

# Celebrity Agenda-Setting: A Preliminary Proposal

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## Abstract

The agenda-setting theory has long been around since investigations into the role of the media in the transmission of salience issues and what awareness it generates plus the priority the audience gives same was unearthed. Three derivatives (policy agenda-setting, public agenda-setting and media agenda or agenda building) earlier identified by Rogers and Dearing have been instrumental to these processes and investigations. On account of the impact of the Internet on the communication ecosystem and to complement the earlier three offshoots, the agenda-setting framework is ripe for additional amplification. And because the Internet has expanded the media ambit and rendered additional platforms via convergence and digitization, a distinct category of media content influencer/source has been birthed. Do celebrities have enough impact on Media offering or salient issues that makes it into editorial content? What do available empirical studies say about the preceding query? Employing causal explanatory research design, while using literature review as a research instrument, this article, therefore, examined the historical background of the agenda-setting theory and the dimensional influence of celebrities in the agenda-setting scope and subsequently developed a springboard for the proposed derivate—the 'Celebrity agenda-setting'—whilst considering its conceptual plausibility which is hinged on the impact of the New Media and audience behaviour. Since this is a preliminary proposition; it is posited that scholars and researchers in the communication ecosphere give this concept further attention and exposition.

**Keywords: Celebrity Agenda-setting; Celebrity journalism; Internet impact; Entertainers; Social media**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Agenda-setting is a communication theory that has been around as long as investigation into media effects and audience response has been going on in the industry. From 1922 when Walter Lippmann laid the foundation for agenda-setting in *Public Opinion Quarterly*—in the chapter: "The World Outside And The Pictures in Our Heads"; through Bernard Cohen's 1963 position that 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"—to its formal development by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972; the theory has continued to experience transformation. As an earlier amplification of the framework, Rogers and Dearing (1988), dissected and identified three adjuncts of the agenda-setting theory as: 'Public or Political agenda-setting', 'Media or Agenda-building' and 'Public or Audience agenda-setting'. And Max McCombs outlined three models which have driven most investigations in the field: "awareness model", "priorities model" and "salience model".

Long before the advent of the Internet and social media, celebrities otherwise known as famous persons have held a fascination and to a certain degree, some level of awestruck admiration with the public who follow their activities in the media. The quest by journalists to satisfy the audience's curiosity and information need about their favourite influential persons gave birth to entertainment journalism, otherwise known as celebrity journalism, which had earlier been preceded by Social journalism—both of which predates social media, through which mainstream media nowadays leverage on its updates to further traditional media content. Social journalism, the offshoot of celebrity journalism is a media model which is a combination of professional journalism, contributor, reader and content (Sussman, 2014). As a hybrid journalism framework, it depends on audience engagement, community involvement, social newsgathering and verification, etc.

Celebrity journalism focuses on popular culture, the entertainment business and its cultural products. As the case with other genres of specialized news reporting, entertainment reporting gives attention to amusement, gossip or recreation, while targeting a specific segment of the general audience. Since it began in 1957 in New York, entertainment journalism has now evolved into what we also call celebrity journalism, with the prominence of celebrities within newspapers' content rising—whether on newspaper cover pages or online versions. The genre has become a phenomenon that stretches far beyond gossip columns, tabloid magazines or

newspapers — its strangled hold is now majorly the Internet and "it now constitutes a whole new world within the media" (Gay, 2018). This genre of journalism gives attention to celebrities such as reality TV stars, prominent sports personalities, pop stars, members of the royal and famous families or even prominent entrepreneurs, big media personalities and famous businesses moguls. The focus here centres around the lives of 'big names' or those who (Gay, 2018, citing Boorstin, 2006) described as "well known for their well knownness."

The concept for Celebrity agenda-setting is based on the mainstream media leveraging social media updates by famous persons to project their position and improve media offerings. The question then arises, which is: in the course of entertainment journalists leveraging on celebrities' social media updates to further celebrity journalism, who is particularly setting the agenda—the media or the celebrities? It is pertinent that this poser is considered on account that on social media, celebrities assumed agenda-setting roles by raising opinions concerning issues while they engaged with followers. The traditional media in the process of agenda-building amplifies these positions (of the celebrities) by taking them to a wider public through "vertical media" in which power, authority, and influence flow from top to bottom between the media and the audience.

Nowadays, however, the vertical media process has undergone a rapid transformation with the growing trend of horizontal media—occasioned by the Internet which allows netizens to become sources and creators of information and influence—meaning, information is now distributed horizontally instead of top to down.

In Celebrity agenda-Setting, these public figures with voices that commands attention and respect, continue to capitalize on the vertical media to impact agenda-building of the media. But in a reversal of role, rather than navigating their positions through the intricate vertical process of the mainstream media, social media have now provided a horizontal avenue for interaction with followers, which the traditional media thereafter harvest to inform their audience.

In addition, social media itself has come to grow its version of celebrities. For instance, *Instagram* now has its celebrities—so too do *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *TikTok* and *Snapchat*. In case of *Instagram*, these celebrities are sometimes called 'models'—while *Twitter* and *Facebook* have what netizens and the legacy media called 'Influencers'. On *YouTube* several influencers have ardent followers running into millions if not billions who consume their content and follow their trends.

Social media celebrities may not even fall into any of the categories earlier identified as public figures in the real sense of the word, but are consistent members of cyberspace, who, due to their persistent presence on the social media platforms and with the nature and type of content they create and share online, have garnered a constant following; thereby bringing themselves into reckoning—both with their fans, the public and the traditional media, who now consider such persons as agenda setters, worthy of having their views and contents projected in the traditional media.

Therefore, either through *Twitter*, *YouTube*, *Snapchat*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, or the likes; newspapers are on a constant lookout for updates from the entertainers to feed the yearnings of the audience, even as these social networking platforms have continued to buoy entertainment journalism in the mix.

At the last count, the list of social media networking platforms continues to grow constantly. From *LinkedIn*, *Whatsapp*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Digg*, *TikTok*, *Snapchat*, *YouTube* to *Instagram*, and many more, netizens have seen cyberspace expand to accommodate their ever-widening desire to share, connect, be informed and interact. Another advantage of social media as earlier mentioned is that it has presented platforms for entertainers to bypass traditional media channels to communicate and engage their fans and followers, as it concerns their most intimate thoughts and opinion on public issues or in championing a particular course of action.

### **Agenda-setting: The Springboard**

Agenda-setting theory continues to take a prominent place in mass media research and practice. The theory which postulates that the mass media has the power to determine which issues are important for the day in their publications according to McCombs & Shaw (1972) is currently undergoing scrutiny by communication scholars and researchers (Bennett & Iyengar, 2009). The effort here at amplifying the theory's adjunct is the continuation of that interrogation. As the media space changes, so too do concepts and thoughts which underlies its process and study.

Agenda-setting theory, also known as The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media, which has now expanded to include other adjuncts, was formally first originated by Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs in *Public Opinion Quarterly*. McCombs and Shaw proposed that:

The power of the news media to set a nation's agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence. Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

In the light of this, the scholars opined that the media places more premium on certain news items to the advantage of others to convince the audience that these events or situations deserve more attention compared to others.

As it concerns the ancillaries of agenda-setting, Rogers and Dearing (1988) have identified three types that have guided research in the area over the years. And as Nownes (2019) stated, "there is not a single 'agenda,' rather there are numerous agendas." Nownes was particularly interested in two of those agendas: the 'media agenda', which comprises issues that receive prominent attention in the news media and the 'public agenda' which consists of issues that the public deems the most important issues for discussion and government action at any given time.

Rogers and Dearing had earlier established the theory's adjuncts such as 'Policy-makers or Political agenda setting, Media agenda-setting or Agenda building and Public or Audience agenda-setting'. Considering the influence of celebrities in the communication process in the unfolding era, we can, therefore, introduce another term in the mix in other to complement the earlier three. This is: 'Celebrity agenda-setting.'

As scholars are struggling to understand the effects of social media on the various types of agenda-setting (Bennett & Iyengar, 2009). On this note, Mayer & Cornfield (2008), suggests that as we shift to an environment in which anyone can produce "news" and social media influence our understanding of the world, and suggests that scholars question whether the power of traditional media gatekeepers has been overturned (Groshek & Groshek, 2013). Predictions of how the abundance of information sources online (including social media contents) might impact traditional media offerings range from modification to attenuation, to reversal of influence (Sayre et al., 2010). Reverse agenda-setting as posited by Max McCombs brings us full circle and suggests the public (this time, including celebrities) long seen as a minimal player in agenda-setting, may influence news media (McCombs, 2004). From the standpoint of being agenda-setters in their rights, celebrities could set agendas that are either amplified by the traditional media or pushed to public space via social media devoid of input from the latter.

In the words of Sun Young Lee and Daniel Riffe; the agenda-building theory speculates that the media does not operate within a vacuum. The media agenda is the result of the influences that certain powerful groups exert as a subtle form of social control. Powerful people in this context may comprise celebrities with tremendous influence on their fans and followers, especially on Social media platforms (Seokawati, 2020). There, therefore, exist a possibility that media agenda and celebrity agenda could be playing overlapping roles which eventually influences audience agenda.

Nonetheless, some scholars have attempted to unravel certain relationships between information sources and the agenda the mass media has set up, while probing the concept of who builds the media agenda—in the case of amplification of social media updates by traditional media (Berkowitz, 1992). Social media could therefore impact agenda-setting processes such as media agenda building and intermedia agenda-setting which focuses on the transfer of salient issue across media (McCombs, 2004).

Nownes (2019) confirmed the postulation that popular celebrities can increase the chances that an issue jumps from the media agenda to the public agenda by speaking out publicly about the importance of the issue, especially on their social network pages or accounts. He concluded by saying that "spotlighting certain issues, popular celebrities can indeed affect which issues reach the public agenda." In a 2007 article on celebrity activists and agenda-setting, Jacobsen cited Drezner has stated thus:

but today, the power of soft news has given stars new leverage. Their rising clout has had much to do with how we consume information as it does with the celebrities themselves. Cable television, talk radio and weblogs have radically diversified the news sources available to Americans (Jacobsen, 2013).

It may be postulated that a certain secret pact exists between newsmen and public figures—do celebrities deliberately choose certain social media platforms to share, connect and push their positions and do journalists randomly access these networking sites to project these (celebrities) updates? Saltzman in "Celebrity Journalism and Politics" however, argued that this relationship no longer exists off-camera but clearly on camera also. Celebrities, with the help of journalists, are influencing which issues we should place importance on (Saltzman 2003).

A study conducted by De Los Salmenes and his colleagues in early 2013 postulated that the images celebrities put forward are more acceptable when positive images towards celebrity activism are already on the audience acceptable frame of reference. If a follower does not agree with celebrity endorsements, they will continue to be unaffected by the endorsements around them. Ultimately, the question that should be asked as we go through the technology-fast-paced communication era is: what is the value of celebrities influence on the audience? There have been a series of studies supporting the fact that celebrities indeed influence the public, especially core followers and those who look up to them for validation of thought or opinion. According to Gilmore & Fleming (2018), the Internet personality is the epicentre of a community of like-minded individuals. "No matter the platform, there is always a community interaction, based on the Internet personality. Therefore, the Internet personality satiates our desire to broaden our social network." They further posited that the Internet

personalities capitalize on the audiences' sense of belonging by endorsing products and selling merchandise to their huge audience. While stating that similar to the traditional Hollywood celebrity, "an Internet personality's greatest asset is their social capital. Social capital is the influence that Internet personality has on his or her audience."

While celebrity-folk-worship has been an important aspect of several modern entertainment cultures across the globe; with advancements in communications technology, New media platforms continue to amplify the role celebrities play in the communication process. There was a time when what celebrities only need to have their voices on issues heard were to be interviewed by journalists, but the cyberspace has changed all that now.

In his paper, "Can Celebrities Set the Public Agenda?" Nownes (2019), Submitted that recent research supports two general findings. First, issues that make it onto the media agenda are more likely to make it onto the public agenda than issues that do not. Secondly, celebrities can affect which issues make it onto the media agenda. Together, these two findings beg the following question: if celebrities can affect which issues reach the media agenda, can they also affect which issues on the media agenda reach the public agenda? If celebrity attention to an issue can help an issue reach the media agenda, it is quite plausible that celebrity attention can affect which issues reach the public agenda.

As mentioned by Max McCombs in his recent textbook: "Reverse Agenda-setting", is a situation where public concern sets the media agenda, in the same manner, celebrity agenda could also trigger both media and public agenda. If celebrities hammer frequently on and give prominence to a particular issue in their social media or blogging posts, these issues could be picked up by the mainstream media and given salience and priority.

### **Celebrity Agenda-Setting: A conceptualization**

Celebrity agenda-setting could assume a distinct position as an adjunct of agenda-setting theory since the tool for its enablement—the Internet, continue to expand and offer more opportunities for people, especially celebrities to exert influence on issues of salient priority as set by them (celebrities) for the public. Celebrity agenda-setting is a concept that should be embraced and explicated on especially in this age of Innovative technology, digitization and convergence where the media is steeped in—and the once all-invasive and influential power of the traditional media is dwindling. As observed by Kim & Lee (2006), agenda-setting as it applies to Internet information, content processes is different from traditional agenda-setting, as the Internet is in direct competition with traditional media "and has an enormous capacity for contents' and users' interactivity."

Celebrity agenda setters as influencers of opinion and contents the media gives attention to, are different from Policy Agenda setters, in that, they (celebrities) command a large following in the media—especially the social networking space where they have succeeded to garner huge social credit which is the currency of the cyberspace as far as a social influence is concerned.

Sometimes these celebrities do not have direct political ties or get involved in matters that could impact or influence policy-makers agenda-setting. But with constant interactions, playing some blend of roles in the political sphere such as lobbyists, endorsement or even hobnobbing with people in the public policy arena—celebrity agenda-setters may see their impact or influence overlap between the two.

To be clear, these sets of public figures or famous persons may not be core politicians. Though some may have, over time gotten involved in active political activities and obtained public office, where they directly influence policy agenda and at the same time maintain their celebrity agenda-setting roles. They, therefore as a result have a dual impact on media agenda building—as policymakers and celebrity agenda-Setters.

A few examples may suffice. For instance, President Donald Trump, who was a TV show personality and businessman, later embraced active politics and was elected the United States 45th president in 2017. Another celebrity politician is Emmanuel Pacquiao, also known as Manny Pacquiao, a Filipino politician and former professional boxer, who is regarded as "one of the greatest professional boxers (Gasgonia, 2010). He has been a popular sportsman, public face and has served as a senator in the Philippines since elected in 2016. Statistics by Forbes declared him the second-highest-paid athlete in the world in 2015 (Forbes, 2016). Also, not forgetting Arnold Schwarzenegger, an Austrian naturalized American film actor, producer, former bodybuilder, and eventually politician, who was elected as the 38th governor of California from 2003 to 2011.

Thus, on account that celebrities may not be politicians, lobbyists, propagandists, or members of pressure groups; in terms of agenda-setting categorization, they cannot, therefore, be lumped together in the Policymakers or Political agenda type. At the same time, we cannot also position their influence and impact within the Public agenda or Agenda building of the media. As the amplifier of agenda-setting, it is seen that the media majority of the time has its agenda which it projects occasioned by ownership structure, stakeholder's influence (such as advertisers, policymakers, sponsors etc) or cultural, economic and political considerations. If celebrities do not fall under any of the earlier categories of agenda-setting, where then do we situate their impact or influence?

The field of media and communication continued to experience revolution and have remained dynamic as each era in communication history see the advent of new technologies with far-reaching effects on media processes and activities. To understand media processes, media effects on the audience and the society at large, researchers and scholars have designed and evolved theories over time to test certain hypotheses and structure the communication process.

On the premise that the New Media has given a distinct platform to celebrities to share and interact with the public, separate from the traditional media; it is time scholars and researchers in the field of media and communication properly categorized and situate the influence and impact of these categories of influencers in the agenda-setting framework — which is Celebrity Agenda-Setting.

### **Celebrity Agenda-Setting: The Bottom line**

Rainie & Wellman (2012) have submitted that media news production and transmission has now become a participatory work that changes the communication spheres. The centre of power according to them has continued to fluctuate between the media as traditional gatekeepers to other creators or agenda setters, such as government, organizations, the individual and lately, celebrities on social media. These fluctuations in the media space raise certain posers about trust in media content and effect. Who for instance does the audience trust more when it comes to dissemination of information concerning critical issues of public importance; the traditional media or public figures on their social networking platforms?

Media audience who follows certain celebrities on the social and traditional media trust in their opinion which shapes their perspectives on issues of personal or public discourse. Early empirical research has pointed out that trust in information sources is pivotal to audiences' decision-making process. Ordinary citizens seek information from a range of sources, a complicated task in the age of mass and New Media, because the public often may not know whom to trust for reliable and valid information, although public institutions are viewed as maintaining a key role in the general acceptance of complicated issues (Love et al 2013, citing Trettin & Musham, 2000).

Again people hold more positive attitudes and respond more easily when messages comes from trustworthy and reliable sources. And in today's digital media space, celebrities have found a channel in the interactive social networking sites to project these 'reliable sources.' A reference point worldwide is the raging pandemic, Covid-19, the vaccine and how information concerning the virus continued to be shared by the traditional media and the position held by public figures and how they have projected the same to the audience via the social media platforms. We have seen how nonconforming views expressed by certain celebrities have engendered responses from the audience, government, corporations and other interested parties.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Technology has revolutionized the communication process, so too are the factors and concepts which shapes it. Agenda setting as an important media framework has been impacted by this change. Hence, the latest effort at amplifying one of its key ancillaries by this article—with this groundwork, a lot needed to be done to put the celebrity agenda-setting concept in proper perspective.

Having explored the concept of Celebrity Agenda-Setting and passing it through the lenses of its progenitor—agenda-setting theory, it is suggested that the time has come that scholars in the field of communication and media studies pay this subject matter the attention that is being built here—since, in the proposition of this paper, the concept is ripe for an additional amplification on account of the development in the communication field of study.

The media in the 21 century through its status conferral function have created and expanded the celebrity phenomenon by the activities which goes on on the Internet. Like every development that has occurred in specific periods in communication history, celebrities influencing media offering has come to stay. The task ahead is how to adequately situate the construct within research and practice in the industry.

In setting the agenda, celebrities possess distinct voices which when projected resounds with the public who invests trust in such famous persons, believing that their opinion could be relied upon leading to some decisive feedback.

Further research on celebrity influence and its distinctiveness on agenda-setting need to be embarked upon. For instance, it should be unearthed if celebrities have any impact on policy decisions taken by policymakers and how much of these are guided by the public agenda or wholly on the influence of the famous faces. Again, how much of the issues celebrities raised that have impacted the other adjuncts (i.e policy agenda-setting, public agenda-setting and agenda building) and how much of these provoke agenda building and public attention. For example, will a public office holder champion the cause of anti-immigration policy on account that certain celebrities are kicking against open migration or such policy are formulated on account of public good or agenda?

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