Psychological Theories Describing How the Media Can Help Influence People's Beliefs and Perceptions on Political Issues

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Abstract:

The agenda-setting and framing analysis theories are essential theoretical frameworks in media studies. The agenda-setting theory suggests that the media can influence the public agenda by emphasizing specific issues and topics. In contrast, the Framing analysis theory suggests that the media uses specific techniques, like employing certain word choices or highlighting particular statistics, to shape how we interpret and understand certain issues. Both theories emphasize the power of media to shape public opinion and behavior. By talking about different psychological theories, I discuss how the media can help influence people's beliefs and perceptions on political issues in this essay. This topic is important to me because I study IB psychology in my high school, and I feel very passionate about using psychology knowledge to discuss a social issue. I also want to practice the ability to think critically while being rational.

Key words: Psychological theory describing media influence, agenda setting theory, priming, framing analysis theory, emotional framing, narrative framing

Introduction

The agenda-setting and framing analysis theories are essential theoretical frameworks in media studies. The agenda-setting theory suggests that the media can influence the public agenda by emphasizing specific issues and topics. In contrast, the Framing analysis theory suggests that the media uses specific techniques, like employing certain word choices or highlighting particular statistics, to shape how we interpret and understand certain issues. Both theories emphasize the power of media to shape public opinion and behavior.

Agenda Setting Theory

Under the Agenda-setting theory, the media can shape public opinion and perceptions by emphasizing specific topics and downplaying others. Through this process, the media can create a "hierarchy of attention" among the public. This theory by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their 1968 study showed that the topics chosen by the media were more likely to be the ones people chose to discuss (Frederick & Evan,2021, p.16). While agenda setting primarily refers to media power, it can also apply to other institutions, such as the government and the public.

Priming

Priming in agenda-setting theory is a phenomenon that occurs when media outlets prioritize the coverage of specific political issues over others. Public opinion and public perceptions of various topics are influenced and shaped (Van et al. 30). Priming sought to influence how people think about political issues by highlighting particular topics, leading to a greater emphasis on those topics and leaving other issues in the background. For instance, if media outlets continuously highlight climate change issues, people might think it is a significant concern, even if other matters are also pressing. Priming may lead to media bias, as the media outlets may be more likely to cover stories that support their political views. Priming can also shape public opinion by reinforcing existing beliefs and opinions about political issues. It can even lead to new opinions and attitudes as people rely on certain messages and ideas they may not have encountered before. Priming may also emphasize certain policy aspects, such as potential costs or rewards, rather than a more holistic view of the issue. By focusing on specific aspects of an issue, the media can shape our perceptions of it and its importance.

Framing

Framing in agenda-setting theory refers to the idea that the media plays an essential role in shaping public opinion and directing attention to specific topics. The media can draw attention to certain aspects of a political issue while de-emphasizing or ignoring other aspects. A biased or incomplete understanding of the issue can develop, influencing people's political beliefs and perceptions (Huma Parveen,2017, p.6). For example, in the debate over healthcare, if media outlets frame the discussion around costs to taxpayers, it can lead to a more negative public view. In contrast, framing it around health benefits or lives saved can create a more positive perspective. The

media's Framing of political issues can thus lead to a framing effect, which defines the influence of Framing on the interpretation of messages and the subsequent judgment and behavior of receivers.

This framing effect can manipulate public opinion and lead people to believe certain things about an issue while ignoring other aspects. Additionally, Framing can reinforce existing beliefs and opinions, leading people to view issues in a certain way and accept particular views as truth. Forming inaccurate and misguided opinions can be dangerous.

Framing Analysis Theory

Framing analysis theory explores how different media aspects can shape people's views and interpretations of events and stories. It focuses on information presentation and how it can influence opinions and beliefs (Tewksbury et al.,2019, p.40). Moreover, it explores how information appears, such as highlighted and omitted, and how language can affect how readers interpret its stories. For example, a news story about a violent protest may highlight the destruction caused, which could result in readers perceiving the protesters as aggressive or lawless. However, if the same event is framed around the protestors' cause or the police's reaction, it might elicit sympathy for the protestors. This type of Framing could lead to different interpretations from readers.

Emotional Framing

Emotional Framing is a communication strategy that attempts to shape how individuals interpret political issues and form opinions by using emotionally charged language, images, and symbols. It seeks to elicit an emotional response from the audience. It highlights an issue's positive or negative aspects, allowing for selective emphasis on specific facts or values. Framing focuses on the emotional aspects of an issue to elicit a response from the audience rather than on facts used to evoke a response (Huma Parveen,2017, p.9). For example, a politician might describe the struggles of a middle-class family during an economic recession, causing the audience to feel sympathy or anger and thus garner support for their economic policies. Emotional Framing can shape political beliefs and perceptions by evoking certain emotions in the audience. It can frame an issue to make an idea more attractive or less desirable or make one set of beliefs or policies appear more legitimate than another (Amsalem et al.,2022, p.400). Thus, Emotional Framing can influence how people perceive political issues, which can make communication more effective because it can create an emotional connection between the audience and the issue or policy, making the message more memorable and impactful.

Narrative Framing

Narrative framing theory seeks to understand how facts, stories, and opinions influence our beliefs and perceptions about political issues. Framing theory examines how language shapes conversations, evokes emotion, and influences decision-making and policy preferences (Amsalem et al.,2022, p.400). Narrative Framing influences public opinion by emphasizing certain aspects and minimizing others.

In recent years, narrative Framing has been used significantly in political campaigns and media. For example, in the 2020 US presidential election, both candidates used narrative Framing to discuss immigration, healthcare, and the economy (Pérez-Curiel et al.,2021, p.156). Joe Biden used rhetoric such as "building back better" to emphasize his commitment to improving the economy and "building an immigration system that works" to emphasize his commitment to immigration reform. Meanwhile, Donald Trump used language such as "build the wall" to emphasize his commitment to border security and "make America great again" to emphasize his commitment to restoring American greatness.

Narrative Framing is a powerful tool for influencing public opinion and shaping decision-making. They can present the issue as a narrative, with a protagonist, a conflict, and a resolution (Huma Parveen,2017, p.10). By understanding how language and stories frame conversations and shape our beliefs and perceptions, we can better understand the power of political narratives.

Conclusion

The agenda-setting and framing analysis theories have both been instrumental in helping to shape people's beliefs and perceptions of political issues. Agenda-setting theory focuses on how the media can prioritize specific political issues, thus influencing the public's view of them. Framing analysis theory examines how media frames the discussion of specific political issues, helping to shape public opinion by emphasizing certain aspects of the issue. Together, these theories help shape public opinion and create a better understanding of political issues. By focusing on the aspects of an essential issue and highlighting the aspects relevant to the public, the media can influence public opinion and help people better understand the day's political issues.

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