

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Setting Agendas in Cultural Markets

Organizations, Creators, Experiences

Philemon Bantimaroudis



Setting Agendas in Cultural Markets

This book draws on agenda-setting theory to examine how cultural organizations relate to media in order to increase their visibility, valence and eventually build their public image. Most organizations have a keen interest in their symbolic presence because their media visibility influences public knowledge, perceptions and even behaviors. Diminished public funding, in combination with the global proliferation of cultural entities, creates a competitive environment, leading to a transformation of cultural industries. In this book, I scrutinize several questions: How do cultural organizations acquire symbolic significance? How do they become prominent in media content? Which mechanisms and processes should be examined by cultural managers as they set out to achieve salience? Is there a relationship between media and public salience? In other words, if an organization becomes symbolically prominent, in what ways is the public influenced, both in terms of perceptions as well as behaviors?

Philemon Bantimaroudis is a Professor in the Department of Cultural Technology and Communication at the University of the Aegean, Greece. He holds a PhD from the University of Texas at Austin, United States (1999). He was a Visiting Professor at Northern Michigan University, United States (1999–2000), the University of Cyprus (2012–2013) and an Academic Visitor at Cambridge Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom (2008). His research interests include media and culture and political and international communication.

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To Katy, Christos, Pavlos and Anna-Julie

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Foreword

Setting Agendas in Cultural Markets

Contemporary expansion of the communication landscape creates significant opportunities and obstacles for cultural organizations and products. To reach their existing niche audiences or to expand those audiences requires a nuanced understanding of the plethora of communication channels now used by the public. Under the umbrella of agenda-setting theory, Philemon Bantimaroudis, a leading scholar in the application of the theory to cultural enterprises, presents a rich exploration of this new environment regarding the salience of various cultural activities and products.

Beyond the obvious practical applications for the diffusion of culture in a world of overwhelming information and messages, this book is a major contribution to the growing scope of agenda-setting theory, a trend that has been described as the centrifugal expansion of agenda setting far beyond its origins in Chapel Hill half a century ago regarding the role of the news media in directing public attention to the important issues of the day. The media's influence on the public's agenda of issues is still the dominant focus of agenda-setting research, but increasingly the core idea of the theory, the transfer of salience from one agenda to another, has been applied to a variety of other domains.

Here the domain is the cultural industries, a greatly understudied area in contemporary communication research. It is an area with a rich variety of organizations, experiences and goods to examine. These include museums, art galleries, movie studios and other media production companies, book publishers and theme parks. The wide array of cultural products and experiences produced by these organizations merits scholarly attention, as do the vast array of creators of these products.

In line with agenda setting's metaphorical notion of agendas, cultural performances, experiences and goods can be arrayed vertically and ranked. What the research on cultural markets adds is a body of new information that moves beyond the traditional measures of cognitive perceptions to actual behavior, such as attendance at events and purchases of goods. This is an important elaboration of the consequences of agenda setting effects among the public by various communication media, and, arguably, a more solid measure of salience in which to

ground agenda-setting effects. Another potential measure of salience is the extent of word of mouth, which is especially important for the success of movies and many other cultural activities and products. Use of this measure has the potential to clarify, at least in part, the role in agenda setting of interpersonal communication, an area marked to date by considerably diverse results.

In cultural settings, agenda setting also is marked by a key distinction from the traditional research on political communication. Unlike the largely homogeneous agendas of public issues across many media and among the public at large, cultural agenda setting is characterized by a plethora of distinct and independent agendas, both at the first level of agenda setting—which organizations, activities and goods to focus attention on—and at the second level—which attributes of these organizations, activities and goods to take into consideration. Concomitant with this broad array of agendas are the extensive variety of niche audiences and their motivations found in the cultural marketplace.

As a consequence, it seems likely that the exploration and subsequent mapping of the cultural domain will considerably broaden our theoretical perspective on the agenda-setting process.

Simultaneously, research in this domain will advance our understanding of the new communication channels that compete for public attention. Given the tremendous variations in media and public cultural agendas, we can better understand the variations across these channels of communication and their agenda setting effects on the public. Most likely in the cultural arena, there is not a single, relatively uniform agenda-setting process, but rather a number of distinct processes. There already is considerable evidence that the expertise of niche sources expressed in press releases about public issues and the reputations of organizations can influence the agendas of mainstream media (McCombs, 2014), including the cultural agenda (Weidman, 2016). And recent research from another arena, technology, documents the considerable influence of niche blogs on the mainstream media (Weiss-Blatt, 2016).

Given the tremendous variation that exists across the media agendas advanced by the numerous players in the cultural marketplace and the variations in the niche cultural agendas among the public, Bantimaroudis raises a series of key theoretical questions prefaced by the rich discussion in *Setting Agendas in Cultural Markets*:

How is salience achieved in the cultural domain?

Are the mechanisms that lead to salience in the field of culture similar to agenda setting's traditional domain of public affairs?

Are there culture-specific processes that result in successful agenda setting in cultural settings?

Which attributes or combinations of attributes best achieve salience among the public?

Attention to new measures of salience across a wide variety of agendas involving the expanding media landscape will provide answers to these questions and broaden our perspective on agenda setting effects. Cultural agenda setting opens a new substantive arena for research and expands the theoretical boundaries of agenda setting.

Maxwell McCombs
University of Texas at Austin
July 2016

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Preface

In our modern world, most of our daily experiences are mediated in nature. We have learned to attribute significance to certain experiences because the media tell us they are important and therefore they deserve our attention. The main themes of this book deal with leisure experiences, the choices people make during their free time and how they choose to spend this time. However, there is a second dimension that deserves our consideration. The value we attribute to these leisure experiences is derived from mediated hierarchies of significance. Different types of media rank organizations, cultural goods and creators according to their perceived significance. They present, in a hierarchical order, the most “important” museums, universities, galleries, restaurants, movies, authors, books, libraries, theme parks and so on. In this book, I argue that, in telling us which cultural providers are the most significant, the media influence public perceptions of leisure experiences. However, the most noteworthy linkage is between perceptions and leisure choices and behaviors. In other words, do the media tell us how to spend our free time? As the media evaluate various leisure choices and assign symbolic values to them, they tell us that reading a particular book might be more “important” than watching a television program; or they might tell us that a certain book is more “valuable” than other books we might have in our library. As the relationship between media and public perceptions has been established, does this mean that we will reach a decision about spending some of our free time reading the book? This function of media influences people’s perceptions about the value of leisure experiences and, to some extent, our leisure selections.

Agenda-setting research examines and analyzes mediated experiences. The intellectual fathers of this paradigm recognized that most of what we learn about the modern world is derived through various types of media. From the age of newspapers to the modern realm of digital media, our perceptions of the world are profoundly shaped by journalists, politicians, advertisers and public relations practitioners, as well as a host of groups and ordinary individuals utilizing multiple media platforms and digital tools.

In the 1990s, as a doctoral student in Austin, Texas, I became acquainted with the foundational principles of agenda-setting theory. I recognized then that the agenda-setting paradigm retains a pronounced relationship with the political domain. Politicians are by definition agenda setters. Over the years, media and politicians have formed an undeniable, symbiotic relationship with one another. Therefore it is not surprising that a significant volume of the agenda-setting research that has been generated over a period of several decades is focused on the civic domain. My own initial steps on agenda-setting research were made in this very same arena.

After almost a decade of studies in the United States, returning to my birthplace—Greece—has had a reframing effect on my own agenda-setting explorations. My personal interest in political communication receded as soon as I came in contact with the Greek political scene. On the other hand, Greece remains a significant cultural destination. With a history stretching over thousands of years, every corner of the country has its own tradition, its own story. And many of those wonderful stories have not been told, or at least have not been told well. I started realizing that the cultural domain provides numerous opportunities for investments, new ideas and innovation in conjunction with old stories and old treasures from the past. Greece possesses excellent cultural assets derived from its long history. In this understudied domain, the establishment of new cultural agendas can be related to advancing favorable perceptions about different available leisure experiences as well as potential selections that might bring more visitors, consumers and leisure-seekers.

This small book examines different possibilities for the formation of cultural agendas. Drawing from a long tradition of agenda setting research in the civic domain, I attempt to explore new routes of investigations in cultural settings and enterprises. For example, the role of museums as agenda setters is explored. To what extent are such cultural providers capable of establishing dominant agendas to advance their symbolic presence? I focus on museums, galleries and art-house films, by definition the weaker players in the cultural domain, because it is common knowledge that popular entertainment industries, such as television, blockbuster movies and popular music spend billions of dollars on promotion. However, even popular entertainment industries deserve our attention in terms of their agenda-setting capacities. Their sheer economic power does not always guarantee a symbolic dominance in media content. As I surveyed various examples of cultural entities, I strove to maintain a balance between different types of cultural providers. Although I use many examples drawn from Greek cultural markets because Greece is a geographic area with a rich cultural heritage, my intent is not to narrow my focus on just one country, but to use this example as a starting point for the exploration of international cultural agendas. In fact, I draw evidence from several different national settings as I survey the diverse characteristics of global cultural markets.

As various organizations and cultural creators attempt to establish their symbolic presence in highly competitive global markets, the extent to which cultural agendas can influence public perceptions of authors, organizations and experiences is open to debate. Furthermore, at a higher level, is it possible that our leisure selections—visitation, purchases, attendance, or participation—can be influenced by the symbolic significance of those entities? Although there is plenty of available information in regards to what drives people's leisure choices, I argue that cultural agenda setting should be considered as an additional explanatory paradigm of leisure activity. In this context, I hope that the evidence I present will generate interesting discussions that might lead to noteworthy future explorations.

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Introduction

Time is a precious commodity. In our finite human existence, we quickly become aware of the scarcity of time. The average person, in the so-called developed world, lives approximately 75 years. Of this brief existence, around 25 years, or one third of the entire human life, is spent sleeping. Some 11 years are consumed by work or work-related activities, a figure magnified significantly by the time spent commuting to and from work. Further substantial portions of time are spent taking care of our family and ourselves. However, the remaining 25 years of human existence is described as leisure, when people invest their time in experiences from which they acquire different forms of gratification. Furthermore, as they seek such experiences, they become motivated to satisfy various perceived needs.

This small book is about the latter third of our time, focusing primarily on cultural organizations or industries, as they are popularly called, that target our leisure time as a strategic corporate choice. Their main activity is centered on providing people with a wide variety of cultural products in the form of media content or leisure experiences, addressing different identities and lifestyles, perceived needs and individual gratifications. Cultural industries try to influence our knowledge, understanding and perceptions as well as our choices in relation to our leisure time. As they design and promote a multitude of different cultural products and services, they set cultural agendas, influencing our leisure perceptions and selections. To set cultural agendas, cultural producers systematically assess individual knowledge, attitudes, preferences, needs and motivations toward different leisure experiences. They conduct research on various segments of the public, as consumers are often clustered together, according to distinct, observable characteristics. Although there are uniform attributes that guide mainstream leisure selections, recognizing segmented preferences and behaviors is also important; this recognition provides significant insights into how cultural consumers invest their leisure time, becoming connected in some way with various providers of leisure experiences. Cultural creators and consumers appear to attain an almost existential connection: Individuals consciously devote a significant portion of their life to cultural creations that acquire a special significance for them.

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How much time do people spend on different cultural experiences? In terms of mainstream, popular media, the available descriptive evidence is quite overwhelming and published reports diverge on their findings, as they often focus on different aspects of the time people spend on different types of media activities. Prior to the internet/digital era, the average person watched more than six hours—and in certain segments, more than seven hours—of broadcast television every day; this figure has been significantly decreasing, to four hours daily. ZenithOptimedia (2015) reports an average daily overall media interaction of slightly more than eight hours, with half of it claimed by broadcast television. Internet in all its forms—mobile phones, tablets and personal computers—comes second, but with a strong tendency to significantly increase in the years to come. Indeed, internet use is expected to drive upward overall media use. Modern media users increasingly find that “half of our waking life is apparently not enough with global average consumption set to rise to 506 minutes.”¹ In terms of sources and devices, emarketer (2015) reports that US adults consume 5.5 hours of video daily derived from broadcast, cable and internet, delivered to TV sets, mobile phones, personal computers and tablets.² These different reports converge in reporting an overall increase in average internet usage to more than 20 hours per week, while tablet usage around the world has been steadily increasing since 2010. Parallel to this, there is an overall increase in mobile and online entertainment, as people tend to watch television online, and the number of online gamers has doubled since 2005. Social media usage has tripled since 2007, with almost 70% of all internet users reporting that they have a social media profile. Social media use has shown the biggest expansion among 35–44-year-olds.³ The average person spends approximately 1.7 hours on social media every day.⁴ The use of mobile phones claims a significant portion of our time both in terms of digital content consumption as well as interpersonal communication, for example, instant messaging.

While time spent on digital media continues to increase, time spent on traditional broadcast and print media (printed newspapers and magazines) continues to diminish. Currently, conventional television claims approximately four hours of daily viewership, while digital media claim approximately 3.5 to 4 hours. If we take into account that digital media gained over 2 hours of daily usage over the past five years, a reversal of time allocation by modern media consumers seems imminent, while our overall media interaction is expected to exceed nine hours per day.

Observing children's media use is indicative of developing trends. After all, leisure habits are formed early on and follow individuals into adulthood. Reports show that children aged 8 to 18 spend roughly 44.5 hours every week in front of a screen, while parents become concerned that “screen time is robbing them of real world experiences.”⁵ Other reports raise this time allocation to up to nine hours every day,

as children engage in multiple media platform usage, including social media, music, games and online videos.⁶

If popular media claim an average of 8 to 9 hours every day, what do other less popular and highly segmented cultural activities, such as reading books or visiting museums, libraries and galleries claim from our time? Reading books, for example, is a segmented choice with a great deal of time differentiations across different groups. For example, students and older people read more than other age-related segments. But reading is segmented across different geographies, nationalities and cultural backgrounds. The highest interest in reading is displayed by people in China, Thailand and India, with an average of roughly 9 hours per week, while the lowest interest is reported in Taiwan, Japan and Korea, with less than 5 hours every week. Europeans read more than Americans—6.5 versus 5.5 hours on average, respectively. Eastern Europeans read more than western Europeans, while the same trend applies for people of the north in contrast to people of the European south.⁷

Museums claim only a small fraction of our overall leisure time, but this is less easily quantifiable than time spent on popular media. Similarly to books, there are differences in museum visitation patterns according to national origin, socioeconomic status and cultural background. For example, in the context of the European Union, people from countries of the north, such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, are more frequent museum visitors, whereas southern Europeans, from countries such as Greece, Cyprus and Portugal, are less frequent visitors.⁸ Research shows that income level and education are significantly related to museum-related activities. Affluent and highly-educated people are more likely to seek museum- and gallery-related experiences, while people of lower socioeconomic status spend their time with popular entertainment media.

Our modern lives are connected with different types of cultural organizations and the products and services they disseminate for public consumption. If 8 or 9 hours per day is devoted to media-related leisure activities, this adds up to approximately 25 years of our human existence. To the extent that organizations and institutions of culture tell us what to think about their productions, their organizational agendas establish their image and brand value and in the process, they claim a significant portion of our existence. Furthermore, to the extent that organizations promote different cultural products in the form of leisure experiences available for public consumption, those agendas tell us which particular experiences are more valuable than others and more importantly, how to spend or invest our precious and scarce time on them and their creations, versus other available leisure choices. Although leisure time is not by definition comprised of mediated experiences, this is increasingly the experience of consumers today. Assessing those cultural agendas that are related to a significant portion of our time constitutes one of the main

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themes of this book. And in the modern age, this portion is, without any type of hyperbole, the third third of our time.

Setting such cultural or leisure agendas can often be described as a zero-sum game. In other words, making a choice in terms of time invested on a leisure experience often excludes other cultural selections. Time is a finite asset, and in most cases, people can hardly be described as leisure multitaskers. As people make choices on how to spend their time, every choice displays traits of exclusivity. Deciding to read a book at home precludes other leisure possibilities, such as a visit in the museum, an athletic event, or attending a lecture. Although there are certain activities that can be combined to some extent, in most cases, cultural experiences are very exclusive. I can only watch one performance at a time, read one text, visit one exhibition. Although my smartphone allows me to look for information online or answer my email while attending an event, there are limitations to cultural multitasking. Sometimes, people listen to music in the background while doing something else simultaneously. However, usually we focus on one thing at a time. Therefore, by making a leisure choice, one cultural provider has set the agenda of my free time, precluding other possibilities.

This zero-sum game aspect of cultural agendas explains to some extent the intense competition among different cultural and leisure service providers as they attempt to influence consumer choices. Cultural providers recognize the complexity of cultural domains as they consider multitudes of individual traits and group attributes along with societal, economic, political, cultural and personality characteristics that influence leisure decisions. They have to take all of these into account as they establish their presence in the mediated environment of modern consumers.

Leisure Time, Creative Industries and Urban Transformations

Starting in the 1960s, the major urban centers of the planet underwent significant transformations, following new city planning initiatives and ambitious architectural designs. One of the main objectives set by policymakers was related to citizens' flexible management of their limited leisure time. This transformation of city centers followed a global investment trend leading to a tremendous growth of cultural and leisure infrastructures. As new investments were made in leisure services, city centers became attractive and competitive, aiming to persuade different urban segments to spend their leisure time in formerly neglected parts of metropolitan areas. According to Rogerson (2012), "localities which formerly were centers of production have been re-constructed and re-invented (or sought to be reinvented) as centres of consumption" (p. 189). Leisure time was recognized as a valuable asset, on which multiple