

Notes for Alice's Christian's presentation, October 10, 2005

"News That Matters" by Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder (Theodoulou and Cahn, *Public Policy: The Essential Readings*, 1987. pp. 295-305)

Authors show that TV news has become a regular participant in the American political process by virtue of being the number one source of information by most Americans.

The authors present the results of their studies on TV news and they assess the implications of the results of their studies for a democratic society.

AGENDA-SETTING AND PRIMING

Agenda-setting: Defining what is viewed as a problem, what is safe to ignore, what problems receive attention, and how problems are dealt with (solutions).

"People shown network broadcasts edited to draw attention to a particular problem assigned greater importance to that problem" (p. 296) As a whole they:

- Felt it was more important for the country
- Cared more about it
- Believed that our government should do more about it
- Reported stronger feelings about it
- Were much more likely to identify it as one of the country's most important problems

The authors found essentially the same result using different methodologies, reinforcing the conclusion that TV news shape the relative importance that Americans attach to various national problems.

Enhancing effects for Agenda-Setting

More "vivid," personal accounts do not necessarily enhance the effect, especially if viewers "blame the victim."

The position of the story in a broadcast did affect agenda setting. Lead stories exert "much more profound" effect than non-lead stories.

Personal experience enhances the effect. When people see a problem that personally affects them, they tend to consider that a problem for the nation as well, for example blacks tended to think civil rights of high importance, senior threats to Social Security.

Priming: Drawing attention to some aspects of political life at the expense of others. In other words, priming is when a viewer is more predisposed to frame the news in terms of a primary issue.

For example, if citizens are primed to believe that inflation is important, they will judge the president based on what he does to control prices.

The authors found that priming is indeed both powerful and pervasive and emerges in a number of tests for arms control, civil rights, defense, inflation, unemployment and energy.

Findings also showed that priming was more effective in opinions of overall presidential performance than in presidential character. They went on to draw distinctions between priming in competence versus integrity.

Further, when coverage implied that the president was responsible for causing a problem or solving it, the priming effect increased. Conversely, when coverage implied that forces other than the president were responsible, the priming effect decreased.

Experiments also showed that local news emphasizing issues primed viewers to use those issues when voting for local candidates, while news emphasizing personal traits primed viewers to use those traits when voting. On a presidential level, for example, priming that emphasized the Iranian hostage crisis encouraged viewers to vote based on Carter's handling of foreign policy.

MINIMAL EFFECTS REVISITED

"Minimal effects" verdict reached by most empirical research in the past holds that propaganda does not change people's opinions. In other words, indoctrination is very difficult to achieve.

Outright persuasion is only effective when:

1. Large numbers of voters remain uncommitted in last days of campaign
2. Late breaking political events attract media attention focused on a single issue
3. Political developments clearly favor one candidate.

However agenda-setting and priming are ubiquitous, because they do not set out to change Democrats into Republicans or vice-versa, but to influence what policies get made into priorities.

Limits to the Power of TV news

1. Agenda setting effects are confined to the specific issue; e.g. energy stories affect energy policy. "Americans are unlikely to be swept away by any coherent vision of the country's problems." (p. 300)

2. Americans who are deeply engaged and have other news sources are less affected by TV news, thus agenda setting and priming.

3. Americans have to see the problems as plausible to be of national interest. Media can not create problems “out of thin air.”

CONCLUSIONS

“News reorders the importance viewers attach to various *plausible* standards of political evaluation: our experiments were not designed to test whether network news could induce viewers to apply trivial or irrelevant standards of evaluation to presidents or presidential candidates.” (p. 301)

TV news shapes priorities that Americans attach to various national problems and the standards they apply to the performance of their government and the qualifications of their leaders. (p. 301)

TV news is powerful in that as we “muddle through” our political understanding, what we see on TV tends to be what we remember about problems.

POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS

TV news affects American political process in at least three ways:

1. The government’s agenda – determining what problems the government must address.

Due to the structure of our representative democracy, the public’s agenda-setting power filters up slowly into the decision-making bodies. Thus TV news does have a significant role in process of policy making.

2. Presidential power – facilitating or undermining an incumbent president’s capacity to govern.

Public approval affects the president’s ability to govern. Presidents thus seek to control TV news with media opportunities, press conferences and the like.

3. The Electoral process – intruding upon campaigns and elections

TV news can shift the grounds of campaigns by agenda-setting and priming.

Last thought:

The question to ponder is how faithfully TV news depicts what is actually important and is actually happening in the world.