Media salience as a key advocacy strategy: concept and measurement

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Media and communication campaigns are an oft-used strategy by organisations to seed or catalyse socially desirable results (Start and Hovland 2004)[1] .

Background

The power of the media lies in its 'agenda-setting capacity', i.e. its ability to "influence which issues, topics, persons as perceived to be important" (McCombs and Shaw 1972)[2]. McCombs and Shaw developed the theory at a time when traditional media entities (newspaper, TV, radio) served as gatekeepers for content creation and distribution. Since then the theory has distended, making room for new media channels and social media. For instance, several bloggers today generate a readership rivalling that of traditional news media, and since they are 'independent' (lack any political affiliation), they are perceived as non-partisan and credible[3].

How does agenda setting happen? When we connect with the external world, it is often through second-hand reality created by media houses and journalists. The media picks up 'objects' (e.g. issues, candidates, activist groups), which, it considers newsworthy. Each of which have 'attributes' (facets), some which are emphasised and some which receive little or no attention. For example, consider the Population Control Bill 2019 as the 'object'. The media may choose to emphasise the 'attribute' of restricting the exploding population by following a two-child policy norm, and not focus on other 'attributes' such as the possible increase in sex-selective and/or unsafe abortions.

What is salience? Salience (or prominence) as a construct has both external (social and visibility) and internal (personal association) properties. Vis-à-vis the former, it refers to the extent to which the referent object stands out from other stimuli in the surrounding situation (Augoustinos and Walker 1995: 86)[4]. With regards the latter, it is associated with personal relevance – how the individual thinks of and about the issue (Sears and Whitney 1973, Weaver 1982)[5].

So, then, how does the media create salience? It is hypothesised that issues that receive persistent media attention are the ones that the public is aware of, remember, consider key and are concerned about. This is referred to as object salience, or first-level agenda-setting theory. Additionally, media also plays a role in shaping public's understanding and perceptions of the issue.

This is through portraying the issue in a compelling fashion or emphasising certain facets. This is referred to as attribute salience or second-level agenda-setting theory.

Measuring Object Salience

Any measurement of media salience needs to consider external and internal properties. External properties of salience include the two indicators of 'attention' and 'prominence', while internal properties include 'valence' (Kiousis 2004)[6].

Attention measures media awareness of the issue ('object'). This is measured by the number of stories dedicated to the topic in print (newspapers, magazines, letters to the

editor, op-eds), broadcast (TV, radio) and digital (social) media (Dearing & Rogers 1996, Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt 1998)[7].

Prominence is the positioning of the story within a media text which, communicates importance. These includes structural and presentational elements of the story – placement (e.g. front page of newspaper, op-ed, lead editorial), size, pictures, pull quotes and other aesthetic devices; if the topic appears as headlines on TV news, or as a main article on a digital platform (Ghanem 1997, et al 2009)[8] . This helps in categorising whether stories are deemed as 'major' or 'minor'. Attention and prominence capture object salience, by highlighting whether the topic/issue has received continued attention.

A prominent tool that is used to monitor attention and prominence is media tracking. A form of performance monitoring, it examines whether media coverage of an issue has changed over time. By tracking whether issues are appearing more in targeted media channels, media tracking helps identify whether media outreach tactics are making a headway. A five-step process is adopted.

1. The organisation identifies the media sources to track (print, broadcast, electronic)

2. The organisation then chooses specific media outlets to track

3. Relevant time periods are selected

4. 'Search terms' (advocacy messages, phrases) are determined. It is critical that these are well chosen – they must be broad enough to uncover relevant articles but specific enough to add value

5. The number of times the search terms appear is counted (to ascertain attention)

6. Contiguously, representational elements are noted (to ascertain prominence)

Measuring Attribute Salience

Valence (also referred to as tonality) focuses on whether people are thinking about the issue/topic and how they are thinking about it (i.e. properties and qualities of the issue), as a result of the object salience. At the outset, it is important to remember that the media may or may not shape what constituents think about the issue. Capturing valence is particularly problematic and therefore most studies focus on object salience (Kim and Kim 2014)[9]. It is a subjective assessment to determine whether content is either favourable or unfavourable to the individual. That is, it includes an affective (emotional) component.

One effective way of gauging valence is to code the number of information nuggets that have a positive, or negative tone towards the object of the story. Such "valenced frames" have shown to affect individual's perceptions, evaluations, and behaviour (Schuck and de Vreese 2006: 22)[10]. The most often tool used to measure valence is content analysis.

> **Measures of 'attention':**
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> •   Total mentions of the issue in print, broadcast, and digital media
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> **Measures of 'prominence':**
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> •   In print and digital media – structural and presentational elements such as placement, size, pull quotes and other aesthetic devices.
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> •   In broadcast media – headlines in news coverage
>
> **Measures of valence:**
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> •   Positive or negative tone towards the object of the story vs. neutral tone

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