A Failure to Communicate: Agenda Setting in Media and Policy Studies

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A Failure to Communicate: Agenda Setting in Media and Policy Studies

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In this article, we review two research programs that could benefit from a more extensive dialogue: media and policy studies of agenda setting. We focus on three key distinctions that divide these two robust research programs: the agenda(s) under investigation (public versus policymaking), the typical level of analysis (individual versus systemic), and framing effects (individual versus macro level). We map out these differences and their impacts on understanding the policy process. There is often a policy disconnect in the agenda-setting studies that emanate from the media tradition. Though interested in the effects of political *communication, scholars from this tradition often fail to link the media to policy outcomes, policy change, or agenda change. Policy process scholars have increasingly rejected simple linear models in favor of models emphasizing complex feedback effects. This suggests a different role for the media—one of highlighting attributes in a multifaceted political reality and involvement in positive feedback cycles. Yet, political communication scholars have for the most part been insensitive to these potentials. We advocate a shared agenda centering on the role of the media in the political system from an information processing framework, emphasizing the reciprocal effects of each on the other.*

Keywords agenda setting, policy process, framing

Why do governments pursue the policies that they do? This deceptively simple question belies a labyrinth of complexity. It seems obvious, and almost everyone has a favorite answer. For many political scientists, it is public opinion, perhaps crystallized into policy proposals by political parties. For others, it is just the severity of the problem: Government has to act when things are going badly. For many critics of the political process, the media is the culprit, and there are several theories about how journalistic norms or ownership structures cause a disjunction between the problems we face and the stories we read.

Deciding what to decide—agenda formation or agenda setting—is of "central importance to any political system" (Walker, 1977, p. 423; see also Schattschneider, 1960). What issues are on the agenda, which ones are not, when and why, are the central questions that drive agenda setting in communications and policy studies. The media are integral to both,

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yet these traditions do not communicate as much as they could or as much as they should. There is greater potential for the integration of ideas than what is evidenced by the main corpus of both literatures.

Students of political communication have devoted little time and energy in examining the policy connection of media effects. Neither have policy scholars displayed any deep understanding of the effects of the media. In the past, students of the policy process have made assumptions about the media's role that were at best naïve (and at worst wrong). For example, it was not uncommon in quantitative studies of 20 years ago for policy scholars to assume a concordance between media attention and public attention—a confusion that could have been avoided through knowledge of developments in the study of the public agenda in political communications.

In this essay, we explore this divide and suggest areas where more communication could improve research in both fields. Because we enter the discussion from the policy studies side of the divide, our remarks will of necessity focus on the potential contributions of the policy studies perspective to political communication. Nevertheless, we have tried to give justice to the political communications perspective, although some incompleteness here is unavoidable. Specifically, we focus on three primary topics: (a) elites and government agendas; (b) systems analysis, institutions, and information processing; and (c) macro-level framing effects.

At base, we argue that students of political communication ought to pay more attention to the role of the mass media in the system-level policymaking process. We argue that the collective effect of the media in highlighting aspects of political issues means that media effects are pervasive, but not likely to be captured by simple linear causal models. Moreover, policy debates and policy outputs feed back into the perceptions of the public—that is, the policymaking process affects the public agenda (Erikson, Stimson, & MacKuen, 2002; Wlezien, 1995). An understanding of the public agenda cannot be complete without an appreciation of the policymaking agenda and the role of political elites in the process.

The Policy Disconnect

Studies in the political communications tradition concentrate on the public agenda, and this literature generally omits a critical link. How does one simply know that policy is influenced just because there are media effects on the public? We know a great deal about how the media affects public opinion, but we know little about how the media directly affects policy. We know even less about the linkage between the public, media, and policy. This is where political communication and policy studies have their greatest difference: Media studies for the most part concentrate on the public, whereas policy studies focus on government agendas. Yet the media has the capacity to influence both. The media and policy agendas are seldom incorporated into a single study in the political communications tradition.[1] Even less frequent is the examination of all three agendas simultaneously.[2] This has a consequence: The scholarly community most conversant with the manner in which the mass media operate is not especially interested in comparisons between the media and policy agendas.

More problematic for scholars who focus on the public agenda is work suggesting feedback effects between what government is doing and what the public thinks. Thermostatic and error correction models (Erikson et al., 2002; Wlezien, 1995) indicate that when government policy becomes more liberal, the public becomes more conservative, and vice versa. As a consequence of this work, one cannot assume a simple relationship between the media and public attitudes, because public attitudes are in part contingent on the activities

of government. The policymaking agenda affects the public agenda. These models have not really explored the role of the media in this process, but this is sorely needed.

An additional disconnect has to do with the treatment of elites in communications research. Elite activity is rarely conceptualized as a system-level variable where the entire policymaking agenda is considered. Instead, elites are most often viewed as sources of information on public affairs whose messages are mediated by the media, as is the case in Bennett's (1990) indexing theory (for other examples, see Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Zaller, 1992); government officials, such as party leaders and presidents, communicating policy goals and achievements to the public (Cook, 1989; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Kernell, 1986; Sellers, 2010); or as the attitude object in election campaigns. These studies tell us a great deal about how the interaction between media and policymaking elites influences political strategy and public opinion, especially in issue areas such as foreign policy (Baum & Groeling, 2010; Entman, 2004; Manheim, 1991, 1994; Sigal, 1973). However, they tell us little about the evolution of policies or agendas.

Policy scholars, on the other hand, generally focus on what causes changes in the policy agenda and in public policy. For us, because government cannot make policy without attending, the key question becomes: *Why do some issues receive attention and others do not, and to what effect?* Of course someone has to pay attention, and in the case of policy agenda setting, that amorphous someone is composed of political actors empowered legitimately to make binding decisions on society. Policy agenda setting places emphasis on government elites in political institutions. What attracts their collective attention to one issue rather than another? Policy agenda setting is about organizing attention in an environment with competing information, interests, issues, and ideas and limited processing capacity (Jones, 2001; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; see also May, Workman, & Jones, 2008; Workman, 2009).

The policy processes approach is anchored to the institutions of government with direct lines to nongovernmental participants that buoy policymaking. Information does not flow one way, as is the case in many public agenda-setting studies, but in multiple directions and with complex feedback into the system.[3] Policy scholars know a lot more about the influence of some of these participants than others. We have a greater understanding of the role of subsystems, policy communities, and interest groups in setting the agenda than we do about parties, the public, and the media. To the extent that policy scholars have examined media effects and public opinion, they tend to find complex causal interactions, with feedback effects and multiple contingencies (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Erikson et al., 2002; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Jones & Wolfe, 2010; Soroka, 2002; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009).

Two Traditions: Agenda Setting for Policy and the Public

The agenda-setting literature in political communication is robust in its depth and breadth. Policy studies have benefited from this rich tradition and would do well to engage in it more directly. But there is a major omission in most studies in the tradition of agenda setting in communications: These scholars—even the many who focus on political issues—rarely connect media effects back to policy or agenda change.

We start this section with a summary of studies in public agenda setting—that is, examinations of the role of the media in focusing the attention of the mass public on particular issues.[4] We then introduce some aspects of agenda setting in policy studies. The origins of agenda setting in political communication can be traced back to Lippman's (1922)

observation that the news media filter reality (McCombs, 2004, p. 3). McCombs and Shaw's (1972) landmark study of the agenda-setting effects of mass communication represented a shift from work that focused on persuasion (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) to studies that focused on earlier stages of attitude formation and information acquisition (McCombs, 2004, pp. 2–4). It also represented an end to the era of the "minimal consequences" of media effects. Agenda setting in this tradition is the process by which the media transfer the salience of issues to the public. The power of the press to set the public agenda as first documented by McCombs and Shaw has been shown to be widespread (Funkhouser, 1973; Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Wanta, 1997; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981; Winter & Eyal, 1981; see Dearing & Rogers, 1996, and McCombs, 2004, for reviews).[5]

Subsequent to establishing basic-level effects, agenda setting in communications developed into several distinct lines of research. In the area of psychology (see Lee & McCombs, in press, for a comprehensive review), one focus is on refining the concept of the need for orientation to better understand variation in agenda-setting effects. Much leverage has been gained by investigating the ways in which relevance and uncertainty moderate information search and perceived levels of issue salience (Evatt & Ghanem, 2001; Matthes, 2008; McCombs, 1999; McCombs & Weaver, 1985; Shaw & McCombs, 1977). Recent research documents agenda-setting effects from incidental (unintentional) exposure to media (Lee, 2009; Lee & McCombs, in press).

Attribute agenda setting, also known as the second level of agenda setting, constitutes another line in the development of the literature. By emphasizing some characteristics over others, the media can focus public attention on certain attributes of an issue or candidate (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000; Weaver et al., 1981) and influence how issues are understood (McCombs, 2004, pp. 86–97; McGuire, 1989). In linking basic- with second-level agenda setting, research on *compelling arguments* has shown that certain attributes can increase the salience of an issue or object (Ghanem, 1996, 1997; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001; Scheafer, 2007). Attribute agenda setting has many commonalities with *attribute intrusion* from policy studies, as will be discussed in detail below.

One outgrowth of this research is the investigation of if, how, and why agenda setting affects attitudes and behavior (McCombs, 2004; Weaver, 2007). Though basic-level effects on behavior have been demonstrated (see McCombs, 2004, for a review), a substantial body of research focuses on a temporal extension of agenda setting, priming (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). How the media frames an issue or object can influence how people evaluate political issues, candidates, and government officials (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997; McGuire, 1989).[6] From basic-level effects, where the media tell people what to think *about*, the agenda-setting tradition in communications has evolved to the point where the media also influence the way people *think* (Entman, 1989; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 1993; Protess et al., 1987) and *act* (McCombs, 2004, pp. 124–132).

The Policy Process Perspective and the Role of the Media

Fundamental to the policy processes approach to agenda setting is system-level analysis grounded in bounded rationality. What follows from this is an emphasis on attention limits, disproportionate information processing, positive and negative feedback, and the role of complexity. These concepts undergird our understanding of what causes both stability and change in policy outcomes and the policy agenda. In the sections that follow, we discuss the media in system-level analyses of agenda setting. We identify where the media and critical concepts in the policy processes tradition intersect to explain policy and agenda change. The

dynamics of media attention are particularly relevant to questions that look into the effects of focusing events, venue shopping, attribute intrusion, and framing on agenda access and policy change.

Policy Agenda Setting and the Media: A System-Level Approach

Policy images, frames, and attributes convey information and compete for public, elite, *and* media attention. Agenda setting from the policy processes approach is fundamentally about the politics of attention and attention dynamics at the level of the political system. As a consequence of this focus on information processing, media dynamics are intimately bound up with policymaking. Because the media play an important role in the process of allocating attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), the media can be understood as fundamental to an information-processing approach to policymaking (Jones & Wolfe, 2010). This is true whether or not the media helps set the policy agenda or indexes to it. It is of less importance to policy theories whether the media lead (set agendas) or lag (index) because we are not so much interested in first-movers as in trying to understand how the media contributes to feedback in the governing system.

Kingdon's (1984) admirable study of agenda setting using elite interviews dismissed the role of the media for two reasons. Kingdon's sources attributed a limited role for the media to facilitate communication within the policy communities most responsible for the generation of policy proposals. They also cited the inability of political actors, such as congressmen, to deal with the remote information of the mass media in a world of information oversupply (p. 63). Kingdon's approach overlooked the potential role of the media to focus institutional attention on one set of issues rather than another. Baumgartner and Jones (1993), on the other hand, gave a much more prominent role to the media in the agenda-setting process: "Media attention sometimes precedes and sometimes follows changes in attention by government agencies. . . . Each can affect the other, reinforcing the pattern of positive feedback and punctuated equilibrium" (p. 125). How could such differences emerge between scholars studying the same processes?

Jones and Wolfe (2010) elaborated the role of the media in the more general framework, citing three mechanisms. First, the media may be less a causal factor in setting the agenda than an amplifying one. In other words, media attention can be viewed as an intervening variable: Media coverage weights information (signals) about the policy environment. Which signals are important and which ones should be ignored? The media play a role in this weighting process and help focus attention. Second, in a process similar to the priming function at the individual level, the media can help set a tone for subsequent policy action.

Third, media attention and policymaking activities can become intertwined in complex feedback systems, as apparently happened in the burst of policy activity surrounding crime and justice issues in the mid-1980s. With a rise in crime came greater media and public attention to the issue, which led to more policymaking activities. This, in turn, led to more media and public attention, in a cycle that continued even after the crime rate had ceased to increase. In a second example of this complex process, Wolfe (2012) developed a model in which media attention mediates the speed with which a bill becomes a public law. She found that high levels of media attention increased during the time from bill introduction to final passage. While media coverage influenced the speed of the policy process, it did not have a direct effect on the probability of the outcome. This is a classic interaction effect of the type we are highlighting here.

Complex systems, such as our political system, involve nonrecursive interactions and multiple feedback loops. As such, simple cause-and-effect relationships are difficult to

establish. This should not be an excuse for walking away from interesting research questions, for thick description or for just bemoaning the failure of the media as a democratic watchdog. Macro-level outcomes cannot be assumed to be simple sums of micro-level effects. In a social setting, norms, mimicry, and threshold effects can play an important role. This is especially the case when the social setting is embedded in an institution, such as Congress and even the media, where norms and rules structure behavior.

Stochastic processes approaches, in which full distributions of observations are studied, is a growing method for examining such complexity (see, for example, Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Jones, Sulkin, & Larsen, 2003). Complexity can also be approached by using computational models, where simulations are compared to observed outcomes (for example, Jones & Baumgartner 2005). The most important tool, however, is a simple awareness of interaction and feedback effects. Information weighted by media attention is nothing more than a straightforward interaction effect. But this gets us immediately beyond the limits of research based on correlations, contingency tables, and simple specifications of linear models.

Similarly, appreciation of the differences between positive (destabilizing) and negative (stabilizing) feedback can go a long way toward eliminating the errors associated with overly simplistic models (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Wolfe, 2012). To this effect, key to understanding the influence of the media in policy agenda setting is how information and institutions interact. Information—changes in indicators about conditions, problems, and policies—is continuously processed by political institutions. The limited information-processing capacity of these institutions distorts the reality of a political problem. Also known as *disproportionate information processing* (Jones, 2001; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), this distortion contributes to negative and positive feedback. The contingencies of such feedback cycles are long overdue for further investigation.

The study of policy processes is a system-level approach based on complex interactions and contingent causal relations. The field exhibits a distinct lack of confidence in simple and direct flows of causation, and this shows up in case studies of particular policies as well as quantitative analyses of system-level variables. Many quantitative studies are based in stochastic process methods, where the size and timing of policy changes are more critical than the exact nature of the causal relationship (Jones et al., 2009; True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2007). Rather than a matter of who leads whom, the media is one of several political institutions that organize attention (Jones & Baumgartner 2005; for the role of bureaucracy in organizing attention, see May et al., 2008; Workman, 2009; Workman, Jones, & Jochim, 2009).

Media Attention Dynamics and Focusing Events

Focusing events or "triggering" devices (Cobb & Elder, 1972; Downs, 1972; Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Birkland, 1997, 1998) have long been tied to the issue attention cycle and policy change. Focusing events can and often do shift the attention of the media, refocusing attention to problems or issues that are either novel or were previously unattended or underattended. Increasing news coverage triggered by a focusing event can contribute positive feedback, increasing issue enthusiasm (Downs, 1972) and focusing the attention of the government and the public. This process essentially carves out agenda space (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). For example, media coverage of the oil spill from the Exxon Valdez provided a window of opportunity for environmental and fishing policy advocates to shift attention to their alternative problem definitions and policy solutions, which led to revising laws pertaining to oil pollution and the clean-up of oil spills (Birkland, 1997).

But not all events are made equal. The nature of the event and the policy communities associated with the event condition the policy impact of a focusing event (Birkland, 1998). As a component of the political system defined by attention and information, media coverage of an event too conditions its impact. Coverage may be fleeting, thus hindering sustained attention by the public or government. Or coverage may be explosive and the issue type attractive enough to sustain media attention long after the problem is solved or subsides. In effect, issue attention becomes institutionalized by the media (see Green-Pederson & Wolfe, 2009, for a comparative example in governing institutions).

Events and issues can be linked and often are due to the journalistic practice of contextualization and the imperative for interpretation. Issue advocates may take advantage of the situation as an opportunity for redefinition, "helping" the media frame events as indicators of problems with current policy. The event-driven nature of the news provides issue advocates opportunities to introduce and/or amplify new frames or definitions to the issue agenda, especially if the focusing or triggering events are dramatic or troubling (i.e., less well understood) and in need of interpretation (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995; Lawrence, 2000, 2001; Molotch & Lester, 1974; Soroka, 2002). Focusing events can thus provide a "window of opportunity" for the strategic use of the media by issue advocates seeking policy change.

The Crime Policy Ratchet and Positive Feedback

Events generally are conceived as abrupt and salient, but they can be sustained and chronic. In such situations, we speak of indicators of underlying problems. These include unemployment and crime, among many others. In some such cases the media can participate in a positive feedback loop, which drives upward policymaking attention and outcomes very rapidly. Indeed, we have argued that the media are a critical component of an information-processing system for setting policy agendas (Jones & Wolfe, 2010).

One example is the issue of crime (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Jones & Wolfe, 2010). There was a general and rapid rise in the violent crime rate in the United States beginning in the late 1960s, which was highlighted by the urban disorders of the period. Media coverage of crime paralleled the rise in violent crime.[7] This is important, because sometimes it is forgotten that news has a basis in information, or changes in real-world conditions as in this case. As press coverage about crime spiked, so too did public attention to crime.[8] Congressional attention to crime increased at the same time as well.[9] Public concern about crime fell throughout the 1970s, as the importance of crime was displaced by economic issues. However, media and congressional attention remained relatively high. Federal spending on crime[10] increased in the late 1960s, peaked and stabilized for a while, then began a long sustained and dramatic rise beginning in the mid-1980s.

Media coverage was an important component of this "crime policy ratchet," but it neither constructed the crime wave nor caused the policymaking agenda to shift. Moreover, the indexing effect is not an epiphenomenon, but becomes a cause of policy itself as it feeds back into the cycle of coverage, public attention, elite focus, and policymaking commitment.

Multiple Venues

Many years ago, Redford (1969) postulated a dynamic by which policymaking took place generally in subsystems, but occasionally appealed to the macropolitical level of government for intervention. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) saw the connection between

this dynamic and Schattschneider's notion of conflict expansion, in which the losers in a policy fight appeal to a broader audience. They named this process punctuated equilibrium. The media can be a key player in expanding the scope of an issue by acting as an alternative venue used by issue advocates inside and outside the institutions of government to increase the salience of issues and their attributes (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Pralle, 2003, 2006). This strategy is undertaken in order to redefine the issue on the systemic and formal agendas with the ultimate goal of changing policy in a desired direction. Issue advocates often rely on the media to mobilize public interest and aid in transforming the issue from one that is defined as a public rather than a private problem.

There are multiple policymaking venues in the United States. Examples of these include the usual suspects: the Supreme Court, Congress, and the Executive Branch. But even within Congress, each committee constitutes a policymaking venue. Policy advocates may "shop" for venues more sympathetic to their goals in seeking policy change. For example, changes in policies regarding nuclear power, pesticides, and tobacco/smoking can be traced to these issues expanding beyond their subsystem and onto the agenda of additional congressional committees, the courts, and the media (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Federalism also makes vertical shifts in venue possible. Large-scale changes in education policy are preceded by a change in policymaking at the state and local levels to the national stage. A recent example of this is Bush's No Child Left Behind. Of course, the number of venues varies cross-nationally. Issue attention and policy change may be more likely in multiple-venue as compared to single-venue countries (see Green-Pedersen & Wolfe, 2009, for an example).

At the macropolitical level, problems are generally defined with symbols, policy images, causal stories, and narratives (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Edelman, 1985; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 1984; Stone, 1989, 2002). But in the specialized sphere of policy subsystems, systematic analyses often matter more. While students of the media have produced many studies of the role of the media in the symbolic, image-laden macropolitical system (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigiliani, 1989; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Molotch & Lester, 1974), they seem to have produced few studies of the role of the specialized media in marshaling analyses and communicating them among members of a specialized policy community.

It is not always the mass media that are critical. Disadvantaged interests do not always lose in policy subsystems (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Sometimes specialized media can mobilize policy communities, resulting in access to the relevant policy subsystem either directly or as a link to mass media. An example of this is Nelson's (1986) *Making an Issue of Child Abuse,* where she attributes the redefinition of child abuse from a private to a public problem in need of government intervention to the utilization by policy entrepreneurs of specialized (medical journals) and mass media.

Dynamics of Attribute Processing and Problem Definition

Much of the literature on decision making in political institutions has been conducted within a spatial framework. In a multidimensional space, two sets of points are postulated: the ideal points of the decision makers and the location of the policy choices. The distance between the decision maker and the policy choice is negatively related to the potential utility derived from that policy (Enelow & Hinich, 1984). Usually this space has been seen as a fixed, invariant space. However, Riker's (1986) heresthetics emphasized the role of the introduction of new issues into the choice space by strategic actors. The shift of a choice space from one that is unidimensional—which limits strategy and requires convergence to

the median vote—to a multidimensional one introduces uncertainty in the choice space. This shift provides political entrepreneurs the opportunity to change the course of policy.

Riker was thinking about such formal decision-making bodies as legislatures or committees, but it seems clear that such processes also take place in larger collectives in which voting rules are not so clear. Indeed, the problem-definition process may be shown to be analogous. Jones (1994b) postulated two separate spaces: a choice space, comprised of the set of issues before a legislative body, and the attribute space, which allowed for multidimensional understandings of issues. For example, we have seen how an infrastructure development project within an economic stimulus package can be seen as critical to promoting economic demand and building the base for future economic activity on the one hand, or as wasteful government spending on the other. Because the problem-definition process is dynamic, Jones postulated that the weights on these attributes would vary, and perhaps shift rapidly, over time.

The policy approach to agenda setting emphasizes the process and politics of problem definition (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1984; Rochefort & Cobb, 1993, 1994; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Stone, 1989, 2002). But how does this happen, and what is the role of the media? The content of public policy news usually comes from government sources (Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973), and the media tend to index coverage to elite conflict (Bennett, 1990; but see Althaus, 2003). However, the content that appears in newspaper stories and television news is filtered, not necessarily for what is relevant (Lippman, 1922) but for what is interesting (Linsky, 1986).

We know that media frames affect individuals, but we do not know much about the collective aggregation of media frames to mass publics and how this affects policymaking. Moreover, few have studied the macropolitical effects of these frames on the problems that government addresses. By highlighting some attributes and underweighting others, the media can limit the bounds of what makes up the set of feasible alternative solutions to a policy problem. Much of the problem-definition process involves shifting the weights of the attributes that structure a policy problem (Jones, 1994b).

The policy process tradition underscores the importance of *changes* in issues—their corresponding images and ideas—to explain how the policy agenda is set and how it evolves. How do the media matter in changing or transforming policies? Changes in policy images, especially from positive to negative, can lead to policy change. Nuclear power is a classic example. At first, policies in this issue area were made in subsystems, as the idea of nuclear power was imbued with positive images of economic growth and prosperity. Nuclear power appeared on the macropolitical agenda and was severely limited when concern over health risks and environmental disasters transformed the issue into one with a negative image (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Jones and Baumgartner (2005) examined what they termed an *issue intrusion process* by which a previously well-understood policy space is disrupted. The policy space is disrupted not by the strategic manipulation of actors, as Riker described, but by new (or previously unattended) information. This occurs because the process of decision making involves interpretation of the problem space (Jones, 2001; Newell & Simon, 1972), and this can be modeled as a set of weights on a multi-attribute space. The issue intrusion process involves a dynamic on the weights—the weights change as the issue is understood in a different way (Jones, 1994b). An implication of the policy process approach is that the media should have a major role in affecting the interpretation of the problem space through the device of highlighting attributes.

Contingent on the characteristics of an issue (will it capture and sustain an audience?), the media may run stories that either commence or increase coverage of an issue and

incorporate particular frames from issue advocates that are distinct from entrenched subsystems. In the name of fair and balanced coverage, the news may involve competing frames (Gamson, 1989; Entman, 2004). What then determines the winning frame? Nothing, a priori: Not only is the media a venue utilized by strategic actors, it is also but one component with multiple functions in our complex and dynamic political system. The media influences and is influenced by inputs and outputs from the policy process.

The media surely has very little influence on what members of Congress, the president, or agency officials *think*; that is, the media should not be thought to alter the preferences of elites in governing positions. However, the media has a large role in pointing policymakers to what they should be paying attention to. The actions of the media can alter items on the agenda by shifting attention to consideration of a new attribute or policy problem. The media may not change policymakers' minds, but it can change their focus (Jones, 1994a; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005) and keep them focused on a problem or on a particular solution.

Why Framing Matters

One of the most important distinctions between the communications and policy approaches to the study of media effects, as well as one where much would be gained if these studies could be better integrated, has to do with framing effects. Where individual political attitudes are the dependent variable, communications scholars and political scientists alike use experimental designs to show the "not so minimal" effects of exposure to news stories. This literature is legion and is perhaps the single area where media scholars and political scientists overlap to a significant degree (see, for example, Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). Both sets of scholars are interested in fundamentally similar questions: how framing matters. Whereas one focuses on the impact on individual cognition, usually at the mass level, the other focuses on system-level or elite effects. Both are concerned with what causes attention to shift from topic to topic or from frame to frame.

Within the policy studies tradition, attention is much less likely to focus on the development of individual attitudes, partly because of the elite rather than mass focus of this literature. Kingdon (1984) based his study of Washington agenda setting on interviews with policymaking elites in two policy domains and found little impact of newspapers in determining the policy priorities of those he interviewed. This may be because of the powerful indexing role of the media and the fact that Kingdon's respondents were just as likely to be the source as the target of newspaper or TV stories.

In any case, if the media are indexing or following what is going on among government officials, those officials may not see them as playing an important role. On the other hand, if the media were not to cover an important issue, public opinion could scarcely be mobilized around it. So, it is hard to square Kingdon's "minimal effects" finding with what we know of the linkages between elite and mass publics. Miller and Stokes's (1963) classic article on mass-elite linkages, based on interviews with members of Congress and samples of their constituents, suggested an important role for issue salience in determining the degree of correspondence between mass preferences and elite behaviors. Still, there are few studies assessing the impact of media framing on elites, in contrast to the standard approach at the level of the mass public.

Chong and Druckman have researched the conditions leading to successful and unsuccessful framing effects. Certain authoritative government officials are seen as credible sources, whereas others are not. Certain newspapers have greater legitimacy than others

(Chong & Druckman, 2007a, 2007b; Druckman 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Druckman & Nelson, 2004). Of course, partisan bias and preconceptions make individuals more susceptible to certain new information and resistant to other new arguments, facts, or frames. In psychology this is referred to as "motivated reasoning," and many scholars have found that individuals are unwilling to accept information that challenges or disconfirms established beliefs (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schweider, & Rich, 2000; Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2000; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Zaller, 1992). These studies all suggest that we should not assume framing effects, whether from media or other sources, will have the same effect in all situations. Media and policy scholars have considerable work to do in understanding these interactions.

The predominant approach to the study of media effects in the public policy tradition is to trace levels of attention in the media to a given issue over time, assessing how shifts in media salience interact with access to the political agenda. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) traced numerous policies over several decades using very simple methods to count the number of stories in such publications as the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* or the *New York Times Index*. Large-scale shifts in levels of media attention corresponded not only to shifts in levels of government attention, but also tended to be associated with changing policy frames. The linkage between agenda setting and issue definition has been seen as a fundamental question since Schattschneider's (1960) assessment that political "losers" would want to push an issue to a wider and wider audience, requiring that they reframe the issue in order to attract a broader audience. Media coverage of the conflict associated with a policy dispute feeds into the process linking salience, issue definition, agenda setting, and policy change.

More recent policy-focused studies of issue definition and framing have found that large communities of policy experts in Washington limit the elasticity of frames. Policy experts are familiar with various possible arguments and often share broad assumptions about how the issue is currently understood (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009). Combined with the individual-level studies referenced above about the resistance of individuals to new frames that challenge their established beliefs, these findings suggest that it may be quite difficult to reframe issues, especially as compared to what might be assumed from a simple reading of Riker's (1986) work on heresthetics.

At the same time, as Baumgartner and Jones (1993) showed, issues do regularly get reframed at the macro level. In a detailed analysis of 50 years of media coverage of capital punishment, Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydstun (2008) showed not only the rise of a new "innocence" frame in the 1990s, but indeed a series of arguments coming and going throughout the history of modern discussion of capital punishment. With so much complexity in most policy debates, it is not surprising that a single frame or focus of attention cannot remain dominant over many decades. However, to suggest that change is inevitable is not to say that any single political or media actor can create those shifts in popular understandings of what the issue is about (see Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008, for more discussion of the linkages between individual- and system-level analyses of frames in the policy process).

The Media in an Information-Processing Approach to Agenda Setting

We have argued in this article that the two traditions of agenda setting differ in such a manner as to make communication between the perspectives difficult—to the detriment of both. Political communication studies tend to focus on the effects of the media on the public; media is viewed as an independent variable. One of the potential effects of the media is to change the policymaking agenda. Policy process scholars ask questions about

the causes of policy; one of those causes is the media. Agenda-setting studies in political communication often neglect to link media effects to policy or agenda change.

Both approaches suffer from an effort to isolate processes that are integrally related to each other. Rather than looking for lead/lag effects and expecting to generate a theory of "who leads whom," scholars on both sides of the divide would do better to integrate their approaches. Policy process scholars have increasingly rejected simple linear models in favor of models emphasizing complex feedback effects. This suggests a different role for the media—one of highlighting attributes in a multifaceted political reality and involvement in positive feedback cycles.

Yet, policy process scholars have for the most part been insensitive to these potentials. Changes in images, attributes, focusing events, indicators, issue definitions, or policy alternatives are all signals that aid in detecting, categorizing, and prioritizing policy-relevant information and are fundamental to understanding the agenda-setting process in government. And yet we cannot understand how governments will do so without knowing how the media will. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine a complete theory of media agenda setting that ignores the actions of government officials, given their privileged access to the press.

An approach that focuses on evaluating the media's role in how political institutions process information will aid in lessening the media-policy disconnect. The media agenda is simultaneously an input and an output of the political system. In terms common in political communication, news both sets the policymaking agenda and indexes it. Increases in coverage of problems and issues may contribute to a positive feedback cycle resulting in relatively large adjustments to the system (i.e., policy change). Highlighting one interpretation of a problem at the expense of others can help foster such positive feedback cycles, such as the crime ratchet we described above. On the other hand, decreases or lack of media attention to problems and issues may be a factor in negative feedback, small adjustments, and incremental policy change or no change at all.

Creating linkages between the micro and macro level and between the media-as-cause and media-as-effect approaches to the study of media effects, framing, and public policy are tall orders. But with greater integration of these research questions, we hope that a new generation of scholars will naturally gravitate to integrate two fields that for too long have developed in parallel rather than in tandem.

Notes

1. Exceptions to this include Altheide (1991), Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, and Wright (1996), Cook et al. (1983), Protess et al. (1987), and Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, and McCombs (1989).

2. But see Gonzenbach (1996), Entman (2004), Dearing and Rogers (1996), and Cook et al. (1983) for work in political communication analyzing issue attention in the government, media, and the public.

3. But see Behr and Iyengar (1985), Cook et al. (1983), Gonzenbach (1996), and Entman (2004) for qualitative and quantitative examples of multidirectional agenda setting in political communication.

4. The organization of this review is guided by the format of McCombs's (2004) and Lee and McCombs's (in press) much more lengthy discussion of the development of agenda-setting research in communications. Rather than providing a detailed review of agenda setting, our intention is to acknowledge the several paths in which agenda setting has progressed. While priming and framing are sometimes coupled as outgrowths in some way or another of agenda setting, we reserve our discussion of the framing literature in communications to a subsequent section where it is explicitly compared to framing from the policy studies perspective.

5. Media exposure can also reinforce existing attitudes and opinions. See Bennett and Iyengar (2008, 2010) for a recent discussion of the increasing endogeneity of media exposure.

6. There is much less consensus in the communications literature on the definition and consequences of media frames and the relationship between agenda setting and framing than that of the link between priming and agenda setting. For example, McCombs and Ghanem (2001) and McCombs (2004) argue that framing converges with attribute agenda setting when frames are defined in such a way that they organize or "bundle" sets of attributes that describe an object; however, a frame is a concept, whereas attribute agenda setting is a theory (McCombs, 2004, p. 87). See Iyengar and Simon (1993), Weaver (2007), Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), and McCombs (2004) for overviews of agenda setting, framing, and priming; Chong and Druckman (2007b) on framing and priming; and Kinder (2007) and Entman (1993) primarily on framing. Agenda setting and priming are processes based on the accessibility of attitudes (Scheufele, 2000; see also Scheufele & Tewsbury, 2007), in which levels of salience play a moderating role in activating the information that contributes to attitude strength and direction (McCombs, 2004; Weaver, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

7. Indeed, coverage led the rise in crime. This could have been a consequence of differences in the local and national crime rates. Media coverage measured using the *New York Times Index* series from the Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org).

8. Measured by Gallup's Most Important Problem series from the Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org).

9. Measured using the congressional hearings series from the Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org).

10. Measured using the U.S. budget series from the Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org).

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