

# Strategy and Tactics of Agenda Surfing

## How to profit from the popularity of current or emerging issues

**A**genda setting means to put an issue on the media agenda and make it the subject of public discussion. Politicians or executives have an interest into being positively associated with certain issues. Conversely, agenda cutting means to divert audiences' attention from certain issues by pushing them off the media agenda.

These tactics are typically used primarily by politicians and parties. The SPD, for instance, emphasized the issue of social justice in its election campaign, while it sought to downplay issues related to the labor market and unemployment in Germany.

Then there is agenda surfing, which describes a tactical effort to profit from the popularity of current or emerging issues. Not-for-profits or companies are most likely to make use of that tactic to gain public attention. Their political agenda may be more in sync with the platform of any individual party, but overall they are more interested in steering the public discussion into a direction favorable to their ends. For instance, while the Hanns-Böckler Foundation may interpret the idea of a social market economy more from a social democratic point of view, Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft may be leaning more toward an open market with liberal regulatory constraints. However, both will try to make sure that their interpretations do not go unheard among the

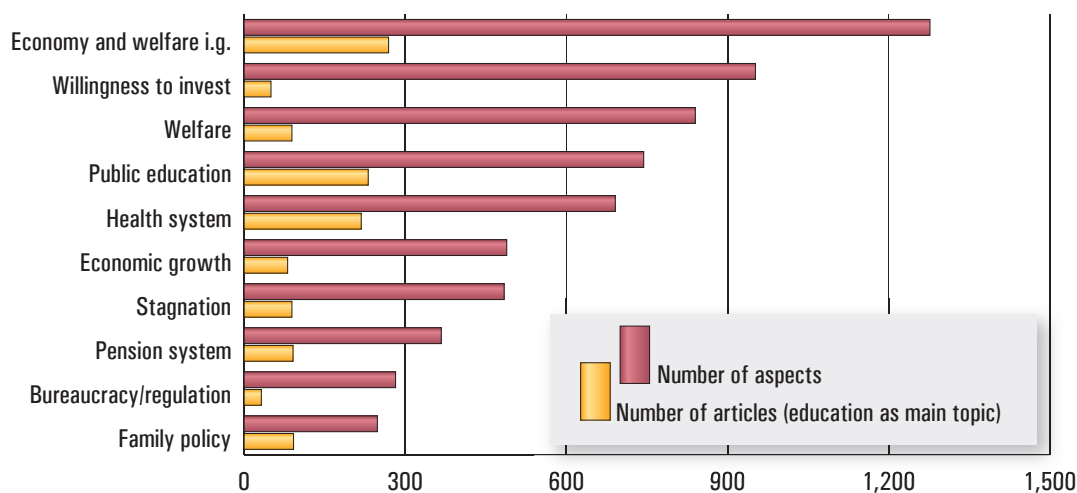
multitude of political, economic and social issues. Yesterday public discussion may have centered on the privatization of healthcare, today on the job market, tomorrow on public pensions. But for anyone interested in steering public discussion, it is always just a matter of identifying the most pressing point of the public discourse, whether good or bad – in other words, the current top issues. When the communications efforts of any interested organization manage to contribute original arguments to the discussion of one of the top issues, chances are greater that the media will pick up on its message and further disseminate it. The challenge is thus to find out when and where new “waves” of suitable issues are emerging.

The tool used for the identification of such issues, making agenda surfing possible, is called issue monitoring. The emergence as well as the disappearance of economic, social or political issues in the media typically follows a certain pattern. Individual issues often make their initial appearances as mentions in the micro and macro-economic news coverage. Then they become a more frequent subject of discussion and the main focus of news reports. Eventually, the political news coverage will turn to them as well.

Issue monitoring aggregates individual issues and collects them in communication environments – those “waves” that promise to draw attention to everything that supports their dynamic. An overall strong presence of an individual issue (for example as mentions in other contexts) goes hand in hand with the emergence of whole series of full reports on that

### 1 Overall coverage of different communication environments 4/28 – 5/31/2005

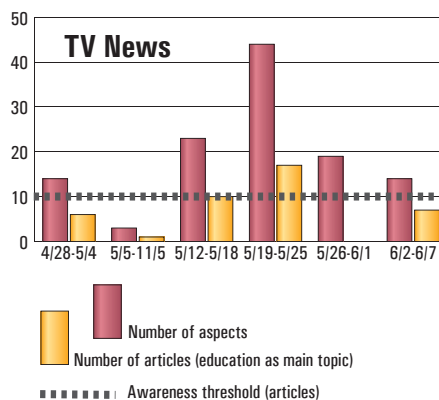
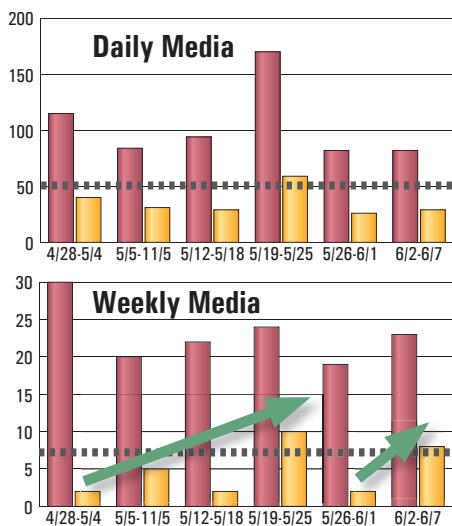
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Source: Media Tenor  
04/28 – 05/31/2005

Basis: 20,056 reports/27,040 aspects from the main category in reports and passages in 23 media

## 2 Weekly analysis and prognosis: Communication environment "Education"



For a while, education had the strongest continuous presence as a sub-issue in weekly media.

Prognosis (correct): Communicate education topics via weekly press

Source: Media Tenor  
04/28 – 06/07/2005

Basis: 24,424 reports/37,476 aspects from the main category in reports and passages in 23 media

issue. That can be seen, for instance, in an analysis of the communication environments in May of 2005 (chart 1).

In order to utilize the dynamic development of an issue, it may be important to monitor various thematic areas not only in light of their chronological evolution, but also according to the types of media in which they appear. As chart 2 shows, for a while, education had the strongest continuous presence as a sub-issue in weekly media. At this place on the spectrum of opinion-leading media – the weeklies – the odds are best that media attention will continue to grow, turning education into the main subject of articles and eventually carrying the issue of education over into other types of media. For any party or other entity that seeks to improve its image with its activities in the area of educational policy – e.g. a company in the educational software market – issue monitoring would thus lead to the conclusion that approaching journalists or editors from weekly media, to provide expert knowledge on the educational software market or other types of background information, would be the best way to publicize the company's own message and ride on the wave of public discussion.

The premise for this approach is of course the preparation of a number of messages, stories or other newsworthy events for every communication environment that promises potential benefits and which can then be used in accordance with the current emergence or weakening of individual issues in the

news. The agenda surfing tactic thus rests on the strategic preparation of communicative resources. Those resources – interesting persons, stories, research findings, etc. – can be mobilized and used to enrich the public debate while at the same time focusing attention on a specific part of an organization and increasing the effectiveness of its communications.

In conclusion, agenda surfing requires flexibility. Flexibility is guaranteed by creating a variety of options and potential actions and by continuously expanding the matrix of target audiences and issues that a company or organization can publicly address. As long as that requirement for professional communication is met, any company or organization can avail itself of issue monitoring as a tool to identify potential opportunities – week by week, medium by medium, and issue by issue. It can thus continuously stay ahead of news developments and position its messages in the media with the greatest possible force.

### Basis:

**Media:** Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, taz, BILD; Focus, Spiegel, Zeit, Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, Welt am Sonntag, Bild am Sonntag, Super Illu; ARD Tagesthemen, ARD Tagesschau, Heute Journal, Heute, RTL Aktuell, Sat.1 News, ProSieben News, Deutsche Welle (German and English)

**Time:** 04/28 – 06/07/2005

**Analysis:** 24,424 reports/37,476 aspects from the main category in reports and passages; some print media from 28.+29.05. incomplete