ON SOME BLIND-SPOTS OF THE AGENDA-SETTING THEORY.
THE MEDIA AND THE “MAD COW” CRISIS POLICY-MAKING IN FRANCE.

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Introduction

The agenda-setting theory is one of the main approaches used to describe the influence of the media on policy-making. Although this theory has been central in international political science, it is not very used in France. Modern French political science is more influenced by sociological, historical and ethnographical scientific methods and intellectual traditions than by quantitative methods and statistic models elaboration. This paper’s hypothesis is that comparing these two epistemological viewpoints on the same object of study (i.e. the social modes of transfer of issue saliency from the media to the public policies) may be heuristic.

Analysing how political and administrative “decision-makers” deal with the “Mad Cow” crisis and its media coverage in the 1990’s France, my PhD research (Nollet 2010) aims to question what the agenda-setting theory assumes. The theoretical background of this research draws bridges between the sociology of newsmaking and the sociology of policymaking. This perspective enables me to answer the following question: how are media-oriented decisions produced? The more emblematic actions in the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis management – such as the French ban on British beef (from March 1996 to October 2002) or the Meat and Bone Meal (MBM) total prohibition in November 2000 – seem less to be based on the genuine necessities than prescribed by the media coverage of the “Mad Cow” disease. In order to sociologically analyse this widespread assumption, the research has to deal with two key-questions:

1. What is the social reality of the media coverage of the “Mad Cow” disease?

2. How political and administrative “decision-makers” take this reality into account when they produce public policies?

In this perspective, useful is the sociological approach that takes together the social agents, their practices, their resources and theirs constraints, as well as their specific logic of action (as a consequence of the differentiation of society into semiautonomous spheres of action). Based on Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory (Bourdieu 1983 & 1996), the sociology of journalistic field (Benson 1998, Benson & Neveu 2005) describes the symbolic and practical rules of the journalistic activity, in other words the journalistic construction of social problems (which refers to framing and agenda-setting operations), as well as the “social organisation of newswork” (Schudson 2000). The sociology of policymaking seems to be a particularity of French political science. It is based on “an in-depth fieldwork in order to

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1 I thank my friend and colleague Clément Desrumaux for his generous help and his precious suggestions. All the remaining mistakes lie with me.
2 The works of Jacques Gerstlé (2001, 2003) are the most notable exceptions.
3 This approach refers to the sociology of social problems (Kitsuse & Spector 1973, Gusfield 1981).
analyze the concrete practices through which a policy is [elaborated and] enforced in everyday life” (Dubois 2009).

With such a sociologic point of view, it appears that the media influence on policy-making is based on the political and administrative agents’ strategic uses of the media. In other words, these agents use the media to legitimate themselves in the political or administrative competition, due to the « symbiotic relationship » (Cook & al 1983.) between the journalistic field on the one hand, and the political and administrative fields on the other hand. Based on ethnographical methods and material (interviews, archive material, biography of ministers’ personal staff, representatives and high civil servants...) the paper can describe precisely what I called *media-oriented political and administrative games*. Indeed, this approach accurately portrays the logic of action (and their variations according to structural, conjuncture and individual factors) by avoiding their reduction in mechanistic variables used in agenda-setting theory. The point of is paper is to show how an ethnographical approach of the media/policy relationship can throw light on some blind-spots of the agenda-setting theory.

To make this point, I first show the agenda-setting theory assumptions that have been acutely criticised by the sociology of newsmaking. Then, I give details about the ethnographical methods I use to analyse the media/policy relationship. Finally, I propose a sociological model of media-oriented policy process in the political and administrative fields.

**The transfer of issue saliency from the media to the policies: Some blind-spots of the agenda-setting theory**

Although the agenda-setting theory is currently the main theoretical framework to conceptualise the media/policy relationship, this is not its primary function. It is the consequence of the connection between two separate research areas, which have concomitantly emerged in the early 1970’s in two fields of social sciences: media sociology and political science. On the one hand, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) elaborated the agenda-setting theory in order to conceive the capacity of the media to impose their definition of electoral issues to the voters. On the other hand, Roger Cobb and Charles Elder (1972) developed the agenda-building theory to explain how policy priorities are determined. These areas of research both inspired numbers of empirical studies and conceptual discussions, impossible to sum up in this paper. A decade later, some scholars have made links between these areas, to evaluate the media’s power on policies. One of the very first scientific articles which mentions both McCombs and Shaw’s article as well as Cobb and Elder’s deals with the 1974 National election in the USA (Erbring & al. 1980). In the following years, many studies analyse the connection between political agendas and public agenda. They introduce a new concept: government’s responsiveness to public opinion (Glynn & al. 1999). In this model, the media/policy relationship is mediated through the general public. Scientific works that focus on the *direct* connection between media agenda and political agenda are much less numerous. For instance, scholars from the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research have conducted an ambitious experience in order to measure the impact of an investigative report on TV upon the general public and policy makers (Cook & al. 1983). One of the most complex and stimulating research in this perspective is Itzhak Yanovitzky’s works about media attention on drunk driving and the policy response to this problem (Yanovitzky 2002).

With this double intellectual source, the agenda-setting theory has inherited some biases in its description of the media influence on policies. The objections raised in this article do not concern methodological criticisms or non-cumulative results (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006); it deals with the epistemological assumptions of the agenda-setting theory.
The intellectualist bias of agenda-setting theory

One of the most fundamental characteristics of the agenda-setting theory is that the media influence on policy is narrowed to symbolic aspects. The connection between journalism and policy-making is based on concepts that describe the selection of issues or policy alternatives. As a consequence, the newsmaking – yet a complex social activity – is reduced to its outputs (i.e. articles, TV reports, titles, etc.). In the same way, the social reality of policymaking is narrowed to knowledge operations, such as classifying policy priorities or formulating policy alternatives. The problem-centred viewpoint of the agenda-setting theory leads to ignore the social agents, the social games and the social structures shaping them. Meaningfully, when Cobb and Elder invented the agenda-building theory in order to criticise the elitist theory of democracy, they introduce an intellectual bias. In their words, the analysis of the (intellectual) domination of some political points of views is replacing the study of the power position occupancy by social elites. That is to say, an ideas struggle-centred approach has taken over an agents-centred sociology. More precisely, the agenda-setting theory does not provide a conceptual framework taking into account the social agents’ practical logics. Indeed, it cannot explain these agents’ contribution to policymaking in sociological terms.

This intellectualist bias is especially problematical when you analyse media effects on public policies. Because the agenda-setting theory does not consider the social agents (i.e. their practical logic and their resources) as an object of study, it tends to assume that ideas have an intrinsic force – which is, of course, an anti-sociological point of view. This paradigm – linked to sociology and psychology - leads to overestimate media cognitive effects on policymakers: from this point of view, exposure to media (and the media agenda) would produce policymakers’ categories of perception and judgement. In other words, the agenda-setting theory – as a model of media/policy relationship – has inherited a strong cognitive point of view from its media power theory genesis.

The mechanical bias of agenda-setting theory

The agenda-setting theory has also inherited a macroscopic point of view from its political science genesis. It does not pay much attention to social agents. Based on a statistical perception of social reality, it tends to postulate the media psycho-sociological effects on policymakers, rather than understand them as real objects of study. Any sociological survey is led on the receptions of messages by policymakers. As a consequence, agenda-setting effects on policymakers and public policies are taken for granted. It is just as if the problems or priorities circulate from media agenda to policy agenda on their own. The social (practical, material...) conditions of such a circulation are not integrated into the analysis. It would not be a problem if it would be a scientific shortcut. But the problem is that the social conditions of this circulation are never treated as a real object of study.

Thus, analysing media/policy relationship with the agenda-setting theory involves a mechanical bias. The circulation from media agenda to policy agenda seems to be an automatic process. Therefore, invisible are the concrete practices, the social agents and the social conditions allowing this circulation. In other words, the agenda-setting theory does not

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4 This remark is akin to Bourdieu’s criticisms towards the internal analysis in media studies (Neveu 2005: 202-203).
5 Even if Itzhak Yanovitzky tends to elaborate a more sociological conception of agenda-setting theory (with a more collective and systemic approach of agenda effects on policymakers, rather than an individual and psychological approach), he cannot abnegate this cognitive bias. In his viewpoint, the collective aspect of the agenda-setting is based on the aggregation of individual intellectual operations.
6 This agentless abstraction is one of Aeron Davis’ criticism of Parliament agenda-setting works. “First is the problem of establishing the line of causality from news media stimuli to political response. Effects research has always struggled to isolate media stimuli and separate them from other possible “real-world” stimuli. Political decision making is no less of a problem. The passage of legislation, from policy idea to votes in the
elaborate an explicative framework of social problems circulation from media agenda to policy agenda, because it does not pay attention to the various agents that implement such a circulation.

**The “media-centric” and “mediacratic” biases of agenda-setting theory**

With these blind-spots (the intellectualist and mechanical biases), the agenda-setting theory assumes that the media would dictate priorities to policymakers on their own. They would hold power to prescribe the list of social problems that should lead to public policies. The ambiguity lies in the statistical link between media agenda and policy agenda. The common variations between these two agendas are interpreted as causal relationships because media agenda is considered as an independent variable. This latter assumption is highly unrealistic: it forgets that newsmaking is heavily dependent on the active role of some sources, and especially official ones. Administrative and political agents mobilise a lot of resources to access to the media and to promote a view of the reality linked to their interests. Consequently, it is quite hazardous to isolate a chronological (and causal) sequence of media agenda-setting from a sequence of political agenda-setting. In doing so, the agenda-setting viewpoint on the media influence on policies is partly based on the fallacy that Philipp Schlesinger (1990) names “media-centrism”: it does not situate the journalistic activity in its larger systemic environment.

This conceptual framework involves a “mediacratic” bias, that is to say it considers media power as an essential property of the media (rather than a characteristic of the journalists/policymakers relationships). This is a journalistic “professional common sense that postulates the omnipotence of television” (Darras 2005: 170), that leaves out that “political and journalistic elites are caught up in a particularly dense and complex net of reciprocal dependencies” (Darras 2005: 167).

**From the effects question to the uses exploration**

The fact that policy agenda fluctuates in the same way as media agenda does not mean that journalists have the power to determine political (or administrative) agents priorities. The concrete circulation of priorities is much more complex. It lies in an active role of political and administrative agents in the enforcement of what seems to be “media power” on policymaking. In order to analyse this latter (social) phenomenon, it is necessary to operate a radical change of viewpoint. Rather than conceptualising the power of the media on public policies in terms of (massive and unidirectional) effects, it is more heuristic to explore the uses of the media made by the policy-making agents. This thought process is inspired by an analogy with cultural studies’ works on media receptions. Rather than analysing what the media do to policymakers, it is necessary to study what the policymakers do with the media. The underlying hypothesis is that if some public decision seems to be media-driven (rather than purely problem-solving), it is because the decision making process is dominated by the most mediatised political and administrative agents; those who are the most involved in interdependency relationships with the journalistic field. The fieldwork is focusing on the way that the political and administrative agents perceive the media, on their concrete practices of media uses and on the social conditions of these uses. This relational sociology allows to link two contradictory phenomena: one the one hand, the media effects on policies, and on the other hand, the fact that, as a general rule, the political field turns out to dictate its hierarchies to the journalistic field. Indeed, if the journalistic field produces some effects on the political (or administrative) field, the necessary condition is that agents from the political (or administrative) field use the media.

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legislature, is usually a slow moving process involving multiple actors and information sources.” (Davis 2007: 182-183).
But the way that political (or administrative) agents use the media is very specific. It is not comparable to the general audience’s uses of the media. It depends on the specific logic of the political (or administrative) field. As political (or administrative) agents, they both read the press (or watch TV, etc.), and access to the media. Rather than using the media, they use the media coverage (i.e. the social process of acceding to the public visibility thanks to mass media). This is a decisive tool of the specific competition at stake in the political (or administrative) field. It has become an essential way to gain legitimacy. The questions that have to be answered, in order to explain the social force of the agenda-setting effect, are the following:

What are the specifically political (or administrative) uses of the media?
How do these practices impact the policymaking practices?\(^7\)

**On ethnographical methods**

In order to give sociological answers to these questions, an intensive ethnographical fieldwork is need. It is the only way to get the empirical data necessary to throw light to the agenda-setting theory blind-spots.

*An monographic approach*

The first choice concerning the research design is to explore the questions with an (apparently) monographic approach. Although comparing is an essential operation for testing a sociological model, it is even more essential to explore intensively the political and administrative uses of the access to the media. This requires focusing on a limited amount of social agents and on a limited period. Instead of analysing a few general and abstract variables, this research aims to describe the concrete practices of using the access to the media in the policy process, in the more detailed and exhaustive way as possible.

The epistemological approach of this paper enables us to draw new perspectives to comprehend the media power on public policy. According to the French sociologist Patrick Champagne: “Pretending that the results of monographic surveys cannot be generalised beyond the cases studied turns out to confuse the empirical generalisation of the results and the theoretical generalisation of an analytical scheme or an explanatory model that has been built in relation to a concrete empirical case”\(^8\) (Champagne 2001: 37). In other words, the evidence does not rely on assessing statistically the media power on policies, but on the objectification of the practical logics of this phenomenon, in order to understand its regularity, as well as its complexity and its contingency.

Of course, the BSE policymaking in France is not a representative case of the media power on public policy. This question has been framed as a sanitary crisis, which involves a very special type of interactions between journalists and the decision-makers agents (Champagne and Marchetti 2005). The “Mad Cow” crisis is characterised by a very intense media coverage of some aspects on the BSE problem and by an exacerbation of the political and administrative sensitiveness to this media coverage. Thus it is a conjuncture, where policymakers’ media-oriented practices are more frequent. But careless generalisation about

\(^7\)These questions are linked to the one that Stephan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst raised about the agenda-setting theory: “In fact, most political agenda setting studies implicitly claim that media coverage mechanically leads to political attention: Political actors adopt media issues simply because they are covered. But this claim is not anchored in any behavioral theory of political actors. Although largely conducted by political scientists, most political agenda setting studies theoretically neglect the political side of the media–politics relationship. The basic question such a theory should primarily answer is simple: Why do political actors embrace issues put forward by the media? Only drawing upon such an explanatory account can precise hypotheses be developed about which political actors are, and when, most inclined to adopt which issues covered in which media.” (Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006: 98-99).

\(^8\)This is my translation.
the media power on policies has to be prohibited. Fortunately, the BSE policy in France concerns a 20 years-long period. During these two decades, crisis management is limited to a few weeks, mainly in 1996 spring and in 2000 autumn. It is possible to compare crisis conjunctures with routine conjunctures.

**Observing the political and administrative practices**

The empirical elements collected have required several research techniques. A large part of the analysis is based on documentary and archive material, from various sources: parliamentary or scientific expertise reports; books written by political or administrative agents, as well as journalists; political and administrative services’ archives, etc. All these documents are used as factual source of information about the BSE policymaking and the media uses by political and administrative agents. They are very useful because they offer the traces of these social agents’ practices without a retrospective viewpoint (contrary to the ex post interviews). One of the most precious archive material is the notes a former Prime minister advisor for political communication. It gives an accurate statement of interactions and concrete practices in the Prime minister’s personal staff. When the archive material does not exist or when it is impossible to access such material, some ethnographic interviews were conducted with the policymakers (mostly some high-ranking public servants) involved in the BSE crisis.

Another (very) important documentary material is constituted by a huge media corpus, which includes thousands of national general-interest press articles and agency copies, as well as the notices of the television news and programmes dedicated to BSE recorded in the national television archive. Three types of analysis have been preceded on this media corpus. First, a comprehensive analysis enables to objectify the main journalistic categories of perception and judgement about BSE problem and policymaking. Then, the media corpus is a useful source of information about the journalists’ practices: the articles conserve some traces of the interactions that constitute the newsmaking process. Finally, some well-informed articles give pertinent information about political (and sometimes administrative) agents’ activities.

**Objectifying capitals and dispositions**

In order to make a sociological analysis of these political and administrative practices, these observations must be completed by an analysis of social trajectories of the political and administrative agents. It enables to objectify the social issues at stake in the political and administrative fields, about BSE media coverage. Information about social positions and trajectories enable to explain the practices and the position-taking that constitute the policymaking process, as well as the media uses. Contrary to the conception of “actors” in the most of public policy theories, social agents are not one-dimensional individuals. It is necessary to take into account their sociological specificity.

**Results: the media-oriented policymaking process**

In order to explain how political and administrative agents take concretely the media into account during the policymaking process, the first step is to characterise – in sociological terms – what “the media” are. Indeed, unlike agenda-setting theory’s assumption, the media...
cannot be narrowed to their outcomes, that is to say the (frames and the hierarchies that structure) articles and TV reports.

Taking both the symbolic and practical rules of media coverage into account

The political and administrative agents take it into account the newsmaking process because, so it has to be considered, as well, in the analysis. In other words, the journalistic field has two faces: a symbolic reality (i.e. articles and TV reports), and a practical reality (i.e. the regularities of journalists practices).

The symbolic aspect of BSE media coverage refers to the categories of perception and judgement that structure the media representation of the “Mad Cow” problem. These categories had deeply changed during the BSE history. From 1985 to 1996, the journalistic field had mainly framed BSE as an agricultural problem (which raises veterinary and commercial issues). It is perceived as a problem of minor importance, which is only destined for a routine policy attention. Since 1996, “Mad Cow” is framed as a public health crisis. The journalistic field focuses on the BSE consequences on the consumers’ health. It generates criticisms towards the Executive (especially the Ministry of Agriculture), according to a managerial conception of public policies. The three main journalistic categories of perception and judgement of public policies are responsiveness (i.e. the fact that the policy fulfils the public problem as it is framed by the journalistic field), independency (i.e. the fact that the policy is not inspired by some lobbies) and transparency (i.e. the fact that policymakers do not conceal information about their activities). In November 2000, a second BSE crisis occurs in France. The media frames are structured in the same line of perception and judgement built in 1996. The main difference is that the 2000 crisis is more politicised than the 1996 one. Political agents are more visible in media representation of the crisis, and political struggles are the main explanatory frame of the policymaking process.

The practical aspect of BSE media coverage refers to journalists’ practices. To put it in a few words, TV has been occupying a dominant position in the journalistic field. It tends to impose its definition of journalism to other journalistic subfields: the priority given to shortened newsmaking process, the short formats constraints and the necessity to illustrate the reports with images. The dominant journalistic norms consist in producing catch-all (commercial) information that maximise audience ratings and lower labour costs (Champagne 2005). This general rule is strengthened in 1996 and in 2000, when the journalistic field focus on BSE, because in that conjuncture, the newsmaking about “Mad Cow” problem is dominated by generalist journalists, such as editorialists, political journalists or investigative journalists (Marchetti 2005).

The media-oriented political game

If political agents make decisions that seem to be inspired by the journalistic frames or agenda, the reason is that the political field tends to be governed by a social rule which is generated by the configuration (according to Elias’ definition) that links political agents and journalists, as well as different kinds of political communication experts (spin doctors, political consultants, pollsters...). In this media-oriented political game, political practices are based on media-access strategies. Political position-takings (and especially those which are involved in policymaking process) are fitted to the symbolic and practical rules of the journalistic field. For instance, the decision-making is shortened to be coherent with the journalistic time: to avoid a perception of the political decision as to slow.

The inclination of political agents to behave according to media-oriented political configuration and, consequently, to the rules of the journalistic field, depends on three set of

12 John Street assets an interesting overview of research on the media impact on politics transformations (Street 2005).
conditions. First, *structural conditions* refer the structural transformation of the political field (i.e. the professionalisation of politics, the “presidentialisation” of the political competition, and the nationalisation of the political field) and the spread of communication techniques and experts within the political field. Theses structural evolutions tend to make media-access an ordinary practice within the political field. Then, *circumstantial conditions* modulate such a structural transformation. The inclination of political agents to transform decisions according to the journalistic field’s rules is stronger under certain circumstances, and, notably, when the journalistic field focuses on the “Mad Cow” disease. Political agents perceive these conjunctures as “crisis” and they adjust their position-taking to what seem to be the public opinion expectations (which are, in reality, the journalistic criteria of “good” policymaking).

Last, media-driven behaviour of political agents depends on individual conditions. The use of the media access in the political game (or the reluctance to use it) depends on each political agent dispositions and interests, which are linked to their position in the political field and to their social trajectory. For instance, political agents who reach rapidly dominant positions in the political field (i.e. politicians who become MPs, party leaders or ministers earlier than most of politicians) or those who just leave dominant positions (i.e. former ministers) are more likely to consider their media image as important and, consequently, to act according to the rules of the journalistic field. Indeed, such trajectories generate resources, constraints, interests and dispositions that favour media-oriented political game. As a consequence, every political agent does not integrate media-oriented criteria in the policymaking process he takes part to.

Within the French political field, the positions located in the executive institutions are the most involved in interdependency relationships with the journalistic field. The media image structures the practices of the President’s and of the ministers’ (as well as their personal staffs’). The political communication in ministers’ staff is amply media-driven. Thus, the amount of writing and arbitration operations, that are implemented by ministers’ staff (and sometimes by the ministers themselves) and that constitute the concrete reality of the policymaking process, are relatively frequently based on media-oriented categories of perception and judgement, as well as on anticipation of the practical rules of the journalistic field. Compared with executive political practices, parliamentary activities involved in policymaking process (i.e. the legislative procedure operations, and some investigations and questions) are less media-driven. In France, MPs and senators are less interdependent with the journalistic field; they are more determined by specifically political rules, such as party discipline. Although the degree of autonomy varies according to individuals and conjunctures, MPs and senators are neither vehicle for media-oriented practices introduction in the political field, nor a powerful a counterbalance to executive political agents heteronomy.

In a nutshell, media framing or agenda-setting effects on political policymakers is a contingent phenomenon. It varies according the journalistic field attention to the policy, and to the dispositions of the political agents that are effectively involved in the decision making. In other words, two conditions explain the most explicitly media-driven decisions during the “Mad Cow” disease. First, they are taken when BSE is at the top of media agenda; then the political agents who take the decision are the most interdependent with the political field (i.e. Prime minister, ministers and the most generalist members in their staff). Two decisions illustrate such media logic in the political field: the 1999 decision not to lift the embargo on beef importations from the UK, and the 2000 decision to ban the MBM in bovine feeding.

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13 Such a media-oriented communication is well described by in the case of the American President (Paletz & Entman 1980).
Another blind-spot of the agenda-setting theory is that it only focuses on the media power on political agents. In other words, it assumes that only political agents take part in policymaking, which is (of course) a highly unrealistic view of this process. On the contrary, it is necessary to analyse the media power on administrative agents because they play a great part in the decision-making process (Campbell 1988).

The administrative field is more autonomous (from the journalistic field) than the political field. But, under certain conditions, some administrative practices of the policymaking process may be media-oriented. High-ranking public servants may be involved in a media-oriented administrative game. But this media-oriented game has a different shape and a lower intensity than in political field. Media access has become one of the issues at stake in the administrative field. Media-oriented communication is one of the most valued criteria of a successful administrative career. “Modern” high civil servants have to make “good” communication, in order to avoid that the journalistic field focus on a deficient policy they pursue. In the administrative field, when the media massively challenge the policy pursued by an administrative department it is perceived as a “crisis”. It is seen as a setback for the head of department, and it may have a negative impact on their career. The administrative activity tends to take this risk into account. A new professional ideology is emerging in the administrative field. This belief makes it a matter of principle to be accountable, that is to say to justify the administrative departments’ position in the public sphere and especially in the media. In other words, administrative legitimacy may be based on the media image on institutions, instead of the Weber model of bureaucracy (i.e. a formal organisation in which rules and hierarchical ranking are used to achieve efficiency). The accountability game is determined by the relationships between administrative agents, the journalistic field, the minister (and his staff), and some communication experts who work for administrative departments.

The administrative field is still very autonomous from the journalistic field. The fact that accountability game determines administrative policymaking practices remains an exception. It notably may be deciding when the journalistic field is focused on a particular policy and/or when a policy is pursued by high civil servants who occupy a position on the top of the hierarchy and have dispositions to use innovative practices, due to their social trajectory. Consequently, media framing or agenda-setting effects on administrative policymakers about BSE is linked to the position and the dispositions of the administrative agents that take charge for the “Mad Cow” disease.

Conclusion

As Stefaan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst (2006) accurately stated, the amount of agenda setting studies that analyse media effects on public policies lead to contradictory results. This indicates that media’s political agenda setting power seems to be a contingent phenomenon. In order to make this contingency intelligible, a sociological theory of political and administrative behaviour is needed. This theory should explain sociologically the political and administrative use of media access and, consequently, the fact that political and administrative agents may take into account the rules of the journalistic field.

This paper hypothesizes that field theory is a convincing behavioural theory for political and administrative agents. It makes agenda setting studies contradictions understandable. First, with the concepts of media-oriented political game and accountability (administrative) game, it can explain why political or administrative agents introduce media-oriented practices and categories of perception in their decision-making. The relational approach of field theory is a useful theoretical framework to state that the media power on public policies lies in the interdependency relationships between the journalistic field on the one hand, and the political
and administrative fields on the other hand. If media “impose” their rules to policymakers, the reason is that policymakers anticipate these rules when they access to media to gain legitimacy (towards public opinion).

But the strength of field theory is that it also account for the limits of such a phenomenon. As a relational sociological framework, it states that every act can only be fully understood according to the visible and invisible relationships with other agents’ acts. In other words, the heteronomous media-oriented position-takings are objectively produced against autonomous expectations (party discipline, coalitional compromises, institutional rules of legislative procedure and of bureaucratic organization of administrative work...). Political agents, and even more administrative agents, cannot behave in a purely media-oriented logic. They are always involved in a configuration of heterogeneous rules and expectations. The journalistic construction of social problems is one on these (the political and administrative agents need to take position – symbolically or/and substantially – to legitimate). But it is far from being the only policy position-taking principle. Most of time, the autonomous rules of political and administrative fields enforce. In these cases, agenda setting effects on public policy are weak or even non-existent. But, under certain circumstantial and individual conditions, political or administrative agents may produce (decisional) position-taking according to the rules of the journalistic field. In other words, media agenda setting effects occur when political agents behave according to the rules of the media-oriented game.

The fact that decision-making may be influenced by autonomous rules or, on the contrary, by the heteronomous rules of the media-oriented game is the consequence that policymaking is a complex process that involves various agents and institutions. It is also a competitive and instable process: the dominant agents (i.e. the agents who concretely impose their categories of perception and judgement in the final decision) change according to the political (or administrative) struggles, the issues at stake and the conjuncture. In some cases, the dominant policymakers are social agents that are largely involved in media-oriented game. Generally, these agents are the ministers and their advisers. In other cases, the policy-making process is dominated by social agents that are relatively autonomous from the media-oriented game, such as MPs or high-ranking public servants (even if there are exceptions and exceptional conjunctures).

REFERENCES


14 “Every position-taking is defined in relation to the space of possibles which is objectively realized as a problematic in the form of the actual or potential position-taking corresponding to the different positions; and it receives its distinctive value from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it.” (Bourdieu 1983: 313)


