AGENDA SETTING AND FRAMING WITHIN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA:
TODAY'S NEWS IS ONLY AS RELEVANT AS TOMORROW'S LEADING STORY

By

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Agenda Setting and Framing within the Mainstream Media: Today’s News is only as Relevant as Tomorrow’s Leading Story

By: Rebecca Brukman

ABSTRACT

Agenda setting theory suggests that the media filter and shape what the public perceive to be reality. The media privilege specific issues that drive a distinct viewpoint. They use repetition to give topics precedence over one another, which leads the public to regard some issues as more relevant than others. Framing creates linkages across information and allows the public to establish a storyline which evokes a predetermined reaction. Heightened visibility and increased access to political news, as a result of the 24-hour news cycle, has created greater demand for using agenda setting theory and framing to understand the effects of the media. As the media rely more heavily on agenda setting and framing to drive the political conversations of the day, public perception of bias within news coverage rises. To demonstrate these principles I conducted my own content analysis of news stories from five different media outlets.
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I. Theories of Media Effects

Talk of potential United States military intervention in Syria riddled the airwaves and scattered the headlines from late August of 2013 to mid-September of 2013. Media stories with a human interest angle tugged at our nation’s heartstrings. As an example, there were stories containing violent images depicting victims of the chemical weapons attacks, speculated to have been released by President Bashar al-Assad. Other media stories focused on a foreign policy stance that highlighted duty, honor and an obligation for world powers to step in and resolve the crisis. These stories set the agenda for the greater part of a month, establishing them as the main focus of public attention and dialogue.

Agenda setting theory refers to the ability of the media to influence topics within the political agenda. It gives some issues precedence over others by allocating more coverage and thus shaping perceptions of the worthiness of attention from the public. Stories that are presented in the media are manipulations of what news agencies themselves have determined the most relevant details. This leads to the concept of framing; wherein linkages across information are established to mold a credible storyline that promotes a specific interpretation. The mainstream media use agenda setting and framing to drive the political conversations of the day, which in turn increases public perception of bias within news coverage.

The newsgathering process is comprised of three main groups: political actors, media actors and the public. Political actors include elected officials, interest groups and policy experts who speak towards the broader political agenda. Media actors include all major print, online, television and radio news agencies, and the pundits who speak on their behalf. The public are the individuals on the receiving end of political messaging. Power plays an influential role in
defining the relationships between these three unique entities. To demonstrate its impact, Eriksson and Ostman (2013: 305) outline power dynamics between political actors and media actors. They highlight the exchange model, a symbiotic relationship between politicians and press, where both groups must rely on each other to be successful. Power is equally distributed through this model. The second claim they introduce is the information subsidy or news management model. Through this model elected officials provide news agencies with the information they wish to be published. Political actors maintain greater control in this relationship. Thirdly, they present the adversary model which suggests conflict between the objectives of political actors and media actors.

The origins of agenda setting theory date back to Walter Lippman’s 1922 classic, Public Opinion. Although he never specifically mentions the term agenda setting, the first chapter of the text titled “The World outside the Pictures in our Heads” argues mass media maintain the power to establish which ideas are important to the public. In doing so, they facilitate a connection between world events and images in our minds. According to McCombs (2013: 11) in 1963, Bernard Cohen would expand our understanding of agenda setting through his remark, “the news media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling their audiences what to think about.” The research of Lippman and Cohen laid the framework for what later would be known as a major tenet of mass media communications. During the presidential election cycle of 1968, scholars Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw introduced agenda setting theory during a presentation at an academic conference. Shortly thereafter, McCombs and Shaw formally coined the concept of agenda setting theory in their 1972 Public Opinion Quarterly article. Another scholar named G. Ray Funkhouser, who presented similar research at the same time as McCombs and Shaw, receives limited recognition
for his contribution to agenda setting theory. As Funkhouser did not formally name the theory and chose not to pursue further research after his initial article was published, the significance of his involvement has been minimized.

Two basic assumptions underlie most research in agenda setting theory:

1) The press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it.
2) Media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. (McCombs and Shaw 1972)

The stories emphasized in the news become the issues most important to the public. In their work *News that Matters*, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder (1987) suggest, “television news powerfully influences which problems viewers regard as the nation’s most serious” (4). If the media are not covering a topic, the public will assume it is irrelevant to their overall understanding. Agenda setting theory is used to advance a predetermined viewpoint specific to a news agency. As McCombs (2013: 13) explains “…[the] central assertion in agenda setting theory is that those issues emphasized in the news come to be regarded overtime as important to the public.” The media agenda sets the public agenda, as news agencies maintain sole control over content.

The media may not always be effective in telling their audiences what to think, but they are consistently successful in their ability to tell the public what to think about. One way to maintain relevance of a political message is through repetition, “…for all news media, the repetition of a topic day after day is the most powerful message of all about its importance,” (McCombs 2013: 10). Repetition of carefully targeted news stories reinforces the desired agenda
of media outlets. All major new sources traditionally cover the same stories. While they universally provide the core facts, they add unique spin to appeal to the values of their audiences. From the end of September 2013 to the middle of October 2013 CNN, FOX, MSNBC, BBC World News and The New York Times primarily focused their coverage on the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and the budget talks in Congress that ultimately initiated the 16-day government shutdown. The day in and day out repetition of these leading stories triggers a response in the minds of the audience that the Affordable Care Act and the government shutdown are issues of public interest. Generally speaking, if a television station broadcasts a story in favor of tighter gun laws twelve times and a story about increased childhood obesity in the U.S. twice in a given week, it is more likely that the audience will give the gun law story more value as its continued repetition mimics its perceived relevance. Outside factors such as emotional appeal, format of news story and delivery of content have an impact on public perception as well. The ability to control the agenda through calculated story selection is one of the most effective tools the mainstream media repeatedly use to generate desired outcomes.

Repetition is a strategic element of agenda setting theory. The media understand the public’s predisposition to use information most readily accessible to formulate political decisions. This leads to the priming effect which refers to,

“...the ability of news programs to affect the criteria by which individuals judge their political leaders. Specifically researchers have found that the more prominent an issue is in the national information stream, the greater will be the weight accorded to it in making political judgments” (Iyengar 1991: 133).
As a component of framing, the priming effect shapes preferences of its audience, “…frames introduce or raise the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel and decide in a particular way” (Entman 2007: 164). The priming effect generates greater speculation in terms of perceived media bias as it possess the ability to showcase, “…certain aspects of national life while ignoring others…” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987: 4). Television news maintains power as they use this as a tool to determine which stories have relevance over one another. This manipulation can be detrimental to the fair and balanced nature of the news, as it limits the full inclusion of all perspectives.

Frames drive the political conversations of the news day. The ideologies they express are perceived as fact in many instances. Frames help audiences’ process information. The audience use frames to structure, order and organize the social world in meaningful ways. Framing can be defined “…as the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlight connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman 2007: 164). Framing is comprised of four broad principles: frame competition, frame selection and modification, frame dynamics and frame consistency. In his article titled “Framing Politics: An Integrative Approach,” Jorg Matthes (2012) describes frame competition as the process within which “news agencies are tasked with the objective of asserting universal meaning that will maintain dominance over other definitions.” (252). Similar to political issues, frames will compete for prominence among one another. Frame selection and modification refers to the ability of political actors, media actors and the public to formulate individualistic frames that fit the interests of their respective agendas (Matthes 2012: 252). Frames present a viewpoint that correlates with the perspective of the news agency they represent. Frame dynamics comment on the evolution and constant manipulation of frames overtime. Similar to frame consistency which
asserts framing is not comprised of a singular message, “…they always refer to a pattern involving the evaluation and interpretation of various issues” (Matthes 2012: 252).

Framing is an active process of creating, altering and transforming storylines in order to produce a desired response. Frames can be distinguished into two main categories: episodic and thematic. The *episodic frame* “…takes the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances” (Iyengar 1991: 14). For example, a news broadcast of an attempted robbery of a storefront is an episodic frame. In contrast, *thematic frames* are “public issues in some more general or abstract context and takes the form of a ‘take-out’ or ‘backgrounder’ report directed at general outcomes or conditions” (Iyengar 1991: 14). An example of this would be a piece about changes in government spending in relation to social entitlement programs. News agencies use specific types of framing methodologies to provoke a predetermined response from their audience. Television news agencies oftentimes use the mirror model, within which “…news media only reflect social and political reality. Sources are bias rather than the news media outlet” (Lee 2013: 5). Through this frame, reporters use their sources as a springboard to mimic their personal viewpoints. Oftentimes, the mainstream media rely on content from individuals who are part of the circle of elites. Power appears to be concentrated at higher rates in the hands of insider elites, such that “…media attention generally is biased towards actors possessing prominent insider positions” (Binderkrantz 2012: 117). This trend contradicts the role of the media as it limits the scope of perspectives.

Individuals use frames to weigh information as they determine which content is most relevant. A successful frame influences the attitudes and perceptions of its audience in regards to a specific topic. Although there are different types and various methodologies associated with framing, an effective frame generally exhibits the following characteristics. Similar to agenda
setting theory, the stories that use repetition within framing are likely to have the greatest impact. These stories continually dominate the agenda, which allows them to hold the most political clout. On the other hand, “framing effects are weaker when competing frames are present…” (Matthes 2012: 250). Two major news stories in one day will divide the audience’s attention and force the public to give one story more prominence over the other. Matthes (2012: 250) also suggests that in addition to compelling facts and visuals, strong frames typically include emotionally charged information that will generate a reaction from the audience. Frames are successful if the audience believes their content is credible. This element draws on preconceived notions and prior attitudes that the public holds about news agencies themselves.

Some scholars suggest that over the past decade the media have seen a dramatic shift in news coverage. They argue that reporting has transitioned from objective to opinionated content. The media in it of itself is subjective in nature. Although journalists try to emulate absolute objectivity, the mainstream media thrive due to their ability to influence the emotions and values of their audiences. In recent years the public appear to approach major news stations with a preconceived notion of what type of content to expect. In her work titled “Partisan Differences in Opinionated News Perceptions: A Test of the Hostile Media Effect,” Laura Feldman (2011: 409) outlines how big name brands like FOX, CNN and MSNBC cue the public to perceived bias even though there may not be any. The expectation of a liberal or conservative slant within these news agencies leads to increased public perception of bias.

The construct of bias is oftentimes manipulated by news agencies as they set the agenda to favor a particular outcome. There are three main types of bias: distortion bias, content bias and decision-making bias. In his work “Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power,” Robert Entman (2007: 163) claims distortion bias allegedly falsifies reality, content bias favors one side
over the other opposed to providing equal treatment to all involved in a political conflict, and *decision-making bias* suggests journalists and the news agencies themselves knowingly produce biased content. Television news uses elements of structural bias to their advantage to encourage support of a particular storyline. Lance Bennett (2011), professor of political science at the University of Washington, takes this definition a bit further as he suggests there are four structural biases of television news in his book *News: the Politics of Illusion*. The first of these structural biases is *personalization*, where the media select a human interest angle to spark public involvement. For example if a news outlet ran a story about poverty in communities, through Bennett’s perspective the greatest impact would be maintained if a real person told his or her story opposed to the outside perspective of a pundit. As the famous newsroom saying goes “if it bleeds it leads” plays into the second component which is *dramatization*. The news must highlight drama, conflict and violence; stories are not what happen in an ordinary day. The third element is *fragmentation*. Since it is nearly impossible to be entirely thorough in a one to two minute segment, some news stations will use framing to place greater emphasis on dramatic visuals, distorting the realism within content. Lastly Bennett defines *authority disorder bias* as when the media must claim order has been restored in light of any recent conflict.

The mainstream media will continually use agenda setting theory and framing to influence public perception of what issues are regarded as the most important. This impact can be understood in terms of cycles of influence. The media use repetition of carefully crafted frames to produce a predetermined political response and or reaction. Although the media will always maintain an obligation to articulate objectivity in their reporting, they will continue to achieve relevance through their ability to influence the emotions and values of their audiences. These manipulations focus public attention on a few subjects, which in turn shifts the perception
of these issues to be weighted as more valuable than others. This trend seems appropriate, as the principles of agenda setting theory teach us---the media do not reflect reality, they simply filter and shape it to fit their predetermined motives.

II. Overview of Coding Process

I conducted a content analysis of five popular news sources to determine the impact of agenda setting and framing within the mainstream media. My analysis focused on the following news outlets: The New York Times, CNN, MSNBC, FOX News and BBC World News. These sources were strategically selected, as they all encompass a unique element of the media landscape. In terms of television, MSNBC, CNN and FOX are viewed as the main cable news powerhouses. These three media outlets are continually compared on a spectrum of bias. With MSNBC leaning toward the left and FOX likewise leaning toward the right, with the assumption that CNN represents the middle ground. I focused exclusively on the online component of BBC World News. This news agency was essential to my analysis, as they offer a perspective outside of the traditional American worldview. I included The New York Times to demonstrate the impact of agenda setting and framing in terms of print media. Throughout my research I compared the online content of BBC World News and The New York Times closely to understand the evolution of print media and its changing role in the broader news landscape.

I divided the coding process into two distinct periods. The first test took place from August 26, 2013 to September 16, 2013, and the second test took place from September 27, 2013 to October 20, 2013. During both of these coding periods I would record data on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. The recording period for my three cable news stations—
MSNBC, FOX and CNN—ranged from 30 minutes to an hour. I recorded data in both the mornings and evenings. I alternated between the three news outlets throughout the week, cognizant that the same programs air at the same time each day. For purposes of my analysis, I considered BBC World News to be a print news source, as I exclusively focus on their online component. To encourage variety, I tried to incorporate at least one print media source—The New York Times or BBC World News—and a sporadic combination of television sources within each test. I rotated between recording data for three sources in the morning and two in the afternoon and vice versa.

Throughout both coding periods I adapted my recording patterns to further randomize my sample. For example about once a week I intentionally recorded data for the three television stations at the same time of day to directly compare and contrast their coverage. I did this for the print sources as well. These deliberate pairings flowed with the overall nature of my test. My goal was to create a sample with the greatest possible diversity, given my limitations.

I tried to record at least three main stories from each news source every day. I consistently identified three main stories within my print news sources. There was more variability within the television news sources. The number of stories I coded for each alternated, depending on how much airtime a specific piece was given. I traditionally recorded two to four main stories for the television sources each day. Consistent with my television recording patterns, I recorded data for the two print media outlets in both the morning and evenings. I alternated this pattern throughout the week to ensure greater variety. Each day I selected three of the top news stories from both The New York Times and BBC World News online. I traditionally selected the “Top Headlines” or “Breaking News” stories from both The New York Times and BBC World News. During the weekend, BBC World News provides a “Top Stories of the
the sources I was analyzing, Sundays proved to be very limited in the amount of content produced. Television stations generally ran pre-recorded programs such as Lock Up or various documentaries, whereas during the week they would broadcast live tapings of their leading pundits. Overall, *The New York Times* and BBC World News were typically more consistent in their content production on Sundays then the three leading cable news stations.

The purpose of my content analysis was to assess the impact of agenda setting and framing in the context of these five major news sources. Through this examination, I was able to analyze the perception of media bias within this framework. The next two sections—First Period of Coding Analysis and Second Period of Coding Analysis—will provide greater depth of understanding in terms of the impact agenda setting and framing have on these five major news sources.

**III. First Period of Coding Analysis**

*August 26, 2013 to September 16, 2013*

The most popular news story during this time period was the conflict in Syria. There was talk that the United States and its allies were preparing for a limited military intervention in the region as a response to President Bashar al-Assad’s suspected use of chemical weapons. I coded this news story as international relations. The following charts from Friday, August 30, 2013 and Sunday September 8, 2013 exhibit relevant trends in regards to agenda setting and framing.
All coding for this day took place during the morning. I recorded at the beginning, middle and end of the hour to encourage diversity within content. All of my news sources focused their coverage exclusively on the conflict in Syria, with the exception of BBC World News which ran a secondary piece on violent weather conditions in addition to this primary story.

With the rise of social media and the increased relevance of the 24-hour news cycle, television, print and online media have experienced some of the most significant effects in terms of viewership. To maintain the support of their audience the media sensationalize the news. They feature stories that emphasize a heightened emotional response at greater rates than traditional fact driven stories. This was shown in how the media framed the stories about the Syrian civil war.

The two leading headlines for The New York Times were “Obama Set for Limited Strike on Syria as British Vote No” and “Fear Grows as Syrians Wait for U.S. Attack.” The power of language, word choice and diction are manipulated to drive the agenda. In the “Obama Set for Limited Strike on Syria as British Vote No” article the author used phrases such as “stinging rejection”, “…by America’s stalwart ally Britain” and “…heavy blow to Prime Minister David Cameron” to describe the current relations between the United States and Great Britain in
regards to the crisis in Syria. As Matthes (2012: 252) suggests in his research effective frames traditionally feature emotionally charged information to increase their chances of provoking a response from the audience. The author of *The New York Times* article sets the agenda through the use of language, which drives the tone to encourage public support of a predetermined storyline.

The second headline “Fear Grows as Syrians Wait for U.S. Attack” is slightly more subjective than the first. The author of this article took a humanistic approach, using descriptive language such as: “In the narrow alley in the old city of Damascus, a shopkeeper who opposes the Syrian government spend Thursday as usual…calm on the cobblestone street….” This strengthens the article’s emotional appeal. This reporting approach draws influence from an element of structural bias which Bennett (2011) defines as *personalization*. The author uses the experiences and descriptions of real life events to humanize their analysis. Through Bennett’s perspective, human interest pieces maintain the most significant impact when the individuals involved in the conflict comment on the issue in question.

When we compare the content styles of *The New York Times* and BBC World News articles from this day, BBC World News took a more straightforward, factual approach to reporting. BBC World News ran two pieces on the crisis in Syria. The first article tilted “Syria Attack: What we Know” used visual imagery through the presentation of graphics, data, tables and a timeline of events to appeal to our senses. To assert credibility, the piece included interviews from doctors, patients and government officials to illustrate a detailed picture of the crisis.

Out of all five news outlets, BBC World News consistently provided the most relevant and informative coverage of issues outside of the realm of traditional domestic politics. This
source was especially effective in reporting stories that expand our typical understanding of what is relevant to Americans. For example BBC World News featured a headline on Friday, August 30, 2013, titled “Russia’s Vladimir Putin Challenged U.S. on Syria Claims.” All of the other news agencies reported this story through the viewpoint of the sentiments of the Obama Administration, while the author of the BBC World News article featured the perspective of the leader of another world power.

The conflict in Syria was a major news story throughout the entire coding period. Overtime the relevancy, consistency and volume of reporting shifted which influenced the style of content. On Sunday, September 8, 2013, CNN, BBC World News, FOX, MSNBC and The New York Times featured the crisis in Syria as their primary story in addition to secondary pieces on issues such as: the environment, domestic politics—elections, education, and violence and gun control.

**Sunday September 8, 2013**

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On MSNBC’s morning show Meet the Press with David Gregory the primary story was the conflict in Syria. This program took a comprehensive approach to reporting by enlisting the commentary of a bipartisan roundtable which included: former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, MSNBC contributor Chuck Todd, former White House advisor David Axelrod, and a former Democratic congressman from California. Power is concentrated at higher rates among insider elites. This panel appeared to encompass a diverse range of viewpoints. However as Binderkrantz (2012: 117) suggests, media attention is traditionally biased towards individuals who maintain positions of power. This trend contradicts the role of the media, as a few prominent individuals set the agenda for the broader public.

The crisis in Syria consistently drove the political agenda for the majority of the three week coding period. McCombs (2013: 10) remarks repetition of a news story is the most powerful tool the media uses to signal the importance of its message. At the beginning of the coding period the crisis in Syria was the primary news story of the five news agencies I analyzed. Overtime, this story would be in competition with other secondary pieces regarding various political issues. Frames are most effective when they emphasize a singular message. As the news outlets covered the crisis in Syria day in and day out, they began to add content pertaining to other politically relevant topics. Framing effects were weaker for this news day. As Matthes (2012: 250) comments in his research, the competing frames of two major news stories in one day will divide the audience, forcing them to give one story greater salience over the other.

All coding for Friday, August 30, 2013 and Sunday, September 8, 2013 was done exclusively during the morning hours of 7:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Mountain Standard Time. Morning viewership appears to be highest from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. on the West Coast. This
trend will shift when breaking news story drive the agenda. In regards to general daily news this trend holds relevance. Consistent patterns in my analysis lead me to believe that the news stories portrayed in the morning introduce the discussions that will drive the rest of the news day. As I compared and contrasted news stories from the morning and evening, I found that depth of coverage builds throughout the day as information becomes more accessible. Consider the following findings from Wednesday, August 28, 2013 to further support this claim.

**Wednesday August 28, 2013**

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Wednesday, August 28, 2013, marked the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights-era March on Washington. Of the five sources I analyzed, MSNBC was the only media outlet who focused a sizable amount of coverage on this topic and its impact on past and present race relations. The primary news story that day was still the crisis in Syria, specifically how the United States would be involved. I recorded data for FOX News in the morning. There was great speculation among all news agencies that the United States would enact a military strike in Syria. FOX News primarily focused on the debate between Congressional versus Presidential authority, questioning the legality of President Obama acting without the authorization of the Congress. They gave a fairly thorough introduction to the further conservations of the day. This piece
introduced the main topics surrounding the issue, but did not provide vast depth of content. It is evident that the facts were unfolding at the time of broadcast.

When we compare this to the story that ran in the evening on CNN’s Piers Morgan Live we recognize how information becomes more readily accessible throughout the news day. Similar to the piece on FOX News, the overall focus of CNN’s piece was how the Obama Administration would handle the unfolding crisis in Syria. During the particular evening, Piers Morgan enlisted the perspectives of a panel including: Christine Amanpour, a military general, a foreign correspondent and an author who covers this topic closely. This style of reporting emphasizes the mirror model, a type of framing where pundits use the perspective of their guests to mimic their personal viewpoints (Lee 2013: 5). Within this frame, the perspectives of these individuals echo the same findings as one another and underlying beliefs of host, Piers Morgan. Although framing method established through the use of this panel increases public perception of bias, it does strengthen the claim that relevant content builds through the course of the news day. News agencies introduce salient topics in the morning and their reporting appears to add detail and depth of content as the day carries on.

IV. Second Period of Coding Analysis
September 27, 2013 to October 20, 2013

During this time period the Affordable Care Act and the government shutdown received the most coverage among the five news outlets. There was a transition from covering the implementation process of the Affordable Care Act to heightened coverage of the controversy surrounding the 16-day government shutdown. The correlation between these two stories is distinct, in that their agendas are linked. At the time many Republican leaders found the Affordable Care Act unfavorable and used the ploy of shutting down the government as leverage
to eliminate the law. Understanding the relationship between these two issues offers one a unique perspective on the role of agenda setting during this particular time frame.

The majority of leading political news stories correlate with one another. Often times today’s leading story will drive the agenda for the following news day. The data I recorded for Sunday, September 29, 2013 demonstrate this trend. During the morning coding period for this day, *The New York Times* ran a breaking news story titled “House Passes Bill Linking Government Financing to Health Law Delay.” The article was written in a traditional breaking news style, focusing exclusively on the main idea. Vivid imagery and pointed language were used to entice a response from the reader. The piece beings with the phrase, “…under the shadows of a looming government shutdown….“ The issue is sensationalized through this frame to trigger an emotional reaction. In contrast with television news, print media holds the upper hand in eliminating the perception of bias. The lack of visual cues and rich content television provides are not applicable through this medium. Print media is not less bias then television media, but rather the illusion of bias is reduced.

MSNBC’s weekly program Meet the Press, which airs every Sunday morning, demonstrated how the agenda surrounding the Affordable Care Act influenced the framing of the government shutdown. The primary story for the segment was the Affordable Care Act. To outline the impact and response to this law, host David Gregory interviewed Senator Ted Cruz of Texas. Senator Cruz carefully tailored his argument to align the Affordable Care Act with a negative economy. He blended both agendas to push his personal political rhetoric. The interaction between media actors and political actors can be explained through the *exchange model*, which is a symbiotic relationship between political and media actors wherein both parties benefit. Eriksson and Ostman (2013: 305) identify this process in their research on power
dynamics. There is a clear give and take relationship between politicians and the press. Senator Cruz used the program as a platform to express his political agenda and MSNBC benefited as the Senator’s animated performance generated greater viewership.

Media actors in live television maintain less control than their counterparts in print and online media platforms. This can be both a benefit and a detriment. In the context of political reporting, this is a double edged sword. It often makes for more entertaining television, but the network loses control of their personal messaging. On this episode of Meet the Press, David Gregory asked Senator Cruz pointed questions about the Affordable Care Act, and Senator Cruz deviated from the topic repeatedly. With each coming question and answer, David Gregory attempted to guide the conversation back on message, while Senator Cruz continued to use the format as a platform to articulate his personal viewpoints.

One of the main duties of Congress is to pass a budget each year. In 2013 the House and Senate were unable to come to a resolution, which lead to the 16-day government shutdown. The five news outlets I was tracking made this story a main element of their coverage. There was an increase in reporting from October 1, 2013 to October 16, 2013—the timeframe of the shutdown itself. The following chart from Monday, September 30, 2013, one day before the government shutdown, demonstrates relevant trends in regards to coverage of this topic.
These data were recorded one day before the looming government shutdown. Coverage on this day spoke of this event as if it had already taken place, giving viewers the opportunity to mentally prepare. Four out of the five sources reported on the government shutdown, either as a primary or secondary story on this day. I coded these stories as, Domestic Politics: Elected Officials, for the following news outlets: CCN, BBC World News, MSNBC and The New York Times. FOX News was the only outlet to divert their attention from this leading story. However, they did feature a “Countdown to the Government Shutdown” clock on all of their programming for the day. I recorded data for FOX in the evening. They may have run a story about the government shutdown in the morning or afternoon. There was a general acknowledgement among all five news sources that this was one of the leading stories of the day—the government shutdown was driving the political agenda.

The two leading headlines for BBC World News were “U.S. Begins Government Shutdown as Budget Deadlines Passes” and “Elected Officials: US Brinksmanship over the
Tone is manipulated in order to garner an emotional appeal to the audience. Both articles were written by the same reporter, Mark Mardell who is the North American Editor for the news agency. The first piece offered a softer tone. It established a minimally opinionated stance, focusing its attention on outlining key points. The second article offered a more opinionated tone, insinuating Republicans are the culprits of the problem. To strengthen this claim Mardell compared Republicans to a poorly behaved family member, stating if we would not allow our family to act in this way why should we encourage politicians to do so. The decision by BBC World News to cover stories regarding the government shutdown as their primary agenda demonstrates the dynamics of power within the international community. As a main super power it is evident that what is important in the United States is relevant to the rest of the world. The United States asserts power over other players in the international community as this type of superiority is not demonstrated in the same way for any other world leader. The American news media traditionally run stories that advance their personal agenda, whereas; other nation states may be more concerned with understanding the overall political climate of the international community.

Although divergent in their coverage, MSNBC and FOX News were uniform in their use of partisan language. Both media outlets ran a secondary story, in which the intent was to slander the other party. The daily program The Five, on FOX News featured a story about the relationship between President Barack Obama and the President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani. The commentators criticized President Obama for speaking with Iran, bringing into question whether this action should be justified. The interaction between the two leaders was framed in such a way to insinuate that President Obama and his party are out of touch with the issues facing the nation. This messaging is captured when one of the commentators says, “that’s a nice hat” in an attempt
to mock the Iranian leader’s religious garb. This story featured culturally offensive stereotyping to distract the viewer from the topic of discussion. Instead of focusing on relations between Iran and the United States, this framework established an attack on President Obama’s leadership ability.

This type of volatile political slander occurs on both sides of the ideological spectrum. On The Ed Show which airs each evening on MSNBC, host Ed Schultz ran a secondary piece about the Voting Rights Act and recent laws that were implemented in North Carolina. The guest on the program was contributor for The Washington Post, Eugene Robinson, who suggested these laws were clearly discriminatory as they aimed to further suppress the rights of minority voters. This example is similar to a type of framing called the mirror model which Lee (2013: 5) points out in his research. Within this model, sources are bias rather than the news media outlet themselves. Ed Schultz carefully selects a guest such as Robinson who will echo his personal viewpoint that these types of voter suppression laws are counterintuitive to American democracy. This frame allows the viewer to understand the issue in the context of partisan politics. It uses the Voting Rights Act as a tool to position Democrats and Republicans against one another in terms of a politically charged policy debate.

Wednesday October 16, 2013

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In *The New York Times* piece “Senate Paves Way to End Debt Impasse,” the reporter makes careful use of politically powerful sources to create a broader political statement. The reporter uses a back-and-forth commentary outline. The article sites viewpoints from Democrat and Republican elite to mimic the rift between the two political parties. Although structurally balanced, there is a perceived bias. The article waivers, critiquing the motives of one party and with each coming paragraph shifting the attack back to the other side. Democratic Congresswoman Jackie Speier states in the article, “I’ve been an elected official for nearly 30 years and I have never seen such juvenile preschool behavior…..” Polarizing, heavily opinionated quotes such as this are used throughout to establish a partisan narrative. In an attempt to appear non-partisan, *The New York Times* uses framing as a tool to highlight the strong viewpoints on both sides of the aisle. This piece articulates framing through a humanistic lens, addressing the personal perspectives of both political parties in regards to this issue.

The facts the media chose to show their audience are just as significant as the information they chose not to show their audience. On *The O’Reilly Factor*, which airs weekly in the
evenings on FOX News, host Bill O’Reilly focused his attention on analyzing the political repercussions this incident may have for Republican leaders such as Speaker of the House John Boehner and Texas Senator Ted Cruz. O’Reilly played a clip from Speaker Boehner’s speech where he commented, “We fought the good fight, we just didn’t win.” FOX News established the frame of underdog and victor to articulate this issue through the Republican perspective. As Speaker Boehner remarks the Republicans were engaged but came up short. This plays into the notion of Democrats as victors and Republicans as underdogs. The program makes little mention of President Barack Obama’s recent speech on the matter during this time, or the Democratic response to this assertion as it does not fit the needs of their audience.

On this news day, The O’Reilly Factor on FOX News and The Martin Bashir Show on MSNBC both demonstrated a content bias in there reporting. According to Robert Entman (2007: 163) the media manipulate our perception of reality by producing a content bias which favors one political viewpoint over the other. With the government shutdown as the driving story, host Martin Bashir focused his analysis on Senator Ted Cruz’s involvement. Headlines such as “Cruz Control” and “Rubio Who,” referring to Senator Marco Rubio, were placed at the bottom of the screen to frame the topic through the Democratic perspective. Implementing a broad frame of Republican inaction during the shutdown, the segment aimed to connect this to further turmoil in the party, using the fall of presidential hopefuls such as Senator Cruz and Senator Rubio as an example. Figurative and humorous language is manipulated throughout the piece to generate a response from the audience. At one point in his analysis host, Martin Bashir makes a reference to the Republican party by asking, “are they just a bunch of struggling ferrets?” The song Why Can’t we be Friends was played leading up to the commercial break, as an attempt to get the audience to evaluate the relations between our nation’s two party system.
The following chart from Friday, October 4, 2013 deviates from the leading agenda of the government shutdown. This day is unique in that four of the five news sources featured a story coded as Violence/Gun Control but no two stories where the same within this category. CNN, FOX News, BBC World News and *The New York Times* each ran a distinctive story about Violence/Gun Control on this day.

**Friday October 04, 2013**

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On the Record with Greta Van Susteren, which premiers nightly on FOX News, ran a recap style piece to highlight the notable interviews host Van Susternen has conducted throughout her career. The majority of the interviews were linked by the theme of violence. She referenced some of her most memorable stories which include but are not limited to: the death of O.J. Simpsons’ wife, the Trayvon Martin case, the death of Anna Nicole Smith and the Casey
Anthony trial. Other seemingly less violent stories have likely had an impact on her career but there was a predominant trend favoring stories of this nature.

CNN’s Special Report with Anderson Cooper ran a breaking news story about a violent attack by a motorcycle gang in New York City. This story highlighted both graphic and distributing visual cues of the incident in real time to appeal to viewers emotions. Coupled with his analysis of the attack, Cooper also included an interview with an eye witness to further humanize his analysis. Cooper uses what scholar Lance Bennett (2011) identifies as personalization which is an element of bias, wherein the media select a human interest angle in the hopes to engage the public in a broader cause. The combination of storytelling through both the perspective of the eye witness account and pundit’s analysis will likely maintain the most significant impact.

One of the most viewed stories from The New York Times during the evening of October 4, 2013 was the headline “Car Chase, White House to Capitol, Has Fatal End.” The article opened with a dramatic lead, “A woman with a young child was shot to death after turning her vehicle into a weapon on Thursday afternoon, ramming her way through barriers outside the White House and on Capitol Hill.” The line between suspect and victim is blurred, as there is reference to many personal attributes of the now deceased Ms. Carey. The reporter states “Ms. Carey was the second-youngest in a churchgoing family of five daughters…” and “Mr. Brown said Ms. Cary was known for stylish jeans, which she wore with combat boots. ‘She was a catch.’” Thus, the reporter takes a human interest approach to his analysis. In the coming days, news reports were released which demonstrated Ms. Carey may have been mentally unstable at the time of the accident. The New York Times may have been aware of this and tailored their story accordingly.
“Egypt Clashes: Four killed at Pro-Morsi Demonstrations” was one of the top stories featured by BBC World News. Similar to the article in *The New York Times*, this piece featured a dramatic lead as well: “Four people have been killed in Egypt as supporters of ousted President Mohammed Morsi clashed with opponents and security forces.” However, in contrast to the feature story in *The New York Times*, the reporter maintained a straightforward, seemingly unemotional tone throughout his description of the incident. In traditional BBC World News reporting style the article uses short, organizational sub headlines such as “Early Curfew” and “Anniversary Plan” to guide the reader through the analysis. Pictures of the conflict are scattered throughout the article to tap into the visual element of reporting and offer a strong appeal to emotions.

Regardless of the medium, whether it is print, online or television, the news media will highlight drama, conflict and violence as a central element of their reporting. As the famous newsroom saying goes “if it bleeds it leads.” Stories that possess an element of surprise, outside of what happens in an ordinary day will appeal more to an audience. Lance Bennett (2011) refers to this action as *dramatization*, a type of structural bias wherein news agencies will play up the dramatic element of stories in order to appeal to emotions and increase viewership.

V. Conclusion

The media filter and shape the public’s perceptions of reality. Daily news coverage is not a true reflection of factual realism. The majority of the news stories we consume are manipulations of what the media outlets themselves have determined to be the most relevant details. Within Agenda Setting Theory, the media concentrate attention on a few subjects which leads the public to perceive these issues as more relevant than other topics. Issues are given precedence over one another, wherein the audience allocates greater worthiness of attention to
these issues. In addition to Agenda Setting Theory, media outlets use carefully crafted frames to establish a storyline that emulates a specific viewpoint. News outlets rely on framing to create a narrative that will both captivate and articulate the needs and viewpoints of their audience.

Agenda setting and framing have long been attributes of the news media landscape. With the rise of the 24-hour news cycle their presence has become more prevalent and identifiable. Heightened visibility and increased access to political news present a greater demand for agenda setting and framing. They give the public the ability to make comparisons and distinctions between competing news outlets.

Main Findings within First and Second Coding Period

I found several general trends from my content analysis of the following news outlets: The New York Times, CNN, MSNBC, FOX News and BBC World News. All of the media outlets I tested used a type of framing called the mirror model as a part of their coverage. As Lee (2013) suggests, within this frame, “sources are bias rather than the news media outlet.” Each media outlet will select contributors who mimic the perspective of the news agencies themselves. This allows reporters to appear nonpartisan, when in fact they are able to use this as a platform to highlight their personal bias. This leads to another trend wherein the mainstream media generally derive their content from the standpoint of the circle of elites. The politically powerfully control the message. This is counterintuitive to the principles of news, as a small group of individuals speak on behalf of the entire American electorate.

The influence of the 24-hour news cycle has led to a surge in media sensationalism. As the coverage of all five sources varied day to day, so too did the rise in sensationalism for each story. No one source was less guilty of this trend; the coverage within all five of the media
outlets I considered exemplifies this practice. In alignment with Bennett’s (2011) research in order to compete within the rapidly evolving media landscape, news outlets use *dramatization*. Stories that drive the political agenda often highlight drama, conflict and violence, elements that are uncharacteristic of a traditional day.

Out of the five sources, BBC World News provided the most effective international relations coverage. As a media outlet based outside of the United States, they were able to explain issues outside of the traditional America-centric viewpoint. Their coverage highlights the worldwide impact. In terms of domestic policy, I found the majority of leading news stories to be interrelated. The leading headline for one day will drive the agenda for the following news day. For example a story about the Affordable Care Act could set the stage for a piece on the economy the following morning. Issues within the domestic policy agenda are linked, as coverage of one develops content for the next.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

To improve my analysis I could increase the sample size to 10 or 15 news outlets. It may have been helpful to be more concrete in the times I recorded in both the morning and evening. I chose to randomize my coding periods. However, my test could have been more effective if I kept to a more consistent recording pattern within the morning and evening. If I was to repeat this test, I would have not only outlined categories to code for but I would also consider behavioral tendencies in coverage; such as strongly worded language, guest selection and so forth. Throughout my analysis I found it was difficult to compare the sources against one another because they were both similar and divergent in their content and analysis. To overcome these obstacles in the future, it would be useful to compare the individual mediums directly with one
another. I would separate print and television media into two sets and determine the trends within each group.

Public perception holds that the media are currently the most bias they have ever been. However, I find that increased visibility and greater access to information has heightened trends that have long been in effect. To expand this analysis for further research I would use the platform of agenda setting and framing to explore how they impact bias. I would explore how trends within agenda setting and framing correlate with various demographic groups. For example, I would be interested to see how women over the age of 50 would respond to a story about gun violence and contrast these results with another demographic group, such as African American males.

Concluding Observations

Although agenda setting and framing appear to contradict the values of the newsgathering process, they allow the public to process information with greater efficiency. These tools allow the audience to further conceptualize information in meaningful ways. In general, the news media may not always be able to tell the public what to think. However, they are almost always successful in telling their audiences what to think about.
Work Cited


