The Third Level of Agenda Setting in Contemporary China: Tracking Descriptions of Moral and National Education in Media Coverage and People's Minds

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This article investigates the third level of agenda setting during the anti–Moral and National Education movement in Hong Kong—a Chinese society—in the summer of 2012. Our content and network analyses focus on 532 newspaper articles and 342 public surveys describing the event. Evidence reveals a strong correlation between the media and online and off-line public attribute network agendas. Results also demonstrate that, at the third level, the media agenda can lose its influence on the setting of the off-line public agenda. Several contingent factors include the political stance and news media credibility. In addition, Hong Kong activists' young age may influence the agenda-setting effects. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: attribute agenda setting, China, Hong Kong, conflict, network agenda setting, network analysis

Introduction

In recent years, Hong Kong, as a Chinese society, has experienced increasing conflicts with mainland China. The latest public opinion surveys found that dissatisfaction with the mainland government is highest since the handover of Hong Kong in 1997 (Bradsher, 2012). Several demonstrations such as the Umbrella Revolution and anticommunist protests have occurred, consequently reinforcing Hong Kong

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residents' attitudes. The movement to oppose the Moral and National Education (MNE), as one typical conflict between Hong Kong and mainland China, provides an example of the main issue and illustrates how online public opinion engaged in new forms of civic participation and became a competing agenda setting force in contemporary China (Luo, 2014).

In 2010, the Hong Kong government announced its plan to introduce MNE into the annual policy address. In June 2012, a school teaching handbook, referred to as the China Model, was distributed as a curriculum guide to infuse the ideologies of patriotism and nationalism into education and promote students' concept of national identity in schools (Education Bureau, 2013). The handbook described the Chinese Communist Party as "progressive, selfless and united" while disparaging the multiparty systems "bringing disaster" (Lai, 2012a, p. 1) to nations such as the United States. Although several system-related educational reforms such as the use of English as medium of instruction for promoting mother-tongue education have been implemented since 1997, Hong Kong residents did not accept MNE, stating that it was a brainwashing tool with "pro-mainland-Chinese propaganda" (Lai, 2012b, p. 1) and questioning whether the introduction of MNE was politically intended as a biased China model that aimed to glorify the Communist Party.

Hong Kong residents, in particular, expressed their intense distrust of the government and their continuing anxiety regarding the mainland's growing influence on local affairs (Lai, 2012a). In response to the MNE proposal, a large group of decentralized netizens in Hong Kong actively sought information outside the control of the traditional state-run media and central government by actively constructing or archiving information, tagging or editing news stories and political media content, and establishing online forums. Consequently, a series of large-scale social movements in the form of hunger strikes and protests involving students, parents, and the general public resulted and persisted for months. In October 2012, the Hong Kong government eventually announced that the MNE curriculum guidelines had been formally shelved, and Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying admitted that "the controversy had polarized Hong Kong society and hindered school operations" (Chong & Tam, 2012, p. 1).

Through theoretical sampling, we selected the anti-MNE movement for a case study applying to China and used the third-level agenda-setting theory (Guo & McCombs, 2011a, 2011b) to investigate the social movement in Hong Kong that had been provoked by education reform. Compared with the first- and second-level agenda-setting paradigm, attributes such as issue positions and valence of media messages were treated as a network-like structure in the media and public agendas. This study also explored several media network agendas with different political stances and levels of credibility and tested the relationships between the media and the online and off-line public agendas.

The ultimate goal of this study is to provide relevant theoretical and practical implications based on the following four dimensions: (a) the extension of agenda-setting research in the Chinese communication field through the application of the third-level agenda-setting theory to a unique case

within a Chinese society, (b) the examination and theorization of contingent factors in contexts that may induce peculiar media effects and guide the agenda process in a different light, (c) the enrichment of theoretical knowledge of agenda-setting research by discussing and exploring the correlation between the media and the online and off-line public agendas, and (d) the suggestions regarding practical implications for policy makers in the future.

First- and Second-Level Agenda Setting

The basic idea of the function of news media agenda setting can be traced back to Cohen (1963), who proposed that, rather than telling the public "what to think," the mass media orients the public toward "what to think about" (p. 13). Researchers then developed first- and second-level agenda setting to confirm their hypotheses that the transfer of salience and attributes of salience from the media agenda influence the public agenda (McCombs, 2014; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). First-level agenda setting refers to the transfer of issue salience from the media to the public. Second-level agenda setting contends that the attributes of the issue emphasized by the media affect the salience of these attributes in the public opinion. Previous research has provided extensive evidence of agenda-setting effects from both the first and second levels (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs et al., 2000; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Winter & Eyal, 1981). For example, the well-known Chapel Hill study tested and supported a positive relationship between the media and the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, and Rey (1997) asked respondents to articulate a hierarchy of attributes, ranked by importance, to describe a candidate, and they found a positive connection between the media and the voter agenda for candidate image attributes during the 1995 Spanish gubernatorial elections. Based on research on the 2000 presidential primary in New Hampshire, Golan and Wanta (2001) found strong second-level agenda-setting effects between media coverage and public opinion.

Third-Level Agenda Setting

Based on the discussion of traditional agenda setting, scholars proposed a third level of agenda setting to explore the "pictures" in people's minds (Guo & McCombs, 2011a, 2011b; Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012). According to this new approach, individuals' cognitive representation of objects or attributes were presented as a network-like structure where different nodes were connected with one another rather than being linearly and logically ranked by importance, as in traditional theories (Kaplan, 1973). Corresponding to the information-processing model, which argued that individuals can obtain information by searching the associative memory network for specific information and restimulating it in the working memory (Lang, 2000), scholars proposed a network agenda-setting model and theoretically hypothesized that one function of the news media is to construct and reconstruct an audience's memory network by connecting new with old information (Guo & McCombs, 2011a, 2011b). In other words, the most readily retrievable information is usually connected to other information within an individual's memory networks. For example, people can easily connect the Statue of Liberty with New York City and Big Ben with London. To test the network agenda-setting effects, two empirical statewide studies on the attributes of networks and a national-scale test on the objects-based network were conducted. Results from these studies supported

the third-level agenda-setting model and the existence of a correlation between the media and public network agenda (Guo & McCombs, 2011a, 2011b). Updated research findings further validated the network agenda-setting effects through data sets on Twitter (Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014).

Contingent Factors in Agenda-Setting Effects

From a conventional media-centered perspective, there is an important direct connection between the media and the public agenda. However, such a notion is challenged by the existence of variables that may constitute contingent effects in the media–public relationship (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998). From a macro-level perspective, scholars have noted that country characteristics (e.g., media and political system) have been underscored as important contingent factors of agenda-setting effects (Jochen, 2003; McCombs, 2014). Within the context of unexpected events, such as crises or conflicts, the media agenda gets out of control (Schudson, 2007) and may indirectly influence the agenda-setting effects. From a micro-level perspective, Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980) found a two-way relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. Other scholars have pointed out that influential individuals may "collect, diffuse, filter, and promote the flow of information" (Brosius & Weimann, 1996, p. 564) and affect the agenda-setting process. Roberts, Wanta, and Dzwo (2002) found that the types of issues may determine the news media agenda-setting effects online. Media credibility also influences people's reliance on the media, and reliance leads to exposure. Exposure, in turn, further influences the agenda-setting effects (Jackob, 2010; Wanta & Hu, 1994).

Online Public Opinion

With the versatile nature of the Internet, scholars have conducted many studies to scrutinize the exaggerated media effects and the empowered online public. For instance, Lee, Lancendorfer, and Lee (2005) found that Internet bulletin board conversations significantly influenced newspaper coverage in the 2000 South Korean elections. With the proliferation of new media and audience fragmentation, the decentralization of communication through online activities has complicated traditional agenda-setting theories (Luo, 2014; Roberts et al., 2002). Research has demonstrated that online activists can directly transmit information to the general public and influence the public agenda (Van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004).

Compared with democratic societies such as the United States, where the media's one-sided commercial feature monitors the government and policy initiatives (Dearing & Rogers, 1996), the nondemocratic Chinese society relies on the Internet to express public disapproval. As asserted by Zhou and Moy (2007) as well as Peng (2005), online activities can be linked to real political change. In post-Mao China in particular, local government authority and the ruling party's political agenda are challenged by the existence of online forums (Luo, 2014; Zhou & Moy, 2007). Through online discussion and interaction,

Chinese Internet users demonstrated their ability to reverse media agenda-setting strategies (Wang, 2008). Thus, the role of the online public agenda becomes more critical than before, and may even help democratize the media–public relationship. This study differentiates between the online and off-line public agenda, and tests their relationships with the media agenda at the third level of agenda setting.

Mixed Media System

In Hong Kong, 50 registered newspapers can adopt their own political stances (Hong Kong Government, 2011). This article explores how the newspapers with different political stances and levels of credibility influence the online and off-line public agenda in a social movement. We selected three representative local newspapers: *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *Ta Kung Pao,* and *Apple Daily*. Of the three newspapers, *Hong Kong Economic Journal*'s credibility ranking was the highest, *Apple Daily*'s was in the middle, and *Ta Kung Pao*'s was the lowest (Siu, 2014). *Hong Kong Economic Journal* was regarded as serious and relatively neutral toward the central Chinese government (Fung, 2007). *Apple Daily* was market oriented and favored the pan-democratic camp by criticizing the government in its news articles and commentaries (Fung, 2007). *Ta Kung Pao*, as the oldest active Chinese language newspaper in China, specialized in providing mainland news and supporting central government policies (Fung, 2007). Two sets of hypotheses were proposed to test the agenda-setting effects between the media and online and off-line public agendas.

H1a: *A significant network relationship exists between* Hong Kong Economic Journal *and the online public attribute agenda in describing MNE as a subject.*

H1b: *A significant network relationship exists between* Ta Kung Pao *and the online public attribute agenda in describing MNE as a subject.*

H1c: *A significant network relationship exists between* Apple Daily *and the online public attribute agenda in describing MNE as a subject.*

H2a: *A significant network relationship exists between* Hong Kong Economic Journal *and the off-line public attribute agenda in describing MNE as a subject.*

H2b: *A significant network relationship exists between* Ta Kung Pao *and the off-line public attribute agenda in describing MNE as a subject.*

H2c: *A significant network relationship exists between* Apple Daily *and the off-line public attribute agenda in describing MNE as a subject.*

Method

Data Collection

Public agenda. Compared with traditional methods such as surveys or interviews, which only test the implicit association of public agenda attributes, this study adopts a new data collection method called the mind-mapping survey and collected data for both the implicit and explicit network public agendas (Guo et al., 2012). To follow the original mind-mapping design to generate the implicit public network agenda, we would have needed to ask participants to write down a maximum of 10 words to describe the attributes of MNE. The explicit association depends on respondents' ability to consciously draw lines to connect any two words. However, the pilot test indicated that respondents could only recall limited words to describe the event. We thus adjusted our survey design to help respondents answer survey questions. In February 2013, a focus group discussion and interviews were conducted involving both professionals (ages 30 and older) and university students (ages 21 to 30). From participants' sharing of descriptions about the MNE event and 50 public online posts, we assembled a pool of 30 words representing people's descriptions of the MNE event. In the redesigned survey, respondents were asked to choose, rather than write down, up to 10 words from a list of 30 representative words. They were also instructed to draw connections between each pair of words if they thought there was a connection.[2] All items were finalized through a pilot test to ensure reliability and validity.

The self-administered online survey was hosted on my3q (http://www.my3q.com), which is a professional online survey platform specially targeting Hong Kong residents in China. A total of 149 online respondents were randomly recruited and participated in the surveys. Fifty-two participants (34.9%) were men, and 97 (65.1%) were women. Participants were 29.9 years of age on average, and 87.3% of them had received higher education. Among the respondents, 117 (78.5%) were from Hong Kong, 29 (19.5%) were from mainland China, 1 (.7%) was from Macao, and 2 (1.3%) were from other areas.

Meanwhile, off-line surveys were sent by using a multistage sampling method. From a pool of the eight institutions funded by the public through the University Grants Committee (Education Bureau, 2012), two universities were randomly selected. Then two classes from each university were randomly drawn. In the final stage, the questionnaire was administered to 210 students, and 193 questionnaires were completed (response rate: 92%) during a 41-day span from March 13 to April 22, 2013.[3] Sixty-six

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[2] In the online version of the survey, participants were asked to write down the numbers for each pair of connected words. For example, if participants consider that items 1. brainwashing and 6. guidelines are connected, they would enter (1, 6) in the survey.

[3] Due to the time delay of funding approval, there is a five-month gap between the collection of media content (July 1to October 9, 2012) and the public survey (March 13 to April 22, 2013). However, this large time gap works against finding support for the hypotheses—that the effects of the media could have largely dissipated after five months—and that the effect of the media agenda on the public agenda must have been quite strong to have persisted.

participants (34.2%) were men, and 127 (65.8%) were women. Participants were 23.6 years of age on average, and 95% of them had received higher education. Among the respondents, 143 (74.1%) were from Hong Kong, 16 (8.3%) were from Macao, 33 (17.1%) were from mainland China, and 1 (0.5%) was from another area.

Media agenda. In view of the media attribute agenda, data were collected from WiseNews, which covers more than 1,500 full-text news items from newspapers, magazines, and websites in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. The information portal allows a keyword search with prompt results of related news reports. Over a period of 13 weeks (101 days) ranging from July 1 to October 9, 2012, we conducted an online keyword search of "Moral and National Education," confining the results to three Hong Kong newspapers with different political positions: *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *Ta Kung Pao*, and *Apple Daily*. Of the 2,659 reports collected, every fifth report was systematically sampled out of the pool, leaving 532 news articles (502,316 words) for our content analysis.

Coding Scheme

Content analyses of media coverage were conducted to collect data of media agenda attributes. The unit of analysis was an assertion in each article that described a certain attribute of MNE. Three independent coders identified each assertion, which yielded a set of 916 assertions to be coded (intercoder reliability clarified by the coders was 0.87 measured by Krippendorff's α) (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

The 916 assertions were further divided into six coding categories: (a) descriptions of mainland China, which includes any assertions describing the mainland, such as "the red power still centrally controlled the education policy of Hong Kong"; (b) introduction of MNE, which includes any assertions describing the process of MNE introduction, such as "MNE endured a three-year trial period"; (c) curriculum of MNE, which consists of assertions on the curriculum of MNE, such as "content educated in MNE includes Chinese history, literature, and art"; (d) public perception, which refers to any assertions describing public perception toward MNE, such as "protestors perceived MNE as a totally brainwashing program"; (e) public reaction, which refers to assertions describing public reaction toward MNE, such as "students and teachers held a series of large-scale social movements of hunger strikes and protests"; and (f) others, which includes assertions describing other minor attributes, such as Western civic education, Hong Kong leaders, and so on.[4] Forty news articles (8% of the coded 532 articles) were selected to test for intercoder reliability. The result of composite intercoder reliability for the attributes' six categories reached 0.88 by applying Krippendorff's α. For the public agenda, the six categories were used to represent the salience of these attributes in the public's mind. The result of composite intercoder reliability for the attributes' categories reached 0.75 by randomly selecting 10% of the sample (342 surveys) for every coder to analyze (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

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[4] This category was not used in the network analysis.

Results

A network associate analysis was applied to test the relationship network of the descriptive attributes both in media coverage and in people's minds. First, in the media attribute agenda, a matrix of five rows by five columns was created for the network analysis. Each row or column represented a descriptive attribute of MNE. The relationship between each pair of attributes was measured according to the frequency of their occurrences in the same news article. The more frequently the two attributes coexist, the stronger their relationship is. For example, if the two attributes "public perception" and "public reaction" appear together in 10 news articles, the entry is 10 in the cell corresponding to the two attributes in the matrix. Based on the content analysis data, Table 1 presents the matrix for the relationship media network of MNE descriptive attributes.

Table 1. Matrix of the Media Agenda Network.

	A	B	C	D	E
A	—	13	21	57	30
B	13	—	21	49	40
C	21	21	—	68	38
D	57	49	68	—	157
E	30	40	38	157	—

Note. A = mainland-related description; B = introduction of MNE; C = curriculum of MNE; D = public perception; E = public reaction.

For the matrix of the online public agenda, we measured both explicit and implicit relationships between two attributes by calculating their co-occurrence in the same respondent's narrative. Using the mind-mapping survey sheet, if two attributes—for example, "public perception" and "public reaction"—appear together in five online respondents' descriptions, then the frequency is counted as 5 in the implicit public agenda. Meanwhile, if six participants make explicit connections (draw direct lines) between the two attributes "public perception" and "public reaction," then the frequency is counted as 6 in the explicit public agenda. So the final entry in the cell is 11 (5 + 6, a sum of the implicit and explicit co-occurrence frequency) corresponding to the two attributes in the online public attribute matrix. Table 2, based on the survey data, presents the matrix for the online public network of MNE descriptive attributes.

Table 2. Matrix of the Online Public Agenda Network.

	A	B	C	D	E
A	—	69	129	175	83
B	69	—	82	151	139
C	129	82	—	192	103
D	175	151	192	—	212
E	83	139	103	212	—

Note. A = mainland-related description; B = introduction of MNE; C = curriculum of MNE; D = public perception; E = public reaction.

Similarly, we measured both the explicit and implicit relationships between two attributes in the off-line public narratives. The off-line public agenda network in the matrix is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Matrix of the Off-line Public Agenda Network.

	A	B	C	D	E
A	—	80	135	207	105
B	80	—	87	152	125
C	135	87	—	232	106
D	207	152	232	—	240
E	105	125	106	240	—

Note. A = mainland-related description; B = introduction of MNE; C = curriculum of MNE; D = public perception; E = public reaction.

We split the media network agenda into three types—*Apple Daily, Ta Kung Pao,* and *Hong Kong Economic Journal*—and examined the degree of centrality for each one, which refers to the number of connections that an attribute has in each media network. As shown in Table 4, a clear pattern emerged that "public perception" had the highest degree of centrality within each specific media agenda: *Apple Daily* (244 connections), *Ta Kung Pao* (58 connections), and *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (575 connections). Of the six categories, "mainland-related description" was the least connected with other elements in *Ta Kung Pao* (23 connections) and *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (319 connections). Among the three newspaper agendas, all five categories in *Hong Kong Economic Journal* shared a higher degree of centrality (e.g., 319 connections for category A) than in other newspapers. In *Ta Kung Pao*, both the degree of centrality and the frequency of the five categories were the lowest. The three domestic news media also possessed different journalistic stances toward the implementation of MNE. For instance, *Apple Daily* connected the introduction and curriculum of MNE with the hegemony of the central government of China over Hong Kong and stimulated the public's perception (e.g., biased education, brainwashing) and reaction (e.g., hunger strike, withdraw, and rally). *Ta Kung Pao* took a positive tone toward the implementation of MNE and emphasized the importance of nationalism in the news reports.

Table 4. Attributes on the Three Media Network Agendas.

Attributes	Apple Daily		Ta Kung Pao		Hong Kong Economic Journal		Media (in total)	
	DC	N	DC	N	DC	N	DC	N
A	198	**23**	**23**	**27**	**319**	**27**	**540**	**77**
B	212	131	29	97	335	97	576	325
C	189	209	36	114	337	114	562	437
D	**244**	**666**	**58**	**234**	**575**	**234**	**877**	**1,134**
E	195	385	50	147	460	147	705	679

Note. A = mainland-related description; B = introduction of MNE; C = curriculum of MNE; D = public perception; E = public reaction. DC refers to degree centrality, which measures the number of connections that an attribute has in the network.

Table 5 presents how the five categories were connected with one another in people's minds. Coinciding with the media attribute network, the attribute "public perception" had the highest degree of centrality within both online (555 connections) and off-line (624 connections) public agendas. In contrast, the attribute "introduction of MNE" contained the lowest connection with other elements in both online (372 connections) and off-line (364 connections) pubic agendas.

Table 5. Attributes on the Online and Off-line Public Agendas.

Attributes	Online public agenda		Off-line public agenda		Public (in total)	
	DC	N	DC	N	DC	N
A	456	**161**	527	272	983	433
B	**372**	181	**364**	**160**	**736**	**341**
C	377	173	425	210	802	383
D	**555**	**653**	624	693	**1,179**	**1,346**
E	454	325	471	314	925	639

Note. A = mainland-related description; B = introduction of MNE; C = curriculum of MNE; D = public perception; E = public reaction. DC refers to degree centrality, which measures the number of connections that an attribute has in the network.

For $H1_{(a,b,c)}$ and $H2_{(a,b,c)}$, which were proposed to test the network relationship between the media (*Apple Daily, Ta Kung Pao,* and *Hong Kong Economic Journal*) and the public attributes (online and off-line) agenda, a social network analysis was performed by applying the software of UCINET 6 (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). We used the Quadratic Assignment Procedure correlation analysis to test the association between the matrix based on the content analysis data and the matrix based on the survey data. As shown in Table 6, the media attribute agenda significantly correlated with the online public attribute network agenda (+0.82, $p < 0.01$). When each newspaper agenda was examined, we found *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (+0.83, $p < 0.01$), *Apple Daily* (+0.80, $p < 0.05$), and *Ta Kung Pao* (+0.71, $p < 0.05$) all positively correlated with the online public agenda. Thus, H1 $_{(a,b,c)}$ was fully supported. A significant network relationship was found between the media (i.e., *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *Ta Kung Pao*, and *Apple Daily*) and the online public attribute agenda in describing MNE as a subject.

Concerning to H2, findings revealed a positive and significant relationship between the media and the off-line public attribute agenda (+0.81, $p < 0.01$). Discrepancies occurred when we tested the three newspapers and their relationships with the off-line public agenda. Both *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (+0.81, $p < 0.05$) and *Apple Daily* (+0.81, $p < 0.05$) showed a strong positive correlation with the off-line public agenda. However, *Ta Kung Pao* was not significantly related to the off-line public agenda (+0.63, $p > 0.05$). Thus, H2a and H2c were supported, but H2b was not supported. In other words, the existence of the third-level agenda-setting effect may depend on a certain type of media agenda.

Table 6. Attribute Network Agendas Correlation.

	Online public agenda	Offline public agenda
	r	r
Apple Daily	0.80*	0.81*
Ta Kung Pao	0.71*	0.63
Hong Kong Economic Journal	0.83**	0.81*
Media (in total)	0.82**	0.81**

Notes: Figures are standardized Pearson correlation coefficient.

**$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

Discussion

Through theoretical sampling, this study adopted the Moral and National Education case in a non-Western society and examined whether the newly proposed third-level agenda-setting theory was universally applicable. We differentiated the online public agenda from the off-line one, explored three types of newspapers with different political stances and levels of credibility, and compared their relationships with the public agenda. Theoretical and practical implications of the results were delineated from the following three dimensions.

Strong Third-Level Agenda-Setting Effects

As the first study applying this third-level approach in China, findings from this research support the proposed network relationship between the media and the public agenda (Guo & McCombs, 2011a, 2011b; Guo et al., 2012) and extend Chinese agenda-setting research (e.g., Luo, 2014; Zhang, Li, & Li, 2001). Notably, the five-month gap between the collection of media content and the public survey further supports the notion that media agenda-setting effects are strong. During the time gap, new issues emerged and expanded rapidly. Two major supporters of Leung Chun-ying, chief executive of Hong Kong, were involved in controversies that aroused credibility crises for the Hong Kong government (But & Wong, 2012; Cheung, 2013). On top of these were the scandals Leung Chun-ying has faced since his inauguration, which have been constantly in the spotlight in Hong Kong society. Even so, the five attribute categories of MNE (e.g., public reaction, public perception) in media coverage and public narratives were closely connected with one another in the form of the major nods connecting media and public networks at the third level of agenda setting. Media agenda-setting effects on both online and off-line public network agendas within this Chinese context clearly existed and strongly persisted for five months since MNE was shelved in October 2012.

Contingent Factors at the Third-Level Agenda Setting

In response to the call that contingent factors at the macro and micro level are important to address agenda-setting effects (Blumler, 1983; Jochen, 2003; McCombs, 2014), this study examined the third-level agenda setting in a unique context with specific political, social, and cultural systems pertaining to China. The unique "one country, two systems" political structure, the mixed media system, active online civic engagement, and the ever-escalating public engagement among young university students should shed light on a deeper understanding of agenda-setting theories.

According to Shirk (2011), the political system in mainland China still reflects its Soviet or Leninist origins, and all the means of communication are controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. The party's power and influence are reinforced through the propaganda apparatus by centrally controlling the media, education, and culture systems. Hong Kong, under the policy of "one country, two systems" within China, enjoys a certain degree of media freedom. In this study, three types of media with different political stances were examined. *Ta Kung Pao,* being distinct from *Apple Daily* and *Hong Kong Economic Journal,* possessed a totally supportive journalistic stance toward the implementation of MNE and became the least credible newspaper in Hong Kong (Siu, 2014). *Ta Kung Pao* failed to set the off-line public agenda (+0.63, $p > 0.05$). In contrast, both *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (+0.81, $p < 0.05$) and *Apple Daily* (+0.81, $p < 0.05$) showed a strong positive correlation with the off-line public agenda, which supports the proposition that the more credible the medium is, the stronger positive relationship exists between the media and the public agenda (Wanta & Hu, 1994). Thus, this study argues that media credibility may act as a key contingent factor at the third level of agenda-setting research. In other words, the existence of the network agenda-setting effects may depend on the public's trust toward a certain type of media.

Our results revealed that the off-line public agenda (+0.63, $p > 0.05$) rather than the online public agenda was not significantly related to *Ta Kung Pao*. One possible factor for this finding might be the participation of active university students enrolled in off-line surveys who represented the young generation of Hong Kong (mean age is 23.6 years) and who were more proactive than other groups in expressing their strong negative sentiments toward the mainland's central control. As an important focus in the MNE incident, Hong Kong students demonstrated their critical thinking about the mainland's attempt to politicize school education, and they played a leading role in driving the movement from anti-MNE to antigovernment in general. According to Fairbrother (2003), it has become a phenomenon that the young Hong Kong students expressed stronger disagreement than mainland students that national interests should come before individual or local interests. Unlike the mainland's compulsory political education, Hong Kong's civic education guidelines are nonmandatory and students' patriotic and nationalistic sentiments were weak (Fairbrother, 2003). Even after the city was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, Hong Kong preserved its own legitimacy and authority to rule. The new local government tried to avoid offending the central Chinese government and preserved Hong Kong's stability and prosperity, conditions favorable to the colonial government's continued rule until 1997, and economic development of Hong Kong society (Sing, 2009). Thus, controversial issues were avoided, more free and informed discussion was encouraged in Hong Kong civic education, and economic growth to development was emphasized.

Last but not least, the media agenda still shows the agenda-setting influence in setting online public opinion, but evidence supports the notion that online public opinion was playing an increasingly important role in the agenda-setting process in China (Luo, 2014). First, data revealed that the degree of centrality and the frequency of "public perception" rank highest among the five main attributes in the media agenda. The online public descriptions of MNE and the central values that online activists try to uphold (e.g., "one country, two systems," "a free society under the rule of law," and "democracy") are frequently cited and emphasized by the media agenda. Second, empowered with fragmented and diversified new media, the online public can choose the preferred media or even establish their own media for self-publicity. For example, this study found that the local online activists successfully framed MNE as a brainwashing policy on their Web pages, connected it with the central-controlled Chinese government, and successfully pushed the Hong Kong government to shelve the MNE curriculum guidelines.

Practical Implications

This third-level agenda-setting model can be applied to help understand the public agenda and its relationship with media coverage and government policy. It provides practical suggestions for government policy strategists in helping to set both the media and public agendas. On the one hand, as shown in the MNE event, the media agenda can lead the public agenda. Maintaining good relations with credible media organizations is crucial to the government in influencing the public agenda. On the other hand, the online public attributes agenda deserves government's attention specifically. If the government could monitor online opinion, respond to the public agenda in a timely, direct, and responsive manner in this event, and stimulate an alternative interpretation of the proposed education reform in people's minds, then the effects of the policy agenda might be stronger than its current status.

Limitations and Future Research

Findings from this study provide directions for future research. First, because the explicit public agenda reflects another level of human cognitive networks, its distinction from the implicit public agenda deserves more exploration. Future research should test whether the media attribute agenda is more positively associated with the implicit public agenda than the explicit public agenda (Guo, 2012). In addition, future analysis may examine first- and second-level agenda setting within the same case, compare the results among the three levels, and provide a broad review of agenda-setting research in a Chinese context. Finally, research should extend this study by comparing people of different ages and their relationships with social media agendas using the network analysis method.

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