, in our public opinion surveys, ascertain a similar agenda of attributes for members of the public. The question which seems to work very well, not just in the United States, but in other countries around the world, is a very nice open-ended question that goes something like, "Suppose you had a friend who had been away for a long time, and knew nothing about George Bush. What would you tell them?" People give very different kinds of answers. Some people describe a political figure, in terms of their political ideology. Others give more encyclopedic, biographical kinds of descriptions. Others give more "personality" kinds of sketches. That is, people can describe these candidates, and similarly they can describe the issues, in many, many different ways.

But what we find is that the attribute agenda also tends to correspond very closely to the attribute agenda that's in the news. That is, the news sketches, or "pictures," of these people. So again, we're going back to this idea of Lippman's, "the pictures in our heads." Perhaps a quick way to summarize the difference between the basic agenda-setting effect, or what's now come to be called attribute agenda-setting, is in terms of Lippman's phrase "the pictures in our heads." The object agenda, in effect, says "What are the pictures about? What are they pictures of?" The attribute agenda setting really says "What are the pictures? What does this really look like?"

Well, once we got as far as that third stage, attribute agenda-setting... I was talking about that at a conference in Germany some years ago, and a friend of mine, Hans-Bernd Brosius, a professor in Munich, came up afterwards, and he said "This is really fantastic, Max." And I said, "Well, I'm glad you find the idea of attribute agenda-setting interesting." He said, "Well, yes, it's very interesting; but the reason it's really fantastic is now we get to do, all over again with attribute agendas, what we did starting with Chapel Hill with basic agendas." Well, that was about fifteen or twenty years ago. We're back to that situation again - which is why I put the phrase there, [referring to the visual aid] "Taking it from the top." We can take it from the

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top again as we move on to the Internet as a place to explore the agenda-setting role of the media.

And there are two very exciting trends that are going on in the research at the present time. One is this continued expansion that Dean Hart talked about in the new settings; the Internet's an obvious place to go to look for the same kinds of effects for all of those three stages that we just briefly looked at. It's an exciting place to go look at those, in terms of these new players in the communication arena. And at the same time, because the theory's been around now for over thirty years, people are returning to some of the basic concepts and are beginning to further elaborate those. And the Internet provides, I think, a particularly interesting place for several of these. But let me just briefly talk about, for each of these - and I've only mentioned three aspects, or three stages, of agenda-setting... we'll get to the other two as we go through each area. You briefly saw the last two. The theory's now expanded into five stages. All of these are very active areas of research, as regards the Internet; all of them offer tremendous opportunities.

Obviously, the starting point is to look at the same kind of basic agenda-setting effects that we looked at in Chapel Hill. There we were looking at very traditional media: newspapers, network television, news magazines. The obvious question, as we now have online newspapers and various kind of websites, we have blogs, et cetera: do they also exert similar kinds of influence on the public? And the basic answer, at this point, is: yes, they do. The literature is not yet extensive, because of course this is still a relatively new area. For those of you who are researchers, who are familiar with this area, you're aware that most of the research looking at agenda-setting effects of the Internet, particularly of online newspapers, have been experimental studies - some using simulated online newspapers, some using actual online vehicles.

Probably the most famous of the ones using actual online media is a study - an experiment by Althaus and Tewksbury, who - in an interesting way - compared readers of the print edition of the New York Times with readers of the online edition... ah, I have to insert here, the old online edition, not the facsimile one... or, I guess, now we could even say the traditional online medium. [laughs]. Some things change very fast. And, of course, because it was an experiment, they had a control group that saw neither one, that functioned as a baseline. Well, they obviously replicated the kinds of agenda-setting effects you get with newspapers. They also found agenda-setting effects for the online version. Interestingly, the effects were stronger for the print edition of the New York Times than they were for the online version. There were effects in both instances, but they were stronger for the print edition. This is obviously a study that needs to be replicated. Was that, the difference between print and online, just a particular idiosyncrasy of that particular experiment? Or is this, in fact, a consistent pattern? And, of course, since they did their experiment, there're now two online versions of the New York Times, so you could even elaborate it farther. But you could also use other kinds of online - you know - vehicles. But in terms of basic agenda-setting effects, the answer is very clear: yes, they do have effects.

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The second area is contingent conditions, the constraints, the idea of "need for orientation." Here again, I think this is a particularly rich area for exploration, in regards to use of online media, because it definitely involves a higher degree of interactivity than many traditional media do - say, particularly television news, which you can be a very passive participant in. So, I think the idea of "need for orientation" provides a particularly rich opportunity to go back and really understand the dynamics of how people use these various online Internet sources. What are the patterns there? What are the motivations that identify these various patterns?

There's also an additional opportunity there, because a Swiss scholar, Jrg Matthes, at the University of Zurich, has developed a new and different approach to "need for orientation" from the one that's traditionally been used since it was introduced back in 1972. He's actually developed three sets of scales to measure different aspects of "need for orientation." The first of these is very similar to the original idea: the degree of "need for orientation" toward a particular issue that's in the news. Is it something you need to turn to the news to learn a great deal about, or is it something you're already reasonably well-informed about? So, differences between high and low needs for - "need for orientation" toward a particular issue. Then, taking into account this second level of agenda-setting, attribute agenda-setting, he has a second set of scales that measure "need for orientation" toward the specific attributes, or aspects, of the issue. The current immigration issue that's very much in the news in the United States would be an excellent example of that area, because it is a complex issue, with many different aspects. Very few people probably claim that, "Yes, I know all about all the aspects of this issue." Some of us know a little bit about one or two; many people know very little about any of them. Unfortunately, I think, including some of the people in the Congress... but that's another matter.

So, a second area in Matthes' approach to "need for orientation," "need for orientation" to specific aspects of the issue. And, of course, the Internet is a rich terrain here, for people with a high "need for orientation" toward specific aspects. They can probably read the general news presentations, they can pursue the hyperlinks to more detailed information about certain aspects of an issue, they can of course go off to other, even more specialized, websites to learn about the issues. And, in Matthes' approach to "need for orientation," the third - which is an interesting one - is "need for orientation" in regard to journalistic evaluations of the issues. To what extent are people receptive to, or closed to, journalists' evaluations of what are the important aspects of these issues, what makes sense, what doesn't make sense. This particularly might suggest a way of approaching blogs, the use of blogs by people, how much influence those blogs end up having with them.

So this second stage, the contingent conditions for agenda-setting effects, has become, again, a very, very active area of inquiry - one that, I think, can teach us a lot about how people use Internet sources of information. The Matthes scale already takes us into the area of agenda-setting effects... but there are also a number of other interesting questions that can be raised there. As the research developed, following the Chapel Hill study, on the kinds of influence that the media can have...

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In Chapel Hill, there was literally - looking at an agenda of issues in the news, what was first, what was second, what was third, et cetera, in the prominent - in prominent coverage, compared to a similar agenda among the public. That is, the full array of issues that were out there in the news compared to the full array of issues that were out there in the public mind.

Well, that's the way the real world works, but it's also a very messy way of doing research, particularly early on, when you're trying to make sense of how these changes take place, because - of course - it's a constantly changing situation, both in terms of what's in the news and what's in the public mind. So, some of the research early on began to focus on a specific issue, the shifting prominence or salience of that issue over time in the news, and how the shifting prominence or salience in the news influenced the shift in the public mind.

Probably one of the most ambitious of those studies was carried out some years ago by two of my students when I was at Syracuse University. They looked at the civil rights issue over a period of twenty-five years. Now, if you go back and look, for instance, in one of the questions in the Gallup Poll that's frequently used in agenda-setting research, a question pioneered by Gallup in the 1930's that goes, "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" People, again, they could say anything that comes to mind. Well, we find, of course, that people tend to follow the leads, the cues, offered by the news. In the [original?] research, it was that whole set of cues about a full set of issues.

But Jim Winter and Chaim Eyal looked at was a single issue - civil rights. They looked at all the Gallup polls, over twenty-five years, that asked people, "What's the most important problem?" to see what was the prominence of civil rights. Well, sometimes it did not appear at all in the responses to that question. At other times, it was at a relatively high level - perhaps twenty-five, thirty percent of the public would nominate that as the most important problem. And, at other times, it was somewhere in between. Now, there was no simple cycle or pattern to this; that is, those - the level of those answers simply went up and down over time. They then looked at the coverage in the news of civil rights for six months prior to each of those polls. It took them a long time to look through all those newspapers. And, as it turned out, they did a lot of unnecessary work, because the rise and fall of civil rights in the public mind as measured in those Gallup polls essentially reflected what had been in the news in the previous one month. It was a little bit of residual influence from, you know, months two, three, four, five, and six, but essentially, the public, in its responses to "what is the most important problem," and in naming civil rights, reflected the prominence of civil rights in the news in the previous month.

So, when you're looking at basic agenda-setting effects, you can either look at a full array of issues, or you can focus over one issue and its shifting salience or prominence over time. You can do the same thing with attributes. And a question, which is still very much an open question, is: when we ask people, "What would you tell a friend about George Bush?" or "What would you tell them about the immigration issue?" or "What would you tell them about budget deficits?" or

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whatever issue or set of issues you're interested in, is it the full array of attributes in the news that's influencing their picture, or are there certain particular attributes that really have extraordinary influence on their description?

Salma Ghanem came up with an interesting name for that situation where one particular attribute influences people's idea about whatever the object is - a person, an issue, or whatever - and also even tends to influence their attitudes. She called that situation where one particular attribute is prominent, has kind of been plucked out of the news coverage, she called those "compelling arguments" - that, when I see this issue or person presented in a particular way, that is a "compelling argument" in my mind. Two quick examples of that. In Salma's doctoral dissertation here some years ago, she was studying the issue of crime, in particular what I call "the great imaginary Texas crime wave." That was not the title, the formal title, of the dissertation [laughter], but it's my title. It was a situation where the Texas poll was asking the MIP, the "most important problem" question, every three months, and we saw crime going up and up and up and up in the public mind. And we wondered, "Why is this happening?" Because, in fact, we knew that in terms of actual crime rates, for three years prior to this, crime in every major category in every part of Texas had been declining. So, here you have reality going this way, and public opinion going this way... Well, it's obvious to you this morning where Salma and I, interested in agenda-setting, would decide to look for an explanation for this. We would look at news coverage of crime. And, indeed, for reasons that are still not entirely clear, news coverage began to climb during this period. And in a period of declining crime rates, the major newspapers of the state, and television news, was giving increased prominence to crime, and this was driving public concern.

And, indeed, in her analysis of the... of public opinion data, she found that if you just look at one particular subset of crime news, crimes where the psychological distance between the crime and a member of the audience would be low - that is, for instance, if the crime occurred in Texas, not in Germany or Chicago or New York - and the kind of crime where you, as an average individual, might in fact be involved - for instance, random drive-by shootings - then in those cases those tended to function as "compelling arguments." That you could kind of ignore the rest of the crime coverage, and you could see exactly what was pushing public opinion.

Another instance of what, at least in the mind of one person, was a "compelling argument" was in the presidential campaign where Bob Dole challenged Bill Clinton. We know the outcome, of course. And shortly after that election, at a news conference, a very brash journalist asked Senator Dole what he thought of the news coverage of his campaign. And, in his usual style, his quick answer was "Not much." And then he elaborated. He said, "It seemed to me" - and I'm going to use my language, but it's essentially a paraphrase of what he said - he said, "It seemed to me that there was only one dominant attribute in the news coverage; namely, that I was old. Not wise and mature, not politically experienced and knowledgeable, just old. And that, against a youthful Bill Clinton, you know, didn't work all that well." So there are, certainly, instances where media - both traditional media and Internet

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sources - have attribute agenda-setting effects. This question of "is it the full array of attributes - all of the different aspects of an issue, or the characteristics of an individual - that impact the picture in the public mind? Are there certain compelling arguments' in that coverage?"

Now we go to the final two stages of agenda-setting theory, and I didn't talk about these earlier. Once it was very clear that news coverage impacted the prominence of issues and attributes in the public mind, scholars began to ask the obvious question: "If the media can set the public's agenda, who sets the media's agenda? Where does this agenda come from?" Well, that, as everyone in this room knows, is an exceedingly complex question. There are many origins that feed in to shaping the media agenda. You know, most immediately, the traditions and news norms of journalism itself, as a profession. But there are also the influences of outside sources, press spokespersons for government officials and politicians, public relations agencies... there are many, many influences that feed in to shaping the media agenda - although my argument remains that it is the news norms and traditions of journalism itself that are ultimately the most powerful, because that's what referees all those other influences and decides, "Are they in bounds or out of bounds? No, no, you stepped out - you know - we're not going to use that." So, even the application of whether news norms and values themselves are changing as a result of different kinds of news presentations on the Internet is in itself an interesting question.

And of course, then, the whole mix of different media - the relationship that exists, for instance, between blogs and news media, both Internet and traditional. Within this area, generally referred to as "origins of the media agenda," there's a particularly fascinating area for me, because I come out of a journalism background, and that's, in the jargon of the research, is called "inter-media agenda-setting" - that is, the influence of one news media on another in setting the agenda.

Anecdotally, of course, there are lots and lots of stories about the influence of the New York Times on the news agendas of other news organizations. Those of us who live here in Austin, we see it almost every morning. If, as I suspect most of us do, on the breakfast table there is the New York Times and there is the Austin-American Statesman... now, if you stand off, you know, five feet, or - if they were over there on the table - the two newspapers look nothing alike. But when you get up closer, where you can see what stories are, quote, "on the agenda," there is a strong resemblance to the two. I've always - I've never quite had the opportunity to ask Rich Opel, the editor of the American Statesman, the key question about inter-media agenda setting. As many of you, or perhaps all of you know, the Austin-American Statesman prints the Southwest edition of the New York Times. And they print it before they print the local paper. My question is, "Whose job in the press room is it to scoop up the first twenty-five copies off the press and take them upstairs to the newsroom?" Because it's nice to, you know, you could look at it online, et cetera, but I think most of us still like to feel newsprint, to lay the paper out on a table and look at it. And so, I'm absolutely convinced the first twenty-five copies of the New York Times that come off the American press, the Statesman's



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press, do not go into any delivery truck. They go right upstairs, to be looked at by the local news staff.

So, this is obviously a very, very rich area - the interplay between all these new members of the Internet community and traditional news media. One could spend years and years and years in that area, certainly.

And finally, in the area I won't talk much about but simply identify, is: where does all this lead? Well, as we talked about agenda-setting effects, both on issues and aspects of those issues, or images of candidates, the ultimate question is, then, "What are the consequences of creating these pictures in the public's mind?" Well, that's kind of, generally... a general frontier for all agenda-setting research, not just that focused on the Internet, and we find that, indeed, it has significant consequences for, first of all, whether people even hold opinions about these issues and persons, and second, in many cases it often predicts very precisely what their opinions are.

To go back to the example of "What would you tell your friend about George Bush?" If you write that down for me, and I read it, I probably don't need to ask you to fill out a ratings scale, you know, from minus three to plus three, in regard to how you feel about George Bush. If I read your "picture," I probably have a very good idea of where you come down, in terms of your attitude or opinion, and we find that there are significant consequences there.

Finally, there's the big, big question raised by the Internet, and the appearance of all these new sources of information. Some of my more pessimistic colleagues, our more pessimistic colleagues, have said, "Well, now there are so many sources out there, there are so many players in the communications and journalism arena, that this is the end of agenda-setting, and the end particularly of the role of the media in creating social consensus." Let me just comment briefly on the link between agenda-setting and social consensus.

My friend Don Shaw, with whom all this started back in 1968 in Chapel Hill, and one of his students, Shannon Martin, who's now at the University of Maine (she didn't like the heat in the South, so she went north) did a very interesting kind of flip-flop on demographics. Usually, in public opinion surveys, when we look at demographics, they're used to identify differences, that, "Oh, attitudes towards this political figure differ between men and women, between young people and older people, between people with low incomes and high incomes." They looked at the agendas of these different demographic groups. Their question was, "As people use the news media more, do these differences that we've come to expect between men and women, young people, old people, et cetera - do these differences diminish? That is, do their agendas begin to converge?" And the answer is: yes, they do.

The original research was done in North Carolina. It's since been replicated in locations as diverse as Taiwan and Spain. That is, generally one of the social roles of the news media is it begins to bring people together, to get them, you might say, on

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the same page in regard to what are the most important issues. Well, our more pessimistic colleagues say, "Well, if there are lots of new players with lots of different agendas, this isn't going to happen anymore." It's very much an open question: is this the end of agenda-setting and social consensus as we've known it? Or will this continue to be a social role of the new media? For those who are pessimistic, there are three assumptions involved in their thinking. And I'll summarize these very quickly, and kind of suggest what the current evidence suggests.

The first assumption is, of course, that there will be wide access to the Internet. Well, that's increasingly true. I mean, year by year, the, you know, the number of people who have access to the Internet, who use the Internet for news, is growing. However, it is far from, you know, the vast majority. There is still a digital divide out there. It may eventually disappear; it may not. But at least the trend, in terms of wide access, that would lead to the end of agenda-setting, is in place.

The second assumption: the use of many different Internet sources. There the evidence doesn't support the idea of the end of agenda-setting, because at least some of the preliminary evidence suggests that you have the same kind of oligopoly, if you will, in the use of Internet sources that has been found for some time in the use of cable television. Your cable television system probably provides you fifty, sixty channels, maybe eighty or a hundred, some even more. Very few people use sixty or eighty channels on cable. Most people concentrate their attention on a small handful of sources... of cable channels. So much so that there's now pressure to un-bundle cable sources, and let people just buy the few channels that they really want.

This appears to also be happening on the Internet. An interesting statistic by Jim Hamilton, political economist at Duke, who noted that of the top online newspapers, the parent newspaper accounts for only about twenty percent of the circulation of the top one hundred newspapers in the country. But of the top five online sites that are referenced across the Internet, they account for forty-one percent of the hyperlinks that are leading people to these online sites. That is, that the online, the online sites are very much an oligopoly in terms of pulling an audience. Yes, there are hundreds and hundreds, and if you count blogs, millions and millions of sites out there. But they're like some of those remote shopping channels that are on your cable system, you know; they don't go to the Uzbekistan shopping channel very often. There probably is one. I just made that up, obviously, but, ah... [laughter].

And then the third assumption is that, among these Internet sources, there will be diverse agendas. Some of the early research... well, let's go back. What's the situation with - Here, I'm gonna flip down a couple... [referring to the visual aid]. If we go back to Chapel Hill in 1968, and we look at five newspapers and two television networks, all very traditional media, but we look at how similar was the agenda of issues that they were presenting, the median correlation, if you compare every one of them, all - every possible pair - and say, "Well, what's the median correlation," it was very high: plus 0.81. Jason Yu, who did his Masters here, and now, appropriately, is in Chapel Hill, is a doctoral student who recently looked at the six online sources: the New York Times and the Washington Post online, CNN and

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MSNBC, Yahoo News and Google News, and, again, he calculated the correlations between all those different agendas, how similar is the agenda of public issues that they're presenting to the public. The home pages overall, 0.68; if you look at the top three stories, 0.78, which looks remarkably like what we found with traditional media thirty-something years ago.

That is, one of the fairly consistent phenomena we have found over the years and around the world is that the various news media tend to present highly-similar agendas. Sometimes, when I'm feeling unflattering towards my professional colleagues, I remark that journalists are great plagiarists; they look to see what other journalists are doing, and usually they do something very similar. The result is, even though we have a proliferation of sites, of locations that you can go to, there appears, still, to be a high degree of homogeneity in the agenda that's being presented.

Which raises the last question that I'll throw out for my research friends: is the Internet a whole new player, in terms of creating news and information and knowledge? Or is it primarily a distribution system, that perhaps makes it easier for many people to obtain information and even knowledge? That is very much an open question because, of course, the situation is still very much in flux.

Well, I think I've exhausted all but one minute of my time, and I know Rosental has a very exciting program for you this morning. I appreciate this opportunity to spend some time talking about the agenda-setting role of the newspaper, past and future. Thank you very much.

[applause]

**ROSENAL CALMON ALVES:** We don't have very much time, but I think we can [inaudible; presumably, soliciting a question], if somebody wants to have this opportunity... Yes, yes, Claudia, come; I knew you would ask this, because - ah, she's, a Brazilian journalist who's a Nieman Fellow at Harvard now, and at dinner last night she was asking the New York Times a question that I think she's going to ask now.

**MAXWELL McCOMBS:** Okay.

**CLAUDIA ANTUNES:** No but, my question to you is, it's more specific to the [inaudible] - it's only about the data you have about the sources people look at on the Internet for the U.S. only, or for - I mean, when they say that, the way you say that they look at the New York Times was composed -

**MAXWELL McCOMBS:** That's obviously U.S., but-

**CLAUDIA ANTUNES:** Okay.

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MAXWELL McCOMBS: -But my understanding is, the patterns in Europe are very similar. But, ah-

CLAUDIA ANTUNES: My question is, - it [inaudible] - it's almost a consensus that the American press was very benevolent towards Bush after 9/11 and at least until last year. Do you have any data about the attributes that Bush had in the American press before Katrina and after Katrina, and in the state of his specific term, in his popularity, seems less clear. Is this - was this a result of, ah, a different agenda of the media? Or, in this specific case, did the media follow an agenda that was settled outside the media? I think it's a quite complicated case.

MAXWELL McCOMBS: Well, I think it is, and I think the research that would pursue that would indeed be very complicated. Ah, and I have not seen any specific studies on that point.

However, there is a fairly well-settled point from, oh, three or four decades now, that when presidential popularity is high, then the influence of the White House, and of the government generally on the press agenda, is also fairly high. The press, to a considerable degree, follows the lead of the White House. As that popularity drops - or, in some cases, plummets - the press feels much freer to go about its own business, sometimes even to the point of ignoring a great deal of the material put out by the White House.

So I would think, based on that general principle, we would indeed see a very different agenda now than we would have seen, certainly, two years ago. There's an example, a good example, in this morning's New York Times; the story at the bottom right corner of the front page is kind of an overview of the situation regarding all these leaks that are now, you know, being identified as in fact not the, you know, things that Bush was preaching against, "Oh," you know, "we can't have all these leaks" - that, in fact, these were deliberate maneuvers, you know, which - I think, maybe, the key sentence in the whole article was "Everybody knows this always happens, but we usually don't know about it until historians uncover it some years after these people are out of government." In this case, it's surfacing, you know, while the same players are still there.

One of the great advantages of covering courts, which was my niche when I was a journalist, sometimes in court documents - which, of course, you can quote with impunity, without being worried about libel - is, ah, you know, you often find interesting secrets, because once people get into court fights, you know, the gloves come off and it's kind of every person for themselves to survive. But you've raised an interesting set of questions, and I'm not aware of any specific person who's doing research in that area, but it's such an intriguing question I'm confident that someone out there is.

ROSENAL CALMON ALVES: Alright, so thank you very much.

MAXWELL McCOMBS: Thank you. [applause]

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