

Agenda Setting and Covid-19 in the UAE

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Abstract: *The aim of the research is to analyse the agenda setting of the main newspapers in the UAE in the critical months of the pandemic Covid-19, between March and May 2020. The objective of this study is to explore the media agenda and the public agenda on the UAE's national news. The research adopts the methodology of content analysis on the three main national newspapers in the UAE, The Gulf News, The National and The Khaleej Times, by determining the frequency of the news regarding Covid-19, therefore discovering the media agenda. In addition, a survey was conducted to determine the public agenda on the topics and news presented on these newspapers; if they actually matched the media agenda. The findings show that the media agenda relatively matches the public agenda as people share the importance of the pandemic of Covid-19 presented in the media. In addition, there is a correlation between agenda setting and the influence on individuals.*

Key words: *Media, Agenda Setting, COVID-19, UAE*

1. Introduction

The news media's ability to set the agenda for a nation and draw public attention on a few main policy issues, is a prodigious and well-documented force. Not only can people gain credible knowledge from the news media about public affairs, viewers and readers often know how important it is to add to a subject based on the importance it imposes on it in the news. In the daily news, newspapers have a variety of hints about the centrality of the issue's lead story on page one, other front-page show, big headlines, etc. Television news also provides various indicators of the pertinence newscast's initial story and the story's duration, etc. Repeated day after day, these hints effectively convey the importance of each subject. In other terms, the news media will set the agenda of the public's attention towards the selected minority of the topic's shape and public opinion. Nonetheless, agenda setting is the idea that what the public thinks about is set by the media. Dr. Maxwell McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw first introduced the agenda setting theory in 1972. The theory affirms that the news is an essential part of constructing political reality. However, the time spent on a subject and the information conveyed in a news article, along with the location of the report, indicate how much a reader grasps and values the importance of the topic. McCombs and Shaw's theory setting agenda notes that when media focuses on a candidate's views during a campaign, the topics of interest are often influenced and decided; this can conclusively outline the agenda for a political campaign in particular but can be effective in other fields as well.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Aruguete, N. (2017), media agenda setting has increased, and continues to do so, since 2005. With an interactive and cyber society, information is exchanging faster than ever, whether it may be credible or not. Due to the excess use of digital media, influence on the audience was and is inevitable. The way this was presented was by including positive and negative statements regarding agenda setting. "Time lag" is a term mentioned to elaborate on

the idea that the audience takes time to input information based on their own beliefs and if they agree with said media Aruguete, N. (2017). Additionally, twitter feeds were observed during the riots in the Middle East in response to economic issues and what was found was that Twitter (also could include other social media platforms) was mainly used for celebrity gossip compared to traditional news media. Separating the two media types for different stories. To conclude, media agenda is strong in terms of how it shapes the perception of the audience on published news stories.

Similarly, Smith (2016) discusses media agenda on twitter; however, regarding the influence of the media users on the presidential election. An analysis was conducted for the content on twitter for this study. The study showed that if a person remains on social media, twitter to be more specific, while following users of political acts, their behavior, beliefs and actions could change with time.

Nevertheless, media agenda setting has not only influenced opinions on twitter, but also being used to encourage political and economic voices. Additionally, in the study in *A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Media Agenda Set by Social Media Sites: Comparing Twitter and Weibo* (n.d.), it presented that China contributed to media agenda when it came to serious issues regarding the economy. However, with the limited information shared online, by the government, media agenda *basically* is set.

According to Rani, S. (n.d.), “mass media, mass culture.” was used to define agenda in the recent past decade of communication in the social and traditional media. The whole theory refers to influencing intellectual change amongst receivers of said media. When applying agenda setting; firstly, relativeness of stories is defined and secondly, stories being discussed on social media cause the effects of change or implant opinions. Additionally, “there are four types of agendas; public, policy, corporate and media.” Rani, S. (n.d.), each of while have very different roles with the effect of change in opinion in common.

Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. (2006) discovered that mass media and long-term effects and receivers came hand in hand; where, as long as information is being shared, streamed or presented, the effect continues to do so as well. Furthermore, not only did media agenda setting influence opinions but also, it affected the way the audience processed information in the media. People are inevitably observing other people’s behavior and vice versa. Lastly, it was admitted that this (agenda setting) may have a negative effect on receivers and caution must be taken before processing it in the media.

1.1 TYPES OF AGENDA SETTING

Agenda setting is categorized into to three types, according to Rogers and Dearing (1988), based on the supremacy of the policy makers and the general public.

1. Public Agenda setting: When the agenda or priorities of the public are dealt with as variables according to traditional assumption. Most studies concentrate on this type.
2. Media Agenda setting: when the media agenda is viewed as the dependent variable, many researchers acknowledge it the most powerful form of agenda building.
3. Policy Agenda setting: when the goals of the dominant decision makers are viewed as variable based. Political scientists have done most of the work on this topic, which was not the target of the researchers in mass communication.

3. NEWSPAPERS IN THE UAE AND THE PUBLIC AGENDA

1. The Gulf News:

The Gulf News was established in 1978, one of the youngest English newspapers in distribution in the UAE that is now owned by Al Nisr Publishing LLC. According to The Arab Media Outlook survey from 2011 to 2015, Gulf News is the most read newspaper in

English and Arabic languages (Gulf News History, 2014). In 2015, Gulf News has around 23 million-page views, 7.2 million visits and 3.3 million unique visitors (Platform, 2015). Alone in print, it has a daily production of 109,905.

2. The National:

Founded in 2008, The National sets a new standard for Middle East quality journalism. Each day The National reaches an influential, English-speaking audience to deliver the latest in news, business, arts, culture, lifestyle and sports, while leading the region in analytical content and commentary (The National, 2017). The National is dedicated in assisting the UAE community at regional level while offering a strong international perception. The National has been awarded regularly for its architecture, reporting, photography, and videography while its undoubted notoriety for perfection that allures business managers and decision-makers. Although the National was initially introduced as part of Abu Dhabi Media, it was obtained by International Media Investments and re-launched in 2017 as a private company. The National is the outlet source for the Middle East to understand the significance of the region.

3. The Khaleej Times:

The Khaleej Times has been around for as long as the Gulf News has been in operation. Its first set up was in 1978, holding a 450,000 global readership. The company forms part of the Galadari Printing and Publishing Company (Khaleej Times, 2015). Galadari Printing and Publishing Company forms a part of the much larger Galadari Brothers conglomerate, with interests in engineering, hospitality, automobiles, and technology amongst others (Galadari Group 2015).

3.1. CONTENT ANALYSIS

The UAE national news, The Gulf News, The National and The Khaleej Times, were observed for three months, from March to May 2020. The analysis is conducted based on the following topics:

COVID-19:

- Daily announcements of COVID-19 new cases, including the death rate and cured patients.
- Updates on the scientist's studies and researches upon finding a cure and/or vaccine for the COVID-19 virus.
- Updates on the locked down places in the country.
- Advised tips and procedures that people should take to stay safe during this pandemic.
- Updates on the travel related policies and plan of action that are being implied.
- The decisions taken by the World Health organization's procedures that people should imply and general updates of COVID-19.

Sports:

- Football Sport League of the country (reviews on the team's performance, winning team and general updates.
- Worldwide sport updates and reviews

Economy:

- The affects that falls upon the delay of EXPO 2020 on the country's economy.
- Tourism, recently mentioning the effects of tourism on the country's economy negatively because of COVID-19 and positively generally due to UAE's attraction sites.
- Internet police, viewing the victims of cybercrimes designated by the country's rules and regulations.

Weather:

- Weather forecast
- Ozone layer positive updates due to the pandemic and lockdown that levelled the pollution percentage down.

In addition to this, analysis of frequency and print space were dedicated to each type of news to stress on its level of importance. To measure the print space of the news, the columns and page space were taken into consideration. Also, the frequency rate was measured by approximate count of repetitive news.

ANALYSIS

Print Space

	COVID-19	Sports	Economy	Weather
The Gulf News	Front page, new and important announcements, also in the health sector	Occupies about three 3 columns	About 40% written in about three columns	Not covered every day, usually covered in half a page
The National	Front page, new and important announcements, also in the health sector	Occupies about three 3 columns	About 45% written in about three columns	Not covered daily, usually covered in about 2 to three columns
The Khaleej Times	Front page, new and important announcements, also in the health sector	Usually covers about 2 columns to three, depends on the news	About 50% written in about three columns	Not covered daily, usually covered in about 2 to three columns

Frequency

	COVID-19	Sports	Economy	Weather
The Gulf News	Daily news, most frequent, about 6000 articles	About 1115 articles	about 2500 articles	weather forecast and alerts, about 389 articles
The National	Daily news, most frequent, about 4208 articles	About 923 articles	About 2189 articles	weather forecast and alerts, about 433 articles
The Khaleej Times	Daily news, most frequent, about 6480 articles	About 3660 articles	About 1,430 articles	weather forecast and alerts, about 330 articles

4. METHODOLOGY

In order for us to understand the media agenda in the UAE we conducted a survey of 12 questions to collect responses of 120 UAE residents about the media's ability to influence the public. This report used a scientific - quantitative and qualitative - approach to collect and analyze data on media agenda setting in the UAE, to better represent the population. The approach was designed to assess the most popular new stories that appeared and were published online over the span of four months.

PARTICIPANTS

The study comprised 120 participants, equal number of females as males, all with the demographic of social media users within the UAE. The chosen medium was due to the

Covid-19 pandemic and the safest option was to send links via Whatsapp, Twitter and Snapchat.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected using online questionnaires through Google Forms. The questions were designed and sent to the 120 participants through social media groups and platforms. The questionnaire varied from open and closed questions, with the option to type what their opinion was on questions regarding media agenda in the country. The questions examined the experience and encounters that participants had with the media in three months from March-May, 2020.

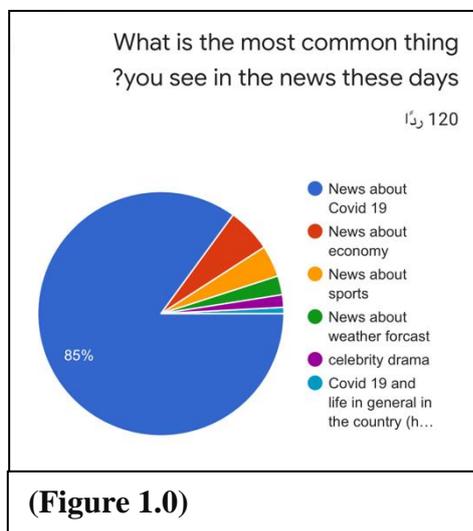
5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents were people from different social groups, age and nationalities and their answers were based on their own opinions and point of views. After collecting the desired number of respondents, the survey has been analyzed as follows:

Firstly, we asked the participants to identify their gender so we could get an idea of what media could possibly be presented to them through cookies.

Secondly, a multiple-choice question was presented, “What section do you look forward to when reading the news?”. The majority – with 40% - stated they are interested in entertainment when checking the news. Another 30% said they look forward to the health section, 19% were more interested in the politics section and the last 7% check the sports section. Some respondents also provided their own answers like “science and tech”, “education”, as well as stories and accidents.

The third question also was a multiple choice that determines, “What is the most common thing you see in the news these days?” where the majority – with 85% - answered “Covid-19 related news”. Then 7% said they were exposed to news about the economy, 5% claimed they’ve been exposed to news about sports, and lastly; 3% see news about whether forecast. Other respondent said they are exposed to news about “celebrity drama” and life in the country. **(Figure 1.0)**



The fourth question asked, “What type of news would you like to know about?” and the majority - with 46% - said they would like to hear about Covid-19. Secondly, 27% would like to hear about the economy, 14% about weather forecasts and 4% about sports. Other expressed their interest in beauty, politics and “development”.

The fifth question in the survey asked, “Which of the following news is most important to you?”, where 72 people answered Covid-19, 24 answered “news about economy”, 11 claimed weather forecasts and 5 participants found sports news the most important. Some other answers also included skills learning, fun games, new opportunities, science and tech, politics, as well as health and education.

The sixth question reads, “Which of these newst topics do you think should be covered in the media?”. 40% claimed “Covid-19 related news”, 32% answered “news about economy”, 9% answered “sport news” and 7% thought weather forecasts. Other answers included uplifting news, positive news, other crises in the world, mental health and entertainment.

The seventh question is a closed-ended question that read, “Do you think the media has a high influence on people’s beliefs and behavior?”. The highest rank of 96% participants chose “Yes” and only 4% answered “No”. (Figure 2.0)

The eighth question asked, “Do you think media has the power to change people’s beliefs and behaviors?” to which 87.5% of the participants answered “Yes” and 12.5% answered “No”.

The ninth question read, “Do you think the media is covering news of importance to the people?” which got a response of 78%, claiming yes, the media is covering news of importance. Whereas 22% claimed it does not cover news of importance.

The tenth question asked, “Do you think the media has a negative effect on people these days?” To which an 83% asserted yes and 17% denied.

The 11th question was an open-ended question

that asked “What are some of the negative effects of the media these days, if any?”

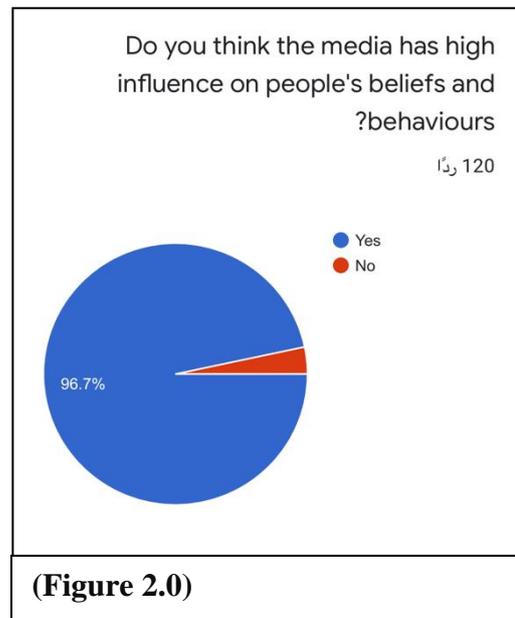
The responses to this were quite interesting and unexpected. Some people thought the news today causes depression to the readers and installs fear in them. Some thought it could lead to the creation of stereotype and judgmental attitudes, as well as manipulate people’s beliefs and point of views. Additionally, it was said that the media could possibly help in the process of spreading rumors and fake news. Some also answered by saying that the media creates high standards for people and promotes the idea of perfection which causes disappointment when they cannot reach these standards.

The 12th and final question asked the respondents, “What in your opinion is news that hasn’t been covered by the media recently?” where they mentioned topics like poverty, sports, positive news, entertainment, tragedies, other health issues, corruption and injustice. The truth about what is happening in different countries and not just what they are told to cover and how COVID 19 is affecting third world countries poorly were also concerns.

After analyzing the survey, it has been clear that although the media provides us with important information that we need to know in our daily lives, it could have a huge impact on the mass perception of the world and it can act as a factor on changing people’s beliefs and behavior. Not only does it hold power to change beliefs and behavior; but also has an influence on their happiness, state of mind and has the power to change or create different psychographics for the readers within the society of the UAE.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper explored media agenda setting in the UAE by reviewing news stories published online - and print - and the impact it had on the receivers. The paper discovered that media agenda setting is worrying and if not addressed, consequences could be dangerous. Social media is one of the key online platforms for fast exchanges of information where sometimes could be misused. Although much more research is needed to determine media agenda setting in the UAE, there is a clear correlation between the presented news and our concerns as a society, “Covid-19 related news” (third question about what they see the most) and “Covid-19” (fourth question about what they would like to know about). Additionally, it could be said that the reason readers want to know more about certain news is due to the repetitive and dramatic headlines, where emotions are imbedded without the knowledge of others. With mass media progressing throughout the years, media agenda



setting could be used both positively and negatively yet is advised not to disregard its power without careful thought.

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