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News sources and the same sex marriage issue

Through the lens of the agenda-setting theory

Victoria Chen and Paromita Pain

National Chung Cheng University / The University of Texas at Austin

Using agenda-setting theory, this study explores the effects of news sources on public opinion on the issue of the same-sex marriage over 10 years. It examines immediate substantive salience, immediate affective salience, cumulative substantive salience and cumulative affective salience of the news sources cited in news articles from The New York Times from 2003 to 2013 and compares the coverage to public opinion polls. Four findings merit notice. First, news sources with a clear standpoint had counter effects on public opinion. Second, the salience of news sources is as influential as the affective attribute salience of news sources on public opinion. Official sources had the power to influence public opinion the most. Thirdly, the influence of the media is stronger than the influence of news sources on influencing public opinion. Fourth, LGBTQ sources were the least used sources in the same-sex marriage coverage.

Keywords: same-sex marriage, news sources, public opinion, affective attribute salience, agenda-setting theory

News sources are widely viewed as having a profound influence on news production in their attempts to shape meanings about issues and occurrences and thus influence the media agenda (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Berkowitz, 2009; Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1986). Sources provide information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) accounting for a large proportion of the news that is reported (Berkowitz, 1987; Brown, Bybee, Weardon, & Straugham, 1987; Soloski, 1989). The interplay of source – journalist influence on the news agenda is complex. Though the relationship between journalists and their news sources has frequently been cast as a power relationship (Reese, & Danielian 1989), journalists are major participants in the construction of the media agenda. The craft values of journalism definitely shape decisions as to what is included in mass media content and how that information is presented (Turk & Franklin, 1987).

The agenda-setting theory addresses the idea that the news media not only tell people “what to think about” but also “how to think about it” (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000). Research on the agenda-setting role of the news media has often been guided by a narrow conception of how media content affects members of the public. The focus has, generally, centered on the mirror image model of media effects and an understanding of agenda setting as a sort of ranking of issues which doesn’t highlight the complexities of the processes linking public salience to media attention (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980). Scholars are now beginning to ask more critical questions about who sets the agenda and news sources are one of the most crucial influences (McCombs, 2014). The most important sources include the president and routinized press conferences (McCombs, 2014; Ragas & Tran, 2013; Schudson, 2002). Public relations practitioners provide information subsidies to the media on behalf of their clients to influence the media agenda and potentially affect public opinion (Curtin, 1999) thus lending credence to Sleurs & Jacob’s (2005) assumption that press releases serve the purpose of pre-formulating the news. Previous studies show strong positive relationships between the issues news sources focus on and the attention given in the media to these issues (Rim, Ha, & Kiouisis, 2014). Media agendas are set to a significant degree by news sources instead of the media organization and journalistic norms.

Yet few studies have explored the relationship between news sources and public opinion. The same-sex marriage issue provides an opportunity to examine the association between news sources and public opinion because the issue was highly visible, polarizing, and thus very salient (Ho & McLeod, 2008). Since June 26, 2015, same-sex marriage in the United States has been legal (Liptak, 2015). President Barack Obama declared the ruling a “victory for America” and it came at the end of a long bitter battle. The BBC (2015) reported, that, “In recent years, a wave of legal rulings and a dramatic shift in public opinion have expanded gay marriage in the US.”

Two classic studies have addressed the impact of news sources on public opinion. Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987) showed that different news sources have different levels of impact on public opinion because they have different degrees of salience and credibility. Elite sources and experts positively influence public opinion whereas special interest groups have negative effects. Public opinion is important in controversial issues because society needs to reach consensus for policymaking.

Page et al. (1987) explored the immediate and cumulative impacts of different sources on public opinion in the context of political campaigns. These two studies were conducted more than a decade ago. Baunach (2012) in a seminal study, which looked at the influences of race and religion on public opinion on the same sex marriage issue, found that influences on attitudes differed substantially over

time. By 2010, support for same-sex marriage was much more broad-based, and opposition to same-sex marriage became more localized to specific subgroups – older Americans, Southerners, African Americans, Evangelical Protestants, and Republicans. McCarthy (2015) also found that significant shifts in public opinion had occurred from 1996 to 2015 with a record high of 60% of the public supporting the issue in 2015. The contentious issue of same sex marriage begs a relook at the influence of news sources on public opinion, especially its effects in the context of controversial issues. In this light, this study bypasses the influence of news coverage and looks directly at the relationship between news sources and public opinion. It examines immediate substantive salience, immediate affective salience, cumulative substantive salience and cumulative affective salience of the news sources cited in the news articles from *The New York Times* from 2003 to 2013 and compares the coverage to public opinion polls conducted by Gallup, Pew Research Center and the CBS/NYT from 2003 to 2013. It also analyzes how the salience and affective attribute (tone) of news sources influenced public opinion towards the same-sex marriage issue in terms of three attributes of the issue: religious beliefs, family values, and legal rights; immediately and cumulatively. This study attempts to add to the scholarship on the agenda-setting theory by focusing on the influence of news sources on public opinion.

Literature review

Influences of news sources

Influences on public opinion are complex. Harrison and Michelson (2015) found that the religious identity of sources had priming effects on public attitudes toward the issue of same-sex marriage. Religious sources have a powerful influence on religious respondents' attitudes. Religious audiences exposed to messages sent by religious elite sources supporting same-sex marriage are likely to support marriage equality (Harrison & Michelson, 2015). Kim (2015) compared hostile media effects from mainstream media and online media on public opinion towards same-sex marriage in terms of source credibility and bias in news content. Hostile media effects take place when partisans tend to assess balanced news coverage as biased against their issue position (Kim, 2015). The results showed that user-generated content caused stronger hostile media effects than mainstream media in terms of source credibility.

Importance of official sources

The literature on media sources sheds important light on the agenda-building process and tends to confirm the preponderance of power elites among news sources ranging from external sources in the government and the private sector (Smith, 1993).

Scholars have focused on the importance of official sources, especially in the area of foreign policy and security issues (Bennett & Paletz 1994; Hallin 1992; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; O’Heffernan 1991, 1994). Ryan’s (2004) study of the editorials of ten U.S. newspapers after 9/11 showed that Bush’s “war on terror” case was accepted without any counterarguments and even reinforced by a selective choice of sources. Norris, Kern, and Just (2003) showed that 9/11 formed a “symbolizing critical cultural shift in the predominant news frame used by the American mass media for understanding issues of national security etc.” (p. 20).

Given the competing interests that must be satisfied in the day-to-day production of news, it seems reasonable to expect that elites are more likely to meet standard definitions of reliability, trustworthiness, authoritativeness and articulateness (Brown et al., 1987). But as Smith (1993) has empirically shown in the study of the news coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, non-bureaucratic sources have more credibility, and are thus better able to persuade reporters according to their non-bureaucratic interpretations of events (Smith, 1993). Brown et al. (1987) in their study discovered that front page national and wire stories “depended very heavily” upon routine channels.

In newspapers the use of sources depend on the situation. Tichenor, Donohue, Olien, & Clarke (1980) found that news accounts about controversial public issues in Minnesota communities tended to “reflect the orientations of organizational power centers.” Fishman (2014) explained this as: “Officials have and give pointers; reporters merely get them” (p. iv). A content analysis of 243 U.S. newspaper articles about the issue revealed that male sources were over three times as common as female sources and that male sources expressed negative views toward same-sex marriage more frequently than female sources (Schwartz, 2011). This paper doesn’t look at the effects of gender and news sources but the study does open up interesting lines of query.

News from different sources, however, tended to have different effects and effects of different degrees on candidate poll standings. Cumulative effects of candidate salience on aggregate opinion change were found for non-partisan and neutral news sources – reporters, poll reporting and public documents – whereas the effects of candidate attribute salience mostly came from partisan sources – the candidates themselves and members of the competing political party (Son & Weaver, 2006). Hovland and Weiss (1951) investigated the extent to which opinions were derived

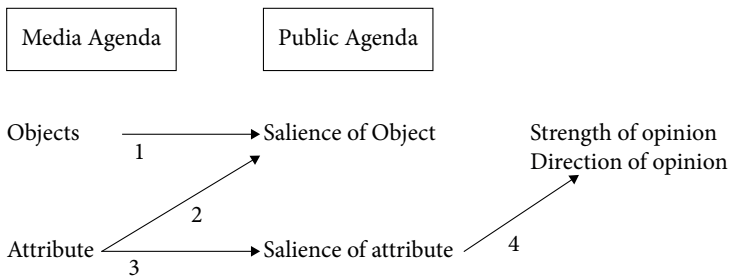
from high and low sources and they found that that some opinions changed in the direction of the communicators after the passage of time. Trustworthy sources influenced opinions far faster and in greater number than sources of low credibility.

Thus the first question this study asks is:

RQ1: What were the dominant sources cited in the same-sex marriage coverage in *The New York Times* from 2003 to 2013?

Agenda setting and sources

The first level of the agenda-setting theory addresses the transmission of object salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. The second level of agenda setting deals with the transmission of attribute salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. In other words, “*the salience of an attribute of an object in media transmits to the salience of the object in public mind*” (McCombs, 2014, p. 52). The influence of attribute agendas in the media as well as the salience of these attributes and objects among the public result in emotions and feelings, which forms public opinion. So the consequences of agenda-setting effects can be measured by measuring the strength and direction of opinion (see Figure 1).



- 1: First level agenda setting.
- 2: Compelling arguments.
- 3: Second-level agenda setting.
- 4: Attribute priming

Figure 1. Compelling arguments (taken from McCombs (2014, p. 52, p. 98))

The focus of the agenda-setting theory is primarily on the interaction between the news media and public opinion. While news cannot be made without sources, sources too need the media to inform the public about their opinions and agendas. Sources seek to influence public opinion through the media. This paper specifically examines the impact of news sources on the direction of public opinion and the salience and the affective attribute salience (tone) of three attributes of the same-sex

marriage issue stratified by news sources cited in news coverage of the controversial issue (see Figure 2).

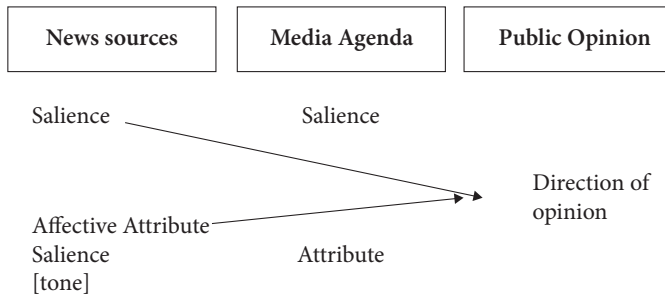


Figure 2. Research model

A previous study (Chen & Pain, 2016) on the influence of the media on public opinion on the same-sex marriage issue found that the media change people's attitudes on controversial issues and that the influence of affective attribute saliency is stronger than substantive attribute saliency on public attitudes. Building on this study, the current paper examines in greater depth the influence of news sources on public opinion to explore if the influence on public opinion is greater from journalists or sources. This study shows that media influence depends on specific news sources and thus contributes to a better understanding of elements that influence public opinion through news coverage. Therefore, the current paper explores the effect of immediate and cumulative saliency and affective attribute saliency of news sources on public opinion.

Sources and controversial issues

Sources and the cues they provide in media messages have important effects. Hartman and Weber's (2009) study concerning the role that sources play in political information processing suggests that individuals are susceptible when exposed to a single consideration from an ideologically congruent source (Druckman, 2001). Relying on a single source could lead to less thoughtful and deliberative conclusions about political issues. As Druckman's (2001) study showed source information serves as a valuable tool, indicating where fellow group members (with similar beliefs) stand on important political issues. In an even-handed debate, in which liberals and conservatives simultaneously present equally valid but opposing concerns, the data showed that ideological cues do not have as strong of an effect on political attitudes. In other words, when sources are multifaceted their cues are weakened.

Page et al. (1987) have indicated that groups and individuals representing various special interests taken together tend to have a negative effect on public opinion and that experts have a substantial impact on public opinion due to their high credibility, especially in the short term. Son and Weaver (2006) whose study examined two levels of media-agenda effects on aggregate public opinion from different news sources showed that both the salience of a candidate and the salience of the attributes of a candidate cumulatively, but not immediately, influenced the candidate's standing in the polls. An analysis of news sources supported the finding that the two levels of agenda-setting effects seemed mostly cumulative rather than immediate. In this light, this analysis examines:

RQ2A: How does the immediate salience of the news sources cited in the same-sex marriage coverage in *The New York Times* influence public opinion toward same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs, family values, and legal rights?

RQ2B: How does the cumulative salience of the news sources in the same-sex news coverage in *The New York Times* influence public opinion toward same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs, family values and legal rights?

RQ3A: How does the immediate affective attribute salience of news sources in the same-sex marriage coverage in *The New York Times* influence public opinion toward same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs, family values, and legal rights?

RQ3B: How does the cumulative affective attribute salience of news sources in the same-sex marriage coverage in *The New York Times* influence public opinion toward same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs, family values, and legal rights?

Method

The study focused on the agenda-setting effect of news sources cited in the same-sex marriage coverage in *The New York Times* from 2003 to 2013 on public opinion towards same-sex marriage. *The New York Times* is selected because scholars have identified it as a key gatekeeper in national news coverage (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Reese & Danielian, 1989; Rogers & Chang, 1991). The agenda-setting power of *The New York Times* has been acknowledged by scholars and is considered the newspaper of record (Harlow & Johnson, 2011; Tan & Weaver, 2013; Winter & Eyal, 1981).

News coverage about same-sex marriage and the public opinion polls on the issue were examined for this study. The study focused on three attributes related to: (1) religious beliefs (whether same-sex marriage is congruent with religious beliefs and its morality); (2) family values (whether same-sex marriage should or should not be legal because it will hurt society, or the institution of marriage/traditional

marriage/ traditional family); and (3) legal rights (same-sex marriage should or should not be legal because it is or is not an issue of legal rights and equality). This study analyzed the relationship between the salience and affective attribute salience (tone) of the news sources in the news coverage related to each attribute and the public opinion poll for each attribute. The study replicates the process three times and each attribute is tested individually.

News coverage of same-sex marriage

The researchers content analyzed same-sex news coverage in section A of the *New York Times* from 2003 to 2013. Search terms for the articles included “same sex marriage” and the timeline. The articles were downloaded from the Lexis-Nexis database. The time period was four weeks prior to each poll because the optimal agenda setting effects takes place within that time frame. Ragas and Tran (2013) found out that news coverage four weeks before the polls influenced public opinion. Similarly, Winter and Eyal (1981) showed that the optimal agenda-setting effect timespan is from four to six weeks. McCombs (2014) indicated that news coverage in the preceding four to eight weeks before the polls have an ideal agenda-setting effect on public opinion. Therefore, news articles four weeks ahead of each poll were selected.

The unit of analysis was the individual news article and 313 articles were analyzed. For the attribute “religious beliefs,” the articles that included the terms “church,” “moral,” “religious” or other religion-related words were selected. Regarding the attribute “family values,” the news articles mentioning the institution of marriage/ traditional marriage/traditional family, or whether same-sex marriage should or should not be legal because it will hurt society were selected. Articles that mentioned “traditional marriage,” “civic union,” or “one man and one woman” were selected. For the attribute “legal rights,” articles that mentioned, “equal,” “right,” or “legal” were selected.

Coded variables

News sources were the main variable in this study. The top three most cited news sources and LGBTQ sources were coded in each news article. The current study coded the salience and the tone of the top three news sources cited in the articles. The categories of news sources was adopted from the content analysis of same-sex marriage coverage conducted by Pew (2013). The 19 mutually exclusive categories were: (1) the president (including president’s family, first lady, and fellow partisans and members of his administration), (2) Congress (including local judges, senators,

representatives and assembly members), (3) business, (4) Supreme Court as an institution, justice (attorney general), (5) lawyers, (6) group advocating same-sex marriage, (7) group opposed to same-sex marriage, (8) religious sources (clergy and people identified with a religious group like pastors), (9) expert/professor, (10) commentators, (11) citizen, (12) celebrity (includes sports figures), (13) polls, (14) Republican partisan, (15) Democratic partisan, (16) other media, (17) plaintiffs in a case, (18) official sources (including clerks, state officials, governors) (19) LGBTQ sources (any news source identified as LGBTQ in the news coverage was coded LGBTQ source as well. For example, if a celebrity source was identified as LGBTQ in a news article, then the celebrity was coded in two categories: one as an LGBTQ source and as a celebrity).

The salience of the news sources was operationalized as the frequency of the news sources cited in the news articles. The cumulative salience of the news sources was the number of times the news source was cited in the coverage from 2003 to 2013 or from T1 to time Tn. The immediate salience of the news sources was operationally defined as the frequency each news source cited in coverage four weeks prior to each poll (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; Son & Weaver, 2006).

Affective salience of the news sources: Each news source was coded on a 5-point scale: clearly pro = 2, probably pro = 1, neutral and uncertain = 0, probably con = -1, and clearly con = -2. The scores were added and averaged for each time interval. The cumulative affective salience of the news sources was operationalized as the accumulative value of the tone of the news sources in the news articles from 2003 to the last poll, meaning from time T1 to time Tn. The immediate affective salience of news sources was operationalized as the tone of the news sources in the articles four weeks prior to each poll.

Ten percent of the sample was randomly selected and coded by two graduate students, using Cohen's k to calculate inter-coder reliability. The overall reliability coefficient was .79. The reliability coefficient was .80 for top three news sources and .92 for LGBTQ news source. The reliability coefficient was .70 for the salience of top three news sources and .86 for the salience of LGBTQ sources. The reliability coefficient was .81 for the affective salience of top three sources.

Public opinion data

Cross-sectional survey data were used in the study. The study gathered 30 polls conducted by Gallup, Pew and CBS/NYT from 2003 to 2013. For the attribute "religious beliefs," 10 polls were gathered from Gallup. The question asked was: "Please tell me whether you personally believe that in general homosexual behavior is morally acceptable or morally wrong." In this study, moral issues were coded as religious issues.

For the attribute “family values,” nine polls were gathered from CBS/NYT. The question related to “family values” asked: “Which statement states your opinion? Gay couples should be allowed to legally marry, or gay couples should be allowed to form civil unions but not legally marry, or there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple’s relationship.” This statement is counted as family values because the question mentions “civil union” instead of “family,” implying that the term family is not appropriate for same-sex couples.

For the attribute “legal rights,” 11 polls were gathered from Pew. The question about “legal rights” asked, “Please tell me whether you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose it...Allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally?” The dependent variable was the percentage of respondents supporting each attribute.

Results

News sources: Trends within the 10-year period

RQ1 examines the dominant sources cited in the same-sex marriage coverage from 2003 to 2013. Religious sources dominated the same-sex marriage coverage from 2003 to 2009. The frequency of the religious sources cited was outnumbered by the frequency of the advocacy groups and opposition groups after 2009, and the frequency of the advocacy and opposition groups cited in the news coverage was similar (see Figure 3).

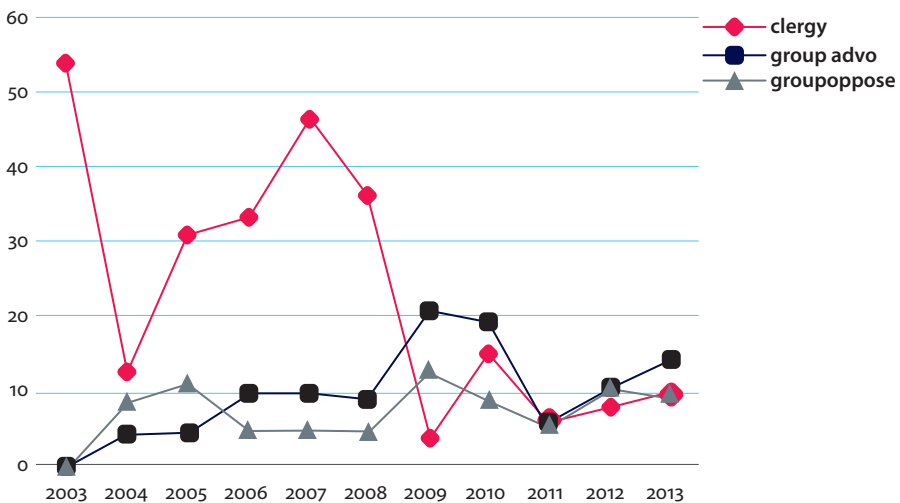


Figure 3. The 10-year trend of news sources cited in the same-sex marriage coverage

The current study also analyzed these news sources in the news coverage related to three attributes of the same-sex marriage issue: religious beliefs, family values, and legal rights separately. Over all, the top three sources cited in the news coverage related to each attribute were religious sources, advocacy groups, and official sources. In the news coverage related to religious beliefs, the top three news sources were religious sources (11.4%), advocacy groups (7.2%), and official sources (7.2%). In the news coverage about family values, the top three news sources cited were religious sources (24.3%), advocacy groups (5.9%), and members of Congress (5.2%). In the news coverage related to legal rights, the top three news sources were religious sources (20.3%), advocacy groups (9%), and official sources (5.3%).

LGBTQ sources in the same-sex news coverage also were coded. Over all, 18.8% of the news coverage cited LGBTQ sources within the 10-year period; 26.7% of the same-sex marriage news coverage about religious beliefs cited LGBTQ sources; 14.9% of the same-sex marriage news coverage about family values cited LGBTQ sources; 20% of the same-sex marriage news articles related to legal rights cited LGBTQ sources.

RQ2 asked how the immediate and cumulative salience of the news sources influenced the public support of same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs, family values, and legal rights. In order to determine the effects of news sources on public opinion, a cross-lagged correlational analysis was performed. No significant results were found in the immediate time periods. However, the lagged cumulative salience of the news sources had significant influence on public support of same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs.

In the news coverage about religious beliefs, the results showed that the frequency of mentions of same-sex marriage by religious sources, advocacy groups and official sources had a significant effect on public support toward same-sex marriage in the long run. Cumulatively, the lagged salience of religious sources, advocacy groups and official sources were highly and strongly associated with public opinion supporting same-sex marriage regarding religious beliefs (see Table 1). The correlations ranged from .93 to .95. Regarding the articles related to family values, the lagged cumulative salience of religious sources is the only one correlated with public opinion. The more frequent the religious sources cited, the more people support same-sex marriage. In the news coverage related to legal rights, the salience and the tone of religious sources are not associated with public opinion. The lagged cumulative salience of advocacy groups and official sources are positively correlated with public opinion.

Table 1. The cross-lagged correlation between public support toward same-sex marriage and the cumulative salience of news source cited in news coverage

| | Lagged religious sources | Religious sources | Lagged advocacy groups | Advocacy groups | Lagged official sources | Official sources |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| The % of the people who support same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs <i>N</i> = 10 ** <i>p</i> < .01 | <i>R</i> = .94** | <i>R</i> = .94** | <i>R</i> = .93** | <i>R</i> = .94** | <i>R</i> = .95** | <i>R</i> = .89** |
| The % of the people who support same-sex marriage in terms of family values <i>N</i> = 9 ** <i>p</i> < .01 | <i>R</i> = .68* | <i>R</i> = .83** | <i>R</i> = .17 | <i>R</i> = .92** | <i>R</i> = -.16 | <i>R</i> = .89** |
| The % of the people who support same-sex marriage in terms of legal rights <i>N</i> = 11 ** <i>p</i> < .01 | <i>R</i> = .61 | <i>R</i> = .56 | <i>R</i> = .73* | <i>R</i> = .71* | <i>R</i> = .70* | <i>R</i> = .65* |

N = Years and the corresponding public opinion polls.

An interesting trend emerged from the data: Public opinion goes against the position of religious sources. The tone of the religious sources in news articles were negative (Religious beliefs: $M = -.45$, $SD = .95$, family values: $M = -.63$, $SD = .58$, Legal rights, $M = -.56$, $SD = .01$). However, the more frequently the religious sources were cited in the news coverage related to religious beliefs and family values, the more public opinion seemed to support same-sex marriage.

RQ3 asked how immediate and cumulative affective attribute salience (the tone) of the news sources influences public support of same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs, family values, and legal rights. Cross-lagged correlational analysis showed that no significant immediate effects were found, but significant cumulative effects occurred as shown in Table 2.

The most significant effect of the affective attribute agenda setting on same-sex marriage about religious beliefs came from advocacy groups and official sources. The salience of the religious sources had an effect on public support, but not the affective attribute salience (tone) of the religious sources. The affective attribute salience of the lagged advocacy groups negatively correlated with the percentage of people who support same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs ($r = -.89$,

Table 2. The cross-lagged correlation between public support toward same-sex marriage and the cumulative affective salience of news sources cited in news coverage

| | Lagged religious sources | Religious sources | Lagged advocacy groups | Advocacy groups | Lagged official sources | Official sources |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| The % of the people who support same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs <i>N</i> = 10 ** <i>p</i> < .01 | <i>R</i> = -.37 | <i>R</i> = -.17 | <i>R</i> = -.89** | <i>R</i> = -.91** | <i>R</i> = .84** | <i>R</i> = .81** |
| The % of the people who support same-sex marriage in terms of family values <i>N</i> = 9 ** <i>p</i> < .01 | <i>R</i> = .80* | <i>R</i> = .59 | <i>R</i> = .89* | <i>R</i> = .93** | <i>R</i> = .86** | <i>R</i> = .75* |
| The % of the people who support same-sex marriage in terms of legal rights <i>N</i> = 11 ** <i>p</i> < .01 | <i>R</i> = -.28 | <i>R</i> = -.16 | <i>R</i> = -.24 | <i>R</i> = -.17 | <i>R</i> = .89** | <i>R</i> = .73* |

N = Years and the corresponding public opinion polls.

p < .01). That is, the more positively advocacy groups were cited in the news coverage, the less people supported the issue of same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs. On the other hand, the lagged correlation indicated that the more positive official news sources were about the issue, the more people supported same-sex marriage in terms of religious beliefs (*R* = .84, *p* < .01). This indicates that official sources were highly influential on public opinion toward same-sex marriage in religious beliefs. The interesting finding is that religious sources had no effect on public opinion towards same-sex marriage whereas advocacy groups had negative effects and official sources had positive effects.

In the same-sex marriage coverage about family values, cross-lagged correlation analysis showed that the lagged affective attribute of religious sources, advocacy groups and legislative sources are positively associated with the percentage of people who support same-sex marriage, meaning that the more positive these three sources were cited in the coverage, the more people supported same-sex marriage in terms of family values.

A cross-lagged correlational analysis showed that the significant effect of the affective attribute salience on same-sex marriage about legal rights came from official

sources. The official sources' cumulative favorable tone on the same-sex marriage issue in the news coverage strongly and positively related to public opinion supporting same-sex marriage. Our correlational analysis suggested that the more positively official news sources were cited, the more people supported same-sex marriage in terms of legal rights ($R = .89, p < .01$).

Discussion

This study sheds light on the effect of news sources in the coverage of the same sex marriage issue on public opinion. By incorporating the salience and the affective attribute salience (tone) of news sources, this study provides a new level of understanding and insight regarding the role news sources play in influencing public opinion and in the agenda-setting power of the media. Four findings merit notice. (1) News sources with a clear standpoint (e.g. pro same-sex marriage or con same-sex marriage) had a counter effect on public opinion. People were skeptical about non-neutral sources. (2) The salience of news sources is as influential as the affective attribute salience of news sources on public opinion. (3) The influence of total media coverage is stronger than the influence of news sources on moving public opinion. (4) LGBTQ sources were the least cited sources on the same-sex marriage coverage, an issue most relevant to them.

Non-neutral sources have a counter effect on public opinion

News sources with a clear standpoint had a counter effect on public opinion. Public opinion goes against the stance of non-neutral news sources, religious sources and advocacy groups. The results showed that the more frequent religious sources were cited, the more people supported the same-sex marriage issue, which is against the position of religious sources toward same-sex marriage.

Religious sources (e.g. church statement, a pastor, a director of communications for the diocese, the denomination's president, Roman Catholic Church, the Catholic Action League of Massachusetts, Point of Grace Church in Waukeg, and Pope Benedict, etc.) were the most salient sources but the tone of religious sources had little effect on public opinion in terms of religious beliefs, suggesting that the public is not influenced by religious sources.

The result can be examined under the historical context of the relationship between the development of same-sex marriage issue and public opinion. The stance of conservative religious groups deviated from the general public opinion. Overall, the debate over the same-sex marriage issue is highly related to religious beliefs,

especially focusing on family values. Conservative religious groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints contended that “Marriage between a man and a woman is the bedrock of society (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2010),” and “Marriage is primarily for procreation (ProCon.org, n.d.)” However, proponents of same-sex marriage asserted that “Same-sex marriage is a civil right and is a secular institution which should not be limited by religious beliefs (ProCon.org, n.d.)” As growing numbers of States granting the right of same-sex couples to marry, public opinion has shifted from 27% of Americans supporting same-sex marriage in 1996 to a record high of 60% in 2015 (McCarthy, 2015; Baunach, 2012). From time to time, religious groups advocate the opposition of same-sex marriage by stating that Churches cannot approve same-sex marriage because same-sex marriage changes the definition of family (Donovan, 2010).

The opinion of religious groups was reflected in the news coverage. Overall, religious sources indicated that same-sex marriage is immoral, unnatural, and destructive. For example:

Last week, Pier Ferdinando Casini, the head of a Catholic centrist party, called gay marriage “a profoundly uncivil idea – a violence of nature against nature”.

(Geitner, 2012, p. 6)

Marriage is holy, while homosexual acts go against the natural moral law.

(On the issues, 2005, p. 10)

The standpoint of religious sources toward issue was clear and strong. Religious sources cited in the coverage conveyed a clear opinion that the legalization of same-sex marriage was considered destructive and harmful, not only for the church, but society as a whole. But the salience of religious sources cited in the coverage is associated with public support toward same-sex marriage issues.

A similar pattern was found in the relationship between the affective salience of advocacy groups and the public support of the issue. The more positively the advocacy groups were cited in the news coverage, the less people supported the same-sex marriage issue in terms of religious beliefs. Overall, advocacy groups worked to speed up the legalization of same-sex marriage by focusing on the hope that they would have the votes to win. For example:

Gay rights advocates said that they think they have the votes to prevail.

(Eckholm, 2013, p. 11)

We’re extremely hopeful that all four of those states will move to marriage equality this year.

(Eckholm, 2013, p. 11)

I think it’s a good wake-up call for the L.G.B.T. community to understand that it’s not the majority leader’s job to get the votes. It’s our job.

(Peters, 2009, p. 16)

The tone of the appeals by advocacy groups didn't sway public opinion in their favor. This is in keeping with Page et al.'s (1987) findings which showed that news sources representing some specific interests, such as business corporations, Jews, and women, often antagonized the public and had a negative effect on public opinion. Son & Weaver (2006) define this as the backfire effect. Criticism from a competing candidate made the rival candidate gain more support in the poll. The news sources with clear positions were considered selfish when they spoke for themselves in the media and thus antagonized the public (Page et al., 1987).

The practical implication for advocacy groups is that mild and balanced messages rather than strong and one-side messages make receivers more receptive to their appeals.

The results show that while religious sources were the most cited sources, they had the least influence on public opinion suggesting that the public is skeptical about information from such sources.

The results showed that agenda-setting effects from news sources occurred on controversial issues, suggesting how and how often news sources are cited influence public opinion in different ways. Whether a news source has a positive or negative impact depends on how the news source was portrayed in the news. A modest and relatively less extreme source positively influenced public opinion whereas sources with extreme stances had a counter effect.

Official sources had the power to influence public opinion towards the same-sex marriage issue

Contradictory to non-neutral sources, official sources (e.g. Supreme Court justices, governors, congressmen, clerks) were the most credible sources with the power to positively influence public opinion. What official sources focused on was the importance of legalization for the same-sex marriage. For example:

It's an important moment in the land of Lincoln. We believe in civil rights and we believe in civil unions. (Davey, 2011, p. 17)

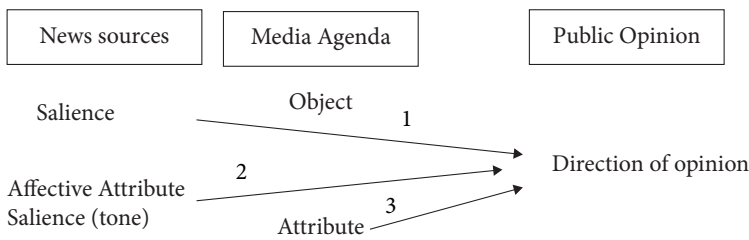
We're the third legislative body in the country to move a marriage bill without being ordered by the courts. That's something New Yorkers should be proud of. (Dominus, 2009, p. 17)

The fact that the legalization of same-sex marriage from official sources is positively related to the public support of same-sex marriage issue indicates that official endorsement works to positively convince the public in the matter of controversial issues. In other words, people were skeptical about non-neutral news sources.

This finding is in agreement with the previous findings that the public was more easily influenced by the sources considered working for public interest, such as news commentators and neutral experts (Page et al., 1987). Official sources are considered credible in the same-sex marriage issue. This explained why official sources were more influential than religious sources and advocacy groups. The findings also support the fact that public official sources are prominent sources because they are routinized and they provide abundant information for the press (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; Schudson, 2002). The study further demonstrates that official sources are not only influential in news coverage but also on public opinion.

The salience of news sources is as influential as the affective attribute salience of news sources on public opinion

The current paper incorporates the influences of news sources in the theoretical map of agenda setting. Frequency of the sources in news coverage has the same effects as the affective attribute salience of specific news sources cited in the coverage on influencing public attitude (see Figure 4, path 1 is as strong as path 2). The cross-lagged correlational analysis demonstrated strong and significant correlations between the salience of news sources and public support of same-sex marriage among three attributes (6 relationships are significant out of 9, see Table 1). Likewise, the similar relationships were found between the affective attribute salience of news sources and public support of same-sex marriage (6 out of 9 relationships are significant, see Table 2). The results showed that the frequency of news sources cited is as influential as the affective attribute salience of news sources on public attitudes toward same-sex marriage. Thus reporters can influence public opinion by either the frequency or the tone of the sources cited.



1. Path 1 is as strong as path 2, suggesting that the salience of news sources are more influential than the affective attribute salience of news sources on public opinion.
2. Path 3 is stronger than path 2, suggesting that media is more influential than news sources on public opinion.

Figure 4.

The influence of media is stronger than the influence of news sources on moving public opinion

Compared to the previous study about the influence of the attribute salience in news coverage on public support of same-sex marriage (Chen & Pain, 2016), the data showed a discrepancy between two relationships: (1) the relationship between the affective attribute cited in media and public support and (2) the relationship between the affective attribute salience of news sources and public support (see Figure 4, path 2 and path 3). For example, media with their ability to choose their sources are more influential than the sources per se who need the media to reach the public.

LGBTQ sources were the least quoted of all sources on the marriage issue

Same-sex marriage is very relevant to LGBTQ groups but the percentage of LGBTQ sources in the news coverage was far less than other sources. Only 18.8% of the news articles cited LGBTQ sources. Two themes emerged from LGBTQ sources. One is related to the legal rights accorded to families. For example:

I believe that visitation rights, health care benefits and other human relationship contracts that are taken for granted by all married people should be available to partners.
(Nagourney, 2005, p. 17)

She said several other women had decided not to ride because they feared they would be recognized and might get fired.
(Kulish, 2010, p. 10)

The second theme is related to revealing their sexual orientation. For example:

I have met bishops who will go and have a lovely dinner with a priest and his gay partner, and then warn the priest that if the dinner becomes public, the bishop will be your worst enemy.
(Goodstein, 2008, p. 18)

Overall, LGBTQ sources mentioned how hard they fought for the legal protection they deserved. The fact that LGBTQ sources were least quoted did not mean that the news coverage didn't focus on the LGBTQ community because advocacy groups were frequently cited news sources in the coverage. One possible explanation for the low salience of LGBTQ sources in the coverage might be that LGBTQ sources did not openly acknowledge they were LGBTQ. They relied on a proxy (advocacy groups) to speak for them, which showed that even in the discussion of same-sex marriage issue, LGBTQ sources remained invisible in public discourse. This is in agreement with previous studies (Schwartz, 2011) which showed that that lesbian sources and women supporting the issue were almost absent from the newspapers from Midwest and South.

Limitations

The study has some limitations. It did not collect all the news coverage from 2003 to 2013. Only the news coverage four weeks prior to the poll was analyzed. Therefore, generalizing the results should be done with caution. The current study only analyzed the frequency of the top three most cited news sources, and fails to provide a holistic picture of the distribution of all news sources. Future studies are encouraged to use qualitative textual analysis to have a better understanding of how news sources were presented in the news coverage.

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Authors' addresses

Victoria Chen
Department of Communication
National Chung Cheng University
168, University Road, Min-Hsiung
Chia-Yi 62102 Taiwan
R.O.C.
vickiechen@utexas.edu

Paromita Pain
School of Journalism
The University of Texas at Austin
300 W Dean Keeton Street, A100
Austin, TX 78712
USA
paromita.pain@gmail.com