This study explores causes and consequences of gatekeeping trust, a new media trust construct defined as trust that the news media selects stories based on judgments of the relative importance of social problems. Gatekeeping trust is a particularly problematic form of media trust because it suggests ignorance of factors other than problem importance that influence news story selection. Research on news production and gatekeeping has delineated many such factors (Atwood, 1970; Atwood & Grotta, 1973; Brown, 1979; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Tuchman, 1978). In summary, news workers primarily assess newsworthiness in their daily work in terms specific to individual news events instead of any underlying social problems (Lester, 1980; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), and are strongly influenced by an event’s news values such as timeliness, novelty, conflict, and drama (Price & Tewksbury, 1997), all of which can be independent from or even opposite to systematic judgments of problem importance.

The primary motivation for our interest in gatekeeping trust is the possibility that it may have implications for agenda setting, both in terms of its cognitive mechanisms and its normative implications. Agenda setting is the effect of media coverage on
audience prioritization of social problems (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Recent research has found that general media trust moderates agenda setting (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsfati, 2003), suggesting a mechanism of conscious cue-taking rather than automatic cognitive accessibility. Gatekeeping trust could be the specific form of trust at work in these effects. If so, this would help to delineate a particularly problematic subset of agenda setting effects and suggest that these effects could be reduced using media literacy or media criticism interventions that reduce gatekeeping trust by educating citizens about news story selection practices.

Thus, a central goal of this initial study is to investigate whether gatekeeping trust can indeed be influenced by media criticism, and furthermore whether this can be done without also reducing other more desirable forms of media trust. Media criticism is increasingly common in media content, but we know relatively little about its effects on audience attitudes and beliefs about the media (de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008). Similarly, although media trust has been shown to play a key role in moderating consequential media effects such as priming and agenda setting (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsfati, 2003), many questions remain unanswered about the nature of media trust and the extent to which it can be shaped by various kinds of interventions, including media criticism. The experimental focus of this study is on three of these questions. First, to what extent can exposure to media criticism affect audience media trust at all? The answer is not at all obvious, in view of the difficulty of finding direct persuasive effects of media exposure, and particularly in this case given the possibility that media trust, like interpersonal trust, may be a stable trait rooted in enduring values (Uslaner, 2002). Second, can the specific content of media criticism shape the nature of media trust, altering what exactly audience members are willing to trust the media to do for them? This should not be taken as given either, as it is also plausible that all media criticism could affect general media trust regardless of the specific content of the criticism. And third, after receiving a media criticism message, can subsequent self-expression of media criticism amplify its effects? Such expression effects—the effects of messages on their senders—have been understudied due to an information flow paradigm, despite frequently being stronger than effects on receivers (Pingree, 2007).

This study takes a first step in addressing these questions by developing a measure of gatekeeping trust, distinguishing it from two other media trust constructs, experimentally testing effects of media criticism reception and expression on three forms of media trust, and indirectly assessing the role of gatekeeping trust in agenda setting using nonexperimental indicators of two mechanisms of agenda setting effects.

**Agenda setting: three mechanisms of effect**

Agenda-setting research has repeatedly demonstrated that exposure to news can affect citizens’ perceptions of the most important problems facing the nation (for a review, see McCombs, 2005). However, the psychological mechanisms used to explain this effect are being reexamined (e.g., Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Takeshita, 2006; Tsfati,
Some earlier work attributed these effects to cognitive accessibility of issues (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). From this perspective, agenda setting is a variant of priming, in which news coverage of an issue makes that issue come to mind more readily in an automatic process of knowledge activation (see Price & Tewksbury, 1997). More recent research has demonstrated that media trust can moderate the relationship between media content and audience uptake of the media’s agenda (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsfati, 2003), challenging the perspective that accessibility alone explains how audiences perceive media content. This suggests that rather than merely reporting the first issues that come to mind as the most important, audiences may be choosing to take news coverage as a cue about issue importance to avoid the cognitive effort of deciding relative issue importance for themselves. Individual differences, such as frequency of news viewing (Gross & Aday, 2003), issue interest (Ebring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980), and need for orientation (Weaver, 1980) can influence the acceptance of such cues, further undermining automatic cognitive accessibility as a complete explanation of agenda setting.

Because cueing is the use of the apparent conclusions of others to avoid cognitive effort (Chaiken, 1980), accepting a cue requires not just general trust in the source of the cue, but also the belief that the prospective cue resulted from the cue source actually doing the cognitive work one is trying to avoid. For example, if a chess master told you to move your king pawn, you would not consider it an appropriate cue if you knew that the chess master had chosen this advice by flipping a coin, with no knowledge about the state of the chess game in question. In terms of news agenda cueing, this perception that the prospective cue resulted from appropriate cognitive effort by the source is what we mean to capture with gatekeeping trust: the perception that news story selection is the result of someone else’s systematic reasoning about problem importance.

Missing from most agenda-setting research is any conception of how citizens ought to prioritize problems if they do not use cueing or priming, and what positive role the news media could play in this process. We propose the concept of agenda reasoning as a more normatively desirable and cognitively systematic mechanism of problem prioritization. Agenda reasoning is active processing of the reasons for and against the importance of various problems. Citizen engagement with substantive reasons is a central concern in theories of deliberative democracy (Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 1989; Fishkin, 1991; Habermas, 1989), and is thought to lead to a variety of benefits including higher-quality opinions and increased democratic legitimacy (Fearson, 1998), whether this reasoning takes place in interpersonal discussion or in private thoughts (Goodin, 2000). Note that agenda reasoning is essentially the same concept Takeshita (2006) labels deliberate or genuine agenda setting, in which the effects come from active inference about both media content and current events. Thus, quite different from merely providing a cue by the covering an issue, the role the media could play in deliberative agenda setting would be providing information that could serve as the basis of agenda reasoning by citizens. Such information could include the number of people affected by a problem, the severity of its effects on
individuals, unfairness or injustice in who is affected, whether action can be delayed, whether any action can address the problem at all, or whether the problem will resolve itself without any further action.

Following recent work on spontaneous policy reasoning (Pingree, Scholl, & Quenette, 2012), this study employs a modified agenda prompt that allows measurement of both the agenda and agenda reasoning with a single question. Specifically, instead of the standard prompt that asks subjects to list the most important problems, we ask what they would say to a friend who asked what the most important problems are. Note that this prompt does not specifically ask respondents to list reasons, allowing the resulting reason coding to indicate the spontaneous tendency to engage in agenda reasoning instead of the capacity to do so when specifically asked to (see Pingree, Scholl, & Quenette, 2012). We expect respondents lower in gatekeeping trust to spontaneously engage in more agenda reasoning simply because they are less likely to view the mere fact of news coverage of a problem as a cue about the problem’s importance.

Effects of media criticism

Many scholars have noted that media criticism is an increasingly frequent topic in political coverage (e.g., Bennett, 1992; de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Esser and D’Angelo 2003; Gitlin, 1991; Jamieson, 1992; Johnson, Boudreau, & Glowacki, 1996). However, we know little about the effects of exposure to this content. It should not be taken as a given that media criticism affects media trust. If media trust, like interpersonal trust, is a highly stable orientation rooted in enduring values (Uslaner, 2002), then interventions such as media criticism would be unlikely to influence it.

However, this does not appear to be the case, at least in terms of criticisms related to the media’s partisan bias. Partisan elite criticism of media bias has been found to strongly influence media trust (Ladd, 2010; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). In particular, Ladd (2010) experimentally manipulated exposure to several statements summarizing recent media coverage, and found that elite cues about partisan bias in the media reduced media trust. Complementing this experimental study, a substantial effect of elite media criticism on media trust was found using an aggregate-level time series analysis that combined content analysis of news coverage, content analysis of media criticism, and public opinion surveys of media trust (Watts et al., 1999). Due to the inclusion in this study of content analysis of the valence of media coverage, Watts and colleagues were able to rule out a shift in actual media favorability toward liberal candidates as an explanation for the increase in liberal bias perceptions over the time period studied. Research has also demonstrated that media trust can be increased in a relatively brief intervention, in studies on media literacy. For instance, one experiment found that a media literacy training session that educated participants about professional practices in news production reduced perceived partisan bias in a subsequent news story, although general media trust was not affected (Vraga, Tully, & Rojas, 2009).
These studies demonstrate that media trust is at least open to influence, and the latter study does suggest that these effects can be specific to a particular form of trust, likely operating by changes in specific beliefs about media practice (or the cognitive accessibility of those beliefs). However, it is possible that when some specific forms of media trust are targeted, instead of a memory-based process driven by altering or activating those specific beliefs about the media, effects could operate via online processing in which the specific beliefs are forgotten after some more general attitude is updated (Hastie & Park, 1986). In other words, in some cases media criticism of any kind could affect a generalized feeling of media trust, or perhaps generalize even further to influence attitudes toward politics overall such as political cynicism (e.g., de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Esser & D’Angelo, 2003). This question of whether effects on media trust are specific or general is important because of the divergent normative implications of specific forms of media trust, as will be discussed in the next section.

Furthermore, we should not assume citizens are merely passive recipients of media criticism. They also actively engage in media criticism themselves, and when they do so, they may be affecting themselves more strongly than when they passively receive it. Expression effects, or effects of messages on their senders, are an often neglected form of message effects that can in many cases be stronger than reception effects (Pingree, 2007). The most relevant form of expression effect for our purposes is composition effects, in which composing a message leads to new ideas, increases understanding via cognitive reorganization, aids memory recall, or causes expressed opinions to be stored in long-term memory (Pingree, 2007). Expression effects may also be increasingly relevant in the modern media environment due to increased availability of expressive opportunities. Expression-encouraging contexts are increasingly common with the spread of social media as well as audience reaction features on existing websites, but of course already existed in forms such as discussion sparked by media exposure, call-in radio shows, or even the mental composition of a response, regardless of whether it is ever actually expressed.

Media trust
Although it is typically conceptualized in very general terms, media trust can also be conceptualized as more specific along two separate dimensions of specificity: outlet specificity and task specificity. By outlet specificity we mean whether trust is specific to a particular media outlet (e.g., trust in CNN), as opposed to outlet generality, meaning trust across media outlets (e.g., trust in mainstream media). By task specificity we mean trust in media to do specific tasks (e.g., rationally prioritize problems facing society, or counter the personal partisan leanings of reporters), as opposed to task generality which refers to a set of evaluations of media that are relevant to most or all tasks a person might trust media to do for them (e.g., trusting media to be honest, accurate, or fair).

The cognitive processes underlying media trust may vary across forms of media trust, or even across individuals for the same kind of media trust. Specifically, two basic kinds of cognitive processes are expected to be involved, depending on
whether a stored attitude is available. First, any media trust construct could be a stored attitude that is updated “online” during relevant experiences with media or media criticism and then simply recalled from memory in responding to media trust questions (Hastie & Park, 1986). Alternatively, a media trust response could be generated rapidly on the basis of a small sample of accessible considerations from memory (Higgins, 1996). This set of considerations may include more general or more specific forms of media trust. Further, naïve theories about news production practices (see Becker, Whitney, & Collins, 1980; Kosicki & McLeod, 1990) could also be used in constructing an evaluation on the fly. This latter, “memory-based” process of constructing an attitude on the fly may mean attitudes are less stable over time, but should not be seen as making these attitudes less “real” in the sense of having real implications (Zaller, 1992).

Media trust is most often conceptualized in general terms on both dimensions, as a broad perception of the overall credibility or trustworthiness of the mass media (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Tsfati, 2010). In its simplest form, general media trust can be measured as a “feeling thermometer” asking respondents to rate how warmly they feel toward the mass media (see Ladd, 2010). In terms of the cueing effects discussed above, such generalized trust in any cue source is only one factor relevant to whether it is rational to accept a cue from that source, with the more fundamental requirement being trust that the cue resulted from the source actually doing the cognitive task the cue-taker is trying to avoid. Gatekeeping trust is a task-specific form of media trust intended to fulfill this role in the context of agenda cueing. Specifically, gatekeeping trust is trust that the problems covered in the news represent the result of news workers doing the difficult cognitive task of systematically weighing the evidence for the relative importance of all social problems, and that news coverage is therefore appropriate for use as a cognitive shortcut to avoid doing that task for oneself. Gatekeeping trust is thus conceptually distinct from general media trust in that it focuses in on trust in media to do this specific task, whereas general media trust taps perceptions of media trustworthiness in general across all tasks. Gatekeeping trust is also conceptually distinct from reporter partisan neutrality trust, which is trust that reporters’ personal partisan leanings do not influence their coverage. Like gatekeeping trust, reporter partisan neutrality trust is trust in the media to perform a specific task. The difference is of course in which task the trust is specific to, with gatekeeping trust being specific to the task of prioritizing problems and neutrality trust being specific to the task of countering any influence of reporters’ own partisan preferences.

The three forms of media trust also differ substantially in their normative implications. As discussed above, many factors other than problem importance influence news story selection, and high levels of gatekeeping trust suggests ignorance of these other factors. Thus, lower levels of gatekeeping trust are more normatively desirable. In the case of partisan neutrality trust, the normative implications are the opposite; arguably, citizens do not place as much faith as they should in the professionalism of news workers in terms of partisan neutrality, in light of research
that has generally failed to find any evidence of partisan bias in news content produced by professional mainstream news outlets (e.g., Broder, 1987; Domke et al., 1997; Epstein, 1973; Graber, 1996; Just et al., 1996; Lemert, 1989; Patterson, 1993). Because task-specific forms of media trust can have such divergent normative implications, it can be difficult to draw normative conclusions about any research results involving only general media trust.

Although some media trust measures used in past research contain individual items that at least indirectly relate to beliefs about how stories are selected, it appears that no scale has been developed to measure trust that the media selects stories based on problem importance judgments. We will now review the quite diverse measurement of media trust in past research, with two goals: First, to identify an efficient scale measuring general media trust that has minimal conceptual overlap with gatekeeping trust (specifically, we adopt the 5-item scale used in Tsfati, 2010); and second, to assess whether any individual items used in existing data sets could be reanalyzed as indicators of gatekeeping trust (we find only one such item, in Miller & Krosnick, 2000). A widely cited and quite comprehensive measure of general media trust is Gaziano & McGrath’s (1986) media credibility scale. This reliable 12-item scale covers general media trust without items that seem to overlap strongly with gatekeeping trust. It does contain three items related to perceptions that the news media care about the public interest. However, these items do not necessarily tap gatekeeping trust, because the belief that journalists care about the public interest does not necessitate the belief that this goodwill is a driving factor in news story selection. The large number of items in this scale also made it impractical for our purposes. We follow Tsfati (2010) in refining this to a more efficient 5-item scale that does not include these potentially overlapping perceptions about the news media’s concern for the public interest.

As discussed above, two recent studies have used media trust as moderators of agenda setting and priming effects (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsfati, 2003). These two studies used two very different approaches to measuring media trust. The earlier Tsfati (2003) scale falls in between the classic Gaziano & McGrath (1986) scale and the newer Tsfati (2010) scale, both in terms of its size and its exclusion of problematic items that may overlap with gatekeeping trust. Tsfati’s (2003) 9-item scale includes only one such problematic item, on whether the media “helps society” or “get in the way of society solving its problems.” Miller & Krosnick (2000) used a novel three-item scale measuring what seem to us to be three distinct subdimensions of media trust: accuracy, bias, and importance. This scale had low reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.43$), with the worst-fitting item being the one measuring importance. Specifically, this item asked “Do news organizations often get people upset over unimportant issues, or do news organizations focus on important problems of the day?” (Miller & Krosnick, 2000, p. 305). On face validity, this seems to us the only item used in any past media trust scale that could be seen as a gatekeeping trust item. However, we do not adopt this item for our gatekeeping trust scale because it also unnecessarily taps third-person perceptions that the news is effective in getting other people upset over unimportant issues.
Hypotheses
The above discussion leads to several predictions about the effects of media criticism on media trust. Our central prediction is that receiving criticism of the media’s gatekeeping role will decrease gatekeeping trust. Thus, hypothesis 1a is that exposure to gatekeeping criticism will decrease gatekeeping trust. In parallel to this is a test of a common alternative form of media criticism, accusations of reporter bias, and its corresponding specific form of trust, reporter partisan neutrality trust. Hypothesis 1b is that exposure to bias criticism will decrease reporter partisan neutrality trust.

The above hypotheses both assume that specific forms of media criticism affect correspondingly specific forms of media trust. Alternatively, it is plausible that any form of media criticism, regardless of its content, could have a generalized effect on all forms of media trust. This is an important alternative possibility to consider because it would complicate what forms of media literacy interventions one would recommend on the basis of this research. Again, gatekeeping trust is a normatively less desirable form of media trust in that it indicates an oversimplified view of news story selection practices. Ideally gatekeeping criticism would reduce gatekeeping trust without also decreasing other, more desirable forms of media trust. Therefore, we also pose the following research questions covering all remaining possible effects of the two forms of media criticism on other forms of media trust. RQ1a asks whether gatekeeping criticism affects reporter partisan neutrality trust, RQ1b asks whether gatekeeping criticism affects general media trust, RQ1c asks whether bias criticism affects gatekeeping trust, and RQ1d asks whether bias criticism affects general media trust.

In addition to the effects of receiving media criticism, we also examine effects of subsequently expressing media criticism in one’s own words. Composing a message can lead to new ideas, increase understanding via cognitive reorganization, aid memory recall, or cause expressed opinions to be stored in long-term memory (Pingree, 2007). Thus, any effects of media criticism received may be amplified in contexts that lead audience members to compose media criticism in their own words. This message composition is one way to ensure the kind of active cognitive processing that may be necessary to fully absorb or retain the implications of media criticism. We predict that an opportunity to express media criticism in one’s own words immediately after reception of media criticism will magnify the effects of exposure. Specifically, hypothesis 2a is that exposure to gatekeeping criticism will decrease gatekeeping trust more with subsequent expression of media criticism than without it. Similarly, hypothesis 2b is that exposure to bias criticism will decrease reporter partisan neutrality trust more with subsequent expression of media criticism than without it.

We now turn to a pair of predictions about the role of gatekeeping trust in how people prioritize social problems. These predictions are not an experimental focus of this study, and instead function here to validate gatekeeping trust as distinct from other forms of media trust. The first prediction is that those with high levels of gatekeeping trust will rely more on agenda cueing, or using the perceived news
agenda as a cue about which problems are important. Specifically, hypothesis 3a is that gatekeeping trust will positively predict agenda cueing, above and beyond other media trust measures, demographics, and general political orientations.

The second prediction used to validate gatekeeping trust is that low levels of gatekeeping trust will predict agenda reasoning, or the inclusion of reasons why problems are (or are not) important when listing the most important problems facing the nation. The choice to include agenda reasons in such a response is seen as an indicator of an active process of weighing pros and cons of the importance of problems—in other words, the kind of systematic processing that is expected in the absence of a trusted cue (Chaiken, 1980). Hypothesis 3b is that gatekeeping trust will negatively predict agenda reasoning, above and beyond other media trust measures, demographics, and general political orientations.

**Method**

**Overview**

An experiment embedded in an online survey was used to test these hypotheses. After answering pretest questions, participants were randomly assigned using a 3 (media criticism exposure) × 2 (media criticism expression) factorial design before being asked a series of closed-ended media trust questions. After answering media trust questions, subjects encountered a second round of experimental stimuli not used in this study: Half of the subjects were then shown a video clip of a nightly newscast intended to contain no important problems.1 This second experiment, to be analyzed elsewhere, although not relevant to our experimental analyses as it took place after measurement of media trust, includes the dependent variables in all of our experimental analyses. Because of the order of these manipulations, we do include it as a covariate in our analyses of the role of gatekeeping trust in predicting agenda overlap and agenda reasoning (for H3a and H3b), because its presentation occurred in between our measurement of media trust and the dependent measure for those analyses.

**Participants**

Participants (N = 582) were recruited from undergraduate communications courses at a large university in the midwestern United States. A majority (55.2%) of the participants were female; the mean age was 21.06 (SD = 2.53). Overall, 79.7% of participants self-identified as White, 8.2% as Asian or Asian-American, 6.5% as Black, 1.7% as Hispanic, and 3.7% selected Other or declined to answer. In terms of social class, 12.9% of participants described their family “Working class,” 21.8% selected “Lower Middle Class,” 59.5% selected “Upper Middle Class,” and 5.2% selected “Wealthy.” Participants tended to be slightly more liberal on average (M = 4.78, SD = 2.14) on a scale from 0 (very liberal) to 10 (very conservative). Ideological strength, a folded version of this same ideology item, ranged from 0 to 5, with 0 indicating the midpoint response on the ideology question and 5 indicating either
extreme ($M = 1.69, SD = 1.34$). Overall, 81.8% of participants stated that they were registered to vote.

**Stimuli**
The media criticism exposure manipulation consisted of a video clip featuring gatekeeping criticism, a video clip featuring (liberal) bias criticism, or no media criticism video. For the media criticism expression manipulation, immediately following the media criticism exposure manipulation, half of the participants were asked to express their own opinions in an open-ended essay regarding media coverage, while the other half were not. The question prompt was “What do you think of the news media overall? When they don’t do as good a job as they should, why do you think that happens?”

The gatekeeping criticism video clip was an excerpt of the CNN show Fareed Zakaria GPS. In the video, which originally aired on June 12, 2010, shortly after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Zakaria offers an editorial that is sharply critical of the news media’s priorities. The clip begins with Zakaria asking “Have we all gone crazy? I don’t mean you. I mean us—the media.” He chastises the media for excessive coverage of a relatively trivial facet of the BP oil spill story (whether President Obama was demonstrating enough anger in response to the incident). He then argues that a lack of available options for government action to address the problem should make it a low priority on the policy agenda, and concludes with a list of other problems that he suggests were neglected as a result of saturation coverage (no pun intended) of the oil spill.

The bias criticism video clip is an excerpt from The O’Reilly Factor on Fox News that originally aired on October 24, 2006. In this excerpt, Mark Halperin of ABC News is interviewed by O’Reilly and asserts that a liberal bias exists in all of the mainstream news networks and in several metropolitan newspapers. It was chosen as a particularly persuasive-seeming example because of the inclusion of a spokesperson for a mainstream news organization effectively admitting liberal bias. Halperin describes the perceived liberal bias in some detail and provide a couple of examples—stating, for instance, that liberal political candidates such as Nancy Pelosi are given greater access to network air time via extended interviews than are conservative candidates.

**Open-ended responses for agenda measures**
Two open-ended responses were measured after all experimental stimuli. The first of these two prompts, the own agenda question, was “If a friend who doesn’t follow politics at all wanted to know what you think are the most important problems facing the nation, what would you say to him or her? Try to write what you might actually say instead of describing what kinds of things you would say.” By adding the “tell a friend” phrasing to the classic “most important problems” wording used in agenda setting research, we create a context more amenable for subjects to include agenda reasons instead of just listing problems. Note that our prompt does not specifically ask
for reasons, allowing our measure of agenda reasoning to tap the spontaneous choice to use agenda reasons (see Pingree, Scholl, & Quenette, 2012). After submitting a response to this question, subjects were prompted on the following page for the news agenda with “What problems do you think are getting the most coverage lately in the news?” For all variables coded from open-ended responses, blank responses were coded as missing values and thus excluded from analyses.

Measures
Unless otherwise noted, all closed-ended items were measured on an 11-point scale from 0, labeled strongly disagree to 10, labeled strongly agree.

General media trust
General media trust (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.872$, $M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.64$) was five items adapted from Tsfati (2010). The first item was, “In general, mainstream news outlets are fair.” The subsequent statements use the same wording, replacing “are fair” with “are accurate,” “are unbiased,” “tell the whole story,” and “can be trusted.”

Reporter partisan neutrality trust
Reporter partisan neutrality trust was an average of two statements ($r = 0.660$, $M = 5.97$, $SD = 1.86$): “News reporters’ own political beliefs strongly influence how they write about news events” and “News reporters’ own political beliefs strongly influence how they check facts, and which facts they check.”

Gatekeeping trust
Gatekeeping trust (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.830$, $M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.73$) was measured by averaging five items: “News outlets choose which stories to cover by carefully deciding which issues or problems are the most important in society”; “When deciding how much time to spend covering each issue, reporters, and editors are thinking mostly about how important each issue is in society”; “When the news gives some topic a lot of coverage, it means they’ve decided it’s a really important issue in society”; “The top stories in a TV newscast are usually about whatever issues the editors think are the most serious, urgent, or widespread in society”; “You can trust that when there are problems in society that really are urgent and important, the news will make a big deal out of them.”

TV news use
For use as a covariate in predicting agenda reasoning and agenda cueing, a TV news use scale (mean inter-item $r = 0.505$, $M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.66$) was constructed from three items. Each item asked how many days in a typical week subjects encountered news from the following respective sources: national network news, local TV news, and CNN (including CNN Headline News and CNN.com), with response options ranging from 0 days to 7 days.
Game and policy interest in politics

Also for use as a covariate in predicting agenda reasoning and agenda cueing were two forms of political interest: policy interest, or interest in the substantive side of politics focusing on government policy solutions to various problems, and game interest, or interest in the political maneuvering or the “game” of politics. Policy interest (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.915$, $M = 6.46$, $SD = 2.19$) was measured using four items: “I am interested in problems that affect this country and possible solutions to them”; “I would be interested in learning objective facts about real and urgent problems facing the nation”; “I am interested in constructive ideas about how to solve real problems facing the nation”; “I would be interested in hearing honest and serious discussions about how to solve real problems facing the nation.” Game interest (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.876$, $M = 3.97$, $SD = 2.30$) was measured using four items: “I am interested in political strategy and maneuvering”; “I find the game of politics fascinating, even when it’s about issues that don’t matter to me”; “I am interested in the competition between politicians, even when it’s about issues that I don’t really care about”; “I find political spin entertaining.” An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on all nine political interest items using the same approach detailed below for the media trust factor analysis. The two scales separated cleanly into two factors, with all loadings on intended factors over 0.8, and only a single factor loading on the unintended factor over 0.2 (0.26 for the first strategy interest item).

Number of problems mentioned

The number of problems listed in response to the own agenda question was coded for use as a covariate to isolate reasoning and cueing from effects of the number of problems one could reason about or accept cues about. Number of problems mentioned (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.89$, $M = 2.067$, $SD = 1.667$) was the number of problems the subject differentiated in the own agenda response. In other words, if it was manifest in the response that two problems were considered separate problems, they were counted as two separate problems. If the same two topics were treated by a different participant as aspects of a single broader problem, in that case it was coded as a single problem. For example, the response “The most important problems are the economy, taxes, and jobs” would be coded as three problems and no agenda reasons. However, the response “The most important problem is the economy because we need jobs and because taxes are way too high” would be coded as one problem with two agenda reasons.

Agenda overlap

Agenda overlap is the nonexperimental indicator of agenda cueing used in this study to examine which form of media trust predicts cueing. Specifically, it is the degree of overlap between the respondent’s own agenda of most important problems and that same respondent’s perceptions of the media agenda. Note that this is not intended as a measure of the actual media agenda. It seems quite likely that many of our participants have inaccurate perceptions of the mainstream news agenda, either
due to inattention or due to attention to an idiosyncratic subset of news sources. Crucially, if cueing is the mechanism of effect, an audience member’s perception of the media agenda is what would be accepted as an agenda cue, not the actual media agenda. In other words, using the perceived media agenda instead of the actual media agenda has the advantage of being able to reveal cue-taking effects even for those who inaccurately perceive the media agenda. See the above discussion for the wording of the two relevant open-ended questions. Two coders coded agenda overlap (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.89$, $M = 0.490$, $SD = 0.787$) as the number of problems listed in the own agenda response that were also listed in the news agenda response.

Agenda reasoning
Responses to the own agenda question were coded as agenda reasons if they provided any insight into why a participant thought a problem was (or was not) important. Agenda reasoning (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .86$, $M = 0.642$, $SD = 1.063$) was the number of distinct agenda reasons given in the own agenda response. In contrast to the above two variables, for which intercoder reliability was quite easily achieved, agenda reasoning required extensive coder training and iterative refinement of coding guidelines. The final agenda reasoning variable was assessed from a full recoding of all responses by two coders, with 90 items coded by both coders and used to assess reliability. Specifically, each coder was given a random half of the responses mixed with 45 randomly selected responses from the other coder’s half. To ensure consistent effort across all responses, coders were blinded to which items were in this overlapping subset. Any who wish to replicate this measure are strongly encouraged to contact the authors for coding guidelines.

Results

Media trust measurement
An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on all 12 media trust items listed above. Factors were extracted using the generalized least squares method in the SPSS software program. Because we did not feel it was justified to assume that the factors were uncorrelated, factors were rotated using the “direct oblimin” function (a Quartimin oblique rotation with Kaiser normalization). Solutions with two, three, and four factors were examined. Examination of a scree plot suggested a 3-factor solution, and both the 2-factor and 4-factor solutions featuring numerous unsatisfactory middle-range factor loadings, so a 3-factor solution was selected. In the 3-factor solution, the separation between the three scales was very clean. Specifically, no items loaded on any unintended factor above 0.2, and only a single item loaded below 0.7 on its intended factor (the third gatekeeping trust item at 0.686).

Media criticism effects
All of the media criticism effects hypotheses and research questions were addressed using three analysis of variance (ANOVA) models, one on each of the three media
trust measures. Other than their dependent variables, the three models were identical, each consisting of three fixed factors: criticism expression, a dummy for bias criticism exposure, and a dummy for gatekeeping criticism exposure. Thus, the control condition with no exposure to media criticism was the missing dummy and served as the point of comparison for all tests of the effects of exposure to the two forms of media criticism.

H1a predicted that gatekeeping criticism would decrease gatekeeping trust. In the model predicting gatekeeping trust, the gatekeeping criticism dummy variable was significant \( F(1, 576) = 9.808, \text{one-tailed } p = .001 \) and gatekeeping trust was lower in the gatekeeping criticism condition \( (M = 5.146) \) than in the control condition \( (M = 5.789) \), supporting H1a. H2a, which predicted that expression would magnify the effects of gatekeeping criticism, was tested in this same model by the interaction term between gatekeeping criticism and criticism expression. This interaction term was significant \( F(1, 576) = 3.016, \text{one-tailed } p = .042 \) and in the predicted direction, supporting H2a. Specifically, gatekeeping criticism decreased gatekeeping trust more in the expression condition (mean difference = 1.085) than in the no-expression condition (mean difference = 0.202). H1b predicted that bias criticism would decrease partisan neutrality trust. In the model predicting partisan neutrality trust, the bias criticism dummy was not significant \( F(1, 569) = .025, \text{one-tailed } p = .437 \), so H1b was not supported. H2b, which predicted that these effects would be magnified by subsequent media criticism expression, was also not supported: The interaction between bias criticism and criticism expression was not significant \( F(1, 569) = 0.561, \text{one-tailed } p = .227 \).

Our four research questions asked whether there were any other effects of either form of media criticism on any of the measures of media trust, apart from those hypothesized in H1a and H1b. None of these effects were significant. Specifically, gatekeeping criticism had no effect on either partisan neutrality trust \( F(1, 569) = 0.035, p = .852 \) or general media trust \( F(1, 576) = 0.157, p = .692 \), and bias criticism had no effect on either gatekeeping trust \( F(1, 576) = 0.586, p = .444 \) or general media trust \( F(1, 576) = 1.92, p = .662 \). In summary, the only effect of either form of media criticism on any form of media trust was that exposure to gatekeeping criticism decreased gatekeeping trust, particularly when followed by media criticism expression.

In addition to the above experimental analyses, we also conducted two ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to validate gatekeeping trust as a measure that contributes to predicting agenda cueing and agenda reasoning (see Table 1). The two models were identical except for their dependent variables of agenda reasoning and news agenda overlap. Both models included the number of problems listed in the agenda response, ideological direction, ideological strength, age, gender, and social class, whether the respondent was registered to vote, their self-reported TV news use, policy interest, and political-game interest as well as all three media trust measures. In the model predicting news agenda overlap (adjusted \( r^2 = 0.221 \)), gatekeeping trust was a significant and positive predictor \( b = 0.098, \text{one-tailed} \).
Table 1 OLS Regression Models Predicting Agenda Overlap and Agenda Reasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agenda Overlap</td>
<td>Agenda Reasoning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$t$</td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$t$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of issues listed</td>
<td>0.466</td>
<td>11.794***</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-issues newscast from ABC(^a)</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.381</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>1.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-issues newscast from NBC(^a)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.984</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>1.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>-1.445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological strength</td>
<td>-0.059</td>
<td>-1.515</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>1.762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>-0.468</td>
<td>-0.048</td>
<td>-1.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male = 1, female = 0)</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>-0.353</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>2.471*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.349</td>
<td>-0.065</td>
<td>-1.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered to vote</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>-0.361</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
<td>-2.167*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrality trust</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>-0.302</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>2.392*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media trust</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>-0.696</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>1.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeeping trust</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>2.364*</td>
<td>-0.125</td>
<td>-2.712**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV news use</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>2.449*</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>-1.675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game interest</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.724</td>
<td>-0.039</td>
<td>-0.784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy interest</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>-0.831</td>
<td>0.231</td>
<td>4.722***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.221   | 0.101   |          |          |

$N$ | 557     | 510     |          |          |

Note: All coefficients are standardized. OLS, ordinary least squares.

\(^a\)These two newscast variables represent the second round of experimental stimuli intended for analysis elsewhere. They are included in these models because the dependent variables used here are measured after this second round of stimuli, whereas in the experimental analyses using the media criticism stimulus, the media trust dependent variables were measured prior to this second round of stimuli.

\(*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

$p = .009$), supporting H3a. The other two media trust measures in this model were not significant predictors (partisan neutrality trust $b = -0.011$, one-tailed $p = .382$; general media trust $b = -0.029$, one-tailed $p = .244$). In the model predicting agenda reasoning (adjusted $r$-square = 0.101), gatekeeping trust was a significant and negative predictor ($b = -0.125$, one-tailed $p = .004$), supporting H3b. As with agenda cueing, general media trust was not a significant predictor of agenda reasoning ($b = 0.048$, one-tailed $p = .148$). However, partisan neutrality trust was a significant predictor of agenda reasoning in the opposite direction of gatekeeping trust ($b = 0.105, p = .017$). To test for quadratic effects, we ran alternative versions of these two regression models using squared terms, and found no significant relationships to gatekeeping trust, suggesting that linear effects better fit the data.

We conducted supplemental analyses to test for effects of media criticism directly on agenda overlap and agenda reasoning. We did not hypothesize these effects because given the one-shot experimental intervention, only modest effects are expected on
gatekeeping trust, and gatekeeping trust is only one of many factors that may influence agenda cueing and agenda reasoning. Thus, it would be quite surprising if this one-shot media criticism intervention could have a strong enough effect on gatekeeping trust for this to translate into significant effects on agenda reasoning or agenda cueing. The two supplemental models were identical to the models testing H1a and H1b, except that agenda overlap and agenda cueing were the dependent variables instead of media trust measures. Unsurprisingly, in these models no significant effects of either form of media criticism were found on agenda overlap or agenda reasoning. As we will discuss below, future research could combine many of the above analyses into a formal mediation analysis testing a two-step causal effect, but should only do so if pretest measures of media trust are included.

**Discussion**

This study developed a new measure of gatekeeping trust and made some first steps in exploring its antecedents and consequences. Exposure to gatekeeping criticism was found to reduce gatekeeping trust, particularly when this exposure was followed by self-expression of media criticism. Reassuringly, gatekeeping criticism had no effects on other media trust measures, indicating that it is possible for media criticism to target specific undesirable forms of media trust without simply leading to a generalized cynicism about the media. There were also no significant effects of bias criticism on any form of media trust, which could perhaps be explained by the prevalence of this form of criticism. Finally, regression analyses were strongly supportive of the importance of adding gatekeeping trust measures to future research involving media trust, as they outperformed other media trust measures in predicting indicators of two agenda setting mechanisms. Specifically, gatekeeping trust was the only form of media trust to positively predict news agenda overlap, an indicator of taking cues from the news about problem importance, and it was also the only media trust measure to negatively predict agenda reasoning, an indicator of thinking through problem priorities for oneself.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the media trust measures used general terms such as “the news” and “mainstream news outlets,” rather than specifying which outlets the respondents should consider (or asking them which outlets they consider “mainstream”). On the one hand, this phrasing seemed appropriate because the same level of generality was present in the stimulus videos, which criticized the mainstream media as a whole, and in the measure of the perceived media agenda. On the other hand, one might argue that in the modern age of online news and audience fragmentation, people may not have clear conceptions of—or well-formed attitudes toward—“mainstream news outlets” as a general category. However, recent panel data suggests that people do in fact have stable attitudes toward the news media as an institution, and that the same attributes of the news media come to mind for respondents to various surveys (see Ladd, 2012). Still, it is worth noting that all three types of media trust that are discussed in the present study may vary across outlets, and the distinctions between different outlets are a key area for future research.
Second, as with any experimental study using an undergraduate convenience sample, external validity is limited. For example, there may be generational differences with regards to levels of media trust, levels of reasoning ability, or conceptions of the news media’s role in society. Whether these results will generalize to broader populations and to real-world conditions are important questions for future research. In addition, our results may not generalize beyond the specific instances of gatekeeping criticism and bias criticism we used here as stimuli. Recall that our bias criticism stimulus did not have a significant effect on perceived media bias, unlike past research (Ladd, 2010; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). This may or may not be due to the specific stimulus that we used. Our stimulus video involved Bill O’Reilly, a well-known conservative pundit, interviewing Mark Halperin of ABC News (whom we suspect is less well-known to our participants). The claims of bias criticism and supporting examples were mostly voiced by Halperin, not O’Reilly; however, viewers who disagree with or dislike O’Reilly may still have discounted or completely ignored the bias criticism message. On the other hand, criticisms of media bias have become quite common in public discourse, and audiences may be desensitized to such criticisms in general. The effects of other instances of bias criticism are a worthwhile question to explore. Also, further research is needed to examine whether other instances of gatekeeping criticism similarly reduce gatekeeper trust, and to examine the persistence of these effects over time.

Causal conclusions related to agenda setting are also limited because of the nonexperimental nature of our indicator of agenda setting. We did not experimentally manipulate the news agenda. Instead, our indicator of agenda cueing was the degree of overlap between perceptions of the problems covered recently in mainstream news and attitudes about the most important problems facing the nation. That gatekeeping trust was the only form of media trust to provide a unique contribution to predicting this overlap is indicative that it may be the form of media trust at work in moderating agenda setting. However, it does not establish the direction of causality in which this cue operates. It could just as easily be the case that those who are high in gatekeeping trust are assuming that the news has been covering important problems, instead of assuming problems are important based on perceptions of recent news coverage. Future research should use gatekeeping trust as a moderator in an actual agenda-setting experiment, manipulating the perceived news agenda experimentally instead of just measuring it.

Another issue related to the perceived agenda measure is the possibility of demand characteristics or consistency. These would be major threats to validity if our aim had been to assess the size of agenda-setting effects, as demand characteristics and consistency could explain a correlation between what is reported as the perceived media agenda and respondent’s own agenda, thus leading to an overestimate of any agenda-setting effect. However, we see no reason why the influence of demand characteristics or consistency would vary depending on a respondent’s level of gatekeeping trust, especially after controlling for other forms of media trust. An alternative approach would have been to measure the actual media agenda based
on content analyses, which are readily available (e.g., from the Pew News Coverage Index), but this approach would have failed to capture any cueing effects on respondents whose perceptions differ from that actual media agenda either due to inattention or due to real differences in the media agenda of the outlets they follow.

Our analytical approach was to examine experimental effects on trust separately from the question of validating gatekeeping trust by assessing its role in predicting mechanisms of agenda setting. Alternatively, we could have used a formal test of mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) in which the three forms of media trust mediate effects on agenda overlap and agenda reasoning. Such a mediation analysis would risk misrepresenting the effects of the experimental manipulation as extending to these other outcomes on which no significant experimental effects were found, by taking advantage of the relationship in pre existing variance between the mediator and the dependent variables. The independent variable is a single experimentally manipulated exposure to media criticism, not an estimate of the total amount of that type of media criticism the subject has received in the past (as would be the case in the survey contexts where such mediation analyses are most often used). Unlike the independent variable, the mediating and dependent variables are general in the sense that they potentially capture accumulated effects of all past media criticism received. This mismatch in generality could lead to a misinterpretation of the results as a two-step causal test, when in fact only the first step from media criticism to media trust isolates causality using experimental manipulation, while the second step from media trust to the dependent variables is primarily a matter of pre existing variance. This could be addressed if pretest measures of the mediator and the dependent variable were available, but they are not. Further, as is typical in one-shot media effects experiments, only a modest proportion of the variance in the mediating variables is affected by the manipulation. It would be quite surprising if this modest effect then translated into significant experimental effects on the dependent variables, given that these outcomes are not solely determined by media trust. Therefore, we used these outcome variables only to validate the difference between the media trust measures, and not to assess a second step in a causal chain driven by our criticism manipulation. Future research could assess such a two-step causal effect by including pretest measures of media trust and by employing a stronger media criticism intervention, perhaps by using multiple interventions over the course of several weeks.

Future research should also focus on agenda reasons, not only as an outcome of low gatekeeping trust but also as an aspect of news content that may affect audiences. Whether news stories include reasons for the importance of problems is potentially a crucial variable neglected by past agenda-setting research. Any or all past agenda-setting experiments may have conflated the mere fact of news coverage of a problem with the inclusion of good reasons to treat a problem as important. Such agenda reasons could include the number of people affected by the problem, the severity of the effects on individuals, or the prospects for various types of interventions to solve the problem. In cases where agenda-setting effects operate via the presence of
agenda reasons in news stories and the subsequent active processing of these reasons by audience members, the resulting agenda-setting effects represent a healthy and rational process of prioritization. Thus, future agenda setting experiments should not only manipulate whether problems are covered, but also whether reasons for problem importance are included in stories.

In summary, this study has laid the groundwork for a program of future research surrounding a key new variable: gatekeeping trust. As with any single study, the specific empirical results here should be taken as tentative. However, there are several conceptual contributions here in mechanisms of agenda setting and forms of media trust, with potentially far-reaching implications that deserve much more research. In particular, our concepts of agenda cueing and agenda reasoning as two mechanisms of media agenda setting effects with opposite normative implications offer hope that future agenda setting research can lead to clearer recommendations about what can be done to improve how we prioritize problems in society. Past research using media trust as a moderator of agenda setting relied on overly general measures of media trust that did not specify what the media were being trusted to do. We refine this agenda-cueing explanation to a more specific form of trust rooted in a misunderstanding of news story selection practices, which makes such trust-based agenda setting more clearly undesirable. Further, past work on agenda setting undertheorized how a good citizen ought to prioritize problems, or what role the media would ideally play in influencing such a process. Agenda reasoning fills this gap. It suggests the need to distinguish between reasons and cues not only in measuring effects as we have done in this study, but also in news content itself. This study has demonstrated that the former can be done with a slight alteration of the standard “most important problems” prompt to allow the subject to include reasons if they so choose while listing problems.

Taken together, these results suggest that media gatekeeping criticism may be a point of leverage for shifting agenda setting toward a more deliberative collective process for prioritizing problems. Specifically, gatekeeping criticism could reduce gatekeeping trust, in turn leading citizens to do more agenda reasoning and less agenda cue-taking. The concepts of gatekeeping trust, agenda cueing, and agenda reasoning create a foundation for future research that we hope other researchers will join us in building upon.

Note

1 Although exposure to a newscast is the independent variable in this other experimental factor, it is not an agenda-setting study, but instead a study of whether news can “set a nonagenda” or create a perception that there are no particularly important issues facing the nation.

References


