

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A New Look at Agenda-Setting Effects—Comparing the Predictive Power of Overall Political News Consumption and Specific News Media Consumption Across Different Media Channels and Media Types

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The purpose of this study was to compare the predictive power of overall political news consumption and media-specific news consumption, on perceived issue salience across different media channels and media types in the context of the 2006 Swedish parliamentary election. Findings suggest that overall consumption of political news is significantly more important than consumption of specific media outlets in predicting changes in issue salience. Although the study demonstrates that the Swedish news media collectively can exert considerable agenda-setting influence over their audiences, it could, however, not find any consistent evidence of differences related to media channels or media types. The reasons for and implications of the results are discussed.

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Now spanning more than 3 decades, a recent meta-analysis showed that agenda-setting constitutes one of the most widely used mass communication theories (Bryant & Miron, 2004), and there is no doubt that extensive support exists for the basic agenda-setting hypothesis: “The amount of press coverage that issues receive gives individuals salience cues with which they learn the relative importance of these issues” (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007, p. 37; see also McCombs, 2004; Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004).

However, most of the agenda-setting research to date has focused on the correlation between issues on the media agenda and issues on the public agenda. Thus, most studies have relied on content-based measures and have seldom investigated in any detail to what extent people actually have been exposed to and paid attention

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to the media content. In addition, most of the studies have not investigated the predictive power of media consumption while controlling for other variables that might have an impact on the public agenda. In addition, most studies have relied on repeated cross-sectional surveys rather than panel surveys, and have thus not allowed the strictest possible control over the chain of causality.

The above-mentioned information is also true with respect to research on whether television or newspapers are most powerful in the process of salience transfer—an issue that is not yet fully resolved and one major focus of this study. When recently reviewing the available body of evidence regarding this question, McCombs (2004, p. 49) concluded that “it depends”—“as a broad empirical generalization, about half the time there is no discernible difference in the agenda-setting roles of newspapers and television news. The other half of the time, it appears that newspapers have the edge by a ratio of about 2 to 1.”

One reason for the edge that newspapers seem to enjoy over television news is the larger information-carrying capacity of newspapers. Another reason, suggested by McCombs (2004, p. 49), is that television in many countries is at least partly controlled by government, which “can diminish the credibility of television news.”

While this explanation might have merit in cases where the broadcasting media are government owned *and* the country is only partially free, it might not have much merit in cases where the country is free and democratic, and the broadcasting media are government owned but independently operated as public service broadcasting. One such country is Sweden, where research has shown that while 73% of the public express confidence in the content of the public service television channels, the corresponding share for the most important commercial news channel is 62%, for the two national morning newspapers 35%, and for their local newspaper 68% (Westlund, 2006). If there is a correlation between the agenda-setting power and credibility of different media, then in some cases, television can be expected to be more powerful than newspapers and public service media more powerful than commercial media. This suggests the need to compare not only the agenda-setting effects of newspapers versus television, but also that of public service versus commercial television. It also suggests the need to compare the agenda-setting effects of various media in countries that offer variation on the dimension of public–commercial broadcasting.

Against this background, the purpose of this study was to compare the predictive power of overall political news consumption and media-specific news consumption, on *perceived issue salience* across different media channels (newspapers vs. television vs. radio) and media types (commercial media vs. public service media and elite newspapers vs. tabloid newspapers) in the context of the 2006 Swedish parliamentary election. More specifically, this study contributes to the agenda-setting literature by comparing the importance of different media channels and media types, by using attention-based rather than content-based measures, and by being one of only a few Swedish agenda-setting studies in the international communication literature. Methodologically, this study is one of only a few studies based on a panel design, which allows for stricter control over the chain of causality than cross-sectional surveys do.

A major benefit of this type of approach is that it enables us to examine the impact of multiple variables in terms of their contributions to issue salience, not just the impact of the news media (see also Kioussis & McDevitt, 2008). Although this deviates some from traditional agenda-setting research, this is consistent with the recent argument by McCombs (2004) that agenda-setting in the most abstract sense is about the transfer of salience from one agenda to another, not just media. Consequently, our approach should help enhance external validity. Finally, comparatively this is one of few studies yet that uses perceived issue salience rather than the public agenda as the core dependent variable.

Agenda-setting and different media channels and types

As noted earlier, the core theoretical proposition concerning the transfer of salience from media to the public has received extensive empirical support for over 3 decades and in more than 400 published studies (McCombs, 2004; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). A key question that has pervaded the literature though is how do agenda-setting effects vary with respect to different media channels? Although this issue has been studied, little consensus has been reached so far. For example, Wanta (1997a) reported that agenda-setting influence for television news appears to have more immediate effects on public opinion, while the duration of effects via print media are longer. In explaining some of the rationales for varying impact due to different media channels, he notes that the expectation for stronger broadcast effects rests largely on the idea that the multiple sensory cues present in television news should result in greater salience transfer than that in print. On the contrary, he explains that the control of pacing that print offers suggests that newspapers should yield stronger agenda-setting impact. Finally, he discusses the possibility that no differences should exist because news agendas tend to be quite similar across media channels. In such a case, overall political news consumption would be a stronger predictor of agenda-setting effects than specific news media consumption.

When directly comparing print and broadcast effects empirically, McClure and Patterson (1976) found stronger agenda-setting relationships for newspapers than television news. The original agenda-setting study also discovered a similar trend (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Nonetheless, strong evidence for the impact of television news has also been reported (Zucker, 1978). Indeed, Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981) observed stronger influence of television news during the 1976 presidential elections. Further, most of the existing research on priming effects as an outcome of agenda-setting has been derived from broadcast news (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Recent research has also extended the idea of exploring channel differences to the Internet (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). Ku, Kaid, and Pfau (2003), for instance, observed agenda-setting influence of television news, newspapers, and candidate websites on public opinion during the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign.

Despite this evidence, few studies have examined channel difference effects outside the United States (but see Takeshita & Mikami, 1995). McCombs (2004) suggests

that one factor clarifying why comparative studies have shown stronger newspaper influence than broadcast news influence might be that broadcast channels in many countries are government controlled, which might decrease their credibility. This pattern may vary, however, depending on whether government-owned media serve as the mouthpiece for an authoritarian regime, as opposed to government-owned but independently operated public service media, such as the BBC in Britain or Sveriges Television in Sweden.

As a result, the question of media channel differences in agenda-setting processes is closely related to differences that might be attributed to media types. For example, tabloid news outlets might be expected to have diminished agenda-setting effects due to their decreased credibility in public opinion. Several studies have in fact observed that credibility is connected to enhanced agenda-setting effects (Wanta, 1997b; Wanta & Hu, 1993), and that elite national news media outlets such as *The New York Times* typically exert greater agenda-setting influence due to the presumed heightened credibility of such outlets (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). In this context, commercial media might be considered credible due to a perceived independence from the subjects they are covering. On the contrary, one could argue that tabloid news outlets might increase agenda-setting impact based on their higher amount of dramatic content and their more frequent use of visuals in general and emotion-laden visuals in particular. As suggested by Bucy and Grabe (2007, p. 655), “seeing is remembering” and dramatic headlines and visuals have the potential to trigger emotional reactions that can be powerful. This also ties in to why television might be more powerful than newspapers. Similarly, it is possible to expect pronounced agenda-setting relationships with public service broadcasting, because of the higher credibility they may enjoy compared to commercial broadcasting (Westlund, 2006). As with channel factors, though, it might also be reasonable to assume that agenda-setting processes operate similarly across all media types and that we should anticipate no differences, but rather that general political news consumption is what matters most.

Content- and attention-based agenda-setting research

All agenda-setting research focuses on the transfer of salience from one agenda to another. Most research on media agenda-setting effects focus on the correlation between issues on the media agenda and issues on the public agenda, and can be characterized as *content-based agenda-setting studies*. Thus, these studies do not really measure attention to different media, which is the focus of *attention-based agenda-setting studies* (Ghanem & Wanta, 2001; Kiousis, McDevitt, & Wu, 2005; Wanta 1997b; Weaver, 1991). While the strength of content-based studies is that they measure what issues the media actually focused on, their weakness is that they assume respondent exposure and attention. They are also restricted in that they do not allow scholars to explore stricter multivariate analyses, which attention-based studies do. Thus, the two types of agenda-setting studies complement each other, and there is a need for both kinds of studies.

The distinction between content- and attention-based studies is critical, because most studies on media channel and media type effects have been content based (see Takeshita & Mikami, 1995). In this respect, this study adds to the literature. In addition, the dearth of international studies on media channel and media type effects is noteworthy in that we cannot surmise that findings in the United States will hold up in other media and political systems. As recently argued by Peter (2003), “research has largely ignored country characteristics as potential contingent conditions of agenda setting” (p. 684), despite warnings that “agenda setting may not be spatially indifferent” (p. 698). This study addresses these limitations by using media attention measures, which are drawn from a large panel data set in Sweden.

The Swedish media system and agenda-setting

Compared to the American media system, where most agenda-setting research has taken place, the Swedish media (and political) system can be considered a “most different case” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). The most important difference is related to the broadcasting system. Whereas the broadcasting media system in the United States is one of the most commercial in the world (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001), Sweden has a dual system. Until the late 1980s, there was a public service monopoly in place and only two television channels and four radio channels. The first commercial terrestrial television channel, TV4, was launched in the early 1990s, and today there are numerous commercial cable and digital channels. However, the public service television channels (SVT1 and SVT2) remain the most important when it comes to news and public affairs programming. One simple reason for this is that most of the commercial channels are heavily focused on entertainment (Jönsson & Strömbäck, 2007). The major exception is TV4, which is obliged to follow a charter that is similar to the charter that the public service media are obliged to follow. Thus, although the operating principle is “freedom under responsibility” (Petersson et al., 2006), they are obliged to carry news and public affairs programming.

On the *national* level, the Swedish media system largely consists of two major newsstand tabloids (*Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*), two serious morning newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*), two major public service news shows (*Rapport* and *Aktuellt*), one major (*TV4 Nyheterna*) and one minor (*TV3 Update*) commercial news show, and one major public service radio news show (*Dagens Eko*). In all major media, journalism can be considered as politically independent (Nord, 2001).

With regard to news consumption, Sweden is a rather newspaper-centric country. According to the 2007 SOM-survey, carried out annually by the SOM-institute at the University of Gothenburg, 70% read a morning newspaper at least 5 days a week, whereas 19% read a tabloid newspaper at least 3 days a week (Färdigh, 2008, p. 317). Furthermore, 52% watch one of the two public service television news shows at least 5 days a week, whereas the corresponding share for the most important commercial television news show, *TV4 Nyheterna*, is 32%. In addition, 25% listen to news on national public radio at least 5 days a week (Holmberg &

Weibull, 2008, p. 28). On average, Swedish citizens watch television approximately 2 hours per day (Carlsson, 2007). Although the public service channels face a very competitive media landscape compared to the situation a couple of decades ago, their news shows are still more widely watched than the commercial news shows. As noted earlier, research also demonstrates that people express higher confidence in the public service television channels than in the commercial television channels (Westlund, 2006).

Although the public service media are basically owned by the state, they still remain independent of direct political influence. They are obliged to follow their charter, as is TV4, but the charter is not very specific and on a daily basis, they operate without any political interference (Petersson et al., 2006). In fact, in the Global Press Freedom Rankings 2005 (Freedom House, 2005), Sweden was ranked as the most liberal country in the world, along with Iceland and Finland. From this it follows that the suggestion by McCombs (2004, p. 49)—“that the edge newspapers have over television news in most studies on agenda-setting is due at least partly to television being to some degree controlled by government in many countries outside of the United States”—might be off target in cases like Sweden.

In fact, the strong and one-sided commercial character of the American media system makes it difficult to sort out whether differences in agenda-setting power are due to different media channels or different media types. The U.S. case does not offer enough variation to allow these kinds of studies. From that perspective, Sweden is a very appropriate case to study.

The need to study the agenda-setting impact of Swedish news media is further underlined by the relative absence of such research (but see Asp, 1983, 1986; Gooch, 1996; Holmberg, 1994; Shehata, 2010). Moreover, most studies were completed in an earlier era when the public service monopoly was still in place. During the last decade, there have only been a few Swedish studies published that statistically investigate the impact of media consumption or the media agenda upon the public agenda, and two of them (Gooch, 1996; Johansson, 1998) focused on the local media. One study focused, however, on how the national media set the public agenda between 1986 and 2001 (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2003), with a particular focus on the impact of media consumption on the salience of three issues on the public agenda: health care, education, and elderly care. This study showed not only that media consumption had some significant effects on the salience of these issues, but also that the agenda-setting impact of media consumption varied across age groups. Broadly speaking, commercial television news consumption had stronger effects among the youngest age group, whereas public service television news consumption had stronger effects among the oldest age group. With regard to newspaper reading, it only had a significant and positive effect on the importance of education among the oldest age group. Thus, this study indicates not only that television news has stronger effects than newspapers, but also that the media type (commercial vs. public service) matters, although in different ways depending on age.

Considering the lack of recent research on the agenda-setting power of the national Swedish media, it is nevertheless clear that no firm conclusions can be drawn and that additional research is warranted. This is particularly so considering that most (although not all) agenda-setting research has relied on cross-sectional surveys. Cross-sectional surveys are basically static instruments, and static instruments are inherently insufficient for capturing dynamics. Furthermore, previous research has mostly relied on the public agenda as the dependent variable, whereas this study used perceived issue salience as the dependent variable.

Purpose and hypotheses

The purpose of this study was to compare the predictive power of overall political news consumption and media-specific news consumption, on perceived issue salience across different media channels and different media types. Based on the literature review above, our first two hypotheses are straightforward:

H1: General political news attention will predict increasing issue salience.

H2: Specific news media attention will predict increasing issue salience.

As is well known, newspapers, television, and radio news include not only politically and socially relevant news, but also a range of other topics whose relationship to what is considered the most important problem facing the country is ambiguous or even nonexistent (Patterson, 2000). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that attention to *political news* specifically will be a stronger predictor of issue salience than attention to specific news media.

H3: General political news attention will be a stronger predictor of increasing issue salience than specific news media attention.

As highlighted above, prior research has not yielded a definitive answer with regard to the agenda-setting power of broadcast news versus newspapers, although newspapers appear to have an edge in the case of the United States (McCombs, 2004). However, it is not self-evident that this pattern holds true in the Swedish case because there are differences both between different broadcast news (commercial vs. public service) and different newspapers (serious morning newspapers vs. newsstand tabloids).

For example, during the 2006 election campaign, the morning newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* published 29 and 18 articles on the election per day, whereas the newsstand tabloids *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* published 18 and 11 articles on the election per day.¹ The public service television news shows *Rapport* and *Aktuellt* broadcast 4.8 and 4.9 stories on the election per day, whereas the commercial television news shows *TV4 Nyheter* and *TV3 Update* broadcast 4.4 and 0.9 such stories per day. The public service radio news show *Dagens Eko* broadcast 3.5 stories per day on the election (Asp, 2006). Expecting that such differences might

have consequences for the agenda-setting power of the different media, our next hypotheses are as follows:

H4a: Consumption of the public service television news shows *Rapport* and *Aktuellt* will be a stronger predictor of increasing issue salience than consumption of the commercial television news shows *TV4 Nyheterna* and *TV3 Update*.

H4b: Consumption of the major commercial TV news show *TV4 Nyheterna* will be a stronger predictor of increasing issue salience than consumption of the minor commercial TV news show *TV3 Update*.

H5a: Consumption of the morning newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* will be a stronger predictor of increasing issue salience than consumption of the newsstand tabloids *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*.

H5b: Consumption of *Aftonbladet* will be a stronger predictor of increasing issue salience than consumption of *Expressen*.

The above hypotheses focus on differences between media types and media outlets rather than differences between media channels. With regard to the latter, the importance of radio versus television and newspapers is an essentially unexplored issue, in contrast to the importance of television versus newspapers. However, when asked in surveys about the most important source of information on politics, Swedes tend to rank television as the most important source, followed by newspapers and radio (Strömbäck, 2001, p. 103). Following this logic, our final hypotheses are as follows:

H6a: Consumption of television news will be a stronger predictor of increasing issue salience than consumption of newspapers.

H6b: Consumption of newspapers will be a stronger predictor of increasing issue salience than consumption of radio news.

It is possible, however, that the effects are not uniform across issues of high and low salience, respectively, an aspect that might be neglected when focusing on either only the top issues or the whole set of issues on the public agenda at the aggregate level. Several studies have in fact suggested that issue type, for example, if an issue is obtrusive or unobtrusive, is an important factor affecting the agenda-setting process (Yagade & Dozier, 1990; Zucker, 1978). Indeed, previous empirical work has indicated that the spectrum of issues in public opinion is limited (Shaw & McCombs, 1977), making it a zero-sum game at any given moment (Zhu, 1992). Zhu's zero-sum game hypothesis would suggest that issues fluctuate due to diminished salience levels of competing issues. Specifically, he maintains that an issue is pushed on the agenda due to an increase in media attention while media concern simultaneously drops for competing issues. This decline in issue competition is one factor that may create an environment conducive to higher issue salience levels for some issues and not others. Thus, understanding potential differences between issues high and low on the public

agenda might have important theoretical and empirical implications. In this spirit, we ask the following research question:

RQ1: Are there any differences between those who mentioned an issue high and low on the public agenda, respectively, with regard to the predictive power of general political news consumption and specific news media consumption on increased perceived issue salience?

Methodology and data

To address the hypotheses and research question above, this study builds upon a three-wave panel study carried out by the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid Sweden University, in cooperation with the polling firm IFS AB.

The election was held on September 17, 2006, and the final phase of the election campaign started in mid-August. The first wave was in the field between 7 and 18 August, the second wave between 28 August and 15 September, and the third wave between 18 and 27 September. The ordering of the interviews in the second and third waves was made so that those who were interviewed early in the first wave were also reinterviewed early in the second and third waves, and those who were interviewed late in the first wave were reinterviewed late in the second and third waves, and so on, to ensure that sufficient time had passed between the successive interviews of the same respondents. Thus, the time span between interviews in two successive waves was about 3 weeks.

IFS AB completed all interviews through computer-assisted telephone interviews, with a random sample between the ages of 18 and 74 years. Each respondent was called up to six times before another respondent replaced him or her. Only 13% declined to participate when called in the first wave. The first wave included 2,161 respondents, the second wave 1,154 respondents, and the final wave 1,007 respondents. Hence, 1,007 respondents participated in all three waves.

The major benefit of panel studies is that they allow scholars to study changes over time on the *individual* level. As such, it is not as crucial as in cross-sectional surveys that the sample is a perfect match to the population it is supposed to represent. Nevertheless, the final sample ($N = 1,007$) in the utilized panel study was broadly representative in terms of gender, age, and education, although with some overrepresentation of males, highly educated and older individuals as opposed to younger people. In total, 57% were male and 43% female. A total of 23% had primary school education, whereas 39.7 and 37.6% had college and university education, respectively. Approximately 3.4% were between the ages 20 and 25, 12.1% between the ages 26 and 35, 14.9% between the ages 36 and 46, 15.1% between the ages 46 and 55 years, whereas 25.2 and 29.3% were between the ages 56 and 65, and 66 and 75 years, respectively.²

Measures

As discussed above, it is important to note that this study is attention based rather than content based, and that the dependent variable is perceived issue salience rather

than the actual issues on the public agenda. Perceived issue salience was measured by a follow-up question to a traditional “most important problem” question: “What is the most important issue facing Sweden today?” This most important problem–question was open ended, although the responses were matched to a predefined list of 21 different issues. After the initial round of interviews, this list was expanded to include four more issues, in addition to the categories “Other” and “Don’t know.” The respondents were allowed to mention only one issue; thus, the question intends to measure *the* most important issue. Perceived issue salience—the dependent variable—was measured by asking respondents the follow-up question: “How important is that issue for how you will vote in the parliamentary election?” The response alternatives ranged from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). The minimum value was 1, the maximum value 5, the mean value 3.92, the standard deviation .988, and the variance .977. These statistics show not only that there is enough variance to allow analysis, but also that some people consider an issue as the most important issue while not thinking that the same issue is very important for how they vote in the election. There might be several reasons for this discrepancy. For example, strong party identification might lead people to vote for parties rather than voting based on the most important issue, and people may vote tactically, to influence the parties represented in parliament and the parliamentary strengths of both individual parties and the left and right blocks, respectively (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004). Thus, the most important issue facing Sweden does not necessarily equal how important or salient an issue is in terms of how people vote. In addition, the fact that people mention a particular issue as the most important issue does not in itself prove that the issue is very important—but only that it is more important than other issues. Conceptually, perceived issue salience does not equal issues high on the public agenda, which is why it is important to extend agenda-setting research to use perceived issue salience as the core dependent variable.

The questionnaire included two items regarding the extent to which people follow the news—one focusing on specific news outlets and the other focusing on general consumption of *political news*. General consumption of political news was measured by the question: “Generally speaking, to what extent do you follow the news about politics?” The response alternatives ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Specific news media consumption was measured by the question: “How many days during the last week did you read or watch the news in the following media, in its traditional form or on the Internet?” Thus, the question recognized that people today have greater freedom than before to choose whether to consume news in their traditional forms or through the Internet, although this also makes it more difficult to entangle how medium-specific *characteristics* influence the agenda-setting power across different media channels and media types. However, considering the purpose, hypotheses, and research question in this particular study, this is of secondary importance. The response alternatives ranged from 1 to 7 days.

Data analysis

We will begin the data analysis by presenting the 10 most important issues on the public agenda in each of the three waves, based on the respondents who participated in all waves. Multiple hierarchical regressions were then used to test the proposed hypotheses. Demographic controls (age, education, and gender) were entered into the first block. The second and third blocks included measures of general political news attention and specific media consumption, respectively, from the Wave 1 interviews to predict perceived issue salience at Wave 2. The fourth and fifth blocks represented the control and predictor variables from Waves 1 and 2 to examine the effects on Wave 3 issue salience. By separating the results for general political news attention and specific news media consumption, the increment to R-square that general political news attention provides is highlighted. By exploring relationships across waves, this strategy provides a rigorous causal test for examining the impact of media attention on issue salience in the case of Sweden. Specifically, our ability to consider causal inferences is strengthened by the multiple variables incorporated into the analysis, as well as by observing the same group of individuals across time. This approach also provides the added benefit of internal replication across waves. To investigate differences based on issue type and answer our research question, we subsequently divided our analysis to examine groups naming one of the top five issues compared to those that did not. To test for the risk of multicollinearity, collinearity diagnostics were run. The variance inflation factor (VIF) ranged from 1.024 to 5.785, and only in two cases did VIF exceed 5. This is well below the value of 10, suggested as the threshold level when VIF is large enough to indicate a problem (Mason & Perreault, 1991; Stine, 1995). Thus, multicollinearity does not appear to be a problem in these analyses. We also tested for autocorrelation, using the Durbin–Watson test. The results are reported beneath each table, but it should be noted that in all cases, the values are close to 2, meaning that autocorrelation does not pose a problem (Field, 2005).

Results

The reporting of our findings will proceed in three stages. First, we present some descriptive data, showing what issues people considered as the most important issues facing Sweden today in each of the three waves. In the second phase, we explore the hypotheses and research questions across the aggregate data set. In the third phase, we will examine differences between the groups that mentioned an issue as high and low on the public agenda.

Table 1 displays the 10 most important issues on the public agenda in each of the waves. As can be seen, unemployment was the most important issue on the public agenda, and it became even more important during the course of the election campaign. In the last wave, almost half of the respondents mentioned unemployment as the most important issue. In the first wave, taxes were the second most important problem on the public agenda, followed by elderly care and health care. In successive

Table 1 Ten Most Important Issues on the Public Agenda in Waves 1–3

Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Unemployment	Unemployment	Unemployment
30.3%	38.6%	46.9%
Taxes	Elderly care	Health care
10.1%	9.6%	7.4%
Elderly care	Health care	Elderly care
9.7%	8.3%	5.7%
Health care	Taxes	Taxes
9.5%	8.0%	5.6%
Education	Education	Energy/Environment
7.1%	6.1%	4.3%
Energy/Environment	Energy/Environment	Education
5.9%	5.7%	4.0%
Family/Children care	Family/Children care	Economy
3.6%	3.2%	3.6%
Pensions	Pensions	Pensions
2.6%	2.6%	2.5%
Integration/immigration	Economy	Family/Children care
2.2%	2.4%	2.4%
Economy	Integration/Immigration	Integration/Immigration
1.5%	1.5%	2.2%
<i>N</i> = 1.007	<i>N</i> = 1.007	<i>N</i> = 1.007

waves, the ordering of these three issues changed so in the third wave, health care was the second most important issue, followed by elderly care and taxes.

Although this study is attention rather than content based, a study by Asp (2006) has detailed the 10 most important issues on the media agenda during the last month before Election Day. His results indicate that unemployment was the most important issue in all media outlets that formed a part of this study, with the exception of *Aftonbladet*, where taxes were the most important issue, followed by family/children and unemployment. On the aggregate and restricting the analysis to the media that form part of our study, unemployment was the most important issue on the media agenda, followed by taxes, family/child care, health care and elderly care, environment, and education. These results thus suggest a rather high degree of intermedia agenda-setting (Reese & Danielian, 1989) in the 2006 Swedish election news.

H1 expected that general political news attention would predict perceived issue salience, whereas H2 expected that news attention to specific media outlets would predict perceived issue salience. Tables 2 and 3 report the findings for these relationships.

As shown in both tables, H1 was supported by the data as general political news attention prompted increased levels of perceived issue salience, even when subjected to a series of rigorous controls ($\beta = .15$, $p < .001$ for Wave 2; $\beta = .20$, $p < .001$

Table 2 Effects of News Media Attention on Wave 2 Perceived Issue Salience

Predictors	Standardized Beta	t-Value
<i>Block 1: Demographics</i>		
Education	.03	1.16
Age	.00	-.02
Gender	.05*	2.16*
ΔR^2	.01**	
<i>Block 2: Wave 1 General Media</i>		
General News Attention	.15***	4.94***
ΔR^2	.02**	
<i>Block 3: Wave 1 Specific Media</i>		
Attention to Rapport	.03	.82
Attention to Aktuellt	-.03	-1.01
Attention to TV4 Nyheterna	.06*	2.10*
Attention to TV3 Update	.02	.73
Attention to Dagens Eko	-.03	-1.12
Attention to Dagens Nyheter	-.02	-.64
Attention to Svenska Dagbladet	.02	.83
Attention to Aftonbladet	-.04	-1.37
Attention to Expressen	.00	.00
ΔR^2	.01	
Total R^2	.04**	

Durbin Watson = 1.96. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

for Wave 3). H2 only received support for *TV4 Nyheterna* ($\beta = .06$, $p < .05$) when predicting issue salience at Wave 2. In Wave 3, a modest negative relationship emerged between attention to *Expressen* and issue salience ($\beta = -.08$, $p < .10$). As a result, H3, which anticipated that general political news attention would be a stronger predictor of issue salience than attention to specific media outlets, was supported when considering the aggregate data. The pattern of greater incremental variance, explained by general news attention compared to specific media outlet attention, was consistent throughout the findings.

Shifting to hypotheses regarding specific media outlets, H4a, predicting stronger linkages between public service television news stations and issue salience than with commercial news stations, was not supported by the data. H4b, which expected a stronger relationship between *TV4 Nyheterna* and issue salience than with *TV3 Update*, was supported by the data. H5a and H5b, which dealt with relationships between newspapers and issue salience, were not supported.

Considering channel differences, H6a and H6b expected that television news attention would show the strongest linkages with issue salience, followed by newspaper attention and finally radio news attention. The data suggest that television attention is the strongest predictor of issue salience. However, the findings in total indicate

Table 3 Effects of News Media Attention on Wave 3 Perceived Issue Salience

Predictors	Standardized Beta	t-Value
<i>Block 1: Demographics</i>		
Education	.00	-.06
Age	.00	.04
Gender	.02	.60
ΔR^2	.01	
<i>Block 2: Wave 1 General Media</i>		
General News Attention	.00	.01
ΔR^2	.01***	
<i>Block 3: Wave 1 Specific Media</i>		
Attention to Rapport	.05	1.12
Attention to Aktuellt	.01	.18
Attention to TV4 Nyheterna	.02	.46
Attention to TV3 Update	-.01	-.47
Attention to Dagens Eko	-.04	-1.03
Attention to Dagens Nyheter	-.02	-.47
Attention to Svenska Dagbladet	-.05	-.99
Attention to Aftonbladet	.02	.48
Attention to Expressen	-.08#	-1.61#
ΔR^2	.01	
<i>Block 4: Wave 2 General Media</i>		
General News Attention	.20***	4.34***
ΔR^2	.02**	
<i>Block 5: Wave 2 Specific Media</i>		
Attention to Rapport	.00	-.07
Attention to Aktuellt	-.01	-.23
Attention to TV4 Nyheterna	-.02	-.58
Attention to TV3 Update	-.03	-.80
Attention to Dagens Eko	.00	-.11
Attention to Dagens Nyheter	.00	.12
Attention to Svenska Dagbladet	.06	1.19
Attention to Aftonbladet	.01	.10
Attention to Expressen	.08	1.59
ΔR^2	.01	
Total R^2	.06***	

Durbin Watson = 1.92. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

that general political news attention leads to increases in issue salience rather than attention to specific outlets or across different channels.

In addition to exploring the aggregate data, we retested the aforementioned hypotheses to assess differences based on issue type. As such, we also set out to

answer this study's research question. Here we made a distinction between people who mentioned issues high and low on the public agenda, respectively, the first group—the high issue-agenda group—composed of those who mentioned one of the top five issues, and the second group—the low issue-agenda group—composed of those who did not. These findings are reported below. Tables 4 and 5 display the findings concerning the impact of media attention on Wave 2 and Wave 3 issue salience, respectively.

As shown in Table 4, general political news attention was a stronger predictor of perceived issue salience ($\beta = .15, p < .01$) than specific news media consumption with regard to both the low issue- and the high issue-agenda groups in Wave 2, although the effect of attention to *TV4 Nyheterna* ($\beta = .15, p < .01$) was as strong as general political news consumption with regard to the low—but not high—issue-agenda group. Thus, H1 and H3 were once again supported, whereas support for H2 was mixed at best. H4b, which predicted a stronger relationship between *TV4 Nyheterna* and issue salience than with *TV3 Update*, was also supported with

Table 4 Effects of News Media Attention on Wave 2 Perceived Issue Salience

Predictors	Low Issue-Agenda Group		High Issue-Agenda Group	
	Standardized Beta	t-Value	Standardized Beta	t-Value
<i>Block 1: Demographics</i>				
Education	.16**	2.90**	-.01	-.43
Age	.00	.12	-.01	-.23
Gender	.03	.59	.06*	1.92*
ΔR^2	.03**		.01#	
<i>Block 2: Wave 1 General Media</i>				
General News Attention	.15**	2.67**	.15***	
ΔR^2	.02**		.02***	
<i>Block 3: Wave 1 Specific Media</i>				
Attention to Rapport	.02	.34	.03	.85
Attention to Aktuellt	-.08	-1.18	-.01	-.33
Attention to TV4 Nyheterna	.15**	2.87**	.02	.56
Attention to TV3 Update	.00	.00	.03	.85
Attention to Dagens Eko	.00	.00	-.05	-1.56
Attention to Dagens Nyheter	-.07	-1.45	.00	.09
Attention to Svenska Dagbladet	-.01	-.25	.03	.99
Attention to Aftonbladet	-.06	-1.16	-.02	-.80
Attention to Expressen	.01	.17	-.01	-.18
ΔR^2	.03		.01	
Total R^2	.08**		.04***	

Durbin Watson (Low Salience Group) = 2.01 and Durbin Watson (High Salience Group) = 1.90. # $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 5 Effects of News Media Attention on Wave 3 Perceived Issue Salience

Predictors	Low Issue-Agenda Group		High Issue-Agenda Group	
	Standardized Beta	<i>t</i> -Value	Standardized Beta	<i>t</i> -Value
<i>Block 1: Demographics</i>				
Education	.05	.68	-.01	-.25
Age	.07	.95	-.05	-1.10
Gender	-.01	-.14	.02	.67
ΔR^2	.00		.01*	
<i>Block 2: Wave 1 General Media</i>				
General News Attention	-.06	-.73	.06	1.12
ΔR^2	.00		.03***	
<i>Block 3: Wave 1 Specific Media</i>				
Attention to Rapport	.04	.38	.05	.84
Attention to Aktuellt	.01	.08	.00	-.01
Attention to TV4 Nyheterna	-.05	-.56	.06	1.21
Attention to TV3 Update	-.06	-.93	.03	.76
Attention to Dagens Eko	.06	.74	-.10*	-1.93*
Attention to Dagens Nyheter	-.04	-.41	.02	.26
Attention to Svenska Dagbladet	.03	.35	-.10	-1.54
Attention to Aftonbladet	-.13	-1.14	.13*	2.01*
Attention to Expressen	-.03	-.29	-.13*	-2.13*
ΔR^2	.03		.01	
<i>Block 4: Wave 2 General Media</i>				
General News Attention	.15	1.60	.20***	3.79***
ΔR^2	.02*		.02***	
<i>Block 5: Wave 2 Specific Media</i>				
Attention to Rapport	.08	.87	-.06	-1.04
Attention to Aktuellt	.03	.39	-.02	-.46
Attention to TV4 Nyheterna	.07	.72	-.07	-1.42
Attention to TV3 Update	.03	.54	-.07#	-1.81#
Attention to Dagens Eko	-.09	-1.13	.06	1.19
Attention to Dagens Nyheter	-.08	-.71	.02	.28
Attention to Svenska Dagbladet	-.07	-.66	.14*	2.08*
Attention to Aftonbladet	.12	1.06	-.06	-1.00
Attention to Expressen	.02	.25	.10#	1.65#
ΔR^2	.02		.03*	
Total R^2	.07*		.10***	

Durbin Watson (Low Salience Group) = 2.01 and Durbin Watson (High Salience Group) = 2.02. # $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

regard to the low issue-agenda group, whereas H4a, predicting stronger effects from consumption of the public service television news shows on perceived issue salience than from consumption of the commercial television news shows, was not supported. H5a and H5b were also not supported.

Table 5, focusing on Wave 3 perceived issue salience, shows that there are no significant relationships with regard to the low agenda-issue group. This is true of both the Wave 1 and the Wave 2 predictors. However, with regard to the high issue-agenda group, attention to *Dagens Eko* ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$) and *Expressen* ($\beta = -.13, p < .05$) in Wave 1 shows a moderate negative relationship to perceived issue salience in Wave 3, whereas attention to *Aftonbladet* ($\beta = .13, p < .13$) shows a positive relationship. In addition, attention to *Svenska Dagbladet* in Wave 2 shows a positive relationship ($\beta = .14, p < .05$) with perceived issue salience in Wave 3, as does general political news consumption ($\beta = .20, p < .001$). If we lower the threshold for significant relationships, attention to *TV3 Update* in Wave 2 reveals a negative relationship ($\beta = -.07, p < .10$) with perceived issue salience in Wave 3, whereas the opposite holds true for attention to *Expressen* ($\beta = .10, p < .10$). Taken together, these results suggest that there are indeed some differences between media effects in the low and high issue-agenda groups, although they are rather modest and inconsistent.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare the predictive power of overall political news consumption and media-specific news consumption on perceived issue salience across different media channels and media types. Using a three-wave panel survey, we were able to put our hypotheses through rigorous causal tests and to control for multiple variables simultaneously.

The results clearly show that the media are influential in affecting perceived issue salience—that is, the extent to which people think that the issue they find is the most important will affect their voting in the election. As predicted, general political news attention prompted increased levels of perceived issue salience across all waves. The only time general political news consumption failed to have an effect upon perceived issue salience was in the low issue-agenda group in Wave 3. Nevertheless, the hypothesis predicting that general political news attention will predict issue salience was supported across the analysis as a whole.

However, the hypotheses focusing on the effects of specific news media attention received only mixed and, overall, weak support. As a consequence, the hypothesis that general political news attention will be a stronger predictor of perceived issue salience than specific news media attention was supported.

In fact, out of the hypotheses focusing on the predictive power of specific news media attention, only the hypothesis that consumption of *TV4 Nyheter* would be a stronger predictor than consumption of *TV3 Update* was supported. We could not find any consistent evidence of differences related to media channels (television

vs. newspapers vs. radio) or media types (commercial vs. public service broadcasting, tabloid vs. serious morning newspapers). If media channels or media type matters, it does not show in these results. This does not necessarily mean that media channels or media types are not important in other respects or in setting the issue agenda of the public, but only that these factors do not seem to influence the extent to which people think that the most important problem also is important when they cast their votes.

Turning to our research question, there seems to be some differences between those who mentioned one of the top five issues on the public agenda and those who mentioned an issue lower on the public agenda, but no clear pattern emerged. More research is needed to unearth and explain these findings.

The main result, then, is that attention to *political news* exerts a significant and rather strong influence on perceived issue salience and that attention to *political news* matters more than attention to various specific news shows on television and in radio, or to different newspapers. How could this be explained? Three possible answers emerge. First, the results of this study are not that surprising, considering that previous research has shown comparable linkages when using attention-based measures for assessing issue salience (Kiouisis et al., 2005). Second, there is compelling evidence suggesting that there is a process of convergence between different media—in Sweden as elsewhere—in terms of what issues they report on and emphasize; a process that has been spurred by the deregulation of broadcasting and the increasing commercialization that has taken place (Jönsson & Strömbäck, 2007). In particular, the concept of intermedia agenda-setting indicates that both media salience of issues and agenda-setting effects are strikingly similar across news outlets (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000; Reese & Danielian, 1989). In other words, news diversity appears to have decreased, at least in mainstream news media. Furthermore and as mentioned above, content analyses have shown that the issue agenda during the same period as the panel survey was rather uniform (Asp, 2006). If the media agenda is rather uniform, then it follows logically that it is more difficult to detect media-specific agenda-setting effects, no matter whether the studies are content or attention based. This is important for future research, as it suggests that general political news attention might be a better measure than attention to specific media outlets.

The third possible explanation is related to what might amount to a methodologic weakness of the study. In the utilized panel survey, media attention was measured by the question of how many days during the last week people watched, listened to, or read a number of specified news media. The scale ranged from 1 to 7. However, it might be the case that people simply do not know how many days they use different news media, and that it would have been better to use a question such as “How often during the last week did you watch/listen to/read the following news media?” with a 4- or 5-point response scale ranging from “never” to “very often.” Indeed, research has suggested that media attention measures are superior to media use indicators for estimating media effects (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986). In a case like this, less variation

(in terms of response alternatives) might actually lead to more discrimination (in terms of more marked differences between response categories), which in turn might generate more significant results while also increasing the reliability of the results.

These comments notwithstanding, we believe that this study has several merits. First, the study has demonstrated that attention to political news is a rather strong predictor of perceived issue salience, and, second, that the Swedish news media collectively can exert considerable agenda-setting influence over their audiences. Third, the study has shown the importance of using dynamic instruments such as panel surveys to investigate dynamic processes such as agenda-setting processes. Finally, by using attention-based measures, it has shown the importance of testing for multiple factors simultaneously, thereby putting the hypotheses through rigorous tests.

In summary, although the study did not yield any unequivocal answers with regard to the importance of differences across media channels and media types, it represents a significant addition to the agenda-setting literature. It is hoped that it can serve as a springboard for future research in this area and the broader political communication literature.

Notes

- 1 Although the tabloid *Aftonbladet* published as many articles as the morning newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, the total space devoted to election news, excluding photos, was greater in the latter than in the former (Asp, 2006, p. 15).
- 2 In the first wave, 59% were male and 41% female, whereas 21.8% had primary school education, 39.4% collage education, and 38.5% university education. In total, 4.1% were between the ages 20 and 25, 13.6% between the ages 26 and 35, 16.5% between the ages 36 and 45, 16.8% between the ages 46 and 55 years, whereas 23.9 and 25.1% were between the ages 56–65 and 55–75 years. There are thus no major demographic differences between those who participated in the first wave only and those who participated in all three waves.

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