



2.2 Critiques of target-group thinking

By using a market research tool, a cultural institution is assigning to itself the role of the goods or services provider; the users (institution-goers), thus represent customers or consumers. There are other ways of viewing the role of a cultural institution than one which places it in the market, subject to the whims of supply and demand. One could think of the cultural institution as a cooperation partner, for instance, or as a forum of public debate which is not bound to market logics and thus able to draw on other freedoms and take more risks than a business. Users, for their part, need not necessarily be seen as customers or consumers: they could be discussion partners and active participants in shaping the institution. That would eliminate, or at least put into perspective, inflexible arts mediation offered in the “we produce – you consume” spirit. Thinking in target groups does not prohibit this kind of thinking, but it does not foster it either.

Another critique has its origins in the field of market research itself, which recognizes that definitions of target groups tend to be conservative and oversimplified and to lag behind social dynamics and developments. As they generally lack the resources to conduct regular market analysis, cultural institutions tend to operate with insufficiently sophisticated definitions of target groups. For instance, the target attribute “family” refers to the heterosexual nuclear family, which has long since ceased to be the only mode of life in diversified societies and, indeed, may not even be the prevalent mode. Another example is the category of “seniors”: this target audience might prefer not to be addressed through that category because its members prefer to spend their time in mixed-age groups which share similar interests and educational backgrounds.

Target group definitions are also problematic when they contain attributes which describe deficits. Two attributes used frequently in professional discourse on cultural mediation provide good examples: “bildungsfern” and “kulturferrn” [literally “remote from education” or “remote from culture” respectively, in similar English contexts one sees “with low exposure to education/to the arts”]. Inherent in terms like these is the unquestioned assumption that the meaning of “education” and “culture” has already been established, and that everyone knows who has them and who does not. Programmes for target groups defined in this way run the risk of exacerbating the inequalities they are intended to combat. On the other hand, simply ignoring inequalities in circumstances associated with the use of forms of culture and the arts causes people who are disadvantaged to be further excluded. There is no easy way out of this quandary.