Chapter 14
The Role of the Mass Media on Shaping the Public Opinion about the Enlargement of the European Union

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ABSTRACT
The pictures in people’s minds about the outside world are significantly influenced by the mass media, both what those pictures are about and what those pictures are. The agenda-setting effects of the mass media also have significant implications beyond the pictures created in people’s heads. The media are the principal means by which a majority of people receive information about policy issues in general, and the EU in particular. The role of information provided by the mass media is substantially important to public opinion formation and change, especially on critical issues such as European Union enlargement. This chapter investigates why and how mass media affects the public opinion about the enlargement of the European Union.

INTRODUCTION
The power of the news media to set a nation’s agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence. Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news. Newspapers provide a host of cues about the salience of the topics in the daily news – lead story on page one, other front page display, large headlines, etc. Television news also offers numerous cues about salience – the opening story on the newscast, length of time devoted to the story, etc. These cues repeated day after day effectively communicate the importance of each topic. In other words, the news media can set the agenda for the public’s attention to that small group of issues around which public opinion forms.

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The principal outlines of this influence were sketched by Walter Lippmann in his 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, which began with a chapter titled “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads.” As he noted, the news media are a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs, a world that for most citizens is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.” What we know about the world is largely based on what the media decide to tell us. More specifically, the result of this mediated view of the world is that the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public. Elements prominent on the media agenda become prominent in the public mind.

A large number of authors such as Meyer (1999) and Miles (2004) deals with explanations of public support for European integration, and also the importance of public support for integration is increasingly recognized. Interestingly, even though several authors have stressed that information, communication and public debate could play a key role in legitimating and shaping public opinion about European integration (Hewstone, 1986; Meyer, 1999; Risse-Kappen et al., 1999), only few studies have in fact made a link between the media and public opinion. The limited body of research that deals with news coverage of European integration investigates European Parliament elections (Blumler, 1983; Kevin, 2001) or referendums (Siune et al., 1995) and makes little connection with public opinion.

In communication science, studies have forcefully demonstrated how the effects of different news media outlets are conditioned by their actual contents (Miller et al., 1979; Moy & Pfau, 2000). However, previous research has not convincingly linked public support for European enlargement to actual media content. This study hypothesizes, firstly, that the media effects the public opinion about European enlargement; and, secondly, that the effects of media exposure on support for European enlargement are likely to be conditioned by the specific media content. This study first reviews traditional explanations of public support for European enlargement and then elaborates on why the media might matter for public opinion about integration and why public opinion in turn matters for European enlargement.

**BACKGROUND**

Public opinion can be defined as the complex of preferences expressed by a significant number of people on an issue of general importance (Hennessy, 1981). The role of the mass media on shaping the public opinion is called ‘the agenda setting role of the mass media’ shortly. Agenda-setting theory points out that elements that are prominent on the press agenda, both “objects” and their “attributes”, frequently become prominent on the public agenda. This idea of an agenda-setting role of the press has its origins in Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, which begins with a chapter titled “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads.” He argues that the press is a major contributor to those pictures in our heads (Lippmann, 1922). His thesis that the news media, our windows to the vast world beyond direct experience, determine our cognitive maps of the world. Public opinion, argued Lippmann, responds not to the environment, but to the pseudo-environment constructed by the news media.

The term “agenda setting” is first mentioned by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw to describe the correspondence between the ranking of major issues on the press and public agendas in their pioneering work (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Since the 1970s, the agenda-setting influence of the press has been widely discussed.

Traditional (or first-level) agenda-setting theory emphasizes how mass media, elites, and the public interact and influence one another to affect issue salience (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Rogers, Dearing & Bregman, 1993; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). Traditional agenda-setting effects point to the visibility and perceived impor-
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