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The Concept of Priming within Political Communication Studies

KEY WORDS

priming, priming effect, agenda setting, mass media effect

ABSTRACT

The study is devoted to the priming concept and the priming effect, as well as their role and consequences for political communication. The concept of priming is considered within cognitive psychology as a cognitive situation. In this situation, the preceding positive incentive can modify the manner in which the following incentive is recognized and processed. Within political communication, priming analysis focuses on the criteria used by the audience in evaluating political objects and reality. The priming concept suggests that the most accessible issues in media broadcasts become the standards of assessing political reality. Priming is regarded as a very meaningful concept within communication science, but studies in this field are relatively rarely, the same with studies on the relationship between priming and the agenda setting hypothesis. This study is an attempt to organize current ideas about the political dimension of priming and to specify the relationship between these two concepts.

The concept of priming comes from cognitive psychology and means a cognitive situation, in which a prior stimulus modifies the propriety and ease of recognition or processing of a later stimulus¹. It was introduced in political communication at the end of the 1980s in a now classic work by Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder². Priming was defined as communication criteria and standards used by recipients to evaluate political reality, which are issues most accessible in the media (most often and intensively reported). The study was based on experiments concerning the consequences of watching news television programmes and making some aspects and issues more accessible by the media in the minds of viewers, with the use of priming as the key concept. The result was a visible priming effect, based on the idea that news programmes defined the criteria of evaluating issues and political figures.

¹ T. Maruszewski, *Psychologia poznawcza*, Gdańsk 2001, p. 168; R.J. Sternberg, *Psychologia poznawcza [Cognitive psychology]*, Warszawa 2001, p. 69.

² S. Iyengar, D.R. Kinder, *News that Matters. Television and American Opinion*, Chicago 1987.

Analyzing relations between media and politics, the authors came to a conclusion that television news matters in the perception and judgment of political reality and although through a historical perspective, this was not a revealing conclusion, it ultimately proved what this meaning-influence depended on.

Since then, several dozen works on the topic and meaning of priming in political communication appeared³, but in Polish literature, the concept is mentioned only in a few works⁴. This is due to not even the insignificant meaning of the concept itself, but because of a lack of sufficient explanation, as to exactly what priming concerns and in what way does it define the process of perceiving political content, as well as and the influence of this perception on judgment and attitudes of citizens in politics and elections.

There is also a lot of doubt about the relation between priming and the theoretically close concept of agenda-setting. Some researchers believe that priming is part of agenda-setting (the second level of agenda-setting), others think that priming does not fit within this theory and is a completely distinct concept, merely explaining the consequences of agenda-setting.

The aim of this work is not only to organize current scientific proposals concerning priming, but is also an attempt at defining the concept and its role in the realm of political communication. Another issue is indicating the place of priming in relation to concepts on media effects, and especially in relation to agenda-setting. Relations between agenda-setting and priming are the most controversial among specialists studying political communication. The basic research assumption of this work is based on the conviction that the concept of priming media content, taking place in the minds of those viewing political messages, adequately reflects the mechanism of shaping political attitudes. Moreover, it is assumed that priming can be used in a more or less purposeful way by senders of the message and have a significant impact on the evaluation of candidates and political issues. The next assumption concerns the outcome of priming – although it is based on the cognitive accessibility of issues and people, its effects are an example of the persuasive influence of media on its recipients.

³ According to D.H. Weaver, until 2005 there were 44 works on priming (D.H. Weaver, *Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing and Priming*, "Journal of Communication" Vol. 57 (2007), No. 1, pp. 142–147).

⁴ S. Michalczyk, *Spoleczeństwo medialne. Studia z teorii komunikowania masowego*, Katowice 2008, p. 405; W. Cwalina, A. Falkowski, *Marketing polityczny. Perspektywa psychologiczna*, Gdańsk 2005, pp. 270–272; E. Nowak, R. Riedel, *Agenda setting, priming, news framing. Analiza porównawcza telewizyjnych audycji informacyjnych TVN i TVP1 w okresie kampanii przedwyborczych w Polsce 2005 i 2007*, "Zeszyty Prasoznawcze" 2008, No. 1/2, pp. 67–84; in the context of cognitive psychology see: P. Francuz, I. Sherstyuk, *Torowanie intencji bohaterów wiadomości telewizyjnych: efekty asymilacji i kontrastu*, [in:] *Psychologiczne aspekty odbioru telewizji*. 2, ed. by P. Francuz, Lublin 2004.

The concept of priming

Cognitive priming, popularized by Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor is the effect of a prior context on the interpretation and retrieval of information, focusing on the effects of long-term memory on the processing of new information⁵. We are therefore dealing with a cognitive situation in which a certain factor activates mind-paths, which strengthen the capacity to process the stimulus in some way linked with the priming stimulus. This is linked to the fact that the earlier stimulus leaves a mark, which changes the processing of the later stimulus. These changes effect not just the modification of certain stimulus, but also their affective judgment. Priming effects are specific for a modality, i.e. priming is stronger when the earlier stimulus and the actual stimulus belong to the same category (modality), e.g. when both are words or pictures⁶. Priming can be both conscious or unconscious. For example, Anthony Marcel in a series of observations noted unconscious processing of stimulus too short to be consciously noticed⁷.

Priming is based on the assumption that the frequency or features of the (cognitive) stimulus activate previously registered meaning and influence, interpreting in particular information which was perceived as unclear and ambiguous. Priming thus means activating information stored in long-term memory, which takes place after being exposed to a stimulus. For example, if the recipient reads a press article about a new computer virus, that destroyed data stored on government computers, and a few minutes later has a conversation about “viruses” (if it is not already clear, what type of virus the conversations concerns), then he will first think of computer viruses, rather than a microscopic organism. Figuratively speaking, new gained information is placed at the top of the pyramid, and the older stored below. That is why new (often, intensively and regularly collected) information is more accessible and strongly influences perceiving reality⁸.

The cognitive concept of priming, from the realm of psychology, was adapted to political science in order to explain the effects of media functioning in the sphere of politics⁹. Defining priming, Iyengar and Kinder claim (and later prove) that while judging complicated political objects, e.g. candidates for president, voters do not equally take into account

⁵ S.T. Fiske, S.E. Taylor, *Social Cognition*, New York 1991.

⁶ T. Maruszewski, *Psychologia...*, p. 170.

⁷ R.J. Sternberg, *Psychologia...*, pp. 69–70.

⁸ L. Willnat, *Agenda Setting and Priming: Conceptual Links and Differences*, [in:] *Communication and Democracy. Exploring the Intellectual Frontiers in Agenda-Setting Theory*, ed. by M.E. McCombs, D.L. Shaw, D.H. Weaver, Mahwah, NJ 1997, p. 53.

⁹ In communication studies, priming is believed to be the successor of the cultivation theory, see: K.S. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing. Constructing Political Reality*, Lanham 2005, pp. 21–22.

everything they know about them, but use the most accessible elements (information, emotions)¹⁰. The authors base their argument on the assumption that the most influential medium at the moment is television (and especially evening television news programmes), because it is the main source of information for most citizens and reaches the largest group of people¹¹.

Consequently, by making some aspects of political life more “prime” and ignoring others, television news define conditions, in which political evaluation and decisions are made – political choices. For example, when television news stories focus on national defense, citizens judge the president largely by how well he has provided for the national defense. If the media primes news about inflation, citizens evaluate the president by how well he and his government have managed, in their view, to keep prices down; and so on¹².

Priming therefore formulates priorities, which function in the minds of voters, when they make their way to the ballots. They are to the greatest extent shaped by last minute news. The effects of priming, tested in experiments, were highly visible among people well-educated and politically involved¹³.

In political literature priming is defined as standards or their changes that people use to make political evaluations. Priming occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments¹⁴. The concept of priming is at the same time a research tool with possibilities of directly following the way in which a media message influences political attitudes and actions of citizens and politicians.

Priming explains the significance of attitudes citizens use to evaluate political subjects. It defines criteria for political judgment of leaders and events. Because priming can alter the criteria citizens use to evaluate political issues, leaders, and events, priming effects can have important consequences for the outcomes of elections, the emergence of public support for policy initiatives, and the approval ratings of political leaders¹⁵.

¹⁰ S. Iyengar, D.R. Kinder, *News that Matters...*, p. 1.

¹¹ As S. Michalczyk writes (*Demokracja medialna. Teoretyczna analiza problemu*, Toruń 2010, p. 61): “The leading medium in current media societies is without doubt television [...] The average daily television viewing time-span, in the global scale, is 2–4 hours.” Cf. *Najbardziej opiniotwórcze media 2011 roku*, Instytut Monitorowania Mediów, <http://biuro.mediacontact.pl/imm/kat=47> [accessed: 6.02.2012].

¹² S. Iyengar, D.R. Kinder, *News that Matters...*, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁴ D.A. Scheufele, D. Tewksbury, *Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models*, “Journal of Communication” Vol. 57 (2007), No. 1, pp. 9–20, 11.

¹⁵ S.L. Althaus, Y.M. Kim, *Priming Effects in Complex Information Environment: Reassessing the Impact of News Discourse on Presidential Approval*, “The Journal of Politics” Vol. 68 (2006), No. 4, p. 960.

Priming can produce a variety of judgmental effects, but research conducted by political communication scholars has focused almost exclusively on what are known as accessibility effects (omitting the applicability effect). Accessibility can be defined as the potential that knowledge stored in memory will be activated for potential use in a judgmental task. Two basic factors have crucial meaning for the occurrence of priming: the accessibility effect – the mentioned access to information, and the applicability effect – the adherence of information and needs accessible in memory to evaluate a given political issue (associations, links between the available cognitive construct and new information, the decision situation, in which stored information could be used to make a decision or have an attitude)¹⁶. In other words, when a citizen has to formulate their opinion, express their attitude, make a political decision, he or she searches in memory such easily accessible information, which fit the current situation and supply the most adequate (in his opinion) data to make that decision.

Joanne M. Miller and Jon A. Krosnick believe that priming occurs when media attention to an issue causes people to place special weight on it when constructing evaluations of political leaders, e.g. presidential job performance¹⁷. Perceiving the priming effect in the context of election communication and its consequences for making election decisions is a particularly important line of thought. In this aspect, priming gains its largest explanatory value, which is not always appreciated. There are also opinions undermining the point of singling out the effect, as its presence is a particular case – thus in certain circumstances it is rather a tendency or a phenomena. Most often it depends on the source of information and its credibility and context, along with the level of political orientation, which is why contradictory results on the effect are sometimes observed¹⁸.

Gabriel S. Lenz claims that priming is based on voters overweighting some issues while underweighting others¹⁹. He believes that what Kinder and Iyengar discovered is a simple effect of voter learning, who getting to know of a certain party stand in a given issue, take it as their own, which is why it becomes an important criteria of policy judgment. The author believes that no priming actually takes place. However, it seems that the learning effect is obviously part of the concept of priming, which includes cognitive availability and real applicability of the criteria and issues, but does not exhaust its meaning. Of key importance is

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 961.

¹⁷ J.M. Miller, J.A. Krosnick, *News Media Impact on the Ingredients of Presidential Evaluations: Politically Knowledgeable Citizens Are Guided by a Trusted Source*, “American Journal of Political Science” Vol. 44 (2001), No. 2, p. 301.

¹⁸ J.N. Druckman, J.W. Holmes, *Does Presidential Rhetoric Matter? Priming and Presidential Approval*, “Presidential Studies Quarterly” Vol. 34 (2004), No. 4, pp. 757–758.

¹⁹ G.S. Lenz, *Learning and Opinion Change, Not Priming: Reconsidering the Priming Hypothesis*, “American Journal of Political Science” Vol. 53 (2009), No. 4, pp. 21–22.

the fact that the audience learn different content and use it as criteria of evaluating political reality in a different degree. It is interesting to determine, on what the intensity of learning and using different issues depends on. Pointed out are i.e. source credibility, audience knowledge and the type of issues brought up²⁰.

Denis McQuail explains priming as exaggerating certain issues²¹. According to the author, priming has been long known as a political strive to give issues associated with certain politicians significant weight. Based on promoting favorable judgmental criteria, it can be used as a way of controlling or influencing what information is used and becomes important for the public. McQuail also includes among exaggerations political attempts to reveal certain information – passing them on to the media in such a way and time so as to distract public attention from other issues, at a disadvantage for certain political players. These cases can be seen as an attempt to achieve the priming effect, however, ultimately its presence depends on how the media and other audiences react to “excessive” availability of an issue in a given time.

Research on priming has also had new ideas and findings. James N. Druckman and Justin W. Holmes introduced the idea of image priming and using different research methods (content analysis, experiment, opinion polls) found out in what way the level of citizen’s political knowledge influences priming issues and image²². Concentrating on image priming, the authors claimed that, true to research, a certain choice of a candidate’s features, emphasized in news programmes, has significant influence on his approval level. Continuing the topic, they proposed research on the possibilities of the candidate having an influence on image priming, i.e. by using a certain rhetoric. The question was, can a presidential candidate successfully prime his or her media image? Experiments confirmed the idea that intense exposure of a certain issue is the criterion of evaluating candidates. President Bush’s State of the Union address delivered on January 29, 2002 was devoted mostly to the war on terrorism. This issue became the dominating approval criteria of the president for those, who participating in the experiment, watched to the speech. This perspective did not dominate with non-watchers of the speech (although it was a relatively significant and up-to-date issue during research). Moreover, those who saw the speech, put pressure on evaluating the president as a “tough guy”, not afraid of outside threats. It confirmed the thesis on image priming, that concentrating on war exhibits efficiency as a feature of the politicians image.

²⁰ J. N. Druckman, J.W. Holmes, *Does Presidential Rhetoric...*, p. 758.

²¹ D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego [McQuail’s mass communication theory]*, Warszawa 2008, p. 503.

²² J. N. Druckman, J.W. Holmes, *Does Presidential Rhetoric...*, p. 755 and ff.

Using content analysis (president's speech), experiments and opinion polls, the authors found proof that the president can, through certain rhetoric, prime the issue criteria underlying his own approval evaluations.²³

Research on priming was also conducted in Poland by a research group under Piotr Francuz²⁴. To begin with, it was assumed that the same story can be understood and interpreted differently based on which cognitive scheme was activated and then directed the narrative process. Experiments focused on the ways of receiving and evaluating objects presented in television news programmes. As a result, it was claimed i.e. that: "evaluating the intentions of the hero depends on the type of history that preceded his presentation. According to the hypotheses, the hero's negative intention of the primed message slightly decreases the approval level of the hero in the tested story. After seeing a similar semantic message, in which the hero had clear positive intentions, the approval of the test-message hero was higher. The biggest influence on approval of the hero in the test-message had news unconnected with it semantically, presenting a heroin with positive intentions. In this case, the contrast effect appeared, that is, a substantial decrease in approval of the heroes intentions in the next message"²⁵. Presenting the results of their findings, the authors at once underlined the necessity to perfect, expand and continue their work, referring to priming as a useful concept in studying the media effects.

Concluding the thoughts on priming, in the context of politics, it is based on the cognitive accessibility of setting standards to evaluate objects appearing in public space (figures and political issues) taking place due to certain (deliberate or not) presentation of these objects (in the media). The effect of priming may be a change of these standards (e.g. in comparison to those used so far), and in consequence, a change of political attitude (e.g. from negative to positive).

Priming, agenda-setting and framing in studies on the mass media effect

Both the agenda-setting hypothesis and the concept of priming are in the research field of mass media effects, but the most frequent object of research in both cases is political and especially election communication. These concepts are often presented alongside the idea of framing or news framing, creating a triad explaining the influence of media on public opinion

²³ See other research on priming: D.H. Weaver, M. McCombs, D. Shaw, *Agenda-Setting Research: Issues, Attributes and Influences*, [in:] *Handbook of Political Communication Research*, ed. by L.L. Kaid, Mawhaw, NJ 2004, pp. 264–267.

²⁴ *Psychologiczne aspekty...*, pp. 165–218.

²⁵ A. Szalkowska, P. Francuz, *Torowanie intencji bohaterów wiadomości telewizyjnych: w kierunku rozumienia narracji*, [in:] *ibidem*, p. 188.

and other important aspects of relations in the golden triangle of political communication – political leaders, media and citizens²⁶.

According to Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury²⁷ these concepts can be labels as “negation models” in relation to the model of minimal influence proposed by Paul Lazarsfeld²⁸, continuing the tendencies of the 1970s by Elisabeth Noell-Neumann²⁹ and George Gerbner³⁰, who proved that media have a strong, long-term influence on audiences³¹. The listed concepts assume strong potential influence of media on viewer attitudes, which is however in a significant way dependent on an individual’s features and the way in which they process information.

In the mentioned triad, the most popular are studies concerning framing. By 2005, 286 works concerned framing, compared to only 183 on agenda-setting³². There are significant links between these three concepts – agenda-setting, framing and priming, although they are not the same. For this reason, in the later part of this work, the role of each of these ideas in explaining mass media effects will be presented.

The agenda-setting theory is based on the breaking study by Chapell Hill, conducted during the 1968 presidential elections, and published in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw³³. The very function of agenda-setting by the media was presented by Walter Lippman in his work *Public Opinion*, published in 1922. It is believed to be the crucial theory in explaining the outcomes of mass media effects in a long-term perspective.

Agenda-setting focuses mostly on transferring the importance of issues between the media and public agenda (the first level theory – basic agenda-setting). According to its assumptions, the news media focus (set the public agenda) the public’s attention on a few key public issues by selecting information and intense exposure of certain news, while omitting others. Through such practices, news media create the list and hierarchy of issues significant for citizens. Opinion poll research and experiments conducted in the United States, but also in

²⁶ R.M. Perloff, *Political Communication. Politics, Press and Public in America*, Mawhaw, NJ 1998, pp. 8–9.

²⁷ D.A. Scheufele, D. Tewksbury, *Framing, Agenda Setting...*, pp. 9–20.

²⁸ P. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson, H. Gaudet, *The People’s choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*, New York 1944; J.T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*, Glencoe, Ill. 1960.

²⁹ E. Noelle-Neumann, *Return to the Concept of Powerful Mass Media*, “Studies of Broadcasting” Vol. 9 (1973), pp. 67–112.

³⁰ G. Gerbner, L. Gross, *System of cultural indicators*, “Public Opinion Quarterly” Vol. 38 (1974), pp. 258–268.

³¹ An entirely different view is presented by Takeshita, who believes that agenda-setting is not the antithesis of the limited effects model but rather is complementary to it (T. Takeshita, *Current Critical Problems in Agenda-Setting Research*, “International Journal of Public Opinion” Vol. 18 (2005), No. 3, p. 284.

³² D.H. Weaver, *Thoughts on Agenda Setting...*, p. 143.

³³ M. McCombs, D. Shaw, *The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media*, “Public Opinion Quarterly” Vol. 36 (1972), pp. 176–187.

many other countries, confirmed that issues highly exposed in the media, after some time (4–8 weeks) become the most crucial public issues³⁴.

Shifting salience of issues between the media and public agenda (but also between the media and political agenda) is explored in first level agenda-setting. The next level (which is still being developed through diverse empirical studies around the world) introduced new dimensions of relations between the media, public and political agenda. Apart from the mentioned first level theory, which concerns transferring the importance of objects (issues, problems, topics, people), there is also the second level – attributes of issues and public figures – which is connected with framing and news framing³⁵.

The first level of the theory states that media can only suggest what to think about, while its second level, relating to the concept of strong media effects³⁶, shows that news media can also influence viewers in terms of interpreting issues (how we should think).

Although studies on framing are the most popular, the concept is still poorly (not precisely) defined³⁷. The concept of framing and news framing is based on the assumption that the way in which a given issues is reported by the media influences its perception by the public. The interpretation of an issue by the media, i.e. a journalist, can be and often is, incorporated by the audience. The concept has its basis, as does priming, in cognitive psychology, i.e. in studies by Daniel Kahneman i Amos Twerski³⁸. As a framing tool, symbols, key words, schemes, metaphors and catchphrases are used³⁹. Most important for the meaning of political communication in the concept of framing is the fact that the person who is able to force their interpretation frame of an issue, determines the perception of a problem by the audience – and as a result, its understanding and judgment.

In topic literature and empirical studies there are many types of frames, the most useful being framing effects classified by Holli A. Semetko and Patti M. Valkenburg, who distinguish: attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences,

³⁴ M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy. Media masowe i opinia publiczna* [Setting the agenda. The mass media and public opinion], Kraków 2008; J.W. Dearing, E.M. Rogers, *Agenda Setting. Communication Concepts*, Vol. 6, Thousand Oaks, Ca. 1996.

³⁵ M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy...*, pp. 99 and ff.

³⁶ J.W. Dearing, E.M. Rogers, *Agenda Setting...*, p. 14 and oth.; R. Cobb, T. Elder, *The Politics of Agenda Building: An alternative perspective for modern democratic theory*, "Journal of Politics" Vol. 33 (1971), p. 909; M. Linsky, *Impact: how the press affects federal policymaking*, New York 1986.

³⁷ D.H. Weaver, *Thoughts on Agenda Setting...*, p. 147. Cf. M. Palczewski, *Koncepcja framingu i jej zastosowanie w badaniach newsów w Wiadomościach TVP i Faktach TVN*, "Studia Medioznawcze" 2011, No. 1, pp. 31–41.

³⁸ A. Twersky, D. Kahneman, *Rational Choice and the Framing of Decisions*, "The Journal of Business" Vol. 57 (1986), No. 4, pp. 251–278.

³⁹ D.H. Weaver, *Thoughts on Agenda Setting...*, p. 143; Cf. S. J. Baran, D.K. Davis, *Teorie komunikowania masowego*, Kraków 2007, pp. 322–324.

and morality⁴⁰. Their research on Polish news programmes shows that i.e. television journalists preferably use the frame of conflict and morality⁴¹. Political conflict dominates in television reports e.g. during election periods, and is by some perceived in the context of sports “competitiveness” and so-called “horse-race” frame, which organized the main election topics⁴².

As mentioned earlier, the concept of framing is connected with second level agenda-setting. McCombs claims that framing is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed⁴³. Agenda refers more to “what” is covered by the media and framing is “how” these issues are reported⁴⁴. Nonetheless it should be noticed that the concept of framing has a broader dimension than simply establishing meaningful attributes within an agenda. Some types of frames expand beyond the idea of attributes, feature, issue or person, as in the case of the economic consequence frame.

In the context of political communication studies, priming complements the media effects triad concept. Researchers began linking the agenda-setting hypothesis and cognitive priming theory in the 1980s and early 1990s to analyze the effects of news coverage on people’s evolutions and opinions of political leaders⁴⁵. Media studies confirmed the priming hypothesis that television news coverage not only heightens viewer cognizance of certain issues, but also affects the criteria by which political leaders are judged⁴⁶. For example, research shows that “chronic accessibility” of information on foreign policy issues in the media ultimately makes it a criteria serving as judgment of candidates for president (which one of them will do better in executing this policy)⁴⁷.

⁴⁰ H.A. Semetko, P.M. Valkenburg, *Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news*, “Journal of Communications” Vol. 50 (2000), No. 2, pp. 93–109; W. Cwalina, A. Falkowski, *Marketing polityczny...*, pp. 272–274; F. D. Durham, *Breaching Powerful Boundaries: A Postmodern Critique of Framing*, [in:] *Framing Public Life. Perspectives on Media and Our Social World*, ed. by S.D. Reese, O.H. Gandy, A.E. Grant, London 2001, p. 124.

⁴¹ E. Nowak, R. Riedel, *Agenda setting...*, pp. 75–78.

⁴² R.M. Entman, *Projections of Power. Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Chicago 2004, p. 6.

⁴³ M. McCombs, *New frontiers in agenda setting: Agendas of attributes of frames*, “Mass Communication Review” Vol. 24 (1997), No. 1/2, p. 37.

⁴⁴ D.H. Weaver, *Thoughts on Agenda Setting...*, p. 142.

⁴⁵ L. Willnat, *Agenda Setting and Priming...*, p. 52.

⁴⁶ S. Iyengar, D.R. Kinder, *News that Matters...*, passim.

⁴⁷ G.M. Kosicki, *Problems and Opportunities in Agenda Setting Research*, “Journal of Communication” Vol. 43 (1993), No. 2, p. 45.

Agenda-setting and priming – mutual relations

The following part of this work will present the relation between agenda-setting and priming, leaving aside however framing. This choice is due to a broader range and development of studies concerning links between agenda-setting and priming than with priming and framing. Priming is at times referred to as an element of second level agenda-setting. This level explains in what way news media create their persuasive influence, suggesting criteria and the way of evaluating issues and political leaders⁴⁸. It does not mean however, that there do not exist theoretical relations between priming and framing. Robert M. Entman – believed to be one of the founders of framing - describes these links as follows: activating as association between an item highlighted in the frames text and an audience's thinking about a related concept⁴⁹. Reflecting on the theoretical links between priming and framing – with a status of a separate theory confirmed in numerous research⁴⁹ – would require a separate study.

Links between agenda-setting and priming are lined with many controversies. Some studies place priming outside the levels of agenda-setting and as its outcome, i.e. the result of creating a list of issues and imposing their interpretation. For example, Gerald M. Kosicki believes that these are qualitatively different concepts due to theoretical and empirical reasons⁵⁰.

McCombs defines priming as the precedence of attention as a link between the effects of agenda-setting and the resulting (effects of agenda-setting i.e. transferring the importance from the media to the public agenda) opinion on certain public figures⁵¹. This also concerns political issues (not just people) – the change of importance of some issues (focusing media attention) causes another change – it influences the overall judgment of achievements e.g. those of the president. Therefore, the relation between agenda-setting and priming is that the agenda-setting effect means viewers learn about which issues (sets of issues) are most important, and their selective attention – the priming effect, uses these issues as a basis for evaluating people and candidate achievements. The priming effect has particular meaning during election campaigns, when the results of this mechanism also concern voter decision making⁵².

⁴⁸ T. Takeshita, *Current Critical Problems...*, p. 281.

⁴⁹ *Doing News Framing Analysis. Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. by P. D'Angelo, J.A. Kuypers, New York 2010, passim; K.S. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives...*, passim; *Framing Public Life...*, ed. by S.D. Reese, O.H. Gandy, A.E. Grant, passim.

⁵⁰ Cf. G.M. Kosicki, *Problems and Opportunities...*, passim.

⁵¹ M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy...*, p. 144.

⁵² S. Michalczyk, *Spółeczeństwo medialne...*, p. 405.

Relations between agenda-setting and priming are similarly described by R. Andrew Holbrook and Timothy G. Hill, who claim that agenda-setting is based on the audience believing that the most important public issues are those which have the most extensive news coverage. In priming on the other hand, the most important issues become the basis for formulating evaluation criteria of public figures⁵³. It can therefore be said, to some degree of simplicity, the agenda-setting defines what is important, and priming – what is the most important for the public.

Winfried Schulz similarly draws the relation between agenda-setting and priming, defining priming as a situation, in which voters judge parties and their candidates based on events and issues they had contact within a period (relatively not long, enabling them to remember the event) before they make their evaluation⁵⁴.

Apart from the distinguishable similarities and links, there are also differences between these two concepts. Both priming and agenda-setting assume that people formulate their opinions and make decisions based on factors that are easily accessible. The effects of priming (but also framing) are different than those of agenda-setting in that in order for the first to take place, intense viewer attention is needed, while to see the outcome of agenda-setting, superficial attention and information processing is enough⁵⁵.

Studying priming, some scholars critically refer to agenda-setting and its relevance. To some extent, this is done by Iyengar and Kinder, through their controversial assumption that agenda-setting is not a theory, but rather a metaphor, that literature on it is scattered and haphazard and research slim and fragmented⁵⁶. They see priming as stronger indication of media influence than agenda-setting. Analyzing who is more prone to priming, they also conclude that these are different citizens than those who are responsive to agenda-setting (other types of victims of priming). Similarly McQuail undermines the relevance of the agenda-setting hypothesis due to the inability of proving its causality, at the same time defining priming as a specific aspect of agenda-setting⁵⁷.

⁵³ R.A. Holbrook, T.G. Hill, *Agenda-Setting and Priming in Prime Time Television*, "Political Communication" Vol. 22 (2005), p. 278.

⁵⁴ W. Schulz, *Komunikacja polityczna. Koncepcje teoretyczne i wyniki badań empirycznych na temat mediów masowych w polityce*, Kraków 2006, p. 152.

⁵⁵ D.A. Scheufele, D. Tewksbury, *Framing, Agenda Setting...*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ S. Iyengar, D.R. Kinder, *News that Matters...*, p. 3; Cf. M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy...*, pp. 7–16, 24–33.

⁵⁷ D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego...*, p. 501; Cf. M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy...*, pp. 16–19. The case of causality is verified by delaying the public agenda in relation to the media agenda; causality is analyzed by S.N. Soroka, *Agenda-setting dynamics in Canada*, Vancouver 2002, p. 9.

The critical element of links between agenda-setting and priming is also proposed by Takeshita⁵⁸. He has certain doubts concerning linking the concept of priming with second level agenda-setting (concepts of the third level of the theory). It is often associated with the direction of attitude, although it is not consistent with the idea of the theory that includes priming as a type of standard perspective to evaluate events and political figures, and not a type or valence of an attitude. These proposals are valid in reference to the very idea of priming as a standard of evaluation, although they do not include the essence of priming, within which there would be a change of attitude as a result of changes in the criteria of evaluating a political figure or situation.

Priming is connected with the consequences of agenda-setting, which result from underlining certain features and are displayed through a change in citizens' attitudes concerning issues and political figures. The frequently mentioned example is the change of attitude towards George Bush in the years 1988-1991. An analysis of public opinion polls devoted to his political image confirmed the change of criteria in judgment: from economy to foreign policy⁵⁹, which determined the increase in popularity of this politician.

Lack of agreement on the relation between agenda-setting and priming is connected with the fact that these theories deal with similar issues and lead to the same conclusions, although based on different foundations⁶⁰. In this context, the most apparent results are those of McCombs, who believes that priming should be treated as one of the most important consequences of media agenda-setting⁶¹. This means that there first needs to be the effect of agenda-setting and later, as one of its consequences – priming, which becomes a kind of guide for “catalogue” of political issues and political leaders.

Doubts as to the justification of differentiating both effects is resolved by the fact that in the case of priming, the accessibility of certain issues is not enough. It is therefore necessary to recognize their importance (e.g. from the point of view of election evaluation of a candidate), because not all issues highly exposed in the media are at the same time perceived as important by the public, and not all can function as a criterion of evaluating policies. This is visible in the conducted empirical research⁶². Correlation between priming and agenda-setting was not yet researched in detail, especially when it comes to results visible

⁵⁸ T. Takeshita, *Current Critical Problems...*, pp. 276–296.

⁵⁹ M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy...*, pp. 144, 147.

⁶⁰ J. N. Druckman, J.W. Holmes, *Does Presidential Rhetoric...*, p. 755.

⁶¹ M. McCombs, *Ustanawianie agendy...*, p. 122.

⁶² W. Cwalina, A. Falkowski, *Marketing polityczny...*, pp. 270–272.

in changes in political behavior, but they would certainly enrich research on mass media effects.

Conclusions

Referring to the assumptions presented in the introduction and based on the thoughts of current theoretical analyses and empirical findings, it should be concluded that the concept of priming media content, taking place in the minds of those receiving media messages, not only describes the mechanism of shaping political attitudes – through setting the criteria to evaluate candidates and/or political issues – but also suggests an efficient way of influencing these attitudes. The criteria are formed by determining the content of the message and giving it a certain form, which is the domain of media senders (selection and information processing). It gives them the possibility to influence the evaluation of political objects, which could be used in as partisan bias, or happen in an incidental manner (e.g. exposing an issue because of its high media attractiveness, it can also have political “side-effects”, making an impression it is a public issue). The essence of priming effects, which can change an attitude as a consequence of changing evaluation criteria of a person or political situation, explains the apparent contradiction between the cognitive and persuasive dimension of priming. The process itself has a cognitive nature, while its effects expose a persuasive aspect – a change of evaluation criteria could be synonymous with a change in the direction of judging a political object (e.g. strong exposure of health issues, where social dissatisfaction is usually high, could cause a loss for the candidates of the ruling party, while strong exposure of foreign policy issues, especially in the period of relative stabilization, could be beneficial, even despite journalist interpretation of the issues). The effects of priming make the thesis on media telling us not only what to think about, but also how to think about issues, all the more justified.

Due to the significant explanatory value of these mechanism of mass media functioning, it seems justified to use the concept of priming more broadly within empirical research concerning the influence of news media on election behavior in Polish circumstances. It would without a doubt be an interesting research direction, which was not yet perused on such a scale in Poland⁶³. The statement made by B.D. Jones and

⁶³ E.g. an interesting field of research is the election context of the Smolensk catastrophe. The issue could be a useful example of the priming effect. The resignation of opinion-shaping media from using the Smolensk catastrophe for political purposes in the presidential campaign of 2010 should be seen as a conscious communication choice of the media and ruling elites, aimed at refuting negative (emotionally charged) perspectives of evaluating political figures. Leaving aside the moral aspect and the relevance of using this type of perspective in election communication, it should be noted without doubt that this media agreement, resigning

F.R. Baumgartner can be the proper justification for further research within the topic: “Attention allocation affects the choice of issues, the choice of issue characterization, and the choice of solutions. Attention is a severely constraining factor in politics – a bottleneck through which all matters must squeeze. As a consequence, attention allocation must be disproportionate. This raises an important issue: just how are problems in the environment translated into policy-making responses?”⁶⁴.

from the Smolensk perspective during presidential elections, meant losses for Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) and gains for Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska – PO).

⁶⁴ B.D. Jones, F.R. Baumgartner, *The Politics of Attention. How Government Prioritizes Problems*, Chicago 2005, p. 208.