Chapter 9
Baby Alan’s Death: Setting the Agenda or Managing the Perception?

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on Baby Alan’s death and the celebrated photograph of the event published in the media in early September 2015, this chapter examines how a single photograph affected the importance of the immigration issue within the media agenda. Four main questions are addressed: (1) Which issues were on the media agenda before and after the photograph? (2) What were the main items in the news at the time? (3) What were the keywords concerning the immigration issue? (4) What themes emerged from the visual images? A three-part content analysis was conducted of the five highest-circulation daily newspapers in Turkey, the findings of which confirmed the existence of the “issue-attention cycle.” During the week following Baby Alan’s death, the event was at “Level 4” on the media agenda and the immigration issue gained in importance, reaching “Level 5.” The photograph acted as a spotlight for the refugee issue, serving to increase the importance given by the media to the issue. However, a single photograph was not powerful enough to raise the issue to the top place on the agenda.

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INTRODUCTION

What do you plan to do today? You are reading this paper right now, but after then, what are the other issues that you will be interested in or you will spend your time, perhaps your money? Of course, there are lots of things that you want to do, perhaps there are several things that you need to, and perhaps there are one or two issues that you have to do before than today ends. But you have only 24 for a day. Perhaps you’ve still spent some of it up to now.

There are lots of problems on government’s lists that their voters want them to solve. While it is your own list, you can decide which issues are important and which are not for yourself, so you can decide where to start and where to spend your own money. But if the subject in the sentence changes to a government, we need to ask the same questions: who decides which issues are important for the society, and where the money of the country will be spent? Let me ask the question in other words: Who or what sets the agenda of governments?

The theory of political agenda-setting gives some important hints for this question: Media, president, politicians, and their election campaigns, trigger events, capital and pressure groups. The name of the competition between these characters is called “zero-sum game” (Zhu, 1992). Because every agenda has a limited capacity. For example, you have a time limit for a day 24 hours, and you have limited budget and power for your own problems. A newspapers’ first page only has the capacity for 10-15 news stories or less. A television news broadcast is limited with usually 30 or 45 minutes. When we ask people what are the most important issues facing the country these days, they usually say 4 or 5 issues. Politicians usually focus on one or two issues at the same time. Therefore, there is a kind of fight between the issues to be on the agenda. But the real fight is behind the issues, it is between ones who brings, offers fends or patronize these issues for and on the agenda that may vary between a single person, or a social group, or a political party, or a government.

The theory of agenda-setting as a process, explains the ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites. Agenda-setting offers an explanation of why information about certain issues, and no other issues, is available to the public in democracy; how public opinion is shaped; and why certain issues are addressed through policy actions while other issues are not (Dearing and Rogers, 1996, p.1-2).
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