ABSTRACT
The emergence of new media, primarily social networks, raises questions about the interactions at play between ‘new’ and ‘old’ media in terms of the media and the public agendas. This topic is particularly relevant during elections. By analysing news from three Israeli television channels and using an online monitoring system to analyse user discourse over six weeks preceding Election Day, this article seeks to trace the shaping processes of the media agenda and public agenda along the axes of ‘new media/old media’ and ‘free user discourse/professional media discourse’.

KEYWORDS
Agenda-setting; elections; new media; social networks

Election campaigns in democratic countries are associated with the triangle of ‘public–politics–media’ driven to its tensest and most sensitive peak. This tension is manifested in the struggle to determine the media agenda, among others, and therefore also the public and political agendas.

The rise of new media – particularly online social networks – to the status of a central element in the media arena raises questions regarding the interactions at play between ‘new’ and ‘old’ media (television, radio and press) in terms of the media and public agendas. The present article seeks to examine the public and media agendas during the March 2015 Israeli general election and explore the nature of their mutual interaction (which exists in general and is heightened around crucial events such as elections). The public agenda was examined via an online monitoring of Internet user discourse that appeared on social networks and news websites. The media agenda research was performed in turn by analysing primary news broadcasts on television channels 1, 2 and 10 over six weeks preceding Election Day. The article also attempts to estimate the role of the new media compared with their older counterparts (represented here by television), as well as to trace the shaping processes of the different agendas.
along the axes of ‘new media/old media’ and ‘free user discourse/professional media discourse’.

Theoretical framework

Media and election

Perceiving the media as a political player has been commonplace among the majority of political communication scholars for many years. This situation implies that the media is thought to have far-reaching effects on the many facets and operative modes of the political system. As a new election campaign is launched, the system as a whole faces a crucial trial: the behavioural patterns of all players involved become ever more critical and significant. This statement holds all the more true in an age in which candidates are requested to conduct themselves in a reality defined as a ‘permanent campaign’: a campaign that stretches between one election and another rather than being confined to the formal election campaign. For the most part, media studies have focused on the two key fields of activity: election propaganda, with its manifold instances and aspects, and the news coverage of those tension-filled days. Of particular interest are instances of election propaganda seeping into the realms of coverage and interpretation, which cumulatively add to other influences such as the effects of the campaign’s media coverage on their content and messages.

In most Western countries, election campaign coverage is subject to ongoing, almost consensual criticism by audiences, political players and political communication researchers. This fact is due to the tendency of the media to focus on the dramatic, colorful particulars of the days leading up to the election, including the personalities of the candidates themselves. This coverage comes at the considerable expense of more significant issues such as platform, vision, performance analysis, etc. The gist of this criticism is well-captured in a concept commonly employed by researchers to describe the coverage modes typically utilized by the media during an election: ‘horse-race journalism’, i.e. coverage focused on the fickle data of public-opinion surveys and the gaps between candidates on their way to the finishing line.

The past few decades have experienced a significant increase in media and election research in Israel. This increase is partly due to the complex, turbulent political reality of the country, the multiple governments that failed to reach full tenure and ended their days in early elections, and the largely autonomous media, which enjoys a wide scope and freedom of operation. Like their colleagues around the world, media and election researchers in Israel are mainly engaged in analysing key trends in the patterns of election campaign coverage and the characteristics of these campaigns; one focus is the ever-increasing ‘Americanization’ of media coverage trends and propaganda characteristics. Another prevalent research interest concerns public opinion and voter
behaviour and the interactions of the public with the media. Another realm of research concerns the application of key theories of studies to the mass media during elections, including agenda building, setting, framing and priming.

**Elections in the age of the new media**

The advent of new media – particularly the Internet, social networks and cellular phones – has changed, and is still changing, patterns of activities during elections. Throughout the political arena, new media opened up fresh avenues of propaganda promotion and direct communication channels with the public, and they also introduced the option of monitoring and following election discourses even beyond the confines of traditional mass media. In addition, the online platform, with its different aspects, facilitates a largely free kind of public discourse.

The essence of this change is at the heart of Henry Jenkins’ Media Convergence Theory. According to this theory, the twenty-first-century media arena has experienced an accelerated process of media convergence. This process includes changes in how media content is produced and consumed, which alters the relationship between ‘new’ and ‘old’ technologies, markets, industries and audiences. According to this theory, the different types of media are diverse, ubiquitous and interconnected. Different researchers have expressed apprehension that the introduction of new media will result in the decline of ‘old’ media. However, Nossek and Adoni argue that a new medium only replaces an ‘old’ one when the two share a functional similarity.

The online discourse, which is taking place in social networks (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) as well as in online forums, blogs and candidate pages, is one of the changes brought about by the online revolution in which media consumers started doubling as media manufacturers to create, share and distribute information that they and their fellow users produced. This situation implies that ‘new’ and ‘old’ media blend with one another even between elections; public discourse is encouraged by, among other things, information sourced from ‘old’ media (television, radio and press) and often echoes this information. In other cases, ‘old’ media cover and echo information that was first featured on the Internet on social networks.

In recent years, Israeli research has naturally ventured into examining the unique effects of new media on the political media arena, particularly during election campaigns. Despite the fact that political players in Israel are slower to embrace technological innovations than their counterparts in other Western countries, the Internet, social networks and mobile media have become significant elements in the arena in question. This change is partially due to considerable and extensive activity on the part of voters.


**Agenda-setting**

The Agenda-Setting Theory relates to the power of media news to dictate the importance of political issues that the public perceives. Agenda-setting is the assumption that news media emphasize and highlight certain events, people and issues while overlooking or failing to highlight others by using gatekeepers (i.e. reporters and editors). The salience of these issues in a given channel or consistently over several channels affects the public agenda and discourse, which focus on people and issues that the media highlight.

The Agenda-Setting Theory has been subjected to a wide variety of test cases since the 1970s. This theory has been examined in political and other contexts and utilized various research methods. McCombs and Shaw, most identified with the Agenda-Setting Theory, quote Cohen's famous saying that “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” The notion of the media affecting our thinking patterns is no novelty. Lippmann cites Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where the shadows cast on the cave's wall are but a faint representation of reality in our mind. According to Lippmann, we often prefer to rely on the ‘picture in our head’ rather than examine reality.

The majority of studies have examined the media agenda via a quantitative analysis of the number of news features devoted to a certain topic (coverage and salience) assuming that the amount of information about a given topic and its place in the news not only inform readers about the subject but also reflect its importance. The public agenda was examined using public opinion surveys to gauge the importance of these topics as perceived by readers and viewers.

Over the years, studies have confirmed the core assumptions of the theory by demonstrating an apparent link that begs for a causal explanation. As part of examining correlations between the importance of topics perceived by the public, experiments have been conducted in which news broadcasts were manipulated in order to establish a link between news coverage and its salience in viewers’ eyes. Another related course of research focuses on inter-media agenda-setting, which denotes the possible influence of mass media agendas on each other. For example, McCombs et al. found correlation between local and national newspapers and television coverage of Spanish general election candidates. Similarly, Lee et al. found that South Korean newspapers and Internet bulletin boards had a reciprocal inter-media agenda-setting in the coverage of the 2000 elections.

According to Weaver et al., the analysis unit in most present-day agenda-setting studies is the subject; however, the research dilemma is whether it is sufficient to examine the subjects themselves or whether the attending attributes should be addressed as well because they do not stand by themselves. The attributes referred to as ‘second-level agenda-setting’, they argue, are largely granted by journalists, directly or otherwise, in media reports because
it is these individuals who highlight different sides and aspects of a subject. In recent years, researchers have been tackling what has been defined as ‘third-level agenda-setting’: analysis of the reciprocal effects of Internet users on the agendas of politicians and journalists.

The Agenda-Setting Theory in the new-media age

The Agenda-Setting Theory has been stirring up academic interest in the age of new media. Coleman et al. argue that the emergence of the Internet constitutes a wide, fertile scope for agenda-setting studies. Similarly, McCombs et al. argue that academic attention in the field of agenda-setting research should focus on the dynamics of online media in different digital platforms, such as news websites and online social networks. Chaffee and Metzger suggest that new media hold a potential for generating a reversed flow of information (i.e. from the public to electoral candidates). To paraphrase the original phrase, it is predicted that the theory will move from ‘subjects that the media tell people to think about’ to ‘subjects that people tell the media that they want to think about’. McCombs refers to this process as ‘reverse agenda-setting’: it is the public interest that sets the media agenda. Furthermore, we can identify a trend in which traditional media journalists, i.e. journalists working in digital and print press, television and radio, turn to social networks in order to sense the public’s opinion about a certain subject and in turn cover that subject in light of the public’s interest. Sweetser et al. argue that the question of ‘who sets whose public agenda’ should continue to be examined in light of the development of new-media technologies. Johnson and Perlmutter argue that even before the age of the Internet, political propaganda by election candidates was under relatively tight control (i.e. sponsored advertisements shown according to the extent, time and place set in advance by campaign managers). The relative high costs of such marketing efforts translated into centralized management and a high level of control over messages in general (bumper stickers, billboards, and radio and television advertising). On the other hand, the emergence of the Internet and social networks contributed to the multiplicity of voices and messages distributed over the Internet by individuals, interest groups and various interested parties; election candidates no longer solely control the online discourse. At times, election candidates are even left behind in the public discourse.

Woolley et al. performed an analysis of user-derived content in online social networks during the 2008 US presidential election campaign between Barack Obama and John McCain. This analysis suggested that there were a few unique subjects that were typical to social networks in general or could be divided according to candidate. Nevertheless, much of the content reflected the key themes that pervaded the mainstream media at the time. In particular, these researchers found that the content aired on the ‘old’ media and that aired on
the new media were consistent. Additionally, the public discourse and the institutionalized media discourse were similar as well.

Moeller categorizes agenda-setting by three players: agenda-setting by the government, agenda-setting by the mainstream media and agenda-setting by ‘citizen journalists’. According to this author, the ‘old’ media’s control over the media’s agenda-setting has been reduced due to changes occurring in the wake of the Internet revolution.

**Research questions**

This article attempts to compare the public agenda, as manifested in the free discourse of Internet users, and the media agenda, as manifested in evening news broadcasts. Two key research questions were developed in order to examine the relationship between the two agendas.

The first research question examines whether, and to what extent, compatibility can be found between the media agenda (as manifested in institutionalized television news broadcasts) and the public agenda (as manifested in the discourse of online users) over the course of six weeks preceding the election.

The second research question explores the extent to which television preserves its power as an agenda-setter in an age in which the Internet and social networks are experiencing increasing popularity. In other words, does television still function as an autonomous player that influences the public agenda?

**Methodology**

The first part of the study included a quantitative content analysis of 132 main news broadcasts of every day during the six weeks preceding the election. Data were collected from the three main television channels in Israel: two commercial channels under public supervision (Channels 2 and 10) and a public–national channel (Channel 1). The coding sheet, originally developed and pre-tested for this research, included subject tagging, ordering of the item, length, item type (report/interview and the like). Two independent encoders were trained and watched news broadcasts on a daily basis. Each encoder was instructed to follow the coding sheet and to elaborate as much as possible about the subject of each media item. In order to ensure uniformity among the encoders and validate the encoding page, the first week of encoding was declared a ‘pilot’ study in which the list of subjects was subjected to changes and updates by the authors to reflect the list of subjects featured in the news. Whenever a contradiction or disagreement was found in the encoding work, the researchers turned to the encoders for help in order to ensure encoding uniformity. Thus, inter-coding reliability attained through a process of consensus.

In the second part of the study, an external monitoring system was employed to monitor the conversations of Internet users. This system was operated by an
outside company specializing in monitoring services for different research and business organizations. This external monitoring system made it possible to monitor the discourse taking place in social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter and Google+) as well as in blogs, forums and articles. The system recorded the volume and duration of discourses generated by each subject that was monitored.

For the purpose of monitoring, all subjects included in the encoding page of the television broadcasts were fed into the system, which made it possible to follow their online presence. For example, the search phrase ‘Iranian threat’ was entered into the monitoring system with its various formulations (in different spellings), and the system traced the number of instances (‘conversations’) that featured the term in social networks, forums, blogs and articles, as well as the volume and duration of the respective discourses.

**Findings**

The first part of the study included a quantitative content analysis of the subjects discussed in television news broadcasts on three channels (1, 2 and 10) during the six weeks preceding the 2015 election.

The content analysis suggested that of the 10 key topics reported on the news on all three television channels, the topic that received the most coverage was the Prime Minister’s residence (in which harsh criticism had been levelled against the excessive expenditures associated with Prime Minister Netanyahu’s residence), followed by incidents and activities concerning ISIS, the Iranian threat on Israel, the Prime Minister’s speech to the US Congress, sexual scandals in the Israeli police, the state comptroller report, rotation (Yitzhak Herzog–Tzipi Livni, in case of an election win), different election surveys, local layoffs and the Israel awards scandal (in which the Prime Minister’s office vetoed two judges from the Israel award for the literature panel, which raised criticism and suggested politicization of the process).

In addition to the number of occurrences of each topic, the salience of each topic was also examined. Salience refers to the importance attributed to each topic during the news broadcasts. This analysis focused on the positionality of news items according to their order of appearance in the broadcast, and this analysis attributed additional weight to items that were featured at the start of each broadcast relative to those that were featured later or at the end of the broadcast. For the purpose of analysing the degree of salience of each news item, the first 15 items of every broadcast were encoded, and each item was attributed a different weight according to its order of appearance; the first item received 15 points, the second item received 14 points, and so forth until the fifteenth item on the broadcast received a single point. Figure 1 presents the cumulative salience value of each item from all three broadcasts during the pre-election period. As one can see, the topics that earned the highest
salience addressed the same issues as topics that earned the largest number of mentions (although not necessarily in the same order).

In the next stage of the study, the volume of conversation for every salient topic in the television coverage was examined by the conversation monitoring system. The goal of this analysis was to reveal whether subjects with a high salience on television also had a high salience in online public discourse. As shown by Figure 2, the topics with the highest online conversation volume included election surveys, the Iranian threat, the coalition assembly and ISIS-related activities.
The first research question concerned the consistency between the media agenda (as manifested in the institutionalized television news broadcasts) and the public agenda (as manifested in the discourse of online users) during the six weeks preceding the 2015 election. The most common and conventional method for analysing correlations between agenda scales is Spearman rank-order correlations. This analysis revealed a significant positive link ($r = .406, p < .001$) between the media and public agenda for all six weeks preceding the election. That is, the topics highlighted by the media on television during each of these six weeks were similarly and simultaneously highlighted on the Internet.

Moreover, in order to examine the question of directionality in the interaction shared by these two agendas, an ordinal regression model was calculated in which the dependent variable was defined as ‘online discourse grading’ and the independent variable was defined as ‘television news broadcast grading’; the ‘topic’ variable was held fixed. The regression model was found to be significant ($\chi^2 (df = 587) = 21.205, p < .01$) and predictive of 27.5% of the dependent variable’s explained variance.

The salience of the Iranian threat in the television news’ agenda and in online public discourse was similar. Both spheres experienced an increase in salience between the first and second weeks, a drop in salience in the third week, a sharp rise in salience the two weeks leading up to the elections (weeks 4–5 in the sample) and a drop in salience in the week immediately before the election. Nevertheless, it is evident that the public interest expressed in the online discourse was more salient from as early as the beginning of the study’s measurement period; the decreasing salience in the week prior to the election was far more significant and pronounced.

Similarity can be found in the salience trends of the Prime Minister’s speech to the US Congress on both television news broadcasts and online discourse. Again, the salience of the online discourse was found to rank higher on the online agenda than on the television news broadcasts in the first week of the study (i.e. six weeks prior to the election). The salience of the Prime Minister’s speech to the US Congress experienced a sharp drop approximately a month before the elections in the online discourse; it then rocketed to the highest ranking two weeks prior to the election. This trend is similar to what is seen in the television broadcasts. Both platforms experienced a drop in the topic’s ranking in the last week prior to the election. Similarity between television news broadcasts and online discourse was found also regarding the ISIS topic and the Prime Minister’s residence.

For a more comprehensive picture, we compared the degree of salience of the television topics with their corresponding degree of salience in the social networks. Table 1 lists the different topics and their salience (with standardized scores) for both the television coverage and the Internet coverage throughout the research period.
Table 1. A comparison of the standardized scores (z) of prominent topics from online discourse and television news broadcasts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iranian threat</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>-.56</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election surveys</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>-.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel award</td>
<td>-.49</td>
<td>-.56</td>
<td>-.54</td>
<td>-.82</td>
<td>-.54</td>
<td>-1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Minister’s speech</td>
<td>-.54</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>-.55</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Minister’s residence</td>
<td>-.52</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>-.55</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>-.50</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police sex scandals</td>
<td>-.55</td>
<td>-.56</td>
<td>-.58</td>
<td>-.88</td>
<td>-.59</td>
<td>-.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State comptroller report</td>
<td>-.52</td>
<td>-.56</td>
<td>-.51</td>
<td>-.97</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition-building</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.58</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local layoffs</td>
<td>-.027</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>-.35</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weeks
For the majority of topics (6 out of 10), compatibility was found between the coverage of the different media in the same direction (i.e. above or below the general salience average). One can also see that the salience in television broadcasts is lower than that on the Internet when it comes to these topics.

For the other topics lacking compatibility, their television salience emerged as above average; their online salience was below average (4 out of 11 topics). Only the ‘election surveys’ topic was more salient online than it was on television.

Table 1 also shows that the coverage of almost all 10 of the selected key topics was higher on television than in the online public discourse (relative to the average prominent discourse in any medium). For example, the topic ‘the Prime Minister’s speech to the US Congress’ was most prominent on television in the fifth week ($z = 1.84$); on the Internet this topic had a low prominence for all six weeks (lower than the average online). The ‘Iranian threat’ topic was the only topic whose salience was similar on both television and the Internet (the fifth week was the highest in terms of salience for both media). However, one can see that for this topic its Internet coverage began to rise from the first week ($z = .34$); its television coverage began to rise only in the fifth week. The only topic whose salience was very high on the Internet for all six weeks (above average) and whose salience was low on television was ‘Election surveys’. From the first week until the last week, the Internet focused on this topic intensively ($2.54 < z < 2.91$); television broadcasts addressed this topic more intensively only in the fifth week ($z = .49$).

**Discussion and conclusions**

The present article sought to underscore the degree of compatibility between the media agenda and the public agenda during an election period. It furthermore sought to explore the current ability of television to set the agenda in a time when new media and social networks are rapidly gaining in popularity.

The 10 topics most prominently covered by the three main Israeli television news broadcast stations were examined in terms of their degree of online salience. Considerable consistency was evident between the media agenda and the public agenda. There was no difference in the most salient subjects on TV and the Internet. In other words, consistent with the findings of Woolley *et al.*, topics that were salient according to their television coverage were also simultaneously salient in the realm of online public discourse. A comparative analysis of salience trends in the coverage of the topics at hand — rise, drop or stagnation — revealed a similarity between the two media spheres.

Despite the fact that issues discussed online without television coverage were not examined in the present study, it is safe to conclude that both agendas, the public and the media, maintained an impressive level of similarity as far as key topics and their relative trends of salience. In other words, topics that generated
salience and media interest on television similarly stirred interest and discussions online as well. These findings emphasize the interconnectedness and convergence of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media suggested by Jenkins.35 Indeed, it seems that media users switch from one platform to another, share their insights and comments on various online platforms and alter the relationship between ‘new’ and ‘old’ media. In other words, as previously suggested, public discourse is fed by, among other things, information sourced from ‘old’ media (television, radio and press). Public discourse often echoes this information; in other cases, ‘old’ media cover and echo information that was first featured on the Internet.

Although this study does not focus on determining which platform was the first to present an issue, ordinal regression analysis, performed with the purpose of identifying prediction possibility, revealed that the relative salience trends in the online public discourse followed those of the television news broadcasts. These findings support the assertion that television maintained its status as an important, leading news medium during the March 2015 general elections campaign in Israel. The media agenda, examined here based on the primary television news broadcasts, very much dictated that the public agenda played out in the online sphere. This finding, it seems, should not be taken lightly. Conventional beliefs regarding the strengthened presence and scope of the effect of online media in our everyday lives prompt leaders around the Western world to channel precious resources into an online presence. The findings of the present study demonstrate that television is as strong as ever; at the very least it is too early to declare its demise as a relevant, influential arena. On the other hand, as suggested by Johnson and Perlmutter,36 the Internet pluralized the public discourse, enabled a multiplicity of voices and messages distributed by individuals and various interested parties, and made it more difficult for election candidates to control the conversation and try to dictate media and public agendas.

Research limitations and follow-up studies

Time-series analysis is one of the most suitable analyses for determining causality between agendas.37 However, time-series analysis could not be employed here because this study spanned only a short period (i.e. six weeks). It was therefore necessary to make do with a Spearman rank-order correlation test to analyse the link between the rankings and ordinal regression analysis. To better understand the interaction between the two agendas, follow-up studies are required that employ a longer period of time, which will make it possible to employ the best, most suitable analysis method for the purpose at hand (i.e. Granger’s time-series analysis).

In addition, the choice of examining the (online) public discourse characteristics regarding the topics raised by the (television) media agenda very much limits our understanding as far as the free public discourse occurring on the
Internet and social networks. Topics that were broached on the Internet but did not receive any coverage by the ‘old’ media, particularly television, evaded the monitoring mechanism used in this study. This article’s findings essentially imply whether and to what extent online social networks dealt with specific issues, and hence disregard the nature of the discourse. Therefore, it is possible that the nature of the online discourse is rather different (e.g. challenging the narrative of the media). A comprehensive follow-up study is undoubtedly required in order to explore the shaping and change patterns of the online public agenda; such a study will be strongest if no previous restrictions are placed on the topics that are examined. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this goal is particularly demanding in terms of the scope of resources required for its realization.

Notes

15. Lippmann, “The Mental Age of Americans.”
17. Dearing and Rogers, Agenda-setting.
18. See review by Dearing and Rogers.
20. Lopez-Escobar et al., “Two Levels of Agenda Setting.”
27. McCombs, Setting the Agenda.
33. Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient was 0.86. A few items were further coded until full agreement was reached among encoders.
35. Jenkins, “The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence.”

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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