



A FIRST LOOK AT  
COMMUNICATION THEORY

**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Max McCombs,  
creator of Agenda-Setting Theory**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vFENr7ABcc>

---

Griffin: I'm talking with Max McCombs, a scholar who's fascinated with broadcast journalism. Along with Donald Shaw, three decades ago, Max floated the idea of the agenda-setting function of the media. What's that function?

McCombs: Well, a good place to begin with an explanation of the idea of agenda-setting is actually to go back to Walter Lipman's classic book on public opinion published early in the last century. He began that book with a chapter titled, "The World Outside and The Pictures in Our Heads." It was Lipman's thesis that the news media, primarily newspapers in his day, were the bridge between that world outside and the pictures in our heads; that the pictures were a reflection of the media and not necessarily of what was really happening in the world outside. So, now the kind of general explanation of the core of agenda-setting would be elements that are emphasized in the media come to be regarded as important among members of the public.

Griffin: For many years students have loved the catch-phrase that you've talked about in connection with the theory; that the media don't tell us what to think but they do tell us what to think about. Does that still hold?

McCombs: The second part holds very much, and that was the beginning point for agenda-setting – the media focus our attention; they tell us what to think about. But the first part has to be considerably modified now, because we've gone beyond just the focus of attention to the second point in the communication process – how do we understand this topic? What's our apprehension of the topic? And that's what now brings us to what is called the second level of agenda-setting; that it's not just what the pictures in our heads are about; but at the second level, literally what are the pictures? And it often flows very directly that what we think – that is, our attitude and our opinion about this – comes very directly from the picture in our head. So, yes, we have to modify that expression now. The media not only can tell us what to think about, they can also influence how we think about it; and even by extension, not only what we think – our attitude and opinion – but in some cases what we do.

Griffin: Most people talk about news stories. And I use the term "story." Is a story by definition, "framing", according to your definition?

McCombs: Very much so. Journalism above all involves selection in deciding to approach a topic from a particular direction and of constructing a coherent story, where possible. Now, there are many factual reports that are simply a kind of jumble of facts.

Griffin: But the kind of stories that you were looking at and continue to in your research – front page, lead story, or any story on network news, broadcast news – these would all be framed?

McCombs: No, no. If you really looked at them closely, many of those are also this same kind of jumbling of facts.

Griffin: If you were doing a study today, which you probably are, would you include CNN as one of the national news media?

McCombs: No.

Griffin: Why?

McCombs: Because the CNN average total audience is less than the circulation of the *Austin American Statesman*. It is a very small audience.

Griffin: Does the agenda-setting function hold just for news stories? Or would it also hold with entertainment?

McCombs: Oh, very much so. The general proposition for agenda-setting is about the transfer of salience from one agenda to another; and if you're exposed enough to a particular agenda, whether it's a news agenda, the Jay Leno agenda, or whatever – and it can even extend far beyond media – then people, if that resonates with them, are going to respond. They're going to perceive those elements, whatever they are, as important

Griffin: Do you see anything sinister in the idea of agenda-setting, that the media would intentionally give a slant to a news story?

McCombs: Not really; that is, it's important to remember that these agenda-setting effects of the media are the inadvertent by-product of the fact that the media do have to select a few topics to pay attention to each day. They don't have the capacity to talk about dozens and dozens of different topics every day, nor do audiences really want that much information on that many different topics every day.

Griffin: How many issues can people focus on at one time? How many can they hold in their mind?

McCombs: A very small number. The public agenda seldom exceeds four or five issues maximum; and most frequently it's two or three issues.

Griffin: Increasingly people say they don't trust the media, and there's a large group of people who are quite convinced that there's a liberal bias. Is there a liberal bias?

McCombs: No, no. In fact, there's been a great deal of research on this; and the evidence is simply not there. And indeed, one increasingly could argue for the dominant national media if there is a bias, it's probably a conservative bias, particularly if you look at the salaries of the major personalities on television. These are not poor people; these are not working-class people. These are among the financial elite of our country, and their interests typically do not run to the liberal side of the political spectrum. The evidence suggests that most of the news plays pretty much right down the middle.

Griffin: Max, if I was better at this, if I knew what you know, and had a real working journalist's background, what would have I asked you about the media agenda that I haven't asked?

McCombs: I suppose you would have asked me, "is there any hope this agenda might change?" These very strong norms would in fact become more sensitive to the public. Having some sensitivity to what parts of the media agenda do and do not resonate with public; and in the case of public issues during a campaign, of in fact asking the people early on in the campaign, "What issues are you concerned about?" And then pushing the candidates to talk about those issues. Most journalists are message-producers; they are not communicators.