

**Agenda-Setting and the Internet:
The Inter-media Influence of Twitter on Traditional Media Coverage of
the Ebola Quarantine Policy**

**Jo-Yun Queenie Li
School of Journalism and Mass Communications
University of South Carolina**

Background: On October 23rd, Dr. Craig Spencer returned to the United States after treating Ebola patients in Guinea and tested positive for the virus. He was not required to quarantine himself when he returned to New York City. Instead, Spencer went about his life, hitting a popular restaurant and bowling alley before his diagnosis – and sending health officials scrambling in the aftermath. The case aroused great controversy and criticism because the government of New York did not any issue appropriate policy to quarantine returning residents from Ebola-stricken nations. After this incident, the rules on quarantines became mandatory in New York and New Jersey and nurse Kaci Hickox, who returned home from West Africa, was quarantined in the hospital without showing any symptoms of the virus. The news about Hickox spread rapidly through Twitter, and drew opposition from the public, calling the policy “inhumane.” Under scrutiny from the media and from the public, the governments of New York and New Jersey revised the policy on October 26: health-care workers returning from Ebola-infected areas but do not show symptoms are allowed to return home and remain there while being monitored by health officials for symptoms.

Purpose: The purpose of this research was to explore: (1) the intermedia influence of Twitter on traditional news media about Ebola mandatory quarantine policy; (2) the role of **Netizens’** opinion on the policy change.

Methods: Content analysis of newspapers (New York Times, New York Daily News, and New York Post) and Twitter. Two variables were coded in this study: the issue salience (i.e., first-level agenda setting: what issues were covered by newspapers and were discussed on Twitter?), and the attribute salience (i.e., second-level agenda setting: what attribute agendas were covered by newspapers and were discussed on Twitter?)

To the first variable, two categories were included: Ebola relevant information (i.e., Basic Information of Ebola, new evidence, and personal stories) and government relevant agendas (i.e., policy changes, policy defense, conflicts, action, and reassurance). To the second variable, four items were listed: appropriateness, human rights, political conflicts, and public safety.

Results:

- (1) First-level agenda setting: the issue agendas presented in newspapers influenced the issue agendas on the Twitter.
- (2) Second-level agenda setting: attributes of quarantine policy posted on the Twitter influenced the attributes of quarantine policy presented in newspapers.

Conclusions: The policy change on Ebola quarantines could be considered a demonstration of social media power. In this case, social media successfully attracted the attention from the public in a short time, mediated the coverage of traditional media, and led to policy changes. Results from this study suggest that in the age of digital media, agenda setting theory has been altered and also supported. In the context of Ebola quarantine policy change, the Internet could be regarded as another source that influences the traditional news media in terms of intermedia agenda-setting. That is, Netizens’ opinions on Ebola quarantine policy was treated as a form of public opinion by the newspapers and journalists was taking online opinions (social media) seriously by covering online discussion points in news stories. Therefore, inter-media advocacy may be considered as a new tool to achieve health-relevant policy change.