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# Listeners' Preference and the Media's Thematic Focus on Public Issues: An Exploration of Agenda-Setting as a Two-Way Process

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## Abstract

The mass media have the power to set public agenda. Public issues that receive emphasis by the media are the issues that are likely to receive prominence in public perception. However, it has been argued that there is a link between what the public expect to constitute news and what the media report as news to set public agenda. This assertion requires further empirical proof, especially in the Nigerian media context. Focusing on radio listeners and the news review programmes of selected radio stations in Oyo State, Nigeria, this study sought to establish the validity or otherwise of the forgoing contention. Premised on agenda-setting and newsworthiness theories, the study combined In-depth Interviews, Content Analysis and Survey as research methods. Findings show that a predominant segment (89.0%) of radio listeners perceived the intensity of media coverage of certain public issues as an indicator that such public issues must be significant: Issues such as politics (33.5%), sports (29.5%), and crises (11.3%) that audience preferred as news were the same issues that the radio stations accorded corresponding degree of emphasis in the news reviews—politics (35.4%), sports (17.0%), and crises (11.9%). Editorial personnel of the radio stations also affirmed that they gave priority to issues that would naturally interest the audience. The basic implication of these findings is that as the media set agenda for the public, the public also set agenda for the media.

**Key Words:** Agenda-Setting, News Reviews, Newsworthiness, Media Context, Radio.

## Introduction

Mass media play important roles in determining what social issues receive the most attention of the mass audience, and which issues will be ignored or given little attention. To a great extent, news media control the social reality the citizens see, when they see it, and how they see such a social reality. As Dimaggio (2009) explains, issues that the media choose to report and to ignore constitute a major factor in the formation of public opinions and conversations.

The mass media constitute a significant institution of the world's democracies and social order. They represent an important part of the dominant means of ideological

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construction because what they produce is considered the representation and images of the social world. As events and issues occur daily, the mass media try to bring them to the consciousness of the public. They describe, explain and interpret events, and create the platforms for perception of how the world is, and why it operates as it is reported and described to operate (Norris, 1995; Vreese, 2005; Watson, 2007). The mass media serve as the 'eyes' and 'ears' of the citizens by helping them to keep surveillance on their environments. They gather and report events in the immediate and remote environments. The citizens see the media as a storehouse of information. For this reason, millions of people turn eagerly to the news media—the modern town crier and constructor of social reality (Eun-Ho, Kyung-Woo, & Afif, 2007)—to satisfy their appetite for up-to-date information about the events that have significant impact on their lives and conducts.

Through their agenda-setting role (Sambe, 2005; McQuail, 2007; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Watson, 2003), news selection and production functions, the mass media help to shape public opinion and dictate public action (Baran, 2002; Soola, 2007). However, not all the happenings can be reported by the mass media. Some issues are reported, while some—or even many—are discarded (Aliagan, 2006; Paul & Elder, 2006). Two main reasons account for this: First, most of these events potentially possess almost comparable status of importance. Second, the criteria for determining what is important are numerous, or quite often, intrinsically subjective and competing. Mass media actors usually consider certain events to be newsworthy. Such events are believed to possess significant implications for the target audience, the larger society, the organisational policies, the proprietors' interest, the advertisers' demand, and or the journalists' professional orientations (Ojebuyi, 2012).

Given the new trend of growing competition occasioned by liberalisation of the media and communications industries as asserted by Olorunnisola (2009), and the emergence of new media, the media audience now have greater freedom and a wide range of alternatives from where to get information about events that affect their lives (Morrisett, 2004; Thorburn & Jenkins, 2003). This trend has compelled media organisations to be more sensitive to their roles to transmit or publish what the audience really want and what they can get from other competing media (Lyons, 2002).

The foregoing phenomenon highlights the growing influence of the audience to exercise some measure of control on what the media choose to report or ignore. In other words, as the media set public agendas, audience too set media agendas. As Watson (2003) argues, there is always a link between media agendas and public perception of what constitute news. "If the public look to the media for news, what the media decides is news is what the public recognise as news" (p. 128) The implication of Watson's position here is that agenda-setting is a two-way process: as the media set agendas for the public, the media pay attention to issues that the public prefer to see or hear and such issues are usually given prominence by the media.

In this study, we want to explore the validity or otherwise of the foregoing proposition. The primary focus of this study, therefore, is to investigate if there is a link between what the media set as public agendas and what issues the audience expect and prefer to get from the media. Our focus in this paper is on the rising trend in Nigeria where the broadcast media—radio stations in particular—monitor, screen, select and represent the primary contents of some media. In the context of this study, this practice is termed *secondary gatekeeping*—that is, secondary or second-level selection of information—Riedel (2008). In this case, the print media—newspapers especially—serve as the primary gatekeepers because they gather, select, process, and report facts which they consider significant from daily events. In the process, they perform their agenda-setting function by selecting which public affairs stories will be reported, and giving special prominence to some stories at the expense of others (Ojebuyi, 2012). Thus, the news media suggest which people, issues, and events are especially deserving of

public attention, and help to shape public attitudes and opinion (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). The radio stations, in addition to their primary gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions, monitor, select and broadcast some portions of the contents of the print media. The dearth of empirical studies on secondary media gatekeeping in the Nigerian broadcast industry especially in relation to the agenda-setting function of the media—to the best of this researcher's knowledge—makes this study worthwhile. The fundamental question that presents the gap that this study intends to fill is: what is the relationship between what the audience perceive and prefer as news on the one hand and what the media report as news in setting public agendas on the other hand?

### Secondary Gatekeeping by Radio Stations: Examples from Oyo State, Nigeria

Practice of Secondary level selection of news (secondary gatekeeping) in Nigeria started in some broadcast stations in the South-western part of Nigeria but it later spread to other parts of the country. At this point the practice caught public attention when newspapers proprietors instituted a legal action against the radio stations on the allegation that the practice was affecting the sales of newspapers negatively ("Newspaper Chiefs Storm the Court", 2003). The major radio stations in Oyo State (Premier FM, Radio O-Y-O, also known as Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State Radio [BCOS], Splash FM, and Amuludun FM) provide typical examples of secondary gatekeeping. Before the litigation in December 2008 against the broadcast stations by the newspapers owners, the radio stations directly reviewed contents of newspapers and news magazines, and broadcast them to the mass audience. These secondary gatekeepers (the radio stations), usually adopted different methods to broadcast the contents of other media (newspapers) they monitor. Some broadcast stations presented *verbatim*, almost the entire contents of the news items they selected from newspapers or news magazines, while some stations paraphrased the news items, or read only the headlines and the leads of the news stories. In some instances, most of the radio stations translated the news stories from the English Language to the indigenous languages of the local audience (the Yoruba Language). The radio stations coined for the programme, different titles such as "Headliner", "From the Dailies", "Press Review", and "Koko inu Iwe Irohin" ("Newspaper Headlines"). In addition, the radio stations sometimes acknowledged their sources by directly mentioning the names of the newspapers being reviewed and referring their audience to the pages or sections where the reviewed stories could be found in the newspapers. The leading Nigerian newspapers whose contents were reviewed by these broadcast stations, were *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, *New Age*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *Daily Independent*, *The Punch*, *Oke-Ogun News*, *The Sun*, *This Day*, and *Vanguard*, among others.

Consequent upon the litigation by the newspapers owners, in December 2008, the Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria (BON) and the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) met and BON announced a ban on the review of newspapers by radio and television stations in Nigeria. This however, seemed to have little effect as the trend still continues, albeit in a more indirect style. The radio stations—especially those in Oyo State—now adopt a new style of review whereby the presenters neither acknowledge the names of the selected newspapers that originally published the stories they review nor make reference to the audience to the pages or sections of the newspapers where the reviewed stories could be found. Programme titles such as "Headliner", "From the Dailies", "Press Review", and "Koko inu Iwe Irohin", no longer exist. What the radio stations in Oyo State now use instead are elusive names like "Day-Break Gisi", "Top Stories", *Gbe e Si Mi L'eti*, "Review", "Have You Heard?", *Eti Oba Nile*, *Tifun-Tedo*, "News Update", and "Inside-out". The stations, in a more blurry style, obliterate every trace of the sources of the news items they review. Most times, they embellish the reviews with locally sourced stories, and attribute substantial segments of the entire reviews to their local reporters whom they refer to as *stringers*—local

informants—(Ojebuyi, 2012). Perhaps to play safe or to give some legitimacy to their secondary content matters, some of the radio stations now adopt a new style: Before rounding off the review, they now spend about two to three minutes to read some select news headlines from the newspapers. At this point, they directly acknowledge the newspapers from where they select the news headlines.

### **The News Coverage Roles of Radio**

Radio, no doubt, has the unparalleled capacity to reach the mass audience at a relatively cheaper cost and within a short time. It is not hindered by the factor of illiteracy, as the case with other mass media, especially the print and the new media (mobile phone and the Internet). Radio has the power of spontaneity and it combines with this, other attributes of the mass media in general as captured in the words of Emery, Ault, and Agee cited in Ojebode (2002, p. 57) that the mass media illuminate the societal fabric of the nation; facilitate the development of economic fabric; protect and improve democracy; and help shape public opinion.

Since Marconi's time till today, radio has received remarkable improvements and has been adopted as an effective mass communication medium spreading fast across the continents. It has transformed from an experimenter's weird tin box in a lonesome enclave to "the marvel of the whole world and to the ubiquitous companion of man" (Ojebode, 2003, p. 87). From being the rescue device in the *Titanic* saga of 1912, and the military/propagandist instrument during the World War I, radio has burst on the scene and become a global craze because of its inherent ability to catalyse national development.

Radio, like other mass media, performs the traditional roles of dissemination of news, entertainment, information and other development messages (Mwakawogo, 2006). Having realised the lofty attributes of radio, governments, individuals and development agencies have fallen in love with the medium as a potent tool for educating and/ or informing the public as well as achieving development goals.

In terms of speed and flexibility in news coverage, radio is the fastest medium. No other news media can compete with radio when it comes to covering events of tremendous national or global significance that must be disseminated instantly to a large, scattered, heterogeneous audience (Sambe, 2005) and cause them to act spontaneously. For instance, the power of radio to report on the spurs of events and produce instant effects was demonstrated on Thursday November 27, 2008, when a group of suspected armed robbers attacked some commercial banks around Idi-Ape; Iwo-Road; and Awolowo, Bodija, all in Ibadan, Capital of Oyo State, Nigeria. Spontaneously, *Splash FM* radio station in Mokola, Ibadan, alerted the public and the Oyo State police Command. The Police instantly mobilised its men and countered the suspected armed robbers. Just three days later (Saturday November 29, 2008), *Premier FM* radio station in Dugbe, Ibadan, successfully foiled further armed robbery attack in Mokola and Gbagi areas of the city by promptly alerting the Police and warning the public to stay off those areas. The television stations in the capital city relayed the stories moments later, while local and national newspapers could not report the incidents until the following days. Probably, majority of the mass public got the details of the incidents during news review programmes by radio stations (Ojebuyi, 2012).

On the 9th of April, 2011, when the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), halted and announced the postponement of the National Assembly elections, which was already underway, most of the electorate relied on the radio as a reliable and rapid source to ascertain the authenticity of the news. Even when the electorate first received the breaking news from friends through mobile communication (GSM), they still remained sceptical until the local radio stations relayed the information. *Splash FM*, Ibadan, the only radio station (private) that was not totally affected by the national strike called by

the nation's labour unions to reject the removal of fuel subsidy by Federal Government, really connected the people in the state capital and beyond. Throughout the period (Monday 9th to Monday 16th January, 2012) that the strike and the nationwide protests lasted, the station continued to give situation reports of the events receiving updates and distress calls from the citizens and helping them to inform the relevant security agents for rapid responses. Despite that there was no electricity in much of the city, the radio station continued to broadcast the minute-by-minute updates on the unprecedented mass protests that greeted the government's policy (Ojebuyi, 2012). In a developing country like Nigeria, where epileptic electricity hampers effective functioning of mass communication media and other social infrastructure, only radio can broadcast with such unusual, astonishing velocity, and substantial veracity, without cultural barriers. Radio performs this golden function without marginalising the grassroots (Haussen, 2005).

### Theoretical Framework

This study examined how well the radio stations in Oyo State, Nigeria (through secondary gatekeeping) set the agenda for the mass audience. It also examined how the audience influenced editorial decisions of the secondary gatekeepers in terms of the issues they select as part of their secondary content matters. The agenda-setting theory and the newsworthiness theories are, therefore, relevant to this study.

### Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory explains the mass media's power, through repeated coverage of an event, to raise the significance of such an event in the public's mind. That is, when the mass media give repeated attention to an issue, they cause such an issue to be elevated in significance to the public (Severin & Tankard, 2001). Agenda setting theory describes how information output is shaped in such a manner that certain issues are raised in importance to the public at the expense of some other events. According to agenda-setting theory (Cohen, 1963; Lippmann, 1922), as the mass media raise issues, they might not tell us what or how to think (for example, what position to take on a health, political, or an economic issue or what candidate to support in an election), but they tell us *what to think about* (for example, what issues are important or what candidates are viable); they do influence our becoming aware of the issues, and eventually forming an opinion on them. The media do this by assigning the issues a high degree of importance through repeated coverage and editorial emphasis (Kiousis & Wu, 2008; McLeod, Becker & Byrnes, 1974; McCombs, 2004; Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977). The agenda-setting theory extends the gatekeeping concept as it establishes a connection between news items that are allowed through the media gates to reach the audience, and the issues audience hold to be significant to their own lives (Lasorsa, 2008; Nesbitt-Larkinc, 2008; Sibii, 2006). In a more succinct fashion, Watson (2003) posits that "what is emphasised by the media is given emphasis in public perception; what is amplified by media is enlarged in public perception" (p. 128).

The first empirical study of the agenda setting hypothesis could be traced to the late 1960s and the early 1970s (1968-1972) when Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, after studying the U.S. presidential campaigns of 1968, found a high correlation between what the news media reported as issues during that year's U.S. presidential race and the set of issues of significance among undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where the study was really conducted. McCombs and Shaw, therefore, conceptualised the media coverage as the "media agenda" and the voters' concerns as the "public agenda." The two researchers consequently hypothesised that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign by influencing the salience of attitudes towards the political issues. They coined the term "agenda setting" to describe this hypothesis (McCombs, 2004; McCombs, 2005).

The promising results of the 1968 study inspired McCombs and Shaw to extend their study to all voters in the 1972 presidential election. They, in addition, tested the opposite hypothesis that *the public agenda set the mass media agenda, rather than the converse*. After they had tracked and juxtaposed the press and public agendas three times during the election campaign, their findings showed that changes in the mass media agenda at one time led to subsequent changes in the public agenda, but the changes in the public agenda did not alter or reflect subsequently in the mass media agenda. Their findings explicated the definition of agenda setting as a theoretical concept focusing on the cognitive (awareness) domain rather than the affective (feeling) domain. That is, the mass media have capability to affect cognitive change among the audience by making them aware of the issues raised by the media, but do not tell them how to think or feel about the issues (DeSanto, 2004; Entman, 2001; Kingdon, 2003; Lasorsa, 2008; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Watson, 2003). The agenda-setting theory explains how the media can help the audience to be conscious of the significant happenings, which may affect their dominant opinions and perception, or understanding of the social realities. The theory would guide this current study to make predictions as to what issues the radio audience would think or talk about after listening to news review programmes by the radio stations.

### **The Theory of Newsworthiness**

The theory of newsworthiness examines the characteristics of events and topics that are selected as news in terms of their news values (Elders, 2006; McGregor, 2010; Shoemaker, 2006; Zeh, 2008). The newsworthiness theory is anchored on the following tenets that: (a) news value determines the chances of an event to be selected as news by gatekeepers; (b) the higher the news value of an event or social reality, the higher is its probability of being considered for publication as news, whereby the newsworthiness of an event is determined by diverse news factors. That is, the newsworthiness factor explains why some events or issues of social reality are selected as news while others are neglected by gatekeepers; (c) journalists use professional norms called news values, such as proximity (topical, geographical and social), impact, magnitude, timeliness/freshness, oddity/bizarre, conflict, celebrity and human interest, to decide what is newsworthy (Lasorsa, 2008; *Media Awareness Network*, 2010); and (d) the concept of newsworthiness is not limited to which item is selected as news, it is also signified through the space allocated to the story, the position of the story, and the visual or vocal emphasis the story receives. That is, newsworthiness of an event selected for publication is usually noticed through the overall editorial significance or emphasis the story is accorded.

Charles Merz conducted the first empirical study of this concept. He identified four elements of news: conflict, personality, prominence, and suspense (Schwarz, 2009; Zeh, 2008). Journalists, and even the audience, use the criteria for selection and retention of media content. Perhaps, this phenomenon accounts for why different media organisations covering the same geographical and thematic terrain usually make similar news-selection decisions. The theory of newsworthiness would the researcher here to predict what issues would be accorded priority by the news editors.

### **The Study**

Two research questions were constructed to guide the study. The research questions are:

- (1) What factors determined the level of importance that the radio listeners attached to the issues reported by radio stations?
- (2) What is the relationship between radio listeners' preference for public issues and the thematic focus of the radio stations in their news reviews?

## Method

In order to investigate the relationship between how the radio stations in Oyo State set public agenda (through their news reviews) and how radio listeners' interest influences the structure of secondary content matters of the radio stations, the researcher combined qualitative and quantitative data from content analysis, survey and in-depth interviews as research designs. The radio stations studied—*Premier FM*; *Radio O-Y-O*, also known as *Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State Radio [BCOS]*; and *Splash FM*—were purposively selected because they provided typical examples of secondary gatekeeping (news reviews). They also represented the media ownership structure in the state—federal, state, and private ownership structures.

For the content analysis, the researcher used a simple random balloting (without replacement) technique to select the days of the news review broadcasts that were content analysed. The 2010 almanac was used as the sampling frame. The simple random sampling method was used because it allowed the researcher to achieve the principle of *Equal Probability of Selection Method (EPSEM)*, where bias and subjectivity were reasonably minimised (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011), and all members of the population had an equal chance of being chosen from the whole entity.

Through balloting, six (6) days in a month (excluding weekends) for each of the radio stations were randomly selected. The selection covered the eleven months (February—December, 2010) that constituted the study period. This made sixty-six (66) days for each of the three radio stations and a total of 240 working days in all. The recorded news reviews that fell on the randomly selected days were, therefore, content analysed for the study.

The Unit of Analysis was each item of secondary content matters in the whole reviews each day for each radio station. One broad category—*Themes*—was constructed. Themes, in this context, mean the focus or subject-matter of the news stories in the reviews. To meet the principles of *mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness*, the broad category of themes, which was our primary focus in this study, was further simplified and broken down to cover the following sub-categories of *politics, religion, crimes, crises, development-centred news, disaster, sports, and society*.

Two news editors/news producers from each of the radio stations were purposively selected and interviewed. These categories of personnel were selected for the in-depths interviews because they were believed to be actively involved in the editorial activities of the radio stations.

A 44-item questionnaire was used to collect data from 520 radio listeners selected across Oyo State through stratification, simple random, and convenience sampling techniques. A total of 574 copies of the questionnaire were distributed in the three senatorial districts—Oyo-North (Oke-Ogun/Ogbomosho); Oyo-Central (Oyo/Afijio/Akinyele); and Oyo-South (Ibadan/Ibarapa)—using ratio 39:33:27 respectively as the approximated percentages of the total number of local governments in the state. The ratio was considered necessary because of the varying sizes of the three senatorial districts in the state. Specifically, out of the 33 local governments in Oyo State, Oyo-North has 13 (39.4%), Oyo-Central has 11 (33.3%), while Oyo-South has 9 (27.3%) local governments respectively (<http://oyostate.gov.ng/media/oyo-state-profile>, May, 2010). The copies of the questionnaire were distributed as follows: Oyo-North with 13 (39.4%) Local Governments got 226 copies; Oyo-Central with 11 (33.3%) Local Governments got 191 copies; while Oyo-South with nine (27.3%) Local Governments received 157 copies. However, five hundred and twenty (520) copies were retrieved eventually and this made the sample size. This means that 90.6% of the copies distributed was retrieved while the attrition rate was just 9.4%. Out of these 520 respondents finally selected for this study, 203 respondents came from Oyo-North District; 176 respondents came from Oyo-Central District; and 141 respondents came from Oyo-South.



To test whether media agenda-setting as carried out by the selected radio stations was affected by radio listeners' preference for public issues, the researcher compared the data generated through content analysis with the data generated through survey (radio listeners' responses to the issues raised in the questionnaire). Qualitative data from the in-depth interviews were used to complement the findings from content analysis and survey.

## Findings

### *Issues that Radio Listeners Considered Significant*

To answer the research question properly, the researcher first examined how the audience respondents perceived the public issues discussed in the news reviews in terms of the level of importance they attached to specific categories of the news contents, or which issues they considered to be more significant than the others. This is presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Respondents' Rating of Public Issues**

S/N	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	No Response.	24	4.6
2	Issues that most news media do not report well.	36	6.9
3	Issues that people in the neighbourhood talk about.	104	20.0
4	Issues that are reported by newspapers.	65	12.0
5	Issues that are reported and given much emphasis by almost all radio stations in their news reviews.	291	56.0
	Total	520	100.0

Source: Author's Fieldwork

Majority (n=291; 56.0%) of the respondents admitted that the most significant issues to them were the issues that received most emphasis by all the radio stations in their news reviews. In the opinion of some respondents (n=104; 20%) as presented in table 1, the most significant issues were those that people in the neighbourhood talked about. Some respondents (n=65; 12.0%) claimed that when certain issues were reported by newspapers, such issues were significant. Only 36 (6.9%) respondents surprisingly claimed that issues which most news media reported less prominently were the most significant, while 24 (4.6%) respondents declined response.

The foregoing phenomenon is further reinforced by the findings presented in table 2. For instance, findings show that the most significant factor that made the respondents attach importance to certain issues is when majority of the radio stations reported such issues in their news reviews (n=245; 47.1%). The next most significant factor that would make the respondents attach importance to certain public issues is when radio stations gave such issues longer duration of coverage than others in the news reviews (n=98; 18.8%).

**Table 2: Factors Influencing Listeners' Rating of Public Issues**

S/N	CATEGORY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	No Response	27	5.2
2	When majority of radio stations report the issue in their news reviews	245	47.1
3	When most radio stations mention the issue as part of the main gist of the review	79	15.2
4	When radio stations give the story wider coverage	98	18.8
5	When the issue comes briefly in the review	30	5.8
6	When the issue comes first in the main review	41	7.9
	Total	520	100.0

Source: Author's Fieldwork

Other factors that determine the degree of significance the listeners would attach to issues are inclusion of such an issue in the main gist of new reviews ( $n=79$ ; 15.2%); and placement of such issues first in the news review broadcast ( $n=41$ ; 7.9%). Only 30 (5.8%) considered brevity as a factor that made them consider certain issues to be significant. Twenty-seven (5.2%) respondents remained silent as to factors that made them to see some issue as being important. If the percentages in items two, three, four and six are added ( $47+15+19+8$ ), the result shows that a predominant segment (89.0%) of the audience respondents saw the degree or intensity of media coverage of certain public issues as an indicator that such public issues must be significant.

### Listeners' Preference for Issues versus Radio Stations' Thematic Focus

The primary aim here is to see if listeners' preference for certain public issues would influence the thematic focus of the radio stations in their news reviews. To do this well, the researcher, therefore, juxtaposed the issues that the audience preferred to listen to, and the issues that the radio stations actually reported more frequently in their news reviews.

**Table 3: Juxtaposition of Listeners' Preference for Issues and Issues Actually Reported in the News Reviews**

AUDIENCE PREFERENCE FOR ISSUES			ISSUES REPORTED IN THE NEWS REVIEWS		
ISSUE	Freq. of Preference	Per-centage	Issue	Freq. of Coverage	Per-centage
Religion	25	2.1	Religion	81	2.2
Crime	70	6.0	Crime	481	13.0
Development -Centred News	156	13.4	Development-centred News	433	11.7
Disaster	36	3.1	Disaster	206	5.6
Crises	132	11.3	Crisis	438	11.9
Sports	343	29.5	Sports	653	17.0
Society	12	1.0	Society	90	2.4
Politics	390	33.5	Politics	1307	35.4
Total	1164	100.0	Total	3689	100.0

\*The total here exceeds 520 because multiple responses were allowed.

Source: Author's Fieldwork

Table 3 presents this relationship between listeners' preference for issues and the prioritization of news agenda by the radio stations. However, for the sake of clarity, the comparison is further presented in figure 1. This brings out the comparability more clearly at a glance.

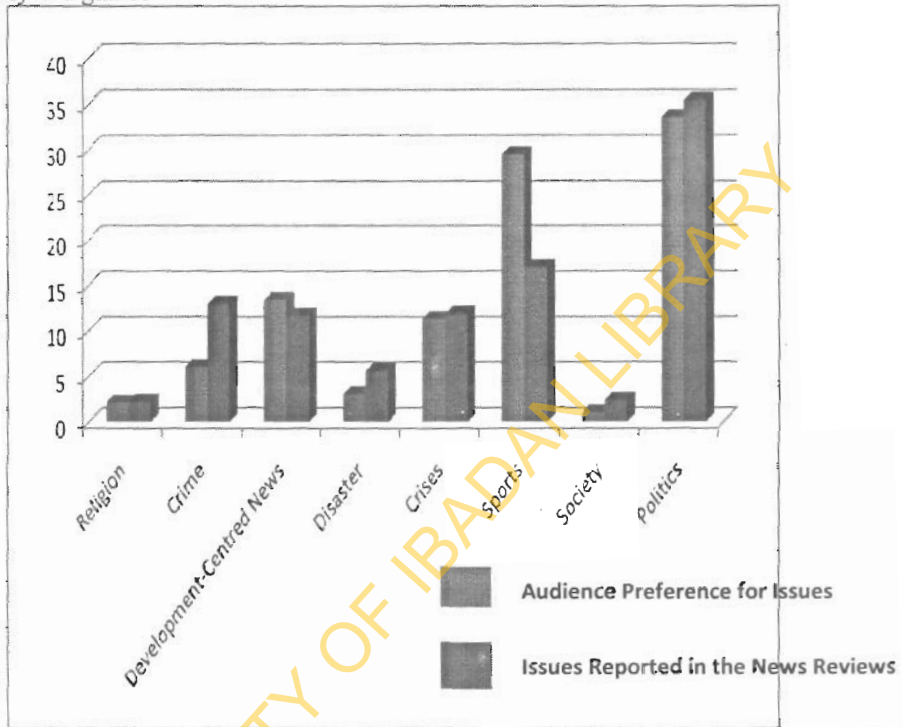


Fig. 1: Comparability of Listeners' Preference for Issues and Issues Actually Reported in the News Reviews

Source: Author's Fieldwork

As presented in table 3, and further represented in figure 1, politics (n=390; 33.5%) is the most preferred issue by the respondents. This is followed by sports (n=343; 29.5%); development-centred news (n=156; 13.4%); crises (n=132; 11.3%); and crimes; (n=70; 6.0%) in that order. The audience displayed less preference for news about disaster (n=36; 3.1%) and religion (n=25; 2.1%); while they demonstrated least preference for news about society (n=12; 1.0%). Similarly, the radio stations apparently gave priority to political news (n=1307; 35.4%) in their news reviews. Next to political issue are sports (n=653; 17.0%); crimes (n=481; 13.0%); crises (n=438; 11.9%); and development-related issues (n=433; 11.7%). News about disaster (n=206; 5.6%), society (n=90; 2.4%) and religion (n=81; 2.2%) featured less in the news reviews of the three radio stations.

### Discussion

What the findings (as presented in tables 1 and 2) suggest is that issues that receive more media emphasis get the listeners' attention and considered as being more significant than other news contents with less media attention. The findings have further proved here that when the mass media (radio in this context) give more emphasis to certain issues in their contents, such issues become significant public issues that audience in turn consider to be significant and think about.

Generally, the findings here show that, to a large, the selected radio stations used their secondary gatekeeping function (news reviews) to set public agenda for the audience. The findings have established the fact that there is a direct relationship between the degree of attention the radio stations in their news reviews gave to public issues and the level of importance the audience attached to such public issues after listening to news reviews. Issues that were reported more prominently by the radio stations in their news were the same issues that the audience respondents admitted they considered to be significant. Therefore, as established by the findings here, the selected radio stations, through their news review programmes, have constructed the windows through which the audience always perceive public issues. What this means is that issues that got prominence in the news reviews, either through placement, frequency of occurrence, or intensity of coverage, became significant in the opinion of the audience while the converse holds. This supports the central tenets of agenda-setting theory of the mass media as espoused by McCombs and Shaw (DeSanto, 2004; McCombs, 2004; McCombs, 2005; Severin & Tankard, 2001) and Watson's (2003) assertion that what the mass media define and present as news is what the audience discern as news; "what is emphasised by the mass media is given emphasis in public perception; what is amplified by media is enlarged in public perception" (P. 128). Obviously, the media always construct the windows through which the public perceive and interpret social reality.

If we compare the frequencies of audience preference for news themes with how the radio stations reported the issues in the news reviews (as presented in table 3), the results show that radio stations, to a very large extent, reported most frequently issues that the audience also preferred most; while issues that the audience preferred least also featured least in the news reviews. For instance, the audience showed the highest preference for politics (n=390; 33.5%) while the radio stations also reported political issues most (n=1307; 35.4%). Again, after politics, the next theme the audience preferred most was sports news (n=343; 29.5%), while at the same time, sports news (n=653; 17.0%) featured more frequently than any other themes excluding political issues. On the other extreme, the respondents demonstrated least preference for news about religion (n=25; 2.1%) and society (n=12; 1.0%), while the radio stations also reported news about society (n=90; 2.4%) and religion (n=81; 2.2%) least. The only obvious deviance is the area of news about crimes for which the radio listeners demonstrated less significant preference (n=70; 6.0%), but which received a relatively higher attention (n=481; 13.0%) in the news reviews.

The pattern of influence that listeners' interest has on the thematic focus by the radio stations as shown in the foregoing quantitative data is similar to the predominant justification for prioritization of news agenda by the radio stations' editorial personnel that were interviewed. The editors unanimously confirmed that while selecting items for the news reviews, interest of the audience was one of the predominant factors they always considered. They confirmed that issues that were topically, socially and geographically proximate to the audience were always given priority in their secondary gatekeeping exercise. For example, the editors affirmed that politics as a thematic focus was given priority because the theme was one of the contemporary public matters as at that time (i.e. the time was proximate to the 2011 general elections in Nigeria) while issues such as conflict, oddity and general human interest stories were selected because they always appealed to the audience. For example, in his explanation, Mr Kunle Thomas, a news editor at *Splash FM*, affirmed that interest of the audience come first in deciding what to include in the news review. He said:

Interest of the audience affects our judgement because we have to think of what the people want to hear. Often, Interest of the people would judge what we must include in the news review. For example, there was the issue

of the tussle within the ranks of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) in Ibadan, Oyo State; they had factions and there were serious crises. There were frequent killings. You cannot ignore this type of story. If you don't include this type of story, it is like you are deliberately leaving out crucial information; and you know the implication of this. There are news stories we always look out for: A place like Cocoa House, Dugbe Ibadan, cannot catch fire and you refuse to report the story. We always take care of human interest stories. People want to hear what really has impact on them, or affects them, their neighbour, or their relatives.

Also, Mr Abolade Salami, a news presenter with the *Premier FM, Ibadan*, recognised human angle stories as a major force that always determined editorial decisions to select audience interest news. He explicated:

We give priority to political and human angle stories—the stories that concern the masses. My belief is that when you want to handle this kind of programme, you should give prominence to what people want to know, not just what a government or its agents want the people to hear. We have to strike a balance between the two.

Really, the editorial teams usually considered proximity factors while selecting audience interest stories. Issues that had social implications for the people, issues that were current, and issues that were geographically close to the people were usually considered. As elucidated in literature under our explication of the newsworthiness theory, these proximity factors are social, topical, and physical proximities in news value judgement (Elders, 2006; McGregor, 2010; Lasorsa, 2008; *Media Awareness Network*, 2010; Shoemaker, 2006; Zeh, 2008;). Mr Bimbo Akanbi, an Assistant producer of news reviews at *Radio O-Y-O*, affirmed that the editorial team in his radio station (*Radio O-YO*) considered many factors that ultimately appealed to the audience: “We look at national angle. We also look at regional angle when local issues affected the people, especially people within our coverage areas. We select stories that would interest our listeners—stories that are strange; stories that have element of bizarre,” he explained. Mr Tunde Oluwanike, a news editor at *Premier FM*, gave more indications of proximity in the selection process. Here is his explanation:

Basically, we cannot have ten items on foreign matters; we want to report issues about Nigeria, we want to talk about what is happening around the people. We should let people know what is happening in the North and in the South, let them know about a cholera outbreak nearby so that they can take precautions. We should let them know there were accidents along Ore-Benin road. This would help them drive with caution...

He further gave instances of topical proximity as a factor the editorial team also considered while selecting items to be included in the news reviews:

We select news depending on the mood of the nation and the happenings in the country. You know for now (*April, 2011 when this interview was conducted*), politics is the main thing. People want to hear more about politics. Therefore, when we select stories for our readers, political news comes first, followed by some other interesting stories like economy, crises, and so on. Sports can even come first depending on the time.

Generally, we look at the angle of human interest to pick stories that would really interest the public.

Generally, therefore, the findings here show that, to a large extent, the preference of the audience and the radio stations' emphasis on stations are similar. The discernible implication of this is that the radio stations in their news agenda were always guided by what the audience wanted to listen to. This means that as the media can set agenda for the public; the audience too hold a significant influence in determining what constitute media agenda.

In summary, findings, as presented in table 2 and figure 1 that the radio stations, to a very large extent, reported most frequently issues that the audience preferred most, and reported less issues that ranked low in audience scale of preference, suggest that the audience also have influence in determining what the mass media present as news. This is evident in Watson's (2003, p. 128) submission that "as far as the media are concerned one might say that the overt (media) agenda is synonymous with public agenda; that is, what is of most importance to the public appears top of the media agenda." Agenda setting, thus, is not unilaterally done by the mass media; it is a cyclical process. It is a two-way process. The public, to a large extent, dictate what the mass media should present as news, while the mass media too sets the public agenda by presenting issues for public discussion through the degree of emphasis attached to such issues.

### Conclusion

The current study has established that agenda-setting is a two-way process. As the mass media have the power to set agendas for the mass audience, the public also exercise a significant degree of influence on the editorial procedure of the media in terms of what are selected as the news content. Editors always give priority to issues that would interest the audience. Findings of this study have some implications; Both Newsworthiness and Agenda-Setting theories adopted for this study are interwoven. They operate in the same domain of news media business. The theory of newsworthiness describes the "forces" or criteria that guide the journalists in their editorial decisions, while the agenda-setting theory explains how the mass media shape public opinions through the news contents. Ultimately, the structure of these news contents is the product (outcome) of the interaction among the diverse criteria (forces) that operate at the media editorial stage; it is the aggregate of the news values that editors always deploy as parameters for gauging newsworthiness of competing events (Newsworthiness Theory). When some of these competing events are selected by editorial team, they receive different degrees of media emphasis, and the extent of media emphasis given to each of the public issues determines the level of attention the issue receives in the public's consciousness (Agenda-setting Theory).

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