Media play a central role in setting and shaping the public agenda—the individuals, issues, events, and topics that are seen as vital to society and public interest.

Agenda-setting is the theory that the news media shapes how viewers perceive politics and, ultimately, how they vote. Learn more about the definition of the agenda-setting theory and the two basic assumptions the idea requires, and explore the news media's effect on audiences with real-world examples of political coverage. *Updated: 10/10/2021*

**Agenda setting** is the idea that what the public thinks about is set by the media. The agenda setting theory was first introduced by **Dr. Maxwell McCombs** and **Dr. Donald Shaw** in 1972. This theory states that the news plays an integral part in the shaping of political realities. The amount of time spent on an issue and the information relayed in a news story, along with the story's position, determines how much a reader learns and the amount of importance placed on the issue. The agenda setting theory of McCombs and Shaw states that when the media reflect on the views of a candidate during a campaign, they are also shaping and determining the issues of importance. This can ultimately set the agenda for a political campaign.

When analyzing agenda setting, there are two basic assumptions to be considered:

1. Media and the press filter and shape reality rather than reflect it.
2. When media focuses on just a few issues and subjects, the public tends to perceive those issues as more important
3. **Technology and Agenda Setting**
4. Advances in technology provide many new avenues for influencing the masses. At the onset of the agenda setting theory, communication was conducted primarily via print and radio, followed by film and television. Today, communication sources are nearly unlimited, allowing for greater public engagement and setting the trend for increased attention on agenda setting.
5. To demonstrate the effect of technology on agenda setting, let's explore the Occupy Wall Street movement. The Occupy Wall Street movement consisted of a diverse group of gender, color, and political viewpoints that opposed social and economic inequity. The movement emerged in July of 2011 with presence via a website, Facebook, and Twitter. The goal was to gather a group of 20,000 on September 17, 2011, on Wall Street in New York City's financial district. The movement was left largely uncovered by mainstream media until late September of 2011, when YouTube footage of an activist being pepper sprayed by a New York police officer was aired. Following this social media coverage, the movement began to gain a significant presence across the country. By utilizing social media, activists have an effective platform for setting agenda in society.
6. **Examples**
7. In 1972, *The Washington Post* set the national agenda by reporting on the details of the Democratic National Headquarters break-in; this set off an influx of public interest and focus on Richard Nixon and Watergate. Likewise, in 1997, an online report by the Drudge Report brought major public attention to the Monica Lewinsky/Bill Clinton sex scandal. While coverage may not directly cause change, it does serve as a catalyst for determining positions and attitudes.