

Research on Train Derailment in Ohio by Comparative Analysis between CNN and Fox News

YaNing Hu

Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, 300380, China

Abstract. This study focused on CNN and Fox News to illustrate how agenda-setting can influence viewers' attitudes and behaviors. In the United States, there has always been a left-right divide in the media. Many of the political commentators on Fox News are considered conservative and have good relations with Republican politicians, and CNN, a more objective network, has gradually "leaned left" in recent years. Although both media outlets are mainstream media in the U.S., they have different political stances and therefore report events from different angles, allowing for a better study of the role of agenda-setting in news coverage.

Keywords: Train Derailment; Ohio; Comparative Analysis.

1. Introduction

On February 3, 2023, a freight train carrying vinyl chloride and other dangerous chemicals derailed and exploded in the state of Ohio (Alisha Ebrahimji and Andi Babineau 2023). Chaos and fear gripped the local community after the derailment. Residents found livestock and wildlife dying for no apparent reason, water sources widely contaminated, drinking water unsafe, and toxic fumes in the air (Jr 2023). By examining the extensive media coverage of train derailments, I show that different news outlets tend to cover different aspects of the accidents and argue that this is due to the agenda-setting of the media.

This paper proceeds as follows: firstly, I provide the concept of agenda-setting based on the previous literature review. Next, I elaborate on my reasons for choosing CNN and Fox News as comparators. Then, I summarize what perspective and position these two news organizations took in reporting the accident and provide my own understanding of this divergence. Finally, a discussion on agenda-setting is presented that future scholars might find it relevant and meaningful.

2. Literature Review

"Agenda-setting" is a concept introduced by Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw in 1968 (Kosicki G M 1993). According to Maxwell & Donald, agenda-setting has two meanings for the audience: "what to think" and "how to think". The former influences the audience's perception of the "existence" and "importance" of an issue, while the latter influences the audience's cognitive framework for that issue (McCombs M E & Shaw D L, 1993). Some scholars focused their research on agenda-setting theory on how mass media influence changes in political behavior during elections (Kiousis S, McCombs M 2004), but this might not be true today (Schmierbach et al, 2022). This article extends the study of agenda-setting to other areas, where agenda-setting has played an important role in a variety of ways, meanwhile, as social media platforms have reduced the gatekeeping power of traditional media much, there is an exception, on the environment issue, the social media agenda of parties has been more predictive of the traditional media agenda than vice-versa recently (Gilardi et al, 2022).

3. Comparative Analysis between CNN and Fox News

CNN reports on several aspects, including politics, economy, and health. On the political front, CNN reported on the recriminations between the Trump and Biden administrations (Julian Zelizer, 2023). It wrote about Trump's trip to Ohio and accused Biden of focusing on international issues instead of domestic ones, apparently to gain a political edge over Joe Biden. It goes on to mention that

Democrats have pointed out the alleged hypocrisy of Republican attacks and that the Biden administration has taken a number of steps, such as the EPA saying it will force Norfolk Southern to clean up contaminated soil and water, reimburse the EPA for cleaning services and more (Nouran Salahieh, Holly Yan and Christina Maxouris 2023), and having sent federal medical experts to the town to "assess local public health needs". Finally, a Washington Post-ABC News poll showed that 6 out of 10 Americans don't feel that Biden has done much (Julian Zelizer, 2023). On the economic front, CNN reported, among other things, that Norfolk Southern lost \$387 million due to a toxic train derailment (Chris Isidore 2023), and the impact on the real estate market in that area of East Palestine (Anna Bahney, Jason Carroll and Aaron Cooper 2023). On the health front, CNN headline reads "CDC team falls ill during investigation", but the content is that officials have repeatedly stressed that the water and air are safe and that people's uncomfortable reactions may be due to fear (Brenda Goodman 2023).

FOX News covered two main aspects of the train derailment: the government and agency response and the prosecution of the Biden administration. On the one hand, FOX News is ostensibly reporting on the facts of the situation, but is actually trying to elicit responses from various parties, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the CDC and Ohio officials, regarding the large number of dead animals, drinking water problems and ill health symptoms raised by residents (Chris Pandolfo 2023). In this way, FOX News was primarily trying to reassure the public that the train derailment was manageable and under control. On the other hand, FOX News has reported in various ways on the dissatisfaction of various parties with the Biden administration. It directly referenced Mayor Trent Conaway slamming Biden for ignoring domestic responsibilities during his visit to Ukraine (Yael Halon 2023), while documenting Republican Rep. Johnson's social media invitation to Buttigieg to come to City Hall to hear residents' concerns (Adam Sabes, Jon Street 2023). Even Fox News featured Greg Gutfeld on The Gutfeld Show, openly mocking CNN for trying to destroy evidence that the Biden administration screwed up (Greg Gutfeld 2023).

Comparing Fox News and CNN in terms of time of publication, when the incident first occurred, it might not be reported in a timely manner, according to the observation of this paper. Later, Fox News gave a more comprehensive report, while CNN mentioned the story only in the health section. In terms of the number and speed of releases, Fox News released the status of the scene, the government's response, and the tracking of the issue faster and more frequently than CNN. In terms of content, CNN expanded its coverage of the train derailment into various areas, while Fox News focused more on politics and US sections. Next, we will examine in detail how these two media outlets influenced the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences through their different agenda settings.

As you can see from the above, a media outlet will increase the amount of coverage on a particular aspect of the story if it wants to keep the audience's attention. The similarity is that CNN and Fox News increased their coverage of the government and various agencies responding to the train derailment will not have much impact and long-term harm to the lives of residents. The difference is that Fox News also focused on accountability and continued to focus on the Biden administration's attitude and actions taken after the accident, while CNN's coverage was scattered across the board and did not focus on one aspect of the story. Whereas first-level agenda setting focuses on the amount of media coverage an issue or other topic receives, the "second-level" of agenda setting looks at how the media discuss those issues or other objects of attention, such as public figures (Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Thomas Hanitzsch 2009). CNN is "Democratic" and Fox News is "Republican". The difference in stance leads to a different approach and focus in their coverage, with Fox News focusing on the Biden administration's indifference to the train derailment and its lack of substantive, helpful action, both through news coverage and through Gutfeld's "King of Late Night" banter on the show. Meanwhile, Fox News wants to focus the public's anger on the Biden administration. Although this incident is related to Trump's earlier reversal of federal train safety regulations, it is now being led by Biden, and the primary responsibility still lies with the Biden administration. CNN is trying to distract the audience from the problem by changing the focus of its coverage, whether it is Norfolk Southern's

loss or the East Palestine real estate market being affected, so that the audience has no time to pursue who is responsible for things not being resolved in a timely manner.

4. Conclusion

By comparing these two media, we can see that different agenda settings are different on media content. Therefore, agenda-setting theory also has a greater impact on some daily events concerning the public, like the recent mortgage redistribution principle proposed by the Biden administration may also affect the public's attitude toward the Biden administration, which deserves attention and consideration.

References

- [1] Alisha Ebrahimji and Andi Babineau. (2023, March 31). US Justice Department sues Norfolk Southern following train derailment in East Palestine Alisha Ebrahimji. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/31/us/us-norfolk-southern-lawsuit/index.html>
- [2] Jr, B. D. (2023, February 17). Ohio town reflects on chemical train derailment aftermath. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64671893>
- [3] Kosicki, G. M. (1993). Problems and opportunities in agenda-setting research. *Journal of communication*, 43(2), 100-127.
- [4] 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.
- [5] Kioussis, S., & McCombs, M. (2004). Agenda-setting effects and attitude strength: Political figures during the 1996 presidential election. *Communication research*, 31(1), 36-57.
- [6] Gilardi, F., Gessler, T., Kubli, M., & Müller, S. (2022). Social media and political agenda setting. *Political Communication*, 39(1), 39-60.
- [7] Schmierbach, M., McCombs, M., Valenzuela, S., Dearing, J. W., Guo, L., Iyengar, S., ... & Willnat, L. (2022). Reflections on a legacy: Thoughts from scholars about agenda-setting past and future. *Mass Communication and Society*, 25(4), 500-527.
- [8] Cheng Manli. (2016). Talking about Issue Setting in the Perspective of Strategic Communication—Taking U.S. Foreign-related Public Opinion as an Example. <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTIOAiTRKibYIV5Vjs7ijP0rjQD-AVm8oHBO0FTadnkoegBgjYydTnhMNpcs-kesYSyiMQKu2v7A7OgLf0kd&uniplatform=NZKPT&src=copy>
- [9] Julian Zelizer. (2023, February 22). Trump's visit to Ohio derailment scene poses risk for Biden. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/22/opinions/trump-ohio-derailment-zelizer/index.html>
- [10] Nouran Salahieh, Holly Yan and Christina Maxouris. (2023, February 22). EPA says it can fine Norfolk Southern \$70,000 a day if it falls short of cleaning up and paying for the Ohio toxic train wreck. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/22/us/ohio-train-derailment-east-palestine-wednesday/index.html>
- [11] Chris Isidore. (2023, April 26). Norfolk Southern says the toxic train derailment cost it \$387 million. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/26/investing/norfolk-southern-earnings/index.html>
- [12] Anna Bahney, Jason Carroll and Aaron Cooper. (2023, April 21). Residents of East Palestine concerned about home values. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/21/homes/east-palestine-home-prices-april/index.html>
- [13] Brenda Goodman. (2023, March 31). CDC team studying health impacts of Ohio train derailment fell ill during investigation. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/31/health/ohio-train-derailment-cdc-team-symptoms/index.html>
- [14] Chris Pandolfo. (2023, February 14). Ohio residents fear train derailment poisoned air, ground, report animals dying. Fox News. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/ohio-residents-fear-train-derailment-poisoned-air-ground-report-animals-dying>
- [15] Yael Halon. (2023, February 20). East Palestine, Ohio mayor "furious" with Biden's Ukraine visit: "That was the biggest slap in the face." <https://www.foxnews.com/media/east-palestine-ohio-mayor-furious-bidens-ukraine-visit-biggest-slap-face>

- [16] Adam Sabes , Jon Street. (2023, ebruary). Ohio congressman slams “blame game” after Buttigieg passes buck on derailed train in East Palestine. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/ohio-congressman-slams-blame-game-buttigieg-passes-buck-derailed-train-east-palestine>
- [17] Greg Gutfeld. (2023, February 17). Biden is ignoring the train derailment in Ohio. <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/greg-gutfeld-biden-ignore-train-derailment>
- [18] Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Thomas Hanitzsch. (2009). The handbook of journalism studies. Routledge.