



Network Agenda-Setting in Contemporary China: Media Coverage and Public Opinion on Anshun Bus Accident

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Abstract. The theory and empirical researches of network agenda-setting are relatively mature, but lack explanatory power in the Chinese context. This study takes the “Anshun bus accident” in July 2020 as a case and conducts an empirical study on network agenda-setting to examine its explanatory power in the Chinese context, exploring the relationship between media agenda and public agenda, as well as the interrelationship between different media agendas. Using Weibo as the research platform, 64 media reports from central official media (People's Daily), local official media (The Paper), and commercial media (Sina News), as well as 1280 Weibo comments and replies are analyzed for content, and co-occurrence matrixes of media and public attributes are formed. The QAP function in UCINET 6 software is applied for social network analysis to test the correlation between agendas. The study reveals that all three types of media have network agenda-setting effects on the public, with official media having a stronger effect than commercial media. At the same time, official media agendas are likely to affect commercial media agendas.

Keywords: network agenda-setting; intermedia agenda-setting; social network analysis; Anshun bus accident; social media

1 Introduction

The public's opinion response does not come from an objective and real environment, but rather from a pseudo-environment created by the news media[1]. In the process of forming public opinion, media agenda-setting is a critical link[2]. If the media can successfully set the agenda, it means that the media can influence or even guide public opinion. Improving the guidance power of online public opinion is a direction that both the media and the government are concerned about and continuously making efforts towards[3]. The theory of agenda-setting is originated in and has been validated multiple times since its inception in the Western context. However, the Western political system, cultural background, and media environment are fairly different from those of China, and this theory may not necessarily be applicable to the Chinese context.

This study is a case study of the "Anshun Bus Accident" that occurred in mainland China. On July 7, 2020, a bus in Anshun City, Guizhou Province, made a sudden turn and crashed into the opposite lane's guardrail before plunging into the Hongshan Lake

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Reservoir, resulting in 21 deaths. The incident happened during the college entrance examination, and the bus was carrying part of students who were about to take the exam. The incident caused significant casualties and widespread public attention, leading to high public opinion. After the incident, people spontaneously discussed it on Sina Weibo and so on, and central official media accounts such as the People's Daily, CCTV News, as well as local official media accounts such as The Paper and Beijing News, and commercial media accounts such as Sina News reported and forwarded relevant contents. The follow-up reporting of the media and the continued attention of the public made the incident a hot topic. In addition, this unexpected public event did not involve political factors or sensitive topics, and its nature was rich in crossing over various areas, including accident information, government action, accident causes, and public transportation safety prevention, thus having research value.

The author tested network agenda-setting theory during the dissemination process of this sudden public event, the Anshun Bus Accident.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Media Environments in China

Compared with the capitalist system adopted by the West, the media environment of China as a socialist country is very different from that of the West: the Chinese media are mostly dominated by the government, while the Western media are not. In China, according to the State Internet Information Office, news information encompasses political, economic, military, diplomatic, and other social and public affairs reports and commentary, as well as coverage of social emergencies[4].(Anshun bus event is a public issue.) The licensed news websites in the country can be separated into two types: official and commercial[4]. Official ones are affiliated with the government to some degree[4], which can be divided into national and regional level ones[5]. The former administered directly by the central government, such as People's Daily website, are mouthpieces of the Chinese Communist Party representing the national leadership's views while the latter owned by local government, such as The Paper belonging to Shanghai Press Group, cover divergent content from the national ones to some extent.

Under the ideological control of the Communist Party, the Chinese government prohibits commercial news websites from engaging in interviews and independent reporting[6]. Commercial ones aggregate news catering to the audiences to get traffic and three strategies could be adopted: improving in-depth thematic coverage, taking advantage of user-generated content, and promoting soft-news that related to entertainment, sports, and "less serious" social incidents and news which is not necessarily political[7]. Therefore the commercial news websites could introduce alternative voices to the public discourse[8].

In recent years, news media websites have rapidly expanded their online presence to social media, maintaining the same attitude and similar coverage. Sina Weibo is one of the most influential and largest social media platforms in China (similar to Twitter) with 586 million monthly active users at the end of 2022[9], covering governmental

accounts, news media accounts, business accounts and general public accounts and so on [10]. On Weibo, all users can post contents and the public can comment in the Comments Section. News media accounts utilize Weibo to disseminate news to a large audience and increase their reach.

2.2 The First-level and Second-level Agenda-Setting Theory

Lippmann proposed that news media report things beyond the public's direct sight and experience, which can affect the cognitive pictures in people's mind[1]. Bernard Cohen asserted that news media isn't successful at telling people how to think, but is effective at telling people what to think about[2]. McCombs and Shaw developed these notions into first-level agenda-setting theory in the Chapel Hill study[11], that is the news media shapes public opinion concerning the prominence of issues by covering certain issues more frequently and others less[11].

The study on the 1976 presidential election in America found that the news media influences the public's perception of issues by selectively highlighting and covering certain attributes to shape how people think about them, which is the second-level agenda-setting. Compared with the first-level agenda-setting, the second-level transfers focus from objects or issues to attributes of objects, which can be separated into substantive(cognitive) and affective attributes that can be typically defined as positive, negative, and neutral[12].

2.3 Network Agenda-setting

News media not only influences what people should think about and how they should think about it, but also highlights the intercorrelations between issues or attributes, thereby increasing their salience in the public's mind. This process, known as third-level agenda-setting, involves the transfer of the interconnectedness of issues or attributes from the news media to the public[13]. The attribute network picture described by the media have a significant impact on the picture in the public's mind[14], which was derived from cognitive network theories, highlighting that individuals' cognition of objects and their attributes present a network-alike structure composed of many interconnected nodes[14]. In contrast, the first-level and the second-level are both based on one presumption that human cognitive representation and thinking structure is linear and hierarchical[14].

2.4 Intermedia Agenda-setting

Agenda-setting effect not only exist between media agenda and public agenda, but also between different media agendas. Intermedia agenda-setting addresses the interaction between different media and the flow of influence among media[15]. In the age of emerging media, new technology facilitates the exchange of information between news organizations[15]. Media sources monitor the reporting of their peers lest they should miss any important news events[16]. Research has shown that the junior news media

will follow the senior news media and imitate the latter's coverage[17], but it was studied in the western context.

2.5 Agenda-setting in Anshun Bus Event

Many studies have examined how the media cover candidate's attributes can influence voters' political attitudes and decision in elections and political events, and in various national settings[18]. The transmission of salience from media agenda to public agenda has been studied in non-political contexts and public issue is one of the most prominent objects in agenda-setting study[19].

A number of empirical studies have been made to test the network agenda-setting theory in various sociocultural contexts[20]. However, researches on the network agenda-setting theory in China are mostly conducted in Hong Kong, where a "one country, two systems" political structure and mixed media situation exist[21]. The context of Hong Kong differs from that of Chinese mainland, with distinct political, social, and cultural systems. Therefore, there is a need to conduct empirical research on the network agenda-setting theory in Chinese mainland.

Meanwhile, as to researches on intermedia agenda-setting in the context of Chinese mainland, one study explores the effect among WeChat public accounts, party newspapers, and metropolitan newspapers[22], one study examines the diffusion of rumors among News Websites, Weibo, and WeChat[10] and a study investigated the Two Sessions, China's biggest annual political event, across official and commercial news website[8]. In short, there are fewer studies on intermedia agenda-setting between official media and commercial ones on a social media platform and fewer studies on public issues in Chinese mainland.

Building upon past research, our study involves examining network agenda-setting theory between the news agenda and the public agenda, and between media agendas, regarding Anshun bus accident on Weibo. To that end, we sought to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What kind of attribute network was represented in news coverage of the Anshun bus issue on social media?

RQ2: What kind of attribute network was represented in public discussions of the Anshun bus issue on social media?

In order to explore the correlation between the media and public network, this study further proposed four research hypotheses:

H1: As for the Anshun bus issue, total media agenda network (the national official, regional official and commercial media agenda network) has a significant relevant relationship with the total public agenda network (the national official, regional official and commercial media's public agenda network).

H2: As for the Anshun bus issue, the national official, regional official and commercial media agenda network has a significant relevant relationship with their own public agenda networks respectively.

H3: As for the Anshun bus issue, the national official media agenda network has a significant relevant relationship with the regional official agenda network.

H4: As for the Anshun bus issue, the national official media agenda network has a significant relevant relationship with the commercial agenda network.

H5: As for the Anshun bus issue, the regional official media agenda network has a significant relevant relationship with the commercial agenda network.

H6: As for the Anshun bus issue, three media agenda networks affect its own public agenda network respectively, and there is a causal relationship between the media and its public agenda separately.

3 Method

3.1 Data Collection

This article selects Sina Weibo as the research platform because as one of China's most influential social media, public discussions on this platform can generate high levels of public opinion. Due to the explosive growth of websites, it is impossible to exhaustively list all of the sites, meaning that the sampling frame cannot cover all websites, so true random sampling is almost impossible[23], and media outlets need to be screened. Based on selection criteria, including recognized prestige and influence-taking into account the number of media followers and authority, the influence in the public opinion field on the Anshun bus accident-the volume of posts, the degree of information openness (i.e. accessibility), and the number of likes and comments on media-published articles, the People's Daily, a central-level official media outlet, was selected, while The Paper, a local-level official media outlet, and Sina News, a commercial media outlet, were chosen.

A single post from Weibo media accounts was seen as an analysis unit for media agendas. Considering the limited length and co-occurrence of comments on Weibo, a comment and its reply texts under the post were used as an analysis unit for public agendas. Based on the monitoring of the event by the internet social hot spot aggregation platform Zhiwei Shijian, this study selected data on Weibo between July 7th to July 15th, 2020.

During the period, media data was collected by the "Weibo Blogger Homepage Data Collection" function of the GooSeeker platform, by entering "Anshun Bus" in the homepage of People's Daily, The Paper, and Sina News Weibo accounts, getting 28, 19, 23 analysis units from each media separately. Public data was collected by manually crawling the comment section. The analysis of network agenda-setting requires identifying co-occurrences of two or more attributes in the same article or comment and replies. The top 20 comments sorted by popularity under each media post with meaningless texts and emoticons deleted and with two or more attributes retained based on the coding table (those with only a single attribute are not included) were collected, as comments with more likes and replies are more influential. To ensure data quality, two coders conducted multiple rounds of data review and consultation and discussed improving the coding table until the selected data was completely consistent. Finally, a total of 1280 comments with analytical significance were obtained. Excluding media reports where it was impossible to collect 20 comments, People's Daily has 28 analysis units, The Paper has 16 analysis units, and Sina News has 20 analysis units.

3.2 Manual Content Analysis

There are generally two ways to classify content: one is initial coding, which is based on ordinary facts and themes presented in the data after preliminary testing; the other is to establish classification in advance based on theory and concepts before data collection[24]. There are two basic principles of coding: each unit of analysis should be classifiable and categories should be mutually exclusive[24]. This study used manual content analysis, adopting the initial coding approach. The study conducted multiple rounds of coding, which were completed by two coders. Coder 1 is an undergraduate student majoring in public relations, and Coder 2 is an undergraduate student majoring in communication. Both received training on the theory and method of network agenda-setting before coding. After reading through all of media articles and comments and replies for each media, the two coders collaborated to develop a coding table for the media agenda and public agenda data. They coded the collected data, reviewed the consistency of the coding, consulted and recoded the data separately. This process was repeated multiple times until complete consistency was achieved.

The 1364 units of analysis were divided into seven categories: (a)accident information that is objective information, which includes what happened at the scene, the situations of rescue, casualties information, bus's driving track and its information; (b)causal analysis, including media presentation or speculation on the cause of the accident and public concern, speculation about the cause of the accident; (c)government action, which includes anything the government did, such as official government rescue, active investigation of accident in all aspects, dealing with the student victims' college entrance examination, holding meetings, and also includes public's pushing and responding to the government's handling, such as urging the government to find the truth; (d)reflection on the event and security protection for prevention, which concludes the official measures and the promotion of personal self-rescue consciousness, such as strengthening the safety precautions of the college entrance examination, improving the safety precautions; (e)denial of rumors, which includes dispelling rumors, correcting fake news, and explaining relevant knowledge and truth; (f1)expression of positive emotions, such as pray for peace, refueling encouragement, praise; (f2)expression of negative emotions, such as anger, grief, fear.

4 Result

Social network analysis is used to compare agenda networks[25]. Firstly, a 7 by 7 matrix was created for analysis in the media attribute agenda. Each row or column represented an attribute related to the accident, and the value in each cell represented the frequency of two attributes' co-occurrence meaning the degree of association between two attributes. The higher the frequency, the stronger the association between them. Based on the content analysis of the three media reports, Table 1 presents the media attribute network matrix of the Anshun bus accident to answer RQ1.

Table 1. Matrix of the Aggregate Media Agenda Network

	a	b	c	d	e	f1	f2
a	0	15	52	5	5	12	13
b	15	0	12	2	5	0	6
c	52	12	0	6	5	9	12
d	5	2	6	0	0	0	0
e	5	5	5	0	0	0	5
f1	12	0	9	0	0	0	4
f2	13	6	12	0	5	4	0

a=accident information, b=causal analysis, c=government action, d=reflection on the event and security protection for prevention, e=denial of rumors, f1=expression of positive emotions, f2=expression of negative emotions

According to the comments data under the three media reports as the overall public data, with each comment and its replies as a unit of analysis, Table 2 presents the public attribute network matrix of the Anshun bus accident to answer RQ2.

Table 2. Matrix of the Aggregate Public Agenda Network

	a	b	c	d	e	f1	f2
a	0	340	341	91	25	310	340
b	340	0	334	135	33	57	238
c	341	334	0	79	22	144	193
d	91	135	79	0	6	24	104
e	25	33	22	6	0	1	19
f1	310	57	144	24	1	0	123
f2	340	238	193	104	19	123	0

a=accident information, b=causal analysis, c=government action, d=reflection on the event and security protection, e=denial of rumors, f1=expression of positive emotions, f2=expression of negative emotions

The media agenda was divided into three types—People's Daily, The Paper, and Sina News - and the degree centrality of each media network was measured, i.e., the number of connections of each attribute in each media network[26]. The higher the degree centrality of an attribute, the more central it is in the network and the more closely it is connected to other attributes[26]. When it comes to agenda-setting theory, centrality is a more nuanced measure of salience than frequency[27].

The UCINET 6 software developed by Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman was used for social network analysis. As shown in Table 3, "accident information" has the highest degree centrality in each media agenda: People's Daily (40 connections), The Paper (25 connections), and Sina News (37 connections). "Government action" has the second-highest degree centrality in each media agenda: People's Daily (37 connections), The Paper (25 connections), and Sina News (34 connections). The least closely related with other attributes or most marginal attributes in each media category are different: "denial of rumors" and "reflection on the event and security protection" in People's Daily, "expression of positive emotions" in The Paper and in Sina News.

Table 3. Attributes on the Three Media Agendas.

Rank	People's Daily		The Paper		Sina News		Media (in total)	
	Attributes	DC	Attributes	DC	Attributes	DC	Attributes	DC
1	a	40	a	25	a	37	a	102
2	c	37	c	25	c	34	c	96
3	f1	18	b	13	b	18	b	40
4	f2	14	f2	10	f2	16	f2	40
5	b	9	e	8	e	8	f1	25
6	d	4	d	2	d	7	e	20
7	e	4	f1	1	f1	6	d	13

DC refers to degree centrality, which measures the number of connections that an attribute has in the network.

Table 4 presents how the seven attributes are connected in the public agenda. Similar to the media attribute agenda, the attribute "accident information" has the highest degree centrality in each public agenda: People's Daily public agenda (774 connections), The Paper's public agenda (318 connections), and Sina News' public agenda (355 connections). In the public agenda of People's Daily, the attribute "government action" has the second-highest degree centrality (664 connections); in The Paper's public agenda, the attribute "causal analysis" has the second-highest degree centrality (265 connections); and in Sina News' public agenda, the attribute "expression of negative emotions" (279 connections).

Table 4. Attributes on the Three Media's Public Agendas.

Rank	People's Daily's Public Agenda		The Paper's Public Agenda		Sina News' Public Agenda		Public (in total)	
	Attributes	DC	Attributes	DC	Attributes	DC	Attributes	DC
1	a	774	a	318	a	355	a	1447
2	c	664	b	265	f2	279	b	1137
3	b	612	c	221	b	260	c	1113
4	f2	524	f2	214	c	228	f2	1017
5	f1	410	f1	123	f1	126	f1	659
6	d	297	d	69	d	73	d	439
7	e	67	e	20	e	19	e	106

DC refers to degree centrality, which measures the number of connections that an attribute has in the network.

To verify the network relationship between the overall media agenda and the overall public agenda, the Quadratic Assignment Procedure correlation analysis in the UCINET 6 software was used to verify the correlation between the media matrix and the public matrix. In Table 5, the overall media agenda and the overall public agenda are significantly correlated (+0.660, $p < 0.01$), which provides sufficient evidence for H1. When verifying the relationship between each media agenda and its corresponding public agenda proposed in H2, the data shows that the media agenda and the public agenda of People's Daily are significantly correlated (+0.664, $p < 0.01$), The Paper's media and its public agenda are significantly correlated (+0.637, $p < 0.05$), and Sina

News' media and its public agenda are significantly correlated (+0.574, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, H2 is fully supported.

Table 5. Attribute Network Agendas Correlation.

	People's Daily's Public	The Paper's Public	Sina News' Public	Public (in to- tal)
	r	r	r	r
People's Daily	0.664**	-	-	-
The Paper	-	0.637*	-	-
Sina News	-	-	0.574*	-
Media (in total)	-	-	-	0.660**

Notes: Figures are standardized Pearson(r) correlation coefficient.

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

To answer H3, H4, and H5, the QAP correlation analysis was used to examine the network correlations among the media agendas of People's Daily, The Paper, and Sina News. As shown in Table 6, the data indicates that there is a significant correlation between the media agendas of People's Daily and The Paper (+0.809, $p < 0.05$), People's Daily and Sina News (+0.861, $p < 0.05$), and Sina News and The Paper (+0.965, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, sufficient evidence is provided for H3, H4, and H5.

Table 6. Media Attribute Network Agendas Correlation.

	People's Daily	The Paper	Sina News
	r	r	r
People's Daily	-	0.809*	0.861*
The Paper	0.809*	-	0.965**
Sina News	0.861*	0.965**	-

Notes: Figures are standardized Pearson(r) correlation coefficient.

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

5 Discussion

This study provides a perspective on the explanatory power of network agendas in the Chinese context based on the Anshun bus incident, and compared three types of media and investigated their relationships with public agendas, as well as with each other. The specific research findings are discussed below.

Firstly, there is a significant correlation between the agendas of the media and the public, but the agenda network undergoes changes during the dissemination process. The most central attribute in both the overall media and public agendas is "accident information". However, the attribute with the second-highest degree centrality differs between the two networks: for the former, it is "government action", while for the latter,

it is "causal analysis". This indicates that the public is more concerned with objective information and the causes of the accident, and less concerned with government actions compared to the media. It reflects the media's emphasis on reporting the government's proactive handling of the event and implies a positive attitude towards the government, which is related to the media environment in China, where the media is party-controlled and is required to identify with the party's political stance[20].

Secondly, the agenda networks of central-level official media, local-level official media, and commercial media set the agenda for their respective public agenda network. Calculating correlations is a commonly used method to verify the effectiveness of agenda-setting[25][27]. However, a positive correlation alone cannot demonstrate causality. Yet, the public agenda is derived from comments below media reports, so the public agenda is based on the media agenda. Previous research has often used individual posts on social media platforms as the public agenda, which cannot guarantee a direct relationship between the public and media agenda[28]. At the same time, the media release comes first, followed by public comments, and there is a temporal sequence between two. Therefore, the positive correlation between the media agenda and the media's public agenda means that there is an agenda-setting effect, so H6 is fully proved.

In addition, the effect of agenda-setting by official media on their respective public is stronger than that of commercial media on their publics. One possible reason is that profit-driven commercial media intentionally create sensational headlines to attract attention. Meanwhile, the Chinese government has strict control over official media, especially at the central level. The possibility of fake news appearing is smaller in official media than in commercial media, and official media has more authority, so the public is more likely to trust official media.

Finally, there is a significant correlation between media and media agenda. The People's Daily and The Paper have a significant correlation in their agendas, as do the People's Daily and Sina News, as well as The Paper and Sina News. The correlation between Sina News and the People's Daily is stronger than that between the People's Daily and The Paper, so is the correlation between Sina News and The Paper. This is likely because Anshun bus accident is a public safety event, the coverage of which within the range of news, and official media have editorial rights, can find angles to obtain first-hand information, while commercial media can only reprint and integrate official media news, hence their dependence on official media is stronger. At the same time, official media not only have to conform to the Chinese Communist Party's views but also face market competition, which makes them have economic logic of increasing their user base and advertising revenue[29], especially local official media, which receive less state financial support. They need to create differentiated news to attract traffic and sustain themselves.

The network agendas of three media outlets are not identical. For People's Daily, the third and fourth highest degree centralities are "expression of positive emotions" and "expression of negative emotions", indicating that mainstream official media not only prioritize presenting positive investigations and objective information by the government, but also emphasize humanistic care, constructing an emotional dimension. In contrast, for The Paper and Sina News, the third and fourth highest degree centralities

are both "causal analysis" and "expression of negative emotions", while "expression of positive emotions" is on the periphery.

6 Conclusion

The study reveals that all three types of media have network agenda-setting effects on the public. In addition, official media agendas are correlated with commercial media agenda.

Media agenda can guide public agenda, and the output of agenda-setting is not only the content but also the logic between the content. Public agenda, in particular, deserves the government's attention. If the government can monitor online public opinion, understand the public's logical understanding, and respond in a timely manner, the effect of agenda-setting will be stronger[21]. Besides, the government can maintain good relations with the commercial media, which can also set public's agenda and strengthen the effect.

This study is not without limitations. The research was conducted only on the Weibo platform, and the data collected was limited to one media outlet for each type of media, which may not fully represent all or most news media. Also, future replications of this study could include a more diverse range of media types, such as incorporating opinion leaders as subjects. In addition, this study did not explore causality enough, and did not conduct a causal analysis between the general media agenda and the general public agenda, and between the media agendas in the event.

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