Can Celebrities Set the Agenda?

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By now, it is well established that the media have the power to set the public agenda—that is, to focus people’s attention on some issues rather than others. This is important for public policy because if an issue is not on the public agenda, chances are it will not be acted upon by government. But not all issues covered by the media manage to achieve public salience. For example, as agenda-setting expert Maxwell McCombs has noted, despite wall to wall coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal late in the Clinton Administration, most Americans never thought the scandal was particularly important. Why do some issues that make it onto the media agenda manage to make it onto the public agenda while others do not? This is the question I address here, focusing on the role of celebrities in the agenda-setting process. Specifically, I test the notion that celebrities can increase the chances that an issue on the media agenda makes it onto the public agenda by speaking out about the importance of that issue. I do this via a post-test only, control group survey experiment.

**Agenda Setting and Celebrities**

There is not, of course, a single “agenda.” Rather, there are numerous agendas. Here, I am particularly interested in two agendas: (1) *The public agenda* (see Gerston, 1997: 50), which consists of issues that the public deems the most important issues for discussion and government action at any given time; and (2) *The media agenda*, which comprises issues that receive prominent attention in the news media. There are also various institutional agendas (e.g., the president’s agenda, the congressional agenda), but they are not the topics of this paper.

*First-Level Agenda Setting*

There are few findings in political science and policy studies as robust and well-supported as this one: the news media profoundly affect the public agenda (Cohen, 1963; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Rogers and Dearing, 1988; Shaw and Martin, 1992; Wanta and Ghanem, 2000; Althaus and Tewksbury, 2002; McCombs and Reynolds, 2002; McCombs, 2004; Miller, 2007). By dint of their agenda-setting power, news media are crucially important in the policy process, as virtually all theories of the process assign an important role to the public agenda; unless an issue makes it onto the public agenda, it is unlikely to be acted upon by government.

Because media are such important (though hardly the only) agenda setters, the question of how some issues reach the media agenda while others do not has received a great deal of scholarly consideration. Studies of media *agenda-building* in this vein (including the seminal Shoemaker and Reese, 2014) find that several factors affect which issues reach the media agenda, including whether or not the issue has far-reaching implications for many people, the extent to which the issue is being covered by other media, the extent to which the issue has a purportedly ready-made solution, and the extent to which the issue is already being dealt with by government (see also Kingdon, 1995, McCombs and Bell, 1996; Lim, 2006). Finally, focusing events can put an issue on the media agenda (see Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Birkland, 1998; Cobb and Elder, 1971), and talented and resourceful policy entrepreneurs can find ways to bring media coverage to the issues that interest them (Cobb and Elder, 1971; Hilgarten and Bosk, 1988; Berkowitz, 1992).

*Spotlighting and Celebrities*

Recently, one additional factor has been shown to increase the chances that an issue makes it onto the media agenda: *celebrity activity*. In a phenomenon he calls “spotlighting,” Mark Harvey (2018) has shown that celebrities can induce media outlets to cover issues that are important to them. Specifically, examining media attention to ongoing fighting in Darfur in 2012, and debt and AIDS in Africa in 1999 and 2010, Harvey shows that “celebrities…produce visible spikes in coverage in broadcast news and newspaper coverage…” (81). So, for example, when George Clooney went to Sudan in 2012 and subsequently engaged in a flurry of activity in Washington (he testified before Congress, met with President Obama, and protested on the lawn of the Sudanese embassy), media attention to the issue skyrocketed. Similarly, when U2 singer Bono spoke out on the issue of African debt in 1999 (via an op-ed in *The* *Guardian* and then a speech at the annual BRIT awards show), media coverage of the issue rose considerably. In a similar vein, DeWitt (2018: 87) notes that celebrities can “leverage their staying power to capture attention and mobilize engagement.” More specifically, Atkinson and DeWitt (2015) show that congressional hearings that feature celebrities are several times more likely to receive media coverage than congressional hearings that do not. Numerous other studies more or less assume (but do not show) that celebrities have the ability to affect the media agenda by calling attention to their pet issues (Cooper, 2007; Jeffreys, 2016; but others are more skeptical, including Thrall et al., 2008; Brockington, 2014).

Beyond the work of Harvey, DeWitt, and a few others, the idea that celebrities can affect the media agenda has not been extensively tested. Nonetheless, this notion seems eminently plausible in light of extensive research showing that celebrities have a relatively easy time commanding the attention of government policy-makers (Busby, 2007; Cooper, 2007; Brockington, 2014; Brockington and Henson, 2015). Attention is sparse among policymakers (Baumgartner et al., 2009), just as it is among media elites.

*Can Celebrities Set the Public Agenda?*

In summary, recent research supports two general findings. First, issues that make it onto the media agenda are more likely to make it onto the public agenda than issues that do not. Second, celebrities can affect which issues make it onto the media agenda. Together, these two findings beg the following question: *If celebrities can affect which issues reach the media agenda, can they also affect which issues on the media agenda reach the public agenda?* If celebrity attention to an issue can help an issue reach the media agenda, it is quite plausible that celebrities can affect which issues reach the public agenda. Here is how this might work. Imagine that a newspaper reporter is preparing to write a story about climate change, partially because a celebrity has spoken out about the issue. The reporter, of course, can write the story in a variety of ways. One option is to invoke the name of one or more celebrities in the story. In the most general terms, this means that the story will say something like, “Climate change is important, and George Clooney agrees” as opposed to something like, “Climate change is important.” The second story is just a story about climate change, while the first is a story about climate change that features a celebrity. Here, I consider the possibility that *ceteris paribus*, the story that features the celebrity is more likely to affect issue salience among readers than is the story that does not feature the celebrity.

Why might we expect that ordinary citizens would take their cues from celebrities when deciding which issues on the media agenda are most important? The short answer is this: a growing body of research indicates that celebrities have real and in some cases profound effects on political attitudes and behavior (for an overview, see Street 2012). In short, voters take their cues from celebrities all the time. For example, Garthwaite and Moore (2008), and Pease and Brewer (2008) show that Oprah Winfrey’s endorsement of Barack Obama during the 2008 Democratic primaries improved Obama’s standing among Democratic voters. Similarly, Jackson (Jackson and Darrow, 2005; Jackson, 2008) shows that celebrity support for a cause can increase support for that cause among young people, and Nownes (2012) has shown that in the midst of the 2008 presidential election, voters’ evaluations of the two political parties were affected by their exposure to information about the (actual) partisan leanings of two popular celebrities (Jennifer Aniston and Peyton Manning), and that celebrity support for Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential election profoundly affected voters’ levels of anxiety and anger toward her (2017). Most recently, DeWitt (2018), following on the work of Brockington and Henson (2015), has shown that media coverage of celebrity advocacy efforts can lead people to show interest in the subjects of these efforts.

Outside of political science (in communication studies, and consumer studies, for example), there is even more evidence that celebrities affect individual attitudes and behavior. For example, copious studies show that when celebrities endorse products, these products become more attractive to consumers (Street, Hague, and Savigny, 2008; Austin, Van de Vord, Pinkleton, and Epstein, 2008; Veer, Becirovic, and Martin, 2010; Inthorn and Street, 2011). In addition, marketing scholars have consistently found that celebrity endorsements of products increase sales (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1995; Farrell, Karels, Montfort, and McClatchey, 2000; Erdogan, Baker, and Tagg, 2001; Butler, Cowan, and Nilsson, 2005).

Empirical support for celebrity effects is buttressed by theoretical work, especially Grant McCracken’s “meaning transfer theory.” This general theory holds that a celebrity enhances the attractiveness of whatever he/she endorses by transferring her/his meaning to it (see McCracken 1986, 1989). A celebrity, the argument goes, has a public persona (for example, “tough guy,” “fighter,” or “powerful woman”), and over time comes to personify certain traits (e.g., she or he is viewed as tough, responsible, competent, beautiful, powerful, or sophisticated). By endorsing something or someone, a celebrity transfers this meaning to the something or someone he/she endorses.

Meaning transfer theory has been around for a long time, but it does not explain precisely *how* celebrity endorsements induce people to behave or think in certain ways. A recent study, however, might provide an answer. In the study, a team of Dutch marketing researchers showed that celebrity endorsements of products actually affected the brains of people exposed to them. Specifically, Stallen et al. (2010) examined fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) brain scans of 23 women as they were exposed to images of attractive celebrities and attractive non-celebrities. The women were then shown scores of additional pictures showing different celebrity-shoe combinations and non-celebrity shoe combinations—that is, pictures in which a face was paired with a pair of shoes. The researchers found that respondents’ brains reacted differently to celebrity-shoe pairings than they did to non-celebrity-shoe pairings. Specifically, the celebrity-shoe pairings “lit up” the medial orbitofrontal cortex in a way that the non-celebrity-shoe pairings did not. The authors “observed increased activity in the orbitofrontal cortex…”—a part of the brain involved in appraisal and expression of emotion, as well as in making positive and negative associations (see, for example, Bechara, Damasio, and Damasio, 2000; Etkin, Egner, and Kalish, 2011)—“during the encoding of celebrity-product pairings” (809). This biological response, the authors concluded, “was related to the learning of associations between a famous face and a product” (807). The authors continued:

The medial orbitofrontal cortex was not activated during the presentation of a famous face alone, which suggests that the medial orbitofrontal cortex did not encode the positive affect associated with the retrieval of implicit memories related to a famous face, but instead represented the learning of associations between an initially neutral product and a positively valenced face (809).

In support of meaning transfer theory, the authors concluded: “This result provides strong support for the idea that the mechanism underlying celebrity endorsement is a transfer of positive affect from celebrity to product…” (809).

**Data and Methods**

In what follows, I test the following general hypotheses:

*GH1. Individuals exposed to a specific political issue via an online news story are more likely to identify the issue as the most important issue facing the country than are individuals who are not exposed to the news story.*

*GH2. Individuals exposed to a specific political issue via an online news story that features a popular celebrity are more likely to identify the issue as the most important issue facing the country than are individuals who are either not exposed to any story or are exposed to an otherwise identical story that does not feature the celebrity.*

*GH3. Individuals exposed to a specific political issue via an online news story will rate the issue as more important than will individuals who are not exposed to the news story.*

*GH4. Individuals exposed to a specific political issue via an online news story that features a popular celebrity will rate the issue as more important than will individuals who are either not exposed to the news story or are exposed to an otherwise identical story that does not feature the celebrity.*

The first and third hypotheses are essentially standard first-level agenda-setting hypotheses; they posit that exposure to a media report about an issue will positively influence individuals’ views of how important the issue is. The second and fourth hypotheses specifically test the notion that is of primary interest here—that celebrities can affect the likelihood that an issue on the media agenda becomes more salient for individuals.

*The Experimental Groups*

To test these hypotheses, I conducted a posttest only, control group, survey experiment. The subject pool comprised 562 university students who participated in exchange for extra course credit. I conducted the experiment during a one week period in late 2018. I randomly assigned participants to one of four experimental groups—*The Control Group* (n=138), *The Media Group* (n=134), *The Celebrity Group* (n=158), and *The Puzzle Group* (n=132). Respondents in each group completed a survey containing several items about their political attitudes and affiliations (e.g., ideology, party identification), and personal characteristics (e.g., age, family income, race/ethnicity, gender). A copy of the entire survey can be found at [redacted]. Prior to completing the survey, respondents were told that they were participating in a university-wide survey designed to gauge the political attitudes and opinions of young people, and were required to read an informed consent form. I administered the experiment via Survey Monkey, the Internet-based data collection site. Web-based survey tools in political science are relatively new, but it appears that the data they produce are as reliable and valid as those collected through more conventional means (Alvarez, Sherman, and VanBeselaere, 2003; Stephenson and Crête, 2011; Cassese, Huddy, Hartman, Mason, and Weber, 2013).

*The Control Group and the Media Group*. Respondents in the Control Group completed a survey with no experimental stimulus. Respondents in the Media Group completed a different survey. Halfway through the survey, after the questions about personal characteristics and political attitudes and behavior, a new section began with these instructions (please note that these instructions obfuscate the true nature of the experiment):

*One of my goals in this study is to see if some voters retain and recall political information more than others. I picked the following news story at random from thousands of stories reported by the news media last week. Please read it, and then I will ask you a series of questions about what you read.*

These instructions were followed by this textbox, which contained a faux news story:

**ed by this textbox:lppearelic ague will aStudy Shows that Health Care Remains an Important Issue**

Clearly, health care is one of the most important policy issues facing our country today. This is the primary message of a recent report commissioned by the Surgeon General of the United States, and published early last week. The report also noted that reforming our health care system is an extremely difficult undertaking, and will require strong leadership. The report notes that health care affects a wide range of other issues, including global competitiveness, economic growth, the opioid epidemic, and taxes. Moreover, the health care system in the United States is complicated, and comprises a large number of moving parts.   
  
In the United States, and indeed in countries across the world, the health care system is struggling with rising costs and uneven quality. Ideas about how to improve our health care system are as numerous as they are varied. Interestingly, however, the report notes that the ultimate goal of almost everyone who believes that health care is an important issue is the same: to achieve the best health outcomes, for the largest number of people, at the lowest cost. The report concludes with an appeal for leaders to define the issue of health care in such a way as to emphasize not just problems, but also opportunities. This, the report notes, is an important first step in creating and implementing a new health care reform agenda. It can also increase the chances of compromise, which is crucial for the development of any serious health care reforms.

*The Celebrity Group*. Respondents in the Celebrity Group completed yet a different survey. Again, midway through the survey, respondents saw these instructions:

*One of my goals in this study is to see if some voters retain and recall political information more than others. I picked the following news story at random from thousands of stories reported by the news media last week. Please read it, and then I will ask you a series of questions about what you read.*

**Then there was this** textbox:

**[Redacted] Legend Peyton Manning Weighs In: Health Care Remains an Important Issue**  
  
Clearly, health care is one of the most important policy issues facing our country today. This is the primary message of a recent report commissioned by the Surgeon General of the United States, and published early last week. The report also noted that reforming our health care system is an extremely difficult undertaking, and will require strong leadership. Interestingly, the report seemed to garner support from an unlikely source--legendary Super Bowl winning quarterback and University of Tennessee alumnus Peyton Manning. Manning said to a group of health care information management professionals: “Revolutionizing health care is a mighty endeavor.” He continued: “Both football and health care require leadership in a world that spins on an axis and is constantly throwing hurricanes at us.” The report notes that health care affects a wide range of other issues, including global competitiveness, economic growth, the opioid epidemic, and taxes. Moreover, the health care system in the United States is complicated, and comprises a large number of moving parts.   
  
In the United States, and indeed in countries across the world, the health care system is struggling with rising costs and uneven quality. Ideas about how to improve our health care system are as numerous as they are varied. Interestingly, however, the report notes that the ultimate goal of almost everyone who believes that health care is an important issue is the same: to achieve the best health outcomes, for the largest number of people, at the lowest cost. The report concludes with an appeal for leaders to define the issue of health care in such a way as to emphasize not just problems, but also opportunities. This, the report notes, is an important first step in creating and implementing a new health care reform agenda. It can also increase the chances of compromise, which is crucial for the development of any serious health care reforms. Again, Peyton Manning, who as an NFL player dealt with several health care issues, seemed to echo this sentiment, saying that leadership is especially important here. He said: “A leader needs to take inventory – to identify real strengths of the team, to focus on self, both strengths and weaknesses, and to have honest communication with everyone.”

**This faux new story is identical to the story that appeared on the Media Group survey except for the references to former NFL superstar quarterback Peyton Manning (who, my research indicates, is extremely popular in the region where this study took place). I chose Peyton Manning as the celebrity for this experiment because he has a very high Q-score, is not known to be particularly politically active (though he has contributed money to Republican candidates over the years), and is very well-known here in [redacted].**

***The Puzzle Group*.** Respondents in the Puzzle Group completed a different survey. This time, a new section after the questions about personal characteristics and political attitudes and behavior began with these instructions (again, note that the instructions obscure the true nature of the experiment):

***One of my goals in this study is to see if some types of voters are better at logical deductive reasoning than others. To explore this issue, I am going to ask you to solve a simple puzzle.***

**Then this puzzle appeared on the screen:**

**Word Search Puzzle 1: Health and Health Care**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| S | U | R | G | E | O | N | E | W | B | U | L |
| V | U | A | L | V | C | L | P | S | J | O | X |
| L | A | T | I | P | S | O | H | U | R | E | E |
| R | O | T | C | O | D | I | X | Z | O | U | R |
| P | H | Y | S | I | C | I | A | N | Q | Y | N |

After this puzzle, this survey question appeared:

*Please indicate which of the following terms you can find in the puzzle above. If after a minute or so you cannot find any of these terms, you can move on to the next question.*

1. ***Doctor***
2. ***Hospital***
3. ***Physician***
4. ***Surgeon***
5. ***Nurse***

**After this question, these words appeared:**

***I have one more puzzle for you.***

Then this puzzle came on the screen.

**Word Search Puzzle 2: Health Insurance Terms**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| P | H | Y | S | I | C | A | L | N | Y | M | O |
| C | S | C | A | D | R | P | L | A | N | I | W |
| U | T | E | Q | A | S | P | R | F | M | A | K |
| H | E | G | A | R | E | V | O | C | U | L | A |
| E | L | B | I | T | C | U | D | E | D | C | L |

Finally, this survey question appeared:

*Please indicate which of the following terms you can find in the puzzle above. If after a minute or so you cannot find any of these terms, you can move on to the next question.*

1. ***Claim***
2. ***Physical***
3. ***Coverage***
4. ***Plan***
5. ***Deductible***

**I included this third and final experimental treatment group to test the notion that the mechanism underlying agenda-setting is *accessibility*. The accessibility model of information processing (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007) holds that at any given time, a person is only able to retrieve a small bit of relevant information from her memory when she is asked to come to some conclusion about something or someone. Some considerations or pieces of information, the theory goes, are more easily retrieved from the memory than others—that is, they are more accessible. Accessibility, according to Kim et al. (2002: 9), “is a function of ‘how much’ or ‘how recently’ a person has been exposed to certain issues.” Agenda-setting works, the theory goes, by bringing certain issues to the “top of the head” and making them more “cognitively available.” If I uncover agenda-setting effects and they are due to accessibility, then all three experimental treatments will show significant agenda-setting effects compared to the control condition. Moreover, the effects will be of equal or near-equal magnitude. Findings along these lines will undercut any notion that celebrities have any unique impact. The inclusion of the Puzzle Group in my study allows me to test two additional general hypotheses:**

**GH5.** *Individuals exposed to a specific political issue via a word puzzle are more likely to identify the issue as the most important issue facing the country than are individuals who are not exposed to the puzzle, and are equally likely to identify the issue as the most important issue facing the country as are individuals who are exposed to the issue via either a news story about the issue or a news story about that issue that features a popular celebrity.*

**GH6.** *Individuals exposed to a specific political issue via a word puzzle will rate the issue as more important than will individuals who are not exposed to the puzzle, and will exhibit issue importance ratings similar to individuals who are exposed to the issue via a news story about the issue and a news story about the issue that features a celebrity.*

*Validity*

To ensure a high level of internal validity, I randomly assigned respondents to the four experimental groups. In addition, I did not reveal the true nature of the experiment to participants during the study (I did afterward, however). As is common practice, I also assured all respondents that their participation was voluntary (respondents could receive extra course credit by doing something else if they did not wish to take the survey), and I gave the respondents the opportunity to leave the study any time they wished once they started.

External validity was more problematic. On the one hand, the news story I used was completely fabricated (though hardly unrealistic). This raises some questions about external validity. On the other hand, the news story I used in the Celebrity Group survey included words that were actually spoken by Peyton Manning (in a keynote speech he gave at a meeting of the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society in 2016; see Packer, 2016). To further safeguard external validity, I limited my sample to potential or actual voters. One potential threat to external validity here is the well-known “college sophomore problem”—that is, the threat posed by using a sample of college students. There are several reasons to believe that this problem is not particularly serious. First, several studies including Cooper, McCord, and Socha (2011) show that college student samples are similar enough to those from the general population on attitudinal indicators as to allow reasonable inferences. In addition, in comprehension and cognitive skills, college students are similar to non-students (Kam, Wilking, and Zechmeister, 2007). Second, research suggests that college students respond to political stimuli much as non-students do. In one recent study, Bol, St-Vincent, and Lavoie (2016) conduct four voting laboratory experiments in which they compare student samples to non-student samples, and conclude that, “The difference in behavioral patterns between student-dominated and heterogeneous samples appears to be minimal” (Bol et al., 2016, p. 284). In short, I do not believe that my sample poses a serious threat to external validity.

*Dependent Variables*

For each experimental group, the survey questionnaire concluded with a set of questions designed to measure individual-level issue salience. Specifically, after a section break, these words appeared: “**One of my goals in this study is to see if different kinds of voters have different issue priorities. In this penultimate section, I will ask you a few questions about which policy issues you think are most important.” Next, these two questions appeared:**

*(1) What do you think are the most important problems facing this country? (Please list up to three problems).*

*(2) Of those you’ve mentioned, what would you say is the single most important problem the country faces?*

I used answers to these questions to create one of the dependent variables—*HCMI* (for “health care most important”). A respondent’s value on *HCMI* is 1 if she/he answered the second question “health care,” and 0 otherwise.[[1]](#endnote-2) I also created a dependent variable called *HCI* (for “health care importance”). This variable is based on responses to this question:

*How important do you consider each of the following policy issues to be? Immigration, Jobs/Unemployment, Health Care, the Economy, Terrorism, the Federal Deficit/Debt, Guns/Gun Control, Poverty, The Environment.*

For each issue, respondents could choose one of the following answers: “Not at all important,” “Not very important,” “Somewhat important,” “Very important.” Responses were coded as follows: “Not at all important” = 0, “Not very important” = 1, “Somewhat important” = 2, and “Very important” =3. The mean on *HCI* was 2.65, the median was 3, and the standard deviation was .59.

**Findings and Results: Celebrities Matter**

For ease of testing and understanding, I will now turn the general hypotheses into specific, testable hypotheses. Here they are:

H1. *Respondents in the Media Group are more likely to identify health care as the most important issue facing the country than are respondents in the Control Group.*

H2. *Respondents in the Celebrity Group are more likely to identify health care as the most important issue facing the country than are respondents in either the Control Group or the Media Treatment Group.*

H3. *Respondents in the Media Group will rate the issue of health care as more important than will respondents in the Control Group.*

H4. *Respondents in the Celebrity Group will rate the issue of health care as more important than will respondents in either the Control Group or the Media Group.*

**H5.** *Respondents in the Puzzle Group are more likely to identify health care as the most important issue facing the country than are respondents in the Control Group, and are equally likely to identify health care as the most important issue facing the country as are individuals in the Media Group and the Celebrity Group.*

**H6.** *Respondents in the Puzzle Group will rate the issue of health care as more important than will individuals in the Control Group, and will exhibit issue importance ratings similar to those reported by respondents in the Media Group and the Celebrity Group.*

*The Effects of Media and Celebrities*

I will turn first to H1, H2, and H5, all of which hypothesize about respondents mentioning health care as the most important issue facing the country. Table 1 contains a list of the five issues deemed most important by respondents, by experimental group.

[Table 1 about here]

The results are suggestive, and provide tentative support for H1, as more respondents in the Media Group than in the Control Group tab health care as the most important issue facing the country. They also provide tentative support for H2, as more respondents in the Celebrity Group tab health care as the most important issue facing the country than in either the Control Group or the Media Group. There is no evidence to support H5, as fewer respondents in the Puzzle Group than in any other group mention health care as the most important issue facing the country.

Are the findings in Table 1 statistically significant? Normally, to address this question I would construct a cross-tabulation table. But there were so many issues mentioned by respondents (58 in all) that this was untenable. So, for a more rigorous test of H1, H2, and H5, I cast a logistic regression model in which the dependent variable was *HCMI* (which I describe above). Again, a value of 1 on *HCMI* means that the respondent tabbed health care as the most important issue facing the country. My model includes three independent variables: *Celebrity Treatment* (0 = not in the Celebrity Treatment Group, 1 = in the Celebrity Treatment Group), *Media Treatment* (0 = not in the Media Treatment Group, 1 = in the Media Treatment Group), and *Puzzle Treatment* (0 = not in the Puzzle Treatment Group, 1 = in the Puzzle Treatment Group).

The results of this analysis are found in Table 2 (Model 1). In short, they provide very strong support for H2, but no support for either H1 or H5. The coefficient on *Celebrity Treatment* is positive and statistically significant (p=.046, two-tailed test), which means that respondents who received the celebrity treatment were more likely to tab health care as the most important issue facing the country than were respondents in the control group. The coefficients and significance tests on the other variables indicate that respondents who received the celebrity treatment were also more likely to tab health care as the most important issue facing the country than were respondents in the other two groups. How large is the celebrity treatment effect displayed in Model 1, Table 2? The Stata add-on *Clarify* helps us answer this question (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King, 2003). The probability of a respondent who scores 0 on *Celebrity treatment* (that is, who did not receive the Celebrity treatment) tabbing health care as the most important issue facing the country is .098. This probability rises to .17 for a respondent who did receive the celebrity treatment. Thus, the chances of citing health care as the most important issue facing the country are almost twice as high for respondents who received the celebrity treatment than it is for respondents who did not. The coefficient on neither *Media treatment* nor *Puzzle treatment* reach statistical significance, so we must reject H1 and H5.

[Table 2 about here]

Normally, controlling for other variables is not strictly required in an experimental study where respondents are randomly assigned to conditions. But here, I followed up on my initial results to further test my hypotheses. Table 3 shows the characteristics of my respondents by experimental group. Unfortunately, there are a few differences of note. Specifically, significance tests show that the mean age differs significantly across groups, as does mean income, and the percentage of respondents who follow politics closely. Thusly, I decided to cast another logistic regression model, this time including a few control variables. Specifically, Model 2 in Table 2 contains the variable *Age* (continuous, mean=21.09, s.d. = 3.74),[[2]](#endnote-3) *Follow* (0 = does not report following politics “most of the time,” 1 = reports following politics “most of the time”),[[3]](#endnote-4) and *Income* (0 = $0-$14,999, 1 = $15,000-$34,999, 2 = $35,000-$64,999, 3 = $65,000-$124,999, 4 = $125,000 and above).[[4]](#endnote-5) I also included *Democrat* (0 = not a Democrat, 1 = Democrat),[[5]](#endnote-6) and *Liberal* (0 = no liberal ideology, 1 = liberal ideology),[[6]](#endnote-7) because there is good reason to believe that liberals and Democrats are more likely to prioritize health care as a policy issues than are other voters, especially in the midst of ongoing battles over the Affordable Care Act.

The results of this second model mirror those of the first. Most important, again the coefficient on *Celebrity treatment* is in the expected direction, and is statistically significant (p=.029, one-tailed test). The size of the coefficient is similar, as is the level of significance. In short, there is good evidence here that exposure to the celebrity treatment increased the chances that a respondent chose health care as the most important issue facing the country. Once again, exposure to either the media treatment or the puzzle treatment seemed to have no impact on respondents; neither the coefficient on *Media treatment* nor that on *Puzzle treatment* reaches statistical significance. The control variables have little impact on the results, though as expected, being a Democrat does increase the chances that a respondent views health care as the most important issue facing the country.

I turn now to H3, H4, and H6. To test these hypotheses, first I conducted a difference of means test on *HCI*. The means on *HCI* across the four experimental groups are found in Figure 1. A Figure 1 shows, the mean on *HCI* is higher among respondents who received the celebrity treatment than it is among respondents in the other three groups. A one-way ANOVA followed by a post-hoc Bonferroni test indicates that there was a significant difference on *HCI* between the Celebrity Group and the Control Group (p=.042). However, there did not appear to be a difference between the Celebrity Group and the other two groups.

[Figure 1 about here]

To further test H3, H4, and H6, I cast two OLS regression models with *HCI* as the dependent variable. First, I included only *Celebrity treatment*, *Media treatment*, and *Puzzle treatment* in the model. These results are in Table 4, Model 1. Most important, the results support H3. The positive and statistically significant coefficient on *Celebrity treatment* (p=.042, two-tailed test) indicates that exposure to the celebrity treatment increases a respondent’s value on *HCI* relative to the control group. This finding coupled with those from subsequent analyses (not shown here) support H4—on average, respondents who received the celebrity treatment rated health care as significantly (p<.05, one-tailed test) more important than did respondents who received either the puzzle treatment or the media treatment. In Model 2, Table 4, I include the same control variables I included in Model 2, Table 2. Once again, the results support H3. Most important, the coefficient on *Celebrity treatment* is positive and statistically significant (p=.033, one-tailed test). Model 2 provides no support for H4, as the coefficient on *Media treatment* is not statistically significant. There is no support here for H6, as the coefficient on *Puzzle treatment* is not significant in either model. Exposure to either the media treatment or the puzzle treatment appears to have no impact on respondents. How large is the celebrity treatment effect displayed in Table 4? Again, *Clarify* helps answer this question. Using the results of Model 1, Table 4, I calculated the expected value on *HCI* for two groups of respondents—those in the *Celebrity Group*, and those not in this group. The expected value on *HCI* for respondents in the former group is 2.53, while the expected value on *HCI* for respondents in the latter group is 2.66. This is an increase of just over five percent.

[Table 4 about here]

**Conclusion: Celebrities Matter in Agenda-Setting**

I began this paper with the following question: Can celebrities increase the chances that an issue on the media agenda makes it onto the public agenda? My data suggest that the answer is yes. Based on previous research on “spotlighting” and celebrity endorsement effects, I hypothesized here that celebrities can affect the public agenda-setting process. My results indicate that they can indeed do this. In a post-test only, control group survey experiment, I showed that respondents exposed to a news story about health care that featured words on the subject from retired NFL superstar Peyton Manning were more likely to view health care as the most important issue facing the country than were respondents who did not read the story. Respondents exposed to either two puzzles featuring health care related terms or to a news story on health care that did not feature the words of Peyton Manning, were not more likely as a result of exposure to view health care as the most important issue facing the country. In follow-up analyses, I also found that on average, respondents exposed to a news story about health care that featured words on the subject from retired NFL superstar Peyton Manning viewed the issue of health care as more important than respondents who were either not exposed to the story or exposed to the story without the words of Peyton Manning, or who were exposed to a health care related puzzle did.

My results show that exposure to an issue within a news story that features a celebrity affects responses to widely-used questions designed to measure traditional (as opposed to “attribute”) agenda-setting effects. The predominant explanation for media agenda-setting effects centers on *construct accessibility*. But my results cast doubt upon this explanation. If accessibility is a sufficient condition for agenda-setting, then all three of my experimental conditions, all of which increased the accessibility of the health care issue, should have shown agenda-setting effects compared to the control condition. But this did not happen. Accessibility clearly is not enough; being exposed to a story about health care and a puzzle containing health care-related terms did not increase the salience of health care as an issue among my respondents. My results indicate that accessibility is not sufficient to create exposure effects, and that the specific *content* of news stories and other information matter (Price and Tewksbury, 1997). Miller (2007) notes that whether or not an issue mentioned in the media affects a person’s opinion about how important the issue is may be affected by relevance. Some issues, she says, “no matter how accessible they are, will not affect importance judgments” (692). Miller continues: “[P]eople will decide whether to use information gleaned from the media to make political judgments only when the information is determined to be relevant” (692). All this, of course, begs the question: What things do people consider when deciding what is and is not relevant to them? Previous studies cite affect (i.e., what emotions a news story arouses; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen, 2000), and personal experience (i.e., the extent to which an issue in a news story touches on an issue that is personally important; Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent, 1995) as important factors that affect relevance judgments. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) identify *inference* as an important mediator of agenda-setting effects. Here, the idea is that when the news media report on an issue, consumers think to themselves, “this must be an important issue to elites, or the media would not be reporting on it.” This triggers a relevance judgment, which then leads to an importance judgment. This may well be what is going on here. In line with meaning transfer theory, the presence of a celebrity in a news story may lead consumers of the story to think, “If Celebrity X thinks the issue is important, it must actually be important.” Increased accessibility may well be necessary for agenda-setting, but the trigger that sets the process in motion may be the inference cue, which in this case, is the public activity of a celebrity.

Of course, my findings are far from the final word on this subject. First, my one-shot experiment has the weakness shared by all such experiments—it does not and cannot demonstrate that the effects I uncover are lasting. Second, my experiment says nothing about the important role of *need for orientation* in the agenda-setting process. I do not consider the effects of the characteristics of respondents at all here. Third, I do not consider other individual characteristics that might mediate agenda-setting, including issue sensitivity (Rossler, 1997), level of media consumption (Demers et al., 1989; Erbring et al, 1980), and level of interpersonal communication (Rossler, 1997; Wanta and Wu, 1992). Fourth, the effects I uncover are far from huge. Exposure to my celebrity treatment did increase the salience of the health care issue, but not by a great deal it seems.

Still, my results are suggestive. As Iyengar and Kinder (1987) noted a long time ago, agenda-setting effects are usually strongest on issues with which people have little direct experience. Presumably, health care is *not* an issue on which most people have little or no experience. Granted, my sample respondents are young. But even young people encounter the health care system at some point in their lives. Thus, using health care as a test issue here is probably a conservative choice. If celebrity agenda-setting effects show up on the issue of health care, they probably will show up on other issues as well. In the end, perhaps more than anything else, my results suggest that celebrities are much more important players in the political and policy-making process than many scholars would have us believe.

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**Table 1. Single Most Important Problem, by Experimental Group**

*Issue* Control Media Celebrity Puzzle

Group Group Group Group

(N=138) (N=134) (N=158) (N=132)

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

1. Guns/gun control 17 (12.3%) 19 (14.2%) 12 (7.6%) 14 (10.6%)

2. Health care 10 (7.2%) 15 (11.2%) 26 (16.5%) 3 (2.3%)

3. Political polarization 19 (7.2%) 10 (7.5%) 17 (10.8%) 14 (10.6%)

4. Immigration 11 (8%) 10 (7.5%) 11 (7%) 9 (6.8%)

5. Civil rights 7 (5.1%) 14 (10.4%) 7 (4.4%) 8 (6.1%)

*Source*: Author’s data. *Notes*: (1) The column number indicates the number of respondents in the column category who cited the row issue as the most important issue facing the country. The column number in parentheses indicates the percentage of respondents in the column category who cited the row issue as the most important issue facing the country. (2) This table contains statistics only on the five issues mentioned most by respondents.

**Table 2. Logistic Regression Results: “Health Care is the Most Important Problem Facing Our Country”**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Independent variable*** | **Model 1** | | | **Model 2** | | | |
|  | *b* | *s.e.* | *Sig.* |  | *b* | *s.e* | *Sig.* |
| Constant | -2.35 | .331 | .000 |  | -3.87 | 1.00 | .021 |
| Celebrity treatment | .789 | .395 | .046 |  | .844 | .444 | .057 |
| Media treatment | .359 | .430 | .404 |  | .509 | .469 | .278 |
| Puzzle treatment | -1.21 | .673 | .071 |  | -.980 | .698 | .160 |
| Age | --- | --- | --- |  | .037 | .030 | .220 |
| Democrat | --- |  |  |  | .803 | .459 | .080 |
| Follow | --- | --- | --- |  | .286 | .321 | .373 |
| Income | --- | --- | --- |  | .005 | .143 | .970 |
| Liberal | --- | --- | --- |  | .126 | .464 | .786 |
| Nagelkerke R2 | .066 | | |  | .111 | | |
| -2 Log likelihood | 325.495 | | |  | 291.758 | | |
| N | 499 | | |  | 468 | | |

*Source*: Author’s data. *Note*: Dependent variable is *HCMI* (1 = “health care is the most important policy issue facing the country”).

**Table 3. Characteristics of Respondents by Experimental Group**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Characteristic*** | **Control Group** | **Celebrity Treatment Group** | **Media Treatment Group** | **Puzzle Treatment Group** |
| Mean age | 20.39 | 22.29 | 21.9 | 19.38 |
| % Democrat | 36.1 | 33.8 | 37.7 | 36.9 |
| % Follow politics “Most of the time” | 43.2 | 58.6 | 40.9 | 44 |
| Mean on *Income scale* | 4.03 | 3.97 | 3.84 | 3.99 |
| % Liberal | 27.9 | 31.6 | 27.1 | 23.3 |
| % Non-white | 18.2 | 19.1 | 16.7 | 16.8 |
| Mean on *Political knowledge* | 4.30 | 4.82 | 4.58 | 4.58 |
| % from state of Tennessee | 65.2 | 80.4 | 76.1 | 66.7 |
| % Women | 55.1 | 60.1 | 62.7 | 53 |

*Source*: Author’s data. *Notes*: (1) Control Group N=120, Celebrity Treatment Group N=153, Media Treatment Group N=130, Puzzle Treatment Group N=115. (2) Ns may vary across survey items.

*Source*: Author’s data. *Notes*: (1) Control Group N=120, Celebrity Group N=153, Media Group N=130, Puzzle Group N=115.

**Table 4. OLS Regression Results: “How Important is Health Care as a Policy Issue?”**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Independent variable*** | **Model 1** | | | **Model 2** | | | |
|  | *b* | *s.e.* | *Sig.* |  | *b* | *s.e* | *Sig.* |
| Constant | 2.58 | .055 | .000 |  | 2.52 | .194 | .000 |
| Celebrity treatment | .149 | .073 | .042 |  | .136 | .074 | .066 |
| Media treatment | .063 | .076 | .407 |  | .045 | .076 | .551 |
| Puzzle treatment | .034 | .078 | .663 |  | .059 | .079 | .453 |
| Age | --- | --- | --- |  | .006 | .007 | .372 |
| Democrat PID | --- | --- | --- |  | .197 | .078 | .012 |
| Follow politics most of the time | --- | --- | --- |  | .030 | .053 | .574 |
| Income | --- | --- | --- |  | -.060 | .024 | .015 |
| Liberal ideology | ---- | --- | --- |  | .172 | .076 | .024 |
| R2 | .01 | | |  | .113 | | |
| N | 518 | | |  | 484 | | |

*Source*: Author’s data. *Note*: Dependent variable is *HCI* (described in text).

1. **Notes**

   I coded this variable very conservatively. Only the following responses to the second question were coded “1”: “health care,” “health care reform,” “lack of health care,” “providing health care,” “affordable health care,” “health care costs.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. To create this variable, I relied upon answers to this question: “What is the year of your birth?” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. To create this variable, I relied upon answers to this question: “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. To create this variable, I relied upon answers to this question: “Below is a list of income categories. Please choose the income group that includes the yearly income of your parent(s) or guardian(s) (those with whom you live[d]). This figure should include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends, interest, and all other income. If you are not certain, please make your best guess.” The responses were: “None-$14,999,” $15,000-$34,999,” “35,000-$64,999,” “$65,000-$124,999,” and “$125,000 and above.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. To create this variable, I relied upon answers to this question: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” Respondents who answered a follow-up question with “strong Democrat,” “not so strong Democrat,” or “closer” to the Democratic Party (if they chose “Independent”) were coded 1 on this variable. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. To create this variable, I relied upon answers to this question: “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this? If you haven’t thought much about this, please leave this question blank.” Possible responses were “extremely liberal,” “liberal,” “slightly liberal,” “moderate/middle of the road,” “slightly conservative,” “conservative,” and “extremely conservative.” Responses who chose any of the first three responses were coded 1 on this variable. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)