

## **A Simultaneous Testing of the Role of Media Message Attributes and Personal Experience in Agenda-Setting and Attitudinal Effects**

Dr. Gennadiy Chernov  
School of Journalism  
University of Regina

### **Abstract**

The current experimental study simultaneously tested whether personal experience and the level of message specificity lead to agenda-setting and attitudinal effects.

The results demonstrated that the overall perceived importance of issues and attitude favorability increased after participants read the newspaper stories about selected issues of gas and oil prices and international trade with China. In addition, those who did not have personal experience with an issue described in a story with general attributes showed significant attitude change.

The initial research in agenda setting started in 1972 (McCombs & Shaw). More than 400 empirical and theoretical investigations worldwide explored different aspects of agenda setting (McCombs, 2004). The concept proved to have a heuristic value and an explanatory power in journalism and communication, political communication and political science. It became a catch phrase in the media themselves. Most of the agenda-setting studies contended that the news media's main function is to inform the audience about issues important for society. Agenda setting states that the amount of information about an issue indicates what media find and subsequently, the public perceives as

important. Thus, the key agenda-setting variable was operationalized as the perceived importance of issues.

Despite the fact that agenda setting successfully demonstrated how the media shape the audience's mental picture of the world, there is no universal agreement about the mechanism of such effects. Some researchers contend that the nature of the issues can determine how strong such effects will be, but they confuse at times personal experience with an issue and personal involvement with it (Lee, 2004). Many studies also state that specific attributes of media messages contribute to agenda-setting effects, but there is no consent on the typology of these attributes. Agenda setting process not only makes people accept the media view of what is important from the media; people also form, hold and change their opinions and attitudes about issues covered by the media. Agenda-setting researchers have not systematically studied the latter process. A few recent studies have just begun to look at whether attitudes are also affected in the process of agenda setting (Ghanem, McCombs & Chernov, 2009). These problems hamper further progress in agenda setting and they require theoretical and empirical resolution.

This study clarifies and tests the roles that direct experience with an issue and specific message attributes play in agenda-setting and attitudinal effects. It is important theoretically, because despite the evident success and high status of agenda setting in media effects research, this theory did not give a clear picture of what impact media have on people's attitudes and behaviors beyond saying to the audience what is important. This study is also important in practical terms, as its results might help show the mechanisms that the media might apply for achieving a positive social shift in attitudes and behaviors.

## Literature review

### *Nature of issues covered by the media*

One of the key concepts in agenda-setting theory is obtrusiveness (Zucker, 1978), empirically supported by a number of studies (Lee, 2004, Wanta, 1997, etc.). Winter (1981) defined obtrusiveness as the amount of personal experience people have with issues. The underlying idea is that the media have limited power to form and shape the views of the audience, if people know from their direct experience the issues (called obtrusive issues) and events described by the media. Demers, Craff, Choi, and Pessin (1989) suggested that obtrusiveness must be considered as a continuum falling between “inflation (obtrusive issue) and international problems (unobtrusive issue)” (p.798).

Zucker (1978) claimed that agenda setting takes place mostly with unobtrusive issues. However, some studies demonstrated that obtrusive issues had strong agenda setting effects on the public (Demers, Craff, Choi, & Pessin, 1989; Wanta, 1997). The latter scholars included personal involvement with an issue (and at times with media) in the term obtrusiveness. Lumping two terms together makes obtrusiveness ambiguous. In this study, obtrusiveness is understood only as personal experience with an issue. Personal issue involvement is a distinct concept that has a broad application in mass communication and social psychology.

### *Agenda setting of attributes.*

In the middle of the 1990s, agenda-setting scholars established that particular attributes of the issues have considerable agenda-setting effects. Media select certain specific characteristics pertaining to the objects or people covered inside more general issues heightening their salience for the public (Ghanem & McCombs, 2001).

Despite general agreement on the role of message attributes in the agenda-setting process, researchers classify them differently, creating confusion about what particular attributes play this role. McCombs (2004) distinguishes between substantive (more factual) and affective (related to feelings about an issue) attributes. Iyengar and Simon (1993) proposes a distinction between episodic (more specific) and thematic (containing more general information) attributes. The concept of episodic attributes overlaps with the concept of vividness employed in cognitive psychology (Hill, Blodgett, Baer & Wakefield, 2004).

Agenda setting is defined as a cognitive theory of media effects. Adding affective attributes (dealing with positive, neutral and negative tone of a message) makes sense in testing the agenda-setting impact on attitudes, but this addition overlaps with concepts in the attitude change tradition, so the role of affective attributes deserves a separate study.

For the purposes of the current study only cognitive attributes of messages relying on neutral information will be considered as the ones reflecting specificity and generality characteristics of messages. Ghanem (1997) demonstrated that specific attributes of the messages that allow for connecting audience members to events described in the news heighten the perceived importance of the story.

*Agenda setting, priming and attitude change.*

Priming is considered to be the key mechanism underlying the agenda-setting process (McCombs, 2004). Priming is "...making certain issues or attributes more salient and more likely to be accessed in forming opinions" (Weaver, 2007). Recent developments in investigating the link between agenda setting and attitude change indicate that priming triggered by agenda setting might set standards for attitude change,

especially on the level of attribute agenda setting (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002; Kim & McCombs, 2007; Miller, 2007). What is lacking in these suggestions is testing whether such key agenda-setting variables as personal experience with an issue and a level of specificity of message attributes are implicated both in agenda-setting and attitudinal effects. McCombs (2004) pointed out that when an issue is not experienced directly, people form opinions about it on the basis of media accounts. Watt, Mazza & Snyder (1993) indicated that experience with an issue might prime existing attitudes that could hamper attitude change. Some studies pointed out that media messages containing non-interpretive, factual information might lead to attitude change due to the nature of the information contained in such messages (Carrol & McCombs, 2003; Ogawa, 2001).

A review of the literature shows that there exists inconclusive evidence and untested suppositions that personal experience with an issue and the character of media message attributes might lead to simultaneous agenda-setting and attitudinal effects through the process of priming. Thus, more systematic testing and analysis are needed to address these problems.

### **Research hypotheses**

The proposed theoretical model used in this study states that a level of specificity of media messages and personal experience with an issue covered by the media heighten the issue's perceived importance for the audience and simultaneously leads to attitude change. Testing this model requires the following hypotheses:

H1a: The perceived importance of an issue increases after people read a story about it.

H1b: People's attitudes towards an issue become more favorable after they read about it.

These hypotheses deal with overall agenda-setting and attitudinal effects.

H2a: Issues covered by the media with which people have no or little direct experience are perceived to be more important than issues covered with which people have direct experience.

H2b: Issues covered by the media with which people have no or little direct experience will lead to a greater attitude change than issues with which people have direct experience.

These hypotheses specify the role of personal experience with an issue.

H3a: News stories with specific attributes will be perceived to be more important than news stories with general attributes.

H3b: News stories with specific attributes will lead to a greater attitude change than news stories with general attributes.

These hypotheses specify the role of a level of specificity of media messages on agenda-setting and attitudinal effects.

H4a: News stories with specific attributes covering issues with which people have no or little direct experience lead to stronger agenda-setting effects than any other types of messages employed in the study.

H4b: News stories with specific attributes covering issues with which people have no or little direct experience lead to stronger attitudinal effects than any other types of messages employed in the study.

These hypotheses test a combined effect of the role of a level of specificity of media messages and personal experience with an issue messages on agenda-setting and attitudinal effects.

## Method

### *Experimental design and procedure*

The experimental method employed in the current study continues a strong tradition in agenda-setting research. It is used because of its ability to test the constructs, comprising an underlying theoretical model as well as causality of hypothesized effects.

Previous studies linking agenda setting and attitudes suggest that to achieve the level of statistical power = .8 at alpha = .05, each treatment group has to have  $n=60$ .

Previous experimental studies (Lee, 2005, Kiouisis, Philemon, & Hyun, 1999) contained useful procedures, some of which are similar to the ones planned in the current study, but none of them simultaneously tested the proposed model.

The validity of the measures and treatments was pretested in the pilot study. An experiment with a pre-test/post-test design was employed.

Participants were divided randomly into four groups. Group I read a story with general attributes about Canada-China trade relations (unobtrusive issue); Group II read a story with general attributes about global oil prices (obtrusive issue); Group III read a story with specific attributes about the surge in gas prices in Saskatoon (obtrusive issue), and Group IV read an episodic story with personal testimonies of Chinese workers in a global economy (unobtrusive issue). Attitude favorability and the order of perceived importance of the problems were measured before and after the treatment to trace the change in the variables evoked by the treatment. The questionnaires measuring dependent variables also were filled out before and after administering the treatment.

The design allows for testing the main hypotheses of the study because it simultaneously tests the effect of key treatment variables, personal experience and the level of specificity of an issue.

Figure 2. Design of the study

	General attributes	Specific attributes
Obtrusive issue (more personal experience)	1	2
Unobtrusive issue (no or little personal experience)	3	4

### *Participants.*

Two hundred sixty students were recruited through an invitation to Faculty of Arts students from large undergraduate classes at the University of Regina. The students were randomly assigned to four types of conditions – (a) obtrusive messages with general attributes, (b) obtrusive messages with specific attributes, (c) unobtrusive messages with general attributes, and (d) unobtrusive messages with specific attributes.<sup>1</sup> Each group comprised about sixty-five students. All groups got questionnaires as a pre-test,

<sup>1</sup> The first two groups read a story about the current growth of the economy in China (unobtrusive issue); the story for one group presented a general overview of China's economic growth, the story for the second group described the success of a certain family business in China. Groups three and four read stories about the surge in gas prices in Saskatchewan; the third group's story contained a general overview of the petrol market, and the fourth group's story contained the budget strains for a particular family as the result of the gas price surge.

measuring issue importance and attitudes toward the issues that will be covered in the treatment articles.

### *Stimuli*

The treatment materials consisted of four news stories introduced as recent publications in the print media. The news stories were prepared on the basis of real news reports and disguised as actual stories from the Leader Post of Regina, the main print outlet for general public in the city. The logo, datelines, and a copyright sign for this newspaper were added to look more like an authentic newspaper article. The format of the articles was designed with fonts and column appearance similar to the ones employed by the Leader-Post. The articles have been written with language and locations appropriate for the local Saskatchewan newspaper.

All four reframed stories were pre-tested with a small group of journalism students at the University of Regina. Most of the students correctly identified what was at issue in the articles.

## **Measures**

### *Independent variables*

Obtrusiveness, operationalized as personal experience with an issue, was deduced from the previous research. The scholars considered an international policy issue as unobtrusive, and the cost of living as obtrusive (Demers, Craff, Choi, & Pessin, 1989; Zucker, 1978). The current study also defines the issue of international trade (trade with China, in this case) as unobtrusive, and the price of gas and oil as an obtrusive issue.

A special manipulation check was designed to make sure that the participants have direct experience with gas prices and do not have personal experience with an unobtrusive issue of international trade.

In operationalizing the issue attributes, the current study follows the distinction between the attributes as “general” and “specific” attributes, close to the one offered by Iyengar and Simon (1993). The messages with general attributes were presented as the basic facts about Canada-China trade relations (unobtrusive issue) and arguments about its strength in the first story, and as the facts and reasons about the growing oil prices (obtrusive issue) in the second one. The messages with specific attributes highlighting the aspects of the issues were presented as a depiction of personal testimonies about the impact of global trade on the fate of Chinese workers (for unobtrusive issue, story 3), and personal accounts about surge of gas prices in the city of Saskatoon, which neighbors Regina (for obtrusive issue, story 4).

#### *Dependent variables*

The key measure of agenda setting effects is the perceived importance of issues. Change in perceived importance of issues for both obtrusive and unobtrusive ones is measured by the following questions in this study: “1) Please name the most important issues facing the country, ranking them in order of importance from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important): 2) Please choose the five most important issues facing the country from the list below and rank them in order of importance from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important): unemployment, economy, international trade, war in Afghanistan, foreign policy, environment, national security, education, cost of living, crime.”

Such an operationalization is consistent with most of the agenda-setting studies (see for a review McCombs, 2004) and has a long history.

The dependent variable of attitude change toward the issue covered by a story was measured by the questions about attitude favorability constructed on the basis of Likert-scale technique.<sup>2</sup> The attitude measurement is amplified through adapting two additional items from Richardson's (2005) attitude measurement scale.<sup>3</sup>

To make a possible direction of attitudes uniform, the questions were crafted as favorable or unfavorable attitudes towards events or actions leading to solutions for issues described in the articles.

The questionnaires measuring dependent variables were filled out before and after reading the treatment stories.

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<sup>2</sup> For the obtrusive issue: "Some people say that it is time now to tap the oil deposits in the Canada Arctic zone. Which statement reflects best your opinion (circle one): a) very favorable toward this idea, b) somewhat favorable toward this idea, c) not sure about this idea, d) somewhat unfavorable toward this idea, e) very unfavorable toward this idea."

For the unobtrusive issue: "Experts predict that trade between Canada and China will expand over the next decade. Which statement reflects best your opinion (circle one): a) very favorable toward this idea, b) somewhat favorable toward this idea, c) not sure about this idea d) somewhat unfavorable toward this idea, e) very unfavorable toward this idea."

<sup>3</sup> For an unobtrusive issue, the first opinion measure is "I believe that Canadian Parliament must support legislation increasing free trade with China: a) strongly agree, b) agree, c) unsure, d) disagree, e) strongly disagree." For an obtrusive issue, the opinion measure is "I believe that Canadian Parliament must support legislation limiting the ability of gas suppliers to raise gas prices: a) strongly agree, b) agree, c) unsure, d) disagree, e) strongly disagree." For an unobtrusive issue, the second opinion measure is "It is reasonable for Saskatchewan media to give special consideration for a deeper coverage of international trade benefits: a) strongly agree, b) agree, c) unsure, d) disagree, e) strongly disagree". For an obtrusive issue, the opinion measure is "It is reasonable for Saskatchewan media to give special consideration for a deeper coverage of the reasons and solutions for high gas prices: a) strongly agree, b) agree, c) unsure, d) disagree, e) strongly disagree."

## Results

*Hypotheses predicting the effects of treatment variables, obtrusiveness and specificity attribute, on issue perceived importance.*

*Agenda-setting effects.* Capturing the agenda-setting effects of reading newspaper articles is a prerequisite for further investigation of the role of specificity and personal experience in agenda-setting mechanism. The test of agenda -setting effects is expected to lead to an increase of the perceived importance of an issue as the result of experimental manipulation.

The hypothesis that the perceived importance of an issue increases after people read a story about it was supported. The difference between the pretest measures of perceived importance and its posttest measures is significant ( $F(1,237) = 121.76, p > .001$ ).

As shown in Table 1-1, the subjects perceived the issues as more important after reading the stories than before reading these stories in all four conditions.

**Table 1-1. Descriptive statistics of change in the perceived importance of issues as the result of reading stories**

IV	Level	N	Issue importance			
			pretest Mean	S.D	posttest Mean	S.D.
Personal Experience	general	59	1.44	2.23	3.17	3.035
High	specific	61	1.21	2.153	3.31	3.047
Total :		120	1.33	2.185	3.24	3.029
Personal Experience	general	61	.80	1.59	2.74	3.04
Low	specific	57	1.04	1.88	2.40	2.89
Total:		118	.92	1.732	2.58	2.96

The hypothesis that issues covered by the media with which people have no or little direct experience are perceived to be more important than issues with which people have direct experience was not confirmed, but the results were close to significance ( $F=3.50$ ,  $p=.063$ ). Those who had less experience with an issue ranked it more important after reading the story than those who had more experience.

The results for the hypothesis that news stories with specific attributes will be perceived to be more important than news stories with general attributes giving abstract information are as follows:

Contrary to the expectations that attributes of the messages with greater specificity will increase the perceived importance of issues, the results do not reveal any reliable effects for specificity. There is no significant difference between subjects for attribute specificity such that subjects who read the stories with specific attributes and specific details about an issue did not find that issue more important after reading the story than those subjects who read the story with thematic attributes and a more general description of an issue ( $F=.027$ ,  $p=.87$ ).

The hypothesis that news stories with specific attributes covering issues with which people have no or little direct experience lead to stronger agenda-setting effects was not supported. The current results indicate that no matter what level of personal experience with an issue was coupled with either specific or general description of this issue, subjects did not assign different level of issue perceived importance after reading these stories (Table 1.2).

**Table 1-2. ANOVA on the main effects and an interaction between obtrusiveness and attribute specificity**

Agenda-setting variables	Sum of squares	d.f	F-test
Intercept	1929.78	1	121.76
Personal experience	34.52	1	2.096
Attribute specificity	.26	1	.027
Experience*specificity Interaction	.002	1	.000
Error	2307.21	234	

*Hypotheses predicting the effects of treatment variables, obtrusiveness and specificity attribute, on attitude change.*

The key attitude change hypothesis was that participants' attitudes towards an issue become more favorable after they read a story about it.

The results indicate that subjects have significantly more favorable attitudes towards an issue described in the article after they read the story ( $F=68.94, p>.01$ ).

**Table 1-3. Descriptive statistics of change in attitude favorability as the result of reading stories**

IV	Level	N	attitude favorability			
			Pretest		posttest	
			Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D.
Personal Experience	general	59	21.28	4.56	21.93	4.44
High	specific	61	20.95	3.90	21.60	4.42
Total:		120	21.116	4.22	21.76	4.22
Personal Experience	general	61	20.98	3.60	23.11	4.18
Low	specific	57	20.45	3.64	21.33	3.78
Total:		118	20.72	3.62	22.25	4.08

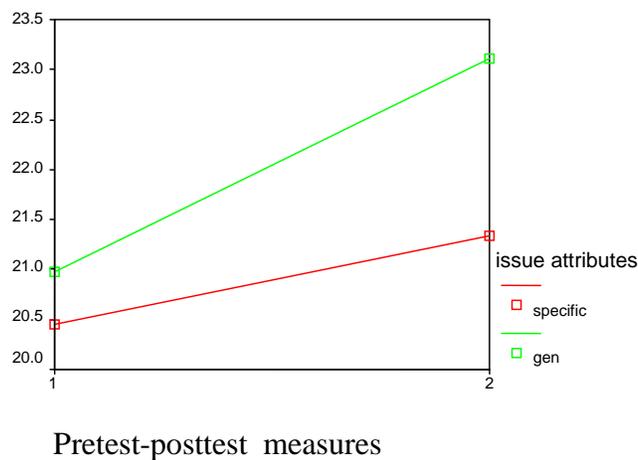
The hypothesis that issues covered by the media with which people have no or little direct experience will lead to greater attitude favorability than issues with which people have direct experience was confirmed. There is a statistically significant increase in attitude favorability towards the issues described in the articles after individuals with no or little experience with the topic read a story ( $F=10.84$ ,  $p=.01$ ).

The hypothesis that messages with specific attributes will lead to greater attitude favorability than with general attributes was not confirmed. The opposite turned out to be true: Attitude change occurred when individuals read more general and abstract stories about an issue ( $F=5.73$ ,  $p=.017$ ).

The results for the hypothesis that news stories with specific attributes covering issues with which people have no or little direct experience lead to stronger attitudinal effects than any other types of messages employed in the study indicate that more attitude

change occurs when individuals encounter a general story on an issue with which they have little or no experience than in any other condition ( $F=5.95$ ,  $p=.015$ ). In fact, a subsequent ANOVA analysis for groups in four different conditions demonstrated an attitudinal effect ( $F(3,234) = 7.99$ ,  $p>.01$ ), but it can be accounted for by the results for only this above-mentioned condition.

**Figure 1. Change in attitude favorability for issues with which individuals have little personal experience for groups reading stories with general and specific attributes**



## Discussion

*The role of personal experience with an issue and attribute specificity in the perceived importance of issues.*

Prior to testing a theoretical model of agenda –setting and attitudinal effects, the key theoretical concepts underlying manipulation variables, obtrusiveness (understood as personal experience) and message attributes. Previously, obtrusiveness was understood as a combination of individuals’ personal experience with an issue depicted in media messages and whether they felt involved with this issue, or whether they perceived an

issue important. The current study attempted to show that the only distinct and objective characteristic of obtrusiveness is personal experience with an issue, which was reflected in labelling the obtrusiveness concept “personal experience” for this particular study. The current also clarified the notion of message attributes, freeing in from an overlap with other concepts. A distinction based on a level of specificity was proposed.

*Agenda-setting effect.*

The key hypothesis suggests that the perceived importance of issues about which individuals read stories will be higher after reading than before reading. The hypothesis was confirmed. It is a universal effect detected by dozens of studies (McCombs, 2004) both for broadcast (Iyengar, 1987) and print (Aday, 2006).

Another hypothesis that a lack of personal experience with an issue leads to stronger agenda-setting effects did not get significant support. However, the results were close to significance and they were in the direction suggested by the hypothesis. This direction in line with previous findings that agenda-setting effects for individuals having personal experience with an issue might be explained by the fact that such issues are already high on the perceived importance scale. Gas prices, for example, is not only an issue experienced by most; it is also a highly sensitive issue. Personal experience and an actual price spike might already place the issue so high on the participants’ agenda that additional exposure to the issue from reading the story could not raise the issue’s importance any higher.

Before reading a story about international trade, most of the participants did not include it in the list of issues which they perceive as important. After reading, many

participants included this issue in their ranking, but still not too high on the scale. It can be argued that if the same participants would get more stories on the issue over a longer period of time (that is how agenda setting works in real life), they could rate international trade even higher.

It was also hypothesized that messages with more specific attributes will lead to greater agenda-setting effects than messages with more general attributes. This hypothesis was not supported by the data. This outcome contradicts Ghanem's (1997) results, who found that more specific messages have greater agenda-setting effects. The idea was that specific descriptions relate more to the individuals attending media messages. However, she studied an issue of crime, and it well may be that this link between specific descriptions and perceived importance of an issue becomes more pronounced for obtrusive issues such as crime.

#### *Attitudinal effects*

One of the key propositions of this study is that attitudinal effects of media messages may accompany agenda-setting ones.

The hypothesis that individuals' attitudes towards an issue become more favorable after they read a story about it was supported. The magnitude of effects was smaller than agenda-setting effects, but the results are significant and relatively strong. Previous research was moot on the relationship between issue agenda setting and attitude change. Although recent studies found a link between agenda setting and attitude change, they considered agenda setting only on the level of attributes. There were also speculations about possible indirect attitudinal effects of agenda setting, but this supposition was not tested.

The current study demonstrated that individuals had more favorable attitudes about issues they read in the stories. A possible explanation is that it happens because they gain new information or information changing their views on an issue. It seems to make sense that attitudinal effects are moderate compared with the strength of agenda-setting effects. A change in issue importance does not always translate into attitude change, and in fact, the data contained quite a few instances when individuals felt even less favorable to opinions offered in questionnaires regarding the issues depicted in the stories.

Another significant finding of this study shows what kind of message attributes can bring about attitude change. Contrary to the hypothesis that specific attributes of the stories will lead to a greater attitude change, it turned out that most attitudinal effects can be ascribed to one condition: after individuals read a general story about an issue with which they had little or no experience, they felt more favorable to the opinions about this issue expressed in questionnaires. Lack of personal experience with an issue (for example, international trade) might be instrumental for attitude change because the stories might add new information, about which individuals did not know or did not consider. A favorability increase could be informed by new information's leading to heightening importance of the issue. Most of the participants changed their attitudes from neutral to positive. It is more difficult to explain why individuals modified their attitudes for stories covering general aspects of an issue more than when covering specific aspects. The following account can be offered: when a story deals with general aspects of an issue, it can give a broader treatment of it with base rate information about the facts, history and current state of this issue. This breadth and context information might lead to individuals feeling that they have more knowledge and basis for judgment about an issue

than in the case of a story with specific aspects, which might make individuals feel that they got only fragmentary, incomplete information about an issue. Specific attributes of a story might not lead to attitude change if participants do not know much about an issue.

The study results are generally in line with recent developments in agenda-setting research in regards to attitudinal effects as a consequence of agenda-setting. The significance of the current study lies in capturing the agenda-setting and attitudinal effects happening simultaneously. Stronger agenda-setting effects might be a predictor of relatively stronger attitudinal effects as well. Priming was suggested as a mechanism for both types of effects. Ha (2003) maintained that priming is effective in changing evaluative standards for issues and attributes of media messages. "...focusing on media coverage of candidate attributes, which is assumed to have objective factual values rather than argumentative values, may be a more efficient way to detect significant media effects susceptibility." (p.147). Cognitive attributes of the media messages can be neutral in tone, but it does not mean that information contained in such messages will be evaluated as neutral. Each message attribute can contain information that either adds new beliefs to an individual's mental picture or modifies existing beliefs. As Miller (2007) demonstrated, the agenda-setting process is not only about the sheer amount of information, but it also about the content of the messages: the more attributes such a message has, the larger the possibility that some of these attributes will change the evaluative standards of these messages.

### **Limitations and implications for the future research**

The main limitation of this study is the fact that participants took part in only a one-time session. Although there is nothing new in such a design in agenda-setting research, it

is admitted that a single session treatment might not detect effects if they are subtle or the result of an accumulated impact of the media. Researchers use such designs because agenda-setting effects proved to be robust and easy to detect. However, de Vreese (2004) suggested that a two-wave experiment with immediate and delayed posttest measures could be used to trace lasting media effects. The current study is a significant contribution to studying the link between agenda setting and attitude change, but several experimental sessions over time may lead to more pronounced results in the future.

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