

ISSN: 1597-4324

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication Studies

Number Eighteen, March 2016



Published by the Communication Studies Forum (CSF)
Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Arts,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

International Journal Of Communication

1 Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication Studies

NUMBER 18, MARCH, 2016

ISSN: 1597-4324

Published & Printed By
COMMUNICATION STUDIES FORUM (CSF)
DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION
FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA

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A VERIFICATION OF THE APPLICABILITY OF COHEN'S ASSERTION AND THE AGENDA-SETTING THEORY TO PUBLIC DISCOURSES IN ILORIN METROPOLIS

BY

EBONY OLATUNDE OLA OKETUNMBI,
ISAH FRIDAY ISAH

&

AISHAT ABDULRAUF-SALAU

Abstract

In order to determine the applicability of the agenda-setting theory in an environment different from the one in which it was postulated, this study replicated the pioneer study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) on the agenda-setting theory. A combination of descriptive survey and content analysis was adopted as research methods. The population of study were adult residents of Ilorin metropolis out of which 100 respondents were randomly selected. Contents of The Punch and The Nation newspapers, in addition to Radio Nigeria's 7 a.m. Network News and Unilorin FM's 5 p.m. News Headlines broadcasts were also analysed for the period of 23 April to 22 May 2013. Data analysis revealed that the mass media agenda mostly constitutes public agenda. Therefore, the study confirmed the agenda-setting theory and recommended that government and policy makers should exploit the finding to set public agenda for development.

Key words: Cohen's assertion, Agenda setting theory, Public discourses

Introduction: The Agenda-Setting Theory

What are the public issues in the news today, and what are the public issues on your mind now? The quest for a universally valid all-time answer to that poser is the purpose of the agenda-setting theory, a theory that evidently ranks high as one of the most heuristic theories of mass communication ever formulated. The agenda-setting theory, which is rooted in the famous assertion popularly ascribed to political scientist Bernard Cohen, 1963 (cited by Littlejohn and Foss, 2009: 31) that 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".

This means that the mass media lack the power to impose opinions or conclusions about public issues on the minds of the mass audience. Put differently, people's majority opinion may be similar or the same as mass media opinions on public issues, but that does not mean that the media foist those opinions on people as the hypodermic needle theory suggests. The similarity between popular opinion and mass media opinion on issues may be due to the overwhelming facts, precedents, and public awareness surrounding particular issues. Nevertheless, the mass media often succeed in imposing public issues to consider on the minds of the mass audience by the sheer effect of prominence, frequency, and depth of coverage in terms of position, time, and space devoted to public issues. In other words, the mass media perpetually exercise the power to duplicate news media priorities as public priorities.

The basic ideas that culminated in the agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 dates half century further back to a 1922 publication by Walter Lippmann titled, *Public Opinion*, and to Cohen's famous assertion (1963). Lippmann argued that the mass media dominate the creation of images in the minds of the public because the public reacts, not to actual events, but to the pictures created in their heads by the mass media. The mass media constitute the primary connection between events in the world and the pictures of these events in the minds of the people which Lippmann called *pseudo environment* (Baran and Davis, 2009: 279). This stems from Lippmann's observation that "the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance" (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008: 293).

The agenda-setting theory was formulated by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their article, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media" (1972). This was sequel to the findings of their study (1968) on Chapel Hill voters in the United States of America which provided empirical support in favour of Cohen's assertion (Udende, 2014: 212; Baran, and Davis, 2009; Littlejohn and Foss, 2009:31; Littlejohn and Foss, 2008: 293; and Baran, 2006: 427). The study was designed to determine whether salient issues in the media during the 1968 American presidential election campaigns coincided with salient issues in the minds of the electorate. In the study, McCombs and Shaw content-analysed four local newspapers, *The New York Times*, the newsmagazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, and the *NBC* and *CBS* evening news broadcasts, which were news sources the Chapel Hill voters used during the campaign (Udende, 2014: 212; Baran, and Davis 2009: 279; Littlejohn and Foss, 2009:31; Littlejohn and Foss, 2008: 293; and Baran, 2006: 427). Furthermore, Littlejohn and Foss (2009:31) summarised the findings of the study and the essence of the agenda-setting theory as follows.

McCombs and Shaw found an almost perfect correlation between the issues listed by the voters as most important and the topics that were given the most space, time, and prominence in the news media. Additionally, the priority order given by voters to the issues almost perfectly matched the relative amounts of time or space given by the media to coverage of those issues. McCombs and Shaw concluded that there is a strong relationship between the emphasis placed on issues by the media (that is, the *media agenda*) and voters' own judgments about the salience and importance of campaign issues (that is, the *public agenda*). The researchers suggested that this was a straightforward, one-way, causal relationship, meaning that we learn from the media not only about an issue but also how much importance to attach to it.

Against this background, these current researchers sought to replicate in a Nigerian setting, the study conducted by McCombs and Shaw in an American environment.

Contextual Clarifications

In the context of this paper, the researchers assigned the following meanings to the following expressions:

Cohen's assertion is the popular and often cited declaration by Bernard Cohen about the relationship between issues in the mass media and issues on the minds of members of the public.

Verification is the attempt to test the agenda-setting theory in an environment different from where it was postulated in order to confirm or contest it.

Applicability refers to the issue of whether the agenda-setting theory is as relevant in another environment as it was in the environment different from where it was postulated.

Public discourse refers to salient issues in the society that occupy the minds of members of the public.

Ilorin metropolis refers to the capital of Kwara State, Nigeria and its adult residence who are mindful of salient public issues.

Review of Research Reports on the Agenda-Setting Theory

Evidence abound in literature that the applicability of the agenda-setting theory in different environments had been established. In that sense, Anaeto, Onabajo, and Osifeso (2008: 187) had observed that, "a great deal of research has already documented the agenda-setting effect with the conventional mass media".

Meanwhile, a study by Amujo and Otubanjo (2012) cited by Isah (2013: 32) titled, "Agenda Setting Effects of Business News on Stakeholders' Perception of Profit Led Business Organisations" revealed that that the amount of news coverage devoted to specific attributes of some business organizations in Nigeria is proportionately similar to stakeholders' perceptions of those organizations in terms of those attributes. The study also revealed that the direction of mass media coverage an organization receives is directly proportional to public perception of that organization. In other words, the more positive the mass media coverage an organization receives, the more positive the public perceives that organization. Also, the more negative the mass media coverage an organization receives, the more negative the public perceives that organization. This shows that media agenda is the same as public agenda as far as the study is concerned.

In addition, a study by Yoon (1998) corroborated the basic principle of the agenda-setting theory. Yoon's study, according to Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008: 188), revealed that there is "...a positive correlation between media exposure and agreement with the media agenda with (respondents) with higher exposure to the web newspapers showing the greatest similarity between their personal agenda and the web newspaper agenda".

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to replicate the study that formed the basis of the agenda-setting theory in order to determine its validity in an environment different from the one in which the pioneer study was conducted. However, the specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- (A) To determine the dominant issues in national dailies between 23 April and 22 May 2013.
- (B) To determine the dominant issues on radio stations in Ilorin between 23 April and 22 May 2013.
- (C) To determine the dominant issues on the minds of Ilorin residents between 23 April and 22 May 2013.
- (D) To determine whether there is a similarity between issues in the mass media and the issues on the minds of Ilorin residents at the time of the study.
- (E) To determine whether positions of the mass media on dominant issues influence Ilorin residents' positions on those issues during the period of the study.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of the study, the researchers sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant issues in national dailies between 23 April and 22 May 2013?
2. What are the dominant issues on radio stations in Ilorin between 23 April and 22 May 2013?
3. What are the dominant issues on the minds of Ilorin residents between 23 April and 22 May 2013?
4. Is there a similarity between issues in the mass media and the issues on the minds of Ilorin residents at the time of the study?

5. Do positions of the mass media on dominant issues influence Ilorin residents' positions on those issues during the period of the study?

Methods of Study

The study adopted a combination of two research methods namely descriptive survey, and content analysis. Therefore, two corresponding research instruments, which were a structured questionnaire and a code-sheet, were used for the survey and content analysis components of the study. Furthermore, there were two major populations in the study. The first one consisted of all adult residents of Ilorin metropolis who were mindful of current issues in the public domain, out of which a sample size of 100 respondents, who were exposed to media messages were randomly selected for the survey aspect of this study.

The second population comprised Radio Nigeria 7 a.m. *Network News*, Unilorin FM 5 p.m. *News Headlines*, in addition to *The Punch* and *The Nation* newspapers. Out of this, 22 editions each of *The Punch* and *The Nation* newspapers, in addition to the Radio Nigeria 7 a.m. *Network News* and Unilorin FM 5 p.m. *News Headlines* broadcasts were purposively selected for the content analysis aspect of this study. The period selected for content analysis was 23 April to 22 May 2013.

To obtain face-validity of the questionnaire, the study conducted a pilot-test of the structured questionnaire among 5% ($n = 5$, $N = 100$) of the target respondents. The study also obtained face-validity for the code-sheet through the inter-coder validity method. To gather data for the study, copies of the research questionnaire were administered and retrieved from 100 respondents in the Ilorin metropolis. Conversely, the code-sheet was used to extract the manifest contents of the selected media. The media contents were assigned numbers and represented on the code-sheet.

Data Analyses and Results

Data on each research question were analysed and presented as follows:

Research Question 1

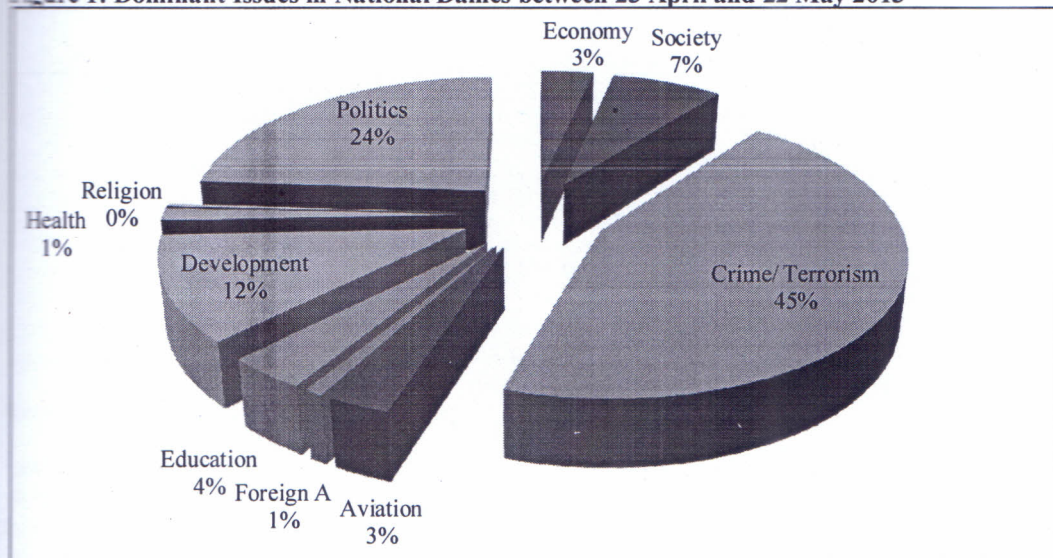
What are the dominant issues in national dailies between 23 April and 22 May 2013? Table 1 and Figure 1 show the dominant issues in the national dailies between 23 April and 22 May 2013 as coded by these researchers.

Table 1: Dominant Issues in National Dailies between 23 April and 22 May 2013

Content Categories	Newspapers		Total
	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	
Economy	4% (n=6)	3% (n=6)	3% (n=12)
Society	8% (n=12)	7% (n=13)	7% (n=25)
Crime/Terrorism	56% (n=85)	36% (n=71)	45% (n=156)
Aviation	3% (n=5)	3% (n=5)	3% (n=10)
Foreign Affairs	0% (n=0)	2% (n=3)	1% (n=3)
Education	5% (n=8)	3% (n=5)	4% (n=13)
Development	12% (n=19)	12% (n=23)	12% (n=42)
Health	2% (n=3)	1% (n=2)	1% (n=5)
Religion	1% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	1% (n=1)
Politics	19% (n=14)	70 (35%)	24% (n=84)
Total	100% (n=153)	100% (n=198)	100% (N=351)

The table and figure show that crime/terrorism received the highest coverage of 45% (n=156) followed by politics with 24% (n=84). Issues on development recorded 12% (n=42) while Societal news was 7% (n=25). Education and economic news recorded 4% (n=13) and 3% (n=12) respectively while aviation and health had 3% (n=10) and 1% (n=5) respectively. Foreign affairs had 1% (n=3) while religious news recorded the lowest with 0% (n=1). Therefore, the top-three dominant issues in the national dailies between 23 April and 22 May 2013 are crime/terrorism, politics, and societal news respectively.

Figure 1: Dominant Issues in National Dailies between 23 April and 22 May 2013



Research question 2

What are the dominant issues on radio stations in Ilorin between 23 April and 22 May 2013? Table 2 and Figure 2 show the distribution of the radio news headlines according to the content categories coded in this study. The analysis shows that religion recorded the lowest headlines with 3% (n=4). Development oriented headlines recorded the highest with 21% (n=31).

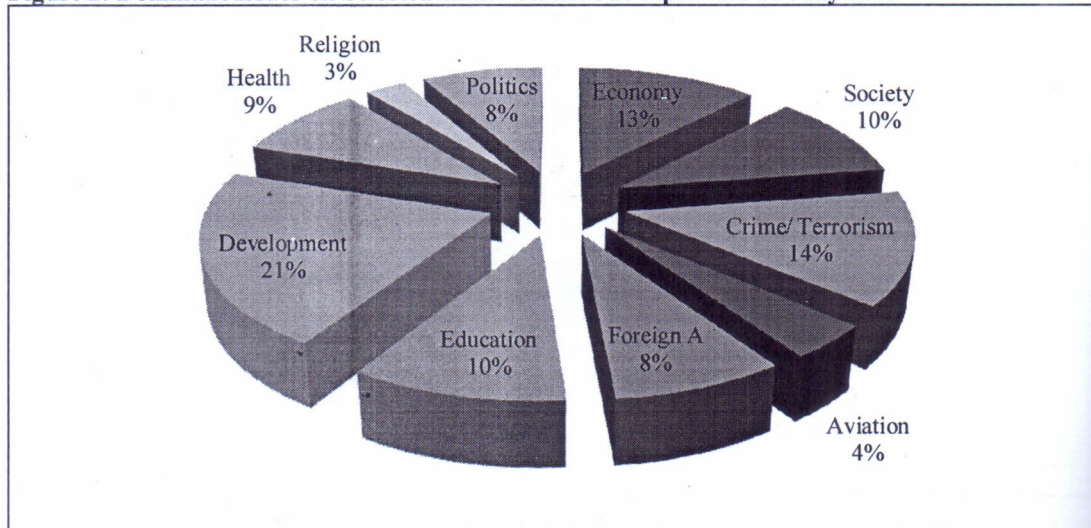
Table 2: Dominant Issues on Selected Radio Stations between 23 April and 22 May 2013

Content Categories	Radio Stations		Total
	Radio Nigeria	Unilorin FM	
Economy	15% (n=13)	8% (n=5)	12% (n=18)
Society	10% (n=9)	10% (n=6)	10% (n=15)
Crime/Terrorism	9% (n=8)	20% (n=12)	14% (n=20)
Aviation	5% (n=4)	3% (n=2)	4% (n=6)
Foreign Affairs	8% (n=7)	8% (n=5)	8% (n=12)
Education	8% (n=7)	14% (n=8)	10% (n=15)
Development	23% (n=20)	19% (n=11)	21% (n=31)
Health	11% (n=10)	5% (n=3)	9% (n=13)

Religion	3% (n=3)	2% (n=1)	3% (n=4)
Politics	7% (n=6)	10% (n=6)	8% (n=12)
Total	100% (n=87)	100% (n=59)	100% (N=146)

Crime/terrorism came second with 14% (n=20), economy recorded 13 % (n=18) headlines and education had 13% (n=15). Health had 9% (n=13) headlines with politics and foreign affairs recording 8% (n=12) apiece while Society and Aviation had 10% (n=15) and 4% (n=6) respectively. Therefore, the top-three dominant issues on radio stations between 23April and 22 May 2013 are development, crime/terrorism, and economy respectively.

Figure 2: Dominant Issues on Selected Radio Stations 23 April and 22 May 2013



Research Question 3

What are the dominant issues on the minds of Ilorin residents between 23 April and 22 May 2013?

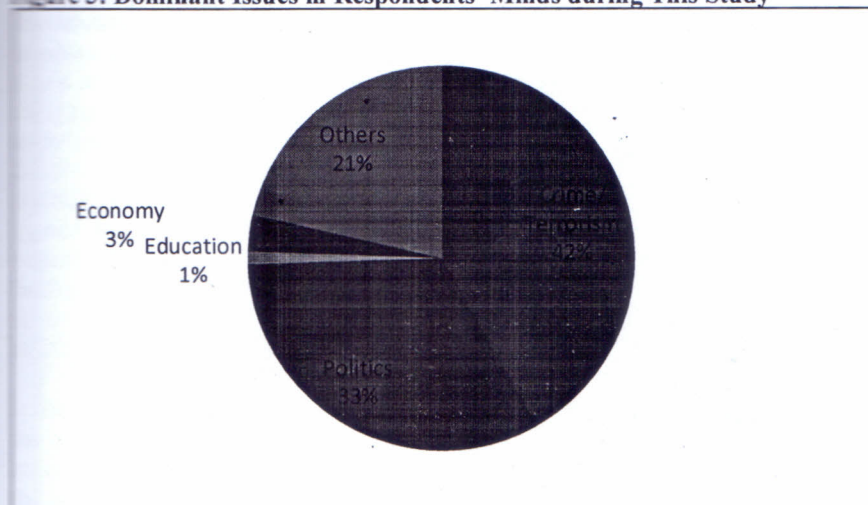
Table 3: Dominant Issues in Respondents' Minds during This Study

Issues	Frequency
Crime/Terrorism	42% (n=41)
Politics	33% (n=32)
Education	1% (n=1)
Economy	3% (n=3)
Miscellaneous	21% (n=21)
Total	100% (N=98)

Table 3 and Figure 3 reveal that crime/terrorism issues topped the agenda of discussions by respondents during the study with a frequency of 42% (n=41). Politics was next with 33% (n=32) followed by miscellaneous 21% (n=21). Economy had 3% (n=3) while education had 1% (n=1) frequency count on the agenda of discussions by respondents during the study. Therefore, the dominant

issues on the minds of Ilorin residents between 23 April and 22 May 2013 were crime/terrorism, politics, and miscellaneous issues respectively.

Figure 3: Dominant Issues in Respondents' Minds during This Study



Research Question 4

Is there a similarity between issues in the mass media and the issues on the minds of Ilorin residents at the time of the study? To answer research question 4, the researchers compared the answers obtained in respect of research questions 1 and 2 on one hand, and research question 3 on the other hand. In respect of research question 1, the study had established that the top-three dominant issues in the national dailies between 23 April and 22 May 2013 are crime/terrorism, politics, and development news respectively (Table 1 and Figure 1). Similarly, in respect of research question 2, the study had established that the top-three dominant issues on radio stations between 23 April and 22 May 2013 were development, crime/terrorism, and economy respectively (Table 2 and Figure 2).

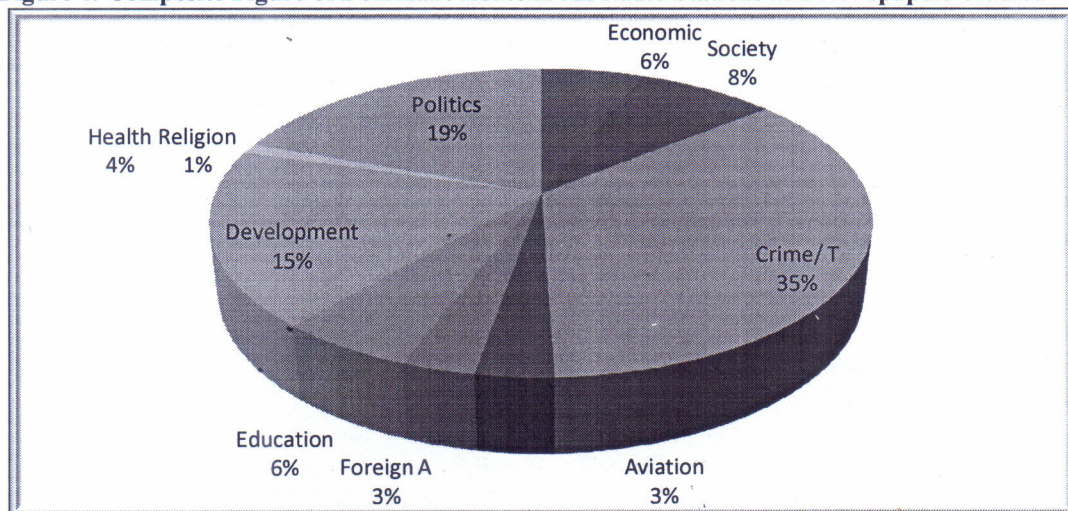
As shown in Table 4 and Figure 4, the top-three dominant issues in the two radio stations and two newspapers studied were crime/terrorism, politics, and development with frequency counts of 35% (n=176), 19%(n=96), and respectively 15% (n=73).

Table 4: Composite Table of Dominant Issues in All Radio Stations and Newspapers Studied

Content Categories	Radio Nigeria	Unilorin FM	The Punch	The Nation	Total
Economy	15% (n=13)	8%(n=5)	4% (n=6)	3% (n=6)	6% (n=30)
Society	10% (n=9)	10% (n=6)	8% (n=12)	7% (n=13)	8%(n=40)
Crime/Terrorism	9% (n=8)	20% (n=12)	56% (n=85)	36% (n=71)	35% (n=176)
Aviation	5% (n=8)	3% (n=2)	3% (n=5)	3% (n=5)	3% (n=16)
Foreign Affairs	8% (n=7)	8% (n=5)	0% (n=0)	2% (n=3)	3% (n=15)
Education	8% (n=7)	14% (n=8)	5% (n=8)	3% (n=5)	6% (n=28)
Development	23% (n=20)	19% (n=11)	12% (n=19)	12% (n=23)	15% (n=73)
Health	11% (n=10)	5% (n=3)	2% (n=3)	1% (n=2)	4% (n=18)
Religion	3% (n=3)	2% (n=1)	1% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	1%,(n=5)

Politics	7% (n=6)	10% (n=6)	9% (n=14)	35% (n=70)	19%(n=96)
Total	100%(N=87)	100%(N=59)	100%(N=153)	100%(N=198)	100%(N=497)

Figure 4: Composite Figure of Dominant Issues in All Radio Stations and Newspapers Studied



Moreover, in respect of research question 3, the study had established that, the dominant issues on the minds of Ilorin residents between 23 April and 22 May 2013 crime/terrorism, politics, and miscellaneous issues respectively (Table 3 and Figure3). In other words, content analysis revealed that crime/terrorism and politics were the top-two issues in the mass media at the time of the study, while survey also revealed that crime/terrorism and politics were the top-two issues on the minds of Ilorin residents during the same period. Therefore, in answer to research question 4, there is a similarity between issues in the mass media and the issues on the minds of Ilorin residents at the time of the study.

Research Question 5

Do positions of the mass media on dominant issues influence Ilorin residents' positions on those issues during the period of the study? To answer research question 5, respondents were asked whether their positions on dominant issues in the public domain were influenced by positions of the mass media on those issues. Table 5 shows that majority of the respondents (73%, n=72) agreed that their opinions on dominant issues in the public domain were influenced by media positions on those issues, while 27% (n=26) respondents disagreed. Therefore, one can say that the opinions of the people are often the same as the opinion of the mass media.

Table 5: Whether Respondents' Positions on Dominant Issues Were Influenced By Positions of the Mass Media on Those Issues

Response	Frequency
Yes	73% (n=72)
No	27% (n=26)
Total	100% (N=98)

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study has established that the top-three dominant issues in the national dailies at the time of the study were crime/terrorism, politics, and societal news. For the same period, the top-three dominant issues on radio stations were development crime/terrorism, politics, and economy. Similarly, the dominant public issues on the minds of Ilorin residents between 23 April and 22 May 2013 were crime/terrorism, politics, and miscellaneous issues. This means that there is a close similarity between issues in the mass media and the issues on the minds of Ilorin residents at the time of the study. The study has also corroborated the findings of research reports reviewed in this study. In other words, this study has verified and confirmed the basic principle of the pioneer study by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) which culminated in the emergence of the Agenda-Setting theory. The basic principle verified and confirmed is that the mass media continuously wield the power to make media agenda become public agenda or as Littlejohn and Foss (2009: 31) explained it "...news media priorities become public priorities" in their agenda setting function. This conclusion stemmed from the findings in this study that salient issues in the media between 23 April and 22 May 2013 coincided with salient issues in the minds of the respondents in the Ilorin metropolis. Therefore, one can say that the agenda of the people are often the same as the agenda of the mass media.

However, majority of respondents reported that mass media opinions on issues in the public domain influence their opinions and one can say that the opinions of the people are often the same as the opinion of the mass media. This is contrary to the assumption of the agenda setting theory that the mass media do not determine people's opinion on various issues, that the mass media only determine the issues on people's minds at any point in time. In other words, it cannot be categorically concluded here that the first part of Cohen's famous assertion that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think..." has been confirmed in this study. This stemmed from the fact that even though majority of the respondents (73%, n=72) agreed that their opinions on dominant issues in the public domain were influenced by media positions on those issues, the similarity between popular opinion and mass media opinion on issues may be due to the overwhelming facts and precedents surrounding particular issues. This may however be due to overwhelming facts, precedents, and public concerns surrounding particular issues.

Since it has been confirmed in this study that the mass media wield the perpetual power to transform media agenda into public agenda, governments and policy makers should exploit the knowledge in getting the public to think about issues that may continuously stimulate the society towards improvements in current conditions. Littlejohn and Foss (2008: 294) encapsulated that point appropriately in their assertion summary of the agenda-setting process that "media agenda affects the public agenda, and the public agenda affects the policy agenda".

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