

# **Agenda-setting research: an exploratory study of Spanish news websites and Menéame.**

Jan Alyne Barbosa e Silva<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

The article aims to show and discuss the results of an exploratory study, having, as a theoretical background, the agenda-setting hypothesis applied to information environments on the Internet, and particularly, to the Spanish system of news promotion<sup>2</sup> Menéame (<http://meneame.net/>). We seek to contribute to the discussion of new theoretical and methodological approaches, in order to: 1) identify and further investigate issue salience and attributes in the context of environments of information on the Internet; 2) to better understand the so-called news consumption according to a more qualitative approach.

We are going to highlight general assumptions of agenda-setting hypothesis, the theories of newsmaking and media effects, and, through literature review, discuss their application within information environments on the Internet, having as a general assumption, new patterns of production, distribution and consumption of information.

In Menéame's system, registered users nominate articles, which are voted by other users (either registered or not), promoting the most voted ones to its main page. Using content and hyperlinks analysis, we are going to present and discuss some of the results of our study, which sought to investigate the following aspects: 1) Correlations between the issues and events which appear on the home page of El País (<http://www.elpais.com/>), El Mundo (<http://elmundo.es/>), La Vanguardia (<http://www.lavanguardia.es/>), ABC (<http://www.abc.es/>) and 20 Minutos (<http://www.20minutos.es/>) and the events and issues promoted by Menéame's users (<http://meneame.net/>), with special regard to the five most voted articles; 2) Sources of the five most voted articles promoted to the main page of Menéame; 3) The obtrusive or unobtrusive aspect of the (somehow) correlated issues or events; 4) Comparisons among the criteria of news values, related to content (Wolf, 2003), applied by the Spanish news websites above, when publishing the stories, and applied by Menéame's users, when selecting and voting for the articles.

**Keywords: Agenda-setting – Menéame – Internet Environments - Newsmaking**

---

<sup>1</sup> Doctorate researcher from the Post-Graduate Program in Communication and Contemporary Culture of the School of Communication of Universidade Federal da Bahia. Her research is sponsored by Capes. At the present time, she has been doing the doctoral stage at Universidad de Navarra (in Pamplona, Spain).

<sup>2</sup> These systems can be also called foreign community-based news article popularity website, where links to news, podcasts and videos are gathered, sent and evaluated by the users themselves. Digg (<http://www.digg.com>) is another example of that kind of system.

## Literature Review

According to Dearing and Rogers (1996, p. 2), an agenda is a set of issues that communicate, according to a hierarchy of importance, at a particular moment in time. The authors define a topic on the agenda, in its turn, as a social, conflictive problem, which received attention from the media (Ibid, p. 3). Many of the research on the agenda-setting theory study possible correlations between media's and the public's agendas.

The agenda-setting theory is based on the premise that the public makes use of relevant clues provided by the mass media to organize its own agenda and decide, thus, what are the most important issues and events, so that the media agenda becomes the public agenda.

The ability of setting the agenda is, in its traditional sense, a consequence of the fact that the media must focus on a few subjects each day, due to little space and time available to disseminate content. Therefore, the agenda-setting theory is connected to the gatekeeping theory (Breed, 1993 [1955]), which explains procedures for production and control of information that compete among themselves to achieve public attention. Although many issues compete for public attention, only a few succeed, and the media provides a great influence on our perception of what are the most important issues of the day, as no society can pay attention to more than a few subjects each time.

Another element related to the agenda-setting theory is the degree of proximity, not only in a geographical sense, but also concerned to the degree of connection that the audience has with an issue. In this sense, there are issues with which the public is most identified as they experience it in a direct way, that is, without the media's reference. Some issues affect people's immediate surroundings or personal lives, such as those related to the job, local issues of their city, inflation, among others. These issues, considered directly familiar by the people, are called obtrusive, which literally means "intrusive". This makes the media do not exercise as much influence in their minds. Those issues where people have no personal reference, in its turn, are called unobtrusive, through which the audience needs the media to be guided<sup>3</sup> (Zucker, 1978).

The concept of need for orientation (Weaver, 1980) also explains in part the reasons for the agenda-setting role of mass media, as it describes individual differences when we search for clues for orientation and contextual information, thus creating a pseudo-environment. This point of view is similar to the ideas of Walter Lippmann

---

<sup>3</sup> The reason for which we have been explicating these concepts is that we are going to identify the obtrusive and unobtrusive aspects of the issues and events promoted Menéame's users.

(1922), who suggested that we do not know or see the world as it is, but rather produce an image of it. We form maps on the outside environment and a good part of that is mediated by the mass media.

The need for orientation of the individual is defined in terms of two secondary concepts: relevance and uncertainty, whose roles are given in a sequential way. The relevance - the feeling that an issue has either personal relevance or to society - is the initial condition that defines the need for orientation, and arises from many sources. If individuals have all the information they want about a particular subject, their degree of uncertainty is low. In conditions of great importance and low uncertainty, the need for orientation is moderate. The greater the need for individuals under the guidance of public affairs, the more likely you pay attention to the media agenda.

The agenda-setting, as a theory which deals with the transmission of relevance, or issue salience, is not limited to the influence of the media agenda over the public agenda, neither an agenda of public topics. In contemporary society, multiple types of agendas coexist (McCombs, 2004, p. 54).

The phenomenon of agenda-setting, which is a byproduct of the continuous mass communication processes, occurs both in electoral scenarios as in non electoral ones, both national and local, on a broad geographical range of scenarios around the world, including a wide range of agendas that go beyond political communication<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, the agenda-setting theory has developed and expanded its scope of investigation, with the inclusion of other types of agenda, and considering the media agenda as a dependent variable, which means that the public agenda can be influenced by other types of agendas (eg inter-personal, community ones etc.).

There are many objects that can define an agenda. Communication is a process and can include any collection of objects - or even a single object - in a competition for the attention of journalists and diverse audiences. The object is the thing for which we drive our attention or the thing on which we have an attitude or an opinion.

Beyond the agenda of objects, there is the agenda of attributes, that is, the characteristics and properties that complement their image<sup>5</sup>. In the same way that the

---

<sup>4</sup> Although most of our knowledge about the process of agenda-setting focuses on the relationship between the media and public agendas, this scenario is only an application of the theory. The agenda-setting theory deals with the transfer of relevance of an agenda to another. The most developed aspect of the theory focuses on the link between the media's and public's agendas because of its roots on the investigation on the formation of public opinion, and those agendas are the focus of interest of most theorists who investigate media effects. The area of global interest remains very focused on the media, but we have to consider many other relations of agenda-setting processes.

<sup>5</sup> Both the selection of the objects of attention and the attributes with which the media represent those objects are powerful features of agenda-setting. The way in which the media's agenda of attributes influence on the public's agenda constitutes the second level of agenda-setting. The first level is the

relevance of the objects varies, there is a change in the agenda of attributes of each object. In agenda-setting theory, an attribute is a general term that encompasses the full spectrum of properties and characteristics belonging to an object (McCombs, 1994).

In order to investigate the agenda-setting theory, researchers draw a distinction between different types of agenda, using them as empirical corpus being investigated, namely the public agenda, the media agenda, political agenda, among others, seeking, in this sense, to explore and verify possible correlations between them.

In agenda-setting research, the public agenda is usually measured with an open question (although not always), which addresses the issue of the Most Important Problem (MIP). In many cases, it is similar to that question: "In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing this country?" One of the most common methods used for the study of agenda-setting is the statistical correlation. It is a statistic that accurately summarizes the degree of correspondence between the hierarchy of the same issues and events on the media agenda – the ones which have received more information coverage, which was the second and so on; and on the public agenda: what the issues or events that members of the public see as the most important, which occupies the second place etc<sup>6</sup>.

In an attempt to describe four different perspectives of agenda-setting research, McCombs (McCombs and Evatt, 1995) has proposed the Acapulco Typology, defined by two dimensions in dichotomy, which are combined between them. The first one distinguishes two ways to consider the agendas. The focus of attention may encompass the entire set of items that define the agenda or be limited to a single item of the agenda. The second dimension distinguishes between two ways of measuring the public relevance of items of the agenda: aggregate measurements, which describe either a group or an entire population, compared to measurements that describe the individual answers.

We are going to adopt for our study, the perspective I, which includes the common agenda of the five main news Spanish websites' frontpage in its entirety and employs aggregate measurements of the public (represented by the Menéame's users) in order to establish the relevance of such subjects<sup>7</sup>. This approach takes the name of

---

transmission of the importance of an object (which compete for attention among the public). The second level is the transmission of the importance of an attribute, which focuses on aspects related to an issue or an event.

<sup>6</sup> The score scale of statistical correlation is from 1.0 (perfect match), going for 0, meaning no type of relationship, - until 1.0 (perfectly inverse relationship). The theory of agenda-setting predicts a highly positive correlation between the media's and the public's agendas (McCombs, 2004, p. 36-7).

<sup>7</sup> The study of Chapel Hill (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) adopted this approach because the media's and public's agendas were composed by five main issues in those American presidential elections. The

**Competition**, because it examines a range of issues competing for a good position on the agenda of Menéame<sup>8</sup>.

What are the observable phenomena, which suggest the adaptation of theoretical and methodological procedures to investigate the agenda-setting theory in information environments on the Internet? Firstly, there appears to be a significant change in the ways by which the public agenda is manifested, since the audience can express what they consider the most important problems through environments, such as weblogs, discussion forums, podcasts, social networks, among others. In other words, the public agenda has become more complex, since the views and the problems the public (also another even more complex concept when observing them in the context of Internet) considers most important are stored in distinct supports, becoming publicly available and can be expressed through different conversational and hierarchical patterns.

Some scholars have also pointed out a collapse in gatekeeping practices (Bruns, 2005; Williams and Delli Carpini, 2004), which leads to the dissemination of several issues and channels of information, as there is no effective control of the amount of information produced by a wide variety of sources, as well as no restrictions of time and space to publish information of various kinds.

We could also point out: 1) the use of publishing tools, allowing the proliferation of several kinds of information, 2) the growth and variety of information channels, culminating in several patterns of conversation among users, 3) more possibilities for customization, control and choice of information; 4) new forms of distribution, circulation and consumption of news through the spread of standards related to hierarchical authority, popularity of publications, collectively constructed in horizontal networks of communication.

In other words, the flow of public opinion is in the process of change and evolution, particularly with regard to expansion of the capacity of the public agenda and

---

relative importance of those issues was determined by two aggregated measurements in the electoral scenario. Regarding the media agenda, the relevance of the issues was determined by the percentage of items of information about each of them, while the public agenda was determined by the percentage of voters who thought the government should do something about each subject.

<sup>8</sup> The perspective II, called Automate, is similar to the first studies of agenda-setting, by focusing also on the full agenda of issues, but it observes the agenda of each of the individuals. If the perspective I focuses on the level of the system or of a community, the perspective II is located at the level of the individual. When individuals are asked to prioritize a number of issues, there is little evidence of any kind of correspondence between their hierarchies and the emphasis the media brings to those topics. The perspective III, Natural History, limits its focus to a single topic of the agenda, by measuring the relevance of the total number of stories about the issue and the percentage of the public who cites the issue as the most important problem that the nation faces. Finally, the perspective IV, called Cognitive Portrait, returns to focus on the individual, but limits its analysis to the relevance of a single item in the agenda. (McCombs and Evatt, 1995).

how it has been manifested in several conversational environments.

In an attempt to define conceptually the agenda of information environments on the Internet, and more specifically, the agenda of Menéame, we have observed and analyzed how the system works, particularly with regard to patterns of interaction among its users, that is, how they select the articles and make them available on the home page. We have also observed and analyzed hierarchical patterns of the system, that is, how the articles become more or less popular and how they are displayed on the page.

When observing the process of selection and displaying of news, we shall say that Menéame's agenda, in its final stage (from the moment when the selected articles appear on its main page), can be seen as a public agenda, in the sense that it is the result of the patterns of interaction among its users.

In this sense, we have witnessed a process of formation of a public and published agenda, which is a result of interactions among distinct individual agendas, to the extent that the registered users select the articles, which, in turn, are reorganized in a pending queue, waiting for votes to be promoted to the main page. In this second stage, we can see the formation of an inter-personal and public-user agenda, since the issues and events are disseminated and promoted collectively, through practices of hiperlinking, establishing inter-personal relationships among users, through the use of systems of comments and news nomination.

Observing this Spanish system of news promotion, we can also say that it is possible to analyze Menéame under point of view of a media agenda, despite not having traditional media features. Menéame is, first and foremost, a support, or a medium, in the traditional sense of the term, that is, it stores and conveys information through a channel of communication, and it has global reach. Besides that, it can be observed and consulted as a source of information by many different receivers and producers of information.

### **Media effects and information environments on the Internet**

Although theoretical and methodological backgrounds of agenda-setting theory had not been used in many of the following studies, some of them have sought to investigate possible effects of processes of communication and orientation in the context of online environments.

The study of Knobloch-Westerwick et al (2005) investigated how types of online news recommendation, based on collaborative filtering, affect the process of

information choice among 93 users. The researchers classified the recommendations in explicit (where readers would give a grade to the articles) or implicit (through the number of page views). The results show that users would select more articles if the portal displayed explicit recommendations, and this type of stronger recommendation would stimulate a longer exposure to those matters.

Another study of Fico et al. (1987) explored effects of agenda-setting from content indexing. The researchers replaced the clues of importance and hierarchy (the headlines of the front page), typical of a printed newspaper, by indexed topics. They suspected that the index would decrease the agenda-setting power of the media over the audience. The results found significant statistics differences with regard to the exposure of readers on the news topics, suggesting that different styles of reading produce responses according to the display of news on a newspaper.

Takeshita (2005) has mapped empirical studies that demonstrate a correlation between media agendas and some Internet environments. On the other hand, a comparative study of Tewksbury and Althaus (2002) points to a distinction on the perception of the importance of political issues between readers of the printed and online versions of The New York Times.

The authors also point out some factors that may interfere in the perception of the importance of subjects published in printed newspapers, namely, the ways of news display, as the daily suggest a hierarchy of information from a selection of the most important facts and more often selected by the reader.

In other words, the authors explain that the display of news on traditional and online media are relevant to processes of agenda-setting because they alter the traditional ways through which the editorial decisions prioritize the importance of issues.

Another study of Schoenbach, de Waal and Lauf (2005) compared levels of public perception on topics among readers of printed and online newspapers. The authors argue, through literature review, that the printed newspaper draw attention to a number of issues related to public affairs, when compared to other media, fostering, thus, a shared social life. However, the authors point to a gradual reduction of newspapers consumption in Western countries and the likelihood that the printing will be replaced by daily online news, a fact that suggests changes in the perception of the importance of the issues in general<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> To deepen the debate around habits of news consumption, it is useful to see the discussions proposed by Mindich (2005), which summarizes a number of studies about the gradual decline in the consumption of news among people under 40 years old.

The research aimed to compare the impact of online and printed newspapers in the formation of attention and in the perception of events and issues of public concern. The authors concluded that reading printed newspapers contributes to the formation of the perception of issues related to public affairs more concretely than reading online newspapers. Moreover, they found that it is not the amount of time spent with a newspaper that determines this perception, but the frequency with which newspapers are read.

The authors confirmed the hypothesis of the research: access to online newspapers produces a lower perception about public affairs than the printed ones, due to a number of factors: a) the non-linear format of online newspapers suggests a fragmentation of news in separate topics, and can disperse the reader, making invisible separate topics which complement the news, unlike the printed newspapers, which often provide more complete and contextualized news in a particular area; b) The printed newspapers, rather than the online ones, are built to guide their readers through a package of offers as a whole, in an attempt to serve as a general agenda of the community.

In this sense, readers of printed newspapers are invited to follow a linear structure and to be conveyed by the newspapers' clues, such as the displays of articles and sections. On the Internet, instead of witnessing the trend of printed newspapers as a push media, we see an increasingly and varied number of customized systems of information, as well as flows and distinct patterns of hierarchy; that is: the modes of information display and flow, typical of online newspapers (media pull), invite the reader to skip the issues that are not of his or her interest.

Tewksbury and Althaus (2002) tested whether the flexibility in the selection of stories and topics and few of what they call Exploring the importance of stories (story importance cues) associated with the reporting formats lead to readers of newspapers online to produce inferences on important public issues when compared to readers of newspapers printed.

The authors came to similar conclusion, as they note that the readers of printed newspapers are more likely to expose themselves to stories they may not be actively seeking, while the online newspapers tend to organize the stories into categories and topics leading the readers to stories for which they are interested.

For Walgrave and Aelst (2006), the potential the media has to influence the perception of the importance of the issues depends on several contingents of information recipients, as well as the issues themselves, and what they call specific

media outlet. Because of that specific media terminal, the comparative study of Tewksbury and Althaus (2002) pointed to a distinction between the perception of the importance of political issues between readers of the printed and online versions of the newspaper The New York Times.

Silva (2008a) has already found some trends related to Menéame's agenda, by identifying: 1) the nature of the issues or events promoted to the main page; 2) the patterns of reference of the 10 most voted articles; and 3) possible correlations of hierarquical patterns between the 10 most voted articles of Menéame and the sources to which the articles belong. She found that Menéame promotes articles related to current issues or events, as well as related to society. Most of the articles promoted by Menéame's users come from news Spanish websites. However, most of the news Spanish websites to which the articles originally belong do not highlight them on the frontpage, but, instead, on the specialized section.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What is the source of the articles promoted by Menéame's users?
2. Is there a correlation between the common agenda displayed on the main page of the five Spanish news websites and the issues promoted by Menéame's users?

2.1. Wether there is a correlation between the issues of the agendas outlined above, are they obtrusive or unobtrusive?

3. According to the news values (Wolf, 2003), what criteria related to the content were applied by the five Spanish news websites, when publishing the stories (which compose the "common agenda"), and Menéame's users, when selecting the five most voted articles?

### **Method**

**Finding a "common agenda" among the Spanish news websites:** using content and hyperlinks analysis<sup>10</sup> of the articles published by the main five news Spanish websites, we first sought to find correlations between the common agenda of

---

<sup>10</sup> According to Bardin (1977), content analysis is a set of analysis techniques of communications, which uses objective and systematic procedures of description of content of messages "(p. 38). Its goal is not to describe contents, but instead, to produce inferences about knowledge related to conditions of production which are built from the identification of indicators (quantitative or not) present in the text. The goal of the analyst is to understand the meaning of the communication and at the same time, "find out another meaning, a different message, inter-viewed or next to the first message" (p. 41). It is all belonged to the area of content analysis "all attempts consisting of revealing and systematizing the content of the messages and expressions of that content, with the contribution of indications, quantifiable or not, from a set of techniques, that although partial, are complementary "(p. 42).

the five main Spanish news websites and the five most voted articles promoted by the Menéame's users. We have established a criteria that the issues or events should be published on the main page of at least three Spanish news website, in order to be considered a "common agenda", so that we could identify possible correlations between their agendas and the agenda of Menéame. This process took place between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> of February.

**Analysing patterns of reference of the five most voted articles by Menéame's users:** We have sought to compare the nature of the five issues and events promoted by Menéame's users and identify if those articles had been also mentioned or highlighted by the five main Spanish websites, either in its main page or in the section to which the article belongs.

**Analyzing the issues according to news values<sup>11</sup>:** In order to investigate the nature of issues and events promoted by the five news websites and Menéame, we sought to apply the substantive or content criteria (Wolf, 2003) of news values, related to the importance and interest of the content of articles. The criteria are: a) Importance: 1) Degree and level of hierarchy of the individuals/degree of institutional power; 2) Impact over the nation and the national interest; 3) Geographical or cultural proximity; 4) Amount of people involved in the event; 5) Relevance of the event in relation to future developments; b) Interest: 1) Stories of people who behave in an uncommon situation; 2) Stories in which there's an inversion of roles (eg. The owner who bites his dog); 3) Stories about exceptional and heroic accomplishments.

## **Results**

**Source of the articles promoted by Menéame's users:** We have coded the source of hyperlinks which referred to the five most prominent articles at the time of data collection. Out of 25 collected articles, 19 of them are somehow connected to news websites, being 7 related to national ones; 6 of them were bound to local or regional ones, and 3 were connected to foreign ones. These results show that Menéame is indeed a service of news promotion and most of the news are related to the issues or events which happen within the country.

---

<sup>11</sup> News values can be defined, as systematized by Wolf (2003), as a set of elements through which the informative apparatus controls and manages the quality and kinds of issues and events which are going to serve as the base for news selection: The news values represent the answer to the following question: What issues and events can be considered enough interesting to become news? Such criteria are composed by individual values, but operate in practice in a complementar way. (p. 202). For a deeper discussion about newsmaking, see Tuchmann (1978) and Golding y Elliott (1979).

**Table 1: Sources of the five most voted articles promoted by Menéame's users**

	February 4 <sup>th</sup>	February 5 <sup>th</sup>	February 6 <sup>th</sup>	February 7 <sup>th</sup>	February 8 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Total</b>
National Spanish news website	2	2	1		2	7
Regional/local Spanish news website	1	1	1	3		6
Foreign news website	1				2	3
Non-commercial website (militante)	1					1
Foreign news agency		1			1	2
Spanish non-specialized weblog		1				1
Video sharing website (broadcast media content related)			1			1
Image gallery			1			1
Specialized news website			1			1
Specialized Spanish blog				1		1
Foreign community-based news article popularity website				1		1

**Correlations between the common agenda displayed on the main page of the five Spanish news websites and the issues promoted to the main page, and most voted by Menéame's users:** As the table 2 shows, during the week between February, 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, there were only three issues fully correlated, when comparing the “common agenda” of the five main Spanish news websites and the five most voted issues promoted to the main page of Menéame. The first one is related to the electoral proposals of Popular Party towards the immigrants. On February 8<sup>th</sup>, all five analyzed Spanish news websites published the political proposals of the conservative Popular Party's leader (PP), Mariano Rajoy, also candidate for the following presidential Spanish elections to be happening on March 9<sup>th</sup>. The electoral proposals were stretched in several articles

during the week (and more specifically on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>) by the news websites, being published either as one article as a whole or divided according to each proposal and policy toward the immigrants.

Rajoy's proposals included the making of policies prohibiting the use of veils among Muslim women, respect for Spanish laws and traditions, visa policies, reintegration contracts, among other things. On the same day, the users of Menéame promoted three articles related to the issue<sup>12</sup>. Despite two of them having been promoted to the main page of the system, it was not among the five most voted articles.

The second correlated issue refers to the price increasing of Movistar's instant messages. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, all the Spanish news websites analyzed published a story about the price increasing of instant messages of a Spanish mobile telephone company. The issue was the most voted on Menéame, but only on the next day. The source of the news was a weblog about technology. This may or might have been the case where the issue gains proeminence due to the fact that is related to direct experience, as the customers would pay directly the costs of instant messages.

Another issue, which belonged to the common agenda of the analyzed news website, talks about an anthropometric study developed to better understand the body type of Spanish women. This article, whose source was a Spanish portal news website, had been mentioned on Menéame's main page, but it did not gain much proeminence (154 votes) that is, it was not among the five most voted articles at the time of data collection.

Although some issues had not been part of the "common agenda" of the analyzed Spanish news websites, at least two of them published stories correlated with some of the articles promoted to the main page of Menéame. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, the news website, 20 Minutos, gave little proeminence to a story about a fine that a girl had to pay for having damaged a car which killed her mother. This issue had been promoted to the main page of Menéame as well, receiving 387 votes (or Menéos, to use its own language), that is, it was among the five most voted articles at the time of data collection. On February 6<sup>th</sup>, Menéame's users have promoted the issue about Spanish economic crisis (which gained great proeminence, being among the five most voted

---

<sup>12</sup> The first article referred in the system belonged to El Mundo's news website and talks about PP's proposal related to the prohibition of the use of the veil in Spanish schools. The second article referred to the pronouncement of one of PP's member, about the politics for immigrants, attacking his opponent, the current president of the Government of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. As it was said before, this article was not among the five most voted ones in Menéame, but it referred to El País, one of the news websites analyzed. The other article related to the issue was one of the five most voted in that day referred to a portal of news and entertainment (Terra), and talked about the considerations of the leader of the leftist coalition, Izquierda Unida (IU, United Left), about PP's proposals.

articles at the time of data collection), referring to a comment a TV reporter had made on a Spanish broadcast channel, whose video had been stored in Youtube. This issue also is correlated with an article published by El País.

Finally, on February 7<sup>th</sup>, two of the analyzed news websites published a story about a protest in Madrid planned and made by social organizations against the Episcopal conference. Although this issue was promoted to Menéame's main page (whose source was a website specialized in disabled people), it had not gained prominence by its users, as it received only 220 votes, considering that the most popular article had received 506 votes at the time of data collection.

On the same day, La Vanguardia published an article about increasing reading rates among Spanish students. The same issue was promoted to Menéame's main page, and it had been among the five most voted ones at the time of data collection. The source of the article was a Spanish regional news website.

Considering the number of issues which belong to the c"ommon agenda of the news websites analyzed, (19), only one of them was fully correlated<sup>13</sup> (PP's el"ectoral proposals towards the immigrants), and two of them correlated to some degree<sup>14</sup> (Movistar's price increasing of instant messages and the anthropometric study of the Spanish women's bodies and sizes). However, it is useful to point out that, during the week, the five news websites analyzed and Menéame's users published and promoted (respectively) to their main pages stories directly or indirectly related to the elections, not only related to the candidate's proposals, but also related to policies carried out by the current president Zapatero, who is also a candidate to following presidential elections. Reactions from the civil society in relation to policies were also published by the analyzed websites. Out of 19 stories found in the "common agenda" on the main page of the five Spanish news websites, 7 of them (36%) were somehow related to politics and elections, whereas on the main page of Menéame, out of 25 stories, 12 (48%) were somehow related to the issues mentioned above.

None of the sources of the articles mentioned by the users of Menéame referred to any of the news websites analyzed in our study, though. Some isolated cases are interesting to point out, however: On February 5<sup>th</sup>, One of the five Menéame's most voted articles was a continuation of an issue about the government's benefit of 400

---

<sup>13</sup> By fully correlated, we mean that the issue gained prominence by the five Spanish websites and was promoted among the five most voted articles on Menéame's main page.

<sup>14</sup> This can happen in two ways: When there is a correlation between the issues published on the main page of Menéame, although it has not been among the five most voted articles, or when the issue gained prominence among the five most voted articles, but it was not published on the main page of at least three, out of five analyzed Spanish news websites.

Euros returned to tax contributors (published by the main Spanish news websites on January 28<sup>th</sup>), which Spanish self-employees would not get. However, this story would not be published by the analyzed news websites.

Another article among the five most voted ones by Menéame's users referred to a Spanish non-profit political website, and asked if someone would charge to vote for a party whose ideas did not match the ones of the self. Although this article is not news, neither has correlations with the objects' attributes of the common agenda of the analyzed news websites, it refers indirectly to the issues due to the upcoming elections.

A similar case was found on February 5<sup>th</sup>, when all five Spanish news websites analyzed in our study published a story about the decreasing rates of trust among Spanish consumers through the ninth following month. Although Menéame's users did not mention it literally, there was an article, published originally on a Spanish weblogs, (which was among the five most voted ones, at the time of data collection) reporting a case of a person who was paying more for an economic package of a yogurt.

Those cases mentioned above may provide useful clues about the attributes of the issues analyzed, which means that Menéame may or might have published articles about issues and events also concerned by professional media, but their attributes may have been more related to personal experience. For that reason, it becomes relevant to understand the obtrusive or unobtrusive aspects of the (somehow correlated) issues published on the main page of Menéame.

**Table 2: Attributes and correlations of the common issues displayed on Menéame and on the main page of the Spanish news websites**

	Menéame's articles	Correlations between the common agenda of the main page of Spanish news websites and Menéame?	Correlations between the issues published on the main page of at least one of the news website analyzed and Menéame?
PP's proposals towards the immigrants	Unobtrusive	Yes	-
Girl who had to pay a damaged car which killed her mother	Unobtrusive	No	Yes, but it was not among the five most voted issues.
Spanish economic crisis	Unobtrusive	No	Yes
Protest against the Episcopal conference	Unobtrusive	No	Yes
Spanish elections	Obtrusive	No	No
Decreasing rates of trust among Spanish consumers	Obtrusive	No	No
Price increasing of Movistar's instant messages	Obtrusive and unobtrusive	Yes	-
Anthropometric study about the type and sizes of Spanish women	Obtrusive and unobtrusive	Yes, but it was not among the five most voted issues.	-

**Comparison of news values applied by Menéame's users, when selecting and voting for the articles, and by the "common agenda" of the five Spanish news websites, when selecting the stories:** As the table 4 shows, there seems to be a great difference between the criteria by which the articles were promoted to Menéame's main page and published on the home page of the Spanish news websites, especially the value related to the degree of hierarchy of individuals and institutions. While the common agenda of the five news websites were more concerned with the criteria mentioned

above, there seems to be a more equally distributed criteria by which the articles are promoted by Menéame's users, although most of articles were related to stories about people who behaved in an unusual situation. The geographical or cultural proximity was the only criteria that seemed to match. The table, thus, also shows a huge gap between the criteria of importance applied by the news websites, when publishing the articles and interest applied by Menéame's users, when selecting and voting for the articles, promoting them to the main page.

**Table 3: News values: Content criteria applied in the selection of articles among Menéame's users and in the production of the stories by the Spanish news websites**

<b>IMPORTANCE</b>	Menéame	Spanish news websites
Degree and level of hierarchy of the individuals/degree of institutional power	8% - 2 articles	47,5% - 9 articles
Impact over the nation and the national interest	16% - 4 articles	31,5% - 6 articles
Geographical or cultural proximity	12% - 3 articles	10,5% - 2 articles
Amount of people involved in the event	16% - 4 articles	
Relevance of the event in relation to future developments	12% - 3 articles	
<b>INTEREST</b>		
Stories of people who behave in an uncommon situation	24% - 6 articles	10,5% - 2 articles
Stories in which there's an inversion of roles	8% - 2 articles	
Stories about exceptional and heroical accomplishments	4% - 1 article	

### **Discussions and conclusions**

This article is, first and foremost, an attempt to contribute to the debate on the proposition of new elements - new structures of hierarchy, uses, control and visibility of information, diversity of issues and channels of information - for the study of agenda-setting within environments information on the Internet.

Most of the researches of media agenda-setting, specially in the Competition perspective, the audience is designed in a more manageable way, as it is usually seen as a statistical aggregate, from which one can produce little detailed inferences in individual or group level.

We do not intend to criticise or reduce the importance of those studies, as they may provide important prospects and findings of various natures, as they follow consistent assumptions with the notions of majority public opinion and popular

democratic ideals. However, the application of agenda-setting theory in information environments on the Internet gives us the opportunity to examine different entities that may be equivalent to the public in search of contemporary public opinion.

In other words, there is no doubt that the model MIP allows researchers to be systematic in the verification and analysis of correlations between the issues and events broadcast and published by the media and the issues considered most important by the general population. In this sense, prospects related to the possibilities of agenda-setting research also change in the same proportion as the public becomes more complex, as they located problems and issues at extended individual and interacional levels of observance, being able to turn the horizons of the issues they consider most important into a channel of communication.

With respect to more significant changes of the agenda-setting research on Internet environments, we can point out not only the wide range of hierarchy, popularity, conversational patterns and informative channels, concerning the study on issue salience. Those environments may provide also the application of a number of new categories drawn from content analysis to study the attributes of these issues and events. In the case of our study, it was possible to use the substantive criteria related to news values, seeking to measure degrees of importance and interest by the Spanish news websites, which produces and publishes the information, and the users of the system of news promotion, who read, select and share with a community to which belongs .

Regarding our exploratory study, it is necessary to point out some aspects which deserve a closer observation: We assume that five days of data collection and analysis are not enough to produce generalized inferences about the nature of the agenda of Menéame. We need a longer-term observation and to analyze more of the highlighted issues, as twenty is the average number of articles promoted to Menéame's home page. Examine the system of promotion of news out of the election period is also useful to examine other dynamics of issue salience and atributes, as 48% of the most voted articles of that week are related, directly or indirectly, to the presidential Spanish elections.

## **Bibliography**

BARDIN, L. (1977) *Análise de Conteúdo*. Lisboa, Edições 70.

- BREED, W. (1993) Controle social na redação. Uma análise funcional". p.152-156. In TRAQUINA, N. (Org.) *Jornalismo: questões, teorias e estórias*. Lisboa: Vega.
- BRUNS, A. (2005) *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*. Peter Lang, New York.
- DEARING, J.; ROGERS, E. (1996) *Agenda-Setting*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage.
- DeGEORGE W. (1981) "Conceptualization and measurement of audience agenda". In G. C. Wilhoit y DeBeck (Eds.), *Mass Communication Review year- book 2*, Beverly Hills, CA, Sage, p. 219-224.
- FICO F.; HEETER, C.; SOFFIN, S. et al.** (1987) "New Wave Gatekeeping. Electronic Indexing Effects on Newspaper Reading". *Communication Research*, vol. 14, n. 3, p. 335-351, SAGE Publications.
- GOLDING, P.; ELLIOTT, P. (1979) *Making the News*, London, Longmann.
- LIPPMANN, W. (1997) *Public Opinion*, New York, Free Press Paperbacks, (v.o 1922).
- McCOMBS, M. (2004) *Estableciendo la Agenda. El impacto de los medios en la opinión pública y en el conocimiento*. Paidós Comunicación 170.
- McCOMBS, M; SHAW, D. L. (1972) "The agenda setting function of mass media". *Public Opinion Quartely*, n.36.
- McCOMBS, M. (1994) "Influencing the pictures in our heads: two dimensions of Agenda-setting" en *Masu Komyunikeishon Kenkyu, Journal of Mass Communication Studies*, no. 45.
- McCOMBS, M. y EVATT, D. (1995) "Los temas y los aspectos: explorando una nueva dimensión de la Agenda-setting", *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 8 (1).
- MINDICH. D. *Turned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*. (2005) New York, Oxford University Press.
- ROBERTS. M.; WANTA, W.; DZWO, T. (2002) "Agenda Setting and Issue Salience Online". *Communication Research*; In <http://crx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/29/4/452>.
- SHAH, D. V.; McLEOD J. M.; YOON, S. (2001) "Communication, Context, and Community An Exploration of Print, Broadcast, and Internet Influences". *Communication Research*, Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 464-506, Sage.
- SCHOENBACH, K., DE WAAL, E. e LAUF, E. (2005) "Research Note: Online and print newspapers: Their impact on the extent of the Perceived Public Agenda". *European Journal of Communication*. Vol. 20 (2), p. 245-258, Sage.
- SILVA, J. A. B. S. (2008a) *O Estabelecimento da Agenda no Menéame: Uma Proposta de Investigação*. Work presented in Congreso Fundacional de la Asociación Española de Investigación de la Comunicación (AE-IC), in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, between January 30th and February 1st of 2008.

- TAKESHITA, T. (2005) "Current critical problems in agenda-setting research". *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. Vol. 22.
- TEWKSBURY, D., ALTHAUS, S. (2002) "Agenda-setting and the 'new' news. Patterns of issue importance among readers of the paper and online versions of The New York Times". *Communication Research*, vol. 29, no. 02, p. 180-207. Sage.
- TEWKSBURY, D. (2005) "The Seeds of Audience Fragmentation: Specialization in the Use of Online News Sites". *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 49, no. 3, p. 332-348.
- TUCHMANN, G. (1978) *Making News (A study in the construction of reality)*, New York, The Free Press, 1978.
- WEAVER, D. (1980) "Audience need for orientation and media effects". *Communication Research*, 7, p. 361-376.
- WILLIAMS, B.; DELLI CARPINI, M. (2004) "Mônica and Bill All the Time and Everywhere. The Collapse of Gatekeeping and Agenda Setting in the New Media Environment". *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 47, no. 9, Sage.
- WOLF, M. (2003) *Teorias da comunicação*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- ZUCKER, H. (1978), "The variable nature of news media influence", en B. Ruben (Eds.), *Communication yearbook 2*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, p. 225 - 245.