

# The concept of Audience Development vs. Arts Marketing. Critical analysis

Das Konzept der Publikumsentwicklung vs. Kulturmarketing.  
Eine kritische Analyse

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## *Abstract*

This essay compares the concept of Audience Development (AD) to arts marketing in order to tease out both similarities and differences. The author argues that it is not necessary to define arts marketing and Audience Development as having different aims and pursuits. The critical analysis relies primarily on literature review and subsequently explores the common understanding of Audience Development as well as assesses the degree of its originality with regard to existing theories and practices in the domain of arts marketing. To that end, the author introduces the concept of Audience Development and situates it within a theoretical framework. Importantly, the paper also examines the modes and means employed by cultural managers to adapt to the market-related challenges facing the cultural sector in Europe since the 1980s. The key outcome of the study is an outline of (and insight into) the cross-national beliefs in relation to the relevance of different areas of AD practices in the European context. The essay concludes by restating the central aim, that Audience Development and arts marketing have a great deal in common.

Der Beitrag vergleicht die Konzepte Audience Development (AD) und Kulturmarketing im Hinblick auf Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede, wobei es nicht notwendig erscheint, unterschiedliche Ziele und Bestrebungen zu definieren. Die kritische Analyse stützt sich in erster Linie auf eine Literaturrecherche und untersucht das Verständnis von Audience Development und bewertet den Grad seiner Originalität im Hinblick auf in Bezug auf bestehende Theorien und Praktiken im Bereich des Kunstmarketings. Unter führt der Autor das Konzept des Audience Development ein und ordnet es in einen es in einen theoretischen Rahmen ein. Wichtig ist, dass das Papier auch die Mittel und Wege, die von Kulturmanagern eingesetzt werden, um sich den marktbezogenen Herausforderungen, mit denen der Kultursektor in Europa seit den 1980er Jahren konfrontiert ist. Das wichtigste Ergebnis der Studie ist ein Überblick über (und Einblick in) die länderübergreifenden Überzeugungen in Bezug auf die Relevanz verschiedener Bereiche der AD-Praktiken im europäischen Kontext. Der Aufsatz schließt mit der zentralen Aussage, dass Audience Development und Kunstmarketing sehr viel gemeinsam haben.

## *Keywords*

cultural organizations, arts management, audience development, marketing

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## Introduction

In recent decades, cultural managers and researchers in Europe have increasingly noted the significance of the so-called participative turn (BONET/NEGRIER 2018; WALMSLEY 2019; HADLEY 2021) in cultural policy. The tangible rise in what might be construed as an audience-oriented focus is largely influenced by the contemporary markets driven by neoliberal policies, as well as technological and social circumstances. The main challenges for cultural organizations are related to changes in cultural participation practices of mass audiences (with a simultaneous decline in levels of interest in the offers of public cultural institutions), increase in competitiveness and commercialization of cultural life, globalization, development of the internet and festivalization. The above-mentioned issues constitute an important context for European debates on cultural policy. They focus primarily on the desired directions in development of what is commonly—and not always precisely considered—the cultural sector. By way of response, cultural organizations seeking to fulfil their missions have to search for new methods of operating where management-related skills become more and more relevant.

For many, the answer to the above listed challenges faced by cultural organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be found in the concept of Audience Development (AD); a strategic and multi-layered approach for building relationships with audiences with the express purpose of increasing audience numbers and expanding audience diversity. The idea originated in the UK (though its history dates to the early 1980s, the concept itself was formulated at the end of the 1990s) where enhancing competencies among cultural managers in the area of Audience Development involves both systemic thinking about the local cultural sector and envisioning long-term cultural policies (HADLEY 2021). Although numerous other factors (for example EU cultural policies) expanded the scope of Audience Development practices, the belief that AD is nothing more than masked arts marketing has become widespread among cultural professionals across Europe. This is one of the most prominent critical arguments formulated against the concept of Audience Development, it entails the conviction that it is based on evil (mercantile) premises.

In the end, if AD is an entirely new concept, then how is it different from what we know about arts marketing? The aim of this essay is to suggest that Audience Development and arts marketing have much in

common and have considerable overlap despite many claims by cultural managers and other cultural actors to the contrary. This essay shows this connection beginning with a literature review that contextualizes the history of arts marketing and delineates its relationship to Audience Development. Data from the international research project, CONNECT, further demonstrates that the borders between these concepts are unclear. I compare the aims and theoretical frameworks of arts marketing and Audience Development in order to tease out both similarities and differences. I argue that it is not necessary to define arts marketing and Audience Development as having different aims and pursuits. The essay concludes by restating the central aim, that Audience Development and arts marketing have a great deal in common. Cultural managers, and the related fields of cultural management and cultural policy would gain by accepting these similarities.

### **Audience Development in its early stages**

Especially in its early stages, the concept of Audience Development was shaped by a marketing mindset (FIRYCH 2023). One of the first publications to spark a debate on AD featured Keith Diggle, an influential arts marketing theorist, who observed:

The aim of Audience Development Arts Marketing practitioners is to bring an appropriate number of people, drawn from the widest possible range of social background, economic condition and age, into an appropriate form of contact with the artist and, in so doing, to arrive at the best financial outcome that is compatible with the achievement of that aim. (DIGGLE 1984)

The most notable element in the above definition is the overtly mercantile nature of early audience-centred activities. Analyzing Diggle's assertions, one readily sees that building relationships between cultural organizations and their audiences is supposed to lead, primarily, to market success (understood as maximizing financial profit by reaching as many potential consumers as possible). Diggle identifies the concept in question with marketing activities, invoking, for example, consumer behaviour and target group segmentation. It is important to analyse Diggle's theory in the broader political contexts of the 1980s and see how managerial spirit was promoted by the State. This sort of mercantile mindset undeniably tallied with former UK prime minister, Margaret Thatcher's cultural policies, which are extensively described by Robert Protherough and John Pick in *Managing Britannia: Culture*

*and Management in Modern Britain* (PROTHEROUGH/PICK 2003). In fact, many constitutive elements of that concept remain consistent with current trends in marketing, and undoubtedly have provided a frame of reference for cultural managers who have sought solutions, over the last twenty years, to many ongoing audience-related challenges such as decrease of mass audiences' interest in what cultural institutions have to offer.

The fact that AD practices are perceived to serve chiefly marketing purposes has been confirmed empirically as part of the international project *CONNECT / Connecting Audiences: European Alliances for Education and Training in Audience Development*; a 3-year project supporting innovative cooperation between universities and the labor market in the cultural domain across Europe. The international team consisted of 54 researchers, academic teachers and trainers who represented academic and cultural institutions from 5 EU countries: Universidad de la Iglesia de Deusto (Spain), Goldsmiths, University of London (UK), Fondazione Fitzcarraldo (Italy), The Audience Agency (UK), Centre for Kunst & Interkultur (Denmark), Asimétrica (Spain), Melting Pro (Italy), ENCATC Network (Belgium), Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Poland) and the Capital City of Warsaw (Poland). In 2017, the study involved 628 cultural practitioners from Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland and Denmark (and partly in neighbouring Scandinavian countries).

Reaching such a geographically diverse group was possible thanks to the use of Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) method. Given the mode of distribution of the questionnaire (participation in the online survey was voluntary), the research sample was unrepresentative for the entire sector. The survey aimed to define the profile of cultural professionals who are interested, in or already apply the concept of Audience Development in their daily work, as well as to analyze their attitudes and associated opinions (CONNECT 2017). An important objective of the study was to outline (and understand) cross-national notions relating to different areas of AD practices. The graphs below sum up responses linking AD with marketing. The first is based on data collected from the entire study sample whereas the second segregates responses according to the country in which the respondents work.

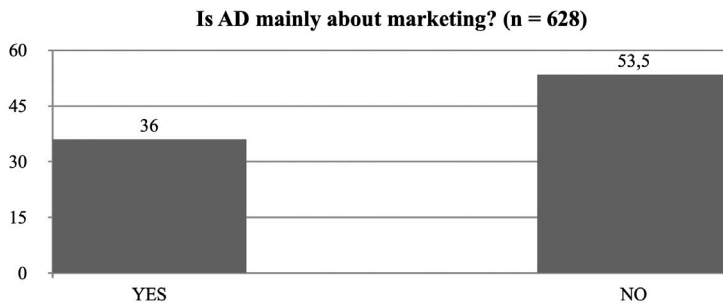


Fig. 1: Views of cultural professionals in Europe in relation to AD practices (source: CONNECT)

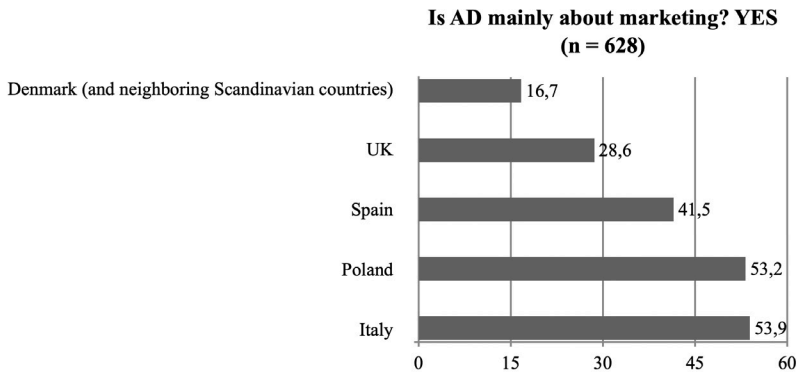


Fig. 2: Views of cultural professionals in Europe in relation to AD practices. Percentage of affirmative opinions by country (source: CONNECT)

While in general only 36% of the respondents associate the concept of Audience Development closely with marketing, detailed data show a substantial divergence in this regard depending on countries of origin. In the UK and Scandinavia, places where the debate on the concept is well-established and AD practices are deeply entrenched, understanding seems to be broad. The situation is different in the case of Italy and Poland, where more than half of the respondents (53.9%–Italy and 53.2%–Poland, respectively) considered marketing to be the main focus of AD activities.

### Arts and culture through a market-oriented lens

The results of the survey raise the question of whether and how Audience Development differs from marketing, which has its own long-standing tradition including a specialized field of arts marketing. It is important to notice that marketing tends to be viewed by representatives of the public, cultural sector in Europe rather pejoratively. Often misunderstood or seen as unfathomable, it is associated with sales that aim to maximize financial profit of an organization over other concerns. Historically, the suspicious, or in some cases even highly distrustful attitudes towards treating cultural activities as a part of the market were visible especially in post-communist Central and Eastern European countries, where the neoliberal paradigm was introduced virtually overnight as part of the political transformation (WOJCIECHOWSKI 2004; SÓJKA et al. 2009; INKEI 2009; DRAGICEVIC-SESIĆ/STOJKOVIC 2010). For example, the Polish scholar Urszula Kaczmarek describes the phenomenon of embedding culture in market realities as

[...] uncritical acquiescence to the demagogy of the liberal vision of the economy and its ideas for arrangement of the entire social and state system—our fascination with the West consists in submitting to the magic of money, which causes other values to be obscured—art becomes only an object of trade. (KACZMAREK 1999: 273)

Negative connotations are largely engendered by the popular culture industry. This is facilitated by a highly manifested social phenomena which perpetuates stereotypical notions about marketing as a killer of excellence in the cultural sphere.

In this context, the arts constitute merchandise sold on the same market terms as clothes in a boutique, in essence subordinating all activities to market models of consumerism. However, equating modern marketing with sales is a frequently repeated mistake. As Ewa Szemborska points out, such an understanding of marketing prevailed in the US in the 1960s. At that time its definition was narrowed down to “a set of factors involved in the distribution of goods and services” (SZEMBORSKA 1995: 29). Separating marketing from sales allows us to see the first one as a tool that might serve different purposes (where selling is just one of them).

It is important to emphasize that marketing and management experts put a spotlight on target groups (here understood as a set of buyers an organization decides to serve) long before the concept of Audience Development was even mentioned for the first time. Philip Kotler, considered by many to be one of the most influential theorists in the field

of management (this is evidenced by the number of his textbooks sold around the world), drew attention to the importance of fighting for the consumer as early as the latter half of the 1960s (KOTLER 1967). He identified marketing as a means of satisfying people's needs and desires (KOTLER 1967). Many other authors shared that view (MOKWA DAWSON/PRIEVE 1980; DIGGLE 1984). But there is a conceptual difference between sales and marketing, which became established as the debate unfolded in the 1980s and 1990s. While the former focuses on the needs of the seller, the latter prioritizes the needs of the buyer. Marketing, therefore, sets out with the assumption that the needs of a potential buyer, to a large extent, drive purchasing decisions.

For a better understanding of the marketing mindset and its conceptual underpinnings, it may be worth recalling the typology of 5 marketing strategies proposed by Kotler (1967) who is also often acknowledged as the father of modern marketing. Kotler posited that the interests of organizations, customers, and the public are oftentimes contradictory. He identified the following competing philosophies of marketing management: 1) The Production Concept, 2) The Product Concept, 3) The Selling Concept, 4) The Marketing Concept and 5) The Societal Concept (KOTLER 1967). The concept that appears to receive the most attention today is marketing. It is fundamentally different from the others chiefly because it presupposes that the most effective way to achieve an organization's goals is to respond to the needs and requirements of the market. In contrast, the Production Concept, the Product, and the Selling concepts focus primarily on the organization and product as opposed to the customer. Kotler emphasizes the importance of customer satisfaction. An accurate diagnosis of customer needs allows an organization to maximize profit (fulfilled needs lead to customer satisfaction). Markets are diverse. For this reason, organizations cannot meet every single need of all customers. However, satisfactory market transactions strengthen overall loyalty, boost word-of-mouth marketing (a satisfied customer speaks positively about the company), and lower costs for a company (routinized transactions). Thus, as Kotler observes, customer satisfaction can be treated as the best indicator of the future profits of a given organization (KOTLER 1967). The next section looks at how traditional marketing applies to the cultural sector, especially as concerns the issue of Audience Development.

### Traditional marketing and its application in the cultural sector

Theorists and practitioners ask questions about the applicability of marketing in the cultural domain (HILL O'SULLIVAN/ O'SULLIVAN 2000; KOTLER/SCHEFF 1997). Relevant literature offers a number of ideas supporting strategic management of cultural organizations and often highlights work on, and around the mission of a given organization, the importance of market research, and target group segmentation (HILL O'SULLIVAN/ O'SULLIVAN 2000; KOTLER/SCHEFF 1997). As previously noted, contemporary marketing does not focus solely on sales of ready-made goods and services. Creating a marketing strategy starts from recognizing one's own market position. In her article on marketing strategies for arts organizations Szemborska makes use of three key questions:

1. Who is my customer?
  2. What does he or she need?
  3. What can I do to meet the market needs better than my competitors?
- (SZEMBORSKA 1995: 30)

Cuenca-Amigo and Makua (2017) notice that some of the tools mentioned here, commonly used to promote culture, are no different from those used in non-arts-related for profit sectors. The distinguishing aspect of cultural marketing, however, is that it might emphasize different elements than is the case with for profit only. Dragičević-Šešić and Stojković point out that the word "marketing" in English literally means "to put on the market" (DRAGICEVIC-SEŠIC/STOJKOVIC 2010: 140). In the case of a for profit business enterprise, it means that all decisions are informed by the economic calculation of supply and demand. Organizations whose activities are based on Kotler's Marketing Concept are characterized by an active attitude towards the market, which they both adapt to and stimulate. This may readily prompt a discussion about the differences between business and cultural marketing. While in a business model the marketing process starts with the market, its equivalent in cultural marketing is usually the offer (product). As Colomer states,

performing arts marketing is unique because of the process of genesis of the artistic products, despite the fact that the elements that compose it are the same as in the traditional marketing models. (COLOMER 2006: 43)

In this sense, it should be assumed that cultural organizations (or artists) usually first develop an offer and only then do they explore the market



in search of those whom it may potentially interest. Dragičević-Šešić discusses cultural marketing of culture in a slightly different tone:

The main task of a manager dealing with cultural marketing is in fact to work on the transmission and popularization of cultural values, artistic outcomes, and to build relationships between works of art and their recipients. (DRAGICEVIC-SE-SIC/STOJKOVIC 2010: 141)

Emphasized here is the importance of cultural policy, focused on the democratization of culture (DRAGICEVIC-SE-SIC/STOJKOVIC 2010). The discrepancy between market- and product-oriented perspectives derives from a fundamental dilemma encountered in debates concerning arts marketing and Audience Development alike. On the one hand, the aforementioned perspectives underscore the importance of the audience's needs, but on the other, the process of creating an artistic offer is perceived as unique. Hence the essential question: what is more important—the needs and preferences of the audience or the competencies and vision of the creators (competent organizers and artists). A number of authors unanimously recognize that arts marketing should strive to reconcile both perspectives (KOTLER/SCHEFF 1997; KOLB 2000; CUENCA-AMIGO/MAKUA 2017). In the work *Creative Arts Marketing*, the search for a certain consensus in this regard was called balancing between excellence and accessibility (HILL O'SULLIVAN/ O'SULLIVAN 2000).

### **Transcending the boundary of marketing in thinking about culture**

Distinguishing between the concepts of Audience Development and arts marketing appears to be a challenging task. Are they right?—that is, the individuals who see both areas of activity as one and the same? To some extent they undoubtedly are. Market conditions in the 1980s and 1990s forced representatives of the cultural sectors in Western Europe to revise their own approaches (PROTHEROUGH/PICK 2003; BONET/NEGRIER 2018). It should be recognized that marketing thinking has strengthened at least two aspects that are fundamental to AD.

First of all, the marketing mindset has had a big impact on changes in the organizational and programming dimensions of the cultural sector, especially in Great Britain during the above-mentioned period. More or less since then, the belief that “working on the quality of the cultural offer is not enough” started to spread (PROTHEROUGH/PICK 2003). This primarily affected organizations subsidized by the state. The private and non-governmental sectors joined the group of those fighting

for their position on the market, significantly influencing the diversity of the already existing offer. Increase of competitiveness thus made considering the audience and their needs an increasingly common standard. Marketing provided the AD concept with a number of practical tools. In the cultural sector, the demand for conducting research has gradually increased, aiming to determine what changes and actions could be taken to attract more patrons to the offer proposed by respective organizations. Strategic thinking and planning would feature ever more prominently in cultural management practices. A debate on how to evaluate the strategies started to resonate, too. In addition, all of a sudden, more attention was paid to the importance of diversifying financial resources. In a sense, early AD has become a panacea for many actual problems of the cultural sector (FIRYCH 2023). Secondly, marketing analyses have statistically proven that the structure of the audience, which takes advantage of the institutional cultural offer is not representative of the entire population. The data draw attention to various types of barriers to cultural participation (KAWASHIMA 2000). As more and more data became available, the debate on accessibility has become necessary, while work with excluded social groups was introduced into the catalogue of AD practices. Therefore, marketing has boosted cultural management in the areas which initially remained entirely beyond its scope.

When analyzing the concept of Audience Development, Nobuko Kawashima uses the term “Extended Marketing” (KAWASHIMA 2000: 12), seeing marketing-like practices solely as one modality among the possible AD approaches. According to Kawashima, AD coincides in meaning with marketing only when it focuses on target groups with a high potential for cultural participation, that is, those already interested in the offer or persons who for some reason do not currently use the offer but could be interested in it. This may be illustrated using the example of practical managerial solutions. Recently, a number of cultural institutions in Poland have attempted to remove the barriers to cultural participation faced by families with children. An assumption, for instance, is that one of the major obstacles for many parents is that they have no one to babysit their children. In response, theatres in different cities undertake initiatives that give parents the opportunity to leave children attended while they watch a performance. For instance, TR Warszawa, one of the contemporary theatres in Poland’s capital has launched a series of events entitled *Mom, Dad—to the Theatre!* (TR WARSZAWA). Also, the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre put a similar program into practice. In its description one can read:

Do you want to go to the theatre, but you have no one to leave the children with?  
We come with the rescue! The Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre meets the expectations  
of all parents who want to go to theatre but cannot provide care for their children.  
During the two performances in June, we will guarantee your children great fun  
that promotes development. (THE GDANSK SHAKESPEARE THEATRE)

Certainly, such activities fall within the understanding of both marketing and AD. In this case, however, the method to attract an audience member is rather simple and follows along the lines of: they would come if only the child didn't make it complicated. Hence, both theatres do not actually strive to foster cultural participation of excluded social groups but seek to draw a core audience segment with a substantial participatory potential. In a nutshell, one could say that the elementary barrier that families with children have to overcome is simply the lack of a babysitter. As Kawashima notes, this type of approach is based on knowledge from the field of marketing because the interest is nurtured predominantly among the audience accustomed to participating in cultural activities (KAWASHIMA 2000). A similar tactic would consist in offering special, cheaper family tickets to theatre performances, as one example.

Bjørnsen (2014) highlights an important aspect of budgeting the marketing activities in cultural organizations. The financial resources available for promotion are normally very limited, notably in the case of public institutions. In these circumstances, strategic choices of managers who decide to address their communication to groups with the greatest participatory potential seem justified. This is market-oriented strategy, as Bjørnsen rightly argues, since it relies on a simple and logical choice (from a marketing point of view) between incentivising people who are already somewhat interested in cultural activities, or reaching out to groups whose needs for participation are low, if at all (BJORNSEN 2014). According to Kawashima, what makes the concept of Audience Development different from marketing is precisely the fact that, unlike the latter, it is not confined to market rationality but tries to take the broader social context into account in its strategies (KAWASHIMA 2000). In other words, while arts marketing fosters the tendency to attract an audience with already developed habits of cultural participation, AD might address the need for including the groups that are not that convinced or willing to partake in cultural offers. Thus, in some of its aspects, AD fully implements the Societal Concept outlined by Kotler.

Experts have been trying to advance analytical frameworks that would fuse the discussed contradictory philosophies in Audience Development. One of those is Cashman, who classifies possible AD objectives using the so-called Ansoff Matrix (CASHMAN 2002). This

tool—adapted for the needs of AD practices—helps one to formulate strategic goals and choose the optimal methods to accomplish them. Today, the Ansoff Matrix is widely used by experts and consulting agencies that assist cultural organizations in planning their audience-oriented activities. It is employed by numerous expert agencies like UK-based The Audience Agency ([www.theaudienceagency.org](http://www.theaudienceagency.org)), Spanish Asimetrica ([www.asimetrica.org](http://www.asimetrica.org)) and Impact Foundation in Poland ([www.rozwoj-widowni.pl](http://www.rozwoj-widowni.pl)). The Audience Agency developed a tool that serves to determine how an AD strategy may reflect an organization’s goals, depending on whether the focus is on the audience or the program (THE AUDIENCE AGENCY 2017).

		PROGRAM	
		EXSISTING	NEW
AUDIENCE	EX SIS TI NG	<u>Maximize current audiences</u> (same people, same program)	<u>Product development</u> (same people, new program)
		Increase frequency of attendance from current audience and bring back lapsed ones	Extend range of program/offer to existing audiences, introduce risk
	NE W	<u>Increase similar audiences</u> (same program, new people)	<u>Diversify offer</u> (new people, new program)
		Attract new audiences for the first time	Completely new program to attract completely new audience

Tab. 1: *The Ansoff Matrix. Adaptation of the tool for AD contexts (based on THE AUDIENCE AGENCY 2017: 41)*

The matrix facilitates understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between the audience and the program. On the one hand, it allows for the perspective of the existing audience (same audience → same program + new program), as well as outlines approaches which lead to acquiring a completely new audience (same program + new program → new audience). Furthermore, by using the tool one can analyze whether the current program is capable of attracting an audience from another, yet similar segment and whether the segment already acquired may be open to program alterations (product development).

It seems that a characteristic feature of current AD practices is a holistic approach to organizational management. An organization which adheres to an AD philosophy strives for a situation where all departments

cooperate with one another for the sake of common goals. In a classic work in the field, *Standing Room Only: Strategies for Marketing the Performing Arts* (1997), Kotler and Scheff speak of the possible difficulties and misunderstandings in collaborations between different departments of cultural organizations, for example artistic director *versus* marketing department (KOTLER/SCHEFF 1997). Two decades since it was first published, the issue still seems relevant.

## Conclusion

Insisting that AD has nothing to do with marketing appears unnecessary. On the contrary, the presence of the marketing element is evident in the discussed concept. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that AD certainly goes beyond the marketing mindset as it is aligned with only some of the goals that AD may pursue. The distinction between AD and marketing is that the former envisages working with social groups that are less interested in cultural participation or even excluded. From the marketing standpoint, focusing on such groups would not make the slightest sense as a managerial strategy. For example, why build a relationship with national/ethnic minorities and promote local arts among them, when it offers no guarantee of acquiring this market segment? Here, AD rejects marketing-oriented argumentation. The very concept is rooted in public interest (albeit to a much greater extent than in the case of Kotler's Societal Concept). The aforementioned Ansoff Matrix demonstrates the diversity of goals that AD might seek to accomplish, balancing the line between the program and the audience. Undoubtedly, Audience Development exploits marketing for its strategic purposes.

Marketing provides cultural organizations with tools to analyze their own situations, increase the effectiveness of their functioning, and conduct evaluation in terms of working with audiences. However, the relationship between marketing and AD does not mean that one of the approaches must dominate, culminating in the belief that—just as with a business organization,—AD is successful only when an organization maximizes audiences and, in consequence, reaps profits. In fact, it is the organization which should determine which goals are important, taking into account its own resources and ethos. All AD and marketing methods should lead to the achievement of such goals. Paradoxically, marketing understood in the classic fashion—the negative associations notwithstanding—performs best with a product-oriented strategy, while

its effectiveness in other contexts is rather limited. Consequently, if one wants to take on the challenge of working with groups other than the existing customer base, the perspectives of the entire organization—including the program—have to be adjusted and changed. Thus, we do not change the audience for the product, but ourselves for the audience.

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