Intermedia agenda setting

Those researching news media in India need to study the impact that social media networks and their use by citizens have on journalism. A research review by USHA M RODRIGUES

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In the past two years – 2011 and 2012 – civil society, particularly the educated and the young, have used social media networking sites to communicate with each other, to campaign and organise themselves, and even converge on the streets in support of their demands. Whether it is the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East; the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York and elsewhere; the anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare in India; the use of social media platforms by those connected via their mobile phones and their internet networks have played a significant part in these movements. Even the recent anti-rape agitations in New Delhi and other metropolis of India demonstrated the importance of social media networking sites as a significant source and exchange of information.

Considering the impact and potential of social media platforms in engaging and organising the younger and educated class in India, which also happens to be the bulls-eye target for many advertisers, it is not surprising that mainstream Indian media and journalists have tapped into this rich tapestry to get a sense of what matters to this group of audiences. Almost every newspaper and news television channel, and their editors and prominent journalists have a Twitter account. For that matter, a number of prominent Indian film personalities and sports stars too are on social media platforms, engaging with their fans and audiences.

Notwithstanding the fact that only about 11 per cent of the Indian population has access to the internet, much lower than the global average, it is still around 137 million Indian users, including 75% below 35 years of age, who are connected to the world wide web, according to Comscore data. Social networking sites reach as many as 84% of these internet users, one of the highest in the world. News consumption online among Indian internet users too is as popular (58%) as it is for web users elsewhere in the world, as per statistics provided by Comscore as of March 2011. Some of the popular news sites Indian online viewers visit include the Times of India, Yahoo! News Network, The Economics Times, NDTV, OneIndia, CNN Network and the Hindustan Times.

In the light of the above, it is important for media researchers to examine if this changing media ecology (traditional and online

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In the light of the above, it is important for media researchers to examine if this changing media ecology (traditional and online
media) intercepted with journalists’ two-way interaction with their audiences on social media has an impact on their news coverage. Within this context, one of the traditional theories of agenda setting – particularly who and what sets news media’s agenda, that is, “intermedia agenda setting” is being revived. A number of recent studies have shown a link between traditional news media and people’s conversations on internet media.

At its simplest level, the media agenda-setting hypothesis states (McCombs and Shaw 1972) that media coverage, by providing the public with cues about the significance of various political issues, exerts a strong influence on the relative importance the public attaches to these issues. A number of studies since 1972 have found a strong relationship between the media and public agendas. In his review of the literature on the media agenda-setting hypothesis, McCombs (2005: 544) says “this often-documented transfer of salience from the news media to the public is a key early step in the formation of public opinion”.

Both traditional agenda-setting effects and attribute agenda-setting effects involve the transfer of salience. The core proposition for these two stages, sometimes called the first and second levels of agenda setting, is that elements prominent on the media agenda become prominent over time on the public agenda. The media not only can be successful in telling us what to think about, they also can be successful in telling us how to think about it. (McCombs 2005: 546)

Noting the dramatic impact of the internet, and the introduction of many news channels, emails, blogs, chat-rooms, and various websites, McCombs (2005:544) acknowledges that “some social observers predict the end of agenda setting as audiences fragment and virtually everyone has a unique external media agenda that is a highly individualized composite constructed from this vast wealth of online news and information”. The result of these idiosyncratic personal agendas will be a public agenda characterised by considerable diversity and the scattering of public attention, he adds.

One of the early pioneers of mass communication research, Harold Lasswell (1948 in McCombs 2005: 555), outlined three basic functions of the mass media: surveillance of the environment, fostering consensus in society, and transmission of the cultural heritage. The traditional agenda-setting role of the mass media involves both the surveillance and consensus functions of communication, calling attention to the new and major issues of the day and influencing agreement about what are the priorities of these issues. Recent studies have examined the various cultural arenas of the mass media and their influence on society.

Since its first appearance in 1972, agenda-setting theory has grown to a theory to include a second-level agenda setting component
(attribute agenda setting), a psychological component to explain individual level agenda setting effects (need for orientation), an emphasis on how the media’s agenda is shaped, and an explanation for the sharing of news agenda among different media (intermedia agenda setting) (Meraz 2011: 177). In the past, this line of research has focused on relationships between national news agencies and daily newspapers (McCombs and Shaw 1976); significant and high correlations found in topic agendas between newspapers in their coverage of state legislator (Atwater, Fico and Pizante 1987), and research identified significant influence of the *New York Times* over the international news agenda of three leading American evening newscasts (Golan 2006).

Several studies of what shapes the media’s agenda have found that ‘sources’ shape news reports more than journalists (Berkowitz and Beach 1993). Shoemaker and Reese (1991) found that news sources could have a strong effect on the content of the news media. The concept of “intermedia agenda setting” was established by Breed (1955 in Atwater, Fico and Pizante 1987) who noted the influence of larger newspapers and news agencies on smaller newspapers. McCombs (2004 in Meraz 2011) says intermedia agenda setting seeks to examine how the news media’s agenda is set by sources.

In a study of 35 issues during the 2004 presidential campaign, Wallsten (2007: 580) found that “on the vast majority of issues, there was a complex, bidirectional relationship between media coverage and blog discussion rather than a unidirectional media or blog agenda setting effect”. He also found that “bloggers and journalists respond to each other’s coverage within a few days” – indicating that the relationship between mainstream media and political blogs is a high-speed, two-way street rather than a slow-moving, one-way road. This study is then added to the fact that mainstream media coverage is an important influence on the governmental agenda, confirming emergence of political bloggers as important actors in the agenda setting process (Wallsten 2007).

Another study by Gyotae, Kaid and Pfau (2003) too focused on the impact of internet media on the traditional news media news agenda in political elections. Lee, Lancendorfer and Lee (2005) provided additional evidence for the intermedia agenda setting phenomenon in their examination of the influence of internet bulletin board conversations on newspaper coverage of the 2000 South Korean elections. They found that newspapers and bulletin boards had a reciprocal intermedia agenda-setting effect in the shaping of their agendas of issues and attributes. Yu and Aikat (2008) also found evidence of sharing of agendas among traditional media platforms and non-traditional portal news outlets, such as Yahoo! News and Google News.

In another quantitative study of intermedia agenda setting between
traditional news media and blogs, Messner and Garrison (2011: 122) show that traditional news media heavily influence the agenda of blogs by being their dominant sources. On the other hand, blogs are also gaining a growing influence on the agenda of traditional news media. However, blogs are also competing with many other sources in shaping the traditional news media agenda, and there is some hesitation among journalists to trust blogs, which leads them not to fully attribute information to specific blogs, raising questions about newsroom attribution policies (Messner and Garrison 2011).

Meraz (2011: 187) in her study of elite US political blogs, traditional news entities and their newsroom blogs across a set of issues in 2007, pointed to a dilution of traditional media’s singular agenda setting power over all the web publics. “The study also affirms growing influence of the progressive political blogosphere in setting other media agendas, while resisting traditional media agenda setting. Progressive blogs resembled traditional media in their embrace of team blogging, investigative journalism and editorial workflow practices” (Meraz 2011: 187). Blogs like the Huffington Post are now drawing larger audiences than the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and the Wall Street Journal.

Although the access to fast broadband in India has lagged behind other developed and developing nations, the rollout of 3G technologies is expected to improve the infrastructure. With improvements in technologies and accessibility, the use of social media networking sites is bound to increase, providing further opportunities for the Indian audiences to use their online social networking sites to source and share news and views, making it imperative for journalists to engage with these social networks. Similarly, those researching news media in India cannot ignore the need to study the impact of these social media networks and their use by citizens on journalism.

References:


