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Print media impact on state legislative policy agendas

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PRINT MEDIA IMPACT
ON STATE LEGISLATIVE POLICY AGENDAS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

By
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B.A., University of South Florida, 1996

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ABSTRACT

Using a survey of Louisiana's State Legislature, this study examined the role media have in developing state legislators' policy agendas by exploring the function of news media in the public policy process. The study also tested whether there was a correlation between media use, years of legislative service, and education level.

This thesis was also able to establish a correlation between media use and gender, with results suggesting that female state legislators rely on newspapers more than their male counterparts.

The results suggest that legislators do seek out issues in newspapers that affect the communities and constituents they serve and that newspapers do prompt their taking legislative action. As much as they use media, however, legislators do not have a particularly high regard for it. Legislators responded that newspapers favor one side in their reporting of the news and were split evenly when asked whether they felt newspapers were accurate in their reporting. Regardless of these perceptions, legislators continue to use newspapers to generate their legislative agendas.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The media-government relationship was forged more than 200 years ago with the protections provided by the First Amendment. This relationship, however, changed considerably during the last century. The change was technological, with the emergence of a 24-hour news cycle through radio, television, and the Internet, and resulted in tactical changes with how media covered government and how public officials reacted.

The inescapable nature of media's presence, left mass communication researchers and scholars to conclude that media may not tell people what to think, but do tell the public what to think about (Cohen 13). Many scholars now view omnipotent mass media as the system linking the public with political officials and have typically concentrated on the public-policymaker link, employing McComb's "agenda-setting" theory to examine the relationship between the two (Rogers and Dearing, 556; Swanson 603).

While this research has certainly shed light on the influence media have on the public's agenda, it has overlooked the fact that there is more to the media-policymaker link than its use as a thermometer for public opinion or its usefulness in political rhetoric. Indeed, Maxwell McCombs, the father of mass communication's agenda-setting theory, writes that although the theory is well-mapped, one aspect that has received little attention is "the media and public's impact on policy and decision-making agendas" (McCombs, Danielian and Wanta, 290).

However obvious the inference that media provide the necessary connection for our continued democracy, there has been relatively little empirical research conducted to examine the role media play in the policymaking process at the national level. Even

fewer studies examine the relationship between policymaking and media at the state level. This gap in the current research highlights a fundamental weakness in current political communication research.

Purpose

This thesis examines the role media have in developing state legislators' policy agendas. The purpose of this thesis is to clarify the role print media have in setting and altering legislative agendas by exploring the function of news media in the public policy process, particularly the "predecision" process, and to determine whether Louisiana state legislators use media to formulate or modify policy agendas. This was tested by examining legislators' perception and use of newspapers when developing their legislative agendas using the survey method.

Research Questions

This thesis examined legislators' use of media in setting their legislative agendas by answering the following questions:

1. Do state policymakers take some policy cues from local and national newspapers?
Further, do legislators continue to reference newspapers throughout the legislative session, following reports on legislation they may have introduced, and are state legislators inclined to change their legislation in response to a negative newspaper editorial?
2. Do media's usefulness to legislators vary by whether they are from a rural or urban district?

3. Is there a correlation between legislators' perception of newspapers' accuracy and objectiveness in reporting the news and their use of newspapers to generate policy options?

Significance of Study

Media play a significant and commanding role in democracy and public affairs, substantially impacting the formation of policy agendas and the performance of political institutions (Linsky, 1986). And “although the verdict is mixed about the extent of media influence on various policy arenas, evidence strongly suggests it is a sizable factor” (Graber 251). Media serve as both the primary and, in some cases, the only mechanism communicating information to the public. In addition, media often serve as the internal communication device among public officials and government leaders (Kingdon 59; Cohen 41).

The second research question tests whether legislators from rural districts rely on their constituent contacts and community relationships more than legislators from urban districts. That assumption comes from the knowledge that generally the population is more dispersed in rural districts than urban ones, and legislators from such districts may be more isolated from their constituents. Some research suggests that as societies become more sophisticated, the distance between government and citizens grows, creating gaps in democracy and our representative form of government.

Knowing what state legislators think of media and how they use it in their legislative capacity will better help specify the dynamics of the media-policymaker relationship, and may impact how we are governed. If legislators and policymakers take their legislative cues from the media, then determining their perception of media becomes

increasingly important to average citizens, lobbying groups, and even other legislators. Understanding legislative perceptions may also affect how lobbyists and voters work to influence legislators and their voting behavior.

President George Bush's comment during a *Today* show interview, accusing the media of being "liberal" and suggesting that media favor one political party over another, reminds us of media's relevance to political discourse and the importance of the media-policymaker relationship, regardless of one's overt distrust of the other. Walter Lippmann (1922) made a similar argument about the media, claiming that "unbiased information is essential" and that "unreliable news sources are the basic problem of democracy" (Lippmann xi). He meant that if newspapers do not do their job of accurately and objectively reporting the news, then policymakers and the public are going to fail at their job of governing.

If Bush thought media are biased, would he be less affected or influenced by newspaper reports, even if by all accounts the facts reported were true and accurate? And would the degree of his media use affect his policy decisions and how he governed? Somewhat similar questions were asked of the Alabama legislature, where it was found that "the extent to which news media are perceived as adversaries may diminish the likelihood of their serving publicly elected representatives (Riffe 327). This suggests a subtle role for media; one that could potentially change the dynamics of the media-policymaker relationship.

Using Walter Lippmann's assertion that accurate and unbiased information are essential for representative government to work successfully, the third research question

attempts to determine whether there is a correlation between legislators' perception of newspapers' accuracy and objectiveness in reporting the news and media use.

In addition, this thesis attempts to identify specific correlations between media use, political party affiliation, and the number of years served in the legislature. The thesis tests whether these two variables, particularly the latter, influence a legislator's use of the media.

Organization of Paper

Beginning with Chapter 2, this paper outlines the relevant literature explaining policy cycles, agenda streams, causal flow, and mass media influence. The literature is divided into two subsections and is not necessarily presented chronologically. The purpose of the literature review is to provide the reader with a synopsis of relevant political science and mass communication studies concerning how policies are created and enacted.

As evidenced in the literature review, research has been conducted independently, with little synthesis of findings in terms of connecting relevant political science research with mass communication research. In other words, the literature provides a great deal of theory but limited empirical evidence to prove my claim that state legislators take policy cues from print media. Because of this, I rely heavily on past theoretical studies to establish a foundation for my hypotheses.

The methodology is the focus in Chapter 3. Because this chapter explains in exhaustive detail the rationale in the research design and survey questions, and because this rationale hinges on the structure of the Louisiana State legislature, an explanation of

the state legislature including committee membership is provided. And, of course, this chapter also discusses the research and sampling methods used to gather data.

Chapters 4 and 5 include a summary of the survey results and findings as well as a conclusion and suggestions for further research. It is the hope of this author that this study will provoke questions and thoughts for future inquiries.

The terms “government” or “legislators” refer to the Louisiana state Representatives and Senators. And by “media” or the “press,” I mean general circulation newspapers, not trade journals or targeted publications.

It is also worth noting what this thesis does not do. It neither attempts to define what constitutes objective news reporting nor does it determine how media should handle public policy debates. It does identify several approaches to public policy formation through examples and the literature review, but in no way does it suggest which process is more effective or reliable.

Another issue not explored in this paper is the extent to which other forms of media influence the policy cycle. Certainly the external environment influences policy decisions. However to limit the scope of this research, this paper does not address the impact of television coverage, radio, or other news reports on the development of policy decisions. That task would have proven unmanageable. And for that reason, only print media receive attention.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Very few studies develop theories demonstrating media's ability to directly influence state lawmakers. Mass communication research generally concerns itself with questions on the "effects of media on agendas through public agenda-setting studies" (Swanson 609), and political science studies explore how competing agendas and "contextual influences" initiate the development of public policy (Swanson 612).

These studies do provide evidence of how media indirectly influence policymakers by way of impacting public opinion, or influencing other agendas for policy initiation and enactment; however, they do not adequately focus on the causal connection between media and public policy development. By that, I mean media have the ability to directly shape legislative agendas.

This chapter briefly highlights the relevant mass communication and political science studies before reviewing the limited research focusing on the initiation of public policy by media.

Media, Public and Policy Agendas

Public policymaking requires the involvement of three agendas: policy agendas, public agendas and media agendas (McQuail 356; Rogers and Dearing 556), with legislators determining their priorities relative to what appears on the various agendas (Swanson 1988).

To illustrate, political science research explores how public policy develops by examining the information flow (Sabatier and Whiteman 1985; Bradley 1980; and Riffe 1988 and 1990), looking at who is affected (Stone 1997; Kingdon 1995; Cobb and Elder

1972; and Walker 1977), the policy's relative level of importance among government agencies (Cobb and Elder 1972; Kingdon 1995; and Stone 1997), whether the proposed policy includes the practical application of programs and policies (Stone 1997), and what the policy's and public's relationship is with the media agenda (Kingdon 1995; Linsky 1986; Cobb and Elder 1972; and Rogers and Dearing 1988). Mass communication literature focuses on the last element by exploring the relationship between the media agenda and public opinion.

President Lincoln said: "Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed" (from Rogers and Dearing 555). Lincoln's comments suggest that public opinion plays an important role in the policymaking process and that favorable public opinion is necessary for successful policies. Public opinion is a necessary ingredient for democracy and, as such, has a substantial impact on public agendas and subsequently on policy agendas.

Policymakers determine public opinion based on their perceptions of the participating public. Voting outcomes and voter attendance are two examples, wherein politicians gain insight on voter preferences based on quantifiable numbers. Public officials respond to "intensity, resources and organizations in constructing their ideas about public opinion" (Kenamer 46).

Agenda-setting research is concerned with identifying and exploring societal influences, by using two research traditions: agenda-setting and agenda building (Rogers and Dearing 556). The authors define agenda-setting as a process by which media communicate the relative importance of issues and events to the public. Others define agenda-setting as the process by which problems become salient as political issues

around which policy alternatives can be defined and support or opposition can be crystallized (Cobb and Elder; Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980, Cook, Tyler, Goetz, et. al, 1983)).

Agenda-setting suggests that the public's attention to issues closely tracks the issues receiving media coverage (Kingdon, 1994; Miller, Goldenberg and Erbring, 1979; Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller, 1980; and Funkhouser, 1973). However, as Benjamin Page points out, the relationship between public policy and public opinion is even more confused by the problem of causal inference. That is, when policies and opinions correspond, it is difficult to determine whether policies influenced public opinion or vice versa (Page 25).

Dennis McQuail points out similar limitations in agenda-setting research (1987). McQuail suggests that agenda-setting remains a "plausible but unproven idea" (McQuail 356), as the theory presupposes a process of influence which could, in theory, flow in the opposite direction. That is, agenda-setting suggests that political priorities flow to the media, and the media increase its coverage of the issue, thereby influencing public opinion. McQuail proposes this process could be reversed, thereby making the agenda-setting theory less powerful.

And as Cook indicates in her study of agenda-setting effects, "there are many factors which might potentially lead issues to achieve salience" (Cook, Tyler, Goetz, et al., 17), including "specialist" legislators (Sabatier and Whiteman 395) or "insider" sources (Riffe 323).

Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller echo this sentiment in their agenda-setting research and state that "issues can and do arise from sources other than media exposure"

(Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller 17). This was confirmed in a study of Alabama's legislature, where "insiders" eclipsed news media as a preferred source of information (Riffe 323). And previous studies support the notion that media are an "unimportant source of decision information" (Sabatier and Whiteman 1985; Bradley 1980). These findings suggest that media are not necessarily the link between public opinion and policy agendas.

Overall, the previous paragraphs demonstrate media's relevance to public opinion formation and agenda-setting research. Researchers have made significant progress in demonstrating how these two theories collectively influence policymakers. Unfortunately, there are far fewer attempts to understand how media help shape the policy agendas of the decision makers (Cook, Tyler, Goetz, et. al. 16; Lambeth 1978).

Making A Connection: Media and Public Policy

Besides playing an important role in elevating issues to the systemic agenda, which Cobb and Elder define as issues "meriting public attention and are within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority," (Cobb and Elder 85 and 91) media possess a "distinctive capability to shape public policy" (Spitzer 5). Kingdon suggests news media shape public policy by linking people inside and outside government with the latest developments, breakthroughs, and information. Kingdon writes that one White House insider suggested that the President was not even aware of a problem until it appeared on the front page of a national paper. Upon reading the paper, that issue became the focus of the day's work (1995).

A study conducted by Robert Muccigrosso contemplates the role media (television) played in accelerating violence during coverage of the Watts Riots in Los

Angeles, as well as the influence coverage had on urban relations (Graber 255).

Muccigrosso concludes that television's impact, while often misrepresenting and exaggerating events, is useful for "informing beleaguered denizens of cities" (Graber 258). He also illustrates how coverage can produce swift remedial action among policymakers (Graber 251).

Muccigrosso's research is significant to this study because of the suggestion that television serves as a type of "call to action" among viewers. While his study focuses on television's impact on viewers, his findings imply that television-watching legislators may experience the same effects. Muccigrosso's findings provide the potential for legislators to be influenced by other forms of media, including newspapers.

Leff, Protess and Brooks found this to be true in their third analysis of how investigative journalism influenced the public and policymakers' perception of police officers (Leff, Protess and Brooks 301). While their study restricted media influence to a specific topic—police brutality—it serves as a useful reference for this study. It also provides evidence that media significantly change public opinion and the opinions of policymakers, although to a lesser degree. The researchers hypothesized that after viewing the report, policymakers would increase their time and commitment to issues relating to police brutality. However, the researchers' findings did not allow them to draw any definitive conclusions (Leff, Protess and Brooks 310).

In a second, subsequent study, the same researchers examined the effects of a newspaper's investigative series reporting government improprieties in the handling of rape cases (Protess et al. 1985). Their subsequent study is relevant to this research because they focus on the impact of newspapers; however, their findings were limited

because their pretest showed already high levels of awareness and concern about crime (Leff, Protess and Brooks 301). Also, the researchers were surprised to see that the largest measurable effect of these newspaper stories was on the medium itself rather than the audiences (Leff, Protess and Brooks 302). That is, the newspaper, in this case the *Chicago Sun-Times*, increased the number, length, and prominence of stories about rape. The authors concluded that reactions among policy makers were “symbolic” and were likely to have occurred without the media stimulus (Leff, Protess and Brooks 302).

The literature presented so far supports the claim that media have the capacity to shape public opinion and can influence some stages of the public policy process; however, previous research examining the public policy process tends to overlook the role media play in “initiating” policy. Kingdon points out in his research that, while studies are saturated with demonstrations of the viability (strength) of media influence once a policy is formulated, accounts of how the media influence the “predecision” policy process are overlooked (Kingdon 19).

Kingdon indicates in his research that media report what is going on in government, rather than having an independent effect on government, and he concludes that media have less effect on policy agendas than even he anticipated (Kingdon 59). Kingdon initially thought that media would have a significant impact on the policy agendas of legislators and policy leaders, but in fact, policymakers admitted that media were not a significant consideration.

Timothy Cook, in his book *Governing with the News: the News Media as a Political Institution* (1998), takes specific exception to Kingdon’s conclusion and argues

that politicians have “incorporated the needs of the news media in their priorities, options, and decisions” (Cook 183).

Similarly, in Lambeth’s 1978 examination of the *Perceived Influence of the Press on Energy Policy Making*, he asserts that the press is “not impotent” in its coverage (Lambeth 11). However, he finds that the press has “low to moderate” influence on those Congressmen active in energy-policy making, in relation to the frequency of interaction and usefulness of the press (Lambeth 13). In other words, Lambeth concludes “the more sources interact with the press the more useful are they likely to perceive it” (Lambeth 18).

Similar examinations of media use suggest that “media influence views about issue importance,” as indicated in the 1983 study *Media and Agenda Setting: Effects on the Public, Interest Group Leaders, Policy Makers and Policy* (Cook, Tyler, Goetz, et al. 16). The authors’ research focused on Illinois legislators’ reaction to a nationally televised investigative report uncovering fraud in local hospitals. Cook, et al. conclude that media do not create an impact among legislators, but rather legislative action was prompted by the collaboration among journalists and policymakers (Cook, Tyler, Goetz, et al. 32). This implies that media affect agendas but do not initiate policy action (Cook, Tyler, Goetz, et al. 32).

A study evaluating how education issues in Boston reach the policy agenda found that “problem visibility, strong political sponsorship, and the availability of solutions” contributed to policymakers’ giving attention to the education issue (Portz 371). Portz concluded “media can play an important role in problem visibility” but have limited impact otherwise.

Denise Scheberle found that media have more of an impact than just providing visibility in her evaluation of the environmental agenda. She found media served as an “influential trigger for legislative action” (Scheberle 78). Media attention caused the EPA to respond to public demands, but it was an article in *The New York Times* that served as a catalyst for state legislators to take legislative actions in the regions affected by radon (Scheberle 79). Her findings support my notion that newspapers are used to initiate policy agendas.

Louisiana State Representative Warren Triche alluded to how newspaper coverage can give pause to legislators (The Advocate, 5/19/00). In his address on the House Floor, Triche announced “If you look at today’s newspaper, and you saw some of the things that went on and heard some of the things that went on. . .it’ll make you stop and think and wonder. . . .” Indeed, Representative Triche’s comments suggest that legislators do or, at the very least, should give consideration to the articles that appear in the newspaper.

Several things seem obvious from the literature review. Mass communication literature supports the idea that media, by influencing public opinion, impact the development of policy agendas. And public policy literature shows how policymakers pull ideas from competing agendas to generate ideas for their legislative agendas. What neither discipline does is give adequate attention to how policymakers employ media to generate their legislative agendas. Also, neither discipline adequately examines whether the level and degree of media use is relative to legislator’s perception of the media.

It is clear that media are relevant to policymakers in terms of helping or impeding favorable public opinion. But aside from the few studies mentioned in this chapter, there is a need for more research to look at how policymakers and legislators, particularly at the state level, find media relevant to the creation of their legislative agendas.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of newspapers on setting legislative policy agendas. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The quantitative data came from a single survey instrument (Appendix A). Qualitative data was gathered from informal conversations with state legislators.

Louisiana State Legislature

Louisiana's legislature consists of two houses—the Senate and the House of Representatives. The state constitution establishes the maximum number of Senators and Representatives, with neither exceeding 39 nor 105, respectively, totaling 144 legislators (La. Const. Art. III §3).

Both the Senate and the House have 17 standing committees that meet during legislative sessions to consider and report on proposed legislative actions. Of the 17 committees between the two chambers, only eight share the same name. Some House committees, although they deliberate on identical legislation as the Senate, have different committee names. The Senate has Judiciary A, Judiciary B, and Judiciary C, whereas in the House, the corresponding committees are titled Civil Law and Procedure, Judiciary, and Administration of Criminal Justice, respectively. In other instances, both chambers share names, such as the Committees on Health and Welfare, Agriculture, and Education.

Legislative Session

As specified by the constitution, the “legislature is a continuous body during the term for which its members are elected;” (La. Const. Art. III, §1(B)). The governor has constitutional authority to call a “special” session (La. Const. Art. III, §2(B)), that is, a

legislative session separate and apart from the regularly scheduled yearly sessions.

Governor M.J. “Mike” Foster, Jr. declared the four weeks between March 13 and April 17, 2000, as the legislative special session. It was during this legislative session that I distributed my survey instrument.

I chose to administer surveys to legislators rather than conducting focus groups or personal interviews for a few reasons. Time and convenience were issues—for both the legislators and me. The likelihood of scheduling an hour, or even a fraction of an hour, with each legislator would have been too laborious for one researcher.

Certainly personal interviews would provide this study with useful data but attempting to meet with each legislator would have proven next to impossible. Besides being under a time limit, travel was also a consideration. Not every legislator has an office at the Capitol, making the scheduling of focus groups or off-site interviews very difficult and expensive. Also, such a choice would possibly dissuade some legislators from participating in the study. Finally, surveys provided the anonymity required for those legislators uncomfortable with identifying themselves. A majority of legislators opted out of answering the last survey question, which asked them to provide their district numbers for statistical purposes, showing a concern about identification.

Sampling

I originally thought the most effective research design for this thesis would be a stratified sample, which would allow for adequate representation of the state’s legislature with regard to sex, age, religion, income level, and ethnicity. Stratifying ensures the sample has exactly the same proportions in each demographic category as the whole population (Fowler 16). Because it was the intent for this thesis to test the likelihood of

correlations between policy cues and specific legislators, I originally thought the sample should proportionately represent the legislature.

However, because there are only 144 legislators in the total population, the immediate concern became primarily one garnering an adequate rate of response. If a stratified sample were used, the sample size would have become significantly smaller, well before taking into account those legislators who would choose not to respond, further reducing the actual number of respondents. Also, self-administered questionnaires typically have low collection and response rates (Miller and Whicker 89), providing an additional reason to survey all legislators.

To help prevent a low response rate, I decided to limit the questionnaire to 29 questions. I hoped that limiting or keeping the number of questions small would increase the number of completed surveys. Additionally, I wrote mostly closed-ended questions, in order to reduce confusion and limit the number of response categories among legislators. The survey contained only one open-ended question where legislators could make additional comments. Few took advantage of the opportunity.

The survey design or question construction sought information in two areas: the newspaper reading habits of legislators, such as whether legislators read more during the legislative session, and whether newspapers influenced the genesis of their policy agendas and at what stage in the legislative process. Specific questions asked about whether legislators read newspapers purposely to design their policy agenda or whether they consult the newspaper during committee or floor debates, or any variation thereof.

Newspapers are defined as those dailies most widely and commonly read among legislators, including local and national publications--- *The Advocate*, *The Times*

Picayune, The Alexandria Town Talk, the Monroe-News Star, the Washington Post, The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and USA Today, as well as two regional newspapers: *The Houston Chronicle* and *The Dallas Morning News*. Regional papers were included because legislators who represent areas bordering Texas and have access to such newspapers may include them in their daily reading. Newspapers from Arkansas and Mississippi were not included in the survey because neither state produces a nationally recognized, regional newspaper.

Because the dependent variable in this study is the influence of newspapers on the development of legislative agendas by state legislators, the majority of questions focused specifically on, first of all, whether legislators read newspapers, and if so, whether they use what they read in them to influence their decisions when generating their legislative agenda. Independent variables consist of the frequency of newspaper use and legislators' opinions of media in general. Consistent with past political science research, I included a question to determine which sources, in general were most useful in providing legislators with information necessary for policymaking (see Bradley 395).

Newly elected legislators were excluded from the survey because they had yet to participate in a legislative session. The survey's first question served as a filter by asking whether the 2000 legislative session was their first. If legislators answered that question in the affirmative, it directed them to skip forward to question 19. That way, I still captured the demographic data, but did not include them in my analysis of media use.

Legislators were asked to gauge the amount of time they read the newspaper during legislative sessions, and whether they read any newspaper they would not

ordinarily read if the legislature were not in session. It was the intent of these questions to determine whether legislators seek out information as it relates to their work.

Once it was established that legislators did indeed read newspapers, the next series of questions determined the importance of newspapers in their legislative work, relative to other possible influences, such as local and national television news, radio, constituent contact, and polling data. In other words, I wanted legislators to rank the importance of newspapers in relation to other sources of information when putting together their legislative requests. Do legislators rely only on constituent contact or polling data when drafting legislation, or are they influenced by newspaper reporting and news articles?

Other questions sought to measure the general attitude of legislators toward media in general. Specifically, these questions gauged the level of trust legislators have of the media, whether they believe the media are objective, how accurate they think the media are in terms of reporting stories, and how important media are in terms of educating the public about public policy issues.

These questions were included to determine whether legislators' overall perception of the media influenced the likelihood of their using media as an information source. If legislators questioned media's credibility or their ability to report stories objectively and accurately, then it was assumed that legislators might not look to newspapers as a guide when developing their policy agendas. On the other hand, if legislators answered survey questions that supported the idea that media are fair in their representation of the news, it was assumed they would be more inclined to reference newspapers as a policy guide. The three questions on media perception came from a

survey administered by The Pew Research Center for the Press (1999). I chose these questions because they already had been tested as reliable and valid indicators for gauging media perception.

I also gathered demographic data in the survey, specifically focusing on district population and size. These demographic questions were included so correlations could be established between media use and urban or rural demographics. I hypothesized that legislators who represented urban districts relied more on media to generate ideas, than legislators in rural areas, who would rely more on constituent input. My assumption here was that constituents in small, rural districts would have more access to the legislators, than those in larger urban districts, thereby having a greater influence on the policy agenda.

Anecdotal Data

In addition to using the survey, I had conversations with two legislators who were willing to talk in more detail about whether they used the newspaper to generate their legislative agenda and under what conditions. The conversations I had took place after the distribution of the survey instruments and were used for anecdotal purposes only. These were not formal interviews and followed no specific outline. Rather, the discussions focused on recent newspaper articles and legislative response to such articles.

Both agreed to speak openly about what prompts them to take legislative action, but only one agreed with my notion that the newspaper is a catalyst. Those conversations are included in my findings in the following chapter.

Validity and Reliability

It is typically considered best to pre-test questionnaires on a group of potential respondents (Fowler 102). The ideal research design for testing causal hypotheses about the agenda-setting capacity of the press is a pre-test/post-test experimental design utilizing a control group which has not been exposed to the media event (Cook, Tyler, Goetz, et al. 17). Because pre-testing on the population was not an option for this study, I opted instead to have the survey reviewed by two professors familiar with survey construction and who could attest to the clarity of the instructions and questions. After their review, minor adjustments were made and the survey was ready for distribution.

Reliability is a necessary consideration in survey construction and distribution. Questions are reliable if they are interpreted the same way by all those participating in the study (Miller and Whicker 89). In other words, questions must mean the same thing to all respondents. One question in particular, which I thought was clear in meaning, unfortunately stumped a few legislators, who did not answer the question the way I had hoped. The results for the survey and this question in particular will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

Question validity was also a consideration. Questions are valid when “answers correspond to what they are intended to measure” (Fowler 69). I chose to increase the validity of my survey by asking multiple, “unidimensional” questions, in different forms, that measure the same subject (Fowler 69, 92). For example, my survey asked legislators three separate times, in three different formats, whether newspaper articles prompt their taking legislative action.

Administering the Survey

This section describes the distribution of the survey in both chambers, starting with the House of Representatives. Unfortunately the approach taken to administer the survey to House members was not the same approach permitted in administering the survey to Senate members.

To distribute the surveys, I sought approval and assistance from Charlie Dewitt, the Speaker of the House. He allowed employees in his office to distribute my survey instrument at the commencement of a day's deliberation. It was not unusual for the legislature to convene in the early afternoon and work until early evening. My hope was that during the few hours that legislators were on the House floor, they would complete the survey. Also, the Speaker's office was kind enough to put a cover note on each survey that indicated he requested its completion. This procedure ensured that the intended population actually completed the survey, rather than a staff member. This also kept the legislators' responses anonymous. Once legislators completed the surveys, they were returned and kept in the Speaker's offices before being compiled and analyzed using SPSS, a statistical software package.

Even working in cooperation with the Speakers' office, my initial response rate from the House members was a little less than 10%. I decided to garner additional responses by distributing the survey to three legislative committees, providing the survey to one committee on two separate occasions. Prior to the start of a committee, I would arrange with the chairman to have him distribute the survey instrument, and announce it to the members.

I selected the House Committees on Environment, Ways and Means, and Appropriations because all three met at the same time. This meant representatives would not receive the survey in a committee more than once. Also, the House Appropriations committee is one of the largest committees for that chamber, and, because of the visibility and recognition of their work, most representatives attend the meeting.

The additional efforts resulted in my getting five more completed surveys. The small number was because either the committee chairman forgot to direct the legislators' attention to the survey, or the legislators weren't interested in completing it. Indeed, on one occasion, I attended an Education committee hearing, hoping to get a few legislators to complete the survey prior to a legislative hearing's commencement. I confronted a legislator directly, told him the survey was for a graduate project, said the results would remain confidential, and asked him to complete the survey. He refused, arguing that he did not believe the results would remain confidential. He was fearful, despite my reassurance, that his name would be used in the final report and his survey responses would be attributed to him. Still, a total of 22 House members completed surveys.

As indicated earlier, the Senate has different procedural formalities, requiring that survey distribution be handled in a slightly different way. Instead of working directly with the Senate President's office, I worked in cooperation with the Senate Administrator, Debra Russell, who recommended having the surveys distributed through inner-office mail. She agreed to involve the Senate President, John Hainkel, only as a last resort.

Administering the survey through inner-office mail raised the question of reliability. How could I be sure that the Senators completed the survey and not their assistants, secretaries, or pages? Unlike the surveys in the House, I was unable to ensure that the intended respondent actually completed the survey.

A cover memo attached to the survey was distributed through the administrator's office to all the Senators on the third week of the special session (Appendix B). Unfortunately, the legislators completed their work early and the special legislative session ended a week earlier than anticipated. This gave Senators only four days to respond to the survey.

Despite the time crunch, the response rate for the Senate was comparable to that of the House of Representatives who had over a week to respond, received encouragement from the Speaker, and an occasional reminder from an anxious student. All in all, the response rate for both chambers was 25%. Other studies of state legislatures had a response rate of about 50% (Riffe 1988 and 1990). Out of the total population, the Senate had a 10% response rate while the House had a 15% response rate.

Fortunately enough, two weeks after the legislature left from a special session, they would convene again for the regular fiscal session. I sent a follow-up memo in the hopes of increasing the response rate among Senators (Appendix C). In sending a follow-up, though, I had to make certain I could account for those responses I had already received and not count them twice.

This second memo introduced this study to the Senators again, reminded them that this survey had been distributed earlier, and encouraged those who had not yet responded to do so. In addition to the instructions sent to the Senators, I also kept track

of the Senate responses by identifying those earlier respondents who provided their district numbers. I received two additional responses from the Senate and included them with the other responses. Then I began the data analysis. The next chapter discusses the survey findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: SURVEY RESULTS AND FINDINGS

After collecting the surveys, the data was input into SPSS, a statistical software package for analysis. From the data, I ran frequency analyses and performed several cross tabulations in an effort to reveal correlations between legislators and media use, the frequency with which legislators read the newspaper, and whether they took policy cues from the newspaper.

This chapter begins with a profile of the respondents, highlighting response rates and describing their demographic make-up. Then this chapter presents the data on legislators' use of the media. From that data, specific demographic data are crosstabulated with media use data to reveal several trends among legislators use of the media.

Demographics

Of 144 legislators, only 40 responded to the survey. Table 1 shows the frequency and valid percentages of legislative responses. Of the 40 respondents, 22 were Representatives and 15 were Senators. The remaining 3 respondents were unidentifiable because those respondents answered the filter question in the affirmative. I input 104 missing cases, representing those legislators failing to respond. The missing cases were necessary to calculate accurate response rates. The overall response rate was 25.7 percent, with a slight majority of responses coming from the House.

As shown in Table 1, only 4 respondents were female (11.1%), all of them members of the House. The remaining 32 respondents (88.9%) were male. This response category adequately reflects the actual demographic make-up of the legislature (12.7% female and 87.3% male, respectively). This allowed me to test some correlations

between gender and media use, such as the extent to which women used media compared to men.

Ninety-four percent of the respondents identified themselves as white; only 2 African Americans (5.4%), one from each legislative chamber, responded to the survey. This data element, on the other hand, was not as significant as I had hoped and does not accurately reflect the make-up of the legislature. Such a low response rate did not allow me to establish a correlation between race and media use. I was unable to generalize from the response how African Americans felt about the media compared to Caucasians.

Table 1

House and Senate Gender		Gender			
House/Senate		Male		Female	
House of Representatives		18	50%	4	11.1%
Senate		14	38.9%		
Total		32	88.9%	4	11.1%

A majority of respondents, 11 in the House and 9 in the Senate, responded to being either 51 years of age or older. Eleven indicated they fell between the ages of 41 and 50. No legislator responded to being younger than 31 years of age. The data did not indicate that the age of a legislator reflected which chamber he served. That is, the Senate does not have older legislators than the House.

As indicated in Table 2, the education level of legislators is split almost evenly between the number of bachelor degrees and Juris Doctors, eleven and nine respectively. One House member had a doctorate degree and one House member only had a high school degree. A total of 6 legislators, three from each chamber, responded to having a

master's degree. It should be noted that Democrats have generally less education than their Republican counterparts.

Table 2

Education Level/Race/Age/Political Affiliation for the House and Senate

Race	Political Affiliation	Age	Education Level	House	Senate	Total
African American	Democrat	31-40	Juris Doctor	1		1
			Total	1		1
		51 and older	Master's Degree		1	1
			Total		1	1
Caucasian	Democrat	31-40	Some College	1		1
			Juris Doctor	2	1	3
			Total	3	1	4
		41-50	Bachelor Degree	3	2	5
			Juris Doctor	1		1
			Total	4	2	6
		51 and older	High School	1		1
			Some College	2	2	4
			Bachelor Degree		1	1
			Master's Degree	2	2	4
			Total	5	5	10
	Republican	31-40	Bachelor Degree		1	1
			Total		1	1
		41-50	Some College	1		1
			Bachelor Degree		1	1
			Juris Doctor	1	1	2
			Total	2	2	4
		51 and older	Bachelor Degree	1	2	3
			Master's Degree	1		1
			Juris Doctor	2		2
			Doctoral Degree	1		1
			Total	5	2	7
	Independent	51 and older	Juris Doctor	1		1
			Total	1		1

Twenty-two legislators indicated they were Democrats, 13 legislators responded they were Republican and one House member indicated he was an Independent. This finding is of interest because it supports the notion of cross voting or “ticket splitting” (Tarrance and DeVries, 1998).

Media Use

To support the hypotheses, I had to first demonstrate that legislators read newspapers and then examine the frequency with which they read the newspaper. By gauging the use of media by legislators, I attempt to establish specific correlations by crosstabulating the data, such as whether media use is related to education level, years of service in the legislature, or political affiliation.

With regard to the frequency legislators read the newspaper, all but 1 House member claimed to read a newspaper daily. Table 3 shows the results to this question. This is good for the purpose of establishing that legislators do indeed expose themselves to ideas contained in the newspaper, and it bolsters my claim that newspapers provide policy cues. Had legislators responded that they do not read the newspaper regularly, it would have weakened my claim that legislators take policy cues from newspapers.

Table 3

House and Senate Frequency of Newspaper Reading				
House/Senate	Frequency Read			
	Daily		Several times a Week	
House of Representatives	21	56.8%	1	2.7%
Senate	15	40.5%		
Total	36	97.3%	1	2.7%

Time Dedicated to Reading Newspaper

When asked if they spent more, less or the same amount of time reading a newspaper during the legislative session compared to when they are not in session, a slight majority of both houses responded that they spend the same amount of time reading the newspapers.

Table 4 shows that a total of 7 legislators responded to reading the paper less during the legislative session. Fourteen legislators responded that they spend more time reading the newspaper during legislative session And 16 responded they spend the same amount of time reading the newspaper, regardless of whether the legislature is in session. This results in a combined total of 30 legislators focusing on the newspaper during the legislative session.

Table 4

Legislators Time Spent Reading Paper						
House/Senate	Time Spent Reading the Paper					
	More		Less		Same	
House of Representatives	6	16.2%	5	13.5%	11	29.7%
Senate	8	21.6%	2	5.4%	5	13.5%
Total	14	37.8%	7	18.9%	16	43.2%

Further analysis was conducted on the legislators who responded to reading the paper less during the session, to identify a correlation with party affiliation and years spent in the legislative branch. The results are shown in Table 5.

No Republican or Independent responded to reading the paper less during the legislative session. Indeed, Republicans were evenly split in their responses to either reading the paper more or about the same when the legislature is in session. By striking contrast, 6 Democrats did respond they read the paper less.

What should be immediately recognized is how the responses correlate to the number of years served. All of the Democrats who responded to reading the paper less when the legislature is in session have only served in the legislature for 8 years or less, while the other Democrats who responded to reading the paper more have years of service, ranging between 4 and 29 years.

Table 5

Political Affiliation/Time Spent Reading the Newspaper/Years Served

Years Served	Political Affiliation	Time Spent Reading the Paper			Total
		More	Less	Same	
1	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
4	Republican	3		2	5
	Democrat	3	1	1	5
	Total	6	1	3	10
5	Democrat		2	1	3
	Total		2	1	3
6	Republican			1	1
	Total			1	1
8	Republican	3		1	4
	Democrat	1	2	2	5
	Total	4	2	3	9
12	Democrat			1	1
	Total			1	1
13	Republican			1	1
	Democrat	1			1
	Total	1		1	2
14	Democrat			1	1
	Total			1	1
17	Republican			1	1
	Total			1	1
22	Democrat	1			1
	Total	1			1
24	Democrat			1	1
	Total			1	1
25	Independent	1			1
	Total	1			1
28	Democrat			1	1
	Total			1	1
29	Democrat	1			1
	Total	1			1
Total	Republicans	6	0	6	12
	Democrats	7	6	9	22
	Independent	1	0	0	1

I also ran data to compare the use of media among legislators to their education level. I ran this data separately to determine whether education levels alone influence the use of media. The results are highlighted in Table 6. Again, the responses are evenly split regardless of education.

Table 6

Education Level and Time Spent Reading the Paper			
	Time Spent Reading the Paper		
Education Level	More	Less	Same
High School			1
Some College	3	3	
Bachelor Degree	7	1	3
Master's Degree		1	5
Juris Doctor	4	2	4
Doctoral Degree			1
Total	14	7	14
Percentages	40%	20%	40%

The responses were evenly split between spending more time reading the newspaper and the same amount of time. However, having 7 legislators respond they spend less time reading the newspaper, does suggest that legislators do not consider reading the newspaper a priority during legislative sessions. This could imply that legislators do not look to the newspaper for news stories that may generate policy action. One might assume that if legislators did take cues from newspapers, their responses this survey would demonstrate that trend.

Taking Cues from the Media

Hypothesis 1 states that legislators use newspapers to generate their legislative agendas, and secondly, that legislators refer to the newspaper throughout the legislative session to follow legislation. The survey asked legislators a number of questions to determine whether they used media to create their policy agendas and to gauge how often they referred to the media.

When asked how often they seek out issues in the newspaper that affect the communities and constituents they serve, 24 legislators (Table 7) responded that they seek out issues in the newspaper every time they read the newspaper. The remaining 12

legislators answered that they seek out issues in the newspaper often. This is a combined total of 36 legislators who use the newspaper for policy cues.

Table 7

Seek Out Issues in the Newspaper		
	Seek Out Issues in Newspaper	
House/Senate	Often	Every time
House of Representatives	6	15
Senate	6	9
Total	12	24
Percentages	33.3%	66.7%

As Table 8 shows, 25 legislators responded that newspapers prompt their taking legislative action, with one House member agreeing strongly with that statement. Only 11 legislators disagreed, with 1 House member responding with a “don’t know.”

Table 8

Articles Prompt Legislative Action					
	Article Prompt Legislative Action				
House/Senate	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
House of Representatives	1	6	13	1	1
Senate	1	3	11		
Total	2	9	24	1	1
Percentages	5.4%	24.3%	64.9%	2.7%	2.7%

The responses to these two questions, although they cannot be generalized to the entire population, strongly indicate that Louisiana legislators craft their legislative agendas in response to what appears in newspapers. And of even more significance, legislators seek out issues of importance in newspapers that may impact local communities. These two data elements support my first hypothesis that legislators take policy cues from newspapers.

A response to these two questions that does apply to the legislative population is the response among female legislators. No female respondent disagreed with the question of whether a newspaper article had ever prompted her taking legislative action. With regard to whether they seek out issues in the newspaper, all but 1 responded every time they read the newspaper. These responses suggest female legislators may rely more heavily on media for cues than their male counterparts.

The responses were less consistent to a direct question asking legislators to respond whether they had ever used a newspaper to generate legislative agendas. As shown in Table 9, a total of 24 legislators indicated they had used the newspaper to generate their legislative agendas, while 13 answered that they had never used a newspaper to generate ideas. These responses are troubling because they are inconsistent with the earlier responses where legislators responded to using the newspaper to generate their legislative agendas. The responses were evenly split among female legislators as well.

Table 9

Used Paper to Generate Legislative Agenda		
	Ever Used Paper to Generate Legislative Agenda	
House/Senate	Yes	No
House of Representatives	13	9
Senate	11	4
Total	24	13
Percentages	64.9%	35.1%

How Often Do Newspapers Prompt Action?

A follow-up question asking how many times a newspaper article had prompted legislative action further supports Hypothesis 1. Nineteen legislators indicate the number

of times newspapers prompted legislative action. Fifteen legislators indicated that newspaper articles prompted their taking legislative action somewhere between 2-5 times, 1 House member said between 6-10 times, and 3 legislators admitted that newspapers prompted action more than ten times. Seven legislators indicated they did not know how many times a newspaper prompted their taking action. Ten legislators, 6 in the House and 4 in the Senate, answered that newspapers never prompted action.

Table 10 shows the responses to this question.

Table 10

		Frequency Newspaper Prompted Action				
		Frequency Newspaper Prompted Action				
		Never	Between 2-5 Times	Between 6-10 Times	More than 10 times	Don't Know
House/Senate	House of Representatives	6	8	1	2	5
	Senate	4	7		1	2
Total		10	15	1	3	7
Percentages		27.8%	41.7%	2.8%	8.3%	19.4%

I used this data and compared it to demographic data to uncover correlations between party affiliation and years served in the legislative branch, which is shown in Table 11.

The eleven legislators who disagreed with the statement that newspapers prompt legislative action are divided evenly between Republican and Democrat affiliation. Also, those 11 legislators responded to only serving in the legislature 12 years or less.

Following Newspapers During Session

Another idea this research hoped to clarify is whether legislators reference newspapers during the legislative session to follow or track the coverage of a specific

bill, particularly their own. Table 12 shows that following newspaper coverage is common among House and Senate members.

Table 11

Articles Prompt Legislative Action/ Years Served/Political Affiliation

		Articles Prompt Legislative Action					Total
Years Served	Political Affiliation	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know	
1	Democrat			1			1
	Total			1			1
4	Republican	1	2	2			5
	Democrat	1	1	3			5
	Total	2	3	5			10
5	Democrat		1	1	1		3
	Total		1	1	1		3
6	Republican		1				1
	Total		1				1
8	Republican		1	3			4
	Democrat		1	4			5
	Total		2	7			9
12	Democrat		1				1
	Total		1				1
13	Republican			1			1
	Democrat			1			1
	Total			2			2
14	Democrat			1			1
	Total			1			1
17	Republican			1			1
	Total			1			1
22	Democrat			1			1
	Total			1			1
24	Democrat			1			1
	Total			1			1
25	Independent			1			1
	Total			1			1
28	Democrat			1			1
	Total			1			1
29	Democrat		1	1			2
	Total		1	1			2
Total	Republicans	1	4	7	0		12
	Democrats	1	5	15	1		22
	Independent	0	0	1	0		1

Table 12

		Reference Newspapers During Legislative Session				
		Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Daily	Often
House/Senate	House of Representatives	1	4	6	5	6
	Senate	2	2	6	3	2
Total		3	6	12	8	8
Percentages		8.1%	16.2%	32.4%	21.6%	21.6%

Only 3 legislators responded that they “never” follow legislation, with 6 indicating they follow legislation “rarely.” A combined total of 28 responded they do follow legislation either occasionally, daily or often. This suggests that legislators follow their legislation in the newspaper to see how it is being reported.

When asked if they would ever change their legislation in response to a newspaper editorial, legislators overwhelmingly disapproved. Table 13 shows that 27 legislators either disagreed or strongly disagreed with changing their legislation in response to a newspaper editorial. Three legislators agreed that they would change their legislation and 7 responded they didn’t know.

Table 13

		Respond to Editorial			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Don’t Know
House/Senate	House of Representatives	4	12	2	4
	Senate	2	9	1	3
Total		6	21	3	7
Percentages		16.2%	56.8%	8.1%	18.9%

Even though a small number agreed that they would change their legislation, additional comparisons were performed to uncover any consistencies, as shown in Table

14. The 3 legislators who indicated they would change their legislation were split between Republicans and Democrats, with both serving 8 years or less in the legislature. The legislators who strongly disagreed with the idea of changing legislation in response to an editorial had only served 8 years or less. No correlation can be drawn from these results.

The first data element support Hypothesis 1 that legislators follow newspaper coverage during the session, but the second data element reject the notion that editorials influence them to change their legislation.

Urban vs. Rural Districts and Media Use

My second hypothesis claims that legislators who represent rural districts would rely less on cues from the media than legislators representing urban districts. The final survey question asked legislators to provide their district numbers to determine whether respondents represented urban or rural districts and to distinguish the level of media use. The survey assured respondents this information was for statistical purposes only and would remain confidential. Unfortunately, very few legislators provided their district number, which did not allow me to test this hypothesis. Because of the number of failed responses, I could not determine whether rural legislators rely on constituent input more than media input.

In addition to asking their district number, the survey also asked for district population to differentiate between urban and rural districts. Nearly all of the legislators responded their district populations were between 20,000 and 50,000 people, including legislators who responded to the last question that they represented districts in New Orleans. Again, because of this, I was unable to distinguish between urban and rural

districts. These questions are discussed in more length in the concluding chapter, as part of the limitations of this study.

Perception of Media

Hypothesis 3 holds that legislators who generally believe newspapers are inaccurate or are biased in their reporting would be less likely to use newspapers as a source for their legislative agenda.

Newspaper Fairness

When asked whether newspapers deal fairly with all sides, 31 legislators responded that newspapers tend to favor one side over another when reporting news. Only 4 legislators responded that newspapers deal fairly with all sides.

Even though these numbers are significant enough to make a conclusion that legislators do not think newspaper coverage is fair, I ran a crosstabulation to identify any relationships between attitude toward the media and years of experience and political affiliation among legislators.

As shown in Table 16, mostly Democrats responded that newspapers tend to favor one side, when asked about fairness. A total of 21 Democrats responded this way, compared with 7 Republicans and 1 Independent. The 13 Democrats who believe that newspapers favor one side only served in the legislature between 1 and 8 years. The remaining 8 Democrats have served between 12 and 29 years.

Table 14

Political Affiliation and Years Served/Responded to Editorial

		Respond to Editorial				Total
Years Served	Political Affiliation	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know	
1	Democrat		1			1
	Total		1			1
4	Republican	1	3			5
	Democrat	2	1	1		5
	Total	3	4	1		10
5	Democrat	1	1		1	3
	Total	1	1		1	3
6	Republican		1			1
	Total		1			1
8	Republican		1	1	2	4
	Democrat	2	1	1	1	5
	Total	2	2	2	3	9
12	Democrat		1			1
	Total		1			1
13	Republican		1			1
	Democrat		1			1
	Total		2			2
14	Democrat		1			1
	Total		1			1
17	Republican		1			1
	Total		1			1
22	Democrat		1			1
	Total		1			1
24	Democrat		1			1
	Total		1			1
25	Independent		1			1
	Total		1			1
28	Democrat		1			1
	Total		1			1
29	Democrat		1		1	2
	Total		1		1	2
Total	Republicans	1	6	1	3	11
	Democrats	5	11	2	4	22
	Independent	0	1	0	0	1

Table 15

Newspaper Fairness			
	Newspaper Fairness		
House/Senate	Deals Fairly with All Sides	Favors One Side	Don't Know
House of Representatives	2	20	
Senate	2	11	1
Total	4	31	1
Percentages	11.1%	86.1%	2.8%

Along the same lines are the 7 Republicans who agreed that newspaper coverage tends to favor one side. None of those respondents had served in the legislature longer than 8 years.

Newspaper Criticism

When asked whether they agreed with whether newspaper criticism gets in the way of society solving its problems or whether newspaper criticism helps identify problems with proposals made by political leaders, 21 legislators responded the criticism is worth it. Highlights of this question are shown in Table 17. A total of 9 legislators responded that criticism gets in the way.

Table 18 shows the results of the second crosstabulation regarding the worth of newspaper criticism.

Republicans are evenly split between whether newspaper criticism is worthwhile, whereas Democrats strongly believe that newspaper criticism is worthwhile to the democratic and legislative process. It should also be noted that no legislator who served more than 8 years responded that newspaper criticism does not play an important role in the legislative process. This last finding gives weight to the notion that newspaper coverage does impact the legislative process.

Table 16

Political Affiliation/Newspaper Fairness/Years Served in Legislature

Years Served	Political Affiliation	Newspaper Fairness			Total
		Deals fairly with all sides	Favors one side	Don't Know	
1	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
4	Republican	1	4		5
	Democrat		4	1	5
	Total	1	8	1	10
5	Democrat		3		3
	Total		3		3
6	Republican		1		1
	Total		1		1
8	Republican	2	2		4
	Democrat		5		5
	Total	2	7		9
12	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
13	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
14	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
17	Republican	1			1
	Total	1			1
22	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
24	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
25	Independent		1		1
	Total		1		1
28	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
29	Democrat		2		2
	Total		2		2
Total	Republicans	4	7	0	11
	Democrats	0	21	1	22
	Independent	0	1	0	1

Table 17

Worth of Newspaper Criticism

	Worth of Newspaper Criticism		
House/Senate	Criticism gets in the way	Criticism is worth it	Don't Know
House of Representatives	5	12	3
Senate	4	9	
Total	9	21	3
Percentages	27.3%	63.6%	9.1%

Table 18

Worth of Newspaper Criticism/Political Affiliation and Years Served

		Worth of Newspaper Criticism			Total
Years Served	Political Affiliation	Criticism gets in the way	Criticism if worth it	Don't Know	
1	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
4	Republican	2	2		4
	Democrat	2	3		5
	Total	4	5		9
5	Democrat		2	1	3
	Total		2	1	3
6	Republican	1			1
	Total	1			1
8	Republican	2	2		4
	Democrat	2	3		5
	Total	4	5		9
12	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
13	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
14	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
17	Republican		1		1
	Total		1		1
22	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
24	Democrat		1		1
	Total		1		1
29	Democrat		1		2
	Total		1		2
Total	Republicans	5	5	0	10
	Democrats	4	15	1	20
	Independent	0	0	0	0

Newspaper Accuracy

A separate question asked legislators if they thought newspapers get their facts straight or whether their reports are inaccurate. Responses to this question were a little closer (Table 19), with 13 legislators indicating newspapers get facts straight and 18 saying facts are inaccurate. Three legislators responded they did not know.

Table 19

Accuracy of Newspaper				
	Accuracy of Newspapers			Total
House/Senate	Get facts straight	Facts are inaccurate	Don't Know	
House of Representatives	9	11	1	21
Senate	4	7	2	14
Total	13	18	3	35
Percentages				

Perception and Use of Media

From results on media perception, I ran several crosstabulations on the use of media. My third hypothesis is that a negative perception of the media affects whether legislators take their policy cues from media. As mentioned earlier, legislators who do not think newspapers report events accurately or think the reporting is one-sided, it seems, would be less likely to use newspapers to develop the legislative agendas.

However, this was not the case.

Apparently, even though legislators felt strongly that newspapers are generally inaccurate in their reporting, that did not dissuade them from using the newspaper to generate their legislative agenda. Table 20 shows the first comparison of this data.

Of the 13 legislators who think newspapers are accurate, all but 3 admitted to using the newspaper to generate their legislative agendas. Of the 20 legislators who think

newspaper facts are inaccurate, 12 of them responded that they had used a newspaper to generate their legislative agenda.

Table 20

Use of Paper to Generate Agenda and Accuracy of Newspaper

Ever Used Paper to Generate Legislative Agenda	Accuracy of Newspapers		
	Get facts straight	Facts are inaccurate	Don't Know
Yes	10	12	1
No	3	8	1
Total	13	20	2
Percentages	37.1%	57.1%	5.7%

Even with a majority of legislators believing newspapers favor one side, 22 of them still used a newspaper to generate their legislative agenda.

Table 21

Use of Paper to Generate Agenda and Newspaper Fairness

Ever Used Paper to Generate Legislative Agenda	Newspaper Fairness		
	Deals Fairly with All Sides	Favors One Side	Don't Know
Yes	2	22	1
No	2	12	
Total	4	34	1
Percentages	10.3%	87.2%	2.6%

These two crosstabulations significantly weaken my hypothesis that the use of media relies on a positive perception of media. Indeed, this data demonstrates that regardless of a negative perception of media, specifically that media reports are one-sided and do not get the facts straight, legislators continue to use media as a source to generate their legislative agendas.

Anecdotal Evidence

In addition to the survey I had a few conversations with legislators, whose responses were mixed in terms of supporting the hypotheses. A Democrat member of the House, who shall remain nameless and who did not complete the survey, discussed the level of influence media have on his agendas.

He laughed at my hypothesis that legislators take their cues from what appears in the newspaper, likening the use of media to being “brain-dead.” Simply put, he did not like that notion of legislators not creating or developing their own agendas, and instead relying on the newspaper to serve their constituents.

I continued and specifically questioned him about a piece of legislation he introduced that was strikingly similar to that introduced in other states. In fact, his legislation received a lot of attention and was often compared to the passage of a similar law in other states.

He said he introduced the legislation in response to a problem in his community. When asked how he developed that idea, specifically whether he got the idea from the newspaper, he indicated that he heard about the problem by listening to “the word on the street.” He did not rely on the newspaper for the idea, but instead listened to his constituents. He admitted to having knowledge of the recent newspaper articles but did not attribute his idea to the newspaper.

I was also fortunate enough to participate in another venue, the Kantrow Lecture and Panel Discussion for Civic Journalism, where legislators, policymakers, and journalists gathered to discuss the role of civic journalism. The panel was sponsored by the School Of Mass Communication and featured Chuck McMains, Representative

(Baton Rouge, R); Jan Schaffer, Director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism; Gordon Pugh, attorney; John Pastorek, WBRZ-TV news director; George Lockwood, Fred Greer Chair in Media Ethics at the Manship School; Linda Lightfoot, Executive Editor of *The Advocate*; Nanette Noland Kelley, community leader; and John Maxwell Hamilton, Dean of the Manship School.

Questions were solicited from audience members and the panel chose to consider my question. I asked for the panel's reaction to the notion of media's agenda-setting theory and whether they agreed with the idea that newspapers influence political agendas. Their responses generally supported my first hypothesis.

Of most significance are Rep. Chuch McMains' comments about the role of media. He admitted that he "absolutely" takes policy cues from the media. He gave an example of reports about health and sanitation issues and how the legislature responded by holding regulatory hearings and including corrective action legislation during the session. McMains commented that taking policy cues from the newspaper "happens often."

Other panel members agreed. George Lockwood, a Manship School professor, agreed that newspapers set policy agendas, but that newspaper editors decide what is important to the community. Jan Schaffer also commented that media set the agenda for the community and helps set the priorities.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My research began with a reading of John Kingdon's book and a question of whether state legislators used newspapers to develop their legislative agendas. That question led to the development of several assumptions. One was that the level of media's influence depends on whether a legislator represents an urban or rural district. Another was that the level of media influence would depend on whether the legislators have a positive or negative view of media.

This study asked three questions:

1. Do state policymakers take some policy cues from local and national newspapers? If so, do legislators continue to reference newspapers throughout the legislative session, following reports on legislation they may have introduced. Furthermore, are state legislators inclined to change their legislation in response to a negative newspaper editorial?
2. Do media's usefulness relate to whether a legislator is from a rural or urban district?
3. Is there a correlation between the perception of newspapers' performance, their ability to report news accurately and objectively, and legislators' use?

Public policy and the political sciences provide the dominant explanations and models of policymaking, with little reference or consideration given to the power of media. There are even fewer mass communication studies that explore how media influence policymaking, particularly at the state level.

However, a review of the available, relevant literature does suggest that media influence on initiating public policy is a logical assumption. And this study, through the administration of a survey to the Louisiana Legislature, takes a step toward confirming that assumption.

Limitations of Study

As it was designed, the study was limited by several factors. An obvious limitation was the low response rate. The less than a 30 percent response rate does not allow many findings to be generalized. Several attempts were made in both chambers to increase the response rate among members; unfortunately they were not successful.

Several things may have caused the low response. Time constraints may be one of the causes. At the time of the survey's administration, the legislature was called into a special legislative session to address the state's \$630 million budget deficit, giving members little time to think or do anything else.

Confidentiality also played a part. Several legislative members were reluctant to respond for fear their identities would be revealed. That probably explains why few legislators wanted to indicate what district they represented. Their reluctance kept me from exploring further assumptions that legislators from urban or rural districts use media to different degrees and in different ways.

The second limitation has to do with the survey itself. Even though the questions were carefully designed and reviewed several times prior to their distribution, not every legislator was able to correctly answer all the questions. There was one question that specifically asked legislators to rank a number of policy influences in order of use, with 1 designating the medium most used and 8 designating the least used. The question was

designed to gauge where print media fell in terms of providing policy cues as compared to other forms of media and influence, including constituents and polling data. Only two legislators answered that question correctly, properly ranking the forms of media. And it was a critical question for this research.

Also, the survey did not contain enough open-ended questions. Having more open-ended questions would allow legislators to include more of their opinions, which could provide additional insight into the role of media. Those questions would allow a researcher to gauge how legislators feel about media, and examine more closely the relationship between the two. This point leads me to the third limitation.

This thesis was unable to identify and discuss the other extraneous influences on legislators. And I do not limit this just to other forms of media; certainly media do not have sole power over legislators. For example, this thesis did not discuss the “diffusion” theories, which “see state policy adoptions as emulations of earlier adoptions by other states” (Berry 442), and more particularly, the study did not explain the role media play in “diffusing” policy among states. As an example, the diffusion theory suggests that if Florida enacted a statewide program or policy, it would not be uncommon for bordering states, like Georgia and Alabama, to enact similar changes. This role media play in the “diffusion” theory would be interesting to pursue.

Finally there is the issue of scope. This study attempted to determine whether legislators use print media to develop any of their legislative agendas. I did not limit or restrict my study to a particular policy area, but instead allowed legislators to reference their entire legislative career when answering the survey. I should have limited the scope of the survey to one particular issue, such as education, health, or the justice system,

rather than conducting a census. Limiting the focus of the study would have helped to make more definite conclusions.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked whether state legislators take policy cues from newspapers and, secondly, whether legislators continue to reference the newspaper throughout the session to follow legislation. I hypothesized that legislators first read the newspaper and secondly that when they did, they sought out issues to include in their legislative agendas.

My research design shows that state legislators do consider the newspaper when developing their legislative agendas and continue to follow their proposals in the newspaper after they are introduced. Further support of this conclusion comes from the number of legislators who indicated the number of times newspapers caused them to take legislative action. Additionally, a majority of legislators indicate they reference newspapers during the legislative session to follow the coverage as it relates to their proposed legislation.

Of note is the number of legislators who responded to reading the paper less when the legislature is in session. Legislators can live without reading the newspaper during the legislative session. This weakens the first hypothesis by indicating that newspapers are not an invaluable policy source. More importantly, though, it suggests an unwillingness of legislators to read and become informed about issues.

It should also be pointed out that legislators did not agree with the notion of changing legislation in response to a newspaper editorial. A total of 27 legislators either disagreed or strongly disagreed with changing their legislation in response to a

newspaper editorial. Only 3 legislators agreed that they would change their legislation and 7 responded they didn't know.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked whether there was a correlation between the level of media use and whether the legislator represented an urban or rural district. This thesis hypothesized that legislators from urban districts would rely more on newspapers for policy cues than legislators from rural districts.

This hypothesis could not be proven or disproven. Only a few legislators responded to the last question asking for their district numbers, making analysis of this variable impossible. In addition to asking their district number, the survey also asked district population to differentiate between urban and rural districts. Nearly all of the legislators responded their district populations were between 20,000 and 50,000 people, including a legislator who responded to the last question that he represented a district in New Orleans. This made identifying correlations between media use and district representation impossible.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked whether legislators' use of media was related to how the legislator perceived media performance. I hypothesized that legislators' use of the media was linked to their positive perception of the media. That is, legislators would rely on the media more for their legislative ideas if they felt that newspapers reported the news fairly and accurately and that newspaper criticism contributed to the policy debate.

The third hypothesis was not supported by the data. Indeed, the findings suggest that legislators use the media to generate their agendas, regardless of whether they think the media are accurate or unbiased in their reporting. A negative perception of the media had no effect on legislators' use.

It is important to note that 31 legislators responded that newspapers tend to favor one side over another when reporting news. Only 4 legislators responded that newspapers deal fairly with all sides. Their responses to whether the newspaper is accurate are slightly more favorable toward the media, with 13 legislators indicating newspapers get facts straight and 18 saying facts are inaccurate.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study was exploratory in nature and broad in scope. It would be more practical to limit future studies to particular policy arenas. It would also be wise to limit future research to a specific legislative item, such as education, environment, or health care. This would allow the researcher to develop definite, qualitative evidence.

It would also be worth examining how the relationship between media and government evolved. Undoubtedly, the technological changes taking place among media institutions and changes in our style of governance will affect the relationship between media and government.

Future research should also explore the value of different sources of information among legislators. This concept is based on Westley and MacLean's study defining the differences between purposive and non-purposive sources (1957).

Referring to Timothy Cook's claim that politicians consider the role of media when designing policies, future studies should look at whether this is true at the state

level, and whether media influence is a consideration for lawmakers when developing priorities and policies. And if so, what influence media have on legislators' decisions. Do they avoid potentially controversial issues because of the possible backlash from the media?

Originally this thesis sought to determine whether state legislators took policy cues from local and *national* newspapers. Very little reference was made to the use of national newspapers because of the total respondents (40); of that small number only 13 legislators claimed to read national newspapers. This is an interesting fact, especially considering that this thesis provides some evidence in support of the notion that legislators take policy cues from the media. It raises a bigger question of whether Louisiana could broaden and possibly improve upon its policy agendas if policymakers had a subscription to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or *The Wall Street Journal*.

And that question raises the issue of what is the proper role for media? And how involved should media be in the mechanics of our democracy? This thesis took a step toward answering those questions.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY ADMINISTER TO LOUISIANA STATE LEGISLATURE

All responses will be kept completely confidential.

I am a student at Louisiana State University, completing the thesis requirement for my graduate degree in Mass Communication. In a nutshell, my thesis focuses on how legislators develop their policy agendas.

Your participation is critical to this research and I am asking for your assistance in completing the attached survey. While your participation is entirely voluntary, please keep in mind that your assistance is necessary for the completion of this study and may play a valuable role in future research at Louisiana State University. Be assured that all responses will be kept completely confidential. No names or identities will be reported in the final document.

Thank you for your assistance.

Directions: Please mark the choice that best answers each of the following questions.

1. Is this your first legislative session as a state legislator?
___ 1. Yes (skip to question 19)
___ 2. No (continue on with questions)
2. How many years total have you served in the Louisiana legislature? Include years served in both House and Senate if appropriate _____
3. On which legislative committees do you presently serve?

___ 1. Education	___ 11. Local and Municipal Affairs
___ 2. Health and Welfare	___ 12. Commerce
___ 3. Labor and Industrial Relations	___ 13. Insurance
___ 4. Agriculture	___ 14. House and Governmental Affairs
___ 5. Environmental Quality	___ 15. Natural Resources
___ 6. Appropriations/Finance	___ 16. Retirement
___ 7. Civil Law & Procedure/Judiciary A	___ 17. Municipal, Parochial and Cultural
___ 8. House Judiciary/Judiciary B	___ 18. Transportation & Public Work
___ 9. Ways and Means/Revenue and Fiscal	
___ 10. Criminal Justice/Judiciary C	
4. Of which are you a member?

- _____ 1. House of Representatives
- _____ 2. Senate

5. How often do you read a newspaper?

- _____ 1. Daily
- _____ 2. Several times a week
- _____ 3. Saturday and Sunday only
- _____ 4. Never

6. Which of the following newspapers do you read, regardless of whether the legislature is in session? (check all that apply)

- _____ 1. The Advocate
- _____ 2. The Times Picayune
- _____ 3. The Shreveport Times
- _____ 4. The Alexandria Town Talk
- _____ 5. The Monroe News Star
- _____ 6. Other

7. Do you typically read national newspapers?

- _____ 1. Yes
- _____ 2. No (Skip to question 9)

8. Which national newspaper(s) do you read? (check all that apply)

- _____ 1. The New York Times
- _____ 2. The Washington Post
- _____ 3. The Los Angeles Times
- _____ 4. USA Today
- _____ 5. The Wall Street Journal
- _____ 6. The Houston Chronicle
- _____ 7. The Dallas Morning Star
- _____ 8. Other (please specify) _____

9. When the legislature is in session, do you spend more, less, or the same amount of time reading a newspaper than when the legislature is not in session?

- _____ 1. More
- _____ 2. Less
- _____ 3. Same
- _____ 4. Don't know

10. When the legislature is in session, do you read any newspaper that you normally would not read if the legislature were not in session?

- _____ 1. Yes
- _____ 2. No

If so, which newspaper? _____.

11. Which of the following do you generally use to provide cues when developing your legislative agenda (i.e. the legislation you intend to introduce during session)? Rank

each of the following in order of use (1 being most used and 8 being the least used) If you don't use one or more at all, leave those choice(s) blank.

- _____ 1. Constituents (mail, phone calls, day-to-day meetings, dinners, social contacts)
- _____ 2. Local television news
- _____ 3. National television news (including CNN, MSNBC, Headline News)
- _____ 4. Local newspapers
- _____ 5. National newspapers
- _____ 6. Polling data
- _____ 7. Political parties
- _____ 8. Lobbyists

12. When you read a newspaper—national or state—how often do you look for issues that affect the communities and constituents that you serve?

- _____ 1. Never
- _____ 2. Rarely
- _____ 3. Occasionally
- _____ 4. Often
- _____ 5. Every time I read the newspaper
- _____ 6. Don't know

13. Newspaper articles prompt me to take legislative action?

- _____ 1. Strongly disagree
- _____ 2. Disagree
- _____ 3. Agree
- _____ 4. Strongly Agree
- _____ 5. Don't know

14. In the last 4 years, has reading a newspaper—national or state—regardless of whether the legislature is in session, prompted you to take legislative action?

- _____ 1. Yes
- _____ 2. No (skip to question 16)

15. If so, can you recall the last time a newspaper served as a policy cue for your legislative agenda—and for what issue (i.e. education, public health, crime)?

16. In presenting the news dealing with political and social issues, do you think that newspapers deal fairly with all sides, or do they tend to favor one side?

- _____ 1. Deal fairly with all sides
- _____ 2. Tend to favor one side
- _____ 3. Don't know

17. How many times would you say a newspaper article has prompted you to take legislative action?

- _____ 1. Never

- ____ 2. Only once
- ____ 3. Between 2 and 5 times
- ____ 4. Between 6 and 10 times
- ____ 5. More than 10 times
- ____ 6. Don't know

18. I would respond to a newspaper editorial (written by editorial staff) by changing my proposed legislation?

- ____ 1. Strongly disagree
- ____ 2. Disagree
- ____ 3. Agree
- ____ 4. Strongly Agree
- ____ 5. Don't know

19. Once your legislation has gone to the floor for debate, how often do you refer to the newspaper to see how your proposed legislation is being reported?

- ____ 1. Never
- ____ 2. Rarely
- ____ 3. Occasionally
- ____ 4. Daily
- ____ 5. Often
- ____ 6. Don't know

20. Some people think that by criticizing proposals made by political leaders, newspapers get in the way of society solving its problems. Others think that such criticism is worth it because it points out possible problems with these proposals. Which is closer to your point of view?

- ____ 1. Criticism gets in the way
- ____ 2. Criticism is worth it
- ____ 3. Don't know

21. In general do you think that newspapers get the facts straight, or do you think that their stories and reports are often inaccurate?

- ____ 1. Get the fact straight
- ____ 2. Facts are inaccurate
- ____ 3. Don't know

22. Have you ever used a newspaper (national or local) to generate ideas when developing your priorities for inclusion on your legislative agenda?

- ____ 1. Yes
- ____ 2. No

23. Are you male or female?

- ____ 1. Male
- ____ 2. Female

24. Are you (mark only one, please)

- ☐ 1. African American
- ☐ 2. American Indian
- ☐ 3. Asian
- ☐ 4. Caucasian/White
- ☐ 5. Hispanic
- ☐ 6. Other (please specify) _____

25. What is your present age?

- ☐ 1. 21-30
- ☐ 2. 31-40
- ☐ 3. 41-50
- ☐ 4. 51 and older

26. What is the highest level you completed?

- ☐ 1. high school
- ☐ 2. some college
- ☐ 3. Bachelor's degree
- ☐ 4. Master's degree
- ☐ 5. Juris Doctor
- ☐ 6. Doctoral Degree

27. Which political party do you generally align yourself with?

- ☐ 1. Republican
- ☐ 2. Democrat
- ☐ 3. Independent
- ☐ 4. Other (please specify)
- ☐ 5. Don't know

27. What is the population of the district you represent?

- ☐ 1. 0-20,000
- ☐ 2. 20,001-50,000
- ☐ 3. 50,001-100,000
- ☐ 4. 100,001-500,000
- ☐ 5. More than 500,000
- ☐ 6. Don't know

28. Which district number do you represent? _____ (optional)

APPENDIX B

MEMORANDA TRANSMITTING SURVEY TO LOUISIANA SENATE

Memo

Date: April 3, 2000

To: Louisiana State Senate

I am a student at Louisiana State University, completing the thesis requirement for my graduate degree in Mass Communication. In a nutshell, my thesis focuses on how legislators develop their policy agendas.

Your participation is critical to this research and I ask for your assistance in completing the attached survey by Thursday, April 6, 2000. While your participation is entirely voluntary, please keep in mind that your assistance is necessary for the completion of this study and may play a valuable role in future research at Louisiana State University.

Be assured that all responses will be kept completely confidential. No names or identities will be reported in the final document.

Thank you for your assistance.

Memo

To: Louisiana State Senate
Subject: Legislative Survey
Date: April 4, 2000

Earlier this week, an LSU graduate student fulfilling her thesis requirement forwarded surveys for Senators to complete. Please allow this memo to serve as a reminder to complete the survey and return to Debra Russell by the end of this week.

If you have completed the survey, please accept the student's thanks and appreciation.

Memo

To: Louisiana State Senators

Date: May 5, 2000

Subject: Survey for LSU graduate student

I am a student at Louisiana State University completing the thesis requirement for my graduate degree in Mass Communications. My thesis focuses on how state legislators use the mass media in determining their legislative agendas. To do this requires that I survey both the houses of the Louisiana Legislature.

A few weeks back I circulated a questionnaire to Senators and was fortunate to receive a few responses. Unfortunately, the legislative session ended earlier than expected and many of you did not have the opportunity to complete the survey, rendering my thesis statistically invalid.

I am circulating the survey again so that those who were unable to complete it the first time are able to do so now. Your participation is crucial to the success of this research and will open new areas of research at LSU that have previously been ignored.

Anyone who did not complete the survey that was circulated a few weeks ago, I ask that you please take the time to do so now. All answers will remain completely confidential—no names or identities will be revealed at any time during this research.

Please return all completed surveys to Debra Russell in the Senate office. I sincerely appreciate your assistance.

VITA

Abby Kral works in the United States Senate as an advisor on health care issues. Prior to moving to Washington, she was the Director of the federal Welfare-to-Work program for the State of Louisiana. She also served as a policy advisor to Governor Mike Foster on workforce and social service issues.

In addition to her professional public service, she volunteered at Literacy Works, an adult literacy program in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She also served on the Board of Directors for Louisiana Coalition for Literacy, as well as the Community Partnership Division of the Capital Area United Way.

She completed her undergraduate studies in English and Political Science at the University of South Florida.