

# A Study on the Temporal Agenda Effects of Media and the Public in the Context of Online Agenda-Setting

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**Abstract:** With the development of digital technology and the proliferation of new media, the agenda-setting power of traditional media has gradually weakened, making online agenda-setting a research hotspot. Using the flood incident in Zhuozhou, Hebei Province as a case study, this paper employs time-series analysis to examine the temporal characteristics and causal relationships among traditional media, social media, and public agendas during emergencies. Data sourced from Weibo and the Wises News database were cleaned and analyzed. Results indicate: public agenda exerts stronger influence on social media during the early stages of an event, while traditional media gradually takes the lead in the middle and later stages; traditional media's agenda-setting power over social media follows a similar pattern. Based on these findings, this study recommends leveraging social media's real-time dissemination advantages during emergencies while strengthening traditional media's guiding role in the middle and later stages to calm public sentiment and stabilize public opinion. This research provides new empirical support and methodological innovation for agenda-setting theory.

**Keywords:** Media Agenda; Public Agenda; Temporal Relationship; Public Opinion Dissemination

**Published:** Feb 24, 2026

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.62177/jetp.v3i1.1048>

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of digital information technology and continuous economic progress, the internet's role in social life has grown increasingly prominent. As traditional media's agenda-setting power gradually diminishes, the rise of social media has enabled more diverse and liberated public expression. During sudden incidents, on-site individuals often become the primary source of information dissemination through social media. Emergent events typically encompass natural disasters, accidents, public health crises, and social security incidents, characterized by suddenness, complexity, destructiveness, persistence, and urgency. During their dissemination, such events exhibit rapid speed, broad reach, and strong anonymity, potentially triggering widespread rumors that exacerbate public panic and may even lead to abnormal collective behavior, threatening social stability.

Understanding the interactive mechanisms between media and public agendas becomes particularly crucial when confronting sudden events. Time series analysis, a research focus since the 20th century, provides scientific tools for examining the dynamic shifts in media and public agendas throughout an event's entire lifecycle. Through time series analysis, we can uncover the temporal characteristics and causal relationships between media and public agendas, predict future event

trajectories, and assist media and policymakers in better guiding public discourse while reducing uncertainty and confusion in information dissemination. Therefore, integrating time series analysis into agenda studies of sudden events not only represents theoretical innovation but also provides scientific support for practical public opinion management and social governance, thereby promoting harmonious and stable societal development.

## 2. Research Review

The agenda-setting theory was first proposed by American scholars Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their 1968 “Town of Chapel Hill Study.” It primarily explains how mass media can influence public attention and perception of events through varying degrees of prominence in reporting. Their 1972 publication *The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media* marked the formal establishment of this theory (McCombs M, 2008). Subsequently, the theory underwent multiple expansions and developments, with the 1997 introduction of “attribute agenda setting” enriching its conceptual framework (McCombs M et al., 1997). With the advent of the internet era, traditional agenda-setting theory gradually struggled to adapt to the new media environment. In 2014, Guo Lei and McCombs et al. proposed the “network agenda setting theory,” emphasizing that media can reconstruct public memory networks by linking new and old information through cognitive networks (Guo L, 2015). This theory breaks through the traditional framework, offering a new perspective for agenda-setting research.

In recent years, with the rapid development of new media, network agenda setting has become a research hotspot. Studies focus on comparisons between emerging and traditional media in agenda setting, the dynamic changes in network agenda structures, and their impact on public cognition (Xi Y & Luo H, 2018). Particularly in social media environments, the public is not only passive recipients of agendas but also active agenda-setters. Related research encompasses multiple dimensions, including the interactive agendas between emerging and traditional media, networked cognitive structures, and time-lag effects. However, compared to international research, studies in China on online agenda setting began relatively late, and empirical research within the new media context remains underdeveloped.

As a crucial statistical method, time series analysis traces its application back to ancient Egyptians observing the Nile’s flood patterns (Li D, 2018). In the 1920s, Jule first proposed the autoregressive (AR) model, marking the entry of time series analysis into the field of mathematical statistics (Luo F & Wu C, 2009). In the 1970s, Box and Jenkins developed the ARIMA model, further refining the theoretical framework of time series analysis and establishing a comprehensive analytical process encompassing data smoothing, model identification, parameter estimation, and model testing (Box Get al., 1970). China only began in-depth research on time series analysis methods in the 1980s, achieving certain progress in the field of nonlinear time series, such as studies on the stationarity of nonlinear autoregressive models. Application domains include psychology, financial analysis, and social welfare research. Zhao Bei and Zhang Hongzhong used the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study to establish a VAR model, employing Granger causality and impulse response analysis. They revealed temporal lags between social bots, media, and the public. The research found that both social bots and media exert positive influences on the public agenda, with media’s contribution to the public agenda gradually increasing over time (Zhao B & Zhang H, 2023). In these fields, time series analysis is employed to uncover patterns in data changes, forecast trends, and model complex social phenomena.

Despite significant achievements in both theoretical and applied research on time series analysis, certain limitations persist. Domestic research generally lacks systematic approaches and theoretical depth, with models requiring further optimization in predictive accuracy and applicability. Moreover, as data within the new media context grows increasingly complex and dynamic, existing models exhibit limited analytical capabilities for networked time-series data. Future research should prioritize model innovation and optimization, strengthen the integration of theoretical research with practical applications, and leverage international academic exchanges to absorb advanced methodologies. This approach will elevate the standard of time-series analysis research domestically, thereby providing scientific support for agenda-setting studies in the era of networked data.

## 3. Research Design

### 3.1 Research Event

This study focuses on the severe flooding in Zhuozhou City triggered by Typhoon Duli starting July 29, 2024. Torrential rains caused extreme flooding in Zhuozhou, with water depths exceeding 6 meters, affecting 130,000 people. The primary cause of the flooding was the immense rainfall, which exceeded the design standards of Zhuozhou's flood control infrastructure, resulting in insufficient flood discharge capacity. Rescue operations proved highly complex, with teams in some areas needing to clear debris before effective assistance could be provided. The National Flood Control and Drought Relief Headquarters and social rescue forces responded urgently, dispatching expert teams to the disaster zone to support relief efforts and initiate post-disaster recovery work. As floodwaters gradually receded, reconstruction efforts commenced intensively. This study collected relevant reports and comments from Weibo platforms and traditional media using data collection tools (such as Souke and Baidu Baike). The data is categorized into two main types: media reports and public comments, covering content from official media, commercial media, and influential individual accounts.

This study confined its timeframe to the entire process of the public opinion cycle surrounding the Zhuozhou, Hebei flood incident: incubation, outbreak, peak, and decline phases. Data collection spanned 17 days of relevant reports and blog posts from July 30 to August 16, 2023. According to the data, July 30–31 constituted the emergence phase; August 1–3 represented the outbreak phase; August 4–5 marked the peak phase; and August 6–16 formed the decline phase. This classification of public opinion stages was determined based on the characteristics of reporting volume across different media types.

### 3.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study aims to examine the relationship between media coverage and the public's temporal agenda during sudden events, as well as the patterns of their evolution. Specific questions include: How do the temporal characteristics of media coverage influence public attention to issues? What are the interactive relationships and causal effects between media and public agendas? How do the issues receiving media and public attention change over time during the course of an event? Through analyzing these questions, the study seeks to reveal the mechanisms of information dissemination between media and the public, understand the role of media in public opinion guidance, and provide a basis for public sentiment management and media strategies. Using the "Hebei Zhuozhou Heavy Rain" incident as a case study, the research will explore public opinion guidance strategies and their dissemination patterns during sudden events.

The hypotheses of this study are as follows:

H1: At different stages of sudden events, traditional media, social media, and the public exhibit distinct leadership and followership relationships in the temporal dimension of agenda setting.

H2: Throughout the event lifecycle, agenda setting by traditional media, social media, and the public displays different temporal characteristics.

H3: In the trend of public opinion shifts, specific trend characteristics emerge among traditional media, social media, and the public.

H4: Does a causal relationship exist among the agendas of traditional media, social media, and the public in the trajectory of public opinion?

### 3.3 Research Methodology

This study employs ARIMA and VAR models from time series analysis to examine and forecast the temporal evolution of media and public agendas during sudden events. First, relevant concepts and model developments are reviewed. Subsequently, these models are applied to analyze the "Hebei Zhuozhou Heavy Rainfall" incident through collecting and organizing related report data. Time-series dynamic data of the event is obtained via observation, investigation, and statistical methods. Based on this data, correlation analyses are conducted, and appropriate random models are selected for curve fitting. This reveals the underlying patterns of change in media and public agendas and forecasts their future trends. The research not only examines surface-level developmental patterns but also delves into the intrinsic mechanisms driving these changes. Ultimately, through model analysis, predictive conclusions regarding the evolution of media and public agendas are drawn, providing scientific grounds for public opinion management and strategic adjustments.

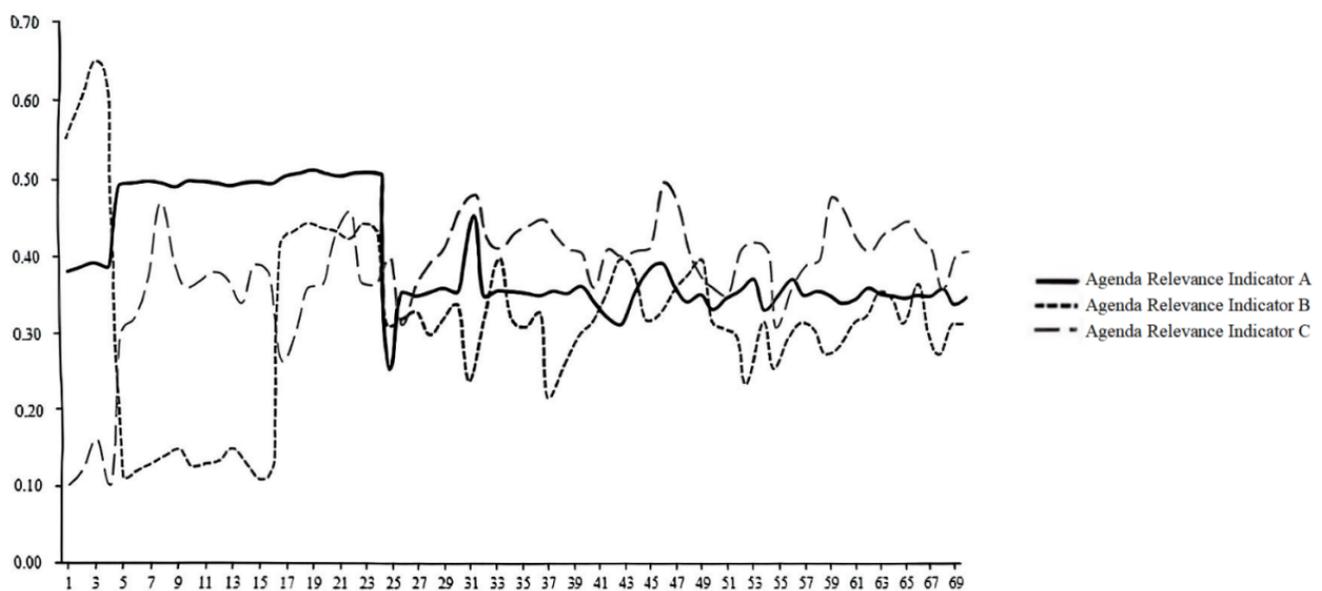
## 4. Data Analysis Results

### 4.1 QAP Index of Agenda Relevance

The QAP index serves as a crucial tool for testing hypotheses and predicting future trend shifts in target subjects. This study constructs daily-count time series data using three primary subjects: public agenda, traditional media agenda, and social media agenda. By modeling the time series data through the ARIMA model and analyzing it via Granger causality tests, we delve into the interrelationships among these three subjects across different stages of public opinion surrounding sudden events.

The findings reveal significant differences in the QAP correlation indices between public and media agendas across distinct public opinion phases. As illustrated in Figure 1, the evolving trends of these indices across phases reflect the interactive dynamics and temporal characteristics among the three agenda-setting entities. These analyses enhance our understanding of the dynamic mechanisms of agenda setting, providing quantitative foundations for forecasting public opinion trends. Among these, Agenda Correlation Index A represents the QAP index between traditional media and the public, Agenda Correlation Index B represents the QAP index between social media and the public, and Agenda Correlation Index C represents the QAP index between traditional media and social media.

Figure 1: Agenda Correlation Index of Traditional Media, Social Media, and the Public as Public Opinion Develops



## 4.2 Stationarity Analysis and Determination of Lag Order

In time series analysis, stationarity is a crucial prerequisite for model establishment. One commonly used stationarity test is the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test, also known as the unit root test. This method assesses whether a time series is stationary by testing the null hypothesis that the series is non-stationary. ADF test results typically include critical values, t-statistics, and p-values. If the p-value is less than the significance level (e.g., 0.1 or 0.05), the null hypothesis can be rejected, indicating the series is stationary. In research, if a time series is non-stationary, first- or second-order differencing is applied until stationarity is achieved. If the series remains non-stationary after second-order differencing, the second-order difference is adopted as the final differencing order.

For the time series data of the agenda relevance index, the initial ADF test yielded a t-statistic of -1.796 and a p-value of 0.383, exceeding the 0.1 significance level. The critical values at 1%, 5%, and 10% significance levels were -3.532, -2.906, and -2.590, respectively. Since the null hypothesis could not be rejected, the sequence was determined to be non-stationary. After applying first-order differencing to the data and re-running the ADF test, the p-value was 0.000, less than 0.01. At a 99% confidence level, the null hypothesis can be rejected, confirming the series is now stationary. Consequently, the ARIMA model parameters were determined as follows: autoregressive order (3), differencing order (0), and moving average order (1).

## 4.3 Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average Model

The Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) model, also known as the Box-Jenkins model, is a widely used method for analyzing and modeling various time series data. It accommodates the combined effects of trend variations,

seasonal fluctuations, and random disturbances within the sequence. (Li Na, Li Yong, Feng Jiacheng, 2021.) The ARIMA model parameters were determined as follows: autoregressive order (3), differencing order (1), and moving average order (1).

### 4.3.1 Future Trends in the Relationship Between Traditional Media and the Public Agenda

Table 1: ARIMA (3,1,1) Model Parameters for the Relationship Between Traditional Media and the Public Agenda

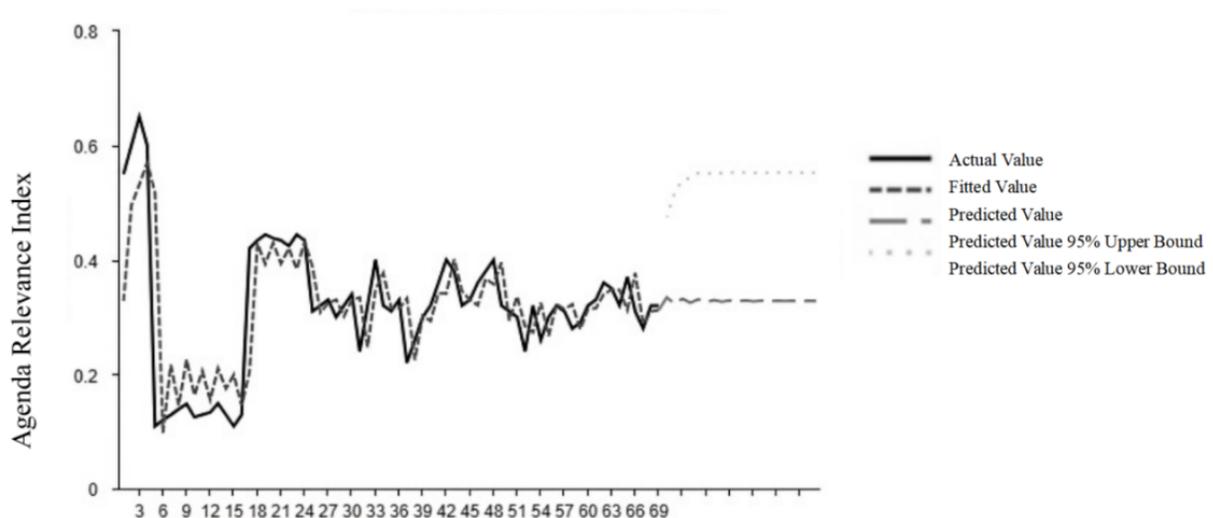
Term	Symbol	Symbol	Standard Error	z-value	p-value	95% CI
Constant term	c	-0.000	0.001	-0.362	0.717	-0.002 ~ 0.001
AR parameter	$\alpha_1$	0.610	0.209	2.922	0.003	0.201 ~ 1.020
	$\alpha_2$	0.160	0.395	0.404	0.686	-0.615 ~ 0.935
	$\alpha_3$	0.037	0.408	0.090	0.928	-0.762 ~ 0.836
MA Parameters	$\beta_1$	-0.980	0.297	-3.295	0.001	-1.562 ~ -0.397
AIC Value: -238.322 BIC Value: -225.005						

Researchers conducted a time-series analysis of the agenda relevance index over 17 days and forecasted trends for the subsequent four days. Results indicated that during the initial phase of the event, the public agenda exerted minimal influence on traditional media agendas, reflecting traditional media’s lagging agenda-setting and failure to respond promptly to public opinion. Over time, the public agenda’s influence on media fluctuated slightly: rising from Day 17 to Day 18, dipping slightly from Day 18 to Day 19, declining continuously from Day 19 to Day 20, and then rising again marginally from Day 20 to Day 21. This indicates that the public agenda exerts a certain degree of persistence on traditional media. Traditional media’s delayed response to public feedback may lead to the spread of irrational opinions, potentially causing social unrest. With the proliferation of social media, the public has emerged as agenda-setters capable of influencing traditional media’s reporting priorities.

### 4.3.2 Future Trends in the Relationship Between Social Media and the Public Agenda

Researchers analyzed the agenda correlation index over 17 days using time series analysis and projected trends for the subsequent four days. Results indicate that during the event’s early stages, the public agenda exerted significant influence on social media agendas, with this impact gradually diminishing later on. Specifically, the influence surged significantly on Day 18, rose slightly from Days 19 to 20, and then declined slightly from Days 20 to 21. Reverse agenda analysis indicates that public influence on social media exhibits fluctuating growth, reflecting social media’s rapid responsiveness and attention to public opinion. During the early stages of public sentiment, the public swiftly generates attention through social platforms, turning issues into hot topics. Later on, as information updates rapidly, the influence of the public agenda diminishes.

Figure 2: Time Series and Forecast Chart of Social Media and Public Agenda QAP Index



### 4.3.3 Future Trend Changes in the Relationship Between Traditional Media and Social Media Agendas

Researchers conducted time series modeling on the 17-day agenda correlation index and forecasted trends for the subsequent four days. Results indicate that during the early stages of public discourse, traditional media exerted relatively weak influence on social media agendas. This reflects traditional media's limitations in guidance and discourse authority, as well as their lag in agenda setting. However, from days 18 to 22, traditional media's agenda-setting efficacy over social media showed a significant upward trend. This indicates its strengthened dominance in the mid-to-late stages of the public opinion event, while the public's voice through social media gradually weakened. Traditional media's values progressively took center stage. This phenomenon stems from the fact that during the early stages, traditional media failed to promptly set the agenda due to time lags, and social media was more influenced by the public agenda, focusing on event information and sentiments. However, in the middle and later stages, faced with vast and complex information, the public and social media tended to rely on authoritative traditional media reports. Leveraging priority access to interviews, rigorous review systems, and credibility and authenticity, traditional media gradually increased their influence on social media agendas.

### 4.4 Granger Causality Test Analysis

As a statistical method, the Granger causality test is typically used to predict the stationarity of time series data and assess causal relationships between variables within the data. However, it is only applicable to variable prediction in econometrics. Before conducting a Granger causality test, unit root tests must be performed on the stationarity of each indicator's time series. Results indicate that during the early stages of public opinion, traditional media exerted limited agenda-setting influence, while social media agendas were significantly shaped by public sentiment. As public discourse evolved, traditional media progressively strengthened their influence over social media agendas, whereas social media's impact on public agendas diminished, revealing pronounced time lags and causal relationships.

Table 2: Granger Causality Test Results

Null Hypothesis H0
'Agenda Relevance Index A' is not a Granger cause of 'Agenda Relevance Index B'
'Agenda Relevance Index A' is not a Granger cause of 'Agenda Relevance Index C'
'Agenda Relevance Index B' is not a Granger cause of 'Agenda Relevance Index A'
'Agenda Relevance Index B' is not a Granger cause of 'Agenda Relevance Index C'
'Agenda Relevance Index C' is not a Granger cause of 'Agenda Relevance Index A'
'Agenda Relevance Index C' is not a Granger cause of 'Agenda Relevance Index B'

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

### 5.1 The temporal agenda exhibits dynamic, complex, and multifaceted characteristics

The shift from agenda lag to instantaneous agendas: "Agenda lag" refers to the time delay between public attention and decision-making. Early research indicated that media agendas required several months to translate into public agendas (Stone G & McCombs M, 1981). The proliferation of new media and social platforms has significantly shortened this lag time. Accelerated information dissemination enables public issues to spread rapidly and influence policy agendas. This shift promotes more democratic, scientific, and transparent policymaking while enhancing governmental responsiveness. However, it also increases policy-making complexity and may lead to short-term decisions dominated by public sentiment. Transition from Static to Dynamic Agendas: With the rise of digital media and social platforms, agenda-setting has shifted from unidirectional dissemination to multidirectional interaction, exhibiting dynamic changes. Research indicates that media agendas demonstrate varying focuses and directions at different times, particularly during emergencies where issues emerge and fade more rapidly. Dynamic agendas accelerate policy responses but also bring challenges like information overload and unfocused public discourse, requiring governments to pay greater attention to public feedback and enhance communication

and collaboration. Iteration from Linear to Networked Agendas: Traditional linear agenda-setting featured one-way information flow, with the public passively receiving content. With advancements in information technology, communication has shifted to interactive, multi-directional networked structures, enabling freer and more flexible interactions between the public and media. This shift offers new avenues for policy-making and social governance but may also lead to issues like information fragmentation and opinion polarization. Governments and platforms must strengthen information oversight to ensure a healthy online environment. From Traditional to Online Public Spheres: The rise of online public spheres has transformed information dissemination, with traditional social spheres gradually transitioning to digital ones. Individuals gain equal voice in cyberspace, and expression becomes more diverse. This shift impacts social structures and cultural forms while also bringing challenges like information overload and privacy breaches, requiring society to navigate new challenges alongside the conveniences of the internet.

## **5.2 Public Opinion Governance Should Shift from Agenda Lag to Agenda Leadership**

This study examines the dynamic relationship among traditional media agendas, social media agendas, and public agendas in agenda-setting, based on time-series data from the flood incident in Zhuozhou, Hebei. Findings indicate that within the reverse agenda-setting framework, the public agenda significantly influenced both traditional media and social media agendas, while traditional media agendas also impacted social media agendas. Specifically, the public agenda exerted strong influence on social media agendas during the early stages of the incident, but its effectiveness gradually diminished as the situation evolved. Conversely, the contribution of public agendas to traditional media agendas steadily increases over time, while the influence of traditional media agendas on social media agendas also grows (Peng B, 2019). This indicates that traditional media retains a dominant position in the middle and late stages of public discourse and plays a crucial role in shaping social media agendas. During the initial phase of sudden events, traditional media agendas exhibit noticeable lag, whereas social media rapidly reflects public sentiment and drives the formation of public opinion. Thus, social media and public agendas dominate this phase. As public sentiment evolves, traditional media gradually becomes the primary force guiding discourse, particularly in steering and controlling public opinion. Moreover, the rise of social media and public agendas highlights the mechanism of media empowerment, enabling the public to engage in free discussion anytime and anywhere, transforming the one-way nature of information dissemination. Current agenda-setting exhibits characteristics of diversity, interactivity, and fluidity. The intertwined influence of traditional media, social media, and the public on agendas has formed a more complex networked agenda. This phenomenon indicates that agenda-setting is no longer a singular linear process but rather the result of multi-party interaction. Overall, the interplay among diverse agenda-setting actors necessitates a time-based approach to guide public sentiment more scientifically. This shift offers fresh perspectives and methodologies for media to navigate public opinion during emergencies.

## **5.3 Establishing Agenda Dominance Through Multi-Dimensional Stakeholder Participation**

In today's highly developed information society, media agenda-setting plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and opinion trends. However, challenges persist due to the lag in media agendas, the influence of emotional media, and the guiding role of dominant agendas (Dong X & Gong H, 2024). To address these issues, media outlets, governments, and the public must collaborate to optimize agenda-setting. First, mitigating the negative effects of media agenda lag is paramount. Such lag often results in delayed, inaccurate information dissemination, potentially misleading the public. To enhance timeliness, media outlets should strengthen collaboration, share information resources, and improve the promptness and accuracy of reporting. Concurrently, elevating public media literacy can bolster information discernment capabilities, reducing misinformation. Furthermore, media outlets should establish effective feedback mechanisms and public opinion guidance systems to adjust reporting content promptly based on public feedback, thereby enhancing public trust and satisfaction. Secondly, emotional media's agenda intervention plays a vital role during socially sensitive periods. At specific times—such as holidays, major events, or sudden crises—emotional media should intervene promptly according to public emotional needs to reduce panic and misunderstanding. The topics selected by emotional media should focus on content that resonates with the public, and appropriate communication methods should be employed to enhance the effectiveness of the intervention. However, media must adhere to principles of truthfulness and fairness during interventions to avoid

misleading the public. Government oversight of media should be strengthened to ensure the legitimacy and effectiveness of such interventions. Finally, the future trajectory of the agenda will depend on the guiding role of dominant agendas. Against the backdrop of networked information dissemination, the diversity of information sources and channels complicates agenda-setting. Technological empowerment and media convergence have made information more diverse and globalized, increasing public access points while heightening the difficulty of discernment. Consequently, the guiding role of dominant agendas becomes particularly crucial. Media must foster interactivity in information dissemination, build credible and impartial communication platforms, and adjust agenda-setting in response to societal needs and evolving times to adapt to changing social environments. Optimizing media agenda-setting requires attention to information timeliness, interactive dissemination, and diversity. By enhancing public media literacy and government oversight, transparency, fairness, and effectiveness in information dissemination can be ensured. This will support the sustainable development of the media industry and foster a healthy public opinion environment.

## 6. Conclusion

This study employs time-series analysis to explore the interactive relationship between media and public agendas during the Zhuozhou flood incident. While the study reveals mechanisms of agenda-setting during emergencies, certain limitations exist. First, data quality is constrained, particularly in the later stages of the event, where data incompleteness affects the accuracy of findings. Second, the treatment of multiple variables is insufficient, and time-series methods struggle to fully capture complex interactive relationships. Future research could integrate qualitative analysis, big data technology, and dynamic models to enhance depth and breadth. Furthermore, the scarcity of relevant domestic and international literature, coupled with translation and comprehension challenges, has hindered in-depth theoretical exploration. Finally, limitations exist in model selection and parameter settings, suggesting the potential adoption of more flexible analytical approaches. Nevertheless, this study offers a fresh perspective on understanding agenda-setting during emergencies. Future research holds promise in further elucidating the interactive mechanisms between media and the public, thereby providing more reliable theoretical support for public opinion guidance and policy formulation.

## Funding

Paradigm Shift: Theoretical Implications, Research Approaches, and Methodological Exploration of Algorithmic Agendas in the Context of Intelligent Media (XW24203)

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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