

Agenda-setting in Brazil: contradictions between success and the epistemological boundaries

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Abstract

With the effervescence of studies on journalism, the constant criticism and the successive efforts to set epistemological and methodological boundaries to the field, the present study raises discussion about the work on agenda-setting, questioning the success which this approach has achieved nationally. Starting from an empirical analysis, based on papers presented in the main science and communications fora in Brazil, we examine how this tradition is reappropriated by Brazilian Researchers, which methodologies are used and whether there is an accumulation of knowledge.

Keywords:

Agenda-setting. Theory of Journalism. Epistemology of Communication.

1 Introduction

Studies on journalism are very abundant in Brazil. The “Journalism” Thematic Division (TD) of the Brazilian Society for Interdisciplinary Studies on Communication (Intercom) presents five Research Groups (RG) comprising genre, history, printed journalism, television journalism and theory of journalism. In 2009, during the Intercom Congress, this TD gathered 170 papers from researchers throughout the country. Since the creation of the Brazilian Association of Journalism Researchers (SBPJor), an increasing number of papers have been submitted to the annual meetings held by the entity. In the meeting held in 2003, approximately 50 papers were presented, distributed into Individual Communication and Coordinated Communication. Last year, this number was greater than 150. The Work Group (WG) for Journalism Studies was renewed through the recycling of the National Association of Graduate Programs on Communication (Compós) and is celebrating its 11th anniversary. It is important to mention also the several scientific journals

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in the field of communication, such as *Ícone* (UFPE), *Contemporânea* (UERJ), *Em Questão* (UFRGS) and the above mentioned *E-Compós*, which dedicate recent dossiers to Journalism. This long-lasting production, however, may conceal other realities. Studies on journalism still lack legitimacy. On the one hand, there is the constant criticism to the field (MARTINO, 2007; SILVA, 2009); on the other, there is the defense of journalism as a specific field of knowledge (MACHADO, 2004).

This epistemological discussion is fruitful and necessary. Nevertheless, this space has neither the pretension nor the intention to dwell on it, but to point out specific weaknesses in certain studies on journalism. Based on the analysis of 34 papers on agenda-setting, we shall examine how this tradition in research is reappropriated by Brazilians and what methodologies are used in papers that claim such tradition and whether or not there is an accumulation of knowledge. The choice of the topic _ agenda-setting, has been mainly due to the large number of papers using this concept or making reference to the writings by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in Brazil, even though many studies by authors of different nationalities regard these writings as relative, highlighting their theoretical and methodological fragility (CHARRON, 1995; WOLF, 1999).

2 The Course of Studies on agenda-setting

In this paper, we do not intend to make a lengthy description of the evolution of the research work on agenda-setting. Several authors have dwelled on it, including the conceivers of the idea themselves (McCOMBS; SHAW, 2000b¹) and other analysts (BARROS FILHO, 1995; HOHLFELDT, 1997; WOLF, 1999; TRAQUINA, 2000). It becomes necessary, however, to outline a minimal contextualization. After all, countless questions remain regarding the ontology and the epistemological statutes of the topic.

According to the author, the agenda-setting process is assigned as a theory, a hypothesis, a line of research, a methodology, a concept or an umbrella concept. Moreover, Traquina (2000) translates agenda-setting as *agendamento* in the Portuguese language. In doing so, he ignores the verb “to set”. Other research traditions add on different words to the term “agenda” as, for example, “agenda-building” (NISBET, 2008) to describe and analyze a distinct phenomenon of agenda-setting. To determine that we are referring specifically to a certain tradition of studies, we opt once again for the use of only the term agenda-setting, or the acronym “AS”.

Agenda-setting is inserted in the functionalist tradition of North American studies on communication, whose nodal point is the analysis and detection of the functions and effects

¹ This article was originally published in 1993 in the *Journal of Communication*, volume 43, n° 2, with the title “The evolution of agenda-setting research: twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas”.

caused by the communication media over the audience, a tradition regarded by some authors as mass communication research (WOLF, 1999). Yet this categorization is not consensual. To discuss the theoretical affiliation, Colling (2001) proposes to untie the entanglement involving the agenda-setting stance and the North American tradition of the unlimited effects, analyzing the postulates by Traquina (2000), according to whom the AS demonstrates the powerful effects of the information media. Moreover, it puts it into perspective with McCombs and Shaw, who prefer to classify it as belonging to the theory of the indirect or limited effects, equally belonging to the functionalist tradition, in which Mattelart e Mattelart (1995) categorize the agenda-setting process. Thus, regardless of the AS being a revisit or an overcoming of the research on limited effects, the important thing is that it is included in the research on the “effects”. However, in a book under his organization, which brings the founding paper and other subsequent work, Traquina (2000) correlates AS with the theoretical perspective of the social construction of reality, also called constructionism, starting from the process of news production. Papers which were subsidized exclusively on Traquina’s work to outline the background for these studies will situate AS in the constructionist theory (MAZZARINO, 2007).

The attraction that the functionalist tradition exerts over communication researchers is visible

and resembles a pendular movement constantly returning to the question about the “effect” of the media over people. One example is Traquina (2000) with his article “The rediscovery of the power of journalism: analysis of the agenda-setting theory”. Perhaps that is the reason for the success of AS in Brazil: McCombs and Shaw create the theoretical bases to subsidize the academic papers which perpetrate the power (influence) of journalism. The power attributed to the media is not a new idea _ nor was it at the time of the first papers on agenda-setting. In the inaugural article on AS McCombs and Shaw (2000a) state that they are inspired by Walter Lippmann and Bernard Cohen. Journalist Walter Lippmann, with the book *Public Opinion*, in 1922, defended that the communication media exerted an important role in the mediation of citizens with the real world, for the seizing of facts and ideologies necessary to the formation of a public opinion². In the 1960’s Barnard Cohen had formulated in a more succinct way the question about the media agenda setting, warning about the press’s efficacy in pointing out to readers “what to think about”. McCombs and Shaw (2000a) assigned a concept to this phenomenon and managed to systematize the hypothesis that the media might set the theme agenda together with the public opinion and still determine a hierarchy of relevance among events.

The agenda-setting concept came up as a hypothesis to be tested, and not as an enclosed

2 A recent translation of Lippmann’s book was released in Brazil in 2008.

theory. After the first studies, conducted in the U.S. presidential elections of 1968 and in the Watergate case, in 1973, the authors estimate that two hundred articles were produced on the theme in the first two decades alone (McCOMBS; SHAW, 2000b). Two years after the publication of the inaugural article, Weaver, McCombs and Spellman analyze the agenda-setting in the Watergate case and explain it as a

[...] marked positive relationship between the emphases of media coverage and the importance assumed by these topics for the individuals who comprise the public. Moreso, this principle is formulated in causal terms: the added projection of a topic in the media leads it to have greater importance in people's conscience. (WEAVER; McCOMBS; SPELLMAN, 2000, p. 65).

The numerical growth gave strength to the agenda-setting concept. According to Traquina the initial concept which limited the influence of the journalistic agenda over the public's agenda is overcome by the mere projection of the issues and occurrences which had made the news headlines. The methodology proposed in the earlier phase included the analysis of the vehicle content and a survey with the public, confronting the published agenda with the formation of the public's agenda. However, in the research evolved, other approaches and developments came up,

While the early phases of research on agenda-setting concentrated on the question "Who determines the public's agenda – and under what conditions", the most recent phase centered its attention on the question "Who determines the agenda of the media?" (McCOMBS; SHAW, 2000b, p. 128).

According to McCombs and Shaw (2000b), the agenda-setting studies are divided into five phases. In the earlier phase, the academic papers claiming the AS focused on the relationship between the media agenda and the public's agenda. The second phase, which appears in 1977, strives to understand the conditions which limited the formation of the public's agenda, reaching concepts such as the need for public guidance, hierarchy among the themes and characteristics of each media support. The third front is oriented towards research about the coverage of electoral campaigns, examining the candidates' agenda and its grasping by the public. It was in 1980's that the studies enter their fourth phase and turn towards the sources of the media agendas.

Although the early authors index four phases, it was the early perspective of the agenda-setting that worked as an umbrella for a host of investigations and new concepts, all of them contemplating at some point the idea of the "power of the media". Counter-arguing Cohen, the authors came to conclude:

The agenda-setting is a lot more than the classic assertion that the news tell us *about what we should be thinking*. The news tell us also *how we ought to think about what we think*. Both the selection of objects to attract attention as well as the selection of frames to think about such objects are powerful agenda-setting tasks (McCOMBS; SHAW, 2000b, p. 131).

3 Agenda-setting in Brazil

In the specific case of Brazil, the theme of agenda-setting gained space as of the 1990's, especially with papers published in Portugal, or by Portuguese authors in Brazil, such as the book *Teorias da comunicação* (Theories of Communication), by the Italian Mauro Wolf, *Poder do Jornalismo* (The Power of Journalism) and *O Estudo do Jornalismo no Século XX* (The Study of Journalism in the XX century), by Nelson Traquina, and by Brazilians, such as *Ética da Comunicação* (Communication Ethics), by Clovis Barros Filho, and articles in journals or book chapters (HOHLFELDT, 1997; TRAQUINA, 2000; AZEVEDO, 2004). Through the publication of books in Portuguese, which made the language issue easier and even gave access to the approach, the AS was disseminated in Brazil. In our research, we were not able to detect any Brazilian paper prior to the articles by Traquina, published in 1995³, and by Hohlfeldt (1997).

Observing the three big communication sciences events in Brazil— Intercom, Compós and SBPJor —, we identified 34 papers presented in the last Five years (2005-2009) which made reference to the terms media agenda-setting or *agendamento* (in the body of the text, regardless of their being in the list of keywords)⁴. The great majority of

the approaches (53%) deal specifically with the agenda of the media, that which would be pointed out by McCombs e Shaw (2000b) as the fourth phase of the studies inspired in the founding hypothesis. The path pursued by Brazilian researchers is oriented towards the attempt to explain how the different media list certain events, invariably getting back to the defense that the means of communication determine not only *what* to think, but *how we should think*. Even the papers that make relative the audience stance, indicating a receiver that is not completely passive and admitting other social and psychological variables, relapse in the relationship between cause and effect and conclude almost by obviousness that the media, when listing and framing the topics, do have the power to define the public's agenda.

Ever more the hypothesis (many times mentioned as a theory, other times as a concept) is added on to the studies concerning the journalistic routine and the production of news, newsmaking and its criteria of noticeability, aside from regarding the role of the gatekeeper and even the silence spiral as a reflex of the power of the press in listing or silencing certain themes in society. The approach of approximately 15% of the papers collected stem from the core and straightforward hypothesis that the media

³ This article came out originally in the issue 21 and 22 of the Journal *Comunicação e Linguagens* (Communication and Languages) and was replicated in 2000 in the book *O poder do jornalismo* (The Power of Journalism). Since we only had access to the 2000 work, this is the one we mention.

⁴ These papers are not mentioned in the body of the article, but are identified in the references.

influences the public's agenda and another 15% of them state the contrary, proving the power of the sources, or the so-called counter-agenda-setting, analyzing the role of the press advisory boards, civil organizations or the political sphere in determining the agenda of the media. There is still an approximate 9% which discussed the inter-influences between the agendas of the media and that of politics.

Although a very large number considered the influence of the media agenda over the themes that are in the agenda of the day, of society, no paper conducted any kind of analysis of the audience or the reception. Approximately 59% adopted the content analysis as the methodology, comparing excerpts, headlines, printed or electronic reports (television and internet). Thus, the product of journalism is analyzed – the piece of news; in general the processes of agenda building are discussed and their frame and it is concluded that, upon adopting a certain approach to a topic, that will be the view to be adopted and taken over by the audience. The hypothesis, at first a compilation of propositions to be tested, is taken as the truth. Almost 15% of the papers conducted some sort of case study and about 18% undertook the literature review, approaching the history of agenda-setting and possible inter-relations with other concepts or theoretical currents.

As to the sources of theoretical reference, less than half (44%) resorted directly to the

founders, working with the writings of McCombs and Shaw. Still, those who cite the authors, sought the information in the early article (dated 1972), without following what the first investigators and others had developed in the 40 years that passed after the concept of agenda-setting had been launched. In the case of Brazilian articles selected in this survey, approximately 60% are based on the texts written or translated by Nelson Traquina. Another 47% also quote Mauro Wolf in his book *Teorias da Comunicação*, originally released in 1985, with the first Portuguese version dated 1987. Few papers presented in these events make reference to other articles using the same theoretical framework or claiming the same methodology. A rare exception is the article by Barbosa e Aguiar (2009), which makes reference to at least six papers on agenda-setting. In spite of the expressive number of papers on AS, an accumulation of knowledge is inexistent.

Moreover, even if they use the terminology “agenda-setting”, some papers are anchored in other research traditions or make use of theoretical references that differ from AS. The epistemological and methodological confusion is not unique to the studies on agenda-setting. Porto (2004) shows the fragilities of the studies on framing. A few more recent research papers, dedicated to the construction of the media agenda, begin to adopt new terminologies, such as agenda-building, because although they are anchored in the early proposition through the bibliographical references, they move away from

the key-concept of the AS hypothesis. On the other hand, simplified appropriations of the agenda-setting theme have also contributed to studies essentially based on content analyses, disregarding important components for the confirmation of such hypotheses, such as inter and intra-personal characteristics (WOLF, 1999), psychological and sociological factors in the reception and, above all, a variability of mediations which are not restricted to the communication media.

Ever since the late 1990's, when the first studies focused on agenda-setting began to be developed in the country, what prevailed was the fourth phase, which was more about the media agenda than about the investigated relationships with that which was in the society's agenda, and how the media influences the society's agenda. Audience studies were omitted or neglected in this approach. The most immediate risk therefrom is the deviation from what was supposed to be a "hypothesis", which begins to be treated as a certainty, an immediate logic: such vehicle prioritized such candidate, thus the public was directly influenced to decide in his favor in the elections.

The topic of agenda-setting reached the spotlight in Brazil in the period during which the country experienced a political openness and when the role of the press in the political debates was increasingly greater, from the campaign for direct elections to the

first direct presidential election and his later impeachment. The increase in the role of the media in the contemporary society, especially after the political opening process, and the constant search for reinforcements which would justify "the power of the press" can be pinpointed as contributing factors for the utilization of this approach among Brazilian researchers. The election of Fernando Collor de Mello, in the 1989 elections, as well as the re-election of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1998, for example, have been pointed out by journalists and scholars in the field as evidence of the power of the media in influencing society (CONTI, 1999; AZEVEDO, 2000).

4 Final Remarks

In the book about the evolution of communication theories, Armand e Michèle Mattellart (1995) observe that the communication scheme defined by Harold Lasswell in the late 1940's resulted in the fact that communication researchers concentrated their attention on one of these topics, privileging the analysis of "Says what?" (Content analysis), and "To what effect?" (Effects analysis). In spite of having broadened the objectives and approaches from the 1970's onwards, communication research still feels resents the supremacy of studies about the content and the effects of the media. Worse, many researchers are concentrated in content analysis and, based on the result, assume that the public may have done the same reading suggested

by the message producer. In other words, the public absorbs the message without any reaction in a communicative process regarded as linear in which each message is capable of producing a discernible and identifiable effect. Several sequences of studies, from distinct epistemologies, traditions and theoretical references dismantled, surpassed, modified this approach of the how the public relates with the media messages. Nevertheless, the attraction which this tradition exerts over communication researchers is visible and resembles a pendular movement which brings the constant return of the question about the “effect” of the media over people. This research tradition which centers its attention on the “effect” caused by the media continues to have its followers. The success of the agenda-setting paradigm in Brazil reveals how the identification of a palpable and discernible concept and the broad power of the media over people still haunt the minds and the hearts of the academia.

This supremacy of studies about content, with conclusions about an assumed effect of the different media, may be related to the peculiarities of the research on Journalism. Silva e Pontes (2009) analyze the impasses for a Theory on Journalism, with two fields of analysis which are opposite each other: one which considers that there is no epistemological uniqueness to journalism for the construction of a theory dissociated from other fields; and another which understands journalism as an autonomous sector,

taking as the object of the theory professional practices, the products and processes of communication enterprises.

The most common and, thus, hegemonic strategy in this process is the one which situates the object of Journalism study exclusively on the investigation of its material product, in this case the newspaper, the magazine, the television news program, the radio news program and the news websites. The empirical manifestation of the object is overtaken by the object itself, cloistering a possible Theory of Journalism in the Theory of the News, identified as theories circumscribed to the techniques, processes and products of the journalist’s professional routine (SILVA; PONTES, 2009, p. 177).

The excessive approaches on agenda-setting, especially with simplified appropriations, feed the scarce tradition of Brazilians in reception studies and highlight research papers which are pleased with the descriptive character and with simply detailing *how* the news are constructed. It is about an exacerbated media-centeredness in the Brazilian studies on communication, with investigations that “plunge so deep in the analyzed contents that hardly ever return to the reflections on Journalism” (SILVA; PONTES, 2009, p. 181).

Upon restricting its analysis about the journalistic product, endowed with a materiality and with defined temporal dimensions, the researcher makes his/her job easier. However, despite its conceptual, epistemological and methodological fragilities, the agenda-setting concept had the advantage of being interested

both in the end-product of journalism as well as in the audience of the journalistic product. In spite of the restrictive approach and the causal relationship, the synchronic verification of the media and the public are part of the paradigm. Moving on to framing, which in Brazil continues to favor the analysis of the journalistic product, the few existing papers on the public focus on the “effect” of framing over the reception. Moving on to agenda-building, one runs the risk of highlighting in the Theory of Journalism only the News Theory, and of getting caught up in questions like “why are the news what they are”, regarding the Theory of Journalism and the News Theory as being synonymous. In doing so, one “metonymically takes part of the object of Journalism as all of the object of the Theory of Journalism. In this case, one dribbles the theoretical insecurity getting caught up in the empiricism of the profession’s practical universe, in the expectancy that the materiality of the journalistic products and processes will *naturally* respond for the theory” (SILVA, 2009).

Wolf (1999) includes the criteria pertaining to the public among the values/news, which comprise the noticeability of an event or topic. In this item, the author discusses how the representation that journalists have of the public influences the selection and the treatment of information. According to him, journalists resent the fact that taking into account the preferences of the public may be a hindrance for the news production and they equate the tension between the interest

by the public and the professional autonomy of deciding what is news. Nevertheless, “the term of reference constituted by the public _ or better, by the opinions that journalists have about the public_ and the boundaries of this reference, are one of the most interesting and less investigated aspects of the newsmaking theme” (WOLF, 1999, p. 213). This realization is shared by Neveu (2006), who states that public is a character who is absent in the papers on journalism and that in many cases there is only an intuitive representation of the public. Even if in a partial manner, the methodology adopted by McCombs e Shaw (2000a) gears its attention towards the public, whereas the approaches that followed focus only on the information media.

The greatest challenge is not to understand if agenda-setting belongs or not to the tradition of unlimited effects or if the subsequent studies _such as agenda-building or framing _ are an improvement, an overcoming or an evolution of the AS concept. Upon holding the attention on the process of news production, on the noticeability of events and topics, researchers feed a mediacentred view. The consequence is that the theoretical object of communication, when being a mere reflex of the media practices, is deprived of its own object. Muniz Sodré (2008) considers that communication studies which limit themselves to analyzing and describing the sheer interaction among people mediated by the media leave an

underlying statement “of a natural, politically untouchable and scientifically guaranteed model of a fragmented society, comprised of competitive and isolated individuals placed in a hyper technological network and interrelated by the media” (SODRÉ, 2008, p. 223).

The fragmentation of research on agenda-setting in one of its currents (agenda-setting of the media by means of sources; agenda of the media; agenda-setting of the public by the media) leads to an isolation of the elements which are part of the communicative process. One studies the source of information and its effect on the media or the routines of news production or the causal correlation between the agenda of the media and that of the public. The corollary is that research originated from this research tradition or which makes use of its methodology or theoretical framework does not regard the social conditions of the production of meaning, refraining from the discussion of how to “articulate” the meaning of a society. It occupies itself only with the transmission and the mediation of information and limits the communicative process to a linear axis which could be summarized in the transmitter/message/receiver scheme. Barbero fights this fragmentation ferociously:

This fragmentation puts the communication process on a par with the transmission of information or, better yet, reduces the former to the latter, thus converting into a methodological reality the *separation* between the analysis of the message _be it an analysis of content or of expression, of textual expressions or discursive

operations _ and the analysis of the *reception* conceived simply or sophisticatedly as an inquiry about the effects and the reaction (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2003, p. 293).

In an article presenting an analysis of the evolution of Journalism research in Brazil, Machado (2004) lists the main lines of research developed since the 1970’s, when the first Graduate programs were created in Brazil. They are: History of Journalism, Theories of Journalism, Discourse Analysis, News Production, Reception, Specialized Journalism, Digital Journalism, and Narrative Theories. In this categorization proposed by Machado, we can distinguish a fragmentation of the lines of research which can result in an isolation of the investigation about the message and the reception.

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O agenda-setting no Brasil: contradições entre o sucesso e os limites epistemológicos

Resumo:

Com a efervescência dos estudos em jornalismo, as constantes críticas e os sucessivos esforços de se delimitar epistemológica e metodologicamente a área, o presente artigo coloca em discussão os trabalhos sobre o agenda-setting, ou do agendamento da mídia, questionando o sucesso que a abordagem alcançou nacionalmente. A partir de uma análise empírica, com base em papers apresentados nos principais fóruns das ciências da comunicação no Brasil, examinamos como essa tradição é reapropriada pelos pesquisadores brasileiros, quais as metodologias usadas e se há acúmulo de conhecimento.

Palavras-chave:

Agenda-setting. Teoria do Jornalismo. Epistemologia da Comunicação.

El agenda-setting en Brasil: las contradicciones entre el éxito y los límites epistemológicos

Resumen:

Con el florecimiento de los estudios de periodismo, la frecuente crítica y los sucesivos esfuerzos por delimitar el área epistemológicamente y metodológicamente, este estudio pone en cuestión la agenda-setting, y el éxito del enfoque alcanzado en Brasil. Desde una mirada empírica, basada en trabajos presentados en los principales foros de ciencias de la comunicación en Brasil, analizamos como la influencia de esta tradición es reapropiada por los investigadores brasileños, incluyendo las metodologías utilizadas y la acumulación de conocimiento.

Palabras clave:

Agenda-setting. Teoría del Periodismo. Epistemología de la Comunicación.

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