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**Author(s):** Badham, Mark

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## **Four news media roles shaping agenda-building processes**

Mark Badham

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### **Abstract**

This chapter identifies, defines and explores four news media roles of *conduit*, *facilitator*, *mediator* and *political actor* through which the media participate with corporate, social and political actors in agenda-building processes. The framework of the media's four agenda-building roles sheds light on how the news media perform their various roles as well as how other actors, such as organizations and media audiences, are able to mobilize the media performing these roles. This framework helps explain how and why media roles affect the way actors are able to influence the media agenda with the intention of shaping the public agenda.

Keywords: Agenda-building, conduit, facilitator, media roles, mediator, political actor

## 1. Introduction

The news media are a vital hub in processes involving multiple actors each negotiating news content that gets consumed by media audiences via online and offline channels. Agenda-setting theory posits that issues rendered “salient” through media coverage are considered important by members of the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Further, a first level of agenda-setting occurs when media influence the public perception of what issues matter (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; McCombs 2004, 2005), while at the second level of agenda-setting content creators, such as public relations practitioners, journalists and editors, assign attributes to these objects (Ghanem, 1997). For this reason, actors, predominantly representing influential organizations, make use of the news media to reach their own audiences with carefully-crafted messages. Indeed, while the media are considered somewhat autonomous in the way they collect, filter and diffuse information and ideas to their audiences, they rely to varying degrees on these external actors to supply “information subsidies” such as public relations material (Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1985; Zoch & Molleda, 2006) that match journalists’ news values.

Agenda-building theory sheds light on this process in which a limited number of actors (i.e., media sources) are able to influence the agenda of news media with their own corporate or state agenda in order to contribute to shaping the public agenda (Curtin, 1999; Hallahan, 1999; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). Indeed, Weaver and Elliott (1985) challenged the idea of the media being able to set agendas if they are “mainly passing on priorities set by other actors and institutions in society” (1985: 87). In the 1980s mass communication scholars began to ask the question, “Who sets the media agenda?” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Gandy, 1982), which led to an interest in what has become known as ‘agenda-building’ (Weaver & Elliott, 1985). Gans’ seminal work (e.g., 1979) highlighted the reciprocal relationship between sources and journalists and referred to the process as “circular” (1979: 80). However, in describing the reciprocal relationship as a dance, he contended that “[E]ither sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading” (1979: 80). Ohl, Pincus, Rimmer and Harrison (1995) also defined agenda-building as “a give-and-take process” (1995: 90). This paper focuses attention on how competing agendas are constructed through negotiation between the media and other actors.

It also largely treats the media as organizations in order to examine the media as active participants in agenda-building processes (Hayward, Rindova & Pollock, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005). It is helpful to focus on the media as organizations and therefore as actors in agenda-building processes because the media in Western democratic societies predominantly are business entities dependent on sales and advertising revenues as well as on their audience for survival (Hirsch, 1977; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Agenda-building is a competitive process because it involves multiple actors (agenda-builders) competing to gain a voice in media reports according to the limitations of time, space and format in news production practices (Berger, 2001; Cameron et al., 1997; Curtin, 1999). Public relations scholarship acknowledges that a finite number of actors have the credibility (Lariscy et al., 2010; Logan, 1991; Tanner, 2004), resources and skills needed to compete to gain a media voice in order to mobilize the media for their own ends. Yet, to a large extent, public relations research has not broadened its focus beyond the influence of one or two actors to multiple actors, including the media themselves and their audiences, competing concurrently to promote their own agendas in offline and online news media spaces.

To address this theoretical gap, this paper focuses on three main actors (or actor groups) engaged in agenda-building processes: organizations (e.g., corporations and state bodies), the news media themselves, and media audiences (which also may constitute the audiences of organizations). Organizations with strategic access to media actors (e.g., journalists) are able to acquire standing in

the media (Gamson, 2004), which is associated with gaining a media voice and thus becoming a source for media reports. The media are dependent on these organizations as official and influential sources of information (Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1978) for their news content. Media audiences may also become involved in expressing their views about certain issues and events through the media, particularly through online discussion forums hosted by contemporary news media organizations. (In their 2017 study, Lee and Riffe argue that the media's audience is an important variable in the agenda-building process.) In this way audiences are able to contribute to the construction of a public agenda. The media themselves are a third actor in these agenda-building processes; media with a stake in issues and events may also communicate their own agenda as autonomous political actors (Deephouse & Heugens, 2009; Page, 1996).

This theoretical paper also contributes to agenda-building theory by identifying and examining the ways in which news media adopt distinct roles, simultaneously or at different times, that affect the way multiple actors are able to participate in the circular and reciprocal relationships that characterize the process of agenda-building. This paper argues that media roles affect the way actors are able to influence the media agenda with the intention of shaping the public agenda, which contributes to answering the question: who leads the media agenda? (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Gandy, 1982) Accordingly, it sets out to identify, define and elaborate four agenda-building roles of the media so as to better understand not only how the news media perform these roles, but also how organizations—and their audiences—are able to mobilize the media in these roles for their own ends, such as to infiltrate the public agenda with their own agenda. This paper proposes four news media roles of *conduit*, *facilitator*, *mediator* and *political actor* through which the news media participate, often simultaneously, with corporate, social and political actors in agenda-building processes. In doing so, it conducts what is arguably the first systematic identification and examination in public relations literature of the roles that media play in agenda-building processes.

In this study media roles are interpreted in terms of the basic or typical functions assumed by or played by mainstream news media organizations in Western democratic societies. The term *role* refers to “a composite of occupational tasks and purposes that is widely recognizable and has a stable and enduring form” (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009: 119). Roles are regulated and influenced by both internal institutional pressures (e.g., professional, commercial and idealistic) and external forces such as audiences, the state (e.g., regulatory authorities), and pressure groups (2009: 116). Media roles are also interpreted in terms of what media do, rather than Christians et al.'s (2009) normative interpretation of media roles (i.e., what media ought to do) such as media responsibility, duty or obligation. Hence, this paper identifies media roles by the practices, ideals and values of media actors (e.g., journalists) that shape what the media do. The paper also extends the idea that media roles can change through time (Hallin, 1986; Bennett, 1990; Butler, 1995) to interpret these roles as either transient (i.e., a media organization may take on more than one role and may switch between roles simultaneously) or established (i.e., a media organization may predominantly adopt one or more permanent roles at the same time). Finally, this paper acknowledges that each role is fluid and thus may be difficult to pigeonhole.

## **2. Media roles in public relations research**

This paper's extensive review of public relations literature found that although numerous studies refer to the role of the media in agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Benton & Frazier, 1976; Brosius, & Kepplinger, 1990; McCombs & Bell, 1996; McCombs, 1997; Kioussis, 2001; McCombs, 2002; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2014) and agenda-building processes, with the exception of McCombs (1997) all of them do not really mean *role* in the sense of a media function or what media do or ought to do. What they really mean is the outcome or effects of routine media coverage on media audiences' awareness or perceptions, such as on corporate reputation and organizational legitimacy. Although

journalism, mass communication, and political communication literature has examined distinctions between roles of the news media (i.e., roles of media organizations and/or journalists and editors), this review shows that what is missing in existing public relations literature is (1) an acknowledgment that the news media sometimes adopt different roles when they seek, edit and disseminate news reports and, consequently, (2) an understanding of the ways in which specific roles of the media affect agenda-building processes.

One exception is the work by communication scholar Maxwell McCombs (1997) titled 'Building consensus: The news media's agenda-setting roles'. In his paper McCombs identifies four ways in which the media (as organizations) become involved in setting a community agenda, each role situated along a continuum between passive and proactive involvement in contributing to agenda-setting. In the first role of *professional detachment*, the media adopt "the dominant stance of professional journalism" and thus rely on objective reporting (1997: 438). Accordingly, media in this role are a passive actor in setting the public agenda. In the *targeted involvement* role, the media's investigative reporting and editorial campaigns, indicating a more proactive participation, move issues onto the public agenda. In the role of *boosterism*, the media become active cheerleaders of a grassroots-led local community agenda. Finally, in the *proactive agenda-setting* role, the media rely on investigative reporting and adopt a public journalism perspective to proactively formulate a community agenda on behalf of their local communities.

These four roles fit along a continuum between a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach to agenda-setting; in the top-down approach, adopted by media in the *targeted involvement*, *boosterism* and *proactive agenda-setting* roles, the journalistic or media agenda drives the media organization, whereas in the bottom-up approach adopted by media in the professional detachment role the public agenda drives the media organization. McCombs contends that there is a tactical distinction between media in the *proactive agenda-setting* and *targeted involvement* roles. In the former role, the leadership of a news organization strategically sets out to influence the community agenda and, as a result, typically there is "an ongoing, sweeping pattern of news coverage" about a particular topic by that media organization. In contrast, in the *targeted involvement* role, a media organization tends to report "a single major story or a series of stories detailing a specific line of investigation" (1997: 440).

Although McCombs' (1997) framework of four agenda-setting roles helps us understand how the media adopt four different roles in building a community agenda, it does not contribute to a better understanding of how corporate and state agendas are constructed, such as by elite organizations that have been able to gain a legitimate media voice. Nor does his paper adequately differentiate four roles according to multiple actors' participation in and influence over agenda-setting and agenda-building processes. For example, although it links the targeted involvement role with the influence of public figures, it does not recognize a media role that empowers media audiences themselves to put forward their own community or public agenda. In their recent 2017 study, Lee and Riffe argue that the media's audience is an important variable in the agenda-building process. In this way audiences are able to contribute to the construction of a public agenda.

### **3. The media's agenda-building roles**

Responding to recent challenges to import big ideas from other disciplines outside of public relations, this paper draws from sociology and mass communication literature that offers a foundational theoretical framework defining four normative roles of the media in Western democratic societies (Christians et al., 2009; Lasswell, 1948; McQuail, 2000, 2006; Wright, 1960). The development of theory explaining why and how the media adopt distinct roles under certain circumstances may help public relations scholars and practitioners better understand how various media roles enable organizations, media audiences, and indeed the media themselves to promote their own agenda more effectively. A synthesis of three typologies of news media roles in society from Lasswell (1948),

Wright (1960), McQuail (2006), and Christians et al. (2009) (see **Figure 1** below) provides an initial framework within which to locate four basic roles of the news media in agenda-building processes. The relationships between some of these roles are not always clear and are therefore open to interpretation. However, they do show how scholarship in sociology and mass communication over the last seven decades has theoretically defined a pattern of essentially four roles the media play in society.

#### *Information transmission: The conduit role*

First, drawing on descriptions of roles of *transmission* and *surveillance* from Lasswell (1948) and Wright (1960 & 1986), *continuity* and *information* from McQuail (2000), and *collaborative* from Christians et al (2009), news media in this type of role may be seen to cooperate with the prevailing foundations of power (e.g. influential organizations and state entities) and perform their primary function of reporting the news objectively. However, journalists typically eschew any hint of collaboration or cooperation, especially with powerful institutional actors, because they value their sense of independence from external influence. Accordingly, the *conduit* label is assigned to this role to more aptly highlight the way the media act as a more or less one-way, neutral channel of information flow between influential organizations and their audiences and to better reflect the non-reflexive nature of the media in this role.

The media predominantly depend on external sources for news content; hence, these sources gain a media voice. The actors who typically supply content to the media in this role are influential actors, such as representatives of the state and corporations, who are privileged with a media voice because they have the resources to supply media content or information subsidies (Gans, 1980). Because of limitations of time, space and format in news production practices (Christians et al., 2009), only a select few organizations are able to gain a voice in the media in this role. These elite sources of information are essential for news output (Manning, 2001; Tuchman, 1978). Hence, in this mutual dependence relationship journalists are dependent on them to a significant extent, “reporting what these sources tell them” (Gans, 2003: 46).

The conduit role encapsulates the concept of the media as an enabler of agenda-building by a select few corporate/state actors representing influential corporate and state organizations with the ability and resources to influence the media agenda. Marginalized groups such as social movement activists are also able to gain a media voice in this role through use of a repertoire of media tactics (de Bakker et al., 2013; McDonnell & King, 2013; Walker et al., 2008) and hence they may also gain a media voice to confer their public agenda through the media in this role. Nevertheless, they are not considered a typical actor able to influence the media in this role. Accordingly, a state agenda (Deacon & Golding, 1991) and corporate agenda (Carroll, 2010; Carroll & McCombs, 2003) dominate this role. In simple terms, media performing this role act as passive participants in agenda-building processes enabling a mostly uni-directional flow of agenda conferral between a select few organizations and their audiences.

Based on key attributes of this role drawn from similar roles in sociology and mass communication literature, the following definition of the conduit role is put forward analytically and in encompassing terms:

As a mostly one-way channel of information transmission, media performing a conduit role are a relatively passive participant in agenda-building processes, predominantly transmitting the relatively unfiltered corporate and state agendas of a select few organizations able to make use of media tactics to gain a media voice; thus organizations and their representatives are typical actors able to mobilize media in this role for their own ends.

#### *Interpretation and commentary: the mediator role*

In the second role, which Christians et al (2009) label *monitorial*, media offer commentary and interpretation. Similarly, McQuail (2000) proposes that media in a *correlation* role explain, interpret and comment on the meaning of events and information. A synthesis of these roles (see **Figure 1** below) suggests a sensemaking role in which media draw on the opinions of ‘experts’ to help audiences make sense of contested issues.

This paper contends that the *mediator* label more aptly describes media in this role as an influential and proactive ‘mediator’ between business and society (Briscoe & Safford, 2008). In this role the media seek, edit and disseminate commentary and interpretations from relatively objective sources of ‘expert’ information, such as economists, analysts and academics, to help media audiences make sense of issues, especially those that are highly contested and therefore require active sense-making participation from the media. Organizations often provide experts as media spokespeople; sources with expert characteristics are valued by the media as credibility matters when journalists select sources (Berkowitz, 1992; Logan, 1991; Gans, 2004; Tuchman, 1978).

Like the conduit role, this role encapsulates the concept of media as an enabler of agenda conferral by actors with the ability to influence the media. In simple terms, media in this role act as relatively active participants in agenda-building processes (e.g. seeking, editing and disseminating commentary and interpretations from ‘experts’) enabling a mostly uni-directional flow of agenda conferral between these actors and media audiences. Because experts typically represent influential organizations and the state, a corporate agenda (Carroll, 2010; Carroll & McCombs, 2003) and state agenda (Deacon & Golding, 1991) dominate this role.

Based on key attributes of this role drawn from similar roles in sociology and mass communication literature, the following definition of the mediator role is put forward analytically and in encompassing terms:

In the mediator role media are somewhat active participants in agenda-building processes, seeking, editing and disseminating interpretations and commentary from a select few experts typically representing influential organizations and the state in order to help audiences make sense of highly contested issues; thus, media performing this role predominantly tend to portray a corporate and/or state agenda.

#### *Audience participation: The facilitator role*

One deviance from the typologies of Lasswell (1948), Wright (1960), McQuail (2006) is what Christians et al. (2009) identify as the *facilitative* role. In this role the media provide a forum for the participation of a plurality of media audiences in public debates. While the first two types of roles described above are largely and typically dominated by the voices of a few actors (e.g., organizations with the resources and institutional power to dominate media content), traditional news media organizations performing this type of participatory role (Rheingold, 2008) enable a plurality of actors to engage in public debate. In this role the media seek to provide a platform, both offline and online (e.g. through media-hosted online discussion forums and social media sites, radio talkback programs, and letters to the editor), for their audiences to put forward a collective public agenda.

This paper’s integrative typology of media roles in agenda-building processes transitions Christians et al’s label from an adjective to a noun, hence from *facilitative* to *facilitator*, to place emphasis on what the media *are* in this role. This role encapsulates the concept of the media as an enabler of a public agenda (Carroll, 2009; Lee & Carroll, 2011: 127; Besiou et al., 2013) conferral by a plurality of media audiences as actors. The role of digital media in political public relations has been recognized as an increasingly important source of communication for the agenda-building process (Schweickart & Neil, 2016), and this paper posits that contemporary news media organizations adopting a facilitator role through digital audience-feedback avenues empower their audiences to push forward a public agenda.

Based on key attributes of this role drawn from similar roles in sociology and mass communication literature, the following definition of the facilitator role is put forward analytically and in encompassing terms:

In the facilitator role media provide a participative arena for their audiences to put forward their own public agenda, typically through the media's online interactive forums; as such media are relatively passive participants in agenda-building processes involving omnidirectional communication flow between social actors (media audiences) and between social actors and the media.

#### *Mobilization: The political actor role*

Finally, media adopting a *radical* (Christians et al., 2009) or *mobilization* (McQuail, 2000) role are predominantly focused on advocating for certain causes, issues and marginalized groups in society. As such, media enacting this role seek to actively expose social, political and corporate injustice and abuses of power. Although the *radical* role proposed by Christians et al (2009) was strongly aligned with the political ideology of Communism, with the collapse of Communism issue- and identity-oriented social movements aligned themselves with media in the radical role, such as alternative media (Atton, 2004) and community media (Howley, 2005) found outside the orbit of mainstream media (Coudry & Curran, 2003). Today the term 'radical' no longer suggests predominantly Marxist perspectives of the political left but "increasingly suggests those fundamentalist approaches that in the Western ideological framework are typically connected to extremist Islamist movements and international terrorism" (2009: 189). Indeed, both left and right fundamentalist approaches still exist today (Dowling, 2001: 88-91). Rather than adopt Christians et al.'s (2009) label of this role, the label *political actor* is assigned to this role in deference to the political actor perspective already developed in political communication studies (see e.g. Page, 1996) and in organization and management studies (see e.g. Deephouse & Heugens, 2009). A political actor perspective is useful to an examination of this mobilization function of the media in agenda-building contexts.

Christians et. al. (2009) describe the *radical* role of media as giving institutional outsiders a greater voice with the goal of helping "minorities articulate an alternative set of goals that represent the needs and just moral claims of all, especially the marginalized, the poor and the dispossessed" (2009: 179). Media in this role are partisan, siding "with those who are developing forms of resistance and advocacy against dominant power holders" (2009: 180).

A typical journalistic ideal applicable to this role is adversarial reporting (Glasser & Ettema, 1989; Olson, 1994). Watchdog journalism (Protess et al., 1992) and investigative journalism (Doyle, 2006; Protess et al., 1992) are also typical in this role. Investigative journalism enables media to proactively uncover and reveal organizational misbehaviour. Finally, advocacy journalism (Janowitz, 1975) assigns journalists the role of participants who "speak on behalf" of groups who typically are denied "powerful spokesmen" (1975: 619) in the media. According to advocacy journalism, journalists are motivated by a desire to redress power imbalances in society and to promote perspectives that are typically under or misrepresented in the media. This aligns with Christians et. al.'s (2009) description of the radical role as challenging the status quo.

Unlike the other three roles, media in this role rely to a lesser degree on the supply of content from other actors. The media themselves are a primary source of content in this role because they actively convey their own agenda. However, although in this role a media organization essentially acts autonomously as the lead actor in mobilizing audiences, other actors, such as activists, may collude—for example, through content sharing—with a media organization if their goals and interests are aligned.

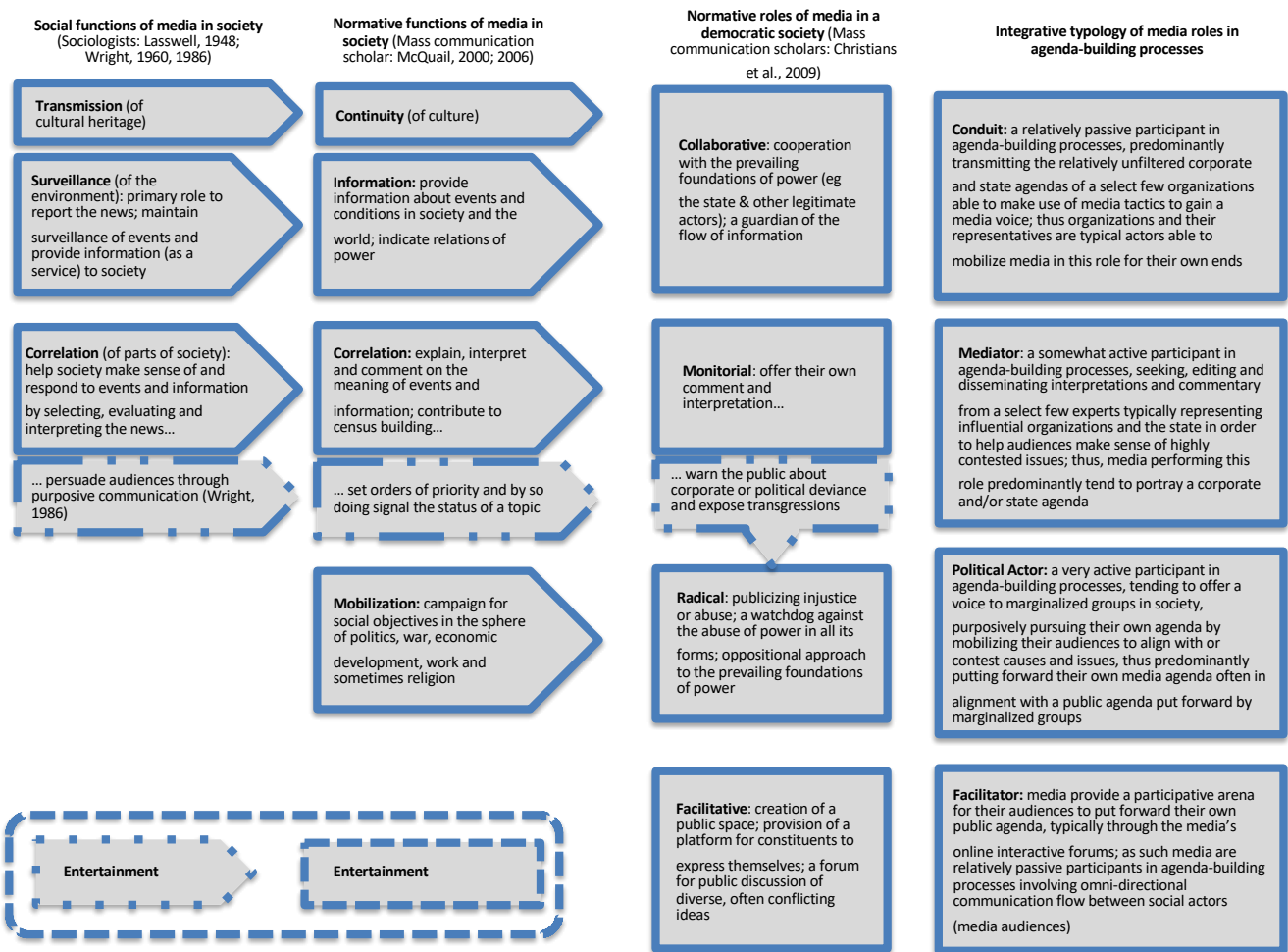
Media performing this role undertake a purposive pursuit of their own agenda over other agendas (Page, 1996). For this reason, I contend that the media agenda (Carroll, 2009) can be seen to dominate



this role while the public agenda (Carroll, 2009; Lee & Carroll, 2011: 127) takes a minor role through the media's advocacy with marginalized groups in society.

Based on key attributes of this role drawn from similar roles in sociology and mass communication literature, the following definition of the political actor role is put forward analytically and in encompassing terms:

Media performing a political actor role are a very active participant in agenda-building processes, tending to offer a voice to marginalized groups in society, purposively pursuing their own agenda by mobilizing their audiences to align with or contest causes and issues, thus predominantly putting forward their own media agenda often in alignment with a public agenda put forward by marginalized groups.



**Figure 1:** Integrative typology of media roles in agenda-building processes based on a synthesis of three typologies of media roles in society.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper develops an integrative typology of four agenda-building media roles of *conduit*, *facilitator*, *mediator* and *political actor*. It makes a theoretical contribution to public relations research by developing a theoretically-refined framework of the roles that news media perform in processes of agenda-building, which is an underdeveloped research area in public relations literature. This typology shifts attention to, and sheds new light on, distinct ways in which contemporary news media organizations serve as a platform for and influence, facilitate and mediate agenda-building

processes alongside multiple other actors in public arenas. The roles the news media play in these processes demand more rigorous and systematic investigation in public relations research in order to better understand not only how the news media perform these roles, but also how organizations—and to some extent their audiences—are able to mobilize the media in these roles in processes in which they collectively construct, negotiate and contest multiple agendas.

This paper's framework of four media roles in agenda-building processes may open up new research avenues through which public relations scholars may explore how the media in their various roles participate in agenda-building processes and hence how this may subsequently and ultimately affect a public agenda. In particular, future research may benefit from drawing on this paper's typology of media roles to identify various news media performing either conduit, facilitator, mediator or political actor roles, for example based largely on their reports about a particular issue or object. Identification of media performing a political actor role as an advocate for marginalized groups in society may offer promise for future research examining how social movements engage with mainstream news media in agenda-building processes. A focus on media performing a facilitator role also offers promise of future research in a number of areas. Contemporary news media increasingly are seeking to better engage with their audiences and to amplify their voice by drawing them into public debates. For example, they are increasingly integrating their audience's social media posts and tweets into news reports.

As for practical implications, the framework of the media's agenda-building roles may help to shed light on how social movements, particularly activist groups and protest movements, can effectively promote their own agenda through mobilizing and aligning with media in both a political actor and a conduit role. Social movements wanting to gain news media support for or against a public cause or issue may benefit from actively collaborating with media in a political actor role while simultaneously mobilizing media in a conduit role. This has implications for corporations and state entities facing simultaneous attacks from both the news media and protest movements.

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Mark Badham (PhD) is Postdoctoral Researcher in Corporate Communication at Jyväskylä University School of Business & Economics in Finland. His research is primarily focused on distinct roles the news media adopt when participating with other actors, such as organisations and media audiences, in mass communication processes (e.g., agenda-building and discursive legitimation processes). A second research interest includes social media engagement by various actors, including organisations, their audiences and the news media. Prior to entering into a full-time academic career, he worked in corporate communication roles for politicians, political parties and NGOs in Australia.