THE PUBLIC'S ROLE IN FRAMING THE AGENDA

IN THE DIGITAL AGE

by

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ABSTRACT

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The rapid growth of the Internet has transformed the business of journalism by allowing the public many new ways to participate in the news process. This thesis focuses on the public's participation in online news forums to assess how consumers' responses to news stories affect agenda setting. It centers on framing and agenda setting theories and employs quantitative methods to analyze the responses.

The study relied on a content analysis of online postings tied to 50 different stories posted on The Lede, a news blog of <u>The New York Times</u> that can be found on the paper's website. The stories were equally divided among five categories: business, politics, sports, education and religion. The finding show that more than half of online respondents offer a new frame within their responses that is different than that of the professional journalist. There is also evidence of a significant difference between the

amounts of new frames offered among the five categories. In addition, the overall findings show that a minority of respondents offered personal information or personal revelations about their own experiences in their online responses. Still, the results show there was also a significant difference in the amounts of personal revelations introduced among the five categories.

The results of this study show that the public is clearly contributing new material and perspectives in online news forums. The results raise questions about whether professionals are the only ones who play a guiding role in agenda setting. To advance scholarship on this critical question, this thesis concludes with several suggestions for further research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the Internet has given the public opportunities to participate in the news gathering process more than ever before (Shiver, 2006; Morris, 2003). It is no longer solely the role of the professional journalist to decide what is important and relevant for the public to consume from news products. The growth of blogs, chat rooms and online news forums has diminished the role of the professional gatekeeper (McCombs, 2005). Many newspaper companies have reached out in various interactive forums online to allow consumers to participate in the process (Lin & Jeffres, 2001). Newspapers – one of the oldest and most powerful forms of media – are still viewed as reliable sources for information and continue to see a growing Internet audience (Smolkin, 2006). By posting their views on particular issues, members of the public have taken on a new role in directly providing information for public consumption.

Traditional research on media effects has focused on how the work of professional journalists influences the actions and opinions of the general audience (Reese, 2007; Tsfati, 2003; Druckman, 2001; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Over the past 30 years, research has consistently showed that a journalist's role in selecting and shaping news stories impacts the public's perceptions about the events of the day (McCombs, 2005). Recently, researchers have also turned to study how the growth of

the Internet has fueled a new interactive age for newspapers (Singer, 2006; Morris, 2003). Some researchers have even extended that work to study how the Internet can increase civic dialogue (Dahlgren, 2005). Within all of that research, academics have not done much to connect agenda setting research and research about the Internet. It remains unclear how the public's interactive activities affect the agenda setting process.

1.1 Media Effects

Research on media effects focuses on the mass media's role in shaping the public's opinions and actions (Reese, 2007). For the purpose of this thesis, the theories of agenda setting and framing will be considered. It's important to note that over the past 35 years a great deal of debate has emerged over the best way to apply those theories to understand their influence on the public (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002). To understand how the public plays a role in agenda setting and framing, it's necessary to consider both theories from different perspectives.

1.1.1 Agenda Setting

Agenda setting research is largely based on the work of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, who developed the theory in a well-known 1972 study. Their work showed a strong correlation between what Chapel Hill voters identified as key campaign issues to what the media focused upon during the 1968 presidential election (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The two men made the critical determination that those factors could not be coincidental because most consumers rely on the media to provide nearly all of their information about the political arena. "The media are the major primary sources of national political information; for most, mass media provide the best

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– and only – easily available approximation of ever-changing political realities" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 185). It's interesting to note that while many more media sources are now widely available to people on the Web, their point still holds: People get their news about politics from a media source.

Since McCombs and Shaw's initial study, the principle findings of agenda setting have been replicated in hundreds of studies worldwide (McCombs, 2005). In essence, the two scholars established the notion that the press does not tell us what to think, but they do tell us what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Once an item makes it onto a news agenda, that item becomes a topic of thought for news consumers. The important items of the day on newscasts are often the important items of the day in consumers' minds. The media also have the power to stress the importance of different stories (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Traditionally, the length and position of a story dictates its importance in print. In television, the placement on the broadcast and the length of the piece play a role in telling consumers how much to weigh a given story. The growth of the Internet changes those calculations. The public now stresses the importance of various stories through "Most Read Stories" lists on newspaper Web sites and other rating mechanisms (Shiver, 2006). In an online forum, the number of responses a story receives may be a strong sign of its importance to a general audience. Still, the central tenet remains the same: The mass media shape the agenda of the day by telling the pubic what members of the media deem important.

1.1.1.1 The Public's Acceptance of Agenda Setting

Research on agenda setting also shows that some people are more susceptible to the media's role in setting the agenda than others. McCombs and Shaw (1972) found that those with a high need for orientation, that is those who find something both relevant yet uncertain, are most likely to be influenced by the media. It's logical to think that undecided voters, for example, might be more susceptible to the media's agenda because relevance is extremely high. In Tsfati's study (2003) on media skepticism, he found that people who are more skeptical of the media tend to be less influenced by the agenda. That is those people resist the agenda because they don't trust the source. "If audiences are active and critical towards news and news producers, they may resist the agenda offered by the media" (Tsfati, 2003, p. 160). That conclusion has profound implications for the public's ability to set the agenda via online forums. On the one hand, newspapers provide a credible source for information. On the other hand, the remarks of the general public may not be valued as highly as those of a professional journalist.

1.1.1.2 Modern Agenda Setting Research

The transformative nature of the Internet in the communications business can hardly be overstated. "E-mail, online newspapers, chat rooms and Web sites representing every ideological, commercial and personal niche have changed the communication behaviors of millions of people across the world and opened vast new territories to communication researchers" (McCombs, 2005, p. 544). Many people speculated that the ability to customize content and the resulting fragmenting audiences

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would diminish the nature of agenda setting. At the heart of this prediction was the thought that the public would no longer routinely and habitually return to the same sources of information as relied upon in McCombs and Shaw's initial work and the agenda setting research that has followed. In essence, the sheer number of Web sites was predicted to open up so many channels that no one perspective would dominate the public agenda.

Nonetheless, the effects of agenda setting have still been documented in new media (Zeller, May 23, 2005). In fact, research shows the public's attention on the Web may be even more concentrated than it is in print. James Hamilton (2004) pointed out that the five largest American newspapers account for nearly twenty-two percent of the circulation among the top 100 newspapers. Online, the top five newspaper Web sites account for nearly forty-two percent of the total links found on the Internet to the top 100 newspapers. It's much like cable television. There are an abundant number of blogs and news sites, but people consistently return to the same sources of information.

Historically, agenda setting research has found a high degree of correlation in content among different publications (McCombs, 2005). It's not surprising that agenda setting is evidenced on the Web as most newspaper sites heavily rely on content from the print products (Smolkin, 2006). The majority of content is still produced by professional journalists who work within established frameworks to construct their stories. "Just as the Chapel Hill study found a high degree of redundancy across traditional news organizations using different media of communication, the Internet – at least most of the popular sites on the Internet – may simply add another set of cells to

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that matrix of high correlations" (McCombs, 2005, pg. 545). In fact, a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism on the 2004 presidential election found that there were actually fewer original political stories on the Web that year compared to previous political contests (Palser, 2004). That finding suggests that the Web may not actually lead to the production of more news content but rather the repackaging of existing content. That needs to be considered when assessing the public's role in framing news content because the public is clearly viewing a limited number of news sources. That may make them more likely to accept content they view through online forums on the Web sites they habitually visit.

1.1.2 Framing

Not only do the media select stories for public consumption, the media also shape how the public considers an issue. Framing theory is a natural extension of agenda setting theory in the sense that it expands upon the media's power to influence public opinion (Reese, 2007; Druckman 2001). In essence, framing theory suggests that the media have the power to make some issues more salient by emphasizing different points in news coverage (Scheufele, 2004; Entman, 1993). Frames often provide a shortcut for consumers to interpret information. When the media focus on a dominant set of characteristics about a given object, consumers focus on those characteristics when considering the situation. "In addition to making issues more salient, the media also seek to reduce the complexity of issues for their audience by presenting news in easy-to-understand interpretive packages or frames" (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002, p. 7).

There is a considerable amount of scholarly disagreement over the best way to approach the study of framing. Scheufele's research (2004) shows that frames can be viewed from the perspective of the media, political players or consumers. In Scheufele's study (2000), he suggests that framing has far more subtle affects that are hard to measure in comparison to the affects of agenda setting. To him, mass media have the power to increase levels of importance assigned to items under agenda setting. He says framing is based on the idea that small changes in wording or description can affect how audience members interpret a situation.

> Although the process of issue selection or agenda-setting by mass media necessarily needs to be a conscious one, framing is based on subtle nuances in wording and syntax that have most likely unintentional effects or at least effects that are hard to predict and control by journalists (Scheufele, 2000, p. 309).

That approach has interesting implications for the study of the public's framing of issues in online forums. Each person who responds in such a forum has the potential to offer slightly different interpretations and opinions that could shape the public's perceptions about an issue.

Stephen Reese, a researcher based at the University of Texas, views framing in terms of a bridging model (2007). Reese says that news stories must select certain aspects of reality and emphasize those issues to convey the story.

> I still think of frames as structures that draw boundaries, set up categories, define some ideas as out and others in, and generally operate

to snag related ideas in their net in an active process. For me, that

captures the way meaning can be embedded across stories, media, and

time (Reese, 2007, p. 150).

What's interesting about his definition within the context of an online forum is that

most people who contribute are not producing a news story of their own to report to the

public; they are merely writing from their own perspectives. They may emphasize

particular aspects of reality without making mention of various other points of

consideration that a professional journalist might include. That could influence the way

the general public views a posting.

It's interesting to note that Reese (2007) cites the "war on terror" as a strong

example of the power of framing. That label, supported by the George W. Bush

administration, has provided an accepted way of thinking about America's status after

the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (Reese, 2007; Entman, 2003). Many news

stories are told within that frame. More importantly, Bush opponents have not

successfully identified another frame in which to view the nation's military actions in

Iraq or Afghanistan. Obviously much of that framing is being done by political

operatives and others outside of journalism, but it could influence how people post

responses in online forums. After all, the public is the one providing the content for the

public to consider. It also provides strong evidence that frames supported by those

outside mainstream media stick in the minds of the general public.

Up to this point, most research on framing has focused on the role of traditional

news media in shaping the public agenda. Druckman (2001) challenges the basic notion

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that framing occurs as part of the elite's manipulation of the general public. Druckman (2001) suggests that people designate authority to credible sources so they can receive guidance on what to think about. He found that credible sources can use frames to shape public thought, but noncredible sources don't have the same power. "Perceived source credibility appears to be a prerequisite for successful framing. Framing effects may occur, not because elites seek to manipulate citizens, but rather because citizens delegate to credible elites for guidance" (Druckman, 2001, p. 1061). In essence he found there are limits to framing. Those findings have profound implications for the public's role in framing on online news forums. Consumers may find information put forth on forums unreliable and thus not consider it in their assessments of newsworthy events. Or, people may not distinguish that content from the writings of the professional journalist, which could result in increased credibility for the posters.

1.1.3 Attribute Agenda Setting and Framing

Agenda setting and framing remain intricately linked within the study of media effects (Kim & McCombs, 2007; Scheufele, 2000). To understand how the public takes a role in framing, it's necessary to first understand how agenda setting, specifically attribute agenda setting, and framing remain distinct in the minds of some scholars and strongly connected in the minds of others. Initially, agenda setting research focused on the salience of issues, or objects, in the public's mind (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The object refers to the thing that people have an opinion about. As time went on, researchers began to look at the attributes of those objects. Research shows that as the media put more emphasis on specific attributes, the importance of those attributes

increases in the public's mind (Kiousis, 2005). Some attributes are emphasized more than others, leading to a stronger agenda.

Many people have come to see attribute agenda setting as the second level of agenda setting. The salience of the object itself is the first-level effect and the attributes become the second-level effect. The basic theory holds for both levels: What the media emphasizes will be emphasized by the public. However, the notion of attribute agenda setting changes the basic premise of agenda setting. "If traditional agenda-setting effects show the influence of the media in telling us 'what to think about,' attribute agenda-setting effects show the influence of the media in telling us 'how to think about an object'" (Kim & McCombs, 2007, p. 300).

In order to understand attribute agenda setting research, it's necessary to consider how the attributes have been analyzed. Research on attribute agenda-setting theory suggests that attributes positively or negatively covered in the news are likely to affect people's judgments of a given situation. This differs from agenda setting theory research, which focuses on the salience of the issue itself in people's minds. Kim and McCombs (2007) point out that attributes have two components: the cognitive element and the affective element. The cognitive component focuses on specific substantive traits, while the affective element addresses the positive, negative or neutral tone of the description. That affective element can have a profound effect on voters. Their research on a Texas political contest shows that attributes positively or negatively covered in the media will be perceived in the same way by the public and relate to opinions about the candidate (Kim & McCombs, 2007). This research poses new

territory for agenda setting research, which has historically stayed away from assessing positive and negative traits of attitude objects as identified in the media. It's interesting to consider how positive and negative attributes could impact the public's perception of online postings. On the one hand, online posters are far more likely to express an opinion than a traditional journalist so there may be more positive or negative characterizations than in traditional media. Conversely, an abundance of opinionated responses may discourage consumers from taking the postings seriously.

The difference between attribute agenda setting and framing remains the subject of great scholarly debate. Scheufele (2000) argues that agenda setting is based on attitude accessibility, the notion that the media have the power to increase levels of importance assigned to issues by audience members. On the other hand, he believes that framing is based on the concept of prospect theory, which suggests that subtle changes in wording might affect how consumers interpret issues. "In other worlds, framing influences how audiences think about issues, not by making aspects of the issue more salient, but by invoking interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information" (Scheufele, 2000, p. 309). In essence, he is suggesting that attribute agenda setting still tells you what to think about, while framing tells you how to interpret it. What that distinction does not consider is that the inherent selection of details that shapes framing plays a role in telling the public what to think about as well. The details that are selected may be considered in the public's mind, but those details that are excluded will not.

Kim, Scheufele and Shanahan (2002) argue that the definitions of framing are so varied that it's difficult to fully assess the similarities to attribute agenda setting. "Framing is a fuzzy term, and multiple theoretical and operational definitions of framing exist in the literature" (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002, p. 8). They argue that framing applies to the public's inherent need to interpret their lives and the events around them by using interpretive schemas. On the other hand, agenda setting relies on memory-based models of information processing. They believe that the media can influence the accessibility of issues with a person's mind. In other words, they argue that agenda setting has to do with how easily a person can retrieve information from his or her memory. Their research on coverage of a development in Ithaca, New York showed support for attribute agenda setting in the sense that there was a significant correspondence between prominent issue attributes in the media and the agenda of attributes among the audience (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002). Still, they maintain that the findings are conceptually different from research on framing, which they argue is based on the notion of steering the public toward a specific interpretation of events:

> In other words, the concept of framing implies that the way a given piece of information is described creates different outcomes among audiences. Attribute agenda setting, in contrast, suggests that the media can successfully make various aspects of an issue more or less accessible and therefore prime which pieces of information people will use when they are making decisions about policies or candidates (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002, p. 21).

That definition of framing addresses outcomes more than process.

McCombs (2005) makes the central argument that the two theories are strongly linked. He bases his argument on Robert Entman's popular definition of framing:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

McCombs (2005) argues that both framing and agenda setting call attention to the perspectives of both the media and their audiences and pay attention to the special status that certain attributes or frames have in the content of any given message. In his mind, there are two distinct types of attributes: aspects and central themes. Aspects are the general category of attributes. Central themes define the dominant perspective on an object, much like frames. "In other words, attributes defining a central theme are frames" (McCombs, 2005, p. 547). Operationally, the distinction is clear in the way media texts are analyzed because the focus remains on identifying the attribute that defines the major theme of each news story versus a tally of the various attributes that appear through the entire piece. "The convergence of attribute agenda setting with the concept of framing offers new insights and raises intriguing questions about the influence that various patterns of description found in the news have on how the public thinks about public affairs topics" (McCombs, 2005, p 547). This thesis focuses on

McCombs' interpretation of framing by relying on the central theme of each unit of analysis to determine whether a new frame is present.

1.1.4 Topics in Modern Agenda Setting Research

Historically, most agenda setting and framing research has focused on political agendas, but there are many agendas in modern society. Researchers have slowly turned their attention to those issues in four distinct areas: business, sports, education and religion (McCombs, 2005). Those four areas cover various aspects of society and appeal to different types of news consumers. Given the various findings in those arenas, it is logical to separate analysis of online news agendas in those areas.

Business provides the first area for analysis. Carroll and McCombs (2003) research shows that the business media have the ability to shape corporate reputations. Their study found first-level and second-level agenda-setting effects, and attribute agenda-setting effects. That is the media's descriptions and coverage influenced overall impressions. Nancy Kieffer's (1983) work studying copy in Fortune magazine showed that stocks increased for companies featured in the magazine. Naturally, positive coverage had the greatest effects. But what is most interesting is that negative and neutral coverage also increased the stocks (Kieffer, 1983). That study is 24 years old and there are now far more sources for business news, but the central tenet of agenda setting would still hold: Coverage can influence business reputations. It's important to note that this research doesn't assess how the public's role in the journalism process could influence the effects.

Research on sports is complex. Sports coverage consists of independent media analysis of athletes and performance as well as live or taped coverage of sporting events themselves. Research has showed that the National Basketball Association relied on agenda-setting theory to increase fans and revenues from television broadcasts (Fortunato, 2000). The sport's image was enhanced through interviews with players and other communication methods that framed the sport in exciting ways. This finding is particularly interesting because it shows that an organization can establish its own frames that may be supported by the media. It suggests that the media may not be the only ones who have the ability to frame. In this case, the media may have simply taken a role in conveying the frame to the public. It remains unclear whether a consumer would frame a sports story in a new and different way.

Researchers have also studied how agenda setting plays a role in the classroom. Viki Young's (2006) work addressed how agenda setting contributes to teachers' decisions about how to use data. McCombs (2005) makes the point that previous research has shown that students see their professors as sources to frame their studies, even when those ideas and frames conflict with their own notions about a particular issue. What is interesting about this finding is that it focuses on the source of the frames. Once again, the credibility of the source is paramount. Still, it doesn't address media coverage of education. It focuses solely on interactions in the classroom, which do not form the basis for most people's thoughts about the educational system if they are not an active student or parent. The media's coverage of education offers other opportunities for studying how education and framing might interact.

Finally, researchers have also looked how organized religion has played into agenda setting. As McCombs (2005) points out, religious organizations communicate with congregants in houses of worship, through written publications and even via television. McCombs notes that previous research has shown religious groups' abilities to keep issues on the public agenda. Those findings have particular implications in politics because of a focus on religion and values in recent American elections. What's interesting is that churches encouraged their members to view abortion as a threat to their freedom. In essence, the churches framed the issue for their congregants as part of an overall effort to keep it in the forefront of the political discussion. Once again, traditional media may have simply been a vessel for communicating the frames. The differences among all five areas of study – politics, business, sports, education and politics – pose a clear opportunity for further framing research as the role of online posters is assessed.

1.2 An Interactive Age for Newspapers

To understand the public's role in framing the agenda, it's necessary to consider the news environment in the new Internet age. Much research has been conducted on the move toward online journalism, specifically the shift within newspaper organizations. As readership of traditional news products continued to decline, most newspapers jumped onto the Web in the 1990s (Morris, 2003; Rosenberry, 2005). Many people in the news business were initially hesitant to embrace the Web. Still, newspaper Internet sites have continued to grow as more people have turned to the Web for entertainment, interactivity, and news. "The migration of news and information to

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an online platform has disrupted old patterns of reading and changed the relationship between audiences and news providers" (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun & Jeong, 2007, p. 236).

Several statistics show strong growth among Internet news consumers. In November of 2004, 69 percent of the American population was online, according to InternetWorldStats.com (Kent, Harrison & Taylor, 2006). A 2004 Pew Research Center study showed that 75 million Americans used the Internet to get information about the 2004 presidential election (Rainie, Cornfield & Horrigan, 2005). In 2005, newspaper Internet advertising hit more than $2 billion for the first time, a 31 percent increase from the previous year, according to the Newspaper Association of America (Smolkin, 2006). Unique visitors to newspaper Web sites grew by 21 percent from the beginning to the end of 2005. The Associated Press reported in January 2008 that U.S. newspapers' online audiences grew by about 6 percent in 2007 to an average of 60 million unique U.S. visitors per month (Sutel, 2007). What's interesting is that it also showed some 38 percent of all active online users visited newspaper sites within the past year. Clearly, the growth of newspaper Internet sites is tremendous. These sites are taking on a new role in informing the American public about the events of the day.

Initially, many sites simply offered the content of news stories in the print edition in the new digital environment (Smolkin, 2006). Rosenberry's research (2005) showed that many newspaper sites failed to utilize interactive elements that were available to them. "Technology allows papers to do things that are not possible in print editions" (Rosenberry, 2005, p. 70). Still, there is a growing awareness among

researchers and industry leaders that newspaper companies need to embrace the Web as a new way to communicate with news consumers. Gordon Borrell, CEO of Borrell Associates, a media research company said:

> If newspaper companies hope to survive, they have to realize the Internet is a distinct medium, and the newspaper needs a separate set of very strong managers who can't be distracted by what's going online. They have it married too much in their minds. The newspaper and online in their minds are Siamese twins (Smolkin, 2006, p. 21).

Research shows that interactive elements, including online chats, blogs, surveys and polls, are changing the way people consume news and information (Shiver, 2006; Singer, 2006; Kunkel, 2006; Lin & Jeffres, 2001). An increasing number of newspaper companies are offering these elements on their Web sites to interact with consumers (Palser, 2007). Deborah Potter's article (2007) shows that newspaper companies are also increasingly offering video on their sites. That allows consumers to read and view news and information in two formats in one location. It allows for the swifter consumption of news, but it could limit the number of sources a person seeks out to receive their news, thus leading to fewer frames to consider. As Leonard Downie Jr., the executive editor of <u>The Washington Post</u> said: The paper needs to become "platform agnostic" (Smolkin, 2006, p. 22). Communicating information is no longer a matter of writing basic news articles; it's a communication sharing process. Joe Sappell, executive editor of the <u>Los Angeles Times</u>, said: "The Web audience has come to

expect more than a single story. They want more interactivity and more ways to deepen the newspaper experience" (Shiver, 2006, p. 37).

One of the great challenges for news operations in the digital age has been deciding how and when to monitor interactivity. Dahlgren points out that dialogue on the Web "does not always follow the high ideals set for deliberative democracy" (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 156). Palser points out (1999) that the decision to moderate a discussion can influence a news organization's liability for content. It can also lead to chaos. "Online forums foster vibrant public discourse. They also draw crackpots out of the woodwork (Palser, 1999, p. 30). Researchers generally suggest that rules for conduct need to be posted to foster honest discourse. It's important to consider that those rules may shape content that influences the public agenda.

1.2.1. Customized Content

The digital age has allowed consumers great selectivity in choosing their news content. No longer do people have to read through several articles to find the ones in which they are interested. Palser's work (2005) on Really Simple Syndication, or RSS feeders, shows how new technology is allowing people to select categories of news stories from various sites to be emailed to them directly. This technology completely transforms the news process because it allows for entirely personalized content. On the one hand, it allows a consumer to read through more relevant news in a shorter period of time. On the other hand, it challenges agenda setting theory because it does not allow a consumer to be exposed to information that he or she didn't specifically select.

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In the case of an online forum, a consumer must specifically choose to go through the responses in order to absorb the content.

1.2.2 Most Read Lists

Research show that one of the most interesting changes with Web journalism comes from the newspaper organization's newfound ability to track interest in news articles. Shiver's work (2006) shows that papers are relying on "Most Read" lists to gauge whether coverage is resonating with communities. That raises important questions about whether the public or journalists are setting the agenda. Tom Rosentiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism said: "What this technology tests is to what extent journalists feel they are agenda-setters who also lead a community rather than tell people what they want to hear" (Shiver, 2006, p. 33.) The lists can change the news process for journalists and consumers alike. If journalists react to popular news stories, they may be ignoring other stories. If they ignore community reaction, they may do so at their own financial peril as consumers lose interest in the product.

Many people use "Most read" lists to choose stories of interest on newspaper Web sites, thus ignoring stories that don't rank highly by the collective group of consumers. As Shiver points out (2006), many believe those lists can be used to edit a newspaper Web site by a referendum of sorts. Those lists are also open to manipulation by people who misuse the ranking system to put the story they choose at the top. Similarly, online news forums are also open to manipulation by those who post multiple responses or encourage others to do the same. In the case of an online forum, the

number of postings may serve as an indication to consumers whether the topic resonated with other viewers.

1.2.3 Online Polls

Finally, researchers have also studied the role of online polls in the past few years. The work of Kent, Harrison and Taylor (2006) points out that most Internet-based newspaper polls are not scientific because the respondents are inherently self selected. However, the results of those polls are often treated as news items on broadcast news shows. They suggest that nonscientific polls create a participatory and entertainment dimension to news stories.

> The online poll as an example of symbolic communication is not
>
> really about making the polity 'think.' Rather, the opinion poll gives
>
> the visitor a context or a frame of reference in which to place
>
> themselves and opinion polls give the media organization's audience
>
> something to think about (Kent, Harrison & Taylor, 2006, p. 303).

That argument is a key one because it supports the notion that online polls serve to show audiences what to think about, in essence an agenda-setting role. They focus on how the results give a person a frame of reference upon which to base his or her own opinions. They focus on numerical polls. They don't address how the content of open-ended, written poll responses may frame the argument at hand for the news consumers. Online forums have similar characteristics in that the results don't serve as a measurable survey of the general population.

1.2.4 Blogs

The growth of weblogs, or blogs, has been the subject of significant research over the past several years. Blogs, which are produced by citizens and professionals alike, merge the world of journalism and citizen communication in a way that is transforming the public's perceptions of news. Anyone can start a blog to express their views about business, politics, sports, education, religion, and a host of other topics. Most researchers consider a blog as a sort of diary posted online, but many blogs receive considerable viewership and have provided news tips to professionals (Drenzer & Farrell, 2004). The growth of blogs has occurred so quickly that it's challenging to find a consistent figure on the number of blogs available. Reese and his team recorded 20 million blogs (2007). Tanni Haas (2005) reported that about 17 percent of blogs cover news and current affairs. Politically oriented blogs are the second most read type of blog after personal or family blogs.

There remains great debate over the level of original content produced by bloggers (Zeller, May, 23 2005). Some people argue that blogs have shifted mainstream control of information to the audience (Chung, Kim, Trammell & Porter, 2007). Still, Reese's team found bloggers rely heavily on professional news reports in developing content (Reese, Rutigliano, Huyn & Jeong, 2007). Haas argues that blogs don't mark a radical departure from traditional forms of communication. In fact, her work suggests that the broader blogosphere serves the same gate-keeping role journalists have always served.

While a small number of weblogs set the agenda for thousands of less visible weblogs, much the same way that certain elite mainstream news organizations set the agenda for numerous smaller news organizations, some of the largest collaborative weblogs have begun to apply procedures for selection of content that resemble the gate-keeping methods used by mainstream news organizations (Haas, 2005, p. 387).

Still, the growth of blogs has encouraged many news agencies to produce their own blogs for public consumption (Haas, 2005). <u>The Chicago Tribune</u>, <u>The Dallas Morning News</u>, <u>The Wall Street Journal</u>, and <u>The New York Times</u> have been some of the leaders in developing news blogs. The blogs take various forms. Sometimes reporters write short news stories and open the site up for comments from the public. Others write shorter postings that don't provide a full picture on a news story. They carry the reputation of established news organizations, and they also carry the same guidelines for fairness and accuracy that set professionals apart from mainstream bloggers.

These differences have sparked some debate between reporters and citizen bloggers (Chung, Kim, Trammell & Porter, 2007). Reporters often look down on citizen bloggers for lacking credibility, but citizens often criticize reporters for being arrogant and not letting the public help decide what's important. Blogs have essentially raised the question: "Who is a journalist?" Johnson and his team (2004) found that blogs were judged as moderately credible, but more credible than any mainstream

media source. That has profound implications for the public's trust of citizen-generated news. It would suggest that skepticism of the mainstream press has placed increased credibility on citizen comments. It's natural to consider whether that would extend to online forums posted on newspaper sites.

1.3 The Public's Relationship with Journalism

Researchers have shown how the growth of the Internet has changed the relationship between the professional journalist and the public in many ways.   In essence, the public is now part of the process. The work of Nichols and her team (2006) suggests that journalists benefit from having a greater understanding of the communities they serve through interaction. Morris' work (2003) supports the idea that interactivity has changed the public's notions of truth and accurate information. "People construct truth from many sources and experiences. They do not receive truth from the news media; they participate in creating it" (Morris, 2003, p. 47).

Singer's work (2006) shows how the Internet has changed the journalist's traditional role as a gatekeeper who determined what information reached the public. On the one hand, anyone with Internet access can now post information on news Web sites, write a blog or make a movie for the rest of the world to see. On the other hand, the abundance of information on the Web creates a need for someone to sift through it to help people decide what is important. Singer's work shows that online editors are placing a growing emphasis on content that serves as the raw material for user participation and personalization.   He found that editors continue to serve a gate keeping role because they select what information can appear on their sites. Many of

them also review postings to ensure that the public's participation meets the standards of the organization. Those findings are interesting because they show how professionals no longer deliver news to consumers: Rather, they deliver news with consumers. The consumers have a role in the content within the interactive framework (Singer, 2006).

Researchers have also studied how the Internet has shaped the public's perceptions about professional journalists, which has profound importance for credibility of professionals and nonprofessionals alike. Lowrey and Anderson (2005) found that the public continues to broaden its ideas about what constitutes news. Their study showed that while people thought journalists needed a high knowledge base to do their jobs, they also didn't think it would be hard to obtain that knowledge base. That's an interesting finding because if people come to view journalism as a less credible occupation, it could increase the credibility given to online postings made by community members on the Internet. Posters may be more likely to challenge or reframe an idea if they see their thoughts as equally credible, or more credible, than that of the professional journalist. They may also consider their own personal experiences as valuable to others' understanding of an issue.

While many people appreciate the public's role in shaping information for public consumption, others do not and would not be receptive to interactive information. Thomas Kunkel (2006) points out that many journalists regret their loss of control. Still, he notes that people often have an inherent desire to speak up and be

heard. "This meeting of old and new media is an uneasy one, needless to say, in part because of the battle over agenda-setting" (Kunkel, 2006, p. 4).

1.3.1. Uses and Gratification Theory

To understand the public's role in shaping news content, it's important to consider why people choose to visit online forums. Though uses and gratification theory is not a focus in this thesis, it provides a sound perspective to consider in assessing the public's consumption of media in the new digital age. Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1974) suggested that there are several social factors that may generate needs people seek to fulfill from various forms of mass media. Their research suggests that people consume media to relax, receive information, receive validation of their own opinions, identify with involved characters, or to connect with others. One type of media can serve several different needs. The researchers also suggested that the media itself may create some of the needs that consumers seek out media to satisfy (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Since their 1974 research, a great deal of further study has been focused on uses and gratification theory in regards to television and newspaper viewers.

It's also important to consider uses and gratification theory when evaluating the agenda setting effects of online news forums. Some researchers have found that going online fulfills a need for social interaction, voter guidance and surveillance of the surrounding issues. Singer (2006) suggests that people participate in online discussions to define themselves and to connect with others. That could have profound implications for how they absorb news. If they visit a news site to define themselves by making a

posting, they may be less likely to read and absorb information from someone else. They may also be more likely to want to distinguish their own posting by offering a frame that conflicts with that of the professional journalist. Their needs may also influence whether they contribute a personal revelation as part of an online posting.

1.3.2 Evolving Civic Dialogue

In addition to changing journalistic practices, online news forums are also transforming civic dialogue as well. Many researchers and practitioners have found potential to enhance civic involvement through interactivity available on news sites and other open forums. Rosenberry (2005) suggests that online journalists can contribute to the democratic system by providing places for citizens to interact on public affairs issues. He notes that newspapers are still seen as the most credible source for information and can only strengthen the fourth estate by offering citizens a voice and providing users with greater access to information. Other researchers support his view. "We should not forget that the online journalism sector is a core element of the public sphere on the Internet" (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 153). Kent, Harrison and Taylor's work (2006) shows that polls, specifically, give people a sense that they are participating in the democratic process.

Several researchers support the view that forums can foster greater civic deliberation that benefits the democratic process (Dahlgren, 2005; Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004; Nichols, Friedland, Rojas, Cho & Shah, 2006). Dahlgren (2005) notes that there are thousands of Web sites that foster public discourse at this point. He points out that the Web is being used to challenge established power structures as well as to

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strengthen established systems. "With the advent of the Net, civic interaction takes a major historical step by going online and the sprawling character of the public sphere becomes all the more accentuated" (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149). Bichard's work on blogs (2006) supports the notion that the Web allows political players an open forum to put forth their ideas and agendas. It's clear that responses in online news forums may serve both to frame the issue of the day and to enhance civic engagement.

1.4 Research Questions

It is clear from the literature that a great deal of research over the past several decades has focused on the role of traditional media in agenda setting and framing. Much agenda setting research has centered on five categories: business, politics, sports, education, and religion. Recent data clearly show that media companies, specifically newspapers, and consumers are swiftly turning toward the Internet to consume news. Professional media no longer have a monopoly in providing information, but little research has focused on how the public plays a role in framing and agenda setting.

This thesis seeks to examine how consumers who respond to online news forums on newspaper web sites support new frames, respond to old frames offered in published reports, or contribute unclear postings. It's important to address these questions because previous framing research has not focused on the user's perspective. By looking at new frames, it allows for a new approach to framing theory that allows for comparison among story types and measures the presence and absence of new frames. The precise definitions of new frames, old frames and unclear frames are spelled out elsewhere in this report. To summarize, new frames are those that offer a

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difference perspective from the professional journalist, whereas old frames simply respond to the published reports. Unclear frames can not be determined.

This thesis also seeks to evaluate whether respondents introduce personal revelations, non-personal responses, or an unclear perspective within their postings. This approach will expand the body of knowledge on uses and gratification theory by evaluating what sort of personal connections the public makes online. The complete definitions of those categories are outlined below, but personal revelations generally offer a personal anecdote or reveal details of a person's background. Non-personal responses don't reveal any background information. Within both framing and personal revelations, this study also seeks to measure differences among the five categories of previous agenda setting research. Given the lack of studies related to online news postings, the following research questions are offered to examine these issues.

R1: What percentage of online news postings offers new frames, respond to old frames, or contribute unclear information?

R2: Is there a significant difference in the number of new frames, old frames, and unclear responses among the five story categories of business, politics, sports, education and religion?

R3: What percentage of online news postings offers personal revelations, non-personal responses, or unclear perspectives?

R4: Is there a significant difference in the number of personal revelations, non-personal responses, and unclear perspectives among the five story categories of business, politics, sports, education and religion?

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

This study consisted of a content analysis of online news postings from The Lede, an online news blog on NYTimes.com, the primary web site of <u>The New York Times</u>. The Web site is one of more than 50 sites operated by The New York Times Company, a leading national media company with 2007 revenues of $3.2 billion (The New York Times Company Reports 2007 Fourth-Quarter and Full-Year Results, Jan. 31, 2008). The NYTimes site was selected because previous studies have shown the print version of the newspaper has historically played a strong role in setting the national agenda (Kiousis, 2004; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Winter & Eyal, 1981). In November, 2007, the Audit Bureau of Circulations released figures showing that the print version of <u>The New York Times'</u> circulation had declined 4.5 % to less than 1.04 million on a daily basis (Perez-Pena, 2007). But the Scarborough Newspaper Audience Rating Report (2007) showed that an estimated 1.39 million people viewed the NYTimes.com site on a weekly basis. In April 2007, Nielsen/NetRatings announced that the site was the top newspaper Web site in audience size, page views and time spent on the site (Times Names New Writer for Leaderless Lede, April 9, 2007). Clearly, the web site has retained a sizeable audience.

2.1 The Lede

The Lede serves as the primary general interest news blog on the NYTimes.com site. It was critical to select one blog upon which to base the study because it provided consistency for posting policies, audience, and other variables that would make it difficult to compare postings from different sources. Anyone who responded to The Lede faced the same rules as anyone else who contributed a posting that was the subject of this study. Web site operators review each comment before it is posted, but they do not edit individual postings (Frequently asked questions about comments, 2008). The site does not tolerate personal attacks or vulgarity. The Lede offered up its first story in 2006. The site describes the purpose of the blog:

> In the news business, the opening sentences of a story are referred to as its "lede" -- spelled that way, journalism lore has it, to avoid confusion with the lead typesetting that once dominated newspaper printing presses. Every sentence in a news story, though, has the potential to spiral off in new directions, and that's where The Lede's mission begins (About the Lede, 2008).

Mike Nizza serves as the primary author of The Lede (Hoyt, Dec. 9, 2007). He writes short stories ranging from three paragraphs to more than a dozen addressing a particular topic. He often includes links to other news sources. In order to construct the stories on his blog, he regularly surveys some 300 online sites. "Like many news blogs, The Lede is more a compilation of news already on the Web — with context and sometimes a little attitude — than an originally reported news article" (Hoyt, Dec. 9,

2007). Each posting is assigned one or more tags describing the general topic that the story addresses. Consumers have an opportunity to respond to as many stories as they want. Each respondent has a tag of their own that identifies their postings. Though some posters use names, other respondents have tags that don't identify them by name or location.

2.2 Procedure

In order to reliably compare the framing and personal revelations for postings among different story types, it was first necessary to identify stories upon which to base the study. On December 15, 2007, 50 stories from The Lede were selected for analysis. The ten most recent stories in each of the five story types – business, politics, sports, education, and religion – were identified. The stories were selected based on the subject tags assigned by the site itself. By selecting the stories based on the site's tags, it eliminated any subjectivity as to the topic of the story. By basing selection on dates of publication, it ensured that the selection was unbiased and consistent. It's important to note that stories selected received as few as one posting to as many as 565 postings in one case. This study restricted review to the first 100 postings in each story for two reasons: To assess a larger number of postings for any given story would have given that particular story too much impact on the overall results of the study. It's also less likely that consumers would read beyond the first 100 postings, making the potential impact of framing less significant.

As stated previously, the number of units of analysis varied among the story types. Most stories received less than 100 postings, but the numbers varied

considerably. To be clear, the study is based off the same number of stories in each story type. It's the public's response in the postings that varied. In total, 2,067 postings were analyzed. Though the number of postings is inconsistent among the story types, it was critical to assess the different units of analysis as they are produced for a general audience. A consumer who visits the NYTimes.com site could be exposed to the same differences in the level of responses for any 50 given stories. Table 2.1 shows the differences among the story types.

Table 2.1 Division of Postings by Story Type

	Business	Politics	Sports	Education	Religion
Total number of postings	341	523	317	247	639
Percentage of total postings	16.5%	25.3%	15.3%	11.9%	31%

2.2.1. Categories

To operationalize this study, two coders read each story selected on The Lede to identify the dominant theme or frame as discussed by McCombs (2005). Then, the two coders read each of the postings and classified them in two areas: framing and personal revelations. The coders labeled each posting as a new frame, old frame, or unclear posting. They also labeled each posting as personal, not personal, or unclear

perspective. It's important to note that the coders were not interested in whether the poster asked a question, made a statement of fact, or raised an opinion. They were interested in the substance of the content. It's also important to note that this method provides an untraditional approach to studying framing. Most framing research focuses on comparing work on specific topics, rather than looking for the presence or absence of a frame or personal perspective. This approach allows for comparing the work of the public to that of the professional. This method also provides a consistent approach across topic areas.

It's necessary to clearly define the framing categories. For the purposes of this study, new frames were identified as those postings which focused on different aspects of a perceived reality compared with the original story and made those points salient within the posting. Many new frame postings offered up entirely new information that was not mentioned in the original story. For example, many posters spoke about the Iraq war when responding to a story that had not mentioned the Iraq war at all. Other new frames focused one issue that was only casually reference in the main story and expanded upon that point. For example, some posters who responded to a story about Barry Bonds' alleged steroid use significantly focused on a list of other suspected steroid users that was only briefly mentioned in the story. They framed the story as one about widespread steroid use in baseball rather than the steroid use of Bonds.

Old frames and unclear responses were more easily defined. Old frame responses offered a basic reaction to the content introduced by the professional journalist. Those postings didn't address new points or focus on different issues.

Rather, they just reacted to the postings. In essence, they did not contribute a new way of viewing the situation for the general audience to consider. Unclear responses were those that didn't make enough sense to attribute them to a new or old frame. In some instances, the posters may have intended to make a sarcastic or otherwise convoluted statement. In others, it's clear that the statement did not make sense.

The second area for the coders to consider was the issue of personal revelations. These categories aimed to measure whether posters offered up personal information about themselves as part of their responses. To start, the coders labeled postings as personal when the respondent specifically referenced a personal story in their own lives. They also labeled postings as personal when posters offered up personal information as to their perspectives. For example, some posters prefaced their statements with such comments as "being a longtime Republican" or "as a New Yorker." Those kinds of revelations provide additional content for the viewer to consider and are thus important for assessing the public's role in shaping the public agenda. Stories were labeled as not personal if they didn't offer any personal perspective, but they merely offered a statement of fact, opinion, or a question. Postings were labeled as having an unclear perspective when it wasn't clear whether the respondent was offering a personal perspective.

2.2.2. Calculations

The two coders performed separate analyses of the data to establish the best codes for each posting, or unit of analysis. The researcher and primary coder provided definitions of the different categories to the secondary coder. After the secondary coder

completed 22 percent of the analysis among all five story types, the researcher and coder compared points of disagreements to reach consensus and provide further training. After the second coder finished the remaining analysis, the resulting data were compared in order to establish intercoder reliability, or intercoder agreement, to support the findings. In order to assess the differences among the story types, a Pearson chi square crosstabulation test was performed.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

The results of this study provide answers to all four research questions under review. The findings show a strong presence of new frames among responses in all five story types. There is also evidence of a significant difference in the amounts of new frames, old frames, and unclear frames among the five categories. In regards to the personal revelations category, the findings show that most people do not offer personal revelations or personal stories within their postings. Still, there is some evidence of a significant difference in the amounts of personal revelations, postings without personal revelations, and unclear perspectives among the five categories. Overall, the results of study provides strong statistical evidence of a journalistic contribution from respondents in the forum.

3.1 Intercoder Reliability

Before evaluating the results, it's necessary to gauge intercoder reliability. This study relied on the Holsti method (Holsti, 1969) to evaluate intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability was calculated separately for both the framing and personal areas of the study as a whole. It was also calculated within each individual story type. It is important to note that intercoder reliability figures do not include the 22 percent of postings that were analyzed prior to secondary coder training as the coders reached

consensus on those findings. Table 3.1 displays strong intercoder reliability in each area.

Table 3.1 Intercoder Reliability

	Overall	Business	Politics	Sports	Education	Religion
Framing Intercoder Reliability	.845	.863	.848	.847	.833	.807
Personal Revelation Intercoder Reliability	.944	.95	.966	.935	.919	.929

It's important to note that strong intercoder reliability above 0.8 is evidenced in all areas. The personal revelation category displays stronger intercoder reliability, which is likely due to the fact that personal revelations are more readily apparent upon cursory reading of the posts compared to a framing designation.

3.2 Framing Results

Analysis of the data shows a strong presence of new frames among all story types considered. To answer the first research question, the number of new frames, old frames and unclear frames were calculated separately for each story type and then tabulated as a whole. The percentage of each type of coding was calculated based on the total number of postings within each story type. It's clear from the results that the

percentage of new frames varied considerably among the story types from nearly 74% in business to 54% in religion. Table 3.2 addresses the first research question.

Table 3.2 Frames by Percentage

	New Frames	Old Frames	Unclear Frames
Business	73.9%	21.1%	5%
Politics	60.6%	38%	1.4%
Sports	57.4%	39.1%	3.5%
Education	58.3%	38.5%	3.2%
Religion	54%	43.7%	2.3%
Total	60%	37.2%	2.8%

In order to address the second research question, a Pearson chi square test was performed to assess whether there was a significant difference in framing among the story types. The test measured all three framing codes in each of the five story types. The results show there is significant difference in the postings of new, old and unclear frames among the five categories ($x^2(8) = 57.671$, p<.01). One of the clearest ways to assess those differences is to look at the number of new frames, old frames, and unclear frames counted in those categories compared to what would be expected by chance. The numbers show some of the greatest variation in the business and religion categories while the remaining three categories show less significant deviations from the expected figures. Table 3.3 shows the numbers counted in each category compared to the numbers expected by chance.

Table 3.3 Frame Counts Compared to Expected Frame Counts

	New Frames	Old Frames	Unclear Frames
Business Count	252	72	17
Business Expected Count	204.6	126.9	9.6
Politics Count	317	199	7
Politics Expected Count	313.7	194.6	14.7
Sports Count	182	124	11
Sports Expected Count	190.2	117.9	8.9
Education Count	144	95	8
Education Expected Count	148.2	91.9	6.9
Religion Count	345	279	15
Religion Expected Count	383.3	237.7	17.9
Total Count	1240	769	58

Chi square crosstabulation results: $x^2(8) = 57.671$, $p<.01$.

3.3 Personal Revelation Results

Analysis of the data did not show a strong presence of personal revelations and anecdotes within the online postings in the five categories. To address the third

research question, the total number of personal revelations, postings without personal revelations, and postings with unclear perspectives were tabulated for each category and for the postings as a whole. The percentages were then determined by dividing those results by the total number of postings in each category and overall. Table 3.4 shows the percentage of personal revelations, non-personal responses, and unclear perspectives.

Table 3.4 Personal Revelations by Percentage

	Personal	Not Personal	Unclear Perspective
Business	30.2%	68.6%	1.2%
Political	9.8%	89.5%	.7%
Sports	12.9%	85.2%	1.9%
Education	20.7%	78.9%	.4%
Religion	16.4%	82%	1.6%
Total	17%	81.8%	1.2%

In order to address the final research question, a Pearson chi square crosstabulation test was performed to measure whether there were significant differences in the level of personal revelations among the five categories. All three coding variables were tabulated for each of the five categories. The results show there is a significant difference among the perspectives offered in the five categories with what would be expected by chance ($x^2(8) = 72.118$, p<.01). The most noticeable differences appear to come in the business and politics categories. Table 3.5 shows the

personal revelations counts compared those that would be expected assuming no relationship.

Table 3.5 Personal Revelations Counts Compared to Expected Personal Revelations Counts

	Personal	Not Personal	Unclear Perspective
Business Count	103	234	4
Business Expected Count	57.9	279	4.1
Politics Count	51	468	4
Politics Expected Count	88.8	427.9	6.3
Sports Count	41	270	6
Sports Expected Count	53.8	259.3	3.8
Education Count	51	195	1
Education Expected Count	41.9	202.1	3
Religion Count	105	524	10
Religion Expected Count	108.5	522.8	7.7
Total	351	1691	25

Chi square crosstabulation results: $x^2(8) = 72.118$, $p<.01$.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The results of this thesis show a strong presence of new frames within postings from an online news forum. That finding has profound implications for framing and agenda setting theories. It's clear that consumers are using online news forums to frame important issues from their own viewpoints for outsiders to see. In a sense, the public is now framing right along with the professionals. In this case, the professional is still determining what issue to bring forth for public discussion so he is still playing a strong role in agenda setting. However, the public's perceptions of those issues may be determined by postings from fellow consumers.

The abundance of new frames raises questions about framing theory itself. Clearly, the work of professional journalists has not led many of the respondents to consider important issues solely within the frame offered by the professional. These people are offering new ideas, new information, and new ways of looking at the stories. It's possible that those who post their thoughts on online forums may be more inclined to dissect news coverage or deviate from it than the general public. However, it's also possible that the abundance of news sources in the digital age has caused people to be more discerning and reflective of the frames within news coverage. In a sense, the public may respond in online forums when they feel a desire to challenge the frame offered by the professional.

The results do not show a strong presence of personal revelations within the postings. That has interesting implications for framing and agenda setting theories, as well as uses and gratification theory. In essence, people who post their thoughts are not choosing to tell others much about themselves. On the one hand, that makes it hard to assess the validity of some comments or the hidden agenda behind others. But it also means that respondents aren't displaying any obvious bias that might decrease their credibility for consumers who view the posts. If someone offered to share a personal experience online, that might deter others from seriously considering that person's response as a product of journalism.

Most people are focusing solely on the news issue. The lack of personal revelations also raises questions about whether people visit online forums to connect with others, increase their own self esteem or fulfill other needs as considered under uses and gratification theory. Personal stories often form a sense of connection among people in real life and the virtual world. Without them, people may not feel a connection to other respondents. Conversely, people who offer a personal story on a large international site like the one reviewed may feel vulnerable to criticism if they offer too much information. The mere notion of having one's thoughts about the world published for everyone else to see may be enough to boost the self esteem of participants.

4.1 Story Types

To fully assess the presence of new frames and personal revelations, it's best to look at it from the individual story types. The five story types showed different results

in both areas. In the framing category, business stories showed the highest percentage of new frames within a story type. Religion showed the lowest percentage of new frames. That poses an interesting finding because most people would naturally assume that people have deeply held religious beliefs that might cause them to frame news stories in different ways. Conversely, business doesn't naturally seem like a subject that would have such a significant number of viewpoints. The business stories also produced the highest percentage of personal revelations within a story type compared to the lowest percentage in the political category. That poses another interesting finding because most people see politics as a very personal matter. It could be that people don't want their opinions discounted by others if they announce their political leanings or histories. Business is a less personal topic to many people so it might seem like a safer place to share personal stories or revelations.

4.1.1 Business

As stated previously, the business category displayed the highest percentage of new frames offered within a story type. It produced about 25 percent more new frames than one would expect, according to the chi square results. This may show that the public is less accepting of the business agenda as reflected in traditional media and therefore more likely to offer new frames for consideration. It may also be reflective of the audience that visits the website, which is based in one of the world's financial capitals. Some people may simply feel they know more about business matters than the general press. That might help explain why 5% of the postings in this story type had unclear frames, the highest percentage of all of the categories. Respondents may not be

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able to clearly express their thoughts. The complexity of business stories may also lead to a multitude of interpretations over a single matter. In that case, it would appear that business forums pose an ideal opportunity to increase reporting, and thus the quality of journalism. The collective voice may be able to offer valuable information that shrinking newspapers can not handle.

The number of personal revelations offered in the business category seems counterintuitive. Though most responses were not personal, nearly one in three respondents offered some kind of personal story or revelation. Again, respondents may view the business category as less threatening to their own identities than more emotional subjects such as religion. However, it's still curious that people chose to share personal information in this category more than any other. It may be that people feel the need to tell personal stories as evidence of their credibility when speaking about a complicated business matter. The types of business stories could have also impacted these results. One of the stories focused on a band's decision to let customers pick the price of their latest song at the time of purchase. That generated a lot of responses from people who wanted to share their stories. Previous research on agenda setting in business has focused on corporate reputation so it's difficult to say how news coverage plays a role in the public's thinking about broader economic matters. Still, the findings in the business category suggest that respondents are contributing new and important information and viewpoints to the public.

4.1.2 Politics

The political category generated new frames in roughly 60 percent of the responses. That finding mirrors the average of the entire study, which is interesting given that the vast majority of previous agenda setting work has focused on political coverage. The category produced only four more new frames than one would expect due to chance. As one would expect, this category drew some nasty responses aimed at the nation's leadership or even other posters. Many people brought up the Iraq war when responding to stories that were only tangentially related or had absolutely nothing to do with the war. On the one hand, that might irritate members of the public who are reading a story on another topic, making them less inclined to consider the poster's points. On the other hand, the abundance of Iraq comments might form an impression in someone's mind. This is a strong example of the differences between respondents and professional journalists as it's unlikely a professional journalist would deviate tremendously from the subject of an article when crafting their prose. Posters have more leeway when making their responses.

Very few people offered personal anecdotes or revelations within the political category, which is an interesting finding. Less than 10 percent of the entire group of responses was classified as personal. That marks the smallest percentage in any of the five categories. People may be less inclined to share their voting habits because those are often considered personal decisions. Still, it's surprising that so few people viewed political stories through their own experiences. It could suggest that people are detached from politics. It could also be reflective of an extremely emotional divide in

the country over the Iraq war that makes people less inclined to open themselves up to criticism. Overall, the results of the political category have some of the greatest implications for agenda setting theory because most previous work has focused in this area. It is clear that many people think about other aspects of important political issues than those offered by professional journalists. It is also clear that news forums in politics have new frames to offer the general public.

4.1.3 Sports

The sports category drew slightly fewer new frames than the politics category. It offered only eight less new frames than one would expect by chance. On the one hand, it's not surprising that what is really a recreational interest would not generate as many new and different ideas for comment. People may root for their own teams and simply visit news sites to see what is being written about those teams. On the other hand, sports draws out emotions and many people spend a significant amount of time learning about a team's history. It's somewhat surprising that more people don't offer new or different reflections on sports as a whole. It's interesting to note that many new frames in this category came from a series of stories about Barry Bonds' alleged steroid use, which has greater implications on sports than just one team or game. That suggests that sports may not typically raise the same kinds of broad issues that spur people to post responses in online forums. That would diminish the agenda setting potential.

The sports category also offered few personal revelations. Only 41 of the 317 postings addressed a personal anecdote or revelation, which could mean that people don't give much thought to their personal experiences with professional sports. It could

also mean that people don't want to identify themselves as fans of a particular team or frequent players because they feel that could isolate themselves from opposing fans. Overall, the results from the sports category seem to provide some challenges to previous notions that national sports leagues can improve their reputations through agenda setting. Some people are clearly offering up new ideas. If people don't offer up many new frames, it could mean they're accepting the frames put forth by the leagues. It could also mean that people don't take sports journalism very seriously. Either they like baseball or they don't.

4.1.4 Education

The education category fell right in the middle of the five categories in terms of the percentage of new frames offered by respondents. In total, roughly 58 percent of posters generated a new frame. It's interesting to note that this category generated the least number of responses for 10 stories among all of the story types. This could indicate that education coverage doesn't appeal to respondents. It could also indicate that the type of people who respond to online polls somehow have different tastes in news coverage than the general population. On a very basic level, it could indicate that the public is more accepting of the media's framing of education issues. A significant number of responses in this category came from a story about a school shooting. Though such an event is clearly an education story, it is also a crime story so that could have impacted the results.

Respondents in the education category offered a relatively high percentage of personal responses. At 20 percent, the personal responses in this category were the

second highest overall. Education is a collective experience that all Americans can share. As such, it is a unique area for news coverage and analysis. In a sense, people can all frame education stories based on their own personal experiences. It's also a very emotional topic for many people. From an agenda setting standpoint, many people may be inclined to accept the frames introduced by the professionals, but they may also translate it into their own experiences. In a sense, that could suggest that professional journalists need to do a better job of connecting to those personal experiences to make education coverage more relevant to parents and students.

4.1.5 Religion

The religion category generated the lowest percentage of new frames introduced by respondents. This finding appears counterintuitive given that religion is a highly emotional and divisive issue in the United States and other countries. It could suggest that respondents are less likely to introduce new frames because they believe religion to be very personal and not appropriate to discuss via an online forum. The finding could also suggest that people are more likely to accept the professional's framing of a religion issue because they don't know much about religions other than their own. It's interesting to note that this category generated the highest number of responses compared to the other categories. That suggests that religion stories clearly resonate as important to the public. From an agenda setting standpoint, the results suggest that respondents are contributing less in this category than any other.

The percentage of personal revelations in the religion category fell in the middle of the story types considered. Only about 16 percent of respondents offered up a

personal anecdote or revelation. This could suggest that people are not inclined to reveal their own religious beliefs to strangers. It could also suggest that people don't consider mainstream news reporting on religion within the context of their own experiences. That could suggest that professional religion reporters need to do more to connect with consumers. As previously noted, the lack of personal revelations could also indicate that people don't want others to discount their thoughts by identifying their personal beliefs. Those who view their comments may be more likely to accept their postings because they have no obvious signs of bias.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

The results of this thesis show there are clearly some opportunities for further research about the way online news forums shape the public agenda. This thesis was limited in the sense that it focused on one blog from one media source. On a very basic level, it would be interesting to see how the results differ among various newspaper sites as well as the sites of other types of media. For example, it's possible that people might offer an increased number of personal revelations on a regional forum because the forum visitors are more likely to live in the same place. People could also be less likely to write out their responses or read others' responses on a television site compared to a newspaper site because television is a traditionally visual medium. It might also be interesting to compare the framing and personal revelations offered on multiple forums based on the same news story. This thesis was also limited by the fact that it focused on five types of stories. It might be interesting to see if the levels of

framing change among other story types. The results of all of those studies would help show how forums shape the public agenda.

To expand upon assessing types of media, it would also be productive to assess the various methods media sites use to generate consumer feedback. In the case of The Lede, the writer does not generally offer pointed questions for the respondents to address. Rather, he writes out a basic story and respondents take it in many directions. Other sites ask pointed questions that likely sway at least some of the responses. It would be interesting to see how the questions or suggestions shape the responses. Likewise, it could also be important to evaluate the limitations placed on the public's responses. In The Lede, posters offered responses from one word in length to several paragraphs in length. Some other news sites do not allow open-ended responses, which could influence content and ultimately the agenda setting role of those postings. Finally, the use of identifying tags to indicate the source of a post is also a good subject for review. The Lede posts a tag to identify a poster at the bottom of each response, but other sites allow entirely anonymous postings. A poster might feel more leeway to offer a new frame to a story if he or she is entirely anonymous. Posters might be less likely to attack or comment upon another response if he or she can not identify at least a tag with which to attribute that response.

In a similar vain, the results of this study call out for further investigation of the public's interactions with one another via online forums. This study was not designed to assess whether posters used the forum to communicate with one another. However, many postings both addressed previous postings and criticized the remarks of others.

That discovery begs the question of what the public seeks from viewing online news forums. Uses and gratification theory clearly shows that people consume media for various reasons, including a need to connect with others (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). The back-and-forth dialogue seen on online forums suggests that people are connecting, but it's unclear whether they perceive any benefit from it. Likewise, it's unclear if the public is truly evaluating and absorbing the content of others' postings or simply arguing back and forth for arguments sake. That has profound implications for whether the postings shape the public agenda.

Finally, perhaps the greatest opportunity for further research comes in the area of the public's perceptions about online forums. It's important to know why people go to these forums and what they take from them to assess how the forums influence the public agenda. This is an area ripe for survey and other field research. If members of the public go to the forums purely to voice their own opinions and not to consider the opinions of others, it's unlikely they will have a sizeable agenda setting influence. However, the postings might make a sizeable contribution if people make a point of reading other postings. It's also important to assess how members of the public view those postings. Tsfati's research (2003) shows that people may resist the agenda if they don't trust the source. Some people may not trust professional media and others may not trust their fellow posters. Going forward, this is perhaps the greatest outstanding question about online forums.

4.3 Conclusion

The results of this thesis clearly show that consumers are contributing to the news process in new ways through the use of online news forums. More specifically, respondents are offering new frames in which to view the important news stories of the day in business, politics, sports, education, and religion. By introducing new information and new perspectives, the respondents have the potential to influence the public's thoughts on critical issues. The results show that most people are not offering personal revelations or anecdotes within their postings. Without any knowledge of a person's background, people who choose to read the responses have to take them at face value. Going forward, the professionals who choose which stories to bring forth to online news forums will maintain a strong agenda setting function. However, online news forums will continue to increase the number of voices speaking out on important issues. In essence, the public is taking on a new role in helping to shape its own agenda.

APPENDIX A

SECONDARY CODER INSTRUCTIONS

THESIS CODING INSTRUCTIONS

Synopsis: This thesis aims to measure whether consumers who post comments in online news forums are introducing new frames and personal revelations by which to consider the issue or merely responding to the frame introduced by the professional journalist. The thesis relies primarily on agenda setting and framing theories. The data come from The Lede, a news blog on nytimes.com, the Web site of The New York Times. I selected 50 stories from The Lede to review. The story list is attached.

The coding process is twofold: First, it's necessary to read the story posting. When reading the posting, it's most important to consider how the professional is framing the story. For purposes of this study, we will rely on Robert Entman's popular definition of framing as supported by Maxwell McCombs: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." Note: It is NOT necessary to click on any links attached within the stories.

Second, it's necessary to go through each posting and code it in two different ways. First, each posting must be labeled as a new frame or an old frame.

What is a new frame?

A posting that offers a new frame focuses on specific aspects of the situation in a way that is different than the original story. In many cases, new frames offer up a different definition of the problem or a different perspective on how to view the problem. A new frame doesn't need to offer up new facts; it may merely focus on different things. It may also focus on a tangential issue that is not mentioned, or hardly mentioned, in the story.

What is an old frame?

An old frame responds to the frame offered by the professional. This kind of posting doesn't offer a new way of looking at the situation; it merely responds to what has already been written.

What is an unclear frame?

An unclear frame is one in which it is unclear what the poster means by his or her comment. This is the kind of posting that is generally hard to decipher or makes no sense.

Note: What is critical to remember is that this thesis isn't interested in whether the posting asks a question or offers an opinion. The content that is included in the response is far more important for framing considerations that the manner in which they offer up the information. Also, it's important to remember that the frames must be compared to the original posting from the professional, not in relationship to other postings. Many times, it's necessary to go back to the original story for conformation.

Second, each posting must also be labeled as personal or not personal.

What is a personal coding?

A personal coding is one in which the respondent offers up a personal anecdote or revelation that relates to the issue. In many cases, people may use the entire posting to tell a story. In other cases, it's only part of the posting.

What is a not personal coding?

This coding covers postings that do not offer any personal anecdotes or revelations. In these postings, it is unclear from what personal circumstances the respondent comes from.

What is an unclear perspective?

These are the postings that make it unclear whether the person is offering a personal revelation. These postings may make reference to a personal experience but may make it such that it's confusing to decide whether it is genuine.

APPENDIX B

STORY LIST

Headline	Number of posts
B1:Week of Record-Breaking Auctions	5
B2:A Place in Our Hearts for Pay Phones	84
B3:Radiohead Frontman Pays Nothing for His Album	12
B4: In One Fell Swoop, Jay-Z Impresses Critics, Fans, the U.N. and Wall Street	32
B5: A Superjumbo Jet That Airbus Better Deliver on Time	37
B6:Heads Turn Over Model's Disputed Dollar Diss	59
B7:Checking In on Radiohead's Experiment	49
B8: Of Baseball, Democracy and Free Tacos	5
B9:Treasure Hunters Face Spanish Armada	33
B10: After a Dip in Attacks, Pirates Mount a Comeback	25
	341
P1: Publisher Deflates Tantalizing Snippet on C.I.A. Leak	85
P2: Ex-Bush Spokesman's Tantalizing Snippet on C.I.A. Leak	73
P3: Benchmarks: 'Passed the Difficult Stage in Baghdad?'	9
P4: State Dept. Struggles to Fill Iraq Posts	21
P5: Armitage's Apology Not Accepted	48
P6: Denver Voters Set 'Lowest Priority' for Cops: Pot	52
P7: Seizing the Slide in Iraq Violence	30
P8: All Scores Settled in 'Don't Tase Me, Bro' Affair	100
P9: Q & A: Warming, Gore and Today's Other Nobel Winner	11
P10: Gore's Nobel: The Commentariat Fires Up	94
	523
S1: Should the Yankees Be Stripped of the Subway Series Title?	73
S2: A Cricket Death That Will Be Left Unresolved	10
S3: Russians Accused of Poisoning Tennis Star	18
S4: The Barry Bonds-Hall of Fame Staredown	58
S5: Update: The Fall of Rush Propst	1
S6: Of Baseball, Democracy and Free Tacos	5
S7: Storm Clouds Over a Powerhouse Football Coach	15
S8: Asterisk to Mark Bonds' Record Ball	88
S9: Another Bonds Ball Is Put to a Vote	9
S10: Bonds Ball May Be Space Bound	40
	317
E1: Literacy: An Iraqi Leading Indicator Less Well Known	3
E2: Ups and Downs of Human-Chimpanzee Competition	19
E3: A Long Way to the Bottom of a U.N. Index	15
E4: U.S. Link to Finland School Shooting	13
E5: A Deadly School Shooting, This Time in Finland	100
E6: Oprah Winfrey Addresses Abuse Charges at School	51
E7: Update: The Fall of Rush Propst	1

E8: Updates: Touchdowns and Lockdowns	3
E9: Storm Clouds Over a Powerhouse Football Coach	15
E10: Miss Teen South Carolina: Celebrity Maps Spokeswoman?	27
	247
R1: Papal Indulgences, Two Ways: Easy and Hard	32
R2: And if the Apocalyptic Cult of the Moment Is Right?	14
R3: Still More Fallout From the Terri Schiavo Case	100
R4: Cultural Flashpoints North of the Scalp	72
R5: Scientologists Ambush the BBC	100
R6: Farrakhan's Reading List Includes Carter; A.D.L. Does Not Approve	12
R7: Raising the Titanic, Sinking Christianity?	100
R8: In Muslims We Do Not Trust	96
R9: God vs. Evolution in Kansas … Again	100
R10: Portugal Vote on Abortion Doesn't Count; More Liberal Laws May Follow Anyway	13
	639

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