In my paper, I will be discovering, evaluating and analyzing agenda-setting theory. I will be discovering the theory through its progression from an idea to a theory. The theory that I researched was Maxwell McCombs and Charles Shaw’s agenda-setting theory. Through my research, I found a selective history of the agenda-setting theory. I say selective because it is very hard to find information when many theories in communication overlap. What I found all related to the agenda-setting theory. However, because the theory has many different agendas as well as frames, there were many different studies done on this theory. Agenda-setting theory is a social scientific theory, which means what the main goal for the researchers’ is a universal truth. This is hard to achieve due to the complexity of this theory. Agenda-setting theory is complex because there are “more than 400 published studies [on agenda-setting].” (McCombs 555) I will be looking at 22 of the different studies done from the first idea in 1922 to the theories of present day. I will also be discussing how the studies fit with what was being researched in the communication world during the time of the studies publications. I will then analyze the future of this theory. The purpose of my paper is to discover the origins of the agenda-setting theory, evaluate on the theory by discussing how the studies fit into what was going on in the world and then analyze the future of the theory. First, I will outline what agenda-setting theory is by the definition in Griffin’s book A First Look at Communication Theory.
Agenda-setting theory is the theory that explains how media sets the agenda for the public. This definition has been changed over the years to mean the media tells us “not what to think, but what to think about” (Griffin 390). Another definition, according to McCombs, is “the transfer of salience from one agenda to another” (553). Salience refers to the importance of the information being portrayed by the media. This suggests that if a story was run first on the news, it would more important than if it was run at the end of the broadcast. According to this definition, agenda-setting theory is the transfer of what is important from the media to the public. This explanation all started from one idea laid out in 1922 by a researcher named Walter Lippmann.

Agenda-setting theory started out as a hypothesis that stated there would be a “cause-and-effect relationship between media content and voter perception [public opinion].” (Griffin 391) This hypothesis came about from other earlier experiments. (Griffin 391) The earliest design involving media and public opinion was from Walter Lippmann. (Griffin 391) Lippmann “elaborated the role of the press in providing the raw materials, the basic information, from which public opinion is constructed.” (McCombs 552) He also coined the idea of “connect[ing] ‘the world outside’ and ‘the pictures in our heads.’” (Yang and Stone 58) This inspiration came about in 1922 and would change the way the communication field thought about the media.

During the 1930-1960’s the communication field took a turn from its normal research or the rhetoric and speech. A new breed of communication scholar was born from the media and they called their studies “communication research”. (Griffin) Not only did they new scholars start looking at the world with a social scientific eye, but they also were interested in the media and its effects. (Griffin) Em Griffin did not state that
Lippmann’s observations started the change, but I believe he helped with the movement. As always with change, the “Rhetoricians ignored the new mass communication technologies of film, radio, and television, dismissing them as mere entertainment.” (Griffin) Nonetheless, the scholars needed much more research in order to prove that media was not just ‘mere entertainment’.

The next idea that helped to bring about agenda-setting theory, was “One of the early pioneers of mass communication research, Harold Lasswell (1948), outlined three basic functions of the mass media: surveillance of the environment, fostering consensus in society, and transmission of the cultural heritage.” (McCombs 555) With this idea, McCombs and Shaw were inspired to study Lasswell’s three basic functions. In order to study the functions, they had to have a way of measuring effects. In McCombs and Shaw’s agenda-setting theory there are measurements known as frames. These frames help separate the theory. “A media frame is the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.” (Griffin 328) In other words, Framing is how the media presents information and how the public sees it as important.

The next inspiration came in 1963 with Cohen who “suggested that the press tells ‘its readers what to think about’.” (Yang and Stone 58) This idea just expanded what Lippmann said into a blunt statement. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet in 1968, assisted with their two-step theory. (Yang and Stone 58) These researchers did a study and found out that people were more informed by “exposing themselves heavily to the mass media” than those who did not. (Yang and Stone 59) They “highlighted the role of individuals who mediate between the mass media and the public.” (Yang and Stone 58)
Just before McCombs and Shaw’s great proposal, Daniel L. Paletz, Judith Koon, Elizabeth Whitehead, and Richard B. Hagens used the idea of selective exposure to describe why the public had the same opinions as the media. (Paletz, Koon, Whitehead, and Hagens 50) They did a study where they showed a movie called *Tell me Lies*, to about 600 individuals and randomly interviewed 58 of them. (Paletz, Koon, Whitehead, and Hagens 50) The movie was about the “American involvement in Vietnam” (Paletz, Koon, Whitehead, and Hagens 48) They thought that the media just “reinforce[d] voter’s per-existing preferences or predispositions.” (Paletz, Koon, Whitehead, and Hagens 48) Meaning if they held similar beliefs, they would tune in to the media that was covering their opinion more. It turned out that was true, 56 of the individuals did not approve of the American policy in Vietnam. (Paletz, Koon, Whitehead, and Hagens 50) If the individuals did not believe in the topic going into the film, they would have a “boomerang effect.” (Paletz, Koon, Whitehead, and Hagens 48) A boomerang effect, as defined by the Griffin as, “persuasion in a direction that has the opposite impact from the desired effect.” (Griffin 519) In other words, the viewer who did not believe in the issue, were persuaded to agree with the film. However, “This effect may be explained by the different expectations member of the audience brought to the film.” (Paletz, Koon, Whitehead, and Hagens 48)

In the summer of 1972, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw noticed the increase interest of the public in the Watergate incident. (390) They believed there was a correlation between putting a story on the front page of a newspaper and the public becoming concerned about that issue. (Griffin 390) In other words, what the media thought was important would become an important issue to the public. Of course,
because it takes a while before people catch on, semiotics, issues take a while to become important to the public. Nonetheless;

“By the late 1960’s, the field of mass communication was ready for a major shake-up. Decades of research into persuasion effects on attitudes and behaviors had left many scholars frustrated. Attitudes were not clearly connected to behaviors, and media were not clearly and consistently connected to either. Agenda-setting, in popularizing the summary statement about media not telling voters what to think but what to think about, clearly rejected persuasion as the central organizing paradigm.” (Kosicki 103)

Thus, agenda-setting theory was born. Once again, agenda-setting theory explains the correlation between the media’s influence on the publics’ opinion.

Around the same time as McCombs and Shaw, Roger Cobb and Charles Elder emerged in June 1972 with their own proposal. They were political scientists who “published an important policy agenda-setting study in 1972 that received scant attention in mass media circles.” (Salwen 207) This was thought to be because they were political scientists and not media scholars. (Salwen 207) Their research looked at “three components of an individual's orientation toward symbols.” (Cobb and Elder 53) These three components were: “(1) the content attributed to the symbol, (2) the individual's affective attachment to the symbol, and (3) the relative systemic importance associated with a symbol.” (Cobb and Elder 53) This study helped demonstrate the complexity of the theory. I will discuss the importance of study later on in my paper.

In January 1974, G. Ray Funkhouser, a political science, published a study about agenda-setting theory. (Salwen) However, according to Salwen, “G. Ray Funkhouser published an important aggregated approach to agenda-setting.” (207) I could not find any articles published by Funkhouser in 1972. All I found was an article published in 1974 called “An Experimental Study on Communicating Specialized Science Information
to a Lay Audience.” This study “Examine[d] the effects of stylistic and rhetorical manipulations in specialized science writing on audience variables in California.”

(Funkhouser 110) “Yet, for a variety of reasons, Funkhouser’s work did not receive the acclaim the McCombs and Shaw’s work received.” (Salwen 207) This was also because he was not a media scholar. (Salwen 207) In that same year, McLeod, Becker and Byrnes “found [that] interpersonal communication played a greater role in agenda-setting when newspapers declined as an information source late in a campaign.” (Yang and Stone 59) Once again, these studies helped demonstrate the complexity of the theory and will be addressed later on in the paper.

In 1976, Charles Shaw did a “study of political campaign [that] supported the claim that interpersonal factors were good predictors of agenda-setting. Specifically, the more frequent the more active one’s participation was in interpersonal networks, the closer the agreement between one’s personal agenda and that of the media.” (Yang and Stone 59) This idea goes back to “boomerang” effect of selective exposure. Even though that study was overlooked or not as popular at that time as McCombs and Shaw’s agenda-setting theory, it was recognized in 1976. I think this is because Shaw, one of the “founders” of agenda-setting theory, finally recognized it was an essential part of the theory. I also think that he got the credit for it because he was a founder of the theory.

According to Yang and Stone, in 1977, Judith Beinstein did a “pilot study of opinion formation compared the reported impact of mass media and the interpersonal sources of information among woman of different social network densities.” (59) Beinstein “found [the] less her friends knew each other, the more likely they were to rely
on media, but the more they knew each other, the more likely they were to relay on each other or interpersonal sources.” (Yang and Stone 59)

In 1980, Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller “found that interpersonal communication may increase salience by playing an essential role when people want to make sense of new topics reported by the media.” (Yang and Stone 59) This means that by talking to others about topics found in the media may make those issues more important to you when you do not understand the issue. (Yang and Stone 59)

The next big idea came from James P. Winter in 1981. He “summarized the point, saying some researchers reported that interpersonal discussion filtered or reduced media influence, whereas others reported that it enhanced media effects.” (Yang and Stone 60) On the same note in 1985, Ball-Rokeach “recognized that individuals are situated in and affected by interpersonal networks and noted ‘the agenda of interpersonal discourse is, to some extent, shaped by the message foci of the media system.’ This argument acknowledges the impact of the mass media on interpersonal discourse, implying a role for interpersonal communication in setting the public agenda.” (Yang and Stone 59)

All these studies look at interpersonal communication because that was what was popular at the time. (Griffin) According to www.afirstlook.com, 1960-1970 was “A Launching pad for Interpersonal Communication.” This was most likely due to the fact that in the 1960’s “the focus of communication ethics switched from telling the truth to loyalty to your communication partner. What was said became secondary to how it was said and to the way it affected others. Relationships were more important than message content.” (Griffin) In simpler terms, “interpersonal and media communication were hot.”
On the other hand, as you look at the dates of the studies done about interpersonal communication relating to agenda-setting theory, you see that the majority of studies are done after the 1970’s. According to Agenda-setting theory, this makes sense because I am sure interpersonal communication was talked about a lot by the media scholar printings, thus making it an important topic. Then, like the theory itself, the public caught on a while later.

The next phase in communication history was the “The Hunt for a Universal Model,” which took place from 1970 to 1980.” Throughout the history of communication research, models and theories have been changed and in turn, made more complex. The complexities of theories come from the fact that “each communication interest group had isolated and studied separate variables that members thought crucial to the process of communication.” The researchers wanted to try to organize and clarify the different models of communication theories from the decades before. Rather than having the models look like “monopoly boards, bedsprings, whirlpools, schematic drawings of electrical circuits, diagrams of football plays, family trees, furnace-thermostat feedback loops, splitting amoebas, Rubic cubes, ladders, hydraulic plumbing, and wheels within wheels,” they wanted a universal truth. However, “as intriguing as they were, no one model generated a consensus as the paradigm of the communication process.”

One of the articles that were published about the topic of condensing was Everett M. Rogers’ and James W. Dearing’s in 1988. They “analyze[d] past research on agenda-setting in order to learn where this research literature [was] deficient and where it [was] sufficient,” This needed to be done because of the many
different studies conducted throughout the past. One major reason why the studies needed to be condensed was because many of them overlapped and were redundant. For example in 1990, Lasorsa and Wanta “found that the more an individual was exposed to political communication interpersonally, the less likely he or she would conform to the media agenda. In other words, interpersonal communication interferes with the media agenda conformity, but only modestly.” (Yang and Stone 60) This same study was repeated in 1992 with Wanta and Wu. They “conducted a political opinion survey comparing media sources with personal sources. They found that interpersonal communication enhanced agenda-setting effects when the discussions dealt with issues covered in the media. However, when the discussions dealt with issues that received little coverage in the media, interpersonal communication competed with the media in agenda-setting.” (Yang and Stone 60) Both studies come to the agreement that interpersonal communication interferes with the media’s agenda-setting.

Then in 1996, Brosius and Weimann “studied interpersonal influentials.” (Yang and Stone 60) They found that “when studies brought such varied results, researchers could conclude only that interpersonal communication influenced media effects in some way.” (Yang and Stone 60) The conclusion Brosius and Weimann proposed can be concluded for all of the research done on agenda-setting theory. “These supportive, non-supportive, and mixed results call for more empirical evidence.” (Yang and Stone 60) In fact, more empirical evidence is needed in every aspect of this theory.

In 1996, Everett M. Rodgers and James W. Dearing wrote a book called “Communication Concepts 6: Agenda-Setting. The book was about how agenda-setting has many different agendas therefore much research in different fields and how different
fields get more coverage and how they do not know what the other researchers have done. Political gets looked over.” (Salwen 207) As I stated before about political scientists being looked over, it is still true. For this reason, agenda-setting theory is looked at as bias because of the “hierarchy” of the information presented. The hierarchy of information only adds to the mass complexity of the theory as well as a need for a universal truth.

In 1999, Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, and Hamm “developed a model of agenda-setting in which individuals adopt views about news and public affairs that lead them into social afflictions stemming from both media and interpersonal interaction. This process of audiences joining agendas involves the commingling of media and interpersonal communication.” (Yang and Stone 59) This is just what agenda-setting theory needs. As many of the other studies I have read stated that the theory needs to be turned into a model. The model will then help make a universal truth that can be applied to all fields of study.

In 2003, Yang and Stone conducted a study [that] test[ed] the hypothesis “The correlation between the public issue agenda and the mass media agenda will be significantly higher for those who rely more on the mass media than those who rely on interpersonal communication.” (Yang and Stone 61) This study is a good example of finding a universal truth. “This study attempts to ascertain whether the mass media’s influence on the public agenda in both direct and indirect.” (Yang and Stone 57) Yang and Stone looked at research done over the last years and found that it “has led to a convergence in two communication theories: agenda-setting and two-step flow.” (Yang and Stone 57) The combination of the two communication theories is an example of
what needs to be done with the agenda-setting theory. Unfortunately, because this theory has gone through so much research over the past years, even this study is a small step compared to what needs to be done. Even with the realization of the multiple research and history of this theory, more research is still being done today. More research is being done because of the ever growing media. What I am talking about is the birth and growing popularity of the internet.

In 2005, McCombs wrote an article called “A look at Agenda-setting: past, present and future.” (544) He stated that “the internet dramatically changed the communication landscape with the introduction of myriad new channels.” (McCombs 544) With this change of landscape, “some social observers predict the end of agenda-setting as audiences fragment and virtually everyone has a unique external media agenda that is a highly individualized composite constructed from this vast wealth of online news and information.” (McCombs 544) I do not believe it is the end of agenda-setting theory because so much still needs to be done with the theory.

In conclusion, agenda-setting theory has changed through the years, but today means “the transfer of salience from one agenda to another.” (McCombs 544) The agenda could be the media to the public or the public to the media. Many studies have been completed over the past 83 years on agenda-setting theory. These studies have been researched through many different fields of study. As McCombs stated, “some of this research has made bold creative leaps into new territory. Other research has been the methodical and painstaking attention to small details.” (544) This is why there is a call for a universal model rather than a theory. However, with the new media of the internet, much more research will be done rather than a formation of a much needed model.
Works Cited


