

Agenda Setting



A presentation by the Mucktracker Team



Objective

Analyze how algorithmic and editorial agenda setting influence news coverage.

Connect

Do you think newspapers and online sources do a good job of covering the most important news stories?

Why or why not?



What is Agenda Setting?



Deciding what to cover has traditionally been a concern of journalism and is reflected in the theory of *agenda setting*. Agenda setting is the power to influence public perception regarding which stories and stances are most important.

We can see agendas in the fact that some stories are given more coverage, and more prominent coverage, than others. You can observe this with stories that are:

- given bigger headlines
- positioned to catch readers' attention first
- often the same as stories highlighted by other outlets (even if presented in radically different ways)

Editorial Agenda Setting in Action



Let's consider the front pages of three highly circulated newspaper websites and how they set their respective agendas.

Look at these front pages on these publication's sites: *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and the *New York Post*. Then, answer:

- What do you notice about how these stories are placed on the front page, and how much space they are given?
- Are the same stories given the most prominence?
- Which topics, events, and people are most discussed?

Newsworthiness & Agenda Setting

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When you surveyed these newspapers, you may have noticed certain factors that were common among important stories.

- For example, you may have seen that the stories were the most recent. In journalism, this is known as *timeliness*, and is one of the factors that make up *newsworthiness*.

Newsworthiness refers to the criteria that editors consider when choosing to cover and publish a story.

- Editors often ask themselves: *Is this deserving, or worthy, of publication?*

What Influences Newsworthiness?

- *timeliness*: a story that describes events that are recent, current, or about to happen
- *historical impact*: a story that describes a significant event (the kind of thing that ends up in the history books)
- *novelty*: a story that describes an unusual or remarkable occurrence
- *relevance to a general or particular audience*: a story that's especially appealing to a media outlet's audience (or a smaller constituency of their audience)



Newsworthy factors: timeliness, historical impact,
novelty, relevance

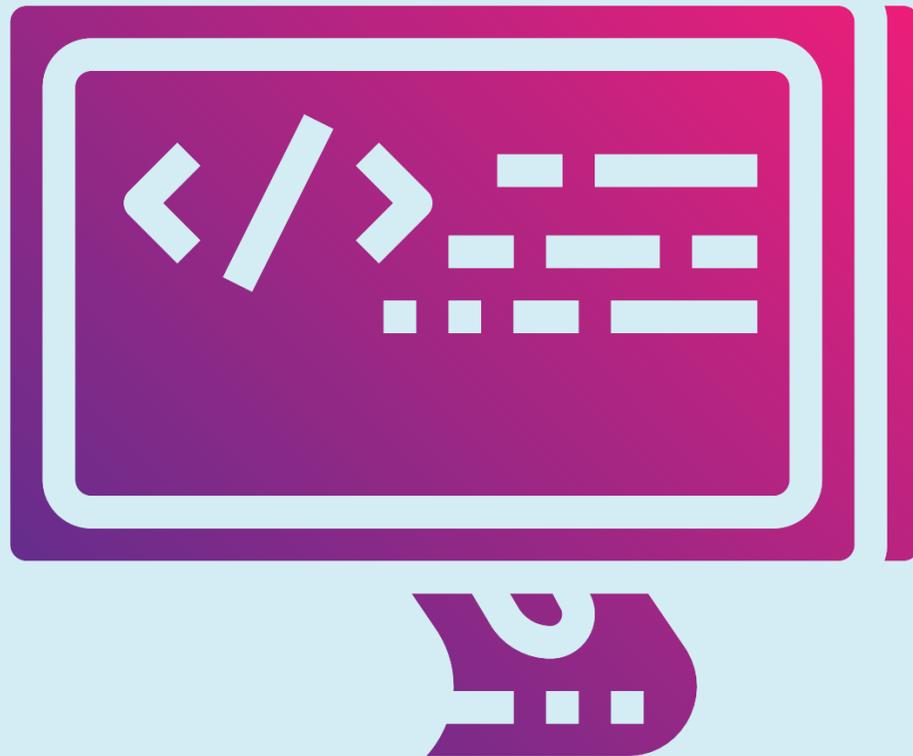
Check for Understanding

Identify the newsworthy factor each story best represents:

- An article about healthy eating
 - An article about an award show airing tomorrow
 - An article about a duck with unusual colors
 - An article about peace talks in the Middle East
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Algorithms & Agenda-Setting



- These days, more Americans receive news online than from print newspapers (according to Pew Research).
 - For newspapers, this means they no longer entirely control the way their content is presented to readers.
- Instead, computer algorithms play a large role.
 - Algorithms are computer programs developed to help people find the information they're looking for, often based on their online habits.
 - Social media sites use *personalization* and *recommendation* algorithms to serve up stories to users based on their past activity.

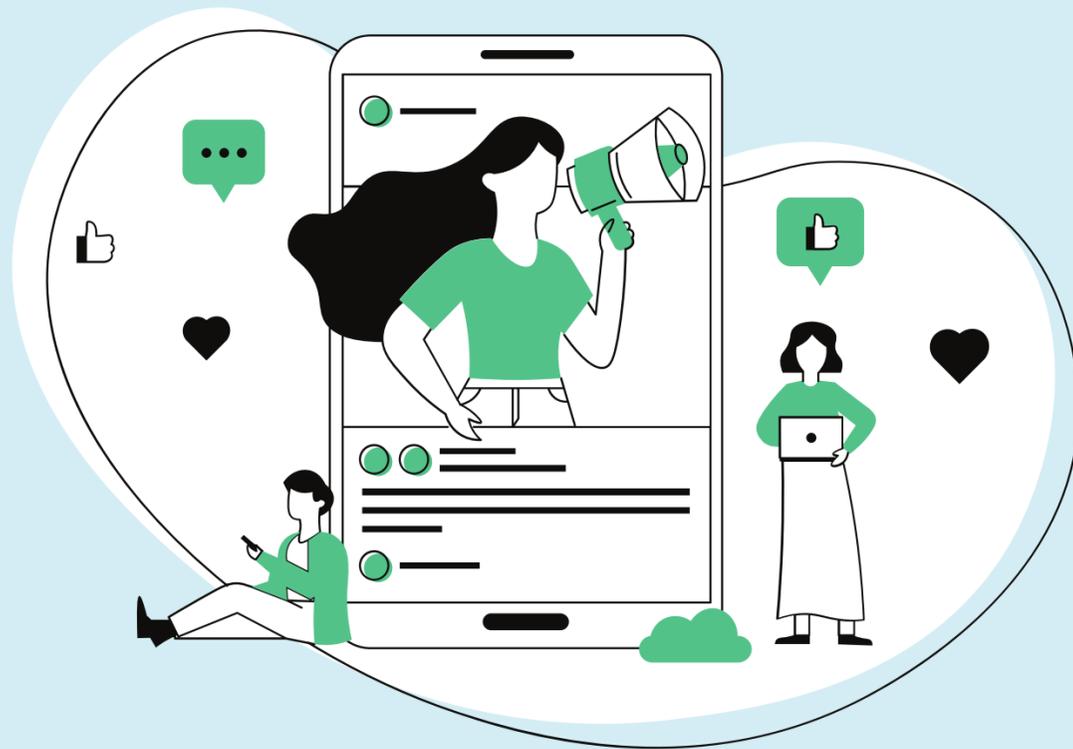
Algorithms & Agenda-Setting

Newspapers keep track of the stories that are the most shared and read all over the internet.

- Many newspaper websites now have a “most popular” or “trending” stories section.
- These sections can help demonstrate the stories that are given public prominence due to algorithmic agenda setting.

Because computer algorithms use information such as number of clicks and popularity of search terms over time, a story or topic can start to trend if a large number of computers are commanded to automatically search for associated terms.

- It should not be assumed that algorithmically generated agendas are always the result of genuine audience interest.



Editorial Agenda Setting

- agenda set by editors
- based on newsworthiness
- can have organizational bias
 - tendencies of organizations to reproduce stories similar to those they have in the past

Algorithmic Agenda Setting

- agenda set by algorithms
- based on a variety of factors that are not necessarily clear to users
 - factors can include previous activity of an account, location, or popularity of a given term
- Susceptible to manipulation
 - agendas may not always reflect genuine audience interest

Comparing Editorial & Algorithmic Agenda Setting



- Visit the “trending” pages on the websites for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Post*.
- Compare these “most popular” stories with the stories you noticed as the largest or most prominent in the first exercise.
- What do you notice about the difference between these two lists of stories? Do they overlap?
- What sorts of stories are trending? Do they fit the standards of newsworthiness, such as historical importance, novelty, and relevance to audiences?

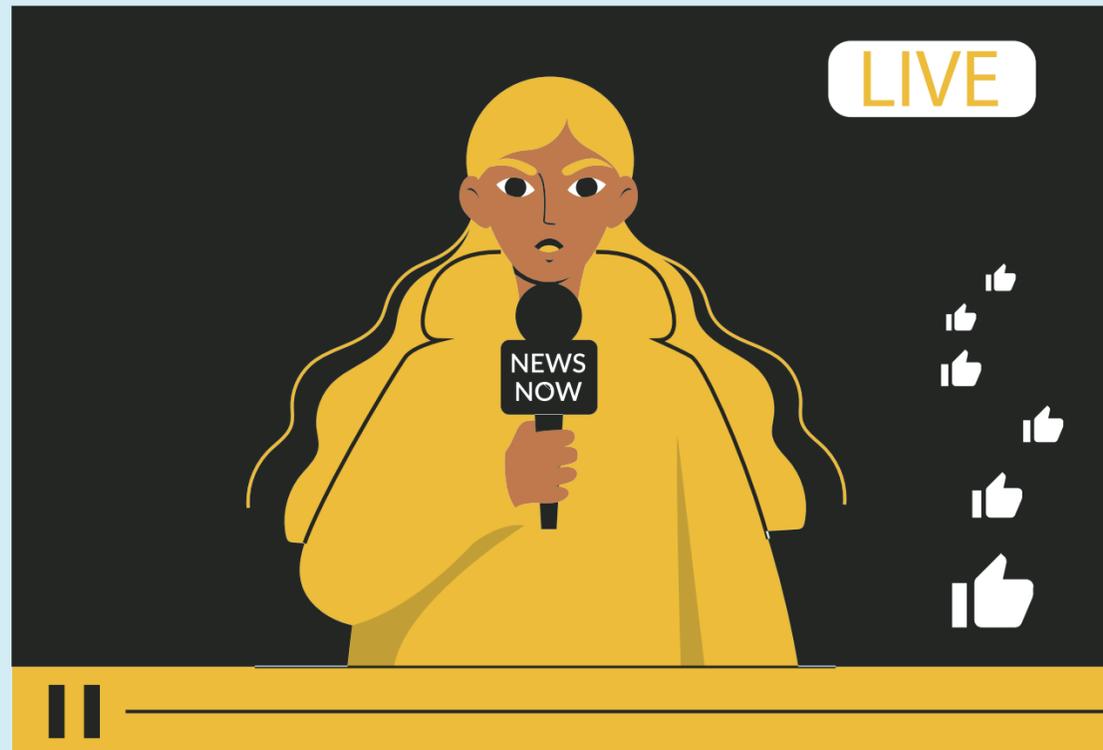
Consider

What are the benefits and drawbacks of both editorial and algorithmic agenda setting?

Do you think personalization and recommendation algorithms should be used to serve up news content?
Why or why not?



Wrap-Up



- Agenda setting is the power to influence public perception regarding which stories and stances are most important.
- When journalists and news editors make these decisions based on principles of newsworthiness, it can be called editorial agenda-setting.
- When websites use computer programs to determine what news stories people see, this can be called algorithmic agenda-setting.
- What constitutes the “news” has changed over time and continues to change, as news media can reach global audiences. What do you think the news should look like?