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Media Influence on Voter Behavior

Wpływ mediów na zachowania wyborców

ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, the media play an extremely important role in the life of every citizen. They are a source of information about the world and a place where we learn. They are also the place where politics is present. It is where election campaigns are conducted, information about events from the world is published, and where politicians and voters communicate. This phenomenon is important and worth analyzing because of the impact it can have on potential voters, and thus on the quality of life of citizens. For this reason, the subject of this paper is to present agenda-setting theory as a methodology for explaining the impact the media can have on voters. This way, the aim of the work is to demonstrate how the media can practically influence the political thoughts of viewers and shape their choices. In the first part of the paper, the general assumptions of the theory will be presented. Then practical examples from the world of politics will be described, based on whetherit will be possible to observe the application of the impact of agenda-setting theory on voters' opinions. The final part of the analysis will answer the questions: by what methods does the media influence voters and what effect it can have in public life.

Keywords: media, CNN, Fox, agenda-setting theory, voter

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the media play an extremely important role in the life of every citizen. They are a source of information about the world and a place where we learn. They are also the place where politics is present. It is where election campaigns are conducted, information about events from the world is published, and it is also the place where politicians and voters communicate. This phenomenon is important and

worth analyzing because of the impact it can have on potential voters, and thus on the quality of life of citizens. For this reason, the subject of this paper is to present agenda-setting theory as a methodology for explaining the impact the media can have on voters. This way, the aim of the work is to demonstrate how the media can practically influence the political thoughts of viewers and shape their choices. In the first part of the paper, the general assumptions of the theory will be presented. Then practical examples from the world of politics will be described, based on which it will be possible to observe the application of the impact of agenda-setting theory on voters' opinions. The final part of the analysis will answer the questions: by what methods does the media influence voters and what effect it can have in public life.

THEORETICAL BASIS

Agenda-setting theory may be one of the most important sources of answers to the question of how the media can influence public opinion and the views of voters. The basis for the development of the theory was provided by Walter Lippmann's work, *Public Opinion* [1922]. In this work, he suggested that the main responsibility for the images, that appear in our minds at the thought of public affairs, lies within the media. Later, its development was led by Bernard Cohen [1963], who claimed that "the press may not be successful most of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" [p. 13]. It was also strongly influenced by Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs [1972], who in the 1960s analyzed the 46th Presidential Election in the United States. Based on result, they determined that there is a relationship between what the media present and what voters consider to be priority policy issues.

As it stands, the theory holds that the media have a real influence in shaping the opinions of audiences, deciding the priority that citizens give to social issues, and shaping the hierarchy of public issues [McCombs, Valenzuela 2020]. This process occurs in stages and begins when the public receives information from the media. These are then transferred, for example through conversations, into everyday life, then public life, and finally translated into citizens' electoral decisions [Maalej 2019].

Research on the media agenda is currently being conducted in many countries. For example, Hilde Bjørnå and Beate Steinveg explore how social media can influence local politics [2023]. Moreover, Menghan Zhang and collaborators analyze how media can be used to shape voter views during the presidential election in South Korea [2023]. The most important role of the media in this process is to select messages and give meaning to specific events. Used for this are such procedures as presenting events in a planned order, devoting a specific amount of time to them, ensuring visibility (e.g. exposure on the website), and displaying information at an appropriate frequency [Robinson 2019]. By selectively presenting world events in the appropriate context, the media provide patterns of interpretation of the environment

and influence the perception of strongly exposed events as important [Bromley--Trujillo, Karch 2021].

Stuart Allan [2004] believes that news outlets are not just a source of neutral information about the world, but also indicate how it is defined and interpreted by the public. This audience also constitutes, in large part, the party electorate. Thus, by concentrating attention on some topics and marginalizing others, the hierarchy of political issues is also established. After contact with the media, voters begin to acquire beliefs about politicians, public affairs and create their own political views. It is worth citing here research on American elections by Robert M. Entman [2007], who proved that there is a correlation between what the media and candidates' election programs present and the outcome of elections. In conclusion, based on the assumptions of agenda-setting theory, it should be said that the media have a real influence on the formation of public opinion, by pointing out events that are then considered important by the audience.

Thus, the hierarchy of events and the directions of public debate are also imposed. In addition, there is a transmission of the qualities and attributes that the media present to the people and events in question, which, in turn, shapes the emotions of the audience, largely constituting the party electorate.

FIRST EXAMPLE: CNN, *ANDERSON COOPER 360°*

An interesting example of experiencing theory in practice is the observation of television programs with similar themes, broadcast in the same band on separate television channels. The example presented in the paper concern the daily news summary on Fox News and CNN channels on February 22, 2023. This day was chosen not coincidentally, it was the day of President Joe Biden's return from Poland. Two days earlier, the President had also visited Kyiv, where he met with representatives of the Ukrainian government. The event received a huge echo throughout Europe, so it is interesting to observe how it was portrayed in the American media.

For the analysis, the *Anderson Cooper 360°* program, airing at 9:00 PM on CNN, and the *Fox News Tonight* program hosted by Tucker Carlson at 8:00 PM were prepared. The premise of both programs is similar, but it is important to note the differences between CNN and Fox. The first channel is associated with liberal views and the Democratic Party [Jarvis 2021]. The latter is regarded as more conservative and supportive of the Republican Party [*ibid*.]. Therefore, the rivalry between the stations and the different narrative is justified, however, this significantly affects public perception.

Their goal of both programs is to present a summary of the most important news of the passing day, from the world and the country. The *Anderson Cooper 360°* program began with the news that President Joe Biden had returned from a visit to Ukraine and Poland. The visit was described as historic and of great strategic importance. This was

followed by material on relations between Russia and China, and an analysis by an expert talking about potential scenarios for China to join the war in Ukraine [CNN 2022]. It is worth noting that the material on Russian-Chinese relations was much longer than the one on President Biden's trip, and throughout the material, the great importance of American aid carried to Ukraine was emphasized. Then, a very emotional account of the families of the victims of the war in Ukraine was broadcasted. Very drastic photos of corpses were presented, as well as interviews with the weeping families of dead soldiers [*ibid*.]. President Biden's visit was then mentioned again as a significant event that could help Ukrainians in their fight against the aggressor [*ibid*.].

Also the statement of the Ukrainian grateful for the aid carried out by the USA were reported. The following material mentioned the subpoenas of Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, who will provide testimony in the investigation of January 6, 2021 [*ibid*.]. Several photos and footage of former president Donald Trump were shown, including those showing the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol [*ibid*.]. In the second half of the program, after 35 minutes, the current situation in East Palestine was recounted, as well as the regulations the president announced on the matter [*ibid*.]. The program was briefly interrupted to show live coverage of the President's landing upon his return from Poland [*ibid*.].

The penultimate report concerned Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, who is Donald Trump's opponent for the Republican Party's presidential nomination [*ibid*.]. The candidate was compared to Donald Trump and shown as an important opponent who has a good chance of winning against Trump. The last material was a report on the murder case trial of Alex Murdaugh. Accounts of witness testimony and several potential scenarios for resolving the case were presented [*ibid*.]. This reported example is an adequate application of agenda-setting theory. The program showed selected images from the world of domestic and international politics. Presenting coverage of the president's visit to Poland and Ukraine at the beginning of the events and portraying them in an unambiguously positive light could certainly have influenced positive emotions among potential voters [Tsiotsou, Diehl 2022].

Putting international relations ahead of domestic ones and portraying America as a strong player on the international stage may have given the impression that President Joe Biden is successful, the government is effective, supported by other countries, and can change the course of history. The prominence of the president's visit certainly made the event seem important and exhibits that President Biden is working for world peace. Presenting a tragic and detailed account of the suffering of Ukrainian families was certainly a factor that could justify his actions and give them weight [*ibid*.]. Domestic events were presented at the end of the program and in a general way. Thus, one got the impression that they were not as important as foreign policy. During the course of the program, there were also mentions of politicians from the Republican party and the opposition to the President. Donald Trump was portrayed unequivocally negatively as the person responsible for the events of January 6. Thus, it was also possible to observe a clear contrast between Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

In the context of creating voters' opinions, this fact is particularly important because they could potentially face each other in the next presidential election.

This thread is worth following, as studies show that concerning election campaigns on popular topics in the media creates voter interest and gives candidates an advantage [Gilardi et al. 2022]. On the other hand, what generates media interest is also important information for individual politicians about what is a priority in the public debate and the expectations of the citizenry [O'Grady, Abou-Chadi 2019]. Against such a backdrop, the picture presented on CNN can certainly draw the attention of voters to Joe Biden's policies and to direct public opinion towards his party.

SECOND EXAMPLE: FOX, THE *FOX NEWS TONIGHT*

As it has been mentioned, the programs are characterized by different political sympathies and promote opposite parties [Jarvis 2021]. That is why a completely different picture of the surrounding reality was presented on Fox. The *Fox News Tonight* program began with information about interruptions in the supply of certain components for the production of everyday items. The problem was compared to that of the pandemic, and then it was mentioned that the president was not responding properly and was neglecting economic problems in the country [Fox News 2022].

This was followed by material reporting on the crisis in East Palestine, Ohio, and criticizing Pete Buttigieg and President Joe Biden for being tardy and ignoring their duties [*ibid*.]. The material featured interviews with Ohio residents who spoke negatively about the president, as well as a photo of Pete Buttigieg at a restaurant [*ibid*.]. The picture was a pretext for the program's presenter's comment that the transport secretary has time to dine and socialize, not to solve social problems [*ibid*.]. The coverage of the situation in East Palestine was summed up by a report on a visit by Donald Trump, who spoke to residents, showed words of support, understanding, and provided water [*ibid*.]. Interviews with residents were shown, who thanked Donald Trump for his help and emphasized that he was involved in their problems and worked more effectively than the government. During this part of the program, the coverage was interspersed with negative comments by the presenter about the activities of the presidential administration and rhetorical questions "how come the president tolerates the behavior of his co-workers?" [*ibid*., 16th minute].

Another material dealt with the primaries in the Republican Party and Donald Trump's bid for re-election [*ibid*.]. During the material, ridiculing videos of the former president aired on CNN were referred to and the station was accused of harming the politician [*ibid*.]. A further part of the program dealt with problems with airline security and an interview with a pilot who had been in an accident and accused the current administration of negligence in aviation law, leading to the death of citizens [*ibid*.]. The second part of the program aired an interview with a man who changed his gender to female a few years ago, but after the next few months decided to return

to his biological, male gender [*ibid*.]. In this context, the mental and physical harms of the gender reassignment procedure were cited [*ibid*.].

Opinion polls are also worth noting. They show that Fox viewers have different views on socio-political issues than viewers of other stations [Hoewe et al. 2020]. They tend to pay more attention to worldview issues, favoring right-wing and conservative views [*ibid*.]. They are more interested in security and military issues and often accuse other mainstreamers of bias. An important example in this regard was the COVID-19 pandemic, which Fox viewers considered less harmful and threatening than viewers of other stations [*ibid*.].

Later, a report was presented on the Biden Institute, which has received funding from foreign sources (including China, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) for its activities [Fox News 2022]. Indicating these countries is also important because of their political relations with the United States. China is regarded as one of the United States' biggest economic competitors, and they have numerous trade disputes [Zhou, Gao 2020]. In addition, rivalries over the two countries' political and military influence in the Asia-Pacific region can be seen [*ibid*.]. Relations with Turkey are strained due to political disagreements over issues related to Syria and the Kurds, as well as Turkey's purchases of a Russian missile system [Margaux 2021]. The later mentioned country, Saudi Arabia, is an important trading partner of the United States, particularly when it comes to oil purchases [Seznec 2020]. Nevertheless, in recent years the country has been accused of human rights violations and restrictions on freedom of speech and press [*ibid*.]. The presenter asked rhetorical questions about the purpose of the subsidy [Fox News 2022]. The final piece dealt with statistics from the last year, showing the growing excess deaths all around the world [*ibid*.]. This was followed by an expert opinion that combined the date and number of concordances with vaccines on COVID-19 [*ibid*.].

The material presented above showed a clear contrast between the actions of President Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The former was portrayed as an unambiguously negative figure, suffering political failures alone and heading an inept, lazy government. The second, as an active figure, caring for the public however wronged by CNN. Opinions and thesis questions definitely went beyond the informational function of the media, replacing it with an interpretative one [Bode, Vraga 2020]. The portrayed image concentrated on the country's internal problems and the pointing of blame. The image presented in this way created evaluative images of politicians, as well as post-petition candidates in future elections, in effect realizing the agenda setting theory [McCombs, Valenzuela 2020]. On the other hand, along these lines, Fox outlined a list of important issues and shaped a perception in which the president and his administration is a negative figure, and the issues raised on the internal, the most important issues of the day [Mortensen et al. 2022]. Such a style of media narrative can certainly focus the attention of potential voters on Donald Trump's activities and develop criticism of Joe Biden. This process may play a particularly important role before the upcoming elections [García-Orosa 2021]. Such programming seems

to be in line with the expectations of Fox viewers, who, according to research, are more likely to vote for Republican party politicians and are skeptical of Democrats [Hoewe et al. 2020]. As a result, after watching the analyzed narrative, their views are strengthened and may even be radicalized. Thus, doubts and distrust of the actions of politicians from the Democratic party and the current government are also conquered. As a result, the programs showed how agenda-setting theory can lead the public to pay attention to the issues discussed in the media and outline priorities depending on the political situation and the interests of the media in question.

A comparison of the two programs leads to the conclusion that CNN tends to praise the actions of the Democratic Party and the current government of Joe Biden. Fox, on the other hand, has shown a critical approach toward them, making complimentary statements toward politicians associated with the Republican. The biggest problems are that both channels create different images about it. In this context agenda setting theory can work for every type of viewers, depends on which kinds of pictures they will choose to watch. For sure, people watching CNN and The Fox News could have different images about problems in country or abroad, and the works of government. This way, attempt to evaluate its objective is so hard and can based on the priority list, explained in the media [Stern et al. 2020].

CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the news on CNN and Fox channels showed a stark contrast between the media narrative. CNN showed a positive attitude towards the actions of the current government and the Democratic party, while Fox leaned towards criticizing them. The programs discussed the same day and at the same time covered completely different topics. To a person outside the United States, they may have given the impression of operating in two different realities. Both examples implement the agenda-setting theory in a similar way. Each draws the audience's attention to a different issue, thus prioritizing it [Tsiotsou, Diehl 2022]. In addition, they evaluate specific events in a negative or positive way, setting an interpretive tone for the news [Waqua et al. 2022]. Such an arrangement certainly built-up different images in the audience's minds and made them think about completely different topics. Thus, a different hierarchy of public issues and opinions on them may have emerged in the viewers of the two programs, according to a supporting political party [*ibid.*].

The analyzed examples represent the same problem – the replacement of the informational function of the media, with an interpretative function. Thus, they make it extremely difficult to get an objective picture of political reality based on facts [Young, Atkin 2022]. As a result, a person who would only choose one of the media presented (without the possibility of comparison to a different source) would receive a false picture based on the interests and sympathies of the media in question. Such a process leads to the hypocrisy of reality and manipulation, which can realistically

translate into voters' opinions and support for a particular party [Alette et al. 2020]. The most immoral in this sphere seems to be playing on emotions [Kuisz, Wigura 2020].

The example presented on CNN concerns the feelings of families of victims of the war in Ukraine [CNN 2022]. The story aired on Fox about the problems in Ohio is also a perfect example [Fox News 2022]. These tragic events have been treated instrumentally as a way to gain the attentionand sympathy of the public and justify the actions of politicians from the respective parties [Mannevuo 2023]. This process seems to be dangerous, as it leads to extremism [Min 2021]. Viewers believe to what is shown in TV channel and that it provides whole version of story and leave no room for discussion [Kuisz, Wigura 2020]. On the other hand, in practice, it seems almost impossible to avoid this problem. The best and most ethical advice on this issue for a potential voter, seems to be to watch different media and compare different programs. In this way, viewers will have a chance to get a more complete picture of reality based on different viewpoints and choose the one that is most in line with their personal needs and views.

The examples analyzed focus on examples from television. Nevertheless, in the current era, where the Internet is most popular, it would be appropriate to adapt agenda-setting theories to the analysis of this type of relationship as well [Zhong et al. 2022]. For example, comparing websites or information appearing on social profiles is certainly an equally interesting and worthy issue for analysis. However, due to the large amount of information coming on the Internet, as well as the speed of its publication and deletion, this is a major challenge. In addition, it should be remembered that due to the multifaceted and ubiquitous nature of the Internet, it can successfully replace both television and newspapers or radio. In this regard, it is worth considering how perceptions of socio-political priorities are created through layout, headlines, or algorithms [Zheng et al. 2022].

The way of interpreting events on CNN and Fox presented in the analysis provide only a narrow example of how agenda-setting theory works in practice. Nevertheless, it would certainly also be interesting to juxtapose the information adventing on the websites and social media of various TV channels, such as MSNBC and CBS News. However, it seems sufficient to confirm how easy it is to manipulate public sentiment and influence voters' opinions. By using an evaluative narrative, selecting topics, and basing them with appropriate commentary, viewers (potential voters) are influenced by the actions of a given media outlet, creating their opinions about public affairs on this basis [Shehata et al. 2021]. This can certainly have an impact on public life. Voters who limit their sources for obtaining information about the world will rely only on narrow, biased information [*ibid*.]. Thus, their political decisions will not be fully informed. Such actions could lead to social pathology, as well as the abuse of power by politicians, which, properly justified in the media, can gain legitimacy. This one, however, will be based on manipulation and propaganda, rather than real social needs. As a result, consumption of all media should be cautious and based on objective comparison of media messages.

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WPŁYW MEDIÓW NA ZACHOWANIA WYBORCÓW

Abstrakt: W XXI wieku media odgrywają niezwykle ważną rolę w życiu każdego obywatela. Są źródłem informacji o świecie i miejscem, w którym się uczymy. Są również przestrzenią, w której obecna jest polityka. To tutaj prowadzone są kampanie wyborcze, publikowane są informacje o wydarzeniach ze świata, a także komunikują się politycy i wyborcy. Zjawisko to jest ważne i warte analizy ze względu na wpływ, jaki może mieć na potencjalnych wyborców, a tym samym na jakość życia obywateli. Z tego powodu tematem artykułu jest przedstawienie teorii agenda-setting jako metodologii wyjaśniającej wpływ, jaki media mogą mieć na wyborców. W ten sposób celem pracy jest pokazanie, w jaki sposób media mogą praktycznie wpływać na myśli polityczne widzów i kształtować ich wybory. W pierwszej części artykułu zostaną przedstawione ogólne założenia teorii. Następnie zostaną opisane praktyczne przykłady ze świata polityki, na podstawie których będzie można zaobserwować zastosowanie teorii agenda-setting na opinie wyborców. Ostatnia część analizy odpowie na pytania: jakimi metodami media wpływają na wyborców i jaki wpływ mogą mieć na życie publiczne.

Słowa kluczowe: media, CNN, Fox, teoria *agenda-setting*, wyborca

BIOGRAPHY

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