

## William Allen White's Anti-Populist Rhetoric as an Agenda-Setting Technique

*White was striving to set a social and political agenda that would advance business values and bring prosperity to his home state.*

► William Allen White, small-town Kansas editor, became a national journalistic figure in 1896 with a now-famous editorial, "What's the Matter with Kansas?" His castigation of the Populists did not represent mere loyalty to Republican politics, but also a conception of his role as one of editor and businessman. He used the *Emporia Gazette*, which he had purchased in 1895, as a platform to attack the farmer-radicals and to advocate norms, values and behavior patterns that represented his "businessman's" concept of the structure of society. During the anti-Populist years (1895-1900) White was striving to set a social and political agenda for Emporia and for Kansas that would advance business values and bring business prosperity to his home state.

Journalism historians, in analyzing press power, traditionally have focused on such factors as extent of circulation, the ability of newspapers to sway elections or other political decisions, and on popularity or business success of a particular publisher.<sup>1</sup>

An alternative approach to studying media impact, agenda-setting theory, has important implications for the historian as

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well as for the monitor of public reaction to media coverage of current issues. Agenda-setting research, developed by McCombs and Shaw, is based on a concept originally advanced by Cohen that publishers don't tell the public what to think, but they tell them what to think about.<sup>2</sup> Recent studies have tried to determine whether voters rearrange their lists of priority issues in response to media arrangement of issues. Other variables, such as public discussion of issues and the impact of opinions gathered from friends and acquaintances, are also examined. In the context of these studies, agenda-setting research has relied on 1) content analysis of themes, placement and weight of issues covered by a newspaper, and 2) analyses of how an audience rates issues before and after media coverage. While the historian would be hard pressed to pre-test and post-test the audience, the theoretical framework of agenda-setting allows new insight into the content of newspapers.

The agenda-setting framework permits a look at how publishers like White structured the content of the newspaper through their choice of issues. This approach directs us away from a too simplistic cause-effect study which examines only a narrow range of issues. For example, in some contexts the important question may not be whether an electorate

<sup>1</sup> See standard journalism texts such as Edwin Emery's *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "Structuring the Unseen Environment," *Journal of Communication*, 26:18-20 (1976); See also McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda - Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36:176-87 (1972); Jack McLeod, Lee Becker and James Byrnes, "Another Look at the Agenda - Setting Function of the Press," *Communication Research*, 1:131-166 (1974); McCombs and Gerald Stone, *Studies in Agenda - Setting* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University, 1976).

voted Democratic or Republican at the bidding of an editor, but whether it had an opportunity to read about the platform of a third party and whether the way the platform was presented represented the values or norms of a particular segment of society. This kind of analysis then might lead us to speculate whether the publisher was more interested in a Republican-Democratic contest, or in maintaining control by a particular societal group. In White's case, we can ask what issues White chose to emphasize during the Populist period. Which issues did he minimize or avoid? Did the content of White's anti-Populist writings reveal a value structure or a set of political or societal goals? Was he using his newspaper to impose his own value system on his audience? Such analysis is significant because of the position publishers have occupied within the power structures and business interests in their communities.<sup>3</sup>

White provides an interesting case study of a publisher who circulated with state and national political leaders, who viewed the business elite as natural leaders and who structured his writings about the Populists to promote his own belief in a stratified society dominated by business values. White's purpose in attacking the People's Party was not only to fight off the farmer's challenge, but also to insure that the business elite would maintain control of changes to be brought by industrialization and urbanization. White's agenda for Emporia and the nation is clearly enunciated throughout his anti-Populist rhetoric.

Looking at White's treatment of the Populists by examining what issues White avoided, what issues he distorted and what issues he emphasized, tells us White set an agenda for his readers that denied the economic hardship of farmers from 1895-1900 because he disliked the institutional reme-

dies they proposed, and he feared loss of control by businessmen and loss of Eastern capital. He viewed outside capital as a necessity for town development, and he opposed rural demands that retarded such growth. White distorted the image of who Populists were in order to place blame on them individually and to strengthen his case for business leadership. White emphasized a philosophy of equal opportunity which maintained a stratified society, again with business control, and he promoted growth through capital. Thus White's readers saw the Populists as bumbling idiots unable to govern successfully and unfit to suggest changes in the power structure White was striving to promote. The readers were never given basic information which would have allowed them to analyze and understand basic demands and remedies proposed by the People's Party. White presented the Populists as destructive radicals rather than as independent thinkers proposing an alternative political style.

Because White had an individual view, rather than an institutional view of society, he saw the poor man as a stupid man, unable and unwilling to make a living. White charged the Populists with their own failures and explained the relativity of wealth within society as a matter of intelligence and industry, denying any realistic basis for the farmers' economic plight.

However, conditions in Lyon County—White's own area—had been difficult, and the farmers had organized in the Alliance by 1899 with a "large and influential" membership.<sup>4</sup> An Alliance Exchange was incorporated and a general merchandise store opened at Emporia. Alliance stores were established in other Lyon County towns and flourished for several years.<sup>5</sup> A joint stock marketing and buying organization was initiated at the state level in 1889, as well as a State Exchange. Although the failure of attempts by the farmers to control their own markets through cooperatives has often been viewed as a failure by the farmers—a result of lack of trust and mutual cooperation—new evidence reveals the problems of getting credit and obtaining cooperation from

<sup>3</sup> See Warren Breed, "Social Control in the News Room," in Wilbur Schramm, *Mass Communication*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 193; and J.K. Hvistendahl, "Publisher's Power: Functional or Dysfunctional?" *Journalism Quarterly*, 47: 473 (1970).

<sup>4</sup> Laura French, *History of Emporia and Lyon County* (Emporia, Kansas: *Gazette*, 1929), pp. 60-61.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

distributors was at least equally responsible for the failure of cooperative efforts.<sup>6</sup>

In Kansas, the 1890 census showed that more than 55% of owner-occupied farms were mortgaged, the largest ratio in the United States. One-third of the farms were rented and no mortgage figures on them were taken. In the nation, only 28% of owner-occupied farms were mortgaged. In 1890, every Kansas family of five owned a mortgage, a debt of \$170 per capita. Adding the public debt, the total was \$210.35 per capita, or about \$1,000 per family. A conservative interest estimate added \$80. The total was a considerable burden when wheat was 30 cents a bushel, particularly when from 1875-1879 the price had been \$1.00.<sup>7</sup> White's position, however ignored these very real economic problems.

This attempt to focus an audience's attention away from economic reality and toward the failure of farmers as individuals was not unique to White. During the drought of 1873, while White was still a child, Marshall M. Murdock, a close friend of White's father, was denying real economic hardship in order to promote business values. As editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, Murdock expressed what Robert Dykstra has labeled a strictly urban viewpoint—that publicity of drought and crop failure was more damaging to the community than real suffering on the part of the farmer. Murdock wrote that only newcomers were poverty stricken and claimed the solution to the farming problem was to plant more corn and less wheat. Murdock expressed the "town" point of view that reports of destitution would retard immigration.<sup>8</sup> Boom town editors like Murdock have been described as laboring

conscientiously to make the most of their respective communities' prospects, defending them against detractors abroad, putting the best face on economic adversity, discreetly suppressing news of community divisiveness, advocating programs for local improvement, urging on citizens a mercantilist doctrine of "buying at home," and blatantly recommending their towns and constituent trade areas to prospective immigrants everywhere.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of such a position was particularly visible in the activities of Editor Murdock. He was a member of the state relief committee in 1873, representing the Sedgwick County area. While Murdock accused the farmers of drinking whiskey and assuming the farming would take care of itself, the state committee was planning distribution of clothing to the Kansas destitute. But Murdock's area was excluded. He had convinced authorities no problems of destitution existed in Sedgwick County. Yet in 1874-75, of the 5,000 rural residents, about 2,000 were in need of food and/or clothing throughout the winter.<sup>10</sup>

White's position in regard to the Populists was similar to Murdock's position. He was afraid the Farmer's Alliance complaints would drive away Eastern capital, and thus he denied the drought and focused on poor business management and lack of crop diversification. Although the boom of earlier years had collapsed, the boom town philosophy persisted.

White denied the economic hardship the farmers faced partly because he opposed the institutional remedies they offered. The differences between his vision of reform and that of the Populists can best be understood by comparing the position he took after the turn of the century when he began to identify with Progressive reforms. During the Progressive Period White argued that the old Populist platform had been adopted by the Progressives. While many political reforms such as the initiative, referendum, recall and direct election of U.S. senators fall into this category, White did not support many of the Populists' economic demands, such as abolition of national banks, the prohibition of dealing in futures of agricultural and mechanical productions, free coinage of silver, prohibition of alien land ownership and a demand for paper currency. These were

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 111, 147-48, 303-304.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Miller, "The Economic Basis of Populism in Kansas," (Master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1923), pp. 35, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Robert K. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1968) pp. 193-195.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

primary Populist demands, but White never treated them as issues in his newspaper, either during or after the Populist years.

While in his autobiography White claimed that after 1900 he began to sing "a squawky little political and industrial radicalism,"<sup>11</sup> he was no radical. He supported political reform in the progressive years, but never came to a position of supporting Populist economic demands or calls for changing society's institutional structure. Whether the Populist demands—or results—were more radical than progressive demands has been debated extensively, but Populists' involvement in earlier reform movements such as the Union Laborite Party and the Greenbacker Party, their economic plight and demands for restructuring economic institutions, their radical rhetoric, their independent reform press and their attempts to affiliate with industrial labor indicated their disaffection with the economic system was greater than that of the progressives of White's nature.<sup>12</sup>

Other differences existed in terms of how the Populists and Progressives of White's nature viewed reform. While the Populists early advocated public ownership of railroads and communication facilities, White concentrated more on regulation. He did consider government ownership as an alternative in later years, but was afraid it wouldn't be acceptable on a national level.

The cooperative movement the Populists attempted that was thwarted by lack of credit and distributors' boycotts<sup>13</sup> was not an issue for White, except in the form

of municipal ownership of utilities. Municipal ownership had arisen as a response to the corruption through patronage of public services which rendered them costly and ineffective to consumers,<sup>14</sup> and as a step toward encouraging industry and population to locate within western communities. Cooperatives had been a definite attempt to circumvent capitalist control of the markets. Those who became Progressives like White, however, wanted regulation of industry, or capital, to preserve competition, not to circumvent the production and marketing system. Such regulation was designed to provide equality of opportunity within a capitalistic society, and that idea was central to White's brand of progressivism. White hammered away at the greediness of man which led to corruption in society. In certain basic ways White viewed the economic system and the social structure as acceptable because they institutionalized growth, competition and the free enterprise system. Thus in terms of how he viewed the institutions of society, White differed from the Populists.

White rarely discussed specific platform issues, concentrating with other Republican editors, primarily on free silver; he relied on reprints from other newspapers to delineate his position. As late as 1908, White wrote that the protest against class legislation of 1896 had failed because "the proposed remedy for the class legislation—the free coinage of silver—was unsound."<sup>15</sup> Yet it had been the nature of the political system, with its two dominant parties, that had forced the emphasis on free silver through Populist fusion with the Democrats. Until the Populists affiliated with a major party they could not achieve a strong power base; however, the same affiliation created the emphasis on free silver rather than on the more radical Populist demands.

White's views rested partly on a town bias against farmers, partly on party prejudice, and partly on a value system which elevated businessmen to an elite position. White's personal and editorial agenda emphasized his town orientation through pleas for Eastern capital and increased population. He was intent on industrializ-

<sup>11</sup> White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1946), p. 401. In his autobiography, White described himself as having moved from a reactionary political position to a liberal position, and claimed he had been wrong about the Populists. However, the thesis of this paper is that his basic value position did not change dramatically over the years.

<sup>12</sup> For a thorough description of Populist disaffection with the political system see Norman Pollack *The Populist Mind*, (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1967).

<sup>13</sup> Goodwyn, *Populist Moment*.

<sup>14</sup> David P. Thelen, *The New Citizenship, Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1972).

<sup>15</sup> White, "Twelve Years of Mr. Bryan," *Collier's*, Oct. 17, 1908, pp. 12-13.

ing Kansas and emphasized the need to attract investors. "Kansas must paint up and prepare for company," he exhorted, noting that investors had been in Emporia a week earlier but thought the town looked dingy.<sup>16</sup> In the *Gazette* during 1897 he campaigned daily to bring industry to Emporia and in April noted that the assurance of a creamery and canning factory were the first results of winter talk about home industry.<sup>17</sup> He believed if factories were established in Kansas, consumption would increase and subsequently drive the price of crops up. White approved of efforts by the Santa Fe and townspeople to establish different forms of enterprise, maintaining in 1896 that too many people in Kansas were farmers. Lyon County was primarily agricultural, with 47.14% of its population engaged in farming in 1895-96. Less than 20% was engaged in trade and transportation.<sup>18</sup>

Attracting investors was a major issue for White. He claimed the current streetcar line in Emporia wasn't as good as it might be because the Lewelling administration had opposed the sale of the line to an electric company, and the Easterners were afraid of the Populists.<sup>19</sup> He never ceased to lament the fact as he claimed it that Missouri interest rates were lower than those of Kansas, and cried, "How long must the businessman here work at a disadvantage?"<sup>20</sup> He also accused the Populists of having spent more money in the management of state charitable institutions, which he claimed clearly revealed the advantage of a business administration over Populist rule. He blamed the slow population growth rate on the Populists as well.<sup>21</sup> White claimed it was difficult to get a mortgage renewed because Easterners were scared, and that "Populists instead of giving cheap money have given dear money," benefitting the rich and making it "tough sledding" for the poor man.<sup>22</sup> The issues he addressed in the famous editorial were the same as those he had confronted in other writings: loss of population and loss of business enterprise:

Not only has she (Kansas) lost population, but she has lost money. Every moneyed man in the state who could get out without

great loss is gone. Every month in every community sees someone who has a little money pick up and leave the state. This has been going on for eight years. Money is being drained out all the time . . . .

No one brings any money into Kansas any more. What community knows over one or two men who have moved in with more than \$5,000 in the past three years? And what community cannot count half a score of men in that time who have left, taking all the money they could scrape together?<sup>23</sup>

White's commercial approach to community development was born, in part, of party prejudice. He belonged to a party which he regarded as the natural rulers of the community, and the Populists he viewed as trying to usurp power. White distorted the image of who Populists were, labeling them "riff-raff" instead of recognizing the main statistical difference between Populists and Republicans was that more Populists were farmers.<sup>24</sup> To avoid usurpation of power by the Populists, White identified them as belonging to the lower strata of society. Republicans, who controlled the Emporia business community, were successful men who had passed all the wise laws of the past 50 years; White neglected to mention that most unwise laws as well had been passed by Republicans—they had dominated the Legislature and governorship since the state's inception.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Gazette*, Nov. 26, 1896, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Gazette*, April 6, 1897, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> "12th Biennial State Agriculture Report," pp. 546-549.

<sup>19</sup> *Gazette*, July 6, 1895, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Gazette*, Nov. 2, 1895, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Gazette*, Aug. 10, 1897, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Gazette*, Nov. 28, 1896, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Gazette*, Sept. 25, 1896, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969), pp. 20-21.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89. The Populist leadership was less agrarian than the legislative members. In 1890, 65% were non-farmers; in 1896, 71% were non-farmers. Some scholars have speculated that as the leadership tended to become non-agrarian, the rank and file tended to leave the Party, while others have argued a broad base for Populism which included intellectuals and urban labor. The decline is then explained in terms of returning prosperity and by concerted efforts on the part of the corporate power structure to thwart the efforts of cooperatives and other organized means to alter societal institutions. See Clanton, *Kansas Populism* for discussion of non-agrarian leaders and their relationship to the rank and file in Kansas. Norman Pollack in *The Populist* (Footnote continued)

Rather than deal with platform issues, White pictured the Populists as failures unable to govern successfully. In an editorial titled, "The Masses and the Classes" he stated his position:

What the Kansas Populist desires is not advice from the successful man; but rather the folly of a failure. What the Kansas crank wishes is the advice of the man who has no standing, no nothing but theories, figures, and wind.

The theories, figures and wind fellows are leading the masses; the men who have succeeded and who know how they did it, are the classes. It is a fight between failure and success. Where are you lined up?<sup>26</sup>

White's bias against farmers and his party prejudices were intricately interwoven with his value system which elevated businessmen to an elite position. White urged farmers to adopt business values. After viewing North Dakota farms for an article for *Scribner's*, White said the successful farmer of this generation must be a businessman first, and "tiller of the soil" afterward. He must be a capitalist, "daring and resourceful," "a businessman and not a crank." White, believer in progress, strongly advocated mechanization, believing the successful farmer was the one who would get the most work out of a machine without damaging it.<sup>27</sup>

As part of his value system, White preached a philosophy of equal opportunity designed to maintain a stratified

*Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962) argues effectively for Populism as a class movement, with a broad base including intellectuals and urban labor. For comments on the return of prosperity and decline of Populism, see John Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1931), and Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*. For efforts on the part of the corporate power structure to thwart populist efforts, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>26</sup> *Gazette*, Aug. 28, 1896, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> White, "Business of a Wheat Farm" *Scribner's*, November 1897, pp. 531-48; *Gazette*, Oct. 2, 1896, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Gazette*, Jan. 12, 1906, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> David Potter, *People of Plenty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 91-92.

<sup>30</sup> Norman Pollack, "Realistic Radicalism," in ed. Allen T. Davis and Harold O. Woodman, eds., *Conflict or Consensus in Modern American History* (Washington, D.C.: Heath and Co., 1968), p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Gazette*, Sept. 6, 1902, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Gazette*, Jan. 14, 1908, p. 2.

society with business control. While the Populists denounced individualistic success myths of Social Darwinism and laissez-faire which had been used by the popular press to explain their lack of success, White led the press in support of the survival of the fittest. While during the Progressive years he moved away from a strict laissez-faire policy, he continued to believe that if government would end corruption and business greed, economics would achieve a balance. White, while he spoke of equality, really argued instead to enforce equality of opportunity. Laws, White said, "will compel only such equality as may be had among men by making them obey fair laws."<sup>28</sup> White's idea of equality of opportunity was peculiarly American, as David Potter has shown in his study of America's abundance. White equated liberty and equality, by proclaiming that if men had individual liberties and the opportunity to move up a social scale, they were equal. In contrast, Potter described the European view of equality as envisioning men as roughly equal in terms of wealth and power.<sup>29</sup>

This idea of equal opportunity set White apart from both the Populists and the Socialists. While Populist ex-governor Lewelling told a Kansas City audience "It is the duty of government to protect the weak, because the strong are able to protect themselves,"<sup>30</sup> White said in 1902 that "it is unfair to expect the strong man to carry the weak man further than in carrying him, the strong man is strengthened physically and morally and spiritually."<sup>31</sup> In 1908 he repeated, there "is still an immutable law of the survival of the fittest."<sup>32</sup>

White's attitude toward labor in 1900 further revealed his concept of a stratified society, in which equality of opportunity was the rule, rather than equality. While the Populists viewed all labor—farmers and the producers of industrial labor—as equal, White believed that those whom he defined as contributing the most to society should receive more from it. The Populists argued that "many of the evils from which the farming community suffers oppress universal labor, and that therefore producers should unite in a demand for the reform



of unjust systems and the repeal of laws that bear unequally upon the people."<sup>33</sup> White, unlike the Populists and Socialists, viewed various levels of labor at the bottom strata of society:

The laborer who works in a bank, handling the accumulated savings of a community, is doing a higher grade of work than the man who works in the ditch, or the man who works in a store; the judge who sits on the bench and settles the disputes of the people is doing a higher grade work than the man who makes the bench, or the man who cleans it up or the man who sits in the clerk's office adding up the witness fees and the judge is entitled to more money for his day's work than the carpenter, the janitor or the clerk. The man who gets business for a railroad system and keeps the wheels going who knows the current of modern commerce as a pilot knows a river is doing a higher grade of service than the man who sits in the lookout box of the caboose of a freight train, and the head of the system should have more money for his day's work than the freight brakeman. . . . There is no question but that there are differences between the worth of men to society, and always must be differences, and those differences should be recognized.<sup>34</sup>

White's emphasis on a stratified society, his goals for town development and his

concern for maintaining business control are apparent in his anti-Populist rhetoric. Unfortunately, the study of audience effect is more difficult than that of publisher intent. This article suggests little in terms of audience reaction to White's social and political agenda. But we do know that from 1895 until well into this century, the *Gazette* was the major source of local information for Emporia and the community. Moreover, White was intricately intertwined with a network of Kansas publishers who shared not only his Republican politics, but also his business values. It is therefore reasonable to speculate that the dominant, established press in Kansas which, until the development of radio, was the main source of information, did play a major role in disseminating themes of town growth, stable business politics and preservation of a business power structure.

Even though we are unable to measure audience reaction in regard to priority of issues, and whether the public restructured its priorities (or did not alter them) in response to publisher's agendas, the agenda-setting framework allows us to ask new questions about newspaper content and the publisher's role in society.

<sup>33</sup> Hicks, *Populist Revolt*, p. 430.

<sup>34</sup> *Gazette*, Nov. 21, 1906, p. 2.

## MANUFACTURERS' VIEWS OF ADVERTISING

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turned to advertising as a response to the proliferation of homogeneous goods, dealer substitution, wholesaler domination and unstable prices. They hopefully established advertising campaigns to build brand demand, eliminate substitution, force wholesaler distribution and maintain profitable prices. Nevertheless, manufacturers also questioned advertising's ability to accomplish such goals. Advertising worked, but not as well as was expected; it would continue to serve manufacturers, but only as part of a general marketing strategy that included special packaging, price policies and dealer "education."

In a general sense, the development of national consumer advertising was charac-

teristic of the entrepreneurial spirit in American culture. Advertising symbolized the efficacy of mind over matter, of shrewd insight over the economic forces of the market. Advertisers faithfully executed their campaigns in the hope that advertising would overcome the natural vicissitudes of demand and price in the economy. They envisioned a new market rationalized by the sublime force of publicity. There would be no more price competition, and except for the creative battles over product images, manufacturers would live in harmony. Ironically, the dream turned sour as manufacturers increasingly turned to advertising as a cure for the ills of a market economy.