

# Exploring the Role of Agenda-Building Efforts in Media Coverage and Policymaking Activity of Healthcare Reform

Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly  
90(4) 652–672  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1077699013503157  
jmcq.sagepub.com



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## **Abstract**

This investigation explores the relationships among information subsidies, news media coverage, and policymaking activities regarding healthcare reform during the first year of the Obama presidential administration. Specifically, a comparison of information subsidies (from the president, federal government offices, Congress, and healthcare-related stakeholder groups), news media content, and policymaking activity was completed from March 2009 to December 2009. Significant correlations were found for the salience of issues and stakeholder groups among information subsidies, news media coverage, and policymaking activity. Robust linkages were also found concerning issue attribute salience.

## **Keywords**

agenda building, presidential public relations, policymaking, healthcare reform

Perhaps the signature political battle during the first year of the Barack Obama presidential administration encompassed the widespread debate and controversy over healthcare reform. While legislation was ultimately passed, the debate revealed sharp

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divisions among policymakers, business leaders, special interest groups, journalists, healthcare professionals, voters, and other constituencies about this issue. Despite heavy media attention and political controversy, little empirical work has explored the communication dynamics of the various parties battling over this legislation.

Agenda building and agenda setting offer useful theoretical frameworks for exploring the interplay among government communications, stakeholder communications, media coverage, public opinion, and policymaking. One limitation with traditional research on political public relations to date is that it has focused primarily on examining the role of just one type of message or information subsidy (e.g., news releases), yet recent research suggests that this may be problematic, as it cannot be assumed that all types of government communications will have parallel relationships with media coverage, public opinion, and policymaking activity.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the present study explores the role of *different types of information subsidies* in impacting the healthcare reform debate from the beginning of the Obama administration until the bill was passed by the Senate in December 2009. Finally, we also scrutinized policymaking activity by monitoring Senate and congressional daily calendars of business.

## Literature Review

### *Healthcare Debate Timeline*

Healthcare reform was a major issue in Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. During the campaign, Obama promised to cover uninsured people throughout the country and to reduce the average family's healthcare costs. In March 2009, the Obama administration set to work on healthcare reform and held a summit with several stakeholder groups to discuss strategies for reducing cost and expanding coverage. In June 2009, House Democratic leaders introduced the bill and, after heated debate, the Senate finance committee approved the legislation in October 2009. The House passed the bill with a 220-215 vote in November 2009, and it was finally passed in the Senate with a party-line vote of 60-39 in December 2009. President Obama signed the healthcare reform bill into law in March 2010.

### *First-Level Agenda Building and Agenda Setting*

In contrast to traditional agenda-setting research that has typically examined the relationship between the salience of issues in news media and public opinion,<sup>2</sup> the broader concept of agenda building suggests that the process of salience formation and transfer involves reciprocal influence among several stakeholder groups,<sup>3</sup> including candidates, political parties, corporations, nonprofit organizations, activist groups, and so forth. While the original emphasis of agenda-setting scholarship was on political issues, research has noted that the core theoretical proposition of agenda setting is about the transfer of salience from one agenda to another.<sup>4</sup>

From an agenda-building perspective, the interplay of source, media, and public agendas is of paramount concern. The role of political public relations efforts has been

deemed crucial to the process of agenda building,<sup>5</sup> yet empirical work is limited compared with the vast literature on agenda setting. One consistent strategy implemented to advance the objectives of political public relations efforts is through the use of information subsidies, such as news releases, press conferences, speeches, and interviews. According to Gandy,<sup>6</sup> information subsidies can be defined as “efforts to reduce the prices faced by others for certain information in order to increase its consumption.” Employing an economic analogy, Berkowitz<sup>7</sup> contends that “it follows, then, that news sources who are able to reduce the costs of reporting news will be able to exert greater influence on the news media agenda.” Finally, Zoch and Molleda<sup>8</sup> explain that “public relations practitioners generate prepackaged information to promote their organizations’ viewpoints, and to communicate aspects of interest within those issues, to their internal and external publics.” Because issues such as health and science can be abstract and technical in nature, agenda-building activities are central to shaping media, policy, and public dialogue about them.<sup>9</sup>

Several studies have reported that news releases are effective agenda-building tools for shaping media coverage. For example, Turk<sup>10</sup> probed the role of news releases in swaying news media coverage of government agencies in the state of Louisiana. Her findings confirmed a positive association between news releases and media attention toward these government offices. In a political campaign context, Kaid<sup>11</sup> discovered that candidate news releases were often printed verbatim in news coverage. Elsewhere, Evatt and Bell<sup>12</sup> compared their impact on the media agenda of candidates during a gubernatorial race in Texas. Their findings revealed that incumbent Ann Richards was more successful in controlling the media agenda than challenger George W. Bush. McKinnon and Tedesco<sup>13</sup> reached similar conclusions for relationships between news releases and media coverage during the 1996 presidential election, where President Bill Clinton was found to be more effective in driving the media agenda than Bob Dole. Finally, Lancendorfer and Lee<sup>14</sup> reported that the salience of issues in campaign news releases affected the salience of issues in news media content during the 2002 Michigan gubernatorial race.

Beyond issue salience, the present project investigates the *salience of stakeholder groups* (as objects) as a logical extension of the existing theoretical frameworks offered by agenda building and agenda setting.<sup>15</sup> Because this study examines the healthcare reform debate of 2009, tracking the salience of stakeholder groups in communication messages can have important implications for our conceptual understanding of issue management and relationship cultivation perspectives,<sup>16</sup> in addition to agenda-building processes. Indeed, several constituencies have contributed to the discourse on healthcare reform, including the president, Congress, insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, doctors, nurses, and patients, to name a few. The salience of these stakeholders in political public relations messages and news media coverage sheds light on the prioritized groups during the healthcare reform debate.

While most scholarship has probed the role of news releases, recent scholarship has suggested that it is crucial to investigate multiple information subsidies in agenda-building and agenda-setting analyses, as we cannot assume that relationships will be consistent across subsidy types.<sup>17</sup> Thus, some studies have investigated the role of other types of information subsidies in agenda-building research. For example, Kiouisis

and Strömbäck,<sup>18</sup> comparing presidential communications and public opinion from 1961 to 1997, reported connections between presidential news conferences and job approval ratings, as well as between speeches and job approval ratings. Notably, the linkages were not always positive, highlighting the need for comparisons of different types of information subsidies. This also suggests that scholars should not assume that more information subsidies are necessarily tied to higher levels of object salience and attribute salience in news coverage, public opinion, and policymaking action. Cohen<sup>19</sup> examined the impact of the State of the Union addresses on public salience of issues and found a positive relationship. This relationship generally remained robust even when controlling for presidential popularity. Nonetheless, other studies that have incorporated media coverage have yielded mixed results on the president's ability to set the media agenda via speeches.<sup>20</sup>

Given the rapid changes in digital and interactive communications, the volume of information subsidies employed in political public relations programs has dramatically increased; yet our understanding of their role in political discourse is in its early stages. Moreover, scholars have stated that journalists are increasingly relying not only on official information subsidies (i.e., press releases), but also on nonofficial subsidies (i.e., blogs).<sup>21</sup> These information subsidies based on new technology have subsidized journalists differently from official sources. For example, prior research has found that news reporters used nonofficial sources of information more heavily during a crisis situation to find out about victims and to gather information (i.e., Virginia Tech shootings or Hurricane Katrina).<sup>22</sup>

Hence, information subsidies from diverse stakeholder groups may reflect different points of view for understanding certain objects. To explore the different roles of information subsidies, the present project will explore relationships among a range of information subsidies to compare their relative influence in the 2009 healthcare reform debate. Specifically, we study presidential statements, speeches, blogs, press briefings, news releases, weekly addresses, Senate committee releases, Department of Health releases, Physicians for a National Health Program releases, the National Coalition on Healthcare reform releases, and America's Health Insurance Plans (AHIP) releases.

A relevant conceptual framework for understanding the need to explore the impact of different types of information subsidies in the agenda-building process is offered by the model of market-driven journalism.<sup>23</sup> According to Curtin,<sup>24</sup> "McManus's model states that the economic subsidy provided by public relations materials directly drives their use by the media." Though most research to date has considered public relations efforts as a whole in this type of research, logic dictates that there are different costs associated with the production and use of different types of information subsidies. Thus, our analysis can provide some insights into the extent to which different information subsidy types are linked with patterns of news coverage regarding healthcare reform.

## *Second-Level Agenda Building and Agenda Setting*

In addition to object salience, the explication of second-level agenda building and agenda setting has linked the concept with framing by suggesting that communication messages can influence *how* groups think about a topic by selecting and placing

emphasis on certain *attributes* and ignoring others.<sup>25</sup> An attribute can be defined as a property, characteristic, or quality that describes an object. Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, and McCombs<sup>26</sup> assert,

Just as objects vary in salience, so do the attributes of each object. When members of the public and journalists describe objects, public issues, political leaders, or whatever, some attributes are emphasized, some mentioned in passing, and others not at all. Both the selection of *objects* for attention and the selection of *attributes* for describing these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles.

Based on this theorizing, logic dictates that the salience of objects and attributes in public relations messages can affect the salience of those elements on the media and public agendas. Thus, the agenda-building process explicitly involves the transfer of both object and attribute salience. Two broad classes of attributes identified in the literature include substantive and affective ones. Substantive attributes can be defined as those elements of communication messages that help us cognitively discern and differentiate among various topics. Affective attributes deal with the valence dimension of communication messages and are defined as the positive, neutral, or negative tone present in them.

Froelich and Rudiger<sup>27</sup> discovered a close correspondence between the frames present about the issue of immigration in public relations messages and news media content during an extended debate in Germany between 2000 and 2002. A longitudinal study of the U.S. stem cell debate from 1975 to 2001 detected a positive relationship between agenda-building activities and general media attention toward the issue.<sup>28</sup> Coverage of the issue spiked when stories were framed in dramatic terms, illustrating journalistic preferences for narratives when conveying reports about complex topics. In sum, a growing body of literature suggests that the agenda-building influence of public relations goes beyond object salience and extends to the level of attributes.

Frames are the most widely used substantive attributes in agenda-building and agenda-setting studies to structure various issues cognitively. In this study, we used generic issue frames to analyze communication messages about healthcare reform, rather than issue-specific frames, only appropriate for specific topics and issues.<sup>29</sup> To our knowledge, there were no prior studies that provide frames only for the healthcare reform debate, and our initial intercoding review suggested that healthcare reform messages would be categorized accordingly into generic issue frames. Furthermore, one purpose of this present study was to explore the relationships among information subsidies, media coverage, and policymaking activities, expecting that the linkages can be observed in communication issue contexts other than healthcare reform. Hence, this investigation used six substantive attributes that have been widely examined in prior scholarship: conflict, human interest, problem definition, responsibility attribution, moral evaluation, and consequence assessment frames.<sup>30</sup>

### *Political Public Relations Outcomes*

In an analysis of second-level agenda building during the 2006 Israel–Lebanon crisis, Sweetser and Brown<sup>31</sup> explored the effectiveness of information subsidies during a

military crisis. Their results suggested that providing access to public affairs personnel was associated with media content that was more neutral and positive than negative in tone. Further evidence for the transfer of affective attribute salience was observed in Zhang and Cameron's<sup>32</sup> study of the Chinese government's international public relations efforts in the United States. Specifically, they found that negative media coverage of China was reduced during the campaign when compared with coverage patterns before it.

While understanding the relationship between information subsidies and news coverage is important, research has underscored the need to go beyond message outputs and focus on outcomes to assess the effectiveness of public relations efforts and programs.<sup>33</sup> In a political public relations context, two central outcomes for determining impact include public opinion and actual policymaking activities. One major challenge with comparisons in public opinion, though, is developing an analytical strategy for ascertaining how changes in the salience of objects and attributes in information subsidies and media coverage are tied to shifts in public support for particular policies. For example, developing a public agenda of issues, stakeholders, and attributes associated with healthcare reform is nearly impossible because most public opinion polls simply address the extent to which citizens supported government healthcare reform. Consequently, policymaking activity will be the core outcome compared with political public relations efforts and news content in this study, but we suggest future inquiries examine public opinion as well when appropriate data are available.

## Hypotheses and Research Questions

Based on the logic of first-level agenda building and agenda setting, the following hypotheses and research question are offered:

- H1:** The salience of issues in information subsidies will be positively related to the salience of issues in news coverage.
- H2:** The salience of issues in information subsidies will be positively related to the salience of issues in congressional policymaking activity.
- H3:** The salience of stakeholders in information subsidies will be positively related to the salience of stakeholders in news coverage.
- H4:** The salience of stakeholders in information subsidies will be positively related to the salience of stakeholders in congressional policymaking activity.
- RQ1:** Will there be differences in relationships among different types of information subsidies in the transfer of object salience?

Based on the logic of second-level agenda building and agenda setting, the following hypotheses and research question are offered:

- H5:** The salience of substantive issue attributes in information subsidies will be positively related to the salience of substantive issue attributes in news coverage.

**H6:** The salience of substantive issue attributes in information subsidies will be positively related to the salience of substantive issue attributes in congressional policymaking activity.

**H7:** The tone of issues in information subsidies will be positively related to the tone of issues in news coverage.

**H8:** The tone of issues in information subsidies will be positively related to the tone of issues in congressional policymaking activity.

**RQ2:** Will there be differences in relationships among different types of information subsidies in the transfer of attribute salience?

## Method

### Content Analysis

This study employed content analysis to explore the interplay among multiple groups engaged in the healthcare reform debate. Government information subsidies, stakeholder communications, media coverage, and policymaking activity were tracked between March 5, 2009, and December 25, 2009. President Obama delivered his first speech about healthcare reform on March 5, 2009, and the Senate passed the healthcare reform bill on December 24, 2009.

Presidential communication materials about the issue were obtained from the White House ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)) website and included weekly addresses, speeches and remarks, press briefings, statements and releases, and presidential actions and blogs. In addition, press releases on the discourse over policymaking were collected from the websites of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions and the Department of Health and Human Services. To determine the role of stakeholder group communications in the discussion regarding healthcare reform, news releases were gathered from the Physicians for a National Health Program, the National Coalition on Healthcare, and AHIP. They were chosen as representative of physicians, the healthcare insurance industry, and patients. In total, 591 information subsidies were used in the content analysis.

News content for the study was collected from major national media outlets with keyword searches in the LexisNexis database that have frequently been used in prior research. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were chosen because they are prominent print news outlets in the United States.<sup>34</sup> The news stories were found using the keyword phrase “healthcare reform,” and the sample of news stories was selected by systematic sampling. Every fifth news story was chosen using a random starting point for each news outlet. For the *New York Times*, 266 news stories were collected, and for the *Washington Post*, 299 news stories were gathered. Policymaking activity was obtained by monitoring 176 Senate and congressional calendars of business, which allowed for daily tracking of an issue’s progress.



### *Intercoder Reliability*

Three graduate students participated in the coding process. A pretest was completed to assess the accuracy of the coding protocol and to make necessary revisions. Each item was coded for the date of publication, type of message, dominant tone, dominant issue discussed in the message, dominant stakeholder presented in the message, and dominant frame.

A randomly selected subsample of materials from the president, news from print media, and press releases from stakeholders (10% of the total samples) was analyzed to check intercoder reliability. The overall average intercoder reliability across variables was .97 using Holsti's<sup>35</sup> formula and .83 using Scott's pi.<sup>36</sup> Holsti's formula on salience of issues, issue frames and tone, and stakeholders yielded scores of .96, .97, and .97, respectively. Using Scott's pi, which corrects for chance agreement, scores were .83, .80, and .88, respectively.<sup>37</sup>

### *Object Salience: Issues*

Nine issues concerning healthcare reform were tracked: coverage, cost, safety, legislation, regulation, job approval, problem, economic consequences, and benefits. These issue categories were developed during the pretest process based on a preliminary review of information subsidies, media coverage, and public opinion data. Descriptions of each issue are included in the appendix. Each issue was coded as 1 (present) and 0 (absent) for all sampled messages.

### *Object Salience: Stakeholders*

To explore the salience of stakeholders at the first level of agenda building, eight stakeholder groups were selected: physicians, insurance companies, patients, taxpayers, pharmaceutical companies, politicians, government, and small business. Each stakeholder group was coded as 1 (present) and 0 (absent) for all sampled messages.

### *Attribute Salience*

The study used generic news frames suggested by prior scholarship to represent substantive issue attribute salience:<sup>38</sup> conflict, human interest, problem/issue definition, responsibility, moral evaluation, and consequences assessment frames. Descriptions of each frame are included in the appendix. Each issue frame was coded as 1 (present) or 0 (absent). The tone of messages was coded as 1 (positive), 2 (neutral), and 3 (negative) to explore the salience of affective attributes of issues. A message was coded as positive when it highlighted positive consequences of healthcare reform or supportive attitudes toward stakeholders. A message was coded as negative when it highlighted problems with healthcare reform or unsupportive attitudes toward stakeholders. A message was coded as neutral when it provided descriptive or factual information about healthcare reform.



**Table 1.** Correlations between Salience of Issues in Information Subsidies and News Media Coverage and Policymaking Activity.

Information Subsidy	News Media Coverage	Policymaking Activity
Presidential statements	.74**	.78**
Presidential speeches	.40	.78**
Presidential blog	.49	.74**
Presidential press briefings	.82**	.82**
Presidential news releases	.22	.54*
Presidential weekly addresses	.26	.75**
Senate committee releases	.83***	.83***
Department of health releases	.45	.69**
PNHP releases	.83***	.70**
NCHC releases	.65*	.77**
AHIP releases	.23	.55*

Note: PNHP = Physicians for a National Health Program; NCHC = National Coalition on Healthcare; AHIP = America's Health Insurance Plans.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Data Analysis

To analyze the relationships between public relations information subsidies and news media content regarding object and substantive attribute salience, Spearman's rho correlation tests were used. Rank-order correlations have been used widely in previous agenda-setting and agenda-building research studies.<sup>39</sup> Several scholars have recommended the use of such nonparametric statistics when sample size is relatively small, as was the case here.<sup>40</sup> To explore relationships with affective attribute salience, chi-square tests were used. Based on the logic of studies from Golan and Wanta<sup>41</sup> and Valenzuela and Correa,<sup>42</sup> nonsignificant relationships between the affective attributes in information subsidies and news coverage would be indicative of support for the hypotheses because of the prediction of similarities between agendas.

## Results

### Object Salience

**H1** predicted that the salience of issues in information subsidies would be positively associated with the salience of issues in news content. In general, the data offer modest support for this hypothesis in five out of eleven possible comparisons (see Table 1). The median correlation value was .49.

Based on these results, the types of presidential information subsidies most strongly associated with news coverage are presidential statements and press briefings. It is also noteworthy that other government office and stakeholder communications were

**Table 2.** Correlations between Saliency of Stakeholders in Information Subsidies and News Media Coverage and Policymaking Activity.

Information Subsidy	News Media Coverage	Policymaking Activity
Presidential statements	.64*	.85**
Presidential speeches	.58*	.85**
Presidential blog	.41	.78***
Presidential press briefings	.70*	.72*
Presidential news releases	.53	.54
Presidential weekly addresses	.77**	.61*
Senate committee releases	.76**	.49
Department of Health releases	.50	.47
PNHP releases	.78**	.08
NCHC releases	.78**	.18
AHIP releases	.79**	.59*

Note: PNHP = Physicians for a National Health Program; NCHC = National Coalition on Healthcare; AHIP = America's Health Insurance Plans.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

linked with news coverage because this demonstrates that the agenda-building metaphor in politics is applicable beyond presidential communications and tactics.

Moving beyond communication outputs, **H2** predicted a positive association between the saliency of issues in information subsidies and congressional policymaking activity. As shown in Table 1, the data offer robust support for this hypothesis in eleven out of eleven possible comparisons, with a median correlation of .75. This adds to the increasing literature emphasizing the role of public relations in advancing organizational objectives. In a political setting, policymaking is, of course, a major outcome.

Similar to **H1**, **H3** predicted that the saliency of stakeholder groups would be positively linked between information subsidies and news coverage. The data also supported this hypothesis in eight out of eleven possible comparisons, as reported in Table 2. The median correlation was .67.

**H4** examined relationships between the saliency of stakeholders in information subsidies and congressional policymaking activity. As shown in Table 2, the data offer evidence supporting this hypothesis in six out of eleven possible comparisons. The median correlation is .56.

In answering **RQ1**, the most prevalent information subsidies consistently linked with news coverage and policymaking were presidential statements and press briefings. Specifically, they were meaningfully associated with news coverage and policymaking activity in all possible comparisons for issue and stakeholder saliency.

### *Attribute Saliency*

Shifting beyond object saliency, the remainder of our analysis focuses on the transfer of attribute saliency. **H5** predicted that the saliency of substantive issue attributes

**Table 3.** Correlations between Salience of Substantive Issue Attributes in Information Subsidies and News Media Coverage and Policymaking Activity.

Information Subsidy	News Media Coverage	Policymaking Activity
Presidential statements	.40	.83**
Presidential speeches	.65	.99***
Presidential blog	.46	.76*
Presidential press briefings	.48	.84**
Presidential news releases	.40	.83**
Presidential weekly addresses	.40	.83**
Senate committee releases	.67*	.81*
Department of Health releases	.40	.83**
PNHP releases	.82*	.93***
NCHC releases	.48	.80*
AHIP releases	.66*	.93***

Note: PNHP = Physicians for a National Health Program; NCHC = National Coalition on Healthcare; AHIP = America's Health Insurance Plans.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

in information subsidies is positively associated with the salience of substantive issue attributes in news coverage. Overall, the data offer weak support concerning this hypothesis. In particular, support was garnered in three out of eleven possible comparisons, and the median correlation was .48. Table 3 summarizes the data regarding the salience of substantive issue attributes in information subsidies and news media content.

**H6** predicted a positive relationship between the salience of substantive issue attributes in information subsidies and policymaking activity. The data strongly support this hypothesis in eleven out of eleven possible comparisons, as reported in Table 3. The median correlation coefficient is a robust .83.

Moving from substantive to affective attributes, **H7** predicted that the tone of issues in information subsidies would be positively associated with the tone of issues in news media coverage. As noted above, these relationships were explored with chi-square tests and nonsignificant relationships would be indicative of support because of the prediction of similarity among agendas. As illustrated in Table 4, the data support this hypothesis for negatively toned messages in seven out of eleven possible comparisons. For neutrally toned messages, it is supported in two out of eleven possible comparisons and just one out of eleven for positively toned messages.

**H8** examined similar relationships with Congressional policymaking activity. The data provide strong for this hypothesis in eight out of eleven comparisons for negative tone. Table 5 summarizes these relationships. For neutral tone, **H8** was supported in four out of eleven possible comparisons and two out of eleven for positive tone. Across both media coverage and policymaking, then, the strongest linkages for affective attributes associations seem to be with negative tone.

To answer **RQ2**, patterns were examined regarding relationships between different types of information subsidies with news coverage and policymaking activity for the

**Table 4.** Chi-Square Values between Salience of Affective Issue Attributes in Information Subsidies and News Media Coverage.

Information Subsidy	Negative News Media Coverage	Neutral News Coverage	Positive News Media Coverage
Presidential statements	0.44	19.51***	25.63***
Presidential speeches	2.76	45.14***	24.50***
Presidential blog	0.01	22.05***	567.82***
Presidential press briefings	0.24	3.50	9.28**
Presidential news releases	4.09*	32.01***	17.00***
Presidential weekly addresses	3.63	42.88***	21.62***
Senate committee releases	5.58**	1.81	0.29
Department of Health releases	5.07*	29.45***	14.78***
PNHP releases	6.11*	23.40***	9.93***
NCHC releases	2.37	47.51***	25.63***
AHIP releases	1.04	18.32***	6.54**

Note: PNHP = Physicians for a National Health Program; NCHC = National Coalition on Healthcare; AHIP = America's Health Insurance Plans.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 5.** Chi-Square Values between Salience of Affective Issue Attributes in Information Subsidies And Policymaking.

Information Subsidy	Negative Tone in Policymaking	Neutral Tone in Policymaking	Positive Tone in Policymaking
Presidential statements	6.48*	3.94*	11.96***
Presidential speeches	0.13	21.42***	11.37***
Presidential blog	4.92*	5.25*	11.37***
Presidential press briefings	5.66**	0.46	1.75
Presidential news releases	0.01	10.79	6.05**
Presidential weekly addresses	0.00	19.55***	9.11**
Senate committee releases	0.22	1.45	5.23*
Department of Health releases	0.12	9.68**	4.68*
PNHP releases	0.34	6.00**	2.05
NCHC releases	0.13	23.43***	11.96***
AHIP releases	0.80	3.37	5.58*

Note: PNHP = Physicians for a National Health Program; NCHC = National Coalition on Healthcare; AHIP = America's Health Insurance Plans.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

salience of attributes. In terms of the salience of substantive attributes, our data suggest that the information subsidies showing the most consistent linkages were Senate committee releases, physician group releases, and AHIP releases. In particular, information subsidies from the physician group and AHIP had the highest correlation values with both news media and policymaking activities. Regarding the salience of

affective attributes, the data showed that information subsidies from presidential press briefings and Senate committee releases had most similarities with news coverage and policymaking activities.

## Discussion

Our findings offer empirical support for the predicted agenda-building relationships among information subsidies, news media coverage, and policymaking activities. First, in terms of issue salience, modest associations were found between information subsidies and news media coverage, while strong linkages were found between information subsidies and policymaking activity. In particular, presidential statements, presidential blogs, and press briefings were revealed as the most frequently connected information subsidies to news media coverage. In regard to the salience of stakeholders, the data show strong linkages for information subsidies with both news media coverage and policymaking activity. Thus, the evidence suggests that stakeholder salience is another important type of object to examine in agenda-building and agenda-setting research beyond issue salience. In addition, in addressing the first research question, our results revealed that presidential statements, presidential press briefings, Senate committee releases, Department of Health releases, and physician group releases were most consistently linked with media coverage and policymaking activity.

Moreover, our data uncover supportive evidence for the predicted agenda-building relationships of attribute salience among information subsidies, news media coverage, and policymaking activity. The substantive issue attributes emphasized in information subsidies were strongly tied to policymaking activity, while a weak relationship was found between information subsidies and news media coverage in terms of substantive issue attributes. With regard to affective attributes (i.e., tone), the findings suggest stronger associations between the tone of issues in information subsidies and those in media coverage and congressional policymaking activity when the tone was negative. This pattern may demonstrate that news media pay more attention to the negative nature of events and that negative stories may more readily be utilized by journalists compared to neutral or positive stories.<sup>43</sup> This is also consistent with the finding that public relations may have the most meaningful impact on negative media messages.<sup>44</sup>

One major theoretical implication of the present study was its extension of agenda-building theory. At the first level of agenda building, scholars have suggested that the salience formation and transfer process of "objects" involves several stakeholder groups and different types of objects.<sup>45</sup> In the present study, issues and stakeholders were the two object types examined, and our results indicated that the efforts of political public relations are crucial in raising the salience of both object types in media coverage and policymaking activity.

Prior scholarship has also indicated that communication messages can affect how people think about an object by emphasizing certain attributes over others.<sup>46</sup> Collectively, our data confer evidence of a weak transfer of substantive attribute salience for media coverage, but suggest a strong transfer of affective attribute salience for negative tone with media coverage. Moreover, our findings show that political

public relations efforts are paramount to policymaking activity as a major public relations outcome. Contemporary public relations scholarship has asserted that evaluation goes beyond measuring message outputs, and also outcomes.<sup>47</sup> The present study investigated the effects of public relations efforts on policymaking activities as a central outcome of political public relations efforts. Evidence for both first- and second-level agenda building was found between information subsidies and policymaking activity.

Another theoretical implication of this investigation is its demonstration of the importance of exploring agenda-building relationships with various types of information subsidies. Prior research has indicated that that we cannot assume consistent relationships across different subsidy types.<sup>48</sup> The present study analyzed eleven different types of information subsidies. Information subsidies from diverse stakeholder groups have different points of view in understanding healthcare reform, and our results showed mainstream information flow from government officials (i.e., president, Senate, and Department of Health) to news media. The official information subsidies from these government officials were most frequently used by reporters affecting cognitive understanding of healthcare reform issues, comparing those from other stakeholder groups (i.e., insurance or physicians). Moreover, our results indicated that nonofficial sources, such as blogs, were not as effective in being connected with news coverage regarding the healthcare reform issue. This result is somewhat different from previous studies emphasizing the role of nonofficial information sources during a crisis. Hence, the role of different types of information subsidies should be further explored in diverse communication settings to help public relations and strategic communication professionals.

In terms of practical implications, one of the major tasks of politicians or policymakers is to put their priorities on the media and policy agendas. Our data suggest that information subsidies can play a key role in shaping media coverage and policymaking activity for major policy initiatives, such as healthcare reform. Specifically, our results show that presidential statements, presidential press briefings, Senate committee releases, Department of Health releases, and physician group releases were strongly linked to media coverage and policymaking at the first level of agenda building. Moreover, presidential speeches, Senate committee releases, physician group releases, and AHIP releases were strongly linked to media coverage and policymaking activity at the second level of agenda building. In particular, regarding the tone of messages, presidential press briefing and Senate committee releases showed most similarities with media and policymaking activities among the eleven different types of information subsidies. Consequently, these traditional information subsidy types may be most effective for future efforts aiming to impact healthcare reform or related policy and discourse.

Despite the theoretical and practical implications, there are some limitations in this present investigation. First, this study covered only the short period of time of less than a year. Policymaking is a long-term process so future research should use longer time spans for analysis and use more sophisticated statistical tests and modeling to explore agenda-building and agenda-setting relationships. Nonetheless, our

design does offer more insight when compared with traditional cross-sectional studies. Moreover, due to limited data availability, this study did not analyze the relationship between information subsidies and public opinion. In agenda-building and agenda-setting research, shifts in public opinion are one of the major results of public relations efforts, and policymaking activity is affected by public opinion. Hence, future research should incorporate public opinion data regarding healthcare reform to expand on this agenda-building analysis. Finally, the emergence of diverse forms of information subsidies should prompt further research on how to use them effectively in public relations programs and campaigns. Exploring the impact of different types of information subsidies will deepen our conceptual understanding of agenda-building and agenda-setting processes.

## Appendix

Variable	Categories	Description
Issue 0: Absent 1: Present	Coverage of healthcare	Coverage of healthcare (i.e., disease information covered by the healthcare)
	Cost of healthcare reform/payment system	Cost produced by healthcare reform and payment system, such as tax
	Patient safety and quality of health care	Patient safety and quality of healthcare produced by reform
	Legislation process of healthcare reform	Process of legislation of healthcare bill (i.e., voting results)
	Government regulation of healthcare	Government regulation of market or industry related to healthcare
	Presidential job approval	Changes of presidential job approval rate due to healthcare reform
	Current problem	Problems/criticisms of existing healthcare system
	Economic effect	Economic effect produced by healthcare reform
	Benefit from healthcare reform	Benefit which comes from healthcare reform (i.e., "makes health insurance easier to get and more affordable")
Stakeholder 0: Absent 1: Present	Physicians	Physicians or physician communities/institutions
	Insurance company/insurance industry	Insurance company/insurance industry
	Patients	Patients
	Taxpayers	Taxpayers
	Pharmacists	Pharmacist or their communities/ institutions
	Politicians	Politicians including congressman and senator
	State/local government	State/ local government

(continued)



Appendix (continued)

Variable	Categories	Description
Issue frame (coded for each issue appeared) 0: Absent 1: Present	Small business owners and employees	Small business owners and employees
	Conflict	One side or the other of an issue or disagreements between two organizations about healthcare reform
	Human interest	Emotional aspect of an issue in an attempt to engender empathy for readers
	Problem/issue definition	Description of a problematic situation and delineate how the situation is
	Responsibility	Placing of blame in a news story for some type of event or issue and could include both negative (placing blame for a bad reputation) or positive (accepting the credit for accomplishing something worthwhile)
Tone (coded for each issue appeared) 1: Negative 2: Neutral 3: Positive	Moral evaluation	Moral aspect of a given issue
	Consequences assessment	Consequences of an event, focusing on events that occurred because of a decision that was made
	Negative	<i>"illegal immigrants will get health insurance under reform and . . . will be funded by taxpayer dollars"</i>
		<i>"No one benefits, and reform is likely to stall, or worse, if doctors are forced to adopt flawed or unproven health IT systems"</i>
		<i>"White House Democrats spent the week congratulating themselves for squeezing out the midnight passage of their version of health-care reform, neutral observers were reminding them: You've left the job half done"</i>
		<i>"reform will somehow bring about a government takeover of health care" "a lot of these fears about government-run health care"</i>
		<i>"Since April, approval of Obama's handling of health care has dropped from 57 percent to 49 percent, with disapproval rising from 29 percent to 44 percent"</i>
		<i>"The U.S. health care system imposes a heavy "tax" on small businesses and their employees . . . Because of their higher health care costs, small businesses are far less likely to provide health insurance for their workers than larger businesses"</i>

(continued)

## Appendix (continued)

Variable	Categories	Description
	Neutral/mixed	<p>"Rising health care costs are undermining our businesses, exploding our deficits, and costing our nation more jobs with each passing month"</p> <p>Article is stated objectively; or</p> <p>Both positive and negative tone are mixed equally</p>
	Positive	<p>"Reform will protect seniors . . . they will be better off under what reform are proposing"</p> <p>"Healthcare reform . . . providing the tools and incentives for physicians, hospitals and other providers to improve the quality of care for all Americans"</p> <p>"Senators need to get their health-care bill done before the end of this year so the House and Senate can come to a speedy agreement on a final bill in January"</p> <p>"The government is not going to make you change plans under health reform . . . but wants some competition. If the private insurance companies have to compete with a public option, it'll keep them honest and it'll help keep their prices down"</p> <p>"Despite these challenges, Obama enters the second half of the year with approval ratings that hover between the high 50s and mid-60s"</p> <p>"Reforming our health insurance system will be a critical step in rebuilding our economy so that our entrepreneurs can pursue the American Dream again, and our small businesses can grow and expand and create new jobs again"</p>

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

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