Exploring How the Rational Agenda Happens in Present Day Politics

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Agenda setting is more complex than ever. Gone are the days when major network news organizations established political agenda. Social media has complicated establishing the political agenda. The connection that appears to occur between political victory and social media has had an influence on how political agenda happens. The digital democracy that is developing encourages citizen involvement in all phases of the political process. Media's power to frame political happenings and to establish political agenda appears to have rationally happened because of the information power of large news organizations. Nowadays, agenda setting is substantially influenced by how well an idea contends in cyber politics.

Has this change to more virtual political reality had a negative effect on what we think of as political agenda? While political commentators added substantial drama to putting together the political agenda, the influence of social media was an inevitable factor in changing how we reason about politics. The virtual political reality was certain to involve more people than anything before this. Public sphere had preceded Internet motivating political activity since the 18th century only to be eclipsed by the mass media strength of radio and television. When Internet began mass political participation again the public sphere was reborn transformed into what we now think of as the virtual political reality. The presence of an astounding
number of people in virtual reality who were again concerned about becoming involved with politics inevitably resulted in a substantial influence in agenda setting to happen.

Media has traditionally had substantial influence on how the political agenda is established. Any concerned that is newsworthy has been recognized as more likely to attract the attention of politicians. The rational significance of media's influence in building the political agenda has been an accepted truth in American politics. The ability of journalists to aggregate citizen concerns has usually been valued positively in democratic process. The image of the political commentator wisely appraising citizens of legitimate issues of the day reassures that democracy is a viable process. American politics has had respect for the analytic strengths of news professionals, and experts have been predominantly favorable in analyzing how professional news organizations contribute to democracy.

While theories may be enthusiastic about the increased importance of the public sphere thanks to the virtual public sphere, how the change affects democracy is less certain. The echo chamber that social media is described to create is astounding political phenomena for sure, but how dependable is this innovation in bringing rational issues to the fore? An objective of this paper is to contrast the staid and rational analytic idea news professionals create with the phenomenological reality emerging from social networking. As social networking and virtual political reality increase in importance with each passing election, some questions need to be asked about how this phenomenological innovation in politics affects rational agenda setting.
Is the Agenda Process Troubled with Emerging Cyber-Politics Dilemmas?

The agenda process has been a concern of those theorists who study democratic responsiveness. Greater civic engagement has been seen as producing improvements in the quality of democracy. Robert Putnam has identified two effects from increased civic engagement. First, increased levels of social capital occur as "social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness" increase. The second effect is mass publics more effectively communicating preferences to political leaders and achieve successful representation of those preferences in public policy. (Hill and Matsubayshi, p. 215)

Putnam's analysis of social capital anticipates Jurgens Habermas analysis of the virtual public sphere. The public sphere developed in Europe in the 18th century. This era witnessed the beginning of coffee houses, salons, and other public places where people of all classes could discuss politics. This public sphere endured and was influential in politics until the rise of mass media. Television and radio returned people to their homes and made them audience to mass media presentation. The public sphere atrophied as mass media developed. Internet revived the public sphere in the form of the virtual public sphere. With Internet, people were again contributing ideas and discussing various perspectives on politics with each other. Virtual reality had replicated the coffee houses, salons, and other public places of the earlier century. (Cropf, p. 35)

Analyzing how social capital results from citizens networking results in concludes those who pursue social capital are more efficacious citizens. The virtuousness of social capital ordinarily does produced an ability to present ideas any more cooperative and reasonable manner.
Trustworthiness and a recognized ability to establish and maintain rapport are personal traits highly correlated with having substantial social capital. Amassing social capital leads to a person having more voice in agenda processes.

The eighteenth-century public sphere allowed citizens to network there political discussions and to establish recognized trustworthy virtues among their fellows. While more elaborate opportunities for networking where to emerge later, early groupings around coffee houses, salons and other public places did produce something akin to what we would call social capital today. When virtual public sphere emerged opportunities happened for interactions that could lead to trustworthy, dependable personalities more likely to influence the political agenda. Appreciating the political change that this newly-created group represents in our politics is somewhat troublesome. The equation in politics has changed in the last few decades because of virtual reality, and many assumptions from preceding decades have been questioned. Replacing old truths with new perspectives is a difficult task.

The influence of mainstream media is still recognized as the preponderant influence in agenda setting. Rogstad states, “Mainstream media, such as TV, radio, and newspapers, still represent the most important platforms for public debate and creation of the public agenda today.” (Rogstad, p. 142) The issue is not so much whether online media rivals mainstream media, but how Internet influences by redefining some determinate issues. The effect of Internet is usually theorized as providing an echo chamber for news related issues that first appear in mainstream media. In a few instances, Internet effectively promotes a subject until mainstream media takes over. There is a third possibility which is that somehow defining issues are taken over by internet.
The analysis presented here recognizes the importance of mainstream media, but seeks to question if Internet's real influence is based on an ability to selectively develop issues with substantial determinative strength. Phenomena including influence leaders and political empowerment could contribute to the real political power of Internet. Possibly, the most influential people in political groups are more tuned in to Internet. Content received online could be thought of greater salience than ideas receive from mainstream media.

Empowerment follows from ICT, in many instances. The same people do not become politically active when ICT is ubiquitous. How ICT produces different political leaders has been viewed phenomenologically throughout Internet's development.

The issues in agenda setting have been a concern of political theory for two decades. “Deliberative democracy” is the phrase that has been used to assess the rational accomplishments of the agenda-setting process. The rational assumption is that agendas should somehow be arrived at so that they reflect the will of the people. Agenda-setting processes that are gimmick laden from mainstream media, ICT, or any influence combination are rejected. Democratic practice is thus evaluated as deliberative democracy only when the connection between the people's wishes and politics is authentic. (Fishkin et al., pp. 1030-31)

Deliberative democracy advocates have question reform practices like initiative and referendum as inadequate agenda setting. The power of special interests to influence initiative and referendums have cause these practices to be faulted. Alternatives like the citizen assemblies in Ontario and British Columbia are presented as more democratic options.
In one Canadian instance, 23,000 voters were sent invitations to be involved with the legislatively mandated citizen assembly. 964 people attended the selection meeting, and 158 of them were randomly-selected. This group then deliberated deciding on citizen initiative measures for the ballot. (Fishkin et al., p. 1032)

Another example of deliberative agenda setting occurred in California in 2011. What's Next California (WNC) convened a statewide sample of registered voters numbering 412 in Torrance. Those that convened consider 30 proposals vetted by an advisory group. Proposals were about four subjects: the initiative process, the legislature, state/local relations, and taxation/spending. After a weekend of deliberation, those attending evidenced increase knowledge about the subjects discussed and some changed attitudes. (Fishkin et al. pp. 1033)

Both the citizen assemblies and the WNC project were attempts to improve deliberative democracy. How the political agenda is created is deemed a serious concern of democratic theory. A somewhat different approach to the democratic issues in agenda setting occurred around the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). In this case, opinion entrepreneurs deliberately attempted an anti-ACORN campaign in 2008.

According to Dreier and Martin, The conservative echo chamber orchestrated the anti-ACORN campaign. The idea was to associate candidate Barack Obama with an anti-American, anti-capitalist, ultra-liberal movement capable of substantial voter fraud. Mainstream media picked up the anti ACORN campaign. Dreier and Martin's data analyzes 55 ACORN stories appearing in the Washington Post 2007-2008. 47.3 percent had a vote
fraud narrative frame, 16.4% used an assist voter registration frame, and 14.5% carried an eliminate predatory lending frame. By contrast, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Minneapolis Star Tribune*, and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* presented a different image of ACORN based on the organization's long-time presents in these communities. Positive frames dominated ACORN story in these three newspapers with stories about eliminating predatory lending (25.4%), counseling low-income homeowners (29.1%), and registering voters (15.7%). (Drier and Martin, pp. 771-776)

In retrospect, the ACORN case was an attempt to cause voters to associate candidate Obama with prospective voter fraud. How the ACORN issue developed first among opinion entrepreneurs and later interested the mainstream media has implications for how the cyber public sphere influences present-day agenda-setting.

Facts checking appears to have been lacking in many mainstream media stories about ACORN. Current interest in facts checking is analogous two concerns in 2008 about the authenticity of allegations against ACORN. Whereas mainstream media was capable I'm presenting views suggesting ACORN had potential for stuffing ballot boxes, the truth was that the organization had acted against irregularities in voter registration. Rhetoric in current politics about facts checking is similarly concerned with implications for deliberative democracy when agenda occurs with little or no connection to the factual reality. (Drier and Martin, pp.777-778)
Trolls, Virtual Public Sphere, and Rational Agenda

Democratic responsiveness and deliberative democracy has been presented to rely upon adequate social capital in the agenda-setting process. Accumulation of social capital has been seen as a process involving successful networking and acceptance of norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. An opposite of successful Democratic agenda setting is now described to happen because of trolling. As Jennifer Forrestal writes in the *American Political Science Review*, “Trolling is, in my interpretation, a specific kind of political activity that is marked by a refusal to participate in the kind of productive exchange of ideas that marks democratic process.” (Forrestal, p. 150)

Another way to conceptualize trolling is to use an analogy to the frontier. Forrestal in her analysis of trolling draws upon John Dewey’s discussion of the frontier. She writes, "Because of the immense amount of land and scattered localities that communicated with one another only by stagecoach, the spatial arrangements for the pioneer age meant that the defining social relationships were largely between small communities and individuals and the savage nature that surrounded them." (Forestal, p. 152)

Pioneers, to Forrestal, had to be well-adjusted people. The frontier was an organizing principle that substantially determined acceptable individual behavior. Pioneers had to be creative and cooperative if they were to survive and thrive in the untamed wilderness of the frontier. (Forestal, p. 152)
This 1980’s graphic presents the idea of a frontier town coping with disruptive influences. In 2018, what is happening in the graphic might be called trolling. As the graphic depicts, the basic idea of trolling was in use decades ago.

Figure One is a graphic that uses frontier imagery. This graphic depicts a fictional film about Russian influence on the frontier. The suggestion from the poster is that the pioneers are having trouble with Russian trolling. This fictional movie poster was not, however, a product of the political controversies of 2018. Rather, this graphic was produced in the 1980's. While "trolling" may be a relatively recent term, the concept involved has been found in our political rhetoric for decades.

Forrestal is impressed with the concept of democratic space. She substantially follows Putnam’s reasoning about networking, cooperation, and reciprocity resulting in social capital. Again referring to Dewey, Forrestal observes, “The spatial limitations of close, geographic locales helps to facilitate sustained engagement with others.” For purposes of democratic theory, whether space is physical space
or virtual space, rules of proximity are approximately the same. Theory about democratic space is suggested as the perspective that might shape future research on social media's political effects. (Forestal, pp. 151-2)

To be effective, Democratic space must have both flexibility and boundaries. Balancing these two concepts is important. Flexibility is required to have democratic inclusiveness. Boundaries, on the other hand, are requisite to restrict the number of possible encounters that one experiences at any given time. Forrestal continues, “Boundaries reduce the number of possible interlocutors in any given space; in so doing, they help foster reciprocity and accommodation through repeated interactions.” (Forrestal, p. 154)

Most all analyst comment upon the ability of a substantially greater number of people to be active in the virtual public sphere. Bernhard and Dohle explain, the high level of attention in Internet and political participation is justified by the fact that online media offer various low threshold possibilities of becoming politically active. (Bernhard and Dohle, p. 285) The adverse effects of mass media radio and television on the public sphere appears to be ending. Internet is reawakening an interest in interacting with the political process. A public thought to have become non reactive to politics and candidates is again finding voice in the virtual public sphere.

Experts who attempt to explain the interaction that occurs between ICT and politics have emphasized the significance of the technology. Ingram writes, “Studies with an interactionist approach posit the different kinds of technology actually change the inner character, experiences, and behavior of the door of the task through the social experience of using the technology. Attitudes towards government are also found to be changed with the use of ICT.” (Ingram, p. 3)
A possible explanation for the profound interest the virtual public sphere has is the opportunity created for citizens to express themselves without the influence of gatekeepers. Prior to recent developments in the public sphere, gatekeepers such as journalists wielded veto power over the information flows and content. Opportunities to reach the public directly have had major candidate influence. (Kovic et al, p. 348)

Evaluating the rationality of the public sphere has been accomplished with the concept of bounded rationality. Steinberger describes a rational person as (1) having rational beliefs and (2) acting on the basis of those beliefs. Normal human activity is seen as reflecting, in a non-trivial sense, a person's abilities to exercise his rational abilities. (Steinberger, p. 751)

To Steinberger the pursuit of rationality is also threatened by a kind of psychological challenge. Cognitive hiccups sometimes confound at interfere with either rational belief formation, the cultivation of suitably rational dispositions, or both. (Steinberger, p. 751) Kovic et al. attribute bounded rationality to cognitive heuristics that affect inference and decision. These authors conclude that contemporary research on rational choice demonstrates that regular human cognition is fundamentally error-prone. (Kovic et al., p. 349)

While many cognitive heuristics affect inference and decision, Kovic et al. direct attention to the so called mere exposure effect. This heuristic results in more exposure producing positive attitudes about candidates. The effects of the mere exposure heuristic are a subset of non-rational voting. Candidates mass media presence and social media activity can be said to have a brute force effect on voting
decisions. These authors explain the more exposure, the more likely voters are to favor a candidate. (Kovic et al., pp. 349-350)

Bernhard and Dohle examine a somewhat related heuristic that influences social media activity. These authors mention that previous studies show that individuals try to compensate for presumed strong and disagreeable media influences on others by intensifying their political activities. This heuristic has been called corrective actions. Campaign communications could be thought to occur to counteract the presumed disagreeable influences. While increase participation is usually explained as confirming political beliefs, some of the additional units of participation probably are corrective instead. (Bernhard and Dohle, p. 286)

Kovic et al. analyzes another cognitive heuristic affecting rational choice. This heuristic assumes social media is the vox populi. The factual connection between social media and public opinion is dubious. Despite the lack of substantiation that social media reflects popular sentiment, social media is often assumed to present the people's views. (Kovic et al., p. 350)

**Methodology for Analyzing Agenda Setting in the Virtual Public Sphere**

This paper's methodology accepts qualitative methods techniques in order to improve conceptualization about virtual public sphere and the agenda. As social science methodology, qualitative methods is advantageous for this project for several reasons. Without quantitative methods requisite accomplishments in validity, qualitative methods are able to more intuitively analyze the social science reality. Emergent explanations happen more readily with qualitative methods. Quantitative methods have been accused of developing preconceived ideas that researchers have when they begin their
research. Since quantitative methods must stay close to acceptable statistical inference, the range of subjects that can be researched is relatively narrow. Qualitative methods allows the researcher a much broader choice in terms of the subjects that he would like to research.

An inductive analysis of narrative data provides this paper’s basis for some original observations about virtual public sphere and agenda. Theoretical sampling allows qualitative methods to follow a researcher’s idea with data. The researcher’s idea can be developed reflexively as data is chosen to allow conceptual development.

This paper uses images of political agenda and media as the data upon which analysis is based. Because theoretical sampling was used a large data set was not compiled. Rather the researcher concentrated on putting together data that created a narrative. The results in data resemble a slideshow that a person might find on Internet.

As research methods, this approach to the problem does reasonably well. The qualitative methods test for successful research is knowledge building. The original ideas that the paper writer gained from data are significant developments on literature perspectives. The change in emphasis resulting from this paper’s analysis does produce significant concept development.

**Figure Two**

*2018 Images about Agenda and Media*
Future research about the virtual public sphere could well make use of the conceptual beginnings produced by this paper's methodology.

Figure Two presents several images from the paper's data set about virtual public sphere and media. The images in Figure Two need be reasoned with as narrative. Imagine these images appear in an Internet slideshow designed to tell a story about virtual public sphere and media.

**Findings**

The analysis of agenda and virtual public sphere found in literature needs to be reasoned again with more emphasis on fake news. Techniques for conceptualizing deliberative democracy and agenda setting in the present day appear to miss how increasingly popular fake news is. The emphasis on cooperation, reciprocity, and trust that precedes explanations about social capital maybe becoming weaker. The strength of consensus about fake news is the variable that's changing ideas. For whatever reason, whether it be ICT influence on people or mass media, an agreement about the effectiveness of fake news maybe emerging.

Somehow there is a reaction to people being asked to accept the politics are all being given over to the virtual public sphere. Maybe there is no acceptance that Facebook friends, Instagram followers, and Twitter followers invariably lead to political success. The equation that suggest the candidate with the most supporters in Virtual reality will always win is stirring up some opposition. Future analysis of the virtual public sphere and agenda setting needs to question how much of what is presently happening is reaction to prophecies of a dismal future dominated by virtual reality.
Conclusions

This paper has considered rational agenda setting in present-day politics. The influence of mainstream media has been commented upon as exceeding that of social media. The ability of social media to have a shaping influence of undetermined proportions on important questions can, however, not be denied. The increasing importance a virtual public sphere appears to be the idea with most of today's pundits.

The bounded rationality in agenda setting that results is substantially shaped by cognitive heuristics. People react to information provided them in ways sometimes shaped by inherent cognitive abilities. Future research can make gains on present knowledge by analyzing whether fake news and similar phenomena are reactions to those who explain future politics as dominated by virtual public sphere.
Bibliography


