

A COOK, A CARDINAL, HIS PRIESTS AND THE PRESS :
AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA AGENDA SETTING

BY

MICHAEL J. BREEN

Doctoral Candidate

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Room 360 G, Newhouse II

Syracuse University

215 University Place

Syracuse, NY 13244

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Theoretical Background

Agenda setting theory states that those issues that receive prominent attention in the media become the problems the reading and listening publics regard as the nation's most important.¹ Iyengar and Kinder's work on agenda setting in television news indicates that news coverage affects the public's approach to major issues.² Their studies show that the people most prone to agenda setting effects are those who are neither politically active nor strongly affiliated with a political party. Significant non-political news items, then, are relatively easily placed in the public consciousness. The clear consequence of agenda setting theory is that it is the framers of the news who wield a vast amount of control over how the public views various events and personalities.

McCombs and Shaw point out that the metaphor of agenda setting incorporates other communications concepts such as status conferral, stereotyping and image.³ It is precisely these dimension of agenda setting that generates public attitudinal change. Media coverage can set an agenda and can also alter public perceptions of the players in the process depending on the type of coverage.⁴

¹ Iyengar and Kinder, News That Matters, 16 - 33.

² Iyengar and Kinder, News That Matters

³ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Evolution of Agenda Setting Research: Twenty Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas," Journal of Communication, 43:58-67 (Spring 1993).

⁴ Richard A. Brody, Assessing the president : the media, elite opinion, and public support. (Stanford, CA. : Stanford University Press, 1991), Ch. 6

Research also shows strong evidence of intermedia agenda setting.^{5,6} As well as setting the agenda for public issues, the news media can also set the agenda for themselves by their repetitious coverage of a single event and their collective definition of newsworthiness. Protess and McCombs say that the “news agenda of the local newspaper or local television station is more likely to be influenced by the play of stories in elite newspapers.”⁷ The media require news items for publication. In the absence of current ‘hard’ news, such items can be manufactured or generated from existing or past stories.⁸ Media coverage extends beyond current affairs to those issues which journalists regard as salient, based on previous coverage.⁹ Journalists, like the members of their audiences, cannot pay attention to everything; they are selective.¹⁰ They take shortcuts by relying on the most accessible information sources.¹¹ Frequent repetition of a given story focuses journalistic attention on that issue.¹²

By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television and newspaper news influences both the standards of judgment and the issues on which leaders are judged.¹³ This is particularly significant when the definition of

⁵ Donald Shaw and S. E. Martin, "The Function of Mass Media Agenda Setting," Journalism Quarterly 69 (4): 902-920, (Winter 1993).

⁶ Warren Breed, "Newspaper 'opinion leaders' and processes of standardization," Journalism Quarterly 35 (2): 277-284, 328, (Spring 1955).

⁷ David L. Protess and Maxwell McCombs, (Eds.), Agenda Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking, (Hillsdale, N.J. : L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 208.

⁸ L. H. Daniellian and Stephen Reese, "A closer look at intermedia influences on agenda setting: The cocaine issue of 1986" in Pamela J. Shoemaker (Ed.), Communication Campaigns about Drugs, (Hillsdale, N.J. : L. Erlbaum Associates, 1989.), 47 - 66.

⁹ Daniellian and Reese

¹⁰ David Manning White, "The 'Gate Keeper': A Case Study In the Selection of News," Journalism Quarterly 27 (4): 383-390, (Winter 1950).

¹¹ Pamela J. Shoemaker, Gatekeeping, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991), 54

¹² Iyengar and Kinder, News That Matters

¹³ Shaw and Martin, "Function."

newsworthiness includes deviance, and the subjects of news reports as portrayed as socially deviant. This fascination with deviance, without regard to guilt or innocence, is a well documented feature of news for many years.¹⁴ Boorstin speaks of the media creating "the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life."¹⁵

The connection between agenda setting and deviance is increasingly important. There is a consequence of reporting criminal deviance that affects those who share an identity with those reported as deviant — they appear socially deviant as a group when more negative stories, not related to the triggering event, are reported. This is a consequence of media treatment; as the group is associated only with negative stories, the criminally deviant reports become new referents for a whole group.

This research focuses principally on the agenda setting and triggering effects of deviant stories by examining the coverage of the clergy as individuals and as a collective within society. It will show how the nature of the coverage of the clergy becomes negative when criminally deviant events act as triggers. This goes beyond the traditional understanding of intermedia agenda setting as outlined by Reese and Daniellian — it speaks to how the individual media outlet agenda is set to issues indirectly related to triggering events, rather than to the events themselves, e.g., in this research, to coverage of clergy rather than to the event of child sexual abuse.

¹⁴ Pamela J. Shoemaker, "The Communication of Deviance" in Brenda Dervin and Melvin J. Voight (eds.), Progress in Communication Studies: Vol. 8 (Norwood, N.J. : Ablex Publications, 1987), 164

¹⁵ D. J. Boorstin cited in Gerald Cromer, "Character Assassination in the Press" in Charles Winick (ed.), Deviance in the Mass Media (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978), 229.

The last few years have seen a sharp rise in the number of media stories on child sexual abuse by members of the Catholic clergy. One significant cluster of reports comes in 1992 and centers around James Porter, a former priest who was sentenced in Massachusetts for serious abuse of minors over many years. Almost a year later, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, one of the best known Catholic churchmen in the United States, was accused of sexual abuse by Stephen Cook, a former seminarian. The allegation was withdrawn in February 1994 by Cook who admitted he believed he had never been abused by the cardinal. This study looks to how the media covered these events and examines how the media coverage portrays clergy as deviant in the light of criminally deviant behavior by individuals.

Hypotheses

The general hypothesis of this study is that certain events, seen as newsworthy when deviance is a news norm, serve as triggers for intermedia agenda setting on side issues with very specific results in terms of both volume and valence of ensuing stories. In this study, the reporting of the Porter case (proven in court) and the reporting of the Bernardin case (withdrawn by its instigator) both served as triggers for the news media, initiating a series of negative stories about clergy. It is important to note that the study omits all stories relating to the triggering events themselves, and analyses only the generalized effect of subsequent media treatment of the subjects, in this case Catholic clergy.

This study advances three hypotheses:

H₁ That media coverage of the clergy becomes negative as a result of the triggering effect of a deviant clergy story.

Deviance stories about individuals are used to cast whole groups in negative light by association. The event itself will take up significant space, including that which might otherwise have been used for more positive stories about the target group or about other events and groups. Journalists will be primed by the negative reporting to seek similar stories.

H₂ That the number of stories about the clergy will rise after a negative triggering event related to clergy.

Once the story has been reported, media are primed by one another to follow through on this news item and to actively seek more stories about these subjects that may be related. Even if the charge is not the same, criminally deviant behavior of any kind by members of the target group will be sufficient to generate a story about the group.

H₃ That the level of media negativity towards the clergy will be greater after the case in which the accused was found guilty than in the case where the accused was found innocent.

Deviant stories retain prominence. Once a story becomes non-deviant, as when an allegation is withdrawn or a suspect is vindicated by a court, the matter quickly fades from public view. It no longer offers the journalist the desired combination of conflict, novelty and sensation and will, therefore, be denied prominence.

METHOD

This study looks at media coverage of clergy from 1991 to 1995. The method used in this research is content analysis of a variety of sources.

Coverage is measured as both:

- the number of clergy dominant stories, and
- the valence of such stories.

The concepts being investigated are amount of media coverage about clergy and the valence of such coverage. Media coverage about clergy is determined by references to individual priests or the clergy in general in the course of a story. The research process is fivefold:

- determination of sources to be used
- locating stories related to clergy
- determining the time period of relevant stories
- determining their valence according to a coding scheme
- categorizing the stories as linked to the events or otherwise.

SOURCES

The Nexis database was searched with a simple search term¹⁶ using the “major papers” subset¹⁷ for each of the seven time periods under consideration.

May 1991 to April 1992 ¹⁸	Prior to Porter's being accused ¹⁹
May 1992 to July 1992	Porter Accused ²⁰
August 1992 to January 1993	Before Porter's Trial

¹⁶ Nexis search term = catholic w/2 priest or catholic w/2 clergy

¹⁷ Nexis offer various file libraries. In this study I used the MAJPAP file.

¹⁸ This larger time frame is to establish the baseline for clergy stories against which a hypothesized rise in negativity can be measured.

¹⁹ This allows coverage of the announcement by Cardinal Bernardin in Chicago of measures to deal with incidents of sexual abuse by members of the clergy, announced in June 1992.

²⁰ James Porter was first accused of sexual abuse in a public forum when a television program aired on his abuse on May 8, 1992

February 1993 to April 1993	Porter Trial
May 1993 - October 1993	Porter Found Guilty/Before Bernardin is Accused
November 1993 - April 1994	Bernardin Accused ²¹
May 1994 - October 1994	After Bernardin is cleared

The time periods serve to mark the occasion of the triggering events, the trial and sentencing of Porter, the accusation against Bernardin, and its subsequent withdrawal. For each time period, the complete set of stories yielded from the search was randomly sampled so as to yield approximately 100 stories in that time frame. This was repeated for each of the seven time periods, allowing an equal number of stories to be included in each sample. These stories were then coded for salience, and if salient, for valence and length.

CODING

The first determinant of salience was for Catholic clergy. Any story, predominantly about a priest or Catholic clergy in general, was included. The following criteria were used for salience:

- Stories must deal primarily with a priest or Catholic clergy. Any story in which a priest is incidental, e.g. as a witness to an accident, or as an incidental party in a society wedding, was not included.
- Stories must *not* deal with the triggering event per se. Any story dealing directly with the accusation against Cardinal Bernardin, e.g., a story about his co-accused, or about James Porter was not counted. A very high number of stories about the triggering events should occur at the time of their inception and these were not included in this study. The purpose of this study was to investigate coverage of clergy in general, not to study coverage of the triggering events.

²¹ Stephen Cooke made his allegations against Cardinal Bernardin in November 1993 and withdrew them in February 1994.

(Coding for predominantly clergy stories, and stories directly related to the triggering events, both of which were to be dropped from the content analysis, reduced the number of stories for analysis from 706 to 235)

These 235 stories were also coded for valence. What constitutes a negative story? In short, they are those stories which portray clergy in a poor light. In the context of this study, negative stories about clergy are deemed to be those that portray individual priests or the clergy collectively as immoral or amoral, as associated with the highly public misdeeds of a few of their number, or in a critical manner. Stories that focus on clerical excesses, however true, are also to be regarded as negative. Stories that refer to the triggering events out of context, (i.e., where the clergy named are not involved in, or charged with, child sexual abuse) are considered to be negative. The same is true of stories which focus on clergy as a primary source of sexual abuse.²²

Before formal coding of stories was done, a systematic random selection of stories was made and these were distributed to two independent coders who were asked to assess the stories via a series of dichotomous choices:

- | | |
|------------|---|
| Decision 1 | Predominantly clergy or not |
| Decision 2 | Related to the triggering events or not |
| Decision 3 | Positive, Negative or Neutral re clergy |

The determination of valence was decided by examining each story which mentions clergy predominantly. Every negative story was given a score of -1, every positive story +1, and every neutral story 0. Coding guidelines were to be

²² According to several surveys, priests, *pro rata*, are much less likely to be abusers than married men. Thus stories conveying the opposite are deemed negative.

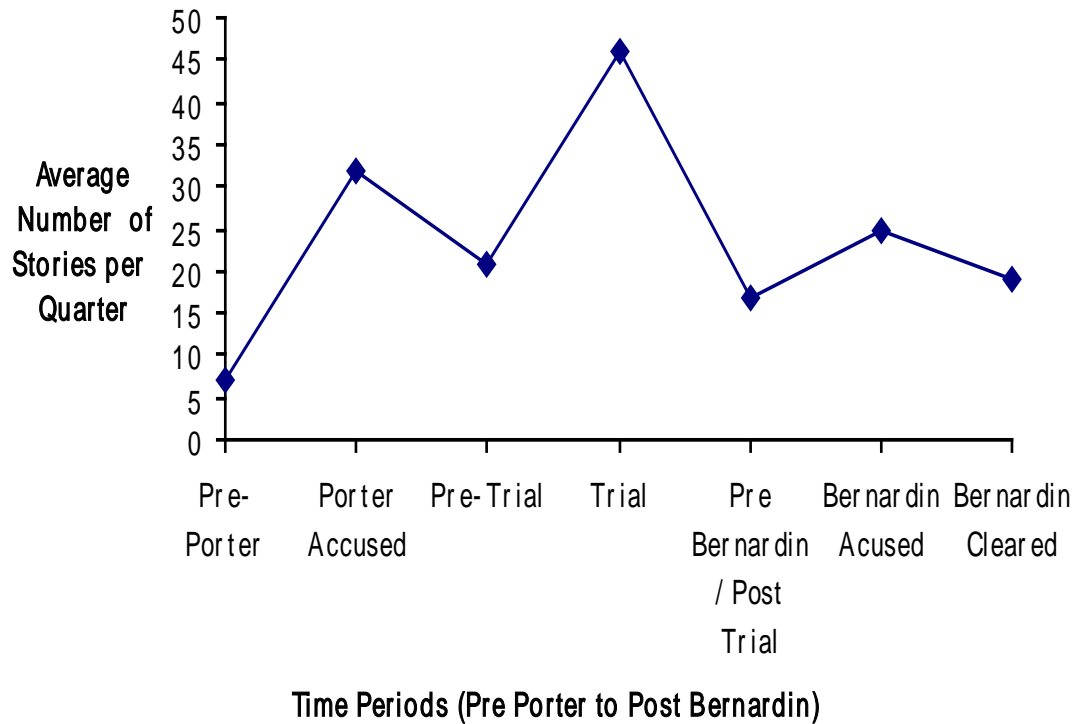
further clarified if this initial coding experience gave a low level of intercoder reliability. The results for intercoder reliability using Scott's pi are as follows:

Selection of relevant stories (Clergy predominant)	=	.97
Determination of Bernardin/Porter Involvement	=	1.00
Valence of Stories	=	.93

RESULTS

The initial random sample from Nexis yielded a total of 706 stories. After coding, when stories related directly to the Porter or Bernardin cases, and stories that were not primarily about clergy were eliminated, there were only 235 stories deemed relevant. These break down as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Average Number of Stories per quarter for each Time Period



It is important to bear in mind that all stories relating to the Porter and Bernardin cases have been removed from this graph. At first glance, it is quite clear that the three triggering events (Porter Accusation, Porter Trial, and Bernardin Accusation) all coincide with a rise in the number of stories about clergy.

Each shift in the number of stories is matched by a corresponding shift in overall negativity. Each triggering event coincides with a change in the direction of valence. Even after the clearing of Cardinal Bernardin following a false accusation by Steven Cook (Time Period 7), the valence of stories about clergy remains negative.

Table 1 **Descriptive Statistics by Time Period**

Valence Comparison	Time	Time	Time	Time	Time	Time	Time
between time periods	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Period 5	Period 6	Period 7
Mean *	.57	-.41	-.05	-.26	-.21	-.25	-.18
Standard Deviation	.69	.61	.85	.77	.81	.77	.77
Total Number of Stories	28	32	42	46	34	16	38
Average Number of Stories per Quarter ²³	7	32	21	46	17	25	19

* Negative=-1, Neutral =0, Positive=+1

Looking at Table 1, we see that only Time Period 1 has a positive mean, all others being negative. We would therefore expect little variation between Time Periods 2 to 7 as the biggest change in valence clearly occurs after Time Period 1, that is at the time that the Porter accusations come to light. The volume of stories changes too, at this time, with a large increase in the average number of stories after the Porter accusation.

Analysis of variance across the time periods yields an F ratio of 5.09 which is statistically significant. T-tests were run on planned comparisons between time periods. Most were not statistically significant but Table 2 lists the results and indicates an interesting pattern of significance. As indicated above, Time Period 1 is very different from all the following periods. That is reflected in Row 4 of the data in Table 2. The only other statistically significant change comes in Row 5, between Time Periods 2 and 3. This is when the valence of stories reaches its most positive, coming close to a neutral 0. From this time period onwards, the valence never improves to such a degree. Each of the Time Periods under consideration is referenced by the actual historical event. The comments following are referenced by the number following the item in the first column of

²³ The time periods are not of equal length, therefore the table shows the mean number of stories for each quarter so as to compare like with like.

each data row in the table.

Table 2 T-test results of planned comparisons between time periods

Mean Valence*	.57	-.41	-.05	-.26	-.21	-.25	-.18
Std Deviation	.69	.61	.85	.77	.81	.77	.77
Valence Comparison between time periods	Time Period 1 Pre-Porter	Time Period 2 Porter Accusation	Time Period 3 Pre Porter Trial	Time Period 4 Porter Trial	Time Period 5 Post Porter Trial /Pre Bernardin	Time Period 6 Bernardin Accusation	Time Period 7 Bernardin Clearance
Pre-Porter and Porter Accusation(1)	t1,2=5.76 p<.001						
Porter Accusation and Pre Porter Trial(2)		t2,3= -2.1 p<.05					
Pre Porter Trial and Porter Trial(3)			t3,4=1.22 ns				
Porter Trial and Pre Bernardin(4)				t4,5= -.31 ns			
Pre Bernardin and Bernardin Allegation(5)					t5,6=.18 ns		
Bernardin Allegation and Bernardin Clearance(6)						t6,7= -.29 ns	
Pre Porter and Pre Bernardin(7)	t1,5=4.08 p<.001						
Pre Porter and Post Porter/ Pre Bernardin Clearance(8)	t1,7=4.19 p<.001						
Pre Bernardin and Bernardin Clearance				t5,7=-.12 ns			
* Negative=-1, Neutral =0, Positive=+1							

There is a significant shift in valence from Time Period 1 to 2 (.57 to -.41), which represents the biggest single effect throughout the study period. The remaining means are all low and the comparisons are not statistically significant; this is expected as a result of the major drop in valence caused by the Porter case which is never overturned. Coverage remains negative from this time period onwards although there is slight fluctuation. The positive valence of clergy stories never recovers even after Bernardin is found innocent.

(1) The result of comparing time period 1 with time period 2 shows the drop in valence. This is in accordance with the hypotheses.

(2) The result of comparing time period 2 with time period 3 is in line with the improvement in valence after the accusation but prior to the trial.

(3,4,5) The results of comparing time period 3 with time period 4, time period 4 with time period 5, and time period 5 with time period 6 are not statistically significant. Valence, already low, drops as a result of the Porter Trial and tends to stay at about the same mean level of valence through the Bernardin allegation.

(6,7) Comparing time period 1 with time period 5 shows that there is not the same drop in valence after the Bernardin Allegation as there was after the Porter Accusation. But there is a drop and valence was already low at this point. The drop in valence caused by Porter is sustained over time and lessens the apparent effect on valence at the time of the Bernardin Accusation.

(8) Although Bernardin is cleared, there is no return to the valence of the pre-Porter period. There is no evidence to suggest that the effects of the

Porter case, as seen in terms of impact on media stories about clergy, have abated as yet.

Three hypotheses were proposed:

Hypotheses 1 and 2 are clearly borne out by this study, although this is stronger for H₂ than for H₁. The statistics indicate that the triggering events have profound repercussions in terms of valence of coverage. From Figure 1 it is readily seen that the valence of stories about clergy (H₁) and the number of stories about clergy (H₂) change as hypothesized.

Hypothesis 3 is a little more difficult to argue and is not demonstrable from the statistics. This could be because of the severe shift in valence after time period 1 distorts the other changes. The initial event of Porter's accusation caused a drop in valence that was unaffected by Bernardin being accused and then found innocent. The major deviant event (Porter) initially influenced subsequent coverage negatively even when positive news resulted from the Bernardin case.

DISCUSSION

This research focused on media treatment of clergy after a negative triggering event of child sexual abuse. By performing content analysis over a significant time period, the study focuses on how newspapers deal with the clergy in stories not directly connected to the negative triggering events. Because the analysis omits all stories directly related to Bernardin and Porter (the two triggering events), any effect seen is not caused by those events and must be from other forces working within the media. The results indicate strong

media agenda setting effects of the negative triggering events or the subsequent coverage of the clergy in general.

The following limitations should be noted. First, media treatment of the clergy may be in response to the specific charges now emerging in the light of an increased awareness of abuse; the stories may simply reflect an accurate account of what is happening. Second, the events studied are recent and the trend of media reporting, in the absence of negative triggers, cannot be stated with any accuracy. Third, the sample of newspapers is itself limited. A larger study dealing with many more publications, a study involving electronic media, or even a comparative study across national boundaries may yield different results. Such limitations aside, there are interesting trends in this study that bear further research.

This paper has focused on the agenda setting function of the media in relation to the media itself — how the media set their own agenda for news. Earlier in this work I referred to the focus of the press being driven by media need as opposed to real events.²⁴ It is evident from the results that the framers of the news do wield significant power over what reaches the public.

Media coverage tends to focus on deviant behavior as a result of the journalistic understanding of what constitutes newsworthiness.²⁵ While the negativity of news is a universal phenomenon²⁶, it does meet certain social and

²⁴ Daniellian and Reese

²⁵ Pamela J. Shoemaker, Lucig H. Daniellian, and Nancy Brendlinger, "Deviant Acts, Risky Business and U.S. Interests: The Newsworthiness of World Events" in Journalism Quarterly, 69 (4) 781-795, (Winter 1991).

²⁶ Teun A. Van Dijk, News As Discourse, (Hillsdale, N.J. : L. Erlbaum Associates, 1988.), 123.

individual needs.²⁷ The outcome here, however, is to portray one group as deviant in the light of the behavior of a minority. The evidence of this paper goes beyond the suggestion that the media are simply interested in deviant behavior *per se*. It appears that the media also create a significant slant on news according to their own schema.

An initial look at Figure 1 shows what one might expect coverage on the clergy to be *without removal of the Porter and Bernardin stories*. But given their removal, there is no doubt that what is being observed is a media effect which has two serious implications. First, reporting on the clergy as a whole is consistently negative because of the triggering events, even when the triggering event is eventually shown to be a false accusation. It is not possible to argue from the data that this occurs in every case because the fall in valence after Bernadin's clearance is not statistically significant — this may simply be because valence was already low indeed. Second, although the average number of stories returns to a level comparable with the level at the outset, the valence remains negative across time, never returning to its previous positive value.

Daniellian and Reese distinguish between news "manufacture" and news "discovery."²⁸ In this paper I see one of the fruits of news discovery — a whole group of people is reported in a negative fashion after the deviant behavior of a few. The consequence of a negative perception of the clergy follows, at least in part, from the media treatment of the issue.

²⁷ Pamela J. Shoemaker, "Hardwired for News: Using Biological and Cultural Evolution to Explain the Surveillance Function," Journal of Communications 47 (2): 32-47, (Summer, 1996).

²⁸ Daniellian and Reese

This raises broader questions about the function of the mass media in society. As the source through which most people survey their world, the media serve to color the lenses through which the world is perceived. Is it a media attribute that some groups in society are perceived negatively, e.g., through crime reporting when reference to race is made only when the suspect is from a minority group?

The study indicates that there are parallel areas of research to be done. Is this set of figures simply applicable to the clergy or generalizable to any group in society which becomes associated with deviant behavior through the activity of a tiny minority of its membership? One further possibility would be to do a similar analysis in connection with two other groups, e.g., educators and physicians. It could also be argued that the media effect of negative coverage comes in part from the nature of the criminally deviant behavior — in this case the sexual abuse of minors. Does the same effect hold for other illegal or immoral behavior, e.g., theft or fraud? A final line of inquiry is suggested by the incomplete nature of the results shown. The question arises as to whether there will ever be a recovery in valence and a return to the pre-Porter days in media coverage of clergy. Perhaps a longer study over time would help with this issue.

The mass media are the major source of information, they can set national agendas, and they can frame issues in a particular light. Together with the change in the style of news over the last two decades,²⁹ this raises important

²⁹ See W. Russell Neuman, Marion R. Just and Ann N. Cringler, Common Knowledge : News and the Construction of Political Meaning, (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Robert M. Entman, Democracy Without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics, (New York : Oxford University Press, 1989); Thomas E. Patterson, Out of Order, (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

questions about the effects of negative news on public perceptions of various groups. The agenda setting function of the media is reinforced, directly and indirectly, when combined with certain news norms, as with deviance in this study.