

# Business Communication: Strategies in the Emerging Papyrus Society

## Agenda Setting, Agenda Cutting and Audience Agendamelding in the New Century

### I. The Emerging Papyrus Society

I had an opportunity several years ago to visit the three towering pyramids at Giza, where the many stones at the base support the fewer stones at the top more than 400 feet up. Like other tourists, I marveled at ancient Egyptian engineering. What a view of the surrounding sands (and modern Cairo) there must be from the top! From the top, if Greek Demosthenes had stood there, transported in time and place, thousands might have heard his apparently-magnificent voice. Nearby, in Giza itself, shops still produce the ancient Egyptian papyrus paper by trimming the outside green covering of the triangular papyrus reed, then cutting and pressing the pulpy white strands inside the plant. Craftsmen lay one strip down, then one over and another down and so forth, like Scottish tartan plaid, to form sheets that can be connected, dried, then rolled onto something resembling the rolling pin in your kitchen, a scroll. Scrolls became books of the ancient world and the words written on these flat horizontal surfaces came to challenge the power of those who stood at the top of organizational pyramids.

Such is our argument. From papyrus to animal skin vellum to Johann Gutenberg's books to newspapers and magazines, to radio and television, to satellites, computers, the Web, and iPod, communication technology has demonstrated great power to level society, if not from the point of view of those who lead our necessary organizations but from the point of view of those being led. Even in China and North Korea, we find horizontal media communication nibbles at the foundations of power. We are discovering that as the era of mass media passes into history, the ability of leaders to shape and control the agenda is diminished, and often contested. We need public information strategies that fit the papyrus society emerging around us. Vertical and horizontal forces, as we shall see, have competed for centuries as the dominant public medium of a period portraying important public issues. So this is nothing new. But our challenges are.

This article is about the notion of national community and how it has changed, along with evolving media, with implications for strategic thinking about how to integrate ongoing public interest into all aspects of business operations. This encompasses more than current business public affairs programs, excellent as many of them are. More needs to be done.

This article attempts to deconstruct American national community in the new century as the press evolves, audiences express more personal interests, the military adapts to horizontal social forces from a vertically-based operational planning history. We are also as individuals blending the agendas of vertical and horizontal media into a kind of Scotch weave, like ancient papyrus paper, to create a more horizontal papyrus paper-like society, a challenging environment for the vertical organizations and institutions

Americans spend about six hours daily with various media – whether Web sites, television, or MP3 players – and these media are so ubiquitous that it is hard to believe that the age of mass media is passing into history. Mass media address the concerns of an entire community, such as a newspaper for a city or town, or network radio or television for a nation. Yet these mass media steadily have lost their audience for decades, local television less dramatically. There were nearly three thousand daily newspapers at the time of World War I; there are fewer than half of that today, and collective daily newspaper circulation is steadily declining despite a steady increase in national population. In the 1950s, the dominant networks some evenings reached more than eight of ten households in the national viewing audiences. Today the Super Bowl brings in about a third of that audience. When President Franklin Roosevelt spoke to a national audience from his White House fireside in 1933, he reached an attentive audience.

These media address the entire community from a vertical, top-down, entire-community perspective. We learn of events from the mainline journalists charged with the responsibility for being society's sentinels. However, we often deepen our knowledge by turning to those people and more personalized news sources such as magazines or trusted Web sites to provide a context for what 20th century journalist Walter Lippmann once called the "confusing buzz of events."<sup>1</sup>

These powerful media remain but they have been challenged. Magazines, Web sites, blogs, cable television, satellite radio are examples of media that fit our interests more directly, more horizontally, more 'where-we-are' media. These media have greatly expanded in the past four decades challenging and altering our attention to national and world issues. While newspapers and network television attempt to present facts with a balan-

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ce of details, cable and satellite radio outlets, talk shows, Web sites, blogs and other sources often swamp us with opinion about those facts from various perspectives. Facts without context are hard to evaluate and so we often reach far beyond the newspapers and broadcast news we use. Parents, friends, teachers and organizations help us form our opinions. Consider the people and institutions that contextualize events within your own life. When modern events stun the nation, such as the attack on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, the nation is very attentive to major news media – for a while – but many soon turn to their favorite magazines, Web sites, blogs, talk radio and television shows, or other media which contextualize events and frame news to fit within our often established views. The ability of professional journalists to provide a balanced context for events has been challenged in the United States and elsewhere in the world, even in totalitarian states. For many, the 18th century Cotton Mather has been replaced by radio hosts Rush Limbaugh or Stephanie Miller.

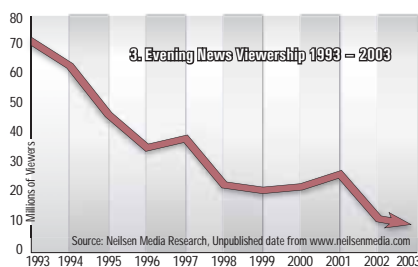
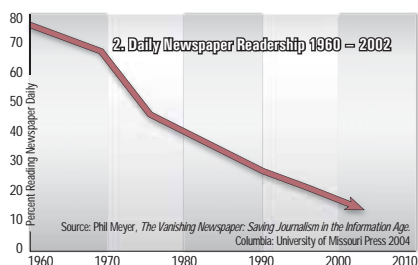
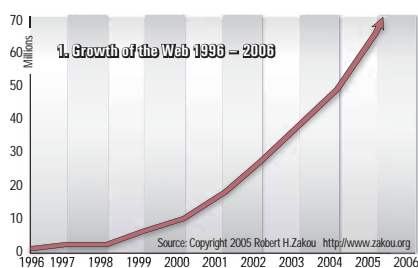
It is not hard to see why people seek to nest knowledge of public events within their own perspectives. After all we have an **Army Times**, a **Navy Times**, a **Marine Corps Times**, and an **Air Force Times**. No doubt all present news about major events, but the details are shaped to fit the interests of their particular audiences. Editors who assemble **Cosmopolitan** or **Seventeen** sometimes cover the same major events, but from a presumed perspective of older or younger women, and the same is true of **Sports Illustrated**, **Fortune**, or any other magazine. Even **Time**, **Newsweek**, and **U.S. News and World Report** seem aimed at an educated middle class interested in political news. Most media today aim at specialized audiences while daily newspapers and network radio and television outlets aim at the entire community, from president to the most humble citizen.

We call daily newspapers, network radio and television vertical because they attempt to cover an entire community from top to bottom. We call those media that aim for niches in the audience horizontal because these media specialize on particular topics or known audiences. Both vertical and horizontal media aim to inform, but their missions are somewhat different and - we argue - citizens meld these agendas to fit their own lives. The vertical and horizontal media we use influence the way we see events.

In other words, the ability of audiences to reach for media that fit their personal interests—horizontal media that do not necessarily consider events from

the point of view of the entire society—allows us as never before to fit events to our own expectations. Vertical media remain strong but horizontal media perspectives are rising as audiences enjoy the rich information environment so readily available. Furthermore agendamelding is worldwide wherever the ubiquitous media spread, with all its potential for enriching citizen knowledge and destabilizing rigid vertical societies and institutions.

The temptations to live in a horizontal community, ignoring the vertical society, can be powerful, like living entirely on an enclosed military base with its own schools, hospitals, libraries, and hospitals → an integrated small social system. If you plug “walled off” into Google, you will find there has been an explosion of gated communities in American, perhaps 80,000 or more, where (often well-off) people live safely within walls. Similarly, many of us seem tempted to live within specialized information communities, with diminished attention to the larger society around us. Perhaps that is why vertical media have struggled to hold audience in recent years, while horizontal media have exploded as is evident in Figures 1, 2, and 3.



The global economy emerged in the period in which the mass media, with less competition, pulled people together, as they still do in crisis, and there was more consensus on major national goals. After all, the greatest generation, as former **NBC** commentator Tom Brokaw put it, was made up by men who stood in lines to volunteer for military service after the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. They were socialized in the age of national agendas that emphasized competing ideologies - first democracy against German National Socialism, and then capitalism against Communism in the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Now things are different.

The ability of newspapers and major broadcasting media to hold our attention for the detailed picture of events remains, if fleeting. Journalist Lippmann drew attention to this power in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, comparing media attention with the spotlight on a stage play.<sup>3</sup> Since then, other scholars have discovered that the press does have, as political scientist Bernard Cohen put it, the power to tell us what to think about, although not what to think.<sup>4</sup> Studies by many journalists and scholars have found that the press does, in fact, provide the initial views of events, and it is not possible for the media to talk about events without providing details and these details also are powerful in shaping views of events. For example the same event—an attack in a Baghdad street—might be presented very differently by **CBS** or **CNN** and **Al-Jazeera**. For many, vertical media provide the topics and horizontal media the interpretation.

Our horizontal differences often became manifest and can influence the entire social pyramid. Social commentator Kevin Phillips finds that those with, for want of a better term, old-fashioned faith and those with oil interests voted Republican in the 2004 presidential election.<sup>5</sup> Horizontal strands can be as powerful today as they have been in the past. One predictor of presidential voting in 2004 was: Do you go to church regularly? The United States is not Iraq or Bosnia or Israel but the United States is not isolated from powerful horizontal forces that provide meaning for large groups of individuals. Three Supreme Court decisions in the early 1960s resulted in the “one man, one vote” ruling has resulted in the gerrymandering of the 435 Congressional Districts along party lines, making Congressmen and women into magazine rather than newspaper editors, representing horizontal rather than vertical districts, so to speak, a profound horizontalling of federal power.

Americans who were socialized in the years of

powerful mass media - those of the first half of the 20th century - grew up with the most powerful vertical media thus far in human history, network radio and television. Even young people today can identify the voice of President Roosevelt. Americans who came of age in the 1920s and 1930s lined up to fight in 1941. Recent wars have created only tiny blips in recruiting. Vertical issues were very strong for the World War II generation, socialized as it was by the mass media of the period. Modern generations are shaped by both vertical and horizontal messages. They are more likely to think in terms of the fire department than in forming a bucket brigade. How did this happen? What are the implications for business?

## 2. Media Agenda Setting and Agendamelding.

Agenda setting - as we shall see - boils down to a few important points. Media cannot create public opinion and they may not even be able to influence public opinion very much. Media probably cannot change minds, unless people take the information they receive and make up their minds in one way or the other. However, the media do have an impressive role in telling people what to think about, to put a particular issue on the public issues agenda.

Since Lippmann observed that modern life is so complex that we learn of events necessarily via the press, other observers have sought to test Lippmann's notions that press attention to public events is like a spotlight on a stage, focusing on a certain character or action, then another character or action.

In 1972, communication theorist Maxwell McCombs and I decided to systematically test Lippmann's arguments, reasoning that the press turns the spotlight on one issue then another. The question was: What, if anything, is learned by media audiences? And, as importantly, do the media shape attitudes, as is so often suspected by many observers, especially those with suspicions of press bias. Our study of the 1968 president campaign, between winning Republican Richard Nixon and losing Democrat Hubert Humphrey employed both a content analysis of what the press - newspapers, magazines, and television - was saying in one community along with what undecided voters in that community thought were important issues.<sup>6</sup> Presumably undecided voters needed information to make a choice and, in fact, we found those undecided voters did reflect the issues that were in the media accessible to them. One could almost predict about fifty percent of their answers by knowing what media they were reading. As political

scientist Cohen had suggested in his study of foreign news coverage, the press did set the agenda. Newspapers and television do have power to influence the public agenda. Since the early 1970s, many studies in the United States and elsewhere suggest the press does seem to have power under many circumstances to tell us what to think about.

These studies show that media ranking of issues at Time 1 is judged by audiences to be important soon thereafter, at Time 2. Correlations show the degree of connection of about .70 on average, with 1.00 meaning a perfect match and .00 no match at all. (Correlations can also be negative.) McCombs calls a transfer this transfer of broad topics, a transfer of Objects, and example of what scholars now call agenda setting, level 1.

There also is a deeper level of learning. More recently McCombs and his colleagues have also discovered that audiences also learn major details of the subject—McCombs calls them Attributes or frames—along with the main subject, a connection so close that McCombs has surmised that perhaps the press also can tell us how to think about issues. Media audiences learn many details from stories in addition to the broad topics.

McCombs therefore has divided the power of the press into two parts which he calls agenda setting, level 1, and agenda setting, level 2. In a recent book, McCombs sketched the way topics (Objects) and details (Attributes) transfer over time from media (Time 1, first mention) to audience members (Time 2, after publication), as shown in **Figure 4**. He uses the word Objects to mean subjects or topics and Attributes to mean the details or frames of messages.<sup>8</sup>

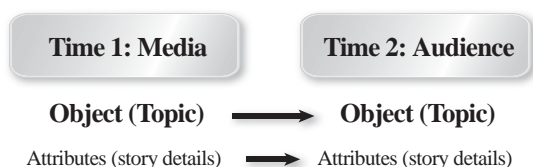


Figure 4. Transferring Object and Attribute Salience

Several other recent studies have also asked audiences what details and associated attributes they learned. These studies show that audiences reflect the same patterns of absorbing the details as of the major topics - about .70 or higher. This is a complex process and there are many perspectives on what is happening in media agenda setting. For example, Stanford's brilliant Shanto Iyengar, who used experiments, suggests that message framing can define social problems, as when, for example, crime stories

nearly always blame the perpetrator.<sup>9</sup> Such stories rarely blame the conditions, such as poverty or lack of education, that might have a factor in the crime, say a robbery. If the victim is at fault, there is no problem with the system and no need for collective action. Political scientist Robert Entman, who used content analysis, found that Chicago television stations most often framed crime in terms of African Americans.<sup>10</sup> Put the two together and you can see the power of framing, or agenda setting, level 2. The subject is crime but people of another race are individually responsible - such might be one result of Object and Attribute agenda setting. Or, those who struggle to make ends meet on a minimum wage should just work harder or get more education - one interpretative outcome of some news frames. No social action is needed, as with those involved with crime. If a military operation fails, is it a failure of soldiers or leadership, or are we all a bit involved? Vertical journalists think little beyond balancing "both sides" of controversies perhaps without much awareness that audiences, often intensely interested in topics, may not find that adequate. By then, vertical media have moved on, as they must in a changing world of events. Horizontal media linger like ducks on the pond after the Canadian geese have flown in a pack to the next destination. And ducks also flock together, often lingering on the pond. Audiences mix agendas from vertical and horizontal media; audiences agendameld.

These findings suggest that P.T. Barnum was wrong. Decades ago, Barnum said something like: I don't care what they say about me as long as they talk about me. Consider that Hitler mentioned Jews frequently in his speeches and writing - he put Jews high on the object agenda - but he also framed the subject very negatively and unfairly - that is, that Jews were the cause of Germany's alleged troubles (among other charges). P.T. Barnum might have been more concerned about what they were saying. Does it make a difference if our forces in Iraq are framed in terms of bad behavior at Abu Ghraib or engaged in friendly contact with Iraq civilians, professional military operations, or building roads or schools? One does not have to be a communication scholar to know the answer. Clearly if an item is not on the agenda—it is cut—this has great potential importance in terms of audience influences.

Audience involvement. Public absorbing of agendas at levels 1 and 2 does not mean that the process ends with newspapers and television. Audiences continue to learn of events from many other sources.

The more significant the event the more people seek additional information, and not without their own values and attitudes coming into play.

All of us learn basic values from our parents and family, school and religious leaders, friends and media (such as television) as we mature. These values are the base of our triangle of cognitions. No one has seen an attitude or value although we have many ways to observe the ways in which our friends act or verbalize about events and issues, suggesting certain values or attitudes. Often we have opinions about events and issues. Opinions, which we often express, are often not as deeply held as attitudes or values. Then, of course, we have knowledge of events and issues from direct or mediated experience, often influenced by media messages and images. We can sketch a picture of this personal triangle of values, attitudes, opinions, and knowledge in the order of their importance to us, as evidenced in **Figure 5**. There is no evidence that there is an easy translation of news about events to opinions or attitudes about events, at least in the short run. As we mentioned, values lie inside all of us and provide filters through which we form, over time, attitudes and even opinions.



Figure 5. Individual Knowledge, Opinions, Attitudes and Values

These values and attitudes that anchor our lives are powerful players when we read and interpret the news. For one thing, if readers judge a medium as biased (to their values, attitudes, and opinions) they might avoid that medium. Those who listen to various types of talk shows often share the same values as the host. This limits the power of vertical media, even after those media provide our initial knowledge of events. It is easy to argue that a major role of journalists, like that of soldiers, is to alert us to dangers, but after we are alerted many of us turn to interpreters in the horizontal media for meaning. Is the thud in the forest a danger? Yes, say some bloggers, for example; no, say others. Yes, say some broadcast hosts; no, say others.

The power of media reaches down to the edge of

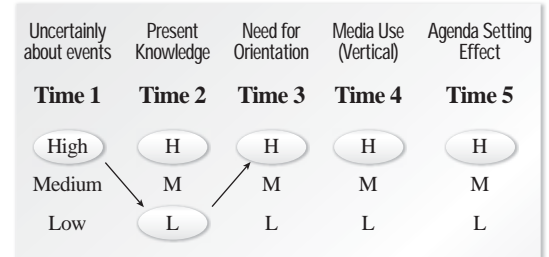


Figure 6. Audience Need for Orientation and Agenda Setting

our attitudes and values, but our values and attitudes also reach up. In our national community, there must be a marriage, a melding of agendas, for messages to become part of the total social fabric. Certainly audiences do reach up. Communication scholar David Weaver tested the notion that voters who 1) wanted to vote, 2) knew little of campaign issues, 3) needed orientation, 4) sought information from newspapers and television would 5) reflect the media agenda more than did voters who were not interested in voting or who already knew about the issues and therefore had little need for orientation. Weaver's findings, almost unique in the mass communication literature in being predictive (and not just explanatory after the fact), are sketched in **Figure 6**.<sup>11</sup>

There are many studies that suggest audiences do pick up the subjects, and growing evidence that they also learn about the details - evidence of agenda setting power, levels 1 and 2. But we argue, as we have seen, there is a decline in reach of the vertical media, upon which most agenda setting studies are based, and an increase in reach of alternative media that deal primarily with interpretation of details, the Attributes in McCombs' model. One gets an initial view of events, such as about the 2003 explosion of the Space Shuttle Columbia, and then turn to our favorite Web site to discuss notions of whether or not there was a conspiracy to blow up the spacecraft, or if the astronauts were adequately prepared (this is a hypothetical example). Little or none of that would be in the vertical media, unless it could be documented.

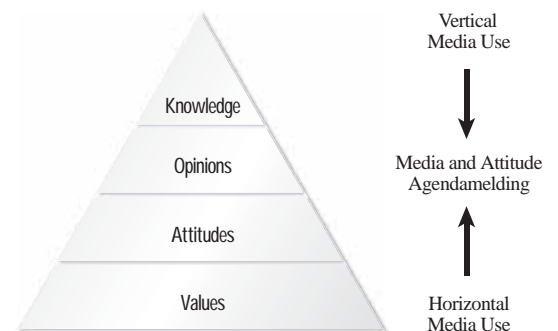


Figure 7. Individual Values Revisited

John Milton's 1644 *Areopagitica* urged freedom for all views, arguing that in a fair fight truth would defeat falsehood. Never has Milton's argument about wheat and chaff been more tested. There are many voices other than the pharaoh. One can see a better picture of how individuals use the full panoply of media in **Figure 7**.

We argue that audiences are agendamelding, drawing their own conclusions, fitting things together to fit their own assessment of events, and this has important implications for organizations.

The newer media enable power to transfer down the pyramid, if those at the top are incapacitated, providing staying power for both horizontal and vertical organizations. Horizontal organizations especially may be more like fishnets than telephone trunk lines, so you cannot always kill a snake by cutting off its head—in fact that is a very vertical way of thinking. The papyrus society requires more debate and sharing with the pyramid pieces. We, as citizens, need to attend to media whose agenda stretches across the entire society, not just to those media of personal interest. And we need to engage in open public dialogue to share our own views with more than our friends, to vote and engage in public life at all levels of community. Could we do it better? Advertising and public relations using vertical media may not be enough.

Vertical Newspapers (1790 - 1870)	V.	Horizontal Magazines (1870 - 1930)
Vertical Network Radio, TV (1930 - 1980)	V.	Horizontal Web, New Media (1980 - present)
Papyrus Society		

Figure 8. Historical Evolution

### 3. What Are the Implications for Business?

While this discussion is based on an American model, we argue that communication technology is changing other nations of the world along the same lines, creating other versions of the papyrus society within various cultural contexts. It means that former approaches to the general public and customers may be successful for older, traditional segments of the market, but far less so for middle aged and younger customers who blend agendas in a much more personal way. Even older customers are aware of, and make some use of, newer communication agendas, although all of us strongly lean to the communication means to which we attended as we were socialized from birth to our early twenties.

Agenda setting remains important as a baseline approach to creating a successful climate for your business, by using the techniques of advertising and public relations. Agendas reflect the strategies of top management, shaped by marketing surveys and data such as that provided by **Media Tenor**, along with sales of course and the shape and direction of profits. Media monitoring remains important and is likely to do so as long as the vertical media define the economic, social, and political realities around us. That certainly is true in Western Europe, North and South American, the Middle East, most of Asia, Australia, and much of Africa. A major function of journalism is to discover and publicize major events and issues, and to put them on the public agenda, using headlines, page placement, and other techniques to signal the salience of events and issues. Recently there has been great interest in agenda cutting, which removes items from the public agenda but, of course, that is not always under control of businesses. Journalists and editors are in charge of agenda setting, level 1. This is the same function as seeking intelligence by a military force in battle, and to fight without the best intelligence possible is to take great risks.

Advertising and public relations, particularly, are tools that businesses use to frame the view of companies within the context of the major social agenda, whether the news is favorable or not. Companies have long been aware of this and have developed skillful resources to address issue framing when necessary in times of bad news and to shape the message toward produce in good times. When vertical media put items on the agenda, companies might want to cut them, so to speak, on the alternative agenda, if it can be done responsibly. So agenda setting, level 2, as well as an awareness of agenda setting, level 1, should be part of any sound business plan.

But understanding of where audiences are makes business the challenges more complex. The availability of various ways to learn of events and of how those events are interpreted by audiences—how individuals are blending agendas, agendamelding them—means that companies need to be more aware than ever before that it may be necessarily to diversity both messages and avenues of communication to reach customers. We need to understand the communication nexus from the point of view of audiences and individuals. Given the ability to construct social pictures individually, individuals are, we argue, and the picture of companies may

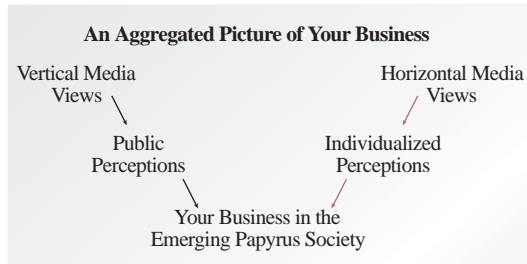


Figure 9. Papyrus Society and Business

begin quite positively in the vertical media but be significantly altered in the horizontal media. One might suggest that various kinds of media, not just newspapers and network television, be sampled, monitored, and analyzed so that the world of selected horizontal media can be monitored as well as the world in front of our eyes each morning as we read our newspapers and watch our favorite television shows. We can even draw a picture, as in **Figure 9**.

So what to do? For one thing businesses need to strengthen that part of their operations allocated to marketing because most marketing departments are too focused on products, and not products from the point of view of how audiences are assessing them. It is more than a question of sales. Sales figures address the immediate, but an understanding of the evolving public view of your business in the emerging Papyrus Society addresses both now and the future. Businesses might reorganize their communication offices to recognize the role of agenda setting from the point of view of media and audience/customers/clients. **Figure 10** suggests a start.

Many businesses succeed in the short run, but the challenge is how to adjust to the road ahead, the view through the windshield rather than the view through the rear view window. That is a challenge for all of us, in business, government, education, and in all human endeavors.

Possible Office Structure Senior Management			
Communication	Marketing	Production	Sales
Vertical Media Monitoring	Audience Analysis	Market Adjustments	Sales Feedback
Horizontal Media Monitoring			

Figure 10

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Lippmann, Walter, *Public Opinion*. New York: MacMillan, 1922.

<sup>2</sup> Brokaw, Tom, *The Greatest Generation*. New York: Random House, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Lippmann.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Bernard, *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963.

<sup>5</sup> Phillips, Kevin, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*. New York: Viking Press, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> McCombs, Maxwell and Shaw, Donald, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1972).

<sup>7</sup> Esteban, Lopez-Escobar, Lennon, Federico Rey, Llamas, Juan Pablo, and McCombs, Maxwell, "Two levels of agenda setting among advertising and news in the 1995 Spanish elections." *Political Communication* 15.n2 (April-June 1998): 225(14).

<sup>8</sup> McCombs, Maxwell, *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*. Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Entman, Robert and Rojecti, Albert, *The Black Image in the White Mind*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Weaver, David, "Political Issues and Voter need for Orientation" Chapter in McCombs, Maxwell and Shaw, Donald, *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda Setting Function of the Press*. St. Paul: West, 1977.