Final Paper: The Danger of Agenda-Setting use on the Internet to Impact Youth

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Abstract

Forcing political opinions on younger generations has gained speed with the digital age. This uses agenda setting, when media news outlets determine which topics become the focus of public attention. Political views start forming from an early age, yet those only become applicable when one can legally vote. Due to that key development time, agenda setting gains importance for the younger audiences. According to Renita Coleman (2007), civic duty tends to come from what is shown in the news. Younger generations rely on the internet for their information. Thus, younger people's involvement and understanding of politics come from what is being communicated on the internet. With the internet being so vast and accessible to many people, the challenge that media outlets face is who can get their information out in a timely manner and reach these audiences. The risk that is conceived, then, is that these young people become bombarded with information and get roped up in issues that may not even be incredibly important, rather it is simply these media news organizations attempting to influence political views.

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As media use transitioned to more nontraditional forms from traditional, there was a possibility of agenda setting growing weaker. Yet, this was not true. Internet news sites are subsidiaries of traditional news media. There is a high degree of redundancy in media agendas even on diverse media. This means that whatever is going to be put in print or broadcast will likely also be shown online through various platforms. Furthermore, most people do not have the time or desire to explore all the issues presented on different websites or channels (Coleman & McCombs, 2007, p.505). This then prompts the usage of agenda setting since people are interested in the events and topics that others consider important. The internet brings Computer Mediated Communication, within this is the application of algorithms. Algorithms can predict what the user likes and would want to see in the future. It reinforces the types of news and

perspectives that the user already consumes. A large part of agenda setting is giving more attention to certain topics over others, these algorithms help with that.

Social media extensively uses these algorithms, which consequently are used on younger generations. A 2015 study found that 95% of teens reported either owning a smartphone or having access to one (Anderson & Jiang, 2022). Before the emergence of digital media, political parties had difficulties reaching the youth. However, with the majority of youth having access to the internet, these political parties can create interactions with their young adult audiences. Researchers have seen a trending relationship between frequent social media use and civic duty, whether that be voting or taking part in protests. Even though the numbers of younger generations involved in politics are increasing, which is a positive thing, there is a large amount of risk that comes with it.

Agenda setting has become very complex due to the growth of the digital age, studies have taken on the phrase "big data," which refers to data that is so complex that it becomes too difficult to process. This rids the need to conduct long-term analyses due to everything occurring quickly online (Neuman et al., 2014, p.194). When things are neglected to be analyzed, the process of how things are concluded is missed. A similar showing of neglect was through the usage of AI in decision making. These kinds of computers were programmed to analyze various situations ranging from employment to education, and what was discovered is that these programs have biases. It resulted in individuals losing housing, being fired from their jobs, and being stopped on the street for being a possibly identified suspect. There was not a separate search into what was going on between the input and output of these findings. While not to these extremes, the same situation could occur with political views.

According to Langer & Gruber, 2021, "research consistently shows that news coverage is an important factor in making policy change more likely and this is especially marked during

"media storms," characterized by explosive increases in media attention." As mentioned before, these can be difficult to analyze since they occur so fast. This is where the possible difficulty of understanding what specifically can be influencing youth lies. Politicians can spread their campaigns through the media, in fact, closer to elections they often do so. Political news at times of elections takes on the most important topic in news hierarchy, politicians integrate current issues and discussions into their campaigns (Bright & Bagley, 2017). What arises is the issue of validity. If what politicians communicate on nontraditional media relates to their campaigns, which is then shared with younger audiences, the way they are presented can become an issue.

Fake news has become increasingly prevalent with the rise of digital media. Explained by Schleffer & Miller, 2021, "content can be produced and relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgement." If politicians are using agenda setting to boost their campaigns, there is a problem with whether their sources are reliable or not. In a 2018 survey, 68% of individuals reported that they regularly see articles and content that seem obviously false (Smith et al., 2019). The knowledge of determining untrue news is seen more in adults than teenagers. The worry is that while the younger generations are looking to social media for their political information to start forming their views, some of it can become skewed and forced upon them since people tend to form opinions based on what their communities believe, hence why agenda setting plays such a large roll.

These unknown applications of false and anonymously sourced news agenda set by politicians have the danger of creating political views based on lies. With the digital age, agenda setting becomes more difficult to track and gatekeep. To help address this, there can be more fact-checking attachments to social media. Instagram already offers a feature that allows users to report certain content as being untrue and explain why. As a response, the platform places a warning screen in front of the post allowing users to know that it is false information. More

media platforms using features such as this one would help acknowledge that there is a plethora of fake news on the internet. Yet, due to the vastness of digital media, it is difficult to define a conclusion. Politicians and the internet both cannot be controlled, and the usage of agenda setting makes it harder to analyze what fake news is being used and how information is reaching people. It is imperative that younger generations understand where their news is coming from and how it affects them.

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