

Connecting data:

agenda-setting through connection

An investigation of the agenda-setting function
in a social media context

a master's thesis by
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New media and digital culture 2013-2014

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Abstract

Traditional media, like the television, the radio, and the newspaper, are not the only ubiquitous media anymore. Social media have attracted a significant amount of users. Media events have started to evolve under social media influence. While traditional and social media differ, they both seem to have an agenda-setting function. The agenda-setting theory is, however, adjusted to researching media events in relation to traditional media only. This thesis transforms the agenda-setting theory to be useful in a new context with social media. The focus will be on the theory's core concept, transfer of salience, by identifying the way social media can participate in the agenda-setting process. Yet, as social media are not created to serve their users, but the companies behind them, their design may harm a potential participation. Through a hermeneutic approach, I investigate the agenda-setting theory and the design of social media to achieve a level of understanding sufficient for the transformation of the agenda-setting theory in relation to social media. Focus will be on the theory's core concept "transfer of salience". This way, the theory may help us understand social media impact from an established perspective in the communication sciences.

It appears that social media are able to exhibit salience through a strategy which I suggest to characterize as "amplification through connection". By connecting messages, users, and other types of content – in short "data" – they are clustered into a meaningful whole. This way, data are amplified and they become salient in the wide plethora of messages on social media. While users are steered through social media's commercial-centered algorithms, users are not fully constrained; and can, to some extent, reject to go with the flow. Furthermore, social media can bypass the traditional media and directly set the public and policy agendas. They also can force traditional media to reconsider salience of an issue and "use" traditional media as an intermediary to set other agendas.

Keywords

philosophy of science social media agenda-setting traditional media user participation
public opinion media influence journalism

//Concepts lead us to make investigations.
They are the expression of our interest and
direct our interest.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein
Philosophical investigations

Below, a scene from a popular satiric television show called *South Park*, from the episode “Two days before the day after tomorrow” depicting a newscast where Tom, a newsreader, is talking to Mitch, a reporter at the town of Beaverton that was ravaged by a flood. The flood may have taken the life of over “hundreds of millions” of people, which is quite devastating for Beaverton, where actually only 8.000 people reside:

Tom: any word on how the survivors in the town are doing, Mitch?

Mitch: we're not sure what exactly is going on inside the town of Beaverton, uh Tom, but we're reporting that there's looting, raping, and yes, even acts of cannibalism.

Tom: my god, you've, you've actually seen people looting, raping, and eating each other?

Mitch: no, no, we haven't actually seen it, Tom, we're just reporting it.

watch the fragment on [the official website](#) of South Park Studios
(fragment officially titled as “Who to blame”)

Acknowledgements. Gratitude goes to my parents, Peter and Mies, for their support and their trust in me to graduate; to my brother and his wife, Kees and Nikki, for their support; and to Sayaka Simmons, for her knowledge of the English language.

Last, but definitely not least, to my supervisors Marianne van den Boomen and Imar de Vries for their input and patience during the thesis writing process.

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Prologue: Friday, September 21, 2012

According to the Dutch authorities, there was a non-existent party in the Dutch town Haren. Yet, for a non-existent party, there was a considerable attention in media, politics, and public (Medialogica 2013b). Sixteen year-old Merthe, the initiator of the party, had innocently created a public Facebook birthday event which was intended only for her friends. However, unbeknownst to her, the event was visible for any Facebook user, and people from all over the country invited themselves to her party. Mortified at the size of the guest list, she had to cancel her party (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013c, 16). Some people were disappointed that Merthe cancelled and started their own event. One event in particular was by Ibe der Führer and Jesse Hobson. They named it "Project X", after the 2012 movie *Project X*, because of the resemblances between the real-world events of Haren and the movie, like mobilizing people online and digitally hijacking a party. The outcome of Haren is comparable to the movie: chaos and violence against the police.

Project X Haren is an interesting instance of a media event. Even though it started in the digital world, it had significant real-world consequences. It shows that media events are changing. Social media propose and influence issues discussed in the media, public, and politics. Moreover, Project X was approached differently across traditional and social media. The depiction differed between media products as well. For example, talk show *De wereld draait door* of public broadcaster VARA approached Project X as hilarious, because it was the result of "a small error" (De wereld draait door 2012). Newspaper Trouw, on the other hand, warned for an escalation (Trouw 2012). On social media, coverage of traditional media made the X-participants think they were doing something that mattered; they felt they were taken seriously (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013a, 10). The incapability of the authorities to contain the situation was also of great interest for traditional and social media (Medialogica 2013b). This way, the X-movement and its reputation kept growing and the X-story perpetuated among media. Project X was heeded with enthusiasm on social media, though there were also negative responses, but these were dismissed by most participants (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013a, 10).

Politicians were also concerned about Project X, and the authorities tried to contain the situation. There was a political aftermath, because of the failure to contain the disturbances. The mayor of Haren stepped down because he felt responsible (ANP 2013).

The age of social media

The media landscape is evolving. Traditional media, like the television, the radio, and the newspaper, are not the only ubiquitous and dominant media anymore. In 2012, 92% of the Dutch population had internet access, and every week, over twelve million people were online for over ten hours (Commissariaat voor de media 2013, 12). Among the new media, social media have become extremely popular. Currently, Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social media among Dutch people with, respectively, eight and three million users (Marketingfacts 2013). According to a poll by the research agency Newcom, a majority of the Netherlands finds that social media use is “integrated in our society”, as people are able to consume and interact with them anytime and anywhere (ibid.).

Media events are also evolving. Social media can have a strong influence on media events, as we saw with “Project X” [in the prologue](#). Media institutions incorporate social media messages in their media products – newspapers, talk shows, newscasts – as facts, or for analysis and discussion. These messages are an account of opinions within the public on a media event, so, there can be input from the public. Stories from traditional media are published, discussed, and shared on social media as well. In other words, there is a mutual influence between traditional and social media: messages are transferred, transformed, and, then, picked up again by the original senders. Thus, stories perpetuate, as we saw in the prologue.

We can see traces of an agenda-setting function of social media in the Project X-media event, following the agenda-setting theory by journalism scientist Maxwell McCombs and historian Donald Shaw (1972), a theory about traditional media influence. Facebook user Merthe created a “story”; a Facebook event for a birthday party in Haren. Merthe, functioning as a “gatekeeper” with Facebook, sent her event into the digital world. The event found its way to Merthe’s friends, but also found its way, due to the “public” status of her event, to people she did not know and did not intend to reach. These people joined the guest list and became part of an online movement for a party. This points to a “viral dynamic” through sharing and making connections on social media, which leads to an “accidental network” of users and content as an inadvertent result of user interaction

(Florian 2012). This dynamic gave the event traction, which made it visible on social media; “salient” in agenda-setting terms. According to an investigation by a governmental-funded committee to investigate the cause of Project X (*further*: the Committee), once a “critical mass” was reached, the story was picked up by traditional media as newsworthy. At the same time, policymakers took precautions to prevent an escalation in the physical world (Commissie “Project X” Haren 2013a, 10). As we saw, the traditional media were critical towards and supportive of Project X. On social media, the dominant trend was to support the idea of having a massive party. This is not the only case where social media play a notable role in a media event. Other examples include Johannes the whale, Occupy, and numerous cases during the Arabic Spring (Medialogica 2013a; Costanza-Chock 2012; Iskander 2011).

The agenda-setting theory is an established theory in the communication sciences. However, it is not established in new media studies. There have been few attempts to bring the agenda-setting theory into a new context with social media. There are instances in which the theory is placed in a new context, but often with news websites without a focus on user participation (Lee 2005; Maier 2010), or media with other types of user interaction, like interactive television or bulletin boards (Roberts, Wanta, and Dzwo 2002; Kim and Lee 2007; Ragas and Roberts 2009). Studies on media like YouTube (Sayre et al. 2010), Twitter (Vargo 2012), now-defunct Hyves (Bekkers et al. 2013), or social media in general (Thorndyke 2013) do use the agenda-setting theory in a new context with social media. Yet, these studies do not fully consider or investigate the theory and its research methods in relation to that new context. There are instances that do raise the question of the validity of the theory in a new media context, but these instances do not go much further than raising that question (Volders 2013), or focus on blogs only (Meraz 2009). In 2013, a collection of papers was published on agenda-setting in a “2.0 world” by a group of journalism and communication scientists, focusing on the influence of the emergence of the internet on the agenda-setting theory (Johnson 2013). Yet, they did not thoroughly investigate agenda-setting and the theory in a social setting either. One of the contributing authors, Hai Tran, calls for further research on agenda-setting in a social setting (Tran 2013, 225).

The agenda-setting theory has proved to be helpful in understanding the relation between traditional media and public opinion, with a significant body of research all over the world (McCombs 2004, 8). Now that the public has a new way to interact with a media event, it is important to understand the relation between the traditional and social media. The public consults both types of media and depictions of media issues in both types influence each other, as we saw with Project X. In addition, members in the public can talk about an issue with other members, journalists, and even politicians. Granted, this has always been possible, but in a non-technologically mediated context on a small scale, often only with people who are already acquainted to one another. Social media offer the potential to have a discussion among a significant amount of people who were previously unconnected. This is reminiscent of a notion of Yochai Benkler, law professor and network researcher, which he calls the "attention backbone". It describes that, due to new technologies, mainly social media, voices can now be heard that otherwise would not have been heard (Benkler et al. 2013, 4). Benkler defines the attention backbone as a pattern in a network, where "peers" come together and form a "cluster", and, this way, becoming visible for other network members due to its size (Benkler 2006, 12). Certain messages become more visible; one could say "amplified", to become salient in the massive amount of messages on social media to become a meaningful whole, without the intervention of the traditional media.

Amplification through connection

The attention backbone refers to the main argument of this thesis. Social media afford messages and other types of content the potential to become visible, through a strategy I suggest to characterize as "amplification through connection". This way, social media have an agenda-setting potential that bypasses traditional channels by amplifying a cluster of users or content through connecting them; a connective strategy. This can be contrasted with the strategy of traditional media which could, then, be characterized as "amplification through massive dissemination". Differently put, their strategy is to disseminate the same message to a large amount of people in a repetitive manner. This refers to the core concept of the agenda-setting theory: the "transfer of salience".

As the theory was created in the 1970s, it is adjusted to investigating traditional media-related questions. Communication scientists Stephen Littlejohn and Karen Foss note that a theory synthesizes existing knowledge, this way; we do not have to start over with each investigation (Littlejohn and Foss 2008, 14). Following this sentiment, we may be able to rearrange existing knowledge of media influence. **Thus, the goal of this thesis is making the first steps in transforming the agenda-setting theory; to make it suited to its evolved research objects, media events with social media influence.** This means that the focus should be on the theory's core concept, the transfer of salience, allowing us to view how social media's connective strategy can contribute to an agenda-setting process. By showing the value of this concept in a social media context, I also hope to show that the theory is still worthwhile. In addition, I argue that social media are not a singular entity, but a group of diverse media, each with their own characteristics. Consequently, not all social media can participate in the agenda-setting process. This is to challenge a trend in (popular) literature and journalism that "social media" as a whole have impact or are a barometer for public opinion (Mitchell and Hitlin 2013).

In short, this thesis focuses on two issues: the transformation of the agenda-setting theory and social media's role in the agenda-setting process. Thus, first and foremost, we need to understand the agenda-setting theory – its roots, properties, and research methods – and to outline the parts that need reconsideration. Secondly, to investigate how social media could participate in the agenda-setting process, we need to understand their design: how they approach users, treat content, and can exhibit and transfer salience. By focusing on the techno-economic aspects of social media's design, I identify a potential dynamic for content to be amplified, and so, the possibility for social media to participate in the agenda-setting process. In the context of social media and media events, I argue that a succinct approach to social media is not just "connecting people" as one body of research asserts (Boyd and Ellison 2008, 211; Khang et al. 2012, 290). Rather, a data-centered approach "connecting data" following techno-economic strategies is better suited (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011, 60; Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 5). In media events, it is content of media products that binds people; like opinions, accounts, or images. They are all "data" on social media. This means that we need to focus on social media's technological design. Yet, there is also commerciality rooted in their design, affecting user experience and an agenda-setting potential. Consequently, to understand the social

media's role in the agenda-setting process, we need to understand their techno-economic design.

Research method and structure

In this thesis, the agenda-setting theory will be transformed in relation to social media, with a focus on the concept of the transfer of salience. Consequently, I build on existing literature: historiographic research on the theory and research on social media's techno-economical design. In addition, literature is enriched with instances of media events with social media influence to take real-world aspects into account. To transform the agenda-setting theory in relation to social media, we need to understand the theory's characteristics and social media's design. This will be done through *hermeneutics* as research method, because it offers the means to understand a "text" for further investigation, and if necessary, for transformation (Ramberg and Gjesdal 2013). This is the goal of this thesis: transforming the research object "agenda-setting theory" in relation to social media.

In this thesis, hermeneutics is understood following philosopher Maurizio Ferraris' approach as "the art of interpretation and transformation" that does *not* view its research objects through a "contemplation of eternal essences unalterable by their observer" (Ferraris 1996, 1). Rather, the goal is to seek understanding through the interpretation of a text, instead of an explanation. Following professor of philosophy Ronald Bontekoe's approach of the methodological process, the "hermeneutic circle", I conduct my own research. In essence, hermeneutic research is a back and forth movement between the various parts and the whole, and this way, it forms a circle (Bontekoe 1996, 3). Bontekoe elaborates:



the circle has what might be called two poles – on the one hand, the object of comprehension understood as a whole, and, on the other, the various parts of which the object of comprehension is composed". (...) The object of comprehension, taken as a whole, is understood in terms of its parts, and (...) this understanding involves the recognition of how these parts are integrated into the whole" (Ibidem, 3).

Understanding occurs when the interpreter recognizes the significance of the parts he notices and the way those parts interrelate as a whole (ibid.). By integrating the interpreted parts, the whole becomes something “meaningful” once understood – which matches the goal of this thesis. Firstly, this thesis looks at the individual parts of the agenda-setting theory and then views how those parts relate to the whole. At the same time, the parts that need transformation become clear. Then, by outlining the relevant social media aspects focused on those that can impact media events, the theory can be transformed into a new meaningful construction taking social media into account.

The hermeneutic circle is a synthesis of information, which always results in a vicious circle, as there is no real taxonomy on which parts need to be investigated to fully grasp a research object (Ramberg and Gjesdal 2013). This can lead to an endless investigation of parts in relation to the whole, an investigation without an end. Furthermore, there is the viewpoint of the interpreter; which is from “somewhere”, situated in language and history. This viewpoint influences the interpretation, and thus, the understanding of the research object. Every viewpoint is partial, following feminist Donna Haraway’s “situated knowledge” situated in time and research tradition (Haraway 1988, 581). In addition, philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927) extended the hermeneutics field to ontology: to self-understanding and of the world (Heidegger 1962). This goes well beyond the scope of my thesis.¹

My intention is not to present an authoritative reading or to offer explanations. Rather, I hope to achieve a level of understanding of the agenda-setting theory which is sufficient for a productive dialogue and to transform it. Gadamer proposes a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1996, 307). In hermeneutics, the goal is to understand a text, “but this means that the interpreter’s own thought too have gone into the re-awakening of the text’s meaning” (ibid., 388). The interpreter’s horizon – or, situated perspective – fuses with the text’s horizon: where the interpreter’s horizon determines the actual outcome, not necessarily as a personal standpoint, but more the choice of the standpoint itself (ibid.). As a new media researcher, I follow a new media horizon. Fusing the agenda-

¹ For a full overview of the hermeneutics field, consult [the philosophic encyclopedia](#) of the University of Stanford.

setting theory with a new media perspective will be a necessity, as the thesis is focused on answering a new media-related question.

In chapter one, I start by investigating the agenda-setting theory; its roots and characteristics to understand and identify the elements that need to be transformed. This chapter features a hermeneutic approach, allowing us to understand the theory. To prevent a vicious circle, I define the parts of the whole with Littlejohn and Foss' typology that outlines the elements of a theory: *philosophical assumptions, concepts, and explanations* (Littlejohn and Foss 2008, 15). To complete the typology, I add *research methods*, so we can fully investigate what the theory proposes and how it researches it. Following hermeneutics, the elements will be investigated in isolation and the way those parts interrelate as a whole.

A number of texts are used to interpret the agenda-setting theory. The theory's concepts and methodology are primarily taken from the first research conducted by McCombs and Shaw (1972), *Setting the agenda* (2004) by McCombs, and *Agenda-setting* (1996) by communication scientists James Dearing and sociologist Everett Rogers. They all give a comprehensive account of the theory and they are often cited in and outside the agenda-setting research field.

Chapter two focuses on the new context of social media. It features a succinct overview of current social media approaches, while the focus is on their techno-economic design. The design affords and implicates social media's potential to participate in the agenda-setting process. With the help of technology and business researchers Jan Kietzmann et al.'s classification of the building blocks of social media in "Social media? Get serious!" (2011), and media scientists José van Dijck and Thomas Poell's "Understanding social media logic" (2013), social media's techno-economic design will be outlined and scrutinized.

Kietzmann et al.'s model fits in a hermeneutic context, as it breaks down elements that make up a social medium, hence "building blocks" of social media. This way, the model helps to understand how social media are constructed and point to the implications of this construction for the user experience for a *separate* social medium (Kietzmann et al. 2010, 241). The same applies to the concept of "social media logic". It

breaks down the norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies into four “grounding principles”, that together make up the dynamics that create a social media discourse outside of their own boundaries (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 2). Inspired by sociologist David Altheide and social psychology professor Robert Snow’s “mass media logic” (1979), Van Dijck and Poell show with social media logic how social media blend with traditional media. Yet, at the same time, how they separate themselves from traditional media and, this way, transforming already existing mechanisms in traditional media, like media events (ibid., 5). Kietzmann et al. and Van Dijck and Poell aid in the understanding of the techno-economic dynamics that point to potential social media impact on media events in the form of agenda-setting. They constitute the theoretical base with which the agenda-setting theory will be transformed in chapter three.

Chapter three extends Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of horizons. The chapter is focused on transforming the agenda-setting theory; just like its research objects evolved due to the rise of social media. The understanding of the agenda-setting theory and social media’s design presented in chapters one and two in conjunction with real-world examples of media events with significant social media influence, the agenda-setting theory will be transformed. Inspired by Gadamer, the two horizons will be fused to pave the way for further research for a new agenda-setting theory that is able to investigate media events with social media influence.

The chapter is focused on the theory’s concepts and it features a critical approach to its research methods, as they are both adjusted to traditional media. It will delve into the details of the concept of the transfer of salience, as it is the theory’s core. In addition, I point towards issues that can arise in the new context with social media, and there will be suggestions for further research to overcome these issues and to continue the transformation of the theory. Finally, I approach social media’s agenda-setting potential normatively, viewing the implications for society and media events.

1 The agenda-setting theory

This chapter investigates the agenda-setting theory: its roots and characteristics. Firstly, I trace the roots and investigate how they relate to the theory's inception. The second paragraph focuses on understanding the theory and its characteristics through a hermeneutic approach by investigating the theory's elements in isolation and the way those parts interrelate as a whole. This way, I hope to achieve a level of understanding sufficient for further research.

1.1 Origins and the first research

McCombs and Shaw were responsible for conducting the initial agenda-setting function investigation (1972). They also coined the term "agenda-setting" during this pioneer investigation. However, they were not the first to attribute an influential function to media. They based the notion of the agenda-setting function on research by media critic Walter Lippmann (1922), historian Bernard Cohen (1963), sociologists Kurt and Gladys Lang (1966), and communication scientists Joseph Trenaman and Denis McQuail (1961).

Trenaman and McQuail (1961) indicated that people can learn from the media when something is discussed often. Lang and Lang suggested that the media force attention to certain issues by building images of political figures and they constantly suggest issues to the public to consider (Lang and Lang 1966, 468). McCombs and Shaw wanted to go further, to investigate if the news media are able to determine what the public thinks about, instead of just suggesting issues and teaching about them (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 176). They were inspired by Cohen's idea on the power of the press and they followed his idea for their hypothesis: the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen 1963, 13). Furthermore, Cohen argued that "the world looks different to different people, depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper the read" (ibid.). This leads to a depiction only existent in media, based on the map of the writers, editors, and publishers. A "pseudo-environment" emerges, a term borrowed from Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922), with a depiction of

events that differs from the actual events (Lippmann 1945, 3). Just like in *South Park's* "[Two days before the day after tomorrow](#)" on page 3, media institutions determine how actual events are presented in a media event; as they "are just reporting it". They decide if there are looting and cannibalism in the Beaverton flood media event. While *South Park* tends to exaggerate, it shows how influential news media is on how the public learns about real-world events, and what that could lead to. In fact, something comparable can actually happen, if we look at Project X' media event. There was no mention of Merthe's party being hijacked. All consequences were attributed to Merthe's "error", as this was easier to report than the actual event, which contained too many (Facebook-specific) details for a tangible story (Medialogica 2013b). Apparently, the media institutions assumed that a significant part of the audience is not that familiar with social media.

According to Lippmann, people respond to this pseudo-environment, as it is often the only way one can interact with a real-world event: "whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat it as if it were the environment itself" (Lippmann 1945, 10). This leads to a number of normative issues, which I will return to at the end of chapter three. It is here, the influence of the pseudo-environment where McCombs and Shaw saw the concept of agenda-setting. They related Lippmann's observation to how the public perceives politics. As there is often no other reference than the news media for people to interact with politics, what they know is based on a second-hand presentation, based on the world view of the writers and editors of media institutions (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 176). Then, McCombs and Shaw hypothesized, with Cohen's notion as fundament, that the "media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (ibid., 177). In other words, there is a relation between what the media say and what the public thinks.

1.1.1 Research method and results

McCombs and Shaw took the 1968 United States presidential elections as case study. They attempted to match what a group of undecided voters said were the key issues of the election campaign with the content of the media; the television, newspapers and news magazines (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 177). One hundred respondents were questioned on what they thought were the important issues. The respondents of various backgrounds were obtained from one community, because regional differences and variations in media

performance were less likely to skew research results. Trenaman and McQuail's strategy was used to form the interviews: each respondent was asked to outline the key issues as he saw them, regardless of what the candidates might be saying at the moment. On the basis of these results, the researchers identified the public agenda (ibid.). McCombs and Shaw chose undecided voters, because these have not a set opinion yet, and are, thus, following Lang and Lang, prone to be influenced (Lang and Lang 1966, 426).

To determine the media agenda, the researchers investigated the news content of three media: television, newspapers, and news magazines. News content was divided into major and minor levels, based on the size and length of a news item. McCombs and Shaw also analyzed the campaign itself, and they found that the media depicted an account that differed from the actual campaign: "a considerable amount of campaign news was *not* devoted to discussion of the major political issues but rather to *analysis of the campaign itself*" (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 179). The campaign's media event was not the actual campaign: "the pseudo-environment reflected in the mass media is less than a perfect representation of the actual 1968 campaign" (ibid., 183).

McCombs and Shaw found, by comparing the key issues according to the media and those according to the public, that the voters appear to reflect the sum of the media messages (ibid., 181). This suggests that they pay attention to all the political news, regardless of its source or political color. However, it is also possible that the public pays more attention on media content focused on their party of interest. This would mean they selectively view media content, instead of an agenda-setting function (ibid.). Yet, the voters who were not firmly committed early in the campaign, McCombs and Shaw found, "attended well to *all* the news" (ibid., 182). Correlations showed that "voters more in agreement with all the news rather than with news only about their own party/candidate preference" (ibid.) McCombs and Shaw concluded that this finding is better explained by an agenda-setting function of the media than by selective perception (ibid.).

1.1.2 Further developments

Since the theory's inception, there have been hundreds of studies worldwide of various types of media events; all of which indicated the presence of a media agenda-setting function (McCombs 2005, 543). Based on decades of research, Dearing and Rogers

created a schematic as depicted in image 1, on the next page (*Adapted from: Dearing and Rogers 1996, 5*). Dearing and Rogers show that media institutions are gatekeepers of stories, determining which issues are presented. They form the media agenda, based on real-world indicators and personal experience; Cohen's map. This agenda influences two other agendas primarily in a linear way: the agendas of the public, and the policymakers.

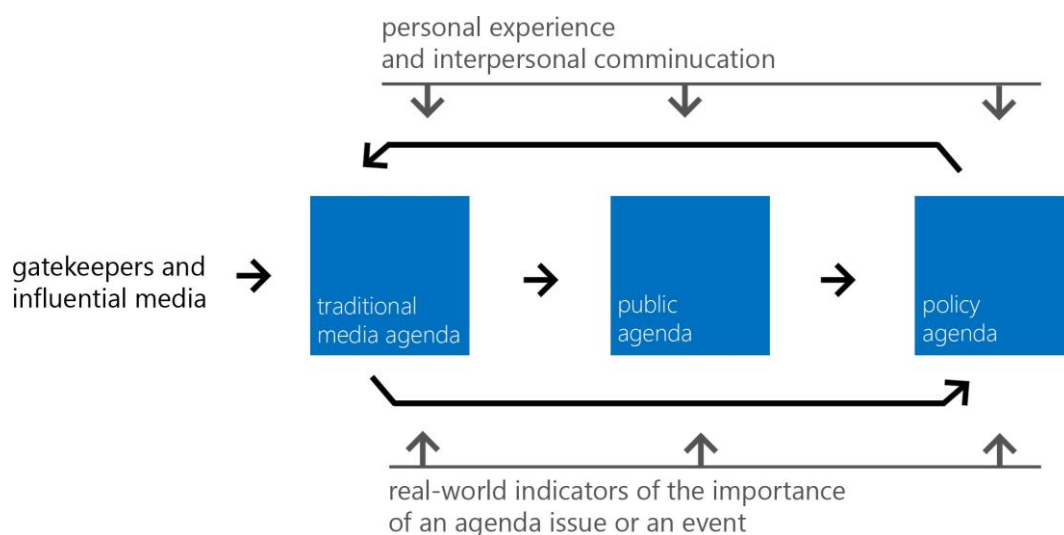


image 1: **Dearing and Rogers' schematic of agenda-setting**

Initially, direct influence of the public on the media agenda was non-existent, according to Dearing and Rogers. We shall see later that this is no longer the case and, in fact, may never have been the case.

1.2 The parts and the whole

This section focuses on understanding the agenda-setting theory. As mentioned, I analyze the theory's elements following Littlejohn and Foss' typology, *philosophical assumptions, concepts, explanations, with research methods*. Following hermeneutics, to understand the theory, the elements will be investigated in isolation and the way they interrelate as a whole. Yet, the theory's philosophical assumptions and explanations are not specifically focused on traditional media, unlike the concepts and research methods. In addition, the philosophical assumptions underlie each element, so, a discussion of the elements identifies the theory's approaches to epistemology, ontology, and axiology (Littlejohn and Foss 2008, 16). Consequently, the first two sections of this paragraph focus on these two elements only. Yet, in the third and final section, all elements are succinctly considered so the whole theory can be understood.

1.2.1 Concepts

The theory has a few important concepts: transfer of salience, gatekeepers, agendas of issues, and the pseudo-environment.

Transfer of salience

There are two types of salience: "issue salience" and "attribute salience" (McCombs 2004, 87). Issue salience refers to salience of an issue, while attribute salience refers to the characteristics of the depiction of an issue. Salience means amplifying certain issues and attributes of these issues, in favor of other issues and attributes. By amplifying issues and attributes through agenda-setting strategies, the media can transfer salience and set an agenda. Following the agenda-setting theory, primarily media institutions determine which issues or attributes become salient. In short, there are two types of agenda-setting: "issue agenda-setting", covered by a majority of research, and "attribute agenda-setting". From an abstract point of view, agenda-setting is "transfer of salience from one agenda to another", not necessarily the media setting the public agenda (McCombs 2005, 553). Yet, the majority of agenda-setting research is focused on media setting the public agenda (Strömbäck and Kiousis 2010, 276). Communication and journalism scientists Sung-Tae Kim and Young-Hwan Lee propose "reversed agenda-setting", suggesting that internet users can influence the media agenda with blogs, or website responses through a ripple-effect of these messages (Kim and Lee 2007, 5). Dearing and Rogers did not anticipate this, considering their schematic [in image 1](#). I argue that there should have been a category for public influence from the beginning, as media institutions take their public into account, through ratings; thus, financial considerations. Media institutions actively investigate their audience's wishes to tailor media content: there is direct influence on the media agenda (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 9). Consequently, the public's role needs to be reconsidered. Now, with the rise of social media, this reconsideration becomes even more relevant. Therefore, in chapter three, these gatekeepers will be reconsidered.

Media products have a variety of strategies to make issues and attributes salient. McCombs mentions, for newspapers, for example, a front page mention, size of headlines, and story length. These methods point to the story's significance according to the media, and, thus, its salience. The television and radio news agendas are more limited, as there is

less space, so McCombs finds a mention enough as a salience cue (McCombs 2004, 2). In all media, salience is best stressed by repetition (ibid.). As we shall see in chapter three, social media have their own approach to salience and repetition.

Attributes can be added from an ideological perspective to make a point, like the critical attitude of *Trouw* concerning Project X mentioned [in the prologue](#). Attributes are also added with a commercial motivation, to be “sexy”. Journalist Jeroen Wollaars defines this tendency as “sloganism”; easily presentable headlines. He notes that this often leads to a partial presentation of events, which could lead to a misunderstanding of the actual event (Medialogica 2013b). In addition, media institutions are often (semi-)private organizations that rely on attracting viewers for profit. Media institutions follow a specific program format to create an appealing media product. For example, NOS’ chief editor Marcel Gelauff mentions in an interview that there has to be a balance between “heavy” and “light” stories for television newscasts (Medialogica 2013a). Yet, social media, as we will see [in section 3.1.2](#), largely ignores those formats.

Gatekeepers

According to the agenda-setting theory, media institutions function as gatekeepers of the stories on the agendas. They decide which real-world events people talk about and also how they talk about these events. As mentioned, depiction of events is formed by the media. Yet, not much research considers these gatekeepers, even though they are viewed as the main agenda-setting force. McCombs does investigate the media as agenda-setters but they are not investigated as institutions in relation to their internal and external influences. McCombs summarizes a handful of influences as “major sources providing the information for news stories (...) and journalism’s news and traditions” (McCombs 2004, 117).

Researchers often do not recognize that the media are run by institutions that often are (semi-)private organizations that depend on a variety of internal and external factors. Communication scientists Jesper Strömbäck and Spiro Kiouisis note that there is a lack of research focusing on these influences (Strömbäck and Kiouisis 2010, 276). What happens with agenda-setting in a dictatorship? What happens when institutions censor themselves because of financial, religious, or ideological reasons to hold audience and advertisers, and to prevent problems with governments, public, or companies (Pew Research Center

2000; Ybema 2003)? Even in countries with an allegedly free press, like the United States, journalists censor themselves because of the NSA (McCauley 2013). There is some research on how agenda-setting is implicated in such contexts by, for example, media scholar Yusuf Kalyango (2008) on the relation between media and government in Eastern Africa and human rights researcher Yiyao Zhang (2010) on agenda-setting in China. It does point to a gap in agenda-setting research. As we shall see in chapter two and three, gatekeeping is not exclusive to media institutions anymore: the public is also capable of presenting issues, though it has its own constraints as well. Researchers need to start considering who the gatekeepers actually are, due to their influence on the agenda-setting process.

Agendas + the pseudo-environment

An agenda can be seen as a hierarchy of issues, describing the important issues for the media, the public, and the policymakers. Each group has an agenda. From an abstract point of view, agenda-setting is, as mentioned, transfer of salience from one agenda to another. Each agenda contains a small amount of salient issues, and a large amount of less salient issues. This is due to the constraints of the media products and the media institutions, but also to the attention span of the public. In essence, salience follows a "power law"; a small amount of issues gets most of the coverage, while a large amount of issues gets little to none coverage (Shirky 2006, 39). Consequently, the reality presented is a "pseudo-environment" where issues can appear more important than they actually are.

The pseudo-environment can be seen as a social constructivist entity, which comes to be through the interaction between media institutions, policymakers, and the public. Thus, according to the agenda-setting theory, (an alternative to) reality is created socially. This way, one can experience more than his direct environment, though this is a second-hand reality, based on the world view of the media institutions. As Lippmann notes, "whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat it as if it were the environment itself" (Lippmann 1945, 10). It becomes a reality on its own due to people responding to it in a way as if it were reality. In chapter three, a suggestion to move away from the "pseudo" is discussed, as it conceals that the pseudo-environment has *actual* consequences, not *pseudo*, unreal ones. In addition, following dictionary Van Dale, "pseudo" points towards intent, yet, while issues are presented with a reason, the sum of issues is inadvertent: no

one really controls the pseudo-environment. Agenda-setting is not a deliberate or premeditated process, but, as McCombs notes, “an inadvertent influence resulting from the necessity of the news media to select and highlight a few topics” due to, among others, constraints of the media institutions, media products, and the public (McCombs 2004, 20). As the following chapters show, social media users also encounter constraints.

1.2.2 Research methods

Most agenda-setting research is focused on finding evidence of an agenda-setting function of the media. In addition, but to a lesser extent, researchers try to trace agenda-setting evidence of policymakers and the public (Rogers 1993, 72; Strömbäck and Kiousis 2010, 271). Researchers still employ a method similar to the first research: combining content analysis with ethnographic methods; interviews and polls (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 177; McCombs 2004, 4). The researcher measures correlation between the two sets of evidence through relevant coding categories. An excerpt from the first research:



the answers of respondents regarding major problems as they saw them and the news and editorial comment appearing between September 12 and October 6 in the sampled newspapers, magazines, and news broadcasts were coded into 15 categories representing the key issues and other kinds of campaign news. Media news content also was divided into ‘major’ and ‘minor’ levels to see whether there was any substantial difference in mass media emphasis across topics. For the print media, this major/minor division was in terms of space and position; for television, it was made in terms of position and time allowed” (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 178).

Interestingly, all media evidence is placed into one group, as though media were seen as one. Yet, there are differences between richness of experience between media when depicting an issue. There is mention of agenda-setting cues per medium, as we saw in the previous paragraph. However, agenda-setting researchers often do not investigate which medium or cue is successful in transferring salience. Researchers assume a “high degree of redundancy” in the media agenda, so the agenda of one medium is often taken as a surrogate for the whole media agenda (McCombs 2004, 48).

Contrary to this assumption, I argue that it may be best to identify an agenda for each medium. Following McLuhan, medium specifics influence the message thoroughly. In a 1969 interview with magazine *Playboy*, he argued that the “medium is the message”, it is not “that content plays no role – merely that it plays a distinctly subordinate role” (McLuhan 2009). There is interplay between the medium and its content, which strongly influences the message. Certain elements of a story may be more suitable for a particular medium. For example, riots of a partying group of youngsters can be more interesting for television, as it is a visual spectacle. Thanks to moving images, television is apt at being a witness account. In such a case, television offers a richer experience than the newspaper. The newspaper, however, could be more fitting for an investigation into the cognitive dynamics of those youngsters; what drove them and how did it escalate? Of course, both media can make a useful report on both issues, but in the end, media institutions create specific media products, which are bound to certain rules. Newspapers offer space for in-depth approach, while television offers a quick, but visual impression of a story. This means that each medium has a different depiction of the same story and its salience. Solely with a content analysis, one does not take the medium specifics into account.

Agenda-setting researchers are interested in the content of the media products – they argue that media *content* brings about social and cultural impact. McLuhan, on the other hand, argues that media *technology* impacts social settings and culture most. Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, social media redefine our approach to friends, connections, and media content. This also leads to a different agenda-setting potential. Therefore, considering media technology is pivotal in this thesis where a different type of media is included in the agenda-setting process.

1.2.3 Understanding the agenda-setting theory

As hermeneutics prescribes, after analyzing the agenda-setting theory's parts, we can view how the entire theory can be understood.

The theory consists of a handful of concepts forming the theory's backbone, with which media phenomena are described, and predictions, thus, hypotheses are made. The theory assumes that there is a pseudo-environment. This environment is created by the media based on their agenda, who determine which issues should be salient, whether or not

these issues have actual importance as a real-world event. Media transfer salience to the agendas of the public and policymakers, primarily through repetition and mass dissemination of issues and their attributes. Yet, other agendas can set the media agenda as well. In an abstract sense, agenda-setting is about the transfer of salience from one agenda to another. Thus, each actor – the public, the media, and the policymakers – has a part in forming the pseudo-environment. This way, the pseudo-environment becomes a social constructivist entity where (a) reality is constructed through social interaction. The environment is partially value-loaded: the public and politicians want to get things done or to make a point, while media institutions need to attract enough audience to make money. On the other hand, the collection of issues on the agenda and, in essence, the pseudo-environment is an inadvertent result of collective interaction. Thus, it is not entirely value-loaded either, as no actor is fully in controls.

To investigate the transfer of salience, the theory employs two qualitative research methods. Firstly, a content analysis to investigate the content of media messages concerning one or more issues, to find out which and how events are depicted. Secondly, researchers interview a (carefully defined) group of respondents or do a poll concerning the issues of in the media. Then, researchers compare these two sets of evidence and investigate how these sets relate to each another. Depending on the correspondence between the sets, they determine if there was agenda-setting. In terms of explanations, researchers find correlations, not causality, because there are too many factors influencing the communication process; including noise and other unintended factors, following mathematicians Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver' seminal communication model (Shannon and Weaver 1948, 4). Even though there is no causal relation, agenda-setting research can exhibit causality between media action and public response when the cause precedes the effect in time, following McCombs (McCombs 2004, 10).

In the next chapter, we will investigate how social media are designed: their approach to content, public, and distribution of that content. Their approach is different from traditional media. This leads to a different role of the public and different strategies to exhibit and transfer salience. With the findings of chapter two as fundament, we will, in chapter three, transform the agenda-setting theory, and view the implications of social media's design on the agenda-setting process.

2 Designing sociality

This chapter is focused on understanding social media's techno-economic design. Firstly, I discuss leading approaches of how to understand social media in general. Then, in the following two paragraphs, I outline two models on the structure and dynamics of social media: starting with Kietzmann et al.'s building blocks of social media and, secondly, Van Dijck and Poell's social media logic. These two paragraphs follow the hermeneutic tradition by viewing separate medial elements – as defined by the models – and how those parts interrelate as a "whole", as social media or a particular medium. The discussed models show how social media are designed, so that in the next chapter, we can view how they implicate the agenda-setting process and, ultimately, to transform the agenda-setting theory.

2.1 Approaching social media

What are social media? Social media and youth researcher Danah Boyd and professor of information Nicole Ellison define them as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd and Ellison 2008, 211). This is a "social" definition, viewing social media facilitating "connecting people", *servicing* their users. Furthermore, Boyd outlines properties for what she calls "networked technologies" (Boyd 2010, 42). She mentions, firstly, persistence of messages, as they are archived immediately and only disappear when removed. Secondly, content is replicated easily, leading to the third characteristic of scalability that gives content a high potential reach of users. Finally, searchability, meaning that users can search content on these technologies (ibid., 46). These are general properties of internet platforms, but it can help in fusing horizons in chapter three, as it summarizes key affordances that are also present in social media.

A more data-centric definition comes from Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, both business and marketing researchers focused on social media. They define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and

technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61). To them, social media are about data created by the user within a commercially designed system; Web 2.0.² This chapter focuses on the techno-economic design of social media that determines the user experience and handling of content, and this way, their potential to participate in the agenda-setting process. As we will see with Van Dijck and Poell’s social media logic, social media do not entirely serve their users, because this is not what the ideology of web 2.0 is about. In addition, in the case of agenda-setting, it is media content – e.g. images, links, and posts – that binds people. Thus, viewing social media as primarily social systems, like Boyd and Ellison, will not take the relevant medium specifics into account.

Interestingly, often, in (popular) literature and traditional media, social media are approached as one entity and some even approach *them* as grammatically singular (see, for example, social media marketer Isra Garcia’s “Social media integration theory model” (2010); comedian Brandon Mendelson’s *Social media is bullshit* (2012); or marketer Erik Qualman’s *Socialnomics* (2012)). Social media are, however, a group of varied media, all with different characteristics. Kietzmann et al.’s model offers a way to distinguish characterizing features of a social medium. The model presents so-called “building blocks” that make up a social medium. Yet, not all of these blocks are always equally present, neither are they mutually exclusive (Kietzmann et al. 2011, 243). This way, a social medium can be distinguished from another by identifying elements that are more present in one medium, but less in another. In addition, the model shows that there is more to social media than sociality. A critical aspect that distinguishes social media from traditional media is that they enable user participation in media content, including the creation of it. Users can now be “gatekeepers” of stories, like the media institutions are through traditional media, leading to voices that otherwise would not have been heard. This way, social media exhibit Benkler’s attention backbone (Benkler et al. 2013, 4). The attention backbone succinctly shows the necessity of taking social media into account in future agenda-setting research due to the participation of the public in media events.

² There is a discussion around the term “Web 2.0”; scholars argue if it even exists. [ZDnet’s Russell Shaw](#) (2010), argues that it implies the web’s development follows a set strategy or that it is different than web 1.0. However, Kaplan and Haenlein use the term as it also refers to a culture with “digital natives” with substantial knowledge and a coding approach that follows economical strategies, as we will see with social media logic (2010, 60).

2.2 The building blocks of social media

Kietzmann et al.'s building blocks are meant to understand the user experience of social media. The blocks are *presence*, *sharing*, *conversations*, *identity*, *reputation*, *groups*, and *relationships* (Kietzmann et al. 2011, 243). As mentioned, they are not mutually exclusive and do not have to be present to the same extent. This way, a medium's distinguishing can be understood features. In other words, the model shows why social media are plural, not singular.

Firstly, the *presence-block* describes the availability of users. This means knowing where others are in the virtual or physical world, and if they are accessible. This way, one can create and manage the reality, intimacy, and immediacy of the media space by, for example, "check-ins" through geo-tagging or online/ offline statuses of users. This is a dominant block of Foursquare, a location-based social medium. Users check in at a location through GPS, showing other users where they are in the physical world. This way the digital and the physical worlds are linked, and it affords incentives to physically meet one another, but also a way to view popular places among users.

The second block, *sharing*, refers to the extent users can exchange, distribute, and receive content on social media. Content can be created by the user, so-called user-generated content (UGC), but it could also be links to content created by others or a media institution. This block is dominant in all social media, as whatever the medium's goal – like presenting photos on Instagram, interests on Pinterest, or locations on Foursquare – it is about sharing content with others. The *sharing*-block can be tied to the *conversations*-block, which refers to the extent users are able to communicate with each other about the shared content. *Conversations* encapsulates the risks of starting or joining a conversation about content. This block also contains the concept of "velocity", to investigate the rate and direction of a conversation. Returning to Project X, if one would join the X-conversation on Facebook, one would associate oneself with an escalating situation. Especially since it was lead by a user with a notorious reputation; Ibe der Führer. Even if one is unfamiliar with his reputation, the username and an Adolf Hitler profile photo refer to provocation (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013c, 17). One risks reputation loss on social media – see the *reputation*-block below – and in the real world by joining

this conversation, if one would be exposed for instigation to violence. The interviews conducted by the Committee shows that the X-participants were aware of this, as the committee assumed that the respondents did not tell the entire truth; pointing to personal damage control (ibid., 39). In terms of velocity, the X-conversation grew quickly. From the invitation on September 6 until the party on September 21, there were over 50,000 messages in a conversation with over 10,000 users (ibid., 22). Most responses were random slurs, not necessarily responding to a post. In addition, most posts, over 56%, had little to none response (ibid., 23). Furthermore, as mentioned, most posts were positive about a party; so the direction of the X-conversation was favorable towards it.

The *identity*-block refers to the extent users (are able to) reveal themselves, which is afforded by tools for self-promotion. It also includes privacy controls to protect one's identity by hiding personal information or using nicknames. This block can be tied to the *reputation*-block and the *sharing*-block, as the identity of the user is also formed by what he shares, which conversations he participates in (or leaves), and as well as by his identity. Nevertheless, social media users are able to maintain a good reputation by sharing or creating quality content, without giving away too much about their "true" identity. Twitter user [@evleaks](#) is an example of this, who frequently leaks information about insider tech news. His leaks were trusted for over a year by notable journalists from all over the world, even though he was anonymous (Ruddock 2013). In this case, what the user shares, becomes his identity. This is also because Twitter does not offer an ample amount of tools for self-promotion: only a profile photo and a description of 160 characters. In other words, the shared posts on Twitter make up most of the user's identity, which differs from the extensive tools for self-promotion that, for example, Facebook and MySpace offer. Still, the latter two force users to promote themselves in a pre-formatted, primarily textual structure. This differs from Tumblr, where users can more freely create/ present their (digital) identity through text, images, and audio.

The *groups*-block refers to the extent users are able or are forced to form communities. This block also encapsulates rules and protocols for membership. These can be analogous with rules and protocols of real-world social groups, like banning bad language or demanding active users, and forming groups on the basis of a shared interest, or on already existing ties like friendship and family. For example, in the Project X-group, an

“unwritten” rule was to respond in agreement with the dominant opinion. Different approaches were greeted with mockery and disrespect (Commissie “Project X” Haren 2013c, 35). As a group is created on the basis of a relation, something that binds people, the *relationships*-block helps to understand how the members relate to one other in that group. This block views a group as a “network of relationships” (Kietzmann et al. 2008, 243). Kietzmann et al. discuss two concepts from social network research, “structure” and “flow”, to investigate relationship traits. The structural-property refers to the amount of connections and their position in the network. For example, a dense and large amount of relations with a somewhat central position, make an influential member in the network. The flow-property describes the strength of a relationship, which can be strong; “long-lasting and affect-laden” and, at the other extreme, “infrequent and distant”; weak ties (ibid., 246). In Project X, the relations were probably not long lasting and dense. The Committee concluded that over 56% of the posts was did not get much response and, content wise, did not contain a meaningful message (Commissie “Project X” Haren 2013c, 23). For a dense community, one would expect a more meaningful conversation.

There was more affection with the event itself, as people chose consciously to join. While perhaps infrequently, a large amount of people did post messages in favor of Project X; the relation was affect-laden. Consequently, we may argue that, as it was the event – social media content – that drew and bound the X-participants, I suggest extending the *relations*-block. Content binds users on social media; or to be more precise, data, as we shall see [in section 2.3.4](#). In addition, social media offer the means to group content. A majority of social media, like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and Foursquare connect content, through keywords, #hashtags, @user-tagging, or location-tagging – which means that content can relate to other content. Users can search on all these elements to get an overview of groups of content, thinking back to Boyd’s searchability. When there are enough links between types of content, like messages in the event group on Facebook, posts with [#projectxharen](#) on Twitter, with recurring (distinguishing) vocabulary like “feessie” (Dutch slang for “party”), or running gags like “waar is dat feestje?” (where is that party?); this content forms a network. Conversations on Twitter and Facebook had a distant connection; while within Facebook and Twitter, they were denser. These dense conversations lead to visible presence of Project X on several social media. Traditional media noticed these messages and found that something

intriguing was going on, also because policymakers were clueless about their response to possible disturbances which could be caused by these messages online (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013a, 10). Here, we can trace the attention backbone. By connecting these messages, they become more visible than others in the vast plethora of messages on social media. This way, exhibiting an attention backbone, as otherwise, these messages would not have been noticed. Here, we can trace an agenda-setting function of social media, as these messages influenced traditional media and policymakers. This will be elaborated in the next chapter.

As these blocks are employed differently by each medium, their interrelation differs, leading a somewhat unique medium. Foursquare, for example, focuses on the *presence*-block as it mainly offers tools connected to location. LinkedIn, on the other hand, is focused on *identity*, as it offers primarily tools for self-promotion and the means to share one's identity. These examples show us why not all social media are able to participate in the agenda-setting process. For example, LinkedIn with its focus on identity does not have the relevant content that is related to current affairs. In addition, a medium does not require tools to distribute content on a significant scale to the "outside", to other platforms, networks; agendas. While LinkedIn offers tools to connect to other websites through linking, it does not offer a central overview of what "trending" to be extended easily to another platform, because it is primarily a profile-centered medium. A focus on *sharing* and *conversation* around (textual) messages, through offering tools like grouping of messages and searchability of messages, on the other hand, better supports an extension. For this reason, the primary media of interest for journalists are Twitter and Facebook, as they offer tools like search queries and #hashtagging (Bradshaw 2012, 14).

Facebook, on the other hand, offers the "News Feed". It gives the user, a simplified overview of important events, "trending" items, in the user's network. The same applies to the Timeline of Twitter. Twitter's Trending Topics even go a step further, as they show important topics in the whole medium based on discussions of users in a specific city, country, or worldwide. Both media contain discussions, links, and conversations about current affair. Combined with the affordance of the searchability of textual messages, Twitter and Facebook's trending issues, or, in agenda-setting terms, salient issues, they have the potential to extend their content to "the outside", to users' offline networks,

through public, journalism, and policymaker's interests. This is strengthened due to the public nature; Twitter is set to public by default. In addition, users can form a community, separate from their existing connections. With Project X, there was a one-issue interest community for an extreme party. It was visible due to its size and that it spread through digital "word of mouth"; users inviting one another. As the group was public, journalists, and interested users could easily find it, while policymakers heard it through an offline network (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013a, 9). Project X demonstrates Facebook's ability to extend to other media, platforms, or offline networks; paramount for agenda-setting, as we will see in chapter three. However, before advancing to fusing horizons, we first need to understand the principles underpinning social media's design, as they are not neutral platforms created to serve the user.

2.3 Social media logic

Van Dijck and Poell's model "social media logic" offers a way to understand the norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies underpinning interaction on social media. Social media logic is a continuation of Altheide and Snow's "mass media logic" (1979) which is focused on traditional media, to understand the media's discourse guiding the public space. Van Dijck and Poell summarize this notion as "a set of principles or common sense rationality cultivated in and by media institutions that penetrates every public domain and dominates its organizing structures" (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 3). Altheide and Snow argue that the power of the media is diffused and exercised through discursive strategies that are accepted as neutral, as they are the dominant way in which media are structured, (Altheide and Snow 1979, 4). As the agenda-setting theory showed in chapter one, media (institutions) are not neutral. Social media logic shows that social media are not neutral either. It refers to the processes, principles, and practices through which information, communication, and social traffic are processed on social media. In addition, it is helpful in questions where traditional and social media converge, as the model shows how social media blend with established media, but also how they differ. It consists of four elements: *programmability*, *popularity*, *connectivity*, and *datafication* (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 5).

2.3.1 Programmability

In the context of traditional media, “programming” is related to the scheduling of media content. Cultural scientist Raymond Williams (1974) argues that programming is an editorial strategy to hold the audience from segment to segment (Williams 2004, 77). Williams shows that programming is cultural and technological. A central institution forms content and, at the same time, it determines that the audience watches content in a continuous flow (ibid.). Van Dijck and Poell argue that programming, in relation to the web, shifts from content and audiences to code and users and from a programmed flow to “programmability” (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 5). The one-way approach of broadcasting changes into a two-way approach, where the content creators and their audience inhabit same environment, both as users. They fill this environment with UGC, while programmers form the environment through algorithms to influence traffic. Programmability, in short, refers to triggering and steering interaction with the platform, but also, through the interaction, users can influence the platform’s communication flow.

While algorithms are just pieces of coded instructions, they lead to a tool that is not neutral, but forming and structuring relational activities. For example, Facebook coined the term and created concept of “friending”, leading to an expansion of language and an implicit redefinition the social concept of making friends (ibid.). In Dutch as well, the verb “to like” has been adopted to an Anglicism, “liken” (Genootschap Onze Taal 2014). Yet, users are not allowed to “dislike”, and “disliken” is not an accepted Anglicism in Dutch. This way, Facebook steers user interaction and it also triggers these actions by promoting them. Apart from following protocols, users are “free”: they can post almost everything, there is no real censorship. Yet, posts may be removed if they violate Facebook’s protocols (Facebook 2014a). Users can also report other users, though that does not always lead to removal. Besides these minor “editorial” demands, Facebook rejects an editorial function, while journalists and other news content makers face this daily. This has consequences on the structure of social media content compared to traditional media products, leading to typos or a hard to find essence of a social media message. It also has consequences for agenda-setting researchers, as we will see [in section 3.1.2](#). In addition, Van Dijck and Poell argue that the algorithms can be challenged. For example, by massively retweeting a certain post to promote it (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 6). Likewise, the members of Project X have also challenged Facebook’s algorithms. Merthe’s Facebook

event was hijacked by the participants of Project X and proceeded to use Facebook to discuss possibilities of public drinking, arranging riots, and other ways to defy the law. Facebook's goal is indeed "helping people make connections" (Facebook 2010). To defy the law was not intended, looking at the innocent examples mentioned on Facebook's information page, like connecting with hobbies or universities (ibid.).

2.3.2 Popularity

From Van Dijck and Poell's understanding of mass media logic, traditional media shape public opinion by filtering out influential voices and assigning them great importance (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 6). Like the agenda-setting theory, mass media logic shows that the media do not always present actual events. Popularity is also present in social media, though in a different manner: "in line with the feature of programmability, popularity is conditioned by both *algorithmic* and *socio-economic* components" (ibid., 7). Facebook follows an algorithm called "EdgeRank" that forms the News Feed; which determines how high posts by user's friends are displayed (Bucher 2012, 1164; Facebook 2014b). Twitter uses an algorithm that identifies "Trending Topics", which measures the popularity of posts on its platform (Rieder 2012). Unlike Facebook, Twitter presents these Topics to all its users, while Facebook primarily displays posts from the user's network. Twitter is reminiscent of broadcasting content, like traditional media, while Facebook only offers a unique overview for each user. Journalists often use the Trending Topics or #hashtags to measure public response of an issue. Yet, there are too many posts to easily analyze the topic and the lack of context – unknown location and authors – makes it problematic to properly use the Topics (Zubiaga, Ji, and Knight 2013).

Despite the claims of Facebook and Twitter having an egalitarian approach to users, the existence of a "verified account"-concept contrasts this claim. This differentiates celebrities from common users, due to their position in the offline world. Moreover, due to that position, they attract a significant amount of followers, thus, they are more dominant on social media than the common user (Twitter 2014a; Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 7). While there is inequality on social media, the main difference compared to traditional media is that users have the potential to influence and manipulate rankings of issues more directly.

2.3.3 Connectivity

In mass media logic, unlike in the agenda-setting theory, media institutions are seen as organizations dependent on public and commercial objectives, “television has packaged the viewer as a viewer product for advertisers” (Altheide and Snow 1979, 219). In other words, connecting advertisers with consumers, and, as mentioned, making appealing media products to attract a large audience. During the 2000s, according to Van Dijck and Poell, the primary goal of the emerging social media was “connectedness” as well. The phrasing of key people in the social media business, like Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, is that social media are about connecting people, not about making profit (Daws 2014).

Social media are, however, about commercialism and making profit, just like traditional media, as they “connect content to user activities and advertisers” (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 8). Connections are made in various ways. Webshop Amazon, for example, while not a social medium, shows a recognizable way to connect people to more than they initially searched for: “[Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought](#)”. These “recommendations” will follow the user anywhere on the internet, including Facebook, through “tracking cookies”, linking users with advertisers (Edwards 2013). Connections can also be made through human actions, like #hashtags, search queries, sharing posts, or @user-tagging. Connectivity is an “advanced strategy of algorithmically connecting users to content, users to users, platforms to users, users to advertisers, and platforms to platforms” (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 9). Connections can be automated, like suggesting who to become friends with, which groups to join, or which Amazon products to buy. Van Dijck and Poell identify a double logic of human connections and automated connections. This double logic leads to a group of scholars applauding social media’s liberating potential, while there is also a group deploring social media as mere advertising platforms (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 8). Algorithms are, indeed, not created to serve the user; but private companies, like [Facebook Inc.](#) and [Twitter Inc.](#), for profits. Media scholar Marianne van den Boomen notes that “the algorithmization of the web, focused on sharing and linking, may primarily be aimed at tracking and targeting possible consumers” (Van den Boomen 2014, 169). Yet, Van Dijck and Poell note that users do not have to “go with the flow” of the algorithms; Project X exemplified this (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 6). Indeed, as Van den Boomen continues, these algorithms “do not foreclose the formation of new types of social organization and bonding” (Van den Boomen 2014, 169). However, as

media philosopher Evgeny Morozov explains in an interview with *Trouw*, the alleged dominant commercial algorithmic approach is just one of the many ways in which technology can be organized; “let us not think that Facebook is a natural manifestation of how the internet works” (Slager 2014, 10). On the polar opposite side of the spectrum, one can identify non-profit platforms, such as Wikipedia that use algorithms to logically display information and link relevant encyclopedia entries. A natural manifestation of technology is, however, that it quantifies aspects of the world into measurable data. This quantification underlies the other aspects of social media logic.

2.3.4 Datafication

In mass media logic, Van Dijck and Poell trace the “ability to reach a large audience in real time onto their ability to do audience research” through polls, ratings, and surveys to better understand the audience and to tailor media content to its wishes (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 9). Again, we view another mention of public influence of the media agenda, something that, as mentioned, Dearing and Rogers did not anticipate [in their schematic](#).

Social media have their own strategies to predict what their users wish and adapting content accordingly; these are encapsulated in the concept of datafication. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, professor of internet governance and regulation, and Kenneth Cukier, data editor of magazine *The Economist*, phrase it as: “to datafy a phenomenon is to put it in a quantified format so it can be tabulated and analyzed” (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013, 78). Data can be viewed as all content in a digitally mediated environment, ranging from messages, posts, and profile information to metadata, such as GPS-location, timestamps, and frequency of visiting (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 9). Consequently, with the development of datafication, aspects of the world that previously were unquantified can now be investigated for further understanding and new questions (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013, 87). A tool to investigate these data, the capacity for polling – gathering and analyzing data – is built into social media (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 9). They are also presented to the users, in the form of Top Stories on Facebook and Trending Topics on Twitter. We could view this presentation is meant as a trigger, to join the discussion and to show that these platforms are alive. These real-time information streams on social media blend with the notion of “liveness”, mainly present in television and radio, though the applications are broader when they are combined; Van Dijck and

Poell mention the analysis of online streams during broadcasts of political debates (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, 10). Social media's focus on liveness, rooted in a commercial approach, leads to the formation of news feeds. This implicates the user experience, as there is a focus on what is trending *right now*, so, news feeds function as a never-ending flow of messages (Levy 2014). This flow also implicates the agenda-setting function, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Journalists and popular authors often say in relation to free platforms like Twitter, Google, or Facebook: "if you're not paying for it, you're the product" (Fitzpatrick 2010). While this is partially erroneous, users of the free Wikipedia are not commoditized, it does point to that on digital platforms, like social media, users are not approached as people. *South Park* (2005) depicts this strikingly in [a scene](#) in the episode "You have 0 friends", where a character named Stan Marsh gets "sucked into Facebook". In the scene, Facebook's "employers" frequently refer to Stan as "profile". We could say that a digital identity is just a set of data based on the user's interaction with the platform. Data are gathered, like the metadata, and are supplied by the user in the entries demanded by the platform (like location, name, or age). In addition, as we saw with @evleaks, his identity was mainly formed by his posts. A social media identity is, thus, not necessarily based on a human identity anymore. Moreover, how human are we, if we are reduced to 160 characters, or a collection of location, name, and gender entries? On Facebook's section for advertisers, data like location, likes or gender, are used for targeting advertisements. In this sense, social media profiles could be seen as data sets for targeting advertisements. "Sociality" also revolves around data: content in the form of text, photos, links et cetera. Consequently, we could say that social media are not about people, but about data. It is data that bind users with others and advertisers, and that is why [paragraph 2.2](#) proposed to extend the *relations*-block.

Now that we understand how social media's design implicates a certain treatment of data, and ultimately, the user experience, we can proceed to view its role in the agenda-setting process. The next chapter will fuse horizon of agenda-setting with the horizon of social media, to transform the theory and to pave the way for further research on agenda-setting in a social media context.

3 Fusing horizons

This chapter transforms the agenda-setting theory. With the findings of chapters one and two in conjunction with real-world examples of media events with social media influence, the theory will be transformed. Inspired by Gadamer, two horizons will be fused, to pave the way for further research to form a transformed agenda-setting theory that is able to investigate media events with social media influence.

The first paragraph is focused on the transformation and reconsideration of the theory's concepts and research methods, as they are both adjusted to traditional media, not social media. Section 3.1.1 delves into the concepts, mainly the transfer of salience as it is the theory's core. Section 3.1.2 critically approaches the research methods in relation to social media. The second paragraph will look at the implications of the commercial design of social media for the agenda-setting function. The final paragraph concludes this thesis; it summarizes the key findings, suggests where further research needs to be done to further transform the theory. Finally, section 3.3.1 contains a normative approach to the inclusion of social media in the agenda-setting function.

3.1 Transforming a theory

The agenda-setting theory hypothesizes, in its most abstract form, the transfer of salience from one agenda to another. Explicit references to traditional media are stripped in this form. In fact, while there is mention of medium-specific cues of salience, the formation of agendas, and the pseudo-environment, the theory does not really "define" its researched media, its primary research focus is content. Yet, the agenda-setting theory's concepts and research methods are adjusted to traditional media, not to social media which, currently, do influence media events and stories in the pseudo-environment. Thus, the theory needs to be transformed to properly understand current media events.

3.1.1 Transforming concepts

Firstly, let us consider the concept of the pseudo-environment. This is where the actual change has taken place, as the media landscape has been expanded with social media. In

this environment, media content and messages perpetuate creating a dynamic reality through the social interaction of the public, media, and policymakers; a reality that differs from actual events. Following dictionary Van Dale, “pseudo” means “unreal”. Moreover, pseudo has negative connotations, classifying the following noun as a sham and as intentionally bad. However, the pseudo-environment in the agenda-setting theory is an inadvertent, primarily unintentional result of the publishing behavior of media institutions and interaction between the other actors; the public and policymakers. Furthermore, as the first research shows, the depiction of the presidential campaign was mostly an analysis of the actual campaign. The analysis was not a sham, nor was it unreal.

Perhaps we can borrow a term from new media studies that better suits an artificially constructed entity that contains alternative depictions of actual events, with people responding to it as if it were reality. New media, like video games, are said to create a reality separate from the actual world: “virtual reality”. This concept has been critiqued, as the “reality” created by technology is not a really real space (Lister et al. 2009, 388). Yet, media scholars Martin Lister et al. note that “in this sense, being virtual is not ‘being unreal’, it is a state produced by actual and material technologies; it can engage our physical senses” (ibid., 125). This way, the consequences of the virtual are not unreal or illusory; people mentally and physically respond to it. Just like Lippmann’s pseudo-environment, it is not a really real space, but it has real-world consequences, as people respond to it as if it were reality. Gilles Deleuze argues that “virtual is not opposed to the real, but to the actual” (Deleuze 1994, 208). Indeed, this describes the entity created by the interaction of public, media, and policymakers more accurately.

By using this term from new media studies, it becomes conceptually possible to include new media – including social media and news websites – in the agenda-setting process and taking the interactive nature of new media into account. Especially if it were up to social media, media events would evolve quicker, as they are always “on”, while traditional media are limited to set release moments. At the time of the inception of the theory, the then-called pseudo-environment was mainly a result of the media agenda; a sluggish entity primarily dependent on media’s publishing behavior. In addition, on social media, content creators and respondents converge: responses are directly connected to the original messages, creating a dynamic for messages to evolve with audience input.

Furthermore, television and radio often incorporate Tweets and Facebook messages in their media products, as “public voices”, thus, creating a different media product than in the time without social media (Bradshaw 2012, 14). This is reminiscent of communication scientist Ulises Mejías’ notion of “paranodality”, describing that nodes previously outside the network now acquire value only by joining the network (Mejías 2007). Indeed, a significant part of the public was not heard before, had no actual value, but has value now by participating in a social conversation; tying neatly with Benkler’s attention backbone.

Now that we conceptually can add social media to the agenda-setting theory, we can focus on how they can contribute to the agenda-setting process. The transfer of salience is an important concept, as the theory is about finding evidence of this transfer. As outlined [in 1.2.1](#), each medium has specific cues for agenda-setting, with repetition as the most powerful cue for all media. Traditional media follow a strategy I suggested to characterize as “amplification through massive dissemination”. This refers to the ability to amplify a message by distributing it to a large amount of people in a repetitive manner. Their mode of distribution, *broadcasting*, gives the potential to extend the reach of a message outside the media agenda; attempting to transfer salience to other agendas.

As mentioned, a considerable amount of media events has had influence of social media and that these media afford messages to be extended to other agendas as well. Thinking back to Benkler’s notion of the attention backbone: due to social media, previously unheard voices are now heard. Benkler defines the attention backbone as a pattern in a network where peers come together and form a cluster of peers, and, this way, becoming visible to other network members (Benkler 2006, 12). On social media, these peers are actually data, as we saw in the previous chapter. One could say that these data are “amplified”, salience through clustering, and this way, become a meaningful whole in the massive amount of social media messages. As these data are connected, they form a network. However, this data network is not intentional; it is an inadvertent result of user interaction with the platform. To better understand this network, we may need to return to Lang and Lang. They describe “collective dynamics”: “those patterns of social actions that are spontaneous and unstructured inasmuch as they are not organized and not reducible to social structure” (Lang and Lang 1966, 4). The network is a result of collective behavior on social media, yet, this is an “accidental” network, as the users

behind these data are not an organized mass like an army (Florian 2012). Especially because users do not connect themselves (at first), but the algorithms do.

Social media are designed for clustering, making connections and measuring these, as we saw [in paragraph 2.2](#) and [in section 2.3.3](#). Firstly, by datifying content, content characteristics (metadata) and users into a quantifiable format, and secondly, offering tools to measure and consult (part of) these data. Through affordances like #hashtagging, search queries, hyperlinking, @user-tagging, or sharing, data on social media are connected, forming a cluster of data. Following the attention backbone, this cluster becomes visible to the rest of the network and, this way, it becomes salient. Put differently: social media follow a strategy I suggest to characterize as “amplification through connection”, leading to a salient whole of messages; in a grand network of separate and dispersed messages. By becoming more visible than other messages, salience is exhibited within the social medium. The cue of “connecting” fits with traditional media’s most powerful salience cue: repetition. In essence, “connecting data” is about *identifying and presenting repetition of data on social media*, strengthening already existing approaches present on social media. According to cognitive research by Lang and Lang, the messages that reinforce already existing habits, tastes, and beliefs are “least likely to reject” (Lang and Lang 1966, 426). Thus, social media are, theoretically, powerful in mobilizing like-minded users talking about a similar issue. Image 2 depicts how salience on and through social media can be viewed, where, the user functions as a gatekeeper of stories.



image 2: **Salience on social media: “Connecting data”**

Also important for agenda-setting, is that social media afford messages to be extended to other media, networks, or other types of platforms; agendas. As journalists often use media like Twitter and Facebook to investigate what the “public thinks”, social media

messages become visible to the “outside” (Bradshaw 2012, 14). Journalists consult these messages mainly through search queries and #hashtags. Yet, traditional media frame social media posts, fitting to their depiction. We saw this with the attribution of Project X to Merthe’s “error” through the tendency of sloganism. Indeed, social media content’s reach is extended, though the message gets a life of its own in the virtual reality. Following this perspective, one could argue that social media messages only get exposure when picked up by traditional media.

Yet, Occupy, and numerous cases during the Arabic Spring, show that social media offer the potential to bypass traditional media, by connecting to the users’ offline networks, the public, without the intervention of traditional media (Iskander 2011; Costanza-Chock 2012; Commissie “Project X” Haren, 2013). In the cases of Egypt and Occupy, we can see Lang and Lang’s notion of enforcement of existing beliefs again. A significant amount of the Egyptian public felt dissatisfied with the current government (Iskander 2011, 1225). The same applied to the Occupy movement, a significant part of the public felt dissatisfied with social and economic inequality (Costanza-Chock 2012, 2). Feelings of dissatisfaction perpetuated between the social media and public agendas, leading to mobilizations in the physical world via social media messages, without the intervention of traditional media (Iskander 2011; Costanza-Chock 2012). This led to nationwide protests of the public, which could perhaps be seen as one of the public’s strategies to transfer salience towards policymakers. In addition, social media can add frames/ attributes, as the case of Johannes the Whale shows. In this case, the traditional media reported, in a somewhat neutral manner, that a whale was dying on a shore in the north of the Netherlands. On Twitter, on the other hand, users formed an anthropomorphic approach to the actual event of the dying animal. Without the intervention of traditional media, on Twitter, users added a frame to the media event of the dying whale. Traditional media adopted this approach, following research by Medialogica (2013a), a television program of public broadcaster HUMAN.

While there is a similarity of topics discussed on social media and on the public agenda, social media do not represent public opinion (Mitchell and Hitlin 2013). This is not so strange, as not every demographic group is represented equally; the concept of the “digital divide” describes this issue (Chinn and Fairlie 2004). Consequently, I suggest assigning social media their own agenda, besides the existing agendas of the traditional

media, the public, and policymakers. Social media have their own issues; present them in their own way, and make their own hierarchy of issues without a dependency on traditional media.

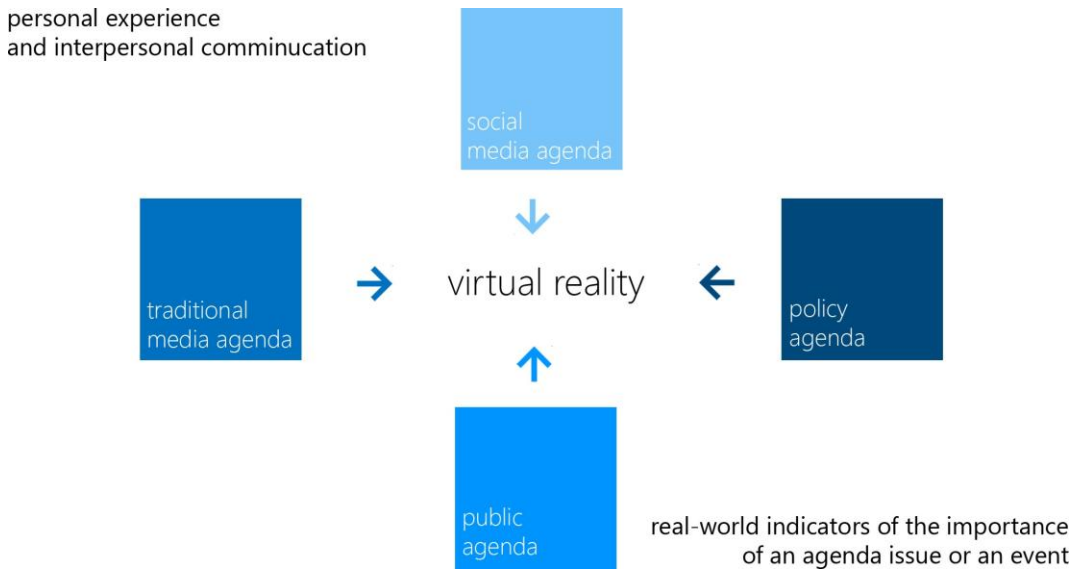


image 3: **The virtual reality and its input; including social media**

Image 3 shows a suggestion for a schematic of how social media participate in the agenda-setting process. We may need to reconsider Dearing and Roger’s partially “linear” approach of [their schematic](#), and their dominant position of the traditional media. I would give all four agendas participating in the agenda-setting process an “equal” place in the agenda-setting process, as each agenda, theoretically, is able to set another agenda, bypassing the traditional media. In addition, I suggest placing the virtual reality, or, Lippmann’s pseudo-environment, more centrally. Lippmann noted that people respond to this environment, because there is no other referent. Thus, we could argue that each agenda partially forms, and at the same time, responds to the virtual reality of stories.

Agenda-setting research starts with the observation that a certain issue is relevant in the virtual reality of stories. In essence, this reality is the result of social interaction between the four actors; traditional media, social media, public, and policymakers; besides the usual internal and external influences mentioned [in section 1.2.1](#) with the real-world indicators and the personal experience. Each actor contributes to the virtual reality by potentially transferring salience to another agenda. By centralizing the virtual reality, we acknowledge the perpetuating nature of current media events and that all agendas

contribute to the virtual reality through attempting to transfer salience. The theory, then, helps us to make sense of the influence of the actors and to view which actor sets the agenda through the transfer of salience, and which actor has been affected by this transfer. This way, it also becomes clear why agenda-setting researchers always find correlations, instead of causality. It is the virtual reality that each actor responds to, not directly to an actor or agenda following Lippmann, and there are many other factors influencing an agenda, including noise. Assuming that actors respond immediately to one actor, like the public responding to the traditional media, would be too (technologically) determinist as well.

Let us view how the schematic works with an actual case study. In Project X, every actor played a part in the X-event and attempted to transfer salience. Policymakers urged people not to go, using their authority, "there is no party" (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013b, 13). Participants on social media connected with their online and offline networks to recruit people; traditional media extended the reach of the X-movement as they found the authorities' response strange and the sudden growth in participants interesting, in short, they found the real-world indicators newsworthy (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013c, 62). Finally, part of the public responded by joining the X-conversation after traditional media coverage, though another part dismissed the party (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013d, 75). As mentioned, messages perpetuate, leading to a story as a social construct of all the actors. In fact, in this virtual reality, salience cues perpetuate, and some have more impact than others. The Committee shows that the policymakers failed: their salience cues were overshadowed by social media's cues, which were, at the same time, more interesting for the traditional media following their sloganistic approach (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013a, 26). Thus, social media were more successful than the policymakers in setting agendas. The agenda-setting theory can put into action here. It fleshes out which actor had actual influence by analyzing the relevant agendas and finding which agenda transferred salience.

3.1.2 Research methods and social media

In essence, when researchers assign social media their own agenda, it becomes possible to investigate social media's contribution to the agenda-setting process. We saw that they have their own agenda-setting strategy: "amplification through connection". In other

words, the agenda-setting function of social media can, then, be researched. Agenda-setting researchers combine two types of research methods: content analysis with ethnographic research (interviews/ polls) as we saw [in section 1.2.2](#). Before considering these methods, we should first determine what should be investigated when social media set the agenda. Are we focusing on one issue? Which agendas are considered? Are we focusing on issues or attributes? Let us, considering the available space of this thesis, focus on *social media setting the media agenda to an issue*. In this instance, researchers need to identify and compare two types of data: the *social media agenda* (SMA) and the *traditional media agenda* (TMA). In essence, the content of messages concerning an issue needs to be investigated to establish the status of that issue on the two agendas. This means that ethnographic research of the public's response shifts from interviews and polling towards a content analysis of data, messages. Before the content of these messages can be analyzed, they need to be collected. In essence, one works with "big data" sets when researching social media data; sets that are too big to investigate manually. We may also need to add methods from network analysis to map and measure the relationships and flows between data. Like the structure and flow properties mentioned [in paragraph 2.2](#), focusing on the position of nodes/data and the ties between nodes/data in the network. This way, the network's properties can be understood. For example, in Project X, the amount of recidivistic posters was less than 1% of the total amount of people that accounted for more than half of the interaction (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013c, 24). As the rest of the participants responded to these messages, this 1% is the main force of the X-conversation, because it provided the data that sparked other users to contribute.

Then, the researcher needs to establish the TMA, which can be done in the same way as before, though with a tilted perspective focused on the media's response to social media salience cues. It could be wise to add a timeline of events, as McCombs argued that correlation can exhibit causality once it is clear that the cause (social media transfer of salience) precedes the consequence (traditional media response). While there are still many aspects influencing the communication process, a timeline can help going from correlation towards causality.

By moving away from polls and interviews, a wide variety of ideas and approaches become available to the researcher. On social media, users do not respond on a pre-formatted questionnaire, thus, researchers may find opinions that are not fixed within the researchers' approach. Yet, using a content analysis to establish the SMA may run into problems. Researchers need to investigate UGC. UGC often does not follow a format like media institutions do, and there is no real editing department supporting or limiting users when creating and responding to posts. This leads to near unfiltered and free responses, but also to issues like typos, sarcasm, or community-specific vocabulary. Furthermore, there is a tendency of what I would call "dispersed essence". As messages are dispersed on social media, the essence of the depicted issue is dispersed too. Posts and responses are intertwined, becoming a dynamic and unstructured construct based on a number of unstructured messages; contrasting traditional media products that follow set rules. Messages can disappear as well, when users or moderators decide to remove them, making it impossible to retrieve the essence. A dispersed essence is perhaps reminiscent of what literary theorist Roland Barthes (1967) proposed with "la mort de l'auteur". Text and author are separate: "a text's unity lies not in its origins but in its destination" (Barthes 1977, 148). On social media, destination and creator's messages intertwine, so their unity, their essence, is found in a collection of messages, not just in one post or thread. On traditional media, on the other hand, the essence of a depiction is found in the depiction itself, as the destination, the audience, does not converge with the creators.

In short, finding and investigating relevant social media messages is quite a task. These were the challenges for the Committee investigating Project X. As the amount of messages on Project X was large, it was necessary to use a computer program for data collection. Yet, computers cannot really understand sarcasm, typos, or a dispersed essence. The Committee was able to solve a few problems, like finding as many as possible ways to spell "party", including misspellings and synonyms (Commissie "Project X" Haren 2013c, 20). In addition, as a significant amount of the X-conversation took place in the public event-group of Project X, it was not too hard for the researchers (and the media at that time) to find the relevant posts and users. Yet, as mentioned [in section 2.3.2](#), there was a lack of context of messages, and a significant amount of users had set their profiles to private, thus, understanding social media depiction was a challenge (ibid., 21).

3.2 Potentially empowering, potentially limiting

Social media allegedly empower their users, though their design shows that they are not tools solely made to serve users. They mainly serve the companies behind those media; companies with commercial interests. As mentioned, social media steer user activity: their algorithms are protocols to connect users to advertisers. There is room to challenge these algorithms, giving users connective power. Yet, what is actually connected on social media are data – their messages, profiles, and metadata – not the users themselves. Here is where the algorithms need to be considered. As journalist Steven Levy phrases, these algorithms follow a “model of continually streaming updates” (Levy 2014). This is reminiscent of the continuous flow of William’s approach to television. Zuckerberg views the news streams in the same way, as according to him, the streams function like television; it does not make demands, but offers a “satisfying” and “compelling” flow of content (ibid.). However, this programmed stream is unique for everyone, unlike on television. By looking at the user’s behavior on the platform and his friends, the feeds on Facebook and Twitter are filled. For example, comments by friends on a tweet appear higher in a thread, links often clicked by friends appear higher in the feeds, or when someone plays games often, messages of friends playing games appear more often than social updates (ibid.). Poell and Van Dijck call this “specialized media diets” in a forthcoming paper (2015) on social media’s influence on online activist culture.

All is focused on a continuous flow of messages. The word “flow” is key here. While the algorithms are prone to place popular messages higher, but more importantly, this popularity needs to be *recent* (Levy 2014). The algorithms do not intend to present messages Trending or place them on top of the News Feed all day, every day, but they are focused on a quick progression of messages. In addition, Twitter offers a tab called “Discover”, helping to find more interesting things to follow that can be incorporated in the feed (Twitter 2014b). Facebook constantly suggests pages to like or to friend people as well. The medium wants the users “glued” to the screen, as it promotes constant impulses to interact with. Overtly hidden in the News Feed and Timeline are advertisements as “sponsored stories” and “promoted Tweets”, presented as if they are status updates of friends or pages users follow. Facebook also displays advertisements

personalized on user's browsing history and interaction on Facebook, on the right-hand side. These change constantly as well.

Apparently, the goal is to keep users online for as long as possible, to make sure they are exposed to as many advertisements as possible. This is still reminiscent to the flow-property of television, as we saw [in section 2.3.1](#). Yet, for television, advertisements are sold per block, between and around television programs. In short, based on timeslot, ratings, and type of programming – essentially commoditized audience types, based on the aired program – advertisement fees are determined, often with a longer contract when audience ratings are stable (Green 2011). As a social media user is more individual than the television audience – users are online on different times, on different online places, while everyone wanting to watch, for example, the *FIFA World Cup* tunes in at the same time, on the same channel – advertisements cannot be sold to a particular "audience type". Consequently, social media follow a model where advertisers pay per follower/click (Cost per click: CPC) or per 1,000 impressions (Cost per mille: CPM) (Facebook 2014c; Twitter 2014c). The more users are drawn to a social medium, the more they are exposed to advertisements; especially because there are no big advertisement contracts like in the television world.

As social media focus on content that is popular *recently*, there is a quick progression of issues. Poell and Van Dijck (2015) conclude it is hard for activists to actually use a social medium to successfully reach and mobilize the right people to achieve a goal. Using a quote by sociologist Manuel Castells "community is a goal to achieve, but togetherness is a starting point" (Castells 2012, 225), Poell and Van Dijck (2015) argue that activists are able to create a sense of togetherness, but as topics progress quickly, this togetherness often does not progress into a community. The activists' issue is one of the many issues competing for attention and exposure. To Poell and Van Dijck (2015), using social media for activist purposes is a "blessing and a curse", as availing social media's potential is a difficult task. Social media are, therefore, potentially empowering their users, but limiting them at the same time.

What does this empowering and limiting mean for agenda-setting? The flow-property harms the agenda-setting potential. Firstly, a large amount of issues competes for

salience, making it nearly impossible to create clear overview of salient issues. Secondly, it harms the most important salience cue: *repetition*. While the strategy of “connecting data” is about identifying and presenting the repetition of similar data, it is not repetition in the sense of *time*. McCombs notes that repeating an issue “day after day is the most powerful message of all about its importance” (McCombs 2004, 2).

For social media agenda-setting, there are two challenges: *becoming* salient on social media and *maintaining* that salience over time. We could argue that social media agenda-setting relies more on Lang and Lang’s enforcing existing ideas than traditional media agenda-setting. Social media’s strategy of connecting data is about identifying and presenting patterns of similar data. Connecting data is actually not focused on content, but on the amount and age of similar data, while traditional media select their issues more consciously, as long as they fit with the format of their media product. In other words, connecting data could lead to a situation in which trivial issues overshadow issues that have importance according to real-world indicators. Traditional media, on the other hand, are not necessarily focused on a rapid progression of popular topics, thus, they are, theoretically, able to focus on a certain issue for a longer period. They can fully exploit *repetition over time* as an agenda-setting cue.

Social media may need traditional media to have an issue picked up to create a dynamic that helps to go from that sense of togetherness to a community that is keen on achieving a goal. As Project X shows, people participating were thinking they were doing something that mattered when they were mentioned by the traditional media, thus, the forming the X-community was strengthened by this attention. Media sociologist Peter Vasterman even argues that the “critical mass” was actually reached *after* attention in the traditional media, contrasting the findings of the Committee (Vasterman 2013; Commissie “Project X” Haren 2013a, 10). Yet, Project X had its origin on social media – it preceded attention on social media before being transferred to other media and agendas. Agenda-setting is ultimately about transferring salience from one agenda to another. It is “careless” about how committed people are or if a critical mass was reached. Yet, to reach the great public, traditional media were needed in the case of Project X, following Vasterman’s findings.

Relying on traditional media for attention is not necessarily the case. Social media also offer the means to *bypass traditional media* to force salience on issues, as researches

on Egypt's Facebook Revolution and Occupy by, respectively, political scientist Elizabeth Iskander (2011) and communication scientist Sacha Costanza-Chock (2012) show. They found that the attention on social media preceded traditional media attention, and became salient on the public agenda, before becoming salient on the TMA. They both state that online mobilization was rapid after the initial start, and for Occupy, an almost immediate emergence of physical communities also played a part in its impact (Iskander 2011, 1229; Costanza-Chock 2012, 10). Even when attention in traditional media precedes social media attention, the case of Johannes shows that social media also can push salience on the TMA. Johannes started as a small objective story in the traditional media, though social media attention, mainly on Twitter, pushed weight and an anthropomorphic attribute on the traditional media (Medialogica 2013a). Put differently, social media forced traditional media to reconsider their original approach. This could be seen as a second form of empowerment besides agenda-setting: to *reconsider salience*. The perpetuating nature led to salience on the political agenda as well, with, for example, a discussion of animal welfare during a rescue mission (ibid.). In conclusion; social media's techno-economic design affects an agenda-setting potential negatively, it does not excise it. Social media are potentially empowering, potentially limiting.

3.3 To be continued: a new agenda-setting theory

The goal of this thesis was to transform the agenda-setting theory. Its research objects, media events, are evolved due the expansion of the media landscape with a new type of media: social media. The goal was to pave the way to make the theory fitting for this new context with social media. This way, the theory could help us understand social media impact from an established perspective in the communication sciences.

Firstly, the thesis investigated the theory through a hermeneutic approach. Then, the techno-economic design of social media was outlined, also following a hermeneutic approach. Finally, inspired by Gadamer, the findings of chapters one and two were fused, like a fusion of the horizons of agenda-setting and social media, to pave to way for a new agenda-setting theory. The focus was on the theory's core concept: the transfer of salience. In addition, there was a critical approach to the theory's research methods to point towards issues with the theory's current methods in relation to social media.

Firstly, I concluded that social media are a group of diverse media; each medium has its own characteristics. Consequently, not every social medium can participate in the agenda-setting process. Reasons for this could be the lack of tools to be extended to other agendas, or a lack of relevant content tied to current affairs.

Secondly, I concluded that social media have their own strategy for transferring salience: amplification through connection. It starts with the datafication of content and users into a quantifiable format and by offering tools to consult these data. Then, through affordances like #hashtagging, search queries, @user-tagging, or sharing, data on social media are connected; "connecting data". Connecting data is essentially about identifying and presenting repetition of data, strengthening already existing approaches on social media. This leads to a meaningful whole in a large network of messages on social media and, this way, salience.

Thirdly, as social media have their own way of exhibiting and transferring salience, and do not represent the entire public or public opinion, I suggested it may be best to assign them their own agenda, besides the existing traditional media, public, and policy agendas. This way, researchers can investigate the agenda-setting role of social media, as the agenda is half of the necessary data to investigate an agenda-setting function.

Based on the above research of the transfer of salience, we can identify two scenarios of social media agenda-setting:

- *the potential to bypass traditional media*, independently setting the public and policy agendas without the intervention of traditional media (Arabic Spring; Occupy);
- *the potential to force salience or force to reconsider salience* upon the traditional media agenda, with the traditional media functioning as an intermediate to set the public and policy agendas (Project X; Johannes).

In both scenarios, I stress that the social media influence is *potential*. Their flow-algorithms harm a participation in the agenda-setting process. Issues are in danger of being overlooked due to the demands of more recent ones, as the flow-algorithms ensure a quick progression of visible issues. This leads to difficulty with issues becoming salient and maintaining that salience. Traditional institutions, on the other hand, have more control over their media: they decide which issues are presented and for how long.

They are not bound to a quick progression of messages. Therefore, the strategy of connecting data appears to be more fragile than the strategy of traditional media.

We may not forget that agenda-setting is an inadvertent result of media institutions' publishing behavior. The same applies to social media, while users can challenge the algorithms with a conscious motivation to set an agenda. As Van Dijck and Poell mentioned, social media reshaped social concepts as friending, liking, communities, so, even when users consciously form a digital community or massively retweet a message to set the agenda, they need to play by the rules set out by the medium's algorithms. The reshaped communities follow social media's algorithms as well. Consequently, social media agenda-setting is, like with traditional media, an inadvertent result of interaction with a social medium.

Further research is needed on investigating social media content: how the theory's research methods can better suit a social media-related question. A handful of problems were outlined by the Committee, mainly related to use of language, like sarcasm, typos, or community-specific vocabulary. In addition, there is the problem understanding the meaning of conversations on social media. As conversations are unstructured, and threads and posts are connected, this can lead to a convergence of original messages and responses, with a meaning dispersed among these messages. Responses could lead to a whole with a different meaning than the original post, so that the complete message changes rapidly – and the essence of the messages is somewhere in the network of posts, leading to a dispersed essence.

Research to overcome these issues could focus on language use online and technical research towards improving software recognizing human language – data sets will still be, in most cases, too large for a full manual investigation, thus, computer programs need to improve. Furthermore, the dispersed essence could be approached as a networked conversation, where one response leads to another, and is connected in a certain manner leading to an essence distributed among all the messages. Thus, research methods and concepts from conversation and network analysis could be added to the agenda-setting research methods. For example, the concepts like flow and structure describing traits of a relation, as mentioned [in paragraph 2.2](#).

3.3.1 With great power comes great responsibility

From a normative perspective, one can applaud the newly acquired affordances, but also lament collateral developments. Social media empower people with a potential influence through social media on traditional media and policymakers, which fits an open and democratic society, and they can help citizens of less open countries to channel their opinions.

The drawback is that social media can have a profound negative influence on the virtual reality of stories and the media agenda. Thinking back to the media event of Beaverton flood in *South Park*, where there was looting, raping, and even acts of cannibalism. While this was an exaggeration, it does point to the power a media depiction of reality can have. Social media now participate in a thorough manner in the virtual reality of stories. Users need to realize their potential influence. As Lippmann showed, people respond to this virtual reality of stories, so they have the potential to have great power. Users need to realize that whatever they post to the world can have actual consequences. They need to accept their responsibility. [Paragraph 3.2](#) touched upon this by mentioning that connecting data could lead to overshadowing issues with real-world important. The same applies to the approach of traditional media towards social media: they should not always present messages or approaches in a heavy manner, as they did with Project X with their superficial sloganistic approach. With this approach towards Project X, they made the participants believe they did something groundbreaking, which led to persistence of the participants and a growth of the movement. They should accept their responsibilities as well, especially because they have an authoritative status. If they report a social media message, they attribute it weight, just by mentioning it – this is even a full an agenda-setting cue as mentioned in [section 1.2.1](#), and this message would literally be amplified.

Consequently, with the potential influence of social media, users and traditional media need to realize that, as Ben Parker puts it in the movie *Spider-Man* (2002), “with great power comes with great responsibility”.

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