

"No existe mejor práctica que una buena teoría". Entrevista realizada al profesor estadounidense Maxwell E. McCombs

"There is no better practice than good theory". Interview with US professor Maxwell E. McCombs

Recibido: 2 de noviembre de 2017

Aceptado: 11 de diciembre de 2017

Entrevistadora: Viviana Muñiz Zúñiga, Universidad de Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba. Profesora y Coordinadora de la Carrera de Periodismo de la Universidad de Oriente. Es doctorante en Ciencias de la Comunicación Social de la Facultad de Comunicación de la Universidad de La Habana. Correo electrónico: vivita@uo.edu.cu.

Entrevistado: Profesor, investigador y periodista norteamericano Maxwell McCombs

Presentación

Maxwell McCombs se inició en el periodismo como reportero del *New Orleans Times* (1961-63) y se graduó como Doctor en la Stanford University (1966). Comenzó su labor docente en las universidades de Los Ángeles (1965-66) y Carolina del Norte (1967-73), pasando con posterioridad a la de Syracuse (1973-85). Fue director del News Research Center de la American Newspaper Publishers Association (1975-84). En 1985 se incorporó al Departamento de Periodismo de la Universidad de Texas en Austin, donde continúa su actividad docente. Es presidente de la World Association for Public Opinion Research.

Con Donald Shaw comenzó la publicación de sus primeros trabajos sobre la teoría de la agenda setting ("The Agenda-Setting Functions of the Mass Media", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 36, 1972), que fue

INVITADO

desarrollado en el libro *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda Setting Function of the Press* (1977).

Asimismo, es autor de los libros *Handbook of Reporting Methods* (con Donald Shaw y David Grey), Boston, 1976; *Television and Human Behavior* (con George Comstock y otros), Nueva York, 1978; *Using Mass Communication Theory* (con Lee Becker), Englewood Cliffs, 1979; *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images, Interes* (con David Weaver y otros), Nueva York, 1981; *Advanced Reporting: Beyond News Event* (con Donald Shaw y Gerry Keir), Nueva York, 1986; *Press Concentration and Monopoly: New Perspectives on Newspaper Ownership and Operation* (con Robert Picard y otros), Norwood, NJ, 1988; *Agenda-Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion and Policymaking* (con David Protess), Hillsdale, NJ, 1991; *Contemporary Public Opinion: Issues and the News* (con Edna Einsiedel y David Weaver), Hillsdale, NJ, 1991; *Communication and Democracy: Exploring the Intellectual Frontiers in Agenda-Setting Theory* (con Donald Shaw y David Weaver, eds.), Mahwah, NJ, 1997.

McCombs es reconocido internacionalmente por su investigación sobre el papel de establecimiento de agenda de la comunicación de masas y la influencia de los medios de comunicación en el foco de atención pública. Entre los premios que ha recibido figuran: el Premio Helen Dinerman de la Asociación Mundial para la Investigación de la Opinión Pública (2011) por su trabajo continuo en esta área; y la Medalla de Plata conmemorativa de 20 años de enseñanza e investigación sobre la programación en el campus universitario de Pamplona (2014).

También ha recibido un doctorado honorario de la Universidad de Amberes, el Premio Paul J. Deutschmann a la Excelencia en Investigación de la Asociación para la Educación en Periodismo y Comunicación de Masas, y es co-receptor con Donald Shaw del Murray Edelman Award de la American Political Science Association. McCombs es un ex presidente de la Asociación Mundial para la Investigación de la Opinión Pública y miembro de la Asociación Internacional de Comunicación.

La segunda edición de su libro, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*, fue publicado en 2014 por Polity Press en

INVITADO

Cambridge, Inglaterra. La primera edición ha sido traducida al español, chino, coreano, portugués, polaco, sueco y checo.

McCombs es también coautor de *The News and Public Opinion: Efectos de los medios sobre la vida cívica* publicado por Polity Press en 2011. Sus coautores son Lance Holbert, Spiro Kiouis y Wayne Wanta. En el año 2015 McCombs y su alumna Lei Guo editaron *El poder de las redes de información*, publicado por Routledge.

La entrevista que se presenta a continuación se enfoca principalmente en tres aspectos fundamentales: la evolución teórica de la agenda setting y las posibilidades de expansión en el estudio de sus categorías, la adaptación metodológica y de los postulados fundamentales de la agenda setting, y la contextualización de ambos elementos en el ámbito latinoamericano.

Presentation

Maxwell McCombs began in journalism as a reporter for the *New Orleans Times* (1961-63) and graduated as a Doctor at Stanford University (1966). He began his teaching at the universities of Los Angeles (1965-66) and North Carolina (1967-73), after that of Syracuse (1973-85). He was director of the News Research Center of the American Newspaper Publishers Association (1975-84). In 1985 he joined the Department of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, where he continues his teaching. He is president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research.

With Donald Shaw, he began publishing his early work on the agenda setting theory ("The Agenda-Setting Functions of the Mass Media", Vol. 36, 1972), which was developed in *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda Setting Function of the Press* (1977).

He is also the author of *Handbook of Reporting Methods* (with Donald Shaw and David Gray), Boston, 1976; *Television and Human Behavior* (with George Comstock et al.), New York, 1978; *Using Mass Communication Theory* (with Lee Becker), Englewood Cliffs, 1979; *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images, Interests* (with David Weaver and others), New York, 1981; *Advanced Reporting: Beyond News Event* (with Donald Shaw and Gerry Keir), New York, 1986; *Press Concentration and Monopoly*: New

INVITADO

Perspectives on Newspaper Ownership and Operation (with Robert Picard et al.), Norwood, NJ, 1988; Agenda-Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion and Policymaking (with David Protess), Hillsdale, NJ, 1991; Contemporary Public Opinion: Issues and the News (with Edna Einsiedel and David Weaver), Hillsdale, NJ, 1991; Communication and Democracy: Exploring the Intellectual Frontiers in Agenda-Setting Theory (with Donald Shaw and David Weaver, eds.), Mahwah, NJ, 1997.

McCombs is internationally recognized for his research on the role of agenda setting in mass communication and the influence of the media in the public spotlight. Among the awards she has received are the Helen Dinerman Award from the World Association for the Research of Public Opinion (2011) for her continuing work in this area; and the Silver Medal commemorating 20 years of teaching and research on programming at the university campus of Pamplona (2014).

He has also received an honorary doctorate from the University of Antwerp, the Paul J. Deutschmann Award for Research Excellence from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and is co-recipient with Donald Shaw of the Murray Edelman Award American Political Science Association. McCombs is a former president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research and a member of the International Communication Association.

The second edition of his book, Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion, was published in 2014 by Polity Press in Cambridge, England. The first edition has been translated into Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Portuguese, Polish, Swedish and Czech.

McCombs is also co-author of The News and Public Opinion: Media Effects on Civic Life published by Polity Press in 2011. His co-authors are Lance Holbert, Spiro Kiousis and Wayne Wanta. In the year 2015 McCombs and his pupil Lei Guo edited The Power of Information Networks, published by Routledge.

The following interview focuses mainly on three fundamental aspects: the theoretical evolution of the agenda setting and the possibilities of expansion in the study of its categories, the methodological adaptation and the fundamental postulates of the agenda setting, and the contextualisation Of both elements in the Latin American sphere.

.....

INVITADO

In the essay published by Donald Shaw, David Weaver and you in 2014, was explained that the theory has been expanded in two trends: a centrifuge and centripetal, which have contributed to the agenda setting to acquire a large number of empirical studies demonstrating the thematic information transfer. In what sense do these trends contribute to the theoretical development of the agenda setting? To what extent the deepening in certain areas could be a bias for the analysis?

The expansion of agenda-setting research into new settings creates numerous opportunities for theoretical growth and expansion. As scholars examine expanded explications of existing concepts, such as the concepts of need for orientation or compelling arguments (examples of the centripetal trend), or fit agenda setting theory to entirely new domains beyond its traditional focus on public affairs (the centrifugal trend), the novelty of these new settings is highly likely to generate new theoretical insights.

Two projects currently in their early stages here at the University of Texas at Austin illustrate these possibilities. The “centripetal” project is exploring the affective dimension of compelling arguments. The “centrifugal” project is exploring the use of centrality measures in network agenda setting to define a new perspective on intermedia agenda setting.

Agenda-setting theory also has continued to evolve over the years because it has incorporated or converged with a number of other concepts and theories (McCombs, 2014, Chapter 3). All three of these trends will guide scholars into new research arenas with great potential, and as these scholars exercise their creativity it is highly likely that unpredictable, but exciting, new contributions will emerge. It is, of course, impossible to predict in advance exactly what new concepts and trends this scholarly work will define, but the appearance of new theoretical and empirical perspectives can confidently be predicted.

Many authors in the last 5 years have wondering how the theory of agenda setting will survive with the digitization of the media and the growing gap between the media and public

INVITADO

taking into account the increasing content available to people. This has been answered in other studies that demonstrate that the theory is able to adapt methodologically to those changes. However, perhaps academics should think what elements could the agenda setting theory contribute to the analysis of the media-public relationship in scenarios such as Latin America, where the relationship between the two has different characteristics?

In thinking about this question it is important to keep in mind the central concept of agenda-setting theory, the transfer of salience from one agenda to another. This transfer of salience has been demonstrated at the first, second and third levels of agenda setting across a wide variety of social, cultural and political settings. Beyond its origins in the United States, this basic concept has been replicated in Europe, particularly in Spain, Germany, Sweden and Poland; across East Asia in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan; also elsewhere in Asia – India, Israel and Turkey. In Latin America there has been extensive agenda setting research in Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Argentina and Brazil. [NOTE: Doesn't Cuba belong in this list?] The initial translation of Setting the Agenda was in Spanish. A recent translation was in Portuguese.

The general conclusion regarding the appearance of agenda setting effects in a society is that strong effects will be found where there are open elections and a press free from political constraints. Beyond this general conclusion your question raises the possibility of identifying other social, cultural or political characteristics that enhance or diminish the likelihood of agenda setting effects, characteristics analogous to the elements identified by the concepts of compelling arguments or need for orientation. This is an intriguing theoretical frontier to explore.

The theoretical evolution of the agenda setting has led for almost 50 years to the factual demonstration of the relationship between media and public from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, mainly at a theoretical level. How could the results of the agenda setting research contribute to the transformation of social reality in the media-public relation?

INVITADO

In his classic book *Public Opinion* Walter Lippmann described the central role of the news media as the bridge between the “world outside and the pictures in our heads.” Agenda setting is a detailed theoretical and empirical explication of this observation. Most importantly it defines the criteria for a socially responsible press and a well-informed public.

For the press, agenda setting reveals a paramount ethical question: Is the news agenda actually composed of the most important information of the day, information that is relevant to the daily lives of citizens? Across the world much of the press agenda is filled with entertaining items or rote political ideology. In other words, much of the agenda is filled with items that have little long-term practical value for the public. As journalists and members of the public assess the daily press agenda, they should ask this question: If I never knew about this item, would my life be impoverished in any way?

Beyond these broad ethical questions, agenda setting also defines the specific elements in the news that should be critiqued by journalists and members of the public. This includes the three types of elements that define issue agendas and other types of agendas. At the first level of agenda setting, the question is about which issues, topics or other objects is attention directed. At the second level, attribute agenda setting, what are the attributes of these objects that are emphasized? Are important attributes downplayed or missing? At the third level, network agenda setting, how comprehensive and how relevant is the daily gestalt of news presented to the public?

Beyond these basic three levels of the agenda setting process, additional elements to consider in the news of the day are defined by the concept of need for orientation –when do people find it useful and relevant to pay close attention to the press agenda– and by the concept of compelling arguments –which attributes in news reports about issues or other topics– are especially relevant to the public in fostering attention to these news reports.

In short, the development of agenda setting theory over nearly 50 years now provides a useful set of guideline for assessing the news and improving the quality of the news and the quality of social reality. As Wilbur Schramm was fond of saying: “There is nothing so practical as a good theory”.

INVITADO

The current Cuban context has demanded an adaptation of the agenda setting theory from its three fundamental constituent elements: the statistical correlation between agendas, contingent conditions and the construction of the media agenda. This demonstrates the openness of the theory and the possibility of an interdisciplinary dialogue for the study of other media contexts. How could the agenda setting deepen the relationship between the agendas studied from their link with other social and technical sciences?

As I noted in my response to Question 1, exploration of agenda setting effects in new settings creates opportunities for the theoretical expansion of agenda setting. As scholars fit the existing version of agenda setting theory to new geographic, social, cultural and political settings, it is highly likely that these efforts will generate new theoretical aspects of agenda setting. Conducting research in well explored areas is relatively easy. Carrying out research in unfamiliar terrain requires greater thought and creativity. And one result of this greater attention to the fit between agenda setting theory and new research settings also is highly likely to link agenda setting with other fields of study. In my response to Question 1, I outlined three trends in current agenda setting research. There is no question in my mind that these trends will continue. And agenda setting research in Cuba is a wonderful opportunity to make significant contributions to these trends.

Many researchers argue that the agenda setting has traveled through five stages in which findings are defined as the first level, contingent conditions, the second level, the agenda building and the so-called fifth phase that includes studies on the network agenda setting model. Do you think that the agenda setting is going through a new stage of studies with the results on digital media, or is it an expansion in the fifth phase?

As agenda-setting theory has expanded from the Chapel Hill study into a major theory of communication with many facets, the primary focus has been on newspapers and television. In Kim, Kim and Zhou's (1971) meta-analysis of 512 published agenda setting studies from 1972 to 2015, two thirds of the studies examined agenda-setting by

INVITADO

newspapers (43.1%) and TV (24.8%). That emphasis has declined somewhat in recent years due to advent of digital media, but newspapers and TV still dominate the research.

The appearance of digital media has not introduced a new theoretical aspect of agenda setting, but rather has broadened the array of communication channels that can be studied from any of the theoretical perspectives that constitute agenda-setting theory. For example, Vargo et al. (2014) conducted a network analysis of issues on Twitter during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. In the book introducing network agenda, *The Power of Information Networks* (Guo & McCombs, 2016) the studies presented there cover a wide variety of networks from both traditional media and social media and are grounded in the analysis of issues and other objects as well as attributes. Examples include issue networks on blogs (Meraz, 2016), issue attribute networks in the New York Times and among the public (Saldana & Ardevol, 2016), issue attribute networks on NGO websites and blogs, an international array of newspapers, and public comments on Facebook (Etter & Vestergaard, 2017).

In short, the rise of digital media does not mark a new aspect of agenda-setting theory, but rather introduces a rich array of new settings for research. In combination with the recent introduction of network agenda setting, the research opportunities are exciting.

Being one of the founders of the agenda setting theory, how would you synthesize the development of your conception in retrospect?

Agenda setting began as a tightly focused 'effects' study in Chapel Hill during the 1968 US presidential election to examine Walter Lippmann's thesis in *Public Opinion* that the news media are the bridge between "the world outside and the pictures in our heads." However, agenda setting rapidly expanded beyond this point. In the second investigation by McCombs and Shaw –a large scale panel study during the following presidential election in 1972– the concept of need for orientation was introduced, which established a psychological basis for agenda setting effects – and the concept of attribute agenda setting was introduced theoretically.

INVITADO

At present, agenda setting theory has six facets – first-level agenda setting built on the Chapel Hill results; attribute agenda setting, the second level; network agenda setting, the third level; a variety of concepts and findings documenting the psychology of agenda setting; a variety of concepts and findings regarding the sources of the media agenda; and a variety of concepts and findings regarding the consequences of agenda-setting effects for attitudes and opinions and behavior. This expansion over the half century since Chapel Hill is a rich case study of the scientific method as dozens of scholars around the world explored new aspects of agenda setting and refined existing aspects of the theory. This case study is ongoing.

This productive explication of Lippmann's thesis was not evident when the Chapel Hill study was published. Nor is it possible to precisely predict where agenda setting theory will continue to expand. However, given its expansion in recent decades far beyond its original domain in public affairs to areas as diverse as corporate reputations, religion, and sports, I feel confident that the coming decades will see a continuing growth in the research literature, and almost certainly this growth will spawn new concepts. To end with a quote from my favorite fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes: Come, Watson, the game is afoot!