journalism and media

MDPI

Review

When Salience Becomes Power: An Integrative Review of Agenda-Setting Across Political Contexts: Levels of Influence, the Need for Orientation, and the Algorithmic Turn in a Networked, Polarized Age

Safran Safar Almakaty

Journalism and New Media Department, College of Media and Communication, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Riyadh 11432, Saudi Arabia; ssamakaty@imamu.edu.sa

Abstract

Agenda-setting theory has anchored communication research for five decades, yet algorithmic curation, audience fragmentation, and a wave of autocratization have unsettled its founding assumptions. This critical integrative review connects three research traditions that have developed in parallel: the three levels of agenda-setting (object salience, attribute salience, and Network Agenda-Setting, NAS), the Need for Orientation (NfO) as the theory's psychological mechanism, and comparative scholarship on media systems and regime types. Drawing on 108 sources assembled through structured searches and citation tracing, it traces the migration of agenda-setting from a linear, institutionally governed transfer of salience toward a recursive, algorithmically mediated process, and reassesses the evidence on echo chambers and algorithmic amplification against recent platform experiments. It then examines networked agenda-building in three polarized cases of democratic erosion—Türkiye, Hungary, and India—where state-aligned media bundle national identity with support for incumbents in their coverage, and where direct evidence that these associative networks are adopted by audiences is confined to the Turkish case, in which transfer occurred only among pro-government respondents. The synthesis yields an integrative multilevel model, specified as six testable propositions, in which micro-level orientation, meso-level networks, and macro-level institutions jointly shape salience and in which the media system is expected to condition whether NAS effects are convergent or divergent. It closes with a research agenda centered on networked measurement, algorithmic auditing, NfO–NAS integration, and comparison beyond Western democracies.

Keywords: agenda-setting; network agenda-setting; need for orientation; intermedia agenda-setting; media systems; hybrid regimes; algorithmic gatekeeping; polarization; disinformation

Check for updates

Academic Editor: Andreu Casero-Ripollés

Received: 19 July 2026
Revised: 19 September 2026
Accepted: 22 September 2026
Published: 2 October 2026
Corrected: 30 October 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

1. Introduction

For more than five decades, agenda-setting theory has served as a cornerstone of communication science, offering a durable framework for understanding the relationship between the priorities of the news media and the concerns of the public. Since the seminal Chapel Hill study, the theory has expanded from the deceptively simple proposition that the media tell audiences "what to think about" to a layered account of "how to think about it" and, more recently, of which ideas the public comes to associate with one another (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993). The contemporary communication environment, however, poses genuine challenges to these foundational assumptions. The mass adoption of algorithmic

curation, the fragmentation of audiences, and the arrival of generative artificial intelligence (AI) have complicated the very notion of a shared public agenda. The transition from a broadcast-dominated order to a digital, algorithmically mediated landscape requires careful re-examination of how salience is constructed, transferred, and contested.

The "universal agenda" once facilitated by centralized media institutions now competes with a recursive, networked process shaped by platform architectures and user behavior, although the extent of its displacement is contested. The "new era of minimal effects" anticipated for high-choice environments (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) has not been borne out by longitudinal evidence, which shows that legacy news media continue to set the aggregate public agenda even as individual-level effects become more heterogeneous (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). Contemporary gatekeeping is no longer enacted solely by human editors within professional hierarchies; it is increasingly a distributed, computationally governed phenomenon in which engagement metrics and recommender systems help determine what becomes visible (DeVito, 2017; Wallace, 2018), within what Chadwick (2017) describes as a hybrid media system in which older and newer media logics interact rather than replace one another. In this environment the boundaries of what counts as an "actor" in the agenda-setting process have blurred, as automated accounts and large language models participate in the circulation of political information (Spitale et al., 2023). This shift is not merely technological but structural, and it demands new theoretical vocabulary to describe the agency that algorithms exercise over salience.

The effectiveness of agenda-setting is, moreover, far from uniform across the globe. The influence of media agendas is moderated by the media systems and political regimes in which they operate (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Whereas established democracies increasingly experience agenda fragmentation, hybrid and authoritarian regimes often deploy media capture and information control to dominate public discourse (Roberts, 2018; Schiffrin, 2018). In countries such as Türkiye, Hungary, and India—each of which has experienced marked democratic erosion under elected incumbents, the signature pattern of the current wave of autocratization (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019)—the interplay between state-aligned outlets and independent digital spaces produces a polarized environment in which the mechanisms of salience transfer are routinely contested or resisted by specific audience segments (Neyazi, 2020; Yeşil, 2018).

Despite the richness of each of these research traditions, they have largely developed in parallel. Studies of the theory's three levels have concentrated on cognitive and measurement questions; scholarship on the Need for Orientation has remained predominantly at the individual level; and comparative work on media systems and regimes has tended to bracket the micro-level psychology of reception. The consequence is a body of knowledge that is deep within each stratum but thin at the joints between them. Recent work has begun to close some of these gaps—by testing NAS in a polarized competitive-authoritarian setting (Melek, 2024), by proposing a way to integrate NfO scales into network designs (Melek, 2025), and by modeling agenda-setting ecosystems for hybrid liberal-democratic systems (Elishar & Ariel, 2026)—but no synthesis yet connects the three strata across regime types. The present paper's contribution is to read these traditions together, arguing that the explanatory power of agenda-setting in the current environment depends precisely on how micro-level orientation, meso-level networks, and macro-level institutions interact. Rather than proposing a new empirical test, the paper offers a critical synthesis that specifies the boundary conditions under which salience transfer strengthens, weakens, or inverts, and it translates that synthesis into a concrete methodological agenda.

1.1. Aims, Research Questions, and Contribution

Three research questions organize the review. RQ1 asks how the explanatory object of agenda-setting theory has changed as the field moved from object salience through attribute salience to network salience, and what the algorithmic curation of visibility adds to that trajectory. RQ2 asks how the Need for Orientation operates as the micro-level mechanism of agenda-setting in an environment in which orientation is increasingly supplied by recommender systems and identity-consonant networks. RQ3 asks how media systems and regime types condition the strength and direction of agenda-setting effects, and what polarized hybrid regimes reveal about the limits of networked salience transfer. The review makes three contributions. Conceptually, it distinguishes network agenda-setting as a level of effect from networked agenda-setting as a process, and it introduces algorithmic orientation as a hypothesized mechanism by which platforms pre-empt the classic orientation sequence. Theoretically, it advances an integrative multilevel model and states six testable propositions that connect orientation, networks, and institutions. Comparatively, it extends the recent turn toward hybrid and non-Western settings (Melek, 2024; Vasist et al., 2024) by reading Türkiye, Hungary, and India through a common analytical grammar.

1.2. Approach and Scope of the Review

The paper is an integrative review in Torraco's (2016) sense: it synthesizes the representative literature on a mature topic in order to reconceptualize it and to generate propositions, rather than to estimate effect sizes. Integrative reviews are appropriate when the aim is to combine perspectives that have developed in separate research traditions (Snyder, 2019); source selection is therefore purposive and critical rather than exhaustive. The corpus was assembled in three steps. First, the canonical statements of each level of the theory and of the Need for Orientation were identified (Guo et al., 2012; Matthes, 2006, 2008; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993; McCombs et al., 1997, 2014; Weaver, 1977, 1980). Second, peer-reviewed empirical and theoretical work published between 2012 and 2026 was located through keyword searches ("agenda-setting," "network agenda setting," "need for orientation," "intermedia agenda setting," "media systems," "hybrid regime," "media capture," "algorithmic gatekeeping," "echo chamber") in Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, giving priority to journals indexed in those databases and to large-scale or cross-national designs. Third, backward and forward citation tracing extended the corpus into political science and computational social science, where the evidence on autocratization, coordinated manipulation, and platform experiments is concentrated. The resulting corpus comprises 108 sources; conference papers were retained only where they constitute the original statement of a concept or report computational evidence not otherwise available.

The three cases were selected on a most-different-systems logic. Türkiye, Hungary, and India differ in media-system legacy (a Mediterranean-type polarized pluralist system; a post-communist system with a public-service tradition; a vast, multilingual commercial market), in region, in scale, and in platform ecology, yet all three have undergone marked democratic erosion under elected incumbents—the gradual, legally cloaked pattern that distinguishes the current wave of autocratization from earlier waves (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019)—and all three are discussed in the polarization literature as cases in which partisan identity has fused with a contested national identity (McCoy et al., 2018; Neyazi, 2020; Somer, 2019; Vegetti, 2019). Similar outcomes across dissimilar systems make it possible to ask whether a common grammar of networked agenda-setting exists and how its mechanisms adapt to the institutional resources at hand. The cases are analytical illustrations drawn from published research rather than new empirical studies, and the review claims no representativeness beyond the regime type under examination.

Terminology is used as follows. Following Levitsky and Way (2010), hybrid regimes are those in which formal democratic institutions coexist with substantial incumbent abuse; the label is used descriptively for the periods covered by the cited studies and does not prejudge finer classifications. Network Agenda-Setting (NAS) denotes the third level of effect—the transfer of associative structure from media to public—whereas networked agenda-setting denotes the broader process by which salience is produced and contested within distributed, platform-mediated networks. Following Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), agenda-setting and priming are treated as accessibility-based effects and framing as an applicability-based effect, so that the second level is referred to as attribute agenda-setting rather than attribute priming.

This paper integrates three strands of scholarship—the theoretical evolution of agenda-setting, its psychological micro-foundations, and its systemic variation—into a single critical analysis. By revisiting the theory's foundations and examining recent developments in Network Agenda-Setting (NAS), it aims to clarify the boundary conditions of media influence in a polarized, technology-driven world. The argument proceeds as follows. Sections 2 and 3 trace the theory from its first-level origins through attribute agenda-setting to third-level network dynamics; Section 4 situates the psychological Need for Orientation (NfO) as the mechanism linking macro-level salience to individual cognition. Sections 5 and 6 examine how media systems and regime types condition agenda-setting; Section 7 offers a critical analysis of networked agenda-setting in three polarized cases of democratic erosion; and Section 8 synthesizes the evidence into an integrative multilevel model, states its propositions, and acknowledges its limitations. Section 9 sets out a methodological and comparative research agenda, and Section 10 concludes.

2. Theoretical Foundations: From Salience Transfer to Attribute Agenda-Setting

The development of agenda-setting theory is conventionally organized into levels that represent successively deeper forms of media influence on cognition. At its core, the theory holds that the emphasis the news media place on an issue shapes the importance the public attributes to that issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This foundational claim established the media as a primary filter of reality; as the field matured, researchers recognized that media power extends beyond lists of issues to the attributes and frames through which those issues are understood (McCombs et al., 1997). A recent synthesis of five decades of scholarship underscores how consistently the core proposition has held even as its scope has widened to encompass big-data and social-media environments (Vargo, 2018); the theory's founders themselves have charted its expansion into network effects and agenda melding as "new directions" rather than departures (McCombs et al., 2014).

2.1. The First Level: Media Salience and Public Importance

The first level of agenda-setting concerns the transfer of object salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. An "object" in this context is a public issue, a political candidate, or an event that becomes a focus of collective attention. The central hypothesis is that the more prominently the media cover a topic, the more likely the public is to regard it as among the "most important problems" facing the nation (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This process is not primarily about changing attitudes; it directs attention toward particular segments of reality while leaving others in shadow. Because attention is finite, the ordering of issues in the news supplies a powerful cue about which concerns are socially legitimate and worthy of deliberation.

First-level effects have proved robust across diverse settings, yet the first level presupposes a relatively unified media environment in which a common set of issues can be

identified and ranked. The proliferation of platforms and the rise in agenda fragmentation have made it increasingly difficult for any single institution to set a truly national agenda (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Even so, legacy outlets retain substantial agenda-setting power: analyses of hybrid news ecologies show that traditional news organizations continue to dominate the intermedia agenda during election campaigns, even as social-media chatter grows in volume (Harder et al., 2017). Panel evidence from Sweden's transition to a high-choice environment likewise shows that traditional news media remained the principal aggregate agenda setter while individual-level effects became more contingent on media use (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017), and experimental work indicates that incidental exposure to news in social-media feeds can itself produce first-level effects, particularly among the least politically interested (Feezell, 2018). The first level, in other words, has not disappeared; it has become one layer within a more complex system.

The durability of the first level across contexts and decades is itself a notable finding. A half-century of replication has shown the object-salience effect to be among the most robust in communication research, holding across print, broadcast, and online media and across established and transitional democracies (Vargo, 2018). Its persistence should not, however, be mistaken for invariance. The magnitude of the effect depends on the accessibility of a shared media agenda, on the personal relevance of the issues in question, and on the degree to which audiences rely on the media for orientation rather than on direct experience. Where an issue is obtrusive—unemployment or inflation experienced first-hand—the media's capacity to elevate its salience is comparatively modest; where an issue is unobtrusive—foreign policy or distant conflict—the media's role in constructing salience is correspondingly larger. The first level, in short, is conditional even when it is strong.

2.2. The Second Level: Substantive and Affective Attributes

The second level, often termed attribute agenda-setting, shifts the analytic focus from objects to the traits or characteristics—the attributes—that define them. If the first level concerns "what to think about," the second level concerns "how to think about it" by rendering certain attributes more salient than others (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Attributes are commonly divided into substantive dimensions—the information and thematic frames used to describe an issue—and affective dimensions—the emotional tone, whether positive, negative, or neutral, attached to those descriptions (McCombs et al., 1997). By emphasizing some attributes and muting others, the media supply an evaluative perspective that can shape public judgments of candidates and policies.

This level bridges agenda-setting and framing, because the selection of attributes inherently frames an issue for the audience (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001), although the two traditions rest on different psychological mechanisms—accessibility in the case of agenda-setting and priming, applicability in the case of framing (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007)—which is why this review treats the second level as attribute agenda-setting rather than as a form of priming. Computational content analyses of how newspapers portray emerging technologies illustrate the dynamic vividly: coverage of AI in the United States has oscillated between optimistic frames of innovation and risk-oriented frames of surveillance, labor displacement, and loss of control, with the balance of attributes shaping whether audiences approach the technology as opportunity or threat (Chuan et al., 2019). The second level thus clarifies that the media do not merely publish a roster of topics; they attach a structured set of meanings to each, and those meanings condition downstream evaluation.

2.3. The Historical Evolution of the Framework Since 1972

Since its inception, agenda-setting theory has undergone continuous expansion and replication, evolving from a correlation between newspaper coverage and voter concern into a sophisticated, multi-platform research program (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The initial decades refined first-level effects and identified the Need for Orientation as a key psychological moderator (McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1977, 1980; see Matthes, 2006). The 1990s produced the second level, which allowed the theory to engage the cognitive nuances of framing and attribute agenda-setting (McCombs et al., 1997). Figure 1 summarizes this trajectory, situating each conceptual milestone within the broader transformation of the media environment.

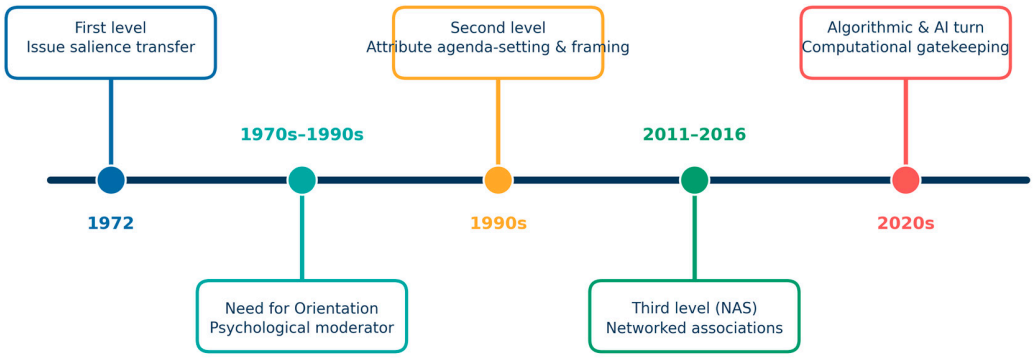


Figure 1. The evolution of agenda-setting theory, 1972–2020s. *Note*. The timeline synthesizes the theory's principal conceptual milestones. Adapted from McCombs and Shaw (1993), Guo and McCombs (2016), and Vargo (2018).

The most consequential shift in this trajectory accompanied the digital revolution. The migration of public discourse from institutionally controlled media—television and newspapers—to algorithmically mediated platforms forced a reconsideration of the gatekeeping process (Wallace, 2018). Traditional gatekeeping was enacted by human editors within professional hierarchies; contemporary gatekeeping is distributed across users, platforms, and recommender systems, with visibility governed as much by engagement signals as by editorial judgment (DeVito, 2017). Thorson and Wells (2016) capture this condition with the notion of "curated flows," in which an individual's information environment is assembled from overlapping curating actors—journalists, strategic communicators, personal contacts, algorithms, and the self. Chadwick's (2017) account of the hybrid media system generalizes the point: older and newer media logics are not sequential stages but interacting layers, so that a television broadcast, a politician's post, and a recommender system can each set the agenda for the others within a single news cycle. The theory itself has registered this shift through the concept of agenda melding, whereby individuals combine media, personal, and group agendas into a picture of the world consonant with the communities to which they belong (McCombs et al., 2014; Shaw et al., 1999), and through evidence that public attention on social media can lead as well as follow the news agenda, with the direction of influence varying by issue type (Neuman et al., 2014).

By the early 2020s, the framework began to absorb the role of AI and large language models, which are increasingly treated not merely as tools but as epistemic actors capable of generating persuasive information and disinformation at scale (Spitale et al., 2023). The historical arc therefore runs from a linear, top-down transfer of salience toward a recursive environment in which the power to set the agenda is contested by journalists, political elites, algorithmic systems, and the public. This maturation culminates in the third level, first proposed by Guo and McCombs (2011) and elaborated by Guo et al. (2012), which addresses the networked nature of the associations that structure public understanding.

3. Network Agenda-Setting: The Third Level of Influence

The most recent and arguably most transformative development in the theory is Network Agenda-Setting (NAS), also known as the third level. Whereas the first level concerns the salience of individual objects and the second level the salience of individual attributes, NAS holds that the media can also transfer the relationships among these elements (Guo et al., 2012). In the contemporary media ecosystem, issues and attributes are rarely encountered in isolation; they are bundled together into associative networks whose structure the media help to shape. Table 1 consolidates the three levels, clarifying how each defines its unit of analysis, its guiding question, and its characteristic mechanism.

Table 1. The three levels of agenda-setting and their defining features.

Level	Unit of Analysis	Guiding Question	Core Mechanism	Representative Studies
First level	Objects (issues, candidates, events)	What to think about	Transfer of object salience	McCombs and Shaw (1972)
Second level	Attributes (substantive, affective)	How to think about it	Transfer of attribute salience; framing	McCombs et al. (1997)
Third level (NAS)	Relationships among objects and attributes	What to associate with what	Transfer of network relationships	Guo et al. (2012); Vu et al. (2014); Melek (2024)

Note. Compiled by the author from McCombs and Shaw (1972, 1993), McCombs et al. (1997), Guo et al. (2012), and McCombs et al. (2014).

3.1. Cognitive Maps and Associative Networks

The theoretical foundation of NAS lies in the concept of cognitive associative networks. Human memory and thought are not organized as linear lists but as interconnected maps in which the activation of one concept primes related concepts. NAS proposes that the news media, by repeatedly linking two or more ideas—for example, connecting "immigration" with "economic threat" or "national security"—can transfer an entire network of associations to the public mind (Guo & McCombs, 2016). The first empirical test of this proposition demonstrated that the co-occurrence structure of issues in the news significantly predicts the co-occurrence structure of issues in the public's mental agenda, over and above first- and second-level effects (Vu et al., 2014).

This process resembles the structure of a mindset, in which the way individuals associate ideas defines how they conceptualize a subject. If an outlet consistently presents "environmental policy" alongside "tax increases" and "job losses," the public's cognitive map will come to reflect a strong link among these concepts, making it difficult to discuss environmental policy without activating negative economic associations. Unlike the first two levels, which foreground the prominence of discrete items, NAS foregrounds the centrality and interconnectedness of items within a mental network, producing a more holistic and often less conscious form of influence (Guo, 2012).

The novelty of the third level is best appreciated by contrast with its predecessors. The first two levels are, in effect, theories of prominence: they ask which objects and which attributes rise to the top of the public's hierarchy of concern. NAS is instead a theory of relational structure. Two media environments could rank the same issues in the same order yet transmit entirely different networks of association, and it is the network rather than the ranking that shapes how audiences reason about cause, blame, and remedy. This relational emphasis aligns agenda-setting with contemporary cognitive science, which models understanding as the traversal of associative structures rather than the retrieval of isolated facts. It also explains why the third level has proved especially generative in the study of polarization: rival publics may agree on which issues are important while holding

incompatible maps of how those issues connect, so that consensus on salience coexists with profound disagreement on meaning (Guo & McCombs, 2016). Evidence from Türkiye bears this out: in a polarized media system operating under competitive authoritarianism, the media's network agenda concerning Syrian refugees was transferred only to pro-government individuals, with no significant effect on pro-opposition individuals from any outlet, whatever that outlet's political stance (Melek, 2024).

3.2. The Methodological Shift Toward Network Analysis

The move to the third level has necessitated methodological reorientation. Traditional agenda-setting studies relied on rank-order correlations or linear regression to compare media and public agendas, techniques that are ill-suited to capturing the structural complexity of associative networks. Researchers have therefore adopted Social Network Analysis (SNA) to map the agenda networks of both the media and the public (Guo, 2012). SNA moves beyond frequency counts to measure the degree centrality of issues—how many other issues a given topic is linked to—and the density of the overall network, using matrix-comparison procedures such as quadratic assignment to relate one network to another.

Big-data extensions of this approach have mapped network issue agendas on social media during national elections, showing that the associative agenda travels across the media and public spheres in ways a simple issue ranking would miss (Vargo et al., 2014). The same network logic has illuminated intermedia dynamics, revealing how partisan and emerging online outlets increasingly shape—rather than merely follow—the associative agenda of the wider press (Guo & Vargo, 2015; Vargo & Guo, 2017), and how fake-news websites can influence the issue agendas of partisan media, so that fringe content enters wider circulation by indirection (Guo & Vargo, 2020; Vargo et al., 2018). SNA has likewise been used to identify coordinated communities that promote specific narratives by manufacturing dense clusters of shares and mentions, thereby inflating the apparent centrality of particular issues (Giglietto et al., 2020; Nizzoli et al., 2021). By treating the agenda as a graph rather than a list, scholars can identify the hubs that anchor public understanding of reality.

3.3. Comparing Linear and Networked Effects in Digital Spaces

The contrast between linear and networked effects is especially pronounced in digital environments. In the classical linear model, media influence is a direct transfer of salience from source to receiver. On digital platforms, this process becomes recursive and multi-directional: algorithms do not simply present a ranked list of salient items but curate a personalized network of content based on prior interactions, generating feedback loops that reinforce particular associative links (Huszár et al., 2022). Engagement-optimizing recommender systems amplify content that provokes reaction, and morally and emotionally charged messages diffuse farther and faster than neutral ones, chiefly within ideological communities (Brady et al., 2017).

Networked effects are further shaped by selective exposure. Cross-platform evidence indicates that echo-chamber structures are more pronounced on platforms whose feeds are governed by engagement-optimizing algorithms than on those organized around chronological or topical browsing (Cinelli et al., 2021). The reach and consequences of these structures are contested, however. Survey evidence indicates that echo chambers are largely confined to the politically disengaged, because diverse media repertoires and high political interest moderate them (Dubois & Blank, 2018). Large-scale field experiments conducted on Facebook and Instagram during the 2020 U.S. election found that replacing the engagement-ranked feed with a chronological feed, or sharply reducing exposure to like-minded sources, changed what users saw but produced no measurable change in polarization or issue attitudes over three months (Guess et al., 2023; Nyhan et al.,

2023), even though exposure to political news on the platform was strongly segregated by ideology (González-Bailón et al., 2023). Exposure to opposing views, moreover, can harden rather than soften partisan positions (Bail et al., 2018). Within such enclaves, the NAS effect is therefore best hypothesized to be amplified because users encounter the same bundle of associations repeatedly, which solidifies their cognitive networks and reduces exposure to alternative frames—a claim about salience and association rather than about attitude change. At the same time, coordinated actors can artificially inflate the centrality of chosen issues, engineering pseudo-events that pressure mainstream media to adopt a networked agenda originating at the digital fringe (Keller et al., 2020). Notably, the strength of these effects should not be overstated; behavioral evidence on citizens' actual media diets suggests that most people consume a more moderate and varied information mix than the strongest echo-chamber narratives imply (Guess, 2021).

Linear effects have not vanished—public concern still rises in the wake of major national events—but the networked influence of digital platforms has introduced a new order of complexity. The capacity to set the agenda now resides partly in the ability to manage networks, a task that involves not only professional journalism but also coordinated amplification by automated accounts, political influencers, and the platform architectures themselves (Wallace, 2018). This evolution underscores the need for an integrated model that accounts simultaneously for the psychological motivations of audiences and the structural constraints of the media system. The next section turns to the first of these, the Need for Orientation, before the analysis situates both within comparative media systems and regime types.

4. Psychological Mechanisms: The Need for Orientation

The psychological foundation of agenda-setting rests on the Need for Orientation (NfO), a cognitive-motivational construct that explains why individuals turn to the media and why some are more susceptible to agenda-setting than others (Matthes, 2006; McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1977, 1980). NfO holds that people possess an inherent drive to understand their environment, particularly when they confront novel or complex issues that require cognitive mapping. The construct is the principal bridge between macro-level media salience and micro-level cognition, governing the intensity with which an individual internalizes the media's hierarchy of importance. In an information environment defined by high-speed digital flows and algorithmic curation, the drive for orientation has evolved from a straightforward quest for facts into a negotiation between cognitive economy and social validation.

4.1. Relevance and Uncertainty as Determinants

The classic model of NfO specifies two antecedents: relevance and uncertainty (Matthes, 2006; Weaver, 1977). Relevance is the initial gatekeeper—the degree to which an individual perceives an issue as personally or socially significant. Absent a baseline of relevance, a person is unlikely to expend the cognitive effort required to seek information or form an opinion. When an issue bears directly on daily life—economic policy during a downturn, or public health guidance during a pandemic—the motivation to seek orientation rises sharply. Yet relevance alone does not guarantee a high NfO: an individual who already feels adequately informed, or who holds a settled opinion, has little residual need for further orientation. Figure 2 represents these antecedents as a two-by-two matrix that yields low, moderate, and high levels of orientation. Matthes's (2006) revision treats relevance and uncertainty as distinct dimensions of a multidimensional construct and shows that the classic single index conflates them; the matrix should therefore be read as a heuristic rather than as a measurement model.

Uncertainty is the second and more dynamic component. It denotes the gap between an individual's current knowledge and the information required to navigate a situation. When relevance is high, and uncertainty is also high, individuals experience an acute NfO that renders them highly receptive to media cues about which issues matter and how they should be understood. This interaction is visible in the reception of emerging technologies, where an absence of settled norms and technical knowledge creates a vacuum that news narratives and expert commentary rapidly fill (Chuan et al., 2019). The measurement of the construct has itself been tested: experimental work shows that the classic two-component index and Matthes's multidimensional scale are correlated and that both reliably predict first-level effects (Chernov et al., 2011), and survey research has extended NfO to the second level by examining how orientation and partisan selective exposure jointly shape attribute agenda-setting effects (Camaj, 2014). Contemporary work on risk information seeking during health crises corroborates the logic: perceived risk and felt information insufficiency jointly drive active, effortful information seeking, a digital-era analog of the orientation impulse (Jin & Lane, 2024).



Figure 2. The Need for Orientation as a function of relevance and uncertainty. *Note*. The matrix operationalizes the classic conceptualization of the Need for Orientation. Adapted from Weaver (1977) and Matthes (2006). Arrows on the axes indicate increasing relevance (horizontal axis) and increasing uncertainty (vertical axis).

4.2. NfO as a Moderator of Agenda-Setting Strength

NfO functions as a critical moderator that calibrates the dosage of agenda-setting influence. Individuals with a high NfO are not passive recipients but active seekers who use media agendas to manage complexity and reduce dissonance. Empirical studies have consistently found the correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda to be strongest among those with high relevance and high uncertainty (Matthes, 2006), and two-wave panel evidence supports a causal reading in which NfO measured at one point in time predicts subsequent agenda-setting effects (Matthes, 2008). The moderating effect is especially pronounced during electoral campaigns and periods of political instability,

when the political communication ecosystem becomes the primary source of orientation for undecided citizens (Matthes, 2008; Weaver, 1980). In such high-stakes moments, the media's power to define the salient issues of the day is amplified by the public's dependence on external cues for decision-making.

NfO also governs the transition from the first level of agenda-setting to the second. When the need for orientation is deep, individuals search not only for what to think about but for how to think about it, which heightens their susceptibility to attribute agenda-setting and framing (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). This dynamic is consequential for political trust: in settings where institutional trust is volatile, reliance on social media for orientation can either reinforce or corrode confidence in political institutions, depending on the character of the information consumed (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). The drive for orientation thus operates as a conduit through which media-constructed realities are internalized as personal belief, particularly where traditional institutional anchors are weak. Whether NfO also moderates third-level effects is only beginning to be examined: a first methodological exploration proposes a strategy for integrating individual NfO scale responses into the matrix-based NAS model, reports some significant outcomes, and calls for testing in further contexts (Melek, 2025). Integrating the construct into the third level is therefore one of the open tasks identified in Section 9.

4.3. Digital Challenges to the Traditional NfO Model

The shift to a digital-first environment has strained the classic NfO model, chiefly through algorithmic filtering and information fragmentation. In the era of legacy media, the need for orientation was often satisfied by a limited set of gatekeeping sources that supplied a relatively unified agenda. Today, recommender systems are engineered to maximize engagement by predicting what will feel relevant to a user, frequently before the user experiences any conscious need for orientation (Huszár et al., 2022). This review terms that pre-emptive supply of relevance algorithmic orientation: the platform infers relevance from behavioral traces and resolves uncertainty before the user has formulated a question, reversing the classic sequence in which felt uncertainty motivates information seeking. Algorithmic orientation is a hypothesis about mechanism rather than an established effect. The platform experiments reviewed in Section 3.3 indicate that its consequences for attitudes are smaller and more conditional than early filter-bubble accounts implied (Guess et al., 2023; Nyhan et al., 2023), which makes its measurement a research priority rather than a foregone conclusion. This proactive nudging can create a closed loop in which orientation is satisfied by content that reinforces prior beliefs, and in which uncertainty is artificially suppressed through the exclusion of dissenting views (Cinelli et al., 2021).

A further shift concerns the object of orientation. In the digital landscape, some individuals appear to seek orientation less to acquire a neutral understanding of the world than to locate content that affirms their identity or group—a movement from information-seeking toward validation-seeking. This tendency can devalue institutional expertise in favor of the socially constructed authority of influencers, and it privileges emotional resonance over factual accuracy (Brady et al., 2017). The assumption that a high NfO reliably produces a better-informed citizenry is therefore complicated, because digital orientation often prioritizes social cohesion. As different publics seek orientation from increasingly divergent and sometimes unverified sources, the agenda-setting authority of mainstream media fragments (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Importantly, this fragmentation is uneven; behavioral evidence indicates that heavy reliance on narrow, homogeneous sources characterizes a comparatively small, highly engaged segment rather than the median citizen (Guess, 2021).

5. Comparative Perspectives: Media Systems and Political Environments

Two structural layers are kept analytically distinct in what follows: media-system characteristics define the structures and channels through which agendas circulate, whereas regime type defines the distribution of political power and thus the extent to which those channels can be controlled, constrained, or contested. Section 5 addresses the first layer and Section 6 the second. Agenda-setting is not a system-neutral process; its dynamics are embedded in the structural characteristics of national media systems. The influential framework of Hallin and Mancini (2004) categorizes media systems according to the relationships among the state, political parties, and the press, distinguishing them along dimensions such as political parallelism, journalistic professionalization, market development, and the role of the state. These systemic differences create distinct opportunity structures for agenda-setting. Although there is evidence of convergence toward shared digital norms, the historical legacies of different systems continue to shape how information flows and how influence is exercised within the public sphere (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). Empirical re-analyses of the typology find that Western systems cluster into four rather than three types (Brüggemann et al., 2014), and applications beyond the West show that the framework's dimensions travel better than its models (Hallin & Mancini, 2012); the three models are therefore treated here as ideal types that anchor comparison rather than as exhaustive categories. Table 2 summarizes the three models and their agenda-setting implications.

Table 2. Hallin and Mancini's three media-system models and their agenda-setting implications.

Dimension	Liberal	Democratic-Corporatist	Polarized Pluralist
Exemplar countries	United States, United Kingdom	Germany, Scandinavia	Greece, Italy, Portugal
Political parallelism	Low to moderate	Moderate, historically organized	High
Professionalization	High	High	Lower; contested autonomy
Role of the state	Limited; market-driven	Strong public-service tradition	Extensive intervention
Agenda-setting implication	Pluralistic contest for attention	Stable, consensus-oriented agenda	Siloed, partisan agendas

Note. Compiled by the author from Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2017), Brüggemann et al. (2014), Castro Herrero et al. (2017), and Santana-Pereira (2016).

5.1. Agenda-Setting in Liberal and Democratic-Corporatist Systems

Liberal media systems, exemplified by the United States and the United Kingdom, are characterized by a market-driven orientation, high journalistic professionalization, and a tradition of ostensibly neutral reporting. In these systems, agenda-setting typically takes the form of a competitive struggle among political and social actors to capture media attention. Because the media are largely independent of direct state control, agenda-building is comparatively pluralistic, though it is heavily influenced by resource-rich actors that can supply information subsidies to newsrooms (Gandy, 1982); crucially, the payoff to such subsidies is itself conditioned by the degree of media freedom in a given system (Grömping, 2019). Social media have introduced new competitive pressures, compelling political journalists to vie with a wider array of commentators for public attention (Vargo & Guo, 2017). The resulting agenda is dynamic and frequently driven by breaking-news cycles, which can crowd out sustained attention to long-term policy problems.

Democratic-Corporatist systems, found across Northern and Central Europe, feature a strong public-service broadcasting tradition and a high degree of organized social represen-

tation. Here the media agenda tends to be more stable and to reflect a broader consensus among social partners, including labor, business, and the state. Where political parallelism exists, it is balanced by high professional standards and a commitment to the public interest, which buffers these systems against the most extreme polarization observed elsewhere. Even robust systems, however, are not immune to digital disruption. The rise of social media and the decline of traditional news consumption have begun to erode the unified national agenda that public-service media once provided, yielding a more fragmented public sphere whose effects vary across demographic groups (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023).

5.2. The Polarized Pluralist Model and Systemic Variation

The Polarized Pluralist model, traditionally associated with Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Italy, and Portugal, is marked by high political parallelism, comparatively lower journalistic professionalization, and significant state intervention in the media market (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In such systems, the media often function as instruments of political struggle rather than as detached watchdogs, and agenda-setting is frequently a top-down process in which the media agenda aligns closely with the interests of political elites. This model has proved resilient and has extended beyond its region of origin. In Central and Eastern Europe, empirical clustering shows that media systems do not map neatly onto the original three models but form distinct hybrids marked by strong state and party influence (Castro Herrero et al., 2017). Poland's post-communist trajectory, for example, exhibits pronounced political parallelism and recurrent state pressure that pull it toward the Mediterranean pattern rather than the Liberal one (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019).

In these environments, the media agenda represents not a shared social reality but a series of siloed agendas that cater to distinct political factions, so that the same event may be framed in diametrically opposed ways depending on the outlet. Portugal continues to display the elevated parallelism and lower professionalization characteristic of the Polarized Pluralist type, which constrains the performance of normative roles such as the provision of objective information (Santana-Pereira, 2016). A key consequence is that agenda-setting effects are often pre-filtered by audiences' political allegiances: rather than the media setting the public agenda outright, existing cleavages determine which outlets citizens trust, producing a circular relationship between political identity and media influence.

These systemic differences carry direct consequences for the operation of NAS. In Liberal systems, the relative independence and internal diversity of the press tend to produce competing associative networks, so that no single bundle of meanings dominates the public mind uncontested. In Democratic–Corporatist systems, the strength of public-service media and organized social representation favors a more consensual network in which mainstream associations remain broadly shared. In Polarized Pluralist systems, by contrast, the alignment of outlets with political camps tends to reproduce rival networks that map neatly onto partisan cleavages, so that the same event activates opposed associative structures depending on the audience's prior loyalties (Castro Herrero et al., 2017). The media system therefore does not merely determine which issues are salient; it conditions whether the public shares a common cognitive map at all.

5.3. Globalization and the Convergence of Media Effects

The rise of global platforms and the professionalization of political campaigning have fueled theories of convergence, which hold that media systems worldwide are growing more alike. Hallin and Mancini (2004) themselves framed this process as a differential, multi-causal blend of Americanization, globalization, and secularization rather than a uniform homogenization. Many phenomena once associated chiefly with the Liberal

model—the personalization of politics, the use of social media for direct appeals—are now observed globally. The practice of political leaders using platforms to address supporters directly, for instance, has been adopted across diverse contexts; yet detailed analysis shows that such messaging typically works by driving the mainstream press rather than bypassing it, sustaining a hybrid interplay between candidate communication and professional journalism (Wells et al., 2020).

Convergence, however, is neither uniform nor complete, and it commonly yields hybrids rather than a single global model. While technology is global, its uses are shaped by local political cultures and institutions. In Latin America, media have realigned along a populism–anti-populism axis, producing a distinctive form of parallelism in which outlets become the principal organizers of political opposition (Hallin et al., 2025). The effects of digital media on democracy likewise diverge: a systematic review of worldwide evidence finds that digital media simultaneously expand participation and information access while amplifying polarization, populism, and distrust, with the balance of outcomes varying by national context (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Globalization has thus supplied a shared toolkit, but the political communication ecosystem remains rooted in national circumstances.

6. Regime Types and the Boundary Conditions of Influence

Political regime type—ranging from liberal democracy to closed autocracy—constitutes the ultimate boundary condition for agenda-setting. Whereas media-system models describe the structure of the press, regime analysis addresses the distribution of power and the mechanisms of social control. In democracies, agenda-setting is a process of negotiation and contestation; in authoritarian regimes it is frequently an instrument of statecraft designed to secure legitimacy and regime survival (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Because contemporary autocratization typically proceeds through the incremental, legal-seeming erosion of checks by elected incumbents rather than through coups (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), the boundary between democracy and hybrid rule is a gradient along which the capture of media is among the earliest and most consequential moves. The degree of media freedom and the capacity for citizen verification are the primary variables determining whether the media function as a pluralistic forum or a monolithic propaganda apparatus. Table 3 maps the principal regime types onto their characteristic agenda-setting modalities.

Table 3. Regime types and their characteristic agenda-setting modalities.

Regime Type	Locus of Agenda Control	Dominant Mechanism	Role of Digital Media
Established democracy	Multi-centric; contested	Pluralistic negotiation	Amplifies alternative and civil-society agendas
Hybrid regime	State-leaning but contested	Media capture; polarization	Battleground of state-aligned and independent voices
Authoritarian regime	State-dominated	Censorship, distraction, flooding	Tool of proactive narrative construction

Note. Compiled by the author from Levitsky and Way (2010), Bermeo (2016), Roberts (2018), Gunitsky (2015), and King et al. (2013, 2017).

6.1. Agenda-Setting in Established Democracies

In established democracies, agenda-setting exhibits a multi-centric flow of influence in which government, media, and public all shape the national discourse. The presence of a free press and an independent judiciary ensures that no single actor fully dominates the agenda. Episodes of crisis-driven alignment between media and government tend to be short-lived, as democratic media systems return to a critical posture and permit the emer-

gence of alternative agendas from civil society and the opposition; cross-national evidence shows that the agenda-setting success of civil-society organizations rises with media freedom, because free media reward rather than penalize challenger claims (Grömping, 2019). This pluralism sustains the corrective function of democracy, enabling the identification and debate of problems that incumbents might prefer to ignore.

The rise in personalist politics nonetheless challenges these dynamics. Personalist leaders often seek to bypass institutional checks and to set the agenda through direct, unmediated communication, frequently manufacturing a sense of crisis that justifies centralized authority (Frantz et al., 2020). Such personalization can hollow out democratic institutions, shifting the media agenda toward the leader's persona and away from substantive policy. Even so, the architecture of democracy—separation of powers, electoral accountability, and a plural press—continues to limit any single actor's control of the agenda. The resilience of democratic agenda-setting depends on the persistence of independent media and an engaged citizenry (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023).

6.2. Information Control in Authoritarian Regimes

In authoritarian regimes, the agenda is less set than constructed and enforced as part of a broader strategy of information control. Such regimes use the media to propagate state narratives that bolster legitimacy and marginalize dissent, and their approach is highly adaptive. A landmark body of research on China shows that censorship is calibrated less to suppress criticism of the state than to forestall collective action, with content bearing mobilizing potential removed most aggressively (King et al., 2013). Rather than rebut critics, the state fabricates large volumes of distracting content that redirects public attention, a strategy of flooding rather than argument (King et al., 2017).

The sophistication of contemporary authoritarianism lies in this capacity for proactive agenda-building. Instead of merely blocking information, regimes increasingly saturate the public sphere with favorable content, making it difficult for alternative agendas to gain traction; censorship operates through fear, friction, and flooding rather than outright prohibition alone (Roberts, 2018). Social media have themselves become instruments of autocratic stability, used for counter-mobilization, discourse framing, the divulgence of citizens' preferences, and elite coordination (Gunitsky, 2015). These strategies are frequently coupled with coordinated information campaigns that manufacture an illusion of consensus across platforms (Starbird et al., 2019). In such systems, the need for orientation can be satisfied by a monolithic state agenda that leaves little room for uncertainty, thereby neutralizing the very mechanism that would otherwise prompt individuals to seek diverse sources, a possibility formalized as Proposition 5 in Section 8.2.

6.3. State-Aligned Versus Independent Media Agendas in Hybrid Regimes

Hybrid regimes—those situated between democracy and autocracy—turn the media environment into a battleground between state-aligned outlets and a shrinking number of independent voices (Levitsky & Way, 2010). These regimes frequently engage in media capture, using economic and regulatory pressure to ensure that the most influential outlets are owned by loyalists (Schiffrin, 2018). The result is a dual agenda-setting environment. State-aligned media promote narratives emphasizing national unity, economic progress, and the perfidy of the opposition, while independent media, often operating on digital platforms, seek to advance an agenda focused on corruption, rights, and inequality. A central instrument of capture is the strategic allocation of state advertising, which starves critical outlets of revenue while rewarding compliant ones (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020; Dragomir, 2018).

The struggle for the agenda is particularly visible in the interaction between pro-government and opposition media, which frequently function as echo chambers for their

respective audiences (Cinelli et al., 2021). Intermedia agenda-setting effects—in which one outlet influences another—are often confined to outlets within the same ideological camp. Although independent media may set the agenda for a small, highly engaged public, state-aligned media typically dominate the mass agenda, especially among older and less digitally connected populations. This dominance is reinforced by the personalization of the regime, whereby the state agenda becomes synonymous with the leader's agenda and dissent is recast as an attack on the nation itself (Frantz et al., 2020). The boundary between news and propaganda blurs, and the media's watchdog role gives way to a cheerleading function.

7. Critical Analysis: Network Agenda-Setting in Polarized Hybrid Regimes

The transition from traditional agenda-setting to NAS supplies a sophisticated lens for examining how information and cognitive associations are managed in hybrid regimes. In these settings, which blend democratic procedure with authoritarian practice, state-aligned media do not merely transfer the salience of individual issues; their coverage assembles associative networks that link actors, policies, and moral evaluations. Read through the lens of NAS, this third-level influence would be expected to operate by bundling concepts in the public mind, making it harder for audiences to disentangle state-sanctioned narratives from independent assessment; as Section 7.3 details, however, direct evidence of such transfer across these cases is confined to Türkiye. In Türkiye, Hungary, and India—whose selection on a most-different-systems logic is explained in Section 1.2—the state's capacity to shape the digital and traditional media landscape enables the construction of media agendas in which national identity is networked with support for the ruling elite, while opposition is linked to external threats or social instability; whether these media-level networks are adopted as public cognitive maps is an empirical question that only the Turkish case has addressed directly. Table 4 summarizes the comparative dynamics across the three cases.

Table 4. Networked agenda-building and associative dynamics in three hybrid or illiberal cases.

Case	Networked Master Frame in Media Content	Key Mechanisms of Control	Principal Counter-Agenda in Cited Studies	Evidentiary Status
Türkiye	National sovereignty and cultural authenticity	Media capture; manufactured trends; surveillance	Injustice and democratic erosion	Mixed: direct public-level NAS evidence (Melek, 2024) alongside media-content and institutional evidence
Hungary	National interest against external interference	State advertising; party colonization; legalism	Democratic backsliding and corruption	Institutional or supply-side evidence
India	Modernization as national strength	Digital propaganda; platform messaging; framing of conflict	Exclusion and majoritarian bias	Mixed: media-content and institutional or supply-side evidence

Note. Compiled by the author from Yeşil (2018), Elmas et al. (2021), Laebens and Öztürk (2021), Bátorfy and Urbán (2020), Krekó and Enyedi (2018), Pirro and Stanley (2022), Neyazi (2020), Udupa (2018), Chebrolu et al. (2025), Çarkoğlu et al. (2014), Bulut and Yörük (2017), Melek (2024), Polyák (2019), Vegetti (2019), and Chakravartty and Roy (2015). Evidentiary status categories: direct public-level NAS evidence denotes a measured transfer of associative networks from media content to audiences; media-content evidence denotes analysis of coverage or platform content only; institutional or supply-side evidence denotes ownership, funding, regulatory, or platform-governance evidence; mixed denotes a combination of these. Among the cited studies, only Melek (2024) reports direct public-level NAS evidence.

7.1. Mapping Network Agendas in Türkiye, Hungary, and India

In the Turkish case, the network agenda is frequently organized around themes of national sovereignty and cultural authenticity. Over the past two decades, media–state relations have been restructured through a combination of capture and discipline, whereby ownership changes, regulatory pressure, and financial leverage align major outlets with the government and bundle national identity with support for the incumbent (Yeşil, 2018). Content analysis of the 2011 election campaign documented the press–party parallelism on which this bundling rests, with outlets' coverage aligning with partisan camps to a degree characteristic of the polarized pluralist model (Çarkoğlu et al., 2014). This associative work is reinforced online: research documents ephemeral astroturfing attacks that manufacture fake trending topics, artificially inflating the centrality of state-favorable issues within the networked public sphere (Elmas et al., 2021), and pro-government troll networks have turned Twitter into a site of digital populism in which polarization is organized rather than merely expressed (Bulut & Yörük, 2017). The environment is further shaped by extensive digital surveillance that raises the cost of sustaining alternative networks of association (Topak, 2019). Two recent studies sharpen the picture. The visibility deficit documented after the 2023 Hatay earthquakes—where most independently verified damage to cultural heritage never entered the news agenda—shows that the boundary of the agenda, and not only its internal ordering, is patterned (Karaduman et al., 2026). And the associative bundle does not travel uniformly: on the Syrian refugee issue, the media's network agenda was transferred only to pro-government individuals, with no significant effect on pro-opposition individuals from any outlet (Melek, 2024). This is the only direct, public-level NAS finding among the three cases and serves here as the direct-evidence anchor for the audience-segmentation argument, a boundary condition to which Section 7.3 returns.

In Hungary, the network agenda centers on the defense of national interest against external interference. The governing party has bundled the concept of national interest with a rejection of specific European norms, embedding these associations in the media agenda through comprehensive control of media infrastructure; the evidence cited below documents this supply-side capture rather than a measured transfer of associative networks to the public. A principal instrument has been the strategic allocation of state advertising, which has reshaped the media market by financing loyal outlets and marginalizing critical ones (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). Together with a politically captured regulatory authority and a public-service broadcaster turned into a government mouthpiece, state-directed intervention in the media market forms one of the three pillars on which the illiberal media order rests (Polyák, 2019). This capture is best understood as party colonization of media institutions rather than episodic interference (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013), and it forms part of a broader illiberal playbook in which laws are forged, bent, or broken to entrench executive power while preserving a legal facade (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). Hungary is thus aptly characterized as an externally constrained hybrid regime and as a laboratory of illiberal governance (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018). Polarization in Hungary is, moreover, primarily political rather than issue-based—organized around identification with or against the governing bloc—which is consistent with NAS expectations of heightened public receptivity to associative bundles keyed to that identity, although Vegetti's (2019) analysis measures the structure of polarization rather than network agenda-setting effects.

India's network agenda increasingly fuses digital transformation with developmentalism, so that modernization is networked with national strength. This fusion has a mediated-populist genealogy: the 2014 campaign combined a development narrative with direct, personalized appeals across television and social media, in a commercial media environment that offered little critical scrutiny (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015). Yet the same environment sustains darker associations. Digital propaganda and political bots have

amplified partisan narratives and deepened polarization, circulating hostile links between opposition groups and notions of national betrayal (Neyazi, 2020); read through an NAS framework, such content would be expected to foster corresponding public associations, although the study measures propaganda and polarization rather than media-to-public network transfer. Nationalist online cultures have normalized abusive exchange as a mode of political participation (Udupa, 2018), and on encrypted platforms sexist and uncivil political discussion has been shown to intensify affective polarization during elections (Neyazi et al., 2025). Computational analysis of election coverage further reveals a pronounced tendency to frame political competition through conflict, a content-level pattern that can be interpreted as reinforcing adversarial associations, although the analysis maps coverage rather than public networks (Chebrolu et al., 2025). The rapid integration of AI into public services compounds these dynamics, since an underdeveloped regulatory architecture leaves room for algorithmic bias to reinforce existing social hierarchies (Joshi, 2024).

Read comparatively, the three cases reveal a common grammar of networked control beneath their distinct vocabularies. In each, the state assembles a master frame that fuses a valued collective identity with the person or party of the incumbent, and then works to make that fusion appear natural rather than contingent. Türkiye bundles sovereignty and cultural authenticity; Hungary bundles national interest and resistance to external interference; India bundles modernization and national strength. What differs is the mechanism through which the bundle is stabilized. In Türkiye, the dominant instrument is the disciplinary reorganization of ownership combined with computational manipulation of trends (Elmas et al., 2021; Yeşil, 2018). In Hungary, it is the financial and legal architecture of capture, executed through state advertising and legislative change (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020; Pirro & Stanley, 2022). In India, it is the sheer scale of digital propaganda and platform-mediated messaging operating within a thin regulatory frame (Joshi, 2024; Neyazi, 2020). The convergence of media-level outcomes across divergent mechanisms suggests that networked agenda-setting is less a technology than a strategy, one that adapts its tools to the institutional resources each regime has at hand.

7.2. Audience Segmentation: Pro-Government and Pro-Opposition Dynamics

The efficacy of network agenda-setting in hybrid regimes would be expected to be moderated by audience segmentation. In highly polarized societies, the public is unlikely to behave as a monolithic entity; it plausibly divides into cognitive enclaves that process identical information through different associative networks. Where polarization becomes pernicious—a single us-versus-them cleavage that overrides cross-cutting identities—these enclaves harden into rival social identities (McCoy et al., 2018). Cross-national evidence indicates that political disinformation and hate speech aggravate this polarization, and that the effect is conditioned by configurations of platform governance and censorship rather than by any single factor (Vasist et al., 2024). Where the gatekeeping role of professional journalists erodes, influencers and partisan intermediaries increasingly set the agenda, which can be interpreted as enveloping pro-government audiences in a network of trust and stability while opposition audiences seek out networks that link the state to injustice (Wallace, 2018).

Segmentation is equally visible in how groups decode the same mediatized events. Partisan identity structures interpretation so thoroughly that a single symbol can be read as cultural authenticity by one camp and as political instrumentalization by another; in Türkiye, the intertwining of partisanship with autocratization has hardened these divergent readings into stable social identities (Laebens & Öztürk, 2021; Somer, 2019). In Hungary, the illiberal playbook relies on nativism and populism to sustain an in-group/out-group dynamic in which the state is cast as the sole protector against external threat, while

opposition supporters struggle to project an alternative network of democratic backsliding into mainstream discourse (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). In each case, the associative agenda would be expected to be received less as new information than as confirmation of a pre-existing map, a reading consistent with the cited evidence on partisan identity rather than one established by direct measurement of public networks.

India illustrates how even technologically sophisticated segments remain bound to culturally specific networks. As citizens integrate new digital tools into political life, the drive for orientation may increasingly be satisfied through personalized, identity-consonant channels, and the broader ecosystem remains fertile ground for misinformation whose diffusion reinforces group-level bias (Neyazi et al., 2025). This reading is a theoretical interpretation rather than a case-level observation: NfO was not measured directly in any of the three cases, and an empirical claim would require separate measures of relevance and uncertainty or another established NfO instrument (Matthes, 2006, 2008). Segmentation is therefore reinforced from two directions at once—by algorithmic filtering that narrows exposure and by the deliberate construction of echo networks by political actors (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Segmentation also transforms the meaning of a successful agenda-setting effect. In a relatively unified public, transferring a network of associations expands the common ground on which deliberation can occur. In a segmented public, the same transfer would instead deepen division, because each camp absorbs the associations that flatter its priors while rejecting those that do not. The result is a paradox familiar from research on affective polarization: highly effective communication can reduce, rather than increase, the shared reality a democracy requires (Iyengar et al., 2019; Laebens & Öztürk, 2021; Vasist et al., 2024). A systematic review of the media–polarization literature likewise finds that effects vary with content, platform, and context, and that the evidence remains heavily concentrated in U.S. samples (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). This is why the raw strength of a network agenda-setting effect is an insufficient measure of its political consequence. Analysts must also ask whether the effect is convergent, drawing publics toward a common map, or divergent, hardening incompatible ones, a distinction that the network method is unusually well suited to capture but that a simple salience correlation would miss.

7.3. The Systematic Limits of Network Agenda-Setting

The limits of NAS become apparent once resistance is taken seriously. The media's power to link concepts is not absolute; it is bounded by audiences' prior beliefs and by their trust in the source. In hybrid regimes, a state's attempt to capture the network agenda may fail to reach opposition-leaning audiences: when outlets repeatedly link "opposition" with "treason," low source credibility can lead audiences to discount the associative bundle. NAS thus appears highly effective at reinforcing existing networks but far weaker at converting those with high political skepticism, a pattern observed directly in Türkiye, where third-level effects were confined to pro-government audiences, with no significant effect among pro-opposition respondents (Melek, 2024), and consistent with evidence that citizens' actual information diets are more heterogeneous than saturation narratives assume (Guess, 2021). This documented null effect should be distinguished from a boomerang or reversal effect, in which audiences actively adopt associations opposite to those promoted: the Turkish data establish the former, whereas the latter is advanced here as a hypothesis that the available evidence does not test.

A second limit concerns the perception of injustice that arises under conditions of steep power asymmetry. Where macro-level discourse emphasizes stability and progress, micro-level experience may foreground grievance, generating a latent counter-agenda that circulates outside formal media networks and that partisan identity alone cannot

fully suppress (Laebens & Öztürk, 2021). Top-down network construction can also be undermined by the state's own incoherence, as fragmented bureaucratic implementation and opaque governance dilute the intended associations (Joshi, 2024).

The limitations are methodological as well. Although NAS advances beyond linear correlation to map associative structure, it struggles to capture the silent or latent power imbalances that only qualitative, micro-level inquiry reveals. In data-scarce settings, particularly across much of the Global South, the complexity of overlapping social, political, and environmental concerns is easily flattened by simplified agendas, and the measurement of networks is constrained by uneven data access (Bruns, 2019; Vargo, 2018). The systematic limits of NAS are therefore both psychological—rooted in audience resistance—and structural—rooted in the inability of centralized agendas to encompass the lived complexity of diverse publics.

8. Discussion: Theoretical Synthesis and Methodological Implications

Studying agenda-setting in the twenty-first century requires a synthesis that connects micro-level psychology with macro-level media systems. As the digital environment grows more complex, the classical salience-transfer model must be integrated with NAS and the Need for Orientation to explain how influence operates across regime types. This synthesis reveals that media power is no longer only a matter of directing attention to issues; it is increasingly a matter of shaping the cognitive architecture of public discourse—the way issues, attributes, and actors are interconnected within a globalized yet fragmented information ecosystem (Guo & McCombs, 2016).

8.1. Integrating Micro-Level Psychology and Macro-Level Systems

The integration of psychology and system-level analysis is best understood through the interaction of orientation and structure. The Need for Orientation remains the primary moderator: when individuals confront high uncertainty about personally relevant issues, their receptivity to media agendas rises (Matthes, 2006). What the media system determines is which networks of association are available to satisfy that need. In centralized systems, the state supplies top-down coherence that resolves uncertainty through a single dominant narrative (Roberts, 2018). In polarized pluralist systems, orientation is frequently met by partisan networks that furnish validation rather than balanced information (Santana-Pereira, 2016). The macro-level system thus defines the menu of networks, while the micro-level psychology of the individual selects among them. Figure 3 presents this logic as an integrative multilevel model in which macro-level institutions, meso-level networks, and micro-level orientation are joined by downward salience transfer and upward feedback.

The model shares its three-level architecture with the agenda-setting ecosystem framework recently proposed for hybrid liberal-democratic systems, which foregrounds flash agendas and agenda leadership at the meso level (Elishar & Ariel, 2026), and with the curated-flows account of exposure (Thorson & Wells, 2016). It differs from both in two respects. It specifies the micro level as the Need for Orientation rather than as generic cognitive processing, so that the individual-level moderator of agenda-setting is the same construct the theory has used since the 1970s; and it treats regime type as a macro-level variable in its own right, so that the same meso-level dynamics—capture, coordination, algorithmic curation—can be compared across democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian settings rather than assumed to operate within a liberal-democratic frame.

The perception of injustice functions as a critical psychological barrier that can interrupt salience transfer even in tightly controlled systems, underscoring the importance of perceived legitimacy to effective governance (Laebens & Öztürk, 2021). This is why identical propaganda strategies produce divergent outcomes across contexts: the same

associative bundle that consolidates an in-group can harden an out-group's resistance. An adequate theory of agenda-setting must therefore model not only the transmission of networks but the conditions under which audiences accept, ignore, or invert them.

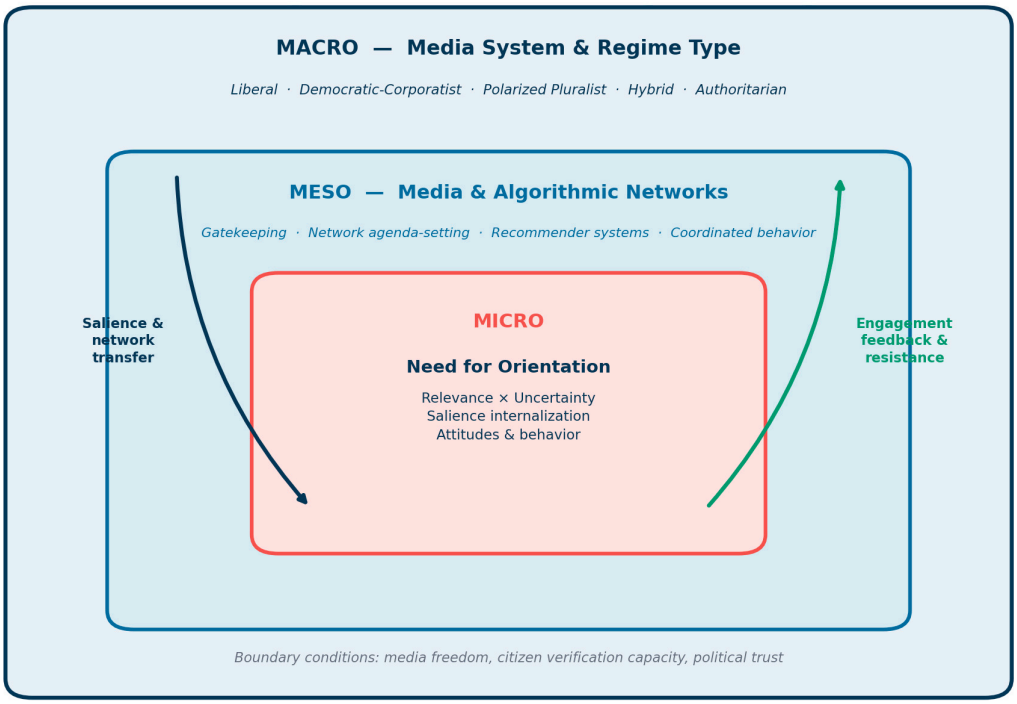


Figure 3. An integrative multilevel model of agenda-setting. *Note*. The model links macro-level media systems and regime types, meso-level media and algorithmic networks, and micro-level Need for Orientation. Developed by the author, drawing on Matthes (2006), Guo and McCombs (2016), and Hallin and Mancini (2004).

This multilevel view also reframes a long-standing debate about media power. Critics of strong-effects traditions have argued that audiences are active interpreters rather than passive recipients, and the evidence on heterogeneous media diets supports that caution (Guess, 2021). Yet activity and influence are not opposites. The multilevel model implies that audience agency operates within a structured menu: individuals choose among the networks their media system makes available, and their choices are shaped by orientation needs that the system itself helps to arouse and to satisfy. Media power, on this account, is neither the hypodermic injection of early theory nor the vanishing influence of minimal-effects revisionism. It is the power to configure the choice environment—to determine which associative maps are on offer, how accessible each is, and at what cost—while leaving the final act of selection to the citizen. Recognizing this preserves the insight of active-audience scholarship without conceding that structure is irrelevant.

8.2. Propositions Derived from the Model

The model can be stated as a set of propositions that are falsifiable with the methods discussed in Section 9; Table 5 summarizes them together with their principal moderators and the evidence from which each is derived. Proposition 1 (persistence with heterogeneity) holds that first-level effects persist at the aggregate level in high-choice environments, while their individual-level magnitude is increasingly conditioned by media repertoire and by NfO (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017; Feezell, 2018). Proposition 2 (relational primacy) holds that third-level effects predict how audiences reason about cause, blame, and remedy over and above first- and second-level effects, and that they are largest where media supply dense and repeated associative bundles (Guo & McCombs, 2016; Vu et al., 2014). Proposition

3 (identity-channeled orientation) holds that NAS effects increase with NfO, but that the relevance component of NfO increasingly channels orientation toward identity-consonant networks, so that high NfO predicts stronger within-camp and weaker cross-camp effects (Matthes, 2008; Melek, 2024, 2025).

Table 5. Propositions derived from the integrative multilevel model.

Proposition	Statement	Principal Moderators	Indicative Evidence
P1 Persistence with heterogeneity	First-level effects persist at the aggregate level in high-choice environments; individual-level magnitude varies with media repertoire and NfO	Media repertoire; political interest; NfO	Djerf-Pierre and Shehata (2017); Feezell (2018); Shehata and Strömbäck (2013)
P2 Relational primacy	Third-level effects predict reasoning about cause, blame, and remedy beyond first- and second-level effects, and are largest where associative bundles are dense and repeated	Density and repetition of media bundles	Guo and McCombs (2016); Vu et al. (2014)
P3 Identity-channeled orientation	NAS effects rise with NfO, but relevance increasingly channels orientation toward identity-consonant networks: stronger within-camp, weaker cross-camp effects	NfO (relevance, uncertainty); partisan identity	Matthes (2008); Melek (2024, 2025)
P4 Algorithmic orientation	Pre-emptive algorithmic supply of relevance weakens the uncertainty–seeking link; curation affects salience and association more than attitudes	Feed design; engagement optimization	Guess et al. (2023); Huszár et al. (2022); Nyhan et al. (2023)
P5 System conditioning	Model-derived expectation requiring comparative testing: media systems should condition the direction of NAS effects—expected to be divergent in polarized pluralist and captured systems, convergent in democratic-corporatist systems, and suppressive of orientation in authoritarian systems	Political parallelism; professionalization; state role	Castro Herrero et al. (2017); Roberts (2018)
P6 Regime limit	In hybrid regimes, state-driven NAS effects are expected to be confined to pro-incumbent audiences; among opposition audiences, low source credibility yields a null effect (directly observed in Türkiye), while boomerang or reversal effects remain a distinct, untested hypothesis; perceived injustice may sustain counter-agendas	Source credibility; power asymmetry; perceived injustice	Laebens and Öztürk (2021); Melek (2024)

Note. Developed by the author. NAS = Network Agenda-Setting; NfO = Need for Orientation.

Proposition 4 (algorithmic orientation) holds that where recommender systems supply relevance pre-emptively, the association between felt uncertainty and active information seeking weakens, and that the effect of algorithmic curation on issue salience and association exceeds its effect on attitudes (Guess et al., 2023; Huszár et al., 2022; Nyhan et al., 2023). Proposition 5 (system conditioning) is a model-derived expectation that requires comparative empirical testing rather than an established cross-system finding: media systems should condition the direction of NAS effects, such that in polarized pluralist and captured systems effects are expected to be divergent and to harden rival cognitive maps, whereas in democratic-corporatist systems they are expected to be convergent, and in authoritarian

systems a monolithic agenda would suppress the uncertainty that otherwise motivates orientation toward alternative sources (Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Roberts, 2018). The proposition attributes this conditioning to three distinguishable sources of media-system structure—political parallelism, institutional capture, and state information control—none of which has yet been tested against directly measured NAS effects. Proposition 6 (regime limit) holds that in hybrid regimes state-driven NAS effects are expected to be confined to pro-incumbent audiences; that among opposition audiences low source credibility produces a null effect, as directly observed in Türkiye (Melek, 2024), whereas a boomerang or reversal effect is a distinct hypothesis that the available evidence does not test; and that the perception of injustice may sustain latent counter-agendas outside captured media (Laebens & Öztürk, 2021). Four outcomes should accordingly be kept analytically separate: a null effect, in which the media network does not transfer; a convergent effect, in which publics move toward a common map; a divergent effect, in which camps move toward incompatible maps; and a boomerang effect, in which audiences adopt associations opposite to those promoted. Propositions 3, 5, and 6 jointly imply the review's central claim: the strength of a network agenda-setting effect and its political consequence are distinct quantities, and the media system determines the sign that connects them.

8.3. Theoretical Extensions for the Multi-Platform Environment

The multi-platform environment, increasingly governed by AI and algorithmic gatekeeping, requires meaningful extensions to the agenda-setting framework. Gatekeeping has shifted from human editors toward algorithmic visibility, so that the most salient items are often those that generate the most interaction, favoring emotional and polarizing content (Brady et al., 2017; DeVito, 2017). Engagement-optimizing recommender systems measurably amplify political content relative to a chronological baseline, introducing a structural bias into the construction of salience (Huszár et al., 2022). Theoretical models must now accommodate the algorithmic orientation introduced in Section 4.3, in which the platform orients the user toward particular networks before any conscious need for orientation arises (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Recommender systems are, in this sense, institutions of the news ecosystem whose design choices carry democratic consequences (Helberger, 2019; Napoli, 2014), and the evidence that feed changes alter exposure more readily than attitudes (Guess et al., 2023; Nyhan et al., 2023) locates their agenda-setting power at the first and third levels—what is seen and what is associated—rather than at the level of persuasion.

Large language models sharpen these challenges. Because such systems can produce information and disinformation that audiences find more convincing than human-authored text, they become consequential actors capable of generating associative content at scale (Spitale et al., 2023); experiments confirm that AI-generated propaganda is nearly as persuasive as human-written propaganda (Goldstein et al., 2024) and that AI-generated news text is generally judged credible by readers (Kreps et al., 2022). Evidence that AI-generated content is persuasive or judged credible does not, however, establish first-, second-, or third-level agenda-setting effects, which require a demonstrated transfer of object salience, attribute salience, or associative structure from media content to publics. The proliferation of synthetic media raises the prospect of a hybrid public sphere in which human psychology, algorithmic logic, and political strategy intersect to produce a network of networks. Detecting coordinated manipulation within this environment increasingly depends on network methods capable of surfacing inauthentic coordination, from astroturfing operations to coordinated link-sharing communities (Giglietto et al., 2020; Keller et al., 2020). The future of agenda-setting theory lies in modeling this socio-technical loop rather than treating technology as an exogenous shock.

8.4. Challenges in Comparative Cross-National Research

Comparative research on agenda-setting across media systems and regime types confronts several obstacles. The first is data scarcity, particularly in hybrid regimes and much of the Global South, where official records may be unreliable or inaccessible and where network measurement depends on data that platforms increasingly restrict (Bruns, 2019; Vargo, 2018). Researchers must often triangulate across media content, social-media traces, and qualitative fieldwork to reconstruct the political agenda, a necessity that introduces questions of credibility and comparability.

A second challenge is the divergence between formal strategy and actual implementation. Instruments of media control and of digital governance that appear similar on paper—state-funding regimes, platform regulations, or AI initiatives, for instance—vary widely in their governance, temporal, and financial execution, which complicates the drawing of mechanical lessons from one country to another and argues for context-sensitive comparison (Dragomir, 2018; Joshi, 2024). A third challenge is that the presumed universality of agenda-setting effects is itself under strain. Where the rule of law is bent or broken, the media system ceases to operate as an independent variable and becomes a component of the state apparatus, which calls for a shift from media-centric toward system-centric research designs (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). Comparative work must therefore treat the media system and the regime not as background conditions but as active parts of the explanation.

8.5. Limitations of the Review

Four limitations qualify the synthesis. First, as an integrative rather than systematic review, the paper relies on purposive selection; although the corpus was assembled through structured searches and citation tracing (Section 1.2), it privileges English-language scholarship and may under-represent work published in the languages of the three cases. Second, the case analyses rest on secondary sources produced by different disciplines with different evidentiary standards; they illustrate the model rather than test it, and the mechanisms attributed to each case should be read as hypotheses about that case. Third, the platform evidence on which the argument about algorithmic orientation draws is concentrated in the United States and in a single election cycle (González-Bailón et al., 2023; Guess et al., 2023; Nyhan et al., 2023); its generalizability to hybrid regimes, where platform governance and political incentives differ, is an open question. Fourth, the propositions in Table 5 are stated at a level of abstraction that admits several operationalizations; their value lies in directing measurement rather than in settling it.

9. Recommendations for Future Research

The foregoing synthesis points to a concrete agenda for advancing agenda-setting research in a networked, algorithmically mediated, and politically polarized environment. Six priorities follow directly from the analysis and from the propositions in Table 5, and they are summarized in Table 6.

First, researchers should institutionalize networked measurement, modeling media and public agendas as graphs rather than ranked lists so that the associative structure central to NAS becomes directly observable. Standardizing SNA measures—degree centrality, network density, and matrix-comparison procedures—would improve comparability across studies and allow the third level to be tested with the same rigor long applied to the first (Guo, 2012; Vu et al., 2014). Second, the field should develop algorithmic auditing as a core method, treating recommender systems as agenda-setting actors whose amplification of political content can be quantified against transparent baselines (Huszár et al., 2022); the 2020 platform experiments show that such baselines can be established through research–platform collaborations, but also that access remains contingent on platform con-

sent (Bruns, 2019; Guess et al., 2023). Independent access to platform data is a precondition for this work and should be a priority for research policy.

Table 6. A research agenda for agenda-setting in the networked, algorithmic era.

Priority	Recommended Direction	Illustrative Methods
Networked measurement	Model agendas as graphs rather than lists to capture associative structure	Social Network Analysis; QAP correlation; centrality and density metrics
Algorithmic auditing	Treat recommender systems as agenda-setting actors and quantify amplification	Platform audits; A/B comparisons; API-based trace data
Multilevel designs	Link micro-level orientation, meso-level networks, and macro-level systems	Multilevel modeling; linked survey and behavioral data
Cross-national comparison	Extend beyond Western cases to hybrid and Global South settings	Most-similar/most-different designs; triangulated evidence
AI and synthetic media	Assess large language models as producers of associative content	Computational text analysis; coordination detection; experiments
NfO–NAS integration	Test the Need for Orientation as a moderator of third-level effects and validate NfO scales for network designs	Panel surveys with multidimensional NfO scales; QAP-based network measures; experiments

Note. Developed by the author on the basis of the preceding analysis and the sources reviewed therein.

Third, future studies should adopt explicitly multilevel designs that connect the micro level of orientation, the meso level of networks, and the macro level of media systems and regimes, rather than examining each in isolation (Hallin & Mancini, 2017; Matthes, 2006). Fourth, the Need for Orientation should be integrated into third-level designs rather than left at the first level: panel studies that measure relevance and uncertainty separately (Matthes, 2006, 2008) and that carry NfO scales into matrix-based network designs (Melek, 2025) would test Proposition 3 directly and clarify whether orientation now channels audiences toward identity-consonant networks. Fifth, the evidentiary base should be broadened well beyond the Western democracies that still dominate the literature; systematic comparison that includes hybrid regimes and Global South settings is essential if the theory's boundary conditions are to be understood (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023; Melek, 2024; Vasist et al., 2024). Finally, research should confront the role of generative AI directly, evaluating large language models as producers of associative content and disinformation and developing methods to detect coordinated manipulation at scale (Giglietto et al., 2020; Goldstein et al., 2024; Spitale et al., 2023). Pursued together, these priorities would equip the theory to explain not only what publics think about, but the contested networks of meaning through which they think.

10. Conclusions

Revisiting agenda-setting in light of network dynamics and diverse regime types underscores both the enduring relevance and the necessary evolution of the framework. From its origins as a study of salience transfer in the 1970s, agenda-setting has expanded into a multi-layered theory that accounts for the attributes through which issues are understood and the associations through which they are linked (Guo et al., 2012; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993). In the contemporary era, this influence is moderated by the Need for Orientation, a psychological drive that is exploited by state actors in hybrid regimes and by engagement-optimizing platforms in digital spaces alike (Huszár et al., 2022; Matthes, 2006).

The critical analysis of Türkiye, Hungary, and India indicates that although the state's power to set the agenda is formidable, it is not absolute. The perception of injustice and the persistence of counter-agendas among segmented audiences point to the limits of top-down network manipulation (Laebens & Öztürk, 2021), a reading reinforced by the only direct public-level test among the three cases, in which the media network agenda transferred to pro-government but not pro-opposition respondents (Melek, 2024). The illiberal playbook deployed in these cases reveals agenda-setting as an instrument of legalistic autocratization, in which the media are used to forge a new common sense that privileges sovereignty and executive power over liberal-democratic norms (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). Read together, the cases suggest that the strength of a network agenda-setting effect is a poor guide to its political consequence: the same effect can be convergent in one system and divergent in another, which is why the media system and the regime belong inside the explanation rather than in its background. The six propositions set out in Section 8.2 translate that conclusion into claims that can be tested.

As the media ecosystem absorbs AI and large-scale computation, gatekeeping will continue to shift from human agents toward algorithmic structures, posing fundamental questions about cognitive autonomy and the integrity of the public square (Spitale et al., 2023). Meeting these questions will require research that is methodologically networked, comparative in scope, and attentive to the interplay among individual psychology, digital networks, and political institutions. The agenda of the future will not be a simple list of issues to think about; it will be a contested network of meanings that helps define the boundaries of shared reality.

Funding: This work was supported and funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research at Imam Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU) (grant number IMSIU-DDRSP2602).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. B. F., Lee, J., Mann, M., Merhout, F., & Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *115*(37), 9216–9221. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Bajomi-Lázár, P. (2013). The party colonisation of the media: The case of Hungary. *East European Politics and Societies*, *27*(1), 69–89. [CrossRef]

Bátorfy, A., & Urbán, Á. (2020). State advertising as an instrument of transformation of the media market in Hungary. *East European Politics*, *36*(1), 44–65. [CrossRef]

Bennett, W. L., & Iyengar, S. (2008). A new era of minimal effects? The changing foundations of political communication. *Journal of Communication*, *58*(4), 707–731. [CrossRef]

Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *27*(1), 5–19. [CrossRef]

Bozóki, A., & Hegedűs, D. (2018). An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union. *Democratization*, *25*(7), 1173–1189. [CrossRef]

Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2017). Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *114*(28), 7313–7318. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Bruns, A. (2019). After the 'APIcalypse': Social media platforms and their fight against critical scholarly research. *Information, Communication & Society*, *22*(11), 1544–1566. [CrossRef]

Brüggemann, M., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., Humprecht, E., & Castro, L. (2014). Hallin and Mancini revisited: Four empirical types of Western media systems. *Journal of Communication*, *64*(6), 1037–1065. [CrossRef]

Bulut, E., & Yörük, E. (2017). Digital populism: Trolls and political polarization of Twitter in Turkey. *International Journal of Communication*, *11*, 4093–4117.

Camaj, L. (2014). Need for orientation, selective exposure, and attribute agenda-setting effects. *Mass Communication and Society*, *17*(5), 689–712. [CrossRef]

Castro Herrero, L., Humprecht, E., Engesser, S., Brüggemann, M., & Büchel, F. (2017). Rethinking Hallin and Mancini beyond the West: An analysis of media systems in Central and Eastern Europe. *International Journal of Communication*, *11*, 4797–4823.

Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. [CrossRef]

Chakravartty, P., & Roy, S. (2015). Mr. Modi goes to Delhi: Mediated populism and the 2014 Indian elections. *Television & New Media*, *16*(4), 311–322. [CrossRef]

Chebrolu, T., Modepalle, R., Vardhan, N. H., Kumaraguru, P., & Rajadesingan, A. (2025). Framing the fray: Conflict framing in Indian election news coverage. In *Proceedings of the 17th ACM web science conference 2025* (pp. 294–305). Association for Computing Machinery. [CrossRef]

Chernov, G., Valenzuela, S., & McCombs, M. (2011). An experimental comparison of two perspectives on the concept of need for orientation in agenda-setting theory. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *88*(1), 142–155. [CrossRef]

Chuan, C.-H., Tsai, W.-H. S., & Cho, S. Y. (2019). Framing artificial intelligence in American newspapers. In *Proceedings of the 2019 AAAI/ACM conference on AI, ethics, and society* (pp. 339–344). Association for Computing Machinery. [CrossRef]

Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *118*(9), e2023301118. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Çarkoğlu, A., Baruh, L., & Yıldırım, K. (2014). Press-party parallelism and polarization of news media during an election campaign: The case of the 2011 Turkish elections. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *19*(3), 295–317. [CrossRef]

DeVito, M. A. (2017). From editors to algorithms: A values-based approach to understanding story selection in the Facebook news feed. *Digital Journalism*, *5*(6), 753–773, (Erratum in 2018, *Digital Journalism*, *6*, 1). [CrossRef]

Djerf-Pierre, M., & Shehata, A. (2017). Still an agenda setter: Traditional news media and public opinion during the transition from low to high choice media environments. *Journal of Communication*, *67*(5), 733–757. [CrossRef]

Dobek-Ostrowska, B. (2019). *Polish media system in a comparative perspective: Media in politics, politics in media*. Peter Lang. [CrossRef]

Dragomir, M. (2018). Control the money, control the media: How government uses funding to keep media in line. *Journalism*, *19*(8), 1131–1148. [CrossRef]

Dubois, E., & Blank, G. (2018). The echo chamber is overstated: The moderating effect of political interest and diverse media. *Information, Communication & Society*, *21*(5), 729–745. [CrossRef]

Elishar, V., & Ariel, Y. (2026). Revisiting agenda-setting theory in hybrid media ecosystems: Flash agendas, agenda leadership, and algorithmic curation. *Journalism and Media*, *7*(2), 116. [CrossRef]

Elmas, T., Overdorf, R., Özkalay, A. F., & Aberer, K. (2021). Ephemeral astroturfing attacks: The case of fake Twitter trends. In *2021 IEEE European symposium on security and privacy* (pp. 403–422). IEEE. [CrossRef]

Feezell, J. T. (2018). Agenda setting through social media: The importance of incidental news exposure and social filtering in the digital era. *Political Research Quarterly*, *71*(2), 482–494. [CrossRef]

Frantz, E., Kendall-Taylor, A., Wright, J., & Xu, X. (2020). Personalization of power and repression in dictatorships. *The Journal of Politics*, *82*(1), 372–377. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Gandy, O. H., Jr. (1982). *Beyond agenda setting: Information subsidies and public policy*. Ablex.

Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., & Marino, G. (2020). It takes a village to manipulate the media: Coordinated link sharing behavior during 2018 and 2019 Italian elections. *Information, Communication & Society*, *23*(6), 867–891, (Erratum in 2020, *Information, Communication & Society*, *23*, I–IV). [CrossRef]

Goldstein, J. A., Chao, J., Grossman, S., Stamos, A., & Tomz, M. (2024). How persuasive is AI-generated propaganda? *PNAS Nexus*, *3*(2), pgae034. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

González-Bailón, S., Lazer, D., Barberá, P., Zhang, M., Allcott, H., Brown, T., Crespo-Tenorio, A., Freelon, D., Gentzkow, M., Guess, A. M., Iyengar, S., Kim, Y. M., Malhotra, N., Moehler, D., Nyhan, B., Pan, J., Velasco Rivera, C., Settle, J., Thorson, E., … Tucker, J. A. (2023). Asymmetric ideological segregation in exposure to political news on Facebook. *Science*, *381*(6656), 392–398. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Grömping, M. (2019). More bang for the buck: Media freedom and organizational strategies in the agenda-setting of human rights groups. *Political Communication*, *36*(3), 452–475. [CrossRef]

Guess, A. M. (2021). (Almost) everything in moderation: New evidence on Americans' online media diets. *American Journal of Political Science*, *65*(4), 1007–1022. [CrossRef]

Guess, A. M., Malhotra, N., Pan, J., Barberá, P., Allcott, H., Brown, T., Crespo-Tenorio, A., Dimmery, D., Freelon, D., Gentzkow, M., González-Bailón, S., Kennedy, E., Kim, Y. M., Lazer, D., Moehler, D., Nyhan, B., Velasco Rivera, C., Settle, J., Thomas, D. R., … Tucker, J. A. (2023). How do social media feed algorithms affect attitudes and behavior in an election campaign? *Science*, *381*(6656), 398–404, (Erratum in 2024, *Science*, *386*, eadu8261; Erratum in 2026, *Science*, *391*, eaeh2575). [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Gunitsky, S. (2015). Corrupting the cyber-commons: Social media as a tool of autocratic stability. *Perspectives on Politics*, *13*(1), 42–54. [CrossRef]

Guo, L. (2012). The application of social network analysis in agenda setting research: A methodological exploration. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(4), 616–631. [CrossRef]

Guo, L., & McCombs, M. (2011, May 26–30). *Network agenda setting: A third level of media effects* [Paper presentation]. International Communication Association Annual Conference, Boston, MA, United States.

Guo, L., & McCombs, M. (Eds.). (2016). *The power of information networks: New directions for agenda setting*. Routledge. [CrossRef]

Guo, L., & Vargo, C. (2015). The power of message networks: A big-data analysis of the network agenda setting model and issue ownership. *Mass Communication and Society*, *18*(5), 557–576. [CrossRef]

Guo, L., & Vargo, C. (2020). "Fake news" and emerging online media ecosystem: An integrated intermedia agenda-setting analysis of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. *Communication Research*, *47*(2), 178–200. [CrossRef]

Guo, L., Vu, H. T., & McCombs, M. (2012). An expanded perspective on agenda-setting effects: Exploring the third level of agenda setting. *Revista de Comunicación*, *11*(1), 51–68.

Hallin, D. C., Kitzberger, P., & Palos-Pons, M. (2025). Media anti-populism and political parallelism in Latin America. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *49*(2), 61–95. [CrossRef]

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press. [CrossRef]

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (Eds.). (2012). *Comparing media systems beyond the Western world*. Cambridge University Press. [CrossRef]

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2017). Ten years after comparing media systems: What have we learned? *Political Communication*, *34*(2), 155–171. [CrossRef]

Harder, R. A., Sevenans, J., & Van Aelst, P. (2017). Intermedia agenda setting in the social media age: How traditional players dominate the news agenda in election times. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *22*(3), 275–293. [CrossRef]

Helberger, N. (2019). On the democratic role of news recommenders. *Digital Journalism*, *7*(8), 993–1012. [CrossRef]

Huszár, F., Ktena, S. I., O'Brien, C., Belli, L., Schlaikjer, A., & Hardt, M. (2022). Algorithmic amplification of politics on Twitter. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *119*(1), e2025334119. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malka, A., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *22*, 129–146. [CrossRef]

Jin, X., & Lane, D. R. (2024). To know or not to know? Exploring COVID-19 information seeking with the risk information seeking and processing model. *Journal of Information Science*, *50*(6), 1587–1604. [CrossRef]

Joshi, D. (2024). AI governance in India—Law, policy and political economy. *Communication Research and Practice*, *10*(3), 328–339. [CrossRef]

Karaduman, S., Demir, N., Karaduman, M., & Çilingiroğlu, Ç. (2026). From damage maps to news agendas: Agenda-setting and the visibility deficit of cultural heritage after the 2023 Hatay earthquakes. *Journalism and Media*, *7*(3), 174. [CrossRef]

Keller, F. B., Schoch, D., Stier, S., & Yang, J. (2020). Political astroturfing on Twitter: How to coordinate a disinformation campaign. *Political Communication*, *37*(2), 256–280. [CrossRef]

King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review*, *107*(2), 326–343. [CrossRef]

King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2017). How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument. *American Political Science Review*, *111*(3), 484–501. [CrossRef]

Krekó, P., & Enyedi, Z. (2018). Orbán's laboratory of illiberalism. *Journal of Democracy*, *29*(3), 39–51. [CrossRef]

Kreps, S., McCain, R. M., & Brundage, M. (2022). All the news that's fit to fabricate: AI-generated text as a tool of media misinformation. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, *9*(1), 104–117. [CrossRef]

Kubin, E., & von Sikorski, C. (2021). The role of (social) media in political polarization: A systematic review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *45*(3), 188–206. [CrossRef]

Laebens, M. G., & Öztürk, A. (2021). Partisanship and autocratization: Polarization, power asymmetry, and partisan social identities in Turkey. *Comparative Political Studies*, *54*(2), 245–279. [CrossRef]

Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press. [CrossRef]

Lorenz-Spreen, P., Oswald, L., Lewandowsky, S., & Hertwig, R. (2023). A systematic review of worldwide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *7*(1), 74–101. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it? *Democratization*, *26*(7), 1095–1113. [CrossRef]

Matthes, J. (2006). The need for orientation towards news media: Revising and validating a classic concept. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *18*(4), 422–444. [CrossRef]

Matthes, J. (2008). Need for orientation as a predictor of agenda-setting effects: Causal evidence from a two-wave panel study. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *20*(4), 440–453. [CrossRef]

McCombs, M. E., & Ghanem, S. I. (2001). The convergence of agenda setting and framing. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world* (pp. 67–81). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

McCombs, M. E., Llamas, J. P., López-Escobar, E., & Rey, F. (1997). Candidate images in Spanish elections: Second-level agenda-setting effects. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *74*(4), 703–717. [CrossRef]

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *36*(2), 176–187. [CrossRef]

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1993). The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. *Journal of Communication*, *43*(2), 58–67. [CrossRef]

McCombs, M. E., Shaw, D. L., & Weaver, D. H. (2014). New directions in agenda-setting theory and research. *Mass Communication and Society*, *17*(6), 781–802. [CrossRef]

McCombs, M. E., & Weaver, D. H. (1973, April 25–28). *Voters' need for orientation and use of mass communication* [Paper presentation]. International Communication Association Annual Conference, Montreal, QC, Canada.

McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *62*(1), 16–42. [CrossRef]

Melek, G. (2024). Examining the role of political party predispositions and polarized media on network agenda setting: The case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *101*(2), 373–404. [CrossRef]

Melek, G. (2025). Applicability of need for orientation scales in network agenda-setting: A methodological exploration. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *37*(3), edaf023. [CrossRef]

Napoli, P. M. (2014). Automated media: An institutional theory perspective on algorithmic media production and consumption. *Communication Theory*, *24*(3), 340–360. [CrossRef]

Neuman, W. R., Guggenheim, L., Jang, S. M., & Bae, S. Y. (2014). The dynamics of public attention: Agenda-setting theory meets big data. *Journal of Communication*, *64*(2), 193–214. [CrossRef]

Neyazi, T. A. (2020). Digital propaganda, political bots and polarized politics in India. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *30*(1), 39–57. [CrossRef]

Neyazi, T. A., Kuru, O., & Mukerjee, S. (2025). The influence of sexism and incivility in WhatsApp political discussions on affective polarization: Evidence from a 2022 multi-party election in India. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *30*(3), 797–818. [CrossRef]

Nizzoli, L., Tardelli, S., Avvenuti, M., Cresci, S., & Tesconi, M. (2021). Coordinated behavior on social media in 2019 UK general election. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, *15*(1), 443–454. [CrossRef]

Nyhan, B., Settle, J., Thorson, E., Wojcieszak, M., Barberá, P., Chen, A. Y., Allcott, H., Brown, T., Crespo-Tenorio, A., Dimmery, D., Freelon, D., Gentzkow, M., González-Bailón, S., Guess, A. M., Kennedy, E., Kim, Y. M., Lazer, D., Malhotra, N., Moehler, D., … Tucker, J. A. (2023). Like-minded sources on Facebook are prevalent but not polarizing. *Nature*, *620*(7972), 137–144, (Erratum in 2023, *Nature*, *623*, E9). [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Pirro, A. L. P., & Stanley, B. (2022). Forging, bending, and breaking: Enacting the illiberal playbook in Hungary and Poland. *Perspectives on Politics*, *20*(1), 86–101. [CrossRef]

Polyák, G. (2019). Media in Hungary: Three pillars of an illiberal democracy. In E. Połońska, & C. Beckett (Eds.), *Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies* (pp. 279–303). Palgrave Macmillan. [CrossRef]

Roberts, M. E. (2018). *Censored: Distraction and diversion inside China's Great Firewall*. Princeton University Press. [CrossRef]

Santana-Pereira, J. (2016). O sistema mediático português e os papéis normativos dos media em perspetiva comparativa. *Análise Social*, *51*(221), 780–801. [CrossRef]

Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of Communication*, *57*(1), 9–20. [CrossRef]

Schiffrin, A. (2018). Introduction to special issue on media capture. *Journalism*, *19*(8), 1033–1042. [CrossRef]

Shaw, D. L., McCombs, M., Weaver, D. H., & Hamm, B. J. (1999). Individuals, groups, and agenda melding: A theory of social dissonance. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *11*(1), 2–24. [CrossRef]

Shehata, A., & Strömbäck, J. (2013). Not (yet) a new era of minimal effects: A study of agenda setting at the aggregate and individual levels. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *18*(2), 234–255. [CrossRef]

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, *104*, 333–339. [CrossRef]

Somer, M. (2019). Turkey: The slippery slope from reformist to revolutionary polarization and democratic breakdown. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *681*(1), 42–61. [CrossRef]

Spitale, G., Biller-Andorno, N., & Germani, F. (2023). AI model GPT-3 (dis)informs us better than humans. *Science Advances*, *9*(26), eadh1850. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Starbird, K., Arif, A., & Wilson, T. (2019). Disinformation as collaborative work: Surfacing the participatory nature of strategic information operations. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *3*(CSCW), 127. [CrossRef]

Thorson, K., & Wells, C. (2016). Curated flows: A framework for mapping media exposure in the digital age. *Communication Theory*, *26*(3), 309–328. [CrossRef]

Topak, Ö. E. (2019). The authoritarian surveillant assemblage: Authoritarian state surveillance in Turkey. *Security Dialogue*, *50*(5), 454–472. [CrossRef]

Torraco, R. J. (2016). Writing integrative literature reviews: Using the past and present to explore the future. *Human Resource Development Review*, *15*(4), 404–428. [CrossRef]

Udupa, S. (2018). Gaali cultures: The politics of abusive exchange on social media. *New Media & Society*, *20*(4), 1506–1522. [CrossRef]

Vargo, C. J. (2018). Fifty years of agenda-setting research: New directions and challenges for the theory. *The Agenda Setting Journal*, *2*(2), 105–123. [CrossRef]

Vargo, C. J., & Guo, L. (2017). Networks, big data, and intermedia agenda setting: An analysis of traditional, partisan, and emerging online U.S. news. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *94*(4), 1031–1055. [CrossRef]

Vargo, C. J., Guo, L., & Amazeen, M. A. (2018). The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016. *New Media & Society*, *20*(5), 2028–2049. [CrossRef]

Vargo, C. J., Guo, L., McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (2014). Network issue agendas on Twitter during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. *Journal of Communication*, *64*(2), 296–316. [CrossRef]

Vasist, P. N., Chatterjee, D., & Krishnan, S. (2024). The polarizing impact of political disinformation and hate speech: A cross-country configural narrative. *Information Systems Frontiers*, *26*(2), 663–688. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Vegetti, F. (2019). The political nature of ideological polarization: The case of Hungary. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *681*(1), 78–96. [CrossRef]

Vu, H. T., Guo, L., & McCombs, M. E. (2014). Exploring "the world outside and the pictures in our heads": A network agenda-setting study. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *91*(4), 669–686. [CrossRef]

Wallace, J. (2018). Modelling contemporary gatekeeping: The rise of individuals, algorithms and platforms in digital news dissemination. *Digital Journalism*, *6*(3), 274–293. [CrossRef]

Weaver, D. H. (1977). Political issues and voter need for orientation. In D. L. Shaw, & M. E. McCombs (Eds.), *The emergence of American political issues: The agenda-setting function of the press* (pp. 107–119). West Publishing.

Weaver, D. H. (1980). Audience need for orientation and media effects. *Communication Research*, *7*(3), 361–373. [CrossRef]

Wells, C., Shah, D., Lukito, J., Pelled, A., Pevehouse, J. C. W., & Yang, J. (2020). Trump, Twitter, and news media responsiveness: A media systems approach. *New Media & Society*, *22*(4), 659–682. [CrossRef]

Yeşil, B. (2018). Authoritarian turn or continuity? Governance of media through capture and discipline in the AKP era. *South European Society and Politics*, *23*(2), 239–257. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.