

# Web Portal Feels Like Home. Applying Agenda Setting Theory To Internet-based Media And Their Influence On Cybersociety

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## Abstract

The progressive process of internetization leads the audience little by little to setting aside traditional media of today's every day: dailies, radio and television. The evolution of media use leads to thorough consideration of the future that awaits both media owners and users. Trying to show potential concerns, the author refers to the classic theory of agenda setting (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). American research conducted in 1999 showed distinctive concentration of Internet traffic; 80% of site visits were made to just 0,5% of websites, such as Yahoo!, Excite, eBay et al. (Waxman 1999). A similar tendency emerged in 2004, during Polish research on Internet traffic (Meller 2004).

The paper focuses on the electronic media which may already be an important field of agenda setting research. The analysis concerns the example of Polish Internet users and Polish e-media. As the paper shows, among the latter, a particularly important role is played by portals – the places where beginners usually start their cyberspace adventure and where, paradoxically, they are encouraged to stay most of the time.

Key words:

Agenda setting theory, internet portals, national enclaves over cyberspace.

## 1 The background

The evolution of media use is tangible. A significant drop in readership of the press is a process that has been observed for years. Growing popularity of Internet portals is often indicated as one of the most important reasons of that phenomenon, and a meaningful contribution to the debates about the paperless society. A similar problem awaits the television, even if the present electronic initiatives (TiVo, ManiaTV etc.) are still on the elite stage – and thus far from the popular stage – on the EPS media evolution cycle (Lowenstein & Merrill, 1971). Various research indicates that the growing popularity of broadband Internet connection influences TV use. According to a December 2004 analysis made by prominent Jupiter Research, around 40% of broadband users in Western Europe spent less time watching TV, allocating that time to online activities (Langford 2004).

This context indicates the need of bringing up the well-known agenda setting theory (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) in the context of the Internet. The theory shows a correlation between what the media deems important and salience in the public mind. Thus the question: are there any electronic media already capable of “setting the agendas” for its users?

The answer is affirmative. According to research done in the US, Internet traffic is very homogenous – 80% of website hits were amassed by only 0,5% of all websites. Additionally, a significant amount of these visits were paid to WWW of just seven companies – Yahoo!, Excite (portals), America OnLine, eBay, Microsoft, CMGI and Disney (Waxman 1999). Resembling behavior was found among Polish Internet users.

## 2 Polish portal as a medium

Any given Polish portal is much more than a daily newspaper in an online version. Vast news coverage is a vital part of the content – but still only a part. The portals attract users by offering them numerous gratuitous services, i.e. free e-mail, blog and WWW accounts, a search engine, chat rooms and other activities. There are five major national portals in Poland today. The first one, Wirtualna Polska, was created in 1995, only one year after Yahoo!. Another important portal, Onet.pl, was created back in 1996.

According to Net Track, a long-term research program by SMG/KRC Poland Media, Poland had 26,1% Internet users (age group 15-75) in October 2004, nearing the number to almost 8 million citizens. The research indicates a true domination of portals in the everyday e-life of Poles. Among ten most often visited websites, there were four portals. Three of them in the top four. The leader was Onet.pl – as much as 72,5% of people claimed to have visited it. More than 60% pointed at Wirtualna Polska (2<sup>nd</sup> place) and over 40% – at another portal, Interia.pl (4<sup>th</sup> place). Prior to Interia.pl was a well-known search engine Google (41,6%), the only foreign website in the top ten (Meller 2004). As it turns out, Polish Internet users spend most of their time on the national webpages and also tend to stick just to the major ones. This matches Waxman's analysis from 1999 regarding the concentration of Internet traffic and the key role of just few websites.

### 3 Agenda setting theory

The agenda setting theory was part of a trend that opposed an earlier question whether or not the media dominate people's thoughts. Instead, it focused on analysis of the extent to which the media form and structure the topics that are discussed by the public. These issues were mentioned by P. Lazarsfeld and R. Merton in 1948 and later developed through empirical research by M. McCombs and D. Shaw in 1972 and 1977. The latter two connected the agenda setting phenomenon with frequency of media use and with subjective needs regarding news coming from the media (McCombs & Shaw 1972). To some extent, mass media are capable of influencing the cognitive structure of the public, which is significant in the process of forming their attitudes and behaviors.

### 4 Good guide or a possessive enclave?

The influential role of national portals was of scientific interest also in the past. P. Sitarski points out their role as initiation places for the newbies. The beginners are easily intimidated with the idea of „Internet chaos” and this makes them stick to safe, well advertised, national enclaves over cyberspace – the portals (Sitarski 2000). The author suggests that national discourse is very helpful in overcoming the unknown and as such – often used by e-media (example: „Wirtualna Polska” literally means „Virtual Poland”). As Sitarski mentions, even search engines within the portals are localized (i.e. prefer Polish websites when queried). Polish portals are contradictory – their mission is to guide the users, helping them find their own way in the Internet, but being commercial initiatives that depend on advertisements, they encourage the users to stay. In this context, the agenda setting theory becomes of even bigger interest.

### 5 Conclusions

In the common understanding, the portals play the role of guides and guide-posts combined. Nevertheless, this state is contradictory to their economic well-being and competitive interest. Onet.pl, Wirtualna Polska et al. become national enclaves in cyberspace, putting big effort in keeping the users within – through the vast offer of free services. Furthermore, the portals are the best recognized websites in Poland and the ones most often visited. Keeping in mind that they also deliver journalistic news and often become a new medium of choice, it is important to notice their growing ability of influencing the attitudes present in the society.

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