

COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS PAPER #2

Agenda Setting in COVID-19 News Coverage

When the pandemic first became a major concern in March 2020, all of the news was focused on covering COVID-19. Specifically, there was a significant focus on the origins of the virus with many reports claiming the virus originated in a Chinese lab as a sort of bioweapon. As a result, many Americans were concerned with the idea that the Chinese government had created the virus which influenced their perception of Asian Americans. The idea that media does not have the ability to change the way we think or what we believe, but it does have the ability to influence what we think about is known as Agenda Setting theory (Beauchamp & Baran, 2020, p. 265). To better understand how Agenda Setting theory works in news media, an examination of a FOX News Network article as well as empirical research of the theory will be analyzed here.

Popular news outlet FOX News Network published an article on April 16, 2020 with the headline “A look at the Wuhan laboratory at the center of China’s coronavirus controversy” (Chakraborty, 2020). In this news article, Chakraborty (2020) frames the origins of the virus with lots of mystery and doubt in US military officials who oppose the bioweapon claim. Yet, well-accredited organizations like the World Health Organization deny these claims and instead claim the virus originated from an animal who passed it to a human. Although it is important to understand the origins of COVID-19, it is only significant in a research sense so we can work to avoid future pandemics. However, news organizations like FOX News work to perpetuate so-called fake news coverage of COVID-19 which reinforces the discrimination of Asian Americans.

Media is often formulated to lead their audiences to certain conclusions, otherwise known as priming. In the example FOX News article, Chakraborty (2020) implements multiple priming strategies to cause their audience to believe the COVID-19 virus was created in a Chinese laboratory. For instance, the article's lead sentence states "The mystery surrounding a top-secret Chinese laboratory at the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic has been growing in recent days as speculation about what goes on behind its closed doors swirls" (Chakraborty, 2020). The language choice of 'mystery', 'top-secret', and 'behind its closed doors' have specific implications of influencing readers to believe the Chinese government is hiding something. Although there is nothing inherently wrong in leading readers to think this way, it is perpetuating false information as Chakraborty references a US official dismissing the COVID-19 bioweapon claims by the end of the article (2020). Media may work to prime audiences to believe certain things, however, Agenda Setting theory claims it is ultimately up to individuals to decide what to believe based on what the media has told them to think about (Beauchamp & Baran, 2020, p. 265).

The various interpretations of most media are labeled as polysemic with three main types of interpretation possible (Beauchamp & Baran, 2020, p. 269). Preferred reading is what the creator intends, negotiated reading is a person's personally meaningful interpretation, and oppositional reading is when a reader opposes the intended meaning (Beauchamp & Baran, 2020, p. 269). All of these interpretations can be applied to the example FOX News article (Chakraborty, 2020). Specifically, a preferred reading is what was outlined above in which a reader concludes the Chinese government possibly created the COVID-19 virus in a lab as a result of priming. A negotiated reading, for example, of an American who has had a previously negative experience with China and/or Asian Americans might more easily believe the Chinese

government created COVID-19 as a bioweapon against America. An oppositional reading might find the article absurd and conclude COVID-19 was not created in a lab as there are opposing claims from the W.H.O., Chinese government, and U.S. officials. These polysemic interpretations follow Agenda Setting theory's claim that the media does not have the power to tell people what to think, but rather what to think about (Beauchamp & Baran, 2020, p. 265). Thus, a preferred reading and possibly a negotiated reading of the example FOX News article may negatively affect audiences' attitudes towards Asian Americans.

Hyun, a Communication Studies professor at Grand Valley State University, and Moon (2016), Hyun's research partner, studied attitudinal agenda-setting in the news media during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Previous research had been performed on agenda-setting in the media, but Hyun and Moon focused their research on the polarization of candidates from partisan news outlets CNN and FOX News with NBC studied as a bipartisan source. They found evidence that watching a specific news program can positively result in agenda setting attitudinal affects as well as no evidence that NBC viewers had polarized attitudes of candidates. Their research also showed that FOX News viewers held strong polarized attitudes of candidates, surprisingly however, CNN viewers did not. Prior to their research, Hyun and Moon hypothesized both CNN and FOX News viewers would have polarized attitudes of candidates as they are partisan news outlets. The issue with partisan news outlets using agenda setting to cause attitudinal changes in their viewers is an increase in polarized perceptions of candidates. With Hyun and Moon's research in mind, news outlets like FOX News have the influential power to cause attitudinal changes in their viewers.

Personally, I have witnessed media influence others into believing ridiculous things like COVID-19 was created in a lab. However, there is no credible evidence that the virus was

created in a lab. Thus, the news media has successfully used their agenda setting to affect what people are thinking about. Only by researching the agenda, or intentions, of the news media can we create informed opinions and beliefs.

References

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