

INTRODUCTION

ARTS COVERAGE IN A NEW CENTURY

Five years ago the National Arts Journalism Program published *Reporting the Arts*, the first comprehensive analysis of how the arts are covered in mainstream American news media. As we promised then, the study was “first of all an effort to create a baseline for future examination of trends in journalistic coverage of the arts in the United States.”

With *Reporting the Arts II* we are not only revisiting the same 10 communities and their local papers, and reexamining arts coverage in the national press and on broadcast television. We are also expanding our report by taking a closer look at the burgeoning areas of the alternative press, online arts coverage, reporting on arts by minorities and in the ethnic press and cultural programming on National Public Radio, among other topics. We are doing this with the aim of further gauging the health of arts journalism in America and capturing the changes swirling around the field as we set off into this new century.

The trends are not encouraging.

While more Americans are participating in cultural activities than at any time in our history, and although the arts have evolved to unprecedented size and complexity, the

resources that metropolitan newsrooms allocate to the arts are generally flat or in retreat.

During the past five years, none of the newspapers that we tracked in this study has increased the amount of editorial space devoted to news, criticism or other types of journalism (not including listings) about arts and entertainment. Even with listings, only one paper expanded its arts-and-culture newshole. At some dailies, the coverage has declined sharply.

The majority of newspapers are running fewer articles about arts and culture. Dailies are shoehorning shorter pieces into shrinking newsholes and assigning a larger share of stories to freelancers, syndicators and wire services than five years ago. Stories about the “high” arts and hard reporting about commercial and nonprofit cultural institutions continue to take a backseat to the traditional staples of previewing and reviewing popular entertainment, such as the release of the latest movie, CD or national concert tour.

Moreover, with few exceptions, papers almost everywhere are devoting more of their arts space to listings. Editorial space for arts journalism is being squeezed from two sides: a near-universal decline in the overall amount of

space dedicated to the area, and by a frequent expansion of listings.

In fairness, it must be said that the arts are not being singled out for cutbacks. Papers everywhere are shrinking, and in most of the dailies we studied, other sections are shrinking faster. The size of arts sections has generally declined relative to sports sections. However, they have gained in prominence compared with hard-news sections at most newspapers, and vis-à-vis non-art feature sections, such as dining and travel, at many dailies.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that most papers dedicate less newsprint to the arts at a time when there is more art to write about. Reportage and criticism about the arts are not keeping up with society.

GAPS AND TENSIONS

The widening chasm between the amount of newsworthy cultural activity and the actual coverage allotted to it is creating tensions inside newsrooms and cultural communities. At the newspapers there is an emerging awareness that the existing structures of arts journalism are overloaded and outmoded. Editors and writers frequently complain that incremental adjustments to the preview-review model of coverage cannot keep up with rapid changes in the cultural environment. As more news is forced down the same pipeline, the limitations of the arts-journalism infrastructure become increasingly evident.

For artists and arts organizations, the dearth of adequate exposure and critical feedback creates mounting frustrations. Many producers of culture, from offbeat theater groups to large Hollywood studios, are experimenting with new ways of circumventing the mainstream media to attract and inform audiences (see Chapter 29).

Drawing on a detailed analysis of local and national dailies in October 1998, *Reporting the Arts* documented a robust commitment to cultural journalism. Although, as the study noted, the coverage appeared “in a mix of heavily featured, once-a-week or twice-a-week entertainment sections,” in which listings accounted for up to half the space, the research also revealed that some of the papers we studied were making significant efforts to upgrade their coverage.

Reporting the Arts was the first study of its kind. There were no benchmarks for comparison. Yet there was reason for hope. The country was in a phase of economic and cultural expan-

KEY FINDINGS

Arts sections have maintained their relative positions of prominence at metropolitan newspapers, gaining ground slightly vis-à-vis hard-news sections and losing ground to sports sections.

Newspapers as a whole are shrinking. So a stable position in a declining environment translates to less coverage than it did five years ago.

No metropolitan newspaper in our study increased the size of its newshole for arts journalism. Of the 15 we tracked, seven cut back severely, five cut back moderately, three maintained roughly the same levels.

Articles are shorter now than they were five years ago. Almost every newspaper cut the average length of its art stories: At seven of the 15 newspapers they are now at least 20 percent shorter.

All the cutbacks in the story count were directed at articles with a staffer's byline. Metropolitan newspapers run as many freelance, syndicated and wire service articles on the arts now as they did five years ago.

The overall newshole for the TV grid and arts listings, as opposed to articles, has not eroded. In newspapers' weekend arts supplements, the listings often increased in size.

Journalism about movies and entertainment television suffered across-the-board cuts at metropolitan newspapers. Coverage of music, the performing arts and publishing avoided such general cutbacks—and gained in relative prominence.

The New York Times remains preeminent in the volume and diversity of its arts coverage. Only the *Chicago Tribune* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* in our study devoted even as much as half the *Times*' space to arts and culture.

Network television journalism is split. The nightly newscasts continue to pay minimal attention to arts news. The morning programs have doubled their interest in the past five years, focusing more than ever on celebrity culture and mass entertainment.

The tabloid television news programs—*Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood* and *Extra*—teem with celebrity soundbites and entertainment clips. Yet almost half their content concerns gossip, scandal and non-show-business stories rather than coverage of mass entertainment itself.

sion. At the same time, a refreshing openness to the arts had taken hold as the “culture wars” of the previous decade faded to a memory. Cities were discovering the arts as a means of revitalizing downtowns. The dotcom economy sparked a sense of unimaginable opportunity for both old- and new-media organizations.

Since then, the country has witnessed the bursting of the stock-market bubble, a recession, a terrorist attack and two wars. The turmoil has left marks on cultural and media organizations. In the arts, years of investments into new facilities and programming gave way to belt-tightening. News organizations likewise trimmed back their budgets and expectations due to declining advertising sales, losses from online ventures and, in some cases, unexpected outlays for war coverage. In the midst of these adjustments the arts have not been foremost on people’s minds.

HARD FACTS

Adding to the challenges for newspapers are several long-term trends that are diminishing the resources that even the most well-meaning news organizations can devote to the arts.

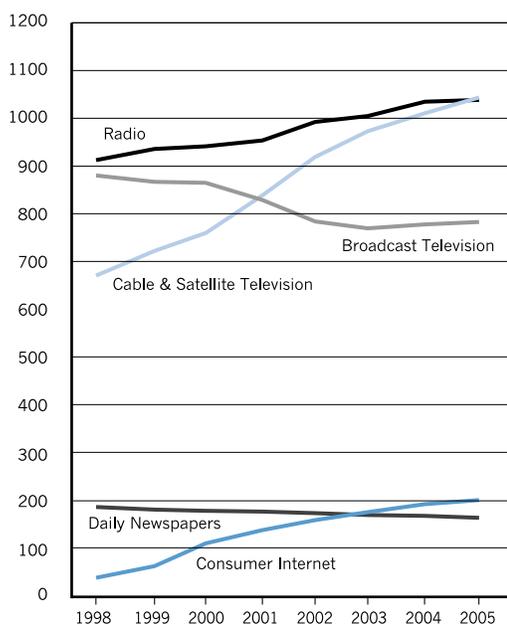
Electronic media are supplanting newspapers. Average weekday newspaper readership dropped to 55.4 percent in 2002 from 58.6 percent in 1998—a steady erosion since the 1960s, when 80 percent of adults read newspapers.¹ Americans today spend no less time in front of the TV than five years ago, but they are listening to more radio and spending a lot more time online. The year 2003 was the first in which an average American spent more time online than reading a newspaper.

This is part of a larger phenomenon—the broad-based decline in reading the printed page. Book reading is on its way to becoming a minority activity in the United States, dropping by 7 percent between 1992 and 2002, to no more than 56.6 percent of adults.² Newspapers are coping with the same societal shift from the printed page to the pixilated screen. And declining circulation translates into smaller news budgets all around.

The news industry is also late in adjusting to America’s changing demographic landscape. In California, for example, more than half of Asian and Pacific Americans, blacks and Latinos identify ethnically specific media as their main source of news, entertainment and advertising.³ While the growing strength of minority and non-English news outlets comes as welcome news (see Chapters 20 and 21),

Newspapers Lag Behind

hours per person per year using consumer media



Source:Veronis Suhler Stevenson

many leading metropolitan dailies are losing readership and advertising revenue because of their lackluster success in attracting minority audiences.

These pressures place hard limits on how much space and staffing newspapers can devote to the arts. Maintaining a commitment to cultural coverage requires motivated newsroom leadership as well as internal advocacy by writers and editors. It demands new ideas that make the most of scarce resources and help journalists do a better job of telling readers about the energy and diversity—and also the failures and shortfalls—of America’s cultural life.

PRIORITIES

Despite the downward trends, it is undeniable that, over the long term, newspapers must rely on arts and entertainment coverage in order to grow and retain their readership. It is a question of purpose and means of survival for newspapers in an age of media saturation.

With their once-a-day publication schedules, newspapers are losing their hard-news franchise to electronic sources. Local arts coverage, though, is under no such threat. This is one reason why most dailies focus so heavily on covering local cultural news (see Chapter 21).

Moreover, arts and culture stories often deliver the kind of depth, nuance and perspec-

tive that's missing from television. They can also compete with the world of specialized Web sites and blogs that commands an ever-larger share of culture-savvy readers' attention. And despite having to fend off such new challenges, papers gain from the arts as an economic lifeline. For far from being a drag on newsroom budgets, the arts pages attract healthy advertising revenues, and they have the potential to be a magnet for readers from relatively untapped segments of the public, including youth, minority and female audiences.

Most significant, the so-called "copyright industries"—industries built substantially on creative content, including but not limited to the nonprofit and commercial arts—have expanded in recent years. They now comprise a sizable part of the nation's economy and lay claim to a growing share of America's workforce (see Chapter 2). The arts have become more important to the lives and livelihoods of communities. They are something no newspaper can afford to ignore. Covering A&E is not just a cultural or civic responsibility, undertaken to satisfy a vaguely defined public mandate. As editors and publishers increasingly recognize, these journalistic areas are moving inexorably from a secondary, "back-of-the-book" status toward the core business of every mainstream news organization.

NEW APPROACHES

The reports from the 10 metropolitan areas featured in this study document how newspapers everywhere are searching for the right mix of topics and sections to deliver the most cogent arts coverage to their readers. Meanwhile, journalism about the arts continues to gravitate to other media, which is why we have included analyses of changes in arts coverage on the radio (Chapter 16), television (Chapters 18 and 28) and the Web (Chapter 17).

While newspaper editors monitor these developments, they are also experimenting with new kinds of journalistic assignments (for example, allowing critics to range more freely within and between art forms) and devising more versatile article formats (such as condensed weekly roundups and critics' journals). Many papers are developing novel listings styles (especially capsule reviews) and eye-catching visual presentation techniques (snappy boxes and teasers, charts and color photography).

In addition, some papers are reassessing the role of their daily and weekend arts sections, to counter the "arts ghetto" effect, and

going head-to-head with alternative weeklies by launching special supplements targeted at young readers (Chapter 15). The division of labor between the printed paper and the online edition remains a work in progress at most newspapers.

These changes have introduced a measure of innovation into arts coverage, but only to a point. Interesting initiatives and outstanding editors and writers exist everywhere; but what is remarkable on the whole is how little the routine formats and procedures of arts journalism have evolved over the years, especially in newspapers. For example, the discipline-based system of daily arts journalism departments—theater, visual art, dance, film, music, etc.—is an inheritance of the past. But no newspaper has broken out of this mold to embrace the fluid eclecticism of our cross-disciplinary culture. No matter how much the landscape has changed, the main sections and staffing charts of the papers we analyzed are surprisingly similar to what we found five years ago. In many papers they have been static for a much longer time.

STRATEGIES

In thinking about a comprehensive strategy for arts coverage, newspapers typically navigate between two extremes. The traditional model emphasizes the paper's filtering role. The key figures in the effort are the editor and the critic. The promise to readers is: "Our experts will select the most noteworthy artistic productions and elucidate their importance, meanings, strengths and weaknesses for you."

In recent years the emphasis has been shifting towards the other extreme. As editorial copy around the TV grid and the weekend listings shrinks at most local dailies, what is growing is the amount of capsule information about all the cultural offerings in the community. Many papers see arts coverage as a service to time-strapped readers: "Only you, the reader, can know how to spend your leisure time; our job is to supply information about your options, with comprehensive listings and brief reviews to suit every possible interest or need."

Meanwhile, editors and publishers at many papers are pushing for a third kind of arts journalism. The economic contributions and organizational complexities of the arts are more widely appreciated today. Arts news reporting, as distinct from arts criticism, appears to be gaining ground as a strategic priority across the industry. The bellwether *New York Times*, for example, has reduced its emphasis on reviews

while increasing the amount of arts coverage it runs in its hard news sections.

Making arts journalism “harder” would elevate its prestige in newsrooms. Editors often pine for “critics who could pick up the phone.” But finding a balance between criticism and reporting is not easy. Different traditions, skills and temperaments are involved. There is also a potential for conflict of interest when critics, whose job it is to judge and sometimes take sides in cultural debates, are asked to report dispassionately about the artists and organizations they cover. Similarly, artists and organizations may be reluctant to speak to reporters who, doubling as critics, may have panned their work.

These issues remain unresolved in newsrooms, but one prognosis is certain: The reevaluation of the role of critical reviews is shaping up to be the defining battle in newspaper arts departments for years to come.

IN THIS REPORT

Reporting the Arts II is the result of a two-year effort by a team of more than 40 people. Most of the research and writing was done by the 2003-04 class of National Arts Journalism Program fellows, professional journalists drawn from news organizations across the United States, as well as two journalists from the Netherlands. Additional essays were filed by some 2002-03 fellows, NAJP alumni and freelance writers. The content analysis of newspaper and TV coverage was supervised by Andrew Tyndall, a media analyst and publisher of the *Tyndall Report*. A dedicated group of Columbia University students was responsible for painstakingly coding nearly 600 editions of the 20 newspapers in our study.

The report begins with an overview of the changing cultural landscape and the economic contributions of the arts, based on recent research findings, followed by a comparative look at the coverage in 17 local and three national dailies. The largest section of the report (Chapters 4-13) surveys the cultural life and local news media of the same 10 cities that we featured in our last study, with a special emphasis on their daily papers. To compile these chapters, NAJP fellows visited all the cities and conducted extensive interviews with artists, journalists and cultural managers.

Next, the study takes a closer look at trends in national media, including public radio, broadcast television, alternative weeklies and the Internet. Other sections take up arts jour-

nalism by, for and about Latinos and Asian Americans, as well as coverage of arts abroad.

In a departure from our last report, the volume concludes with a selection of Critical Perspectives on key issues in arts journalism and especially criticism. These essays are offered as a counterweight to the statistical results in the earlier chapters. Quantitative findings are essential for a realistic understanding of how the news media cover the arts—but they go only so far. The eight articles included here, written by leading critics and reporters, delve further into the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas underlying contemporary American arts journalism.

TO KEEP IN MIND

First, the cities and newspapers scrutinized here do not, statistically speaking, amount to an accurate portrayal of American arts journalism. Other clusters of case studies might have yielded somewhat different results. We are confident, though, that the larger picture of transforming newsrooms and communities is accurate for the country as a whole today.

Second, October is not a typical month of the year. We chose it because it’s a busy time for arts coverage. The cities and the papers—which were picked to encompass a wide range of types—add up to an illustrative cross section of communities and news organizations, analyzed at the peak of their annual performance.

Third, our goal here is not to deliver a “report card” on one or another of the featured papers. We’re grateful to them for their willingness to subject themselves to the analysis and, as such, to serve as a mirror for industry-wide trends.

Fourth, while we touch upon a wide spectrum of media, the main emphasis throughout remains on newspapers, still the most widely consumed local news source.

Fifth, the quantitative content analysis at the heart of this study, and especially over-time comparisons, are subject to error. Obtaining, filing, examining and coding thousands of articles in hundreds of papers amounts to a complicated process rife with opportunities for mistakes. These are compounded when measurements happen at two points in time and are made by different groups of coders. (A methodological summary appears in the Appendix.) We have emphasized only trends that were discernible even when we were accounting for a double margin of error.

KEY

Throughout this report we feature an arrow symbol indicating broad trends in aspects of arts coverage.

WHAT THE ARROWS MEAN:

-  increase or decrease between +/- 10%
-  increase between 10%-30%
-  increase more than 30%
-  decrease between 10%-30%
-  decrease more than 30%

GOING FORWARD

Some of the most urgent issues confronting arts journalism today cannot be resolved in a study like this one. Beyond the obvious question of writing quality, which is almost impossible to gauge systematically, several thorny dilemmas appear only in passing on these pages. These range from ethical issues—such as accepting “freebies,” plagiarism and copyright-infringement—to various kinds of conflicts of interest. These topics await future NAJP studies.

The backdrop to all such questions is a rapidly changing culture where the rules of artistic

creation, distribution and consumption are being rewritten on a daily basis. In an environment of flux, can the protocols of arts journalism stay the same?

The last five years have added new dimensions to our nation’s artistic life. But years of growth and adaptation have also revived concerns that the ecology of arts journalism is ill-equipped to reflect the energy and eclecticism of the arts in America. This report is intended to help the news media catch up to new cultural realities, and transform its own routines in the process.

THE EDITORS

¹Source: Newspaper Association of America, based on the 50 top markets measured by Scarborough Research; available at www.naa.org.

²Literary reading is down 14 percent, with not much more than a third of male adults now reading any kind of literature at all. From: *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. National Endowment for the Arts. Research Division Report #46. Washington, D.C.: June 2004. According to the report, which is based on Census figures, 56.6 percent of U.S. adults read a book in the 12 months prior to the 2002 SPPA study and 46.7 percent read some literature.

³Félix Gutiérrez for USC Annenberg’s Institute for Justice and Journalism. “Communicating To and About All Californians.” Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2002. The report cites surveys by New California Media.