

# DEFINING THEIR TURF

## THE NATIONALS FINE TUNE THEIR STRATEGIES

BY NICHOLAS STEIN

At *USA Today* they call them “pop culture moments”—instances in which an artistic event moves beyond the stage and into the realm of public discourse. When pop singer Janet Jackson unexpectedly bared her breast during the Super Bowl halftime show, for example, the efficacy of her performance immediately was overshadowed by its political and cultural implications. “We were planning to cover the performance as Jackson’s attempt to revive her somewhat stagnant career,” says Dennis Moore, a deputy managing editor at *USA Today*. “But once she exposed herself, our coverage took a different turn.”

Even to casual observers of the arts scene it is clear that the focus of the arts media has shifted from serious criticism to entertainment. The media deluge that preceded the release of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for example, devoted much attention to the religious and political points of view of the filmmakers, while largely failing to comment on the relative artistic merits of their movies.

This phenomenon can be traced, in part, to the rise of the national media. In their quest for a broad and geographically diverse audience and

advertiser base, national media outlets—many of which, from *Entertainment Weekly* to the E! channel to the Arts & Entertainment network, announce their intentions in their titles—have largely ignored the live concerts, theatrical events and exhibitions that make up the core of America’s local arts scene. For most of these outlets the arts themselves have ceased to be the story. They have become merely the backdrop—the setting in which the movements of pop-culture icons can be chronicled and in which political and economic forces collide.

The three American newspapers that can legitimately claim a national readership—*The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*—find themselves in a curious position within this cultural landscape. They belong to a medium whose participants are typically rooted in their respective communities, leaving them well-situated to cover the local arts scene. But the three newspapers also strive to reach national readers and advertisers whose interests are seldom defined in geographic terms.

In keeping with their distinct histories, missions and audiences, each of the papers has taken a different approach to bridging this cultural divide. Five years ago *Reporting the Arts* exam-

*“Our cultural coverage is core to our financial health and viability.... It represents both good business and good journalism.”*

Scott Heekin-Canedy  
president and  
general manager  
*The New York Times*

ined the manner in which the three cover the arts. For the month of October 1998, the report catalogued how much space was devoted to arts coverage, where in the papers arts stories were likely to run, and how much emphasis was placed on the different artistic disciplines. Five years later we revisited each newspaper to examine what had changed; whether these changes were motivated by financial, rather than artistic, considerations; and how each publication had responded to the media's prevailing emphasis on entertainment news.

## THE NEW YORK TIMES

ALTHOUGH THE TIMES has had a national profile for more than a century, the paper didn't launch its national edition until 1980. Even then the edition was not readily available to readers outside the New York region, and its arts section, entitled *Living Arts*, was a heavily truncated version of the local one. In the last five years the *Times* has made a major push to expand its national circulation and its appeal with national advertisers. The newspaper reconfigured its distribution channels and struck a partnership with Starbucks to make the daily available in more than 2,000 locations. It also bulked up the national edition—especially its arts section—which is now indistinguishable from the one readers get in New York. As a result the *Times's* circulation outside the greater metropolitan area has more than doubled. And nearly 90% of the paper's advertisements now run in the national edition, compared with just 34% in 1996.

The depth, breadth and sheer quantity of the *Times's* arts coverage was unparalleled five years ago and remains so today. It continues to emphasize the visual and performing arts rather than popular music, movies and TV. Of the 20 newspapers in our study, the *Times* was the clear leader in coverage of painting, photography, architecture and other visual and decorative arts. It was also the only newspaper to devote more space to the performing arts than to movies, and to file more articles on classical than contemporary music. The *Times's* overall story count remained constant compared with five years ago, with an increase in the number of articles devoted to theater and painting as well as compensating declines in dance and opera.

The paper also maintained a commitment to cultural criticism, running 400 reviews in October 2003—almost as many as five years



THE NEW YORK TIMES

earlier. Many of them used the particular performance or exhibition as a jumping-off point to investigate a significant artistic question. For example, a review of the "Drawing Now" exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art became an exploration of whether drawing skills still matter in contemporary art.

Despite its national reach and reputation, when it comes to covering the arts, the *Times* seldom strays beyond New York. "New York is the country's preeminent city in many of the arts, so a lot of what we cover locally has national importance," says Jonathan Landman, the paper's culture editor. "There may be theater companies in other cities, for example, but the heart of the American theater is Broadway."

But the *Times* has also been prone to looking through the same entertainment-centric prism

that much of the rest of the media use to view the arts. According to Landman, the paper is planning to devote more money, personnel and space to arts news. “The strongest element at the paper for generations has been its criticism,” he says. “But what is less strong is the news reporting. . . . The paper has worked hard to keep its news coverage as energetic as possible. Now it’s time to make sure the arts coverage meets the same standard.”

On the business side the *Times’s* arts coverage continues to generate significant profits for the newspaper. Though President and General Manager Scott Heekin-Canedy declines to break out the numbers of the paper’s individual sections, he notes that the *Times’s* arts coverage remains crucial to its success. “Our cultural coverage is core to our financial health and viability,” he says. “In addition to being jam-packed with advertising, it is an integral part of our reader franchise. It represents both good business and good journalism.”

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

THE JOURNAL HAS EVOLVED substantially from its origins as the weekday bible for the business reader into a publication that devotes serious attention to other subjects, including the arts. A significant part of this evolution has occurred since 1998 with the introduction of two new sections devoted entirely to arts, lifestyle and features: the Friday arts and culture section, Weekend Journal and the three-times-weekly Personal Journal. A comparison of the paper’s arts coverage in 1998 and 2003, however, found that in spite of these changes, the volume of arts and culture coverage actually declined.

When it chooses to cover the arts, the *Journal* tends to focus on a few areas of interest to its affluent, educated readership: books, architecture and the decorative arts. Within these areas the paper’s coverage is deep, and its articles run an average of 18 column inches, longer than anyone else, including the *Times*. Issues from October 2003 included reviews of off-Broadway plays, new recordings from Elvis Costello, Joan Baez and Nathalie Merchant; a survey of major art exhibits at galleries across the country; and an architecture review of Frank Gehry’s new Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, which compared the long and arduous approval and construction process to the contentious, 20-year effort to construct Jorn Utzon’s famed opera house in Sydney, Australia.

Most of the *Journal’s* arts-related advertising falls within the same subject areas, especially book publishing and the decorative arts. “The major auction houses, Sotheby’s and Christie’s, run the most advertising with us, and we target them heavily,” says Rochelle Cohen, an advertising sales rep for Weekend Journal. “Book publishing is also very much on the upswing. One of the areas in which we have really seen growth is that of consumer books, which is very much tied to the success of Weekend Journal and Personal Journal. Cohen says the growth in arts-related advertising has helped to offset declines in the *Journal’s* two biggest categories, financial services and technology.

Although it publishes a significant number of



THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

reviews, the *Journal's* arts coverage is weighted most heavily toward news. "Our coverage is driven to some degree by events," says News Editor Alexandra Peers, who oversees much of the paper's arts reporting. "Now, with e-mail, we get the same amount of hype and publicity behind a must-see event and an absolutely missable piece of nonsense. Our reporters are charged with telling us things we haven't heard anything about. Every 85-year-old art critic thinks he knows what's going on in SoHo. But SoHo may not be the place where things are going on."

As a business publication the *Journal* also devotes attention to the financial aspect of the arts, a side Peers feels is often missed by other media. "You can't cover museums without dollar signs," she says. "How could the media cover the Guggenheim for 15 years without asking where they got the money to pay for everything? All arts coverage could use a bit more knowledge of the bottom line."

## USA TODAY

FROM ITS INCEPTION IN 1982, *USA Today* was conceived as a newspaper for a national audience. By targeting the emerging business traveler through a novel distribution system in hotels and airports, *USA Today* has become the most widely distributed paper in the country, with a weekday circulation of 2.3 million. By comparison *The New York Times's* daily circulation is 1.1 million and 1.7 million on Sunday, and *The Wall Street Journal's* is 1.8 million. As a result, *USA Today's* arts coverage is geared to a national audience. "There has to be a national interest to a local story," says Moore, citing an article from Christmas 2003 about how communities across the country adapted productions of *The Nutcracker* ballet.

Like other national media, *USA Today's* arts coverage focuses chiefly on popular culture, in particular television and movies. For the month of October 2003, 48 percent of *USA Today's* arts and culture articles and listings was assigned to TV and 35 percent to movies. It published just two articles on classical music, two on jazz and three on the visual arts. "We concentrate on mainstream popular culture, primarily movies, TV and music, with a healthy dose of celebrity," says Moore. "The expertise and strength of our reporters and critics lie in the pop realm."

*USA Today* tends to treat the arts as news stories. The paper was one of only four in our



USA TODAY

study to run more news articles than reviews. In October 2003, for example, *USA Today* ran a feature about how midsize cities such as Cincinnati and Pittsburgh were mounting art and music festivals to attract young professionals; and a profile of Australian actress Cate Blanchett that explores why she hasn't achieved the fame of fellow countrywomen Nicole Kidman and Naomi Watts.

The paper's national focus has resulted in a dearth of arts-related advertising, which tends to be geared toward regional and local audiences. "We don't do very much with the arts," says vice

president of advertising sales Johanna deBonte. “We haven’t spent much time trying to develop the arts category because we don’t have the editorial [content],” says deBonte. “Most of the advertising dollars go to newspapers that offer geographic, not demographic, coverage.”

## MOVING FORWARD

SO WHAT CAN WE expect in 2008? From *USA Today*, probably more of the same. In the last five years the paper has changed little about the volume or pop-culture focus of its arts coverage and is unlikely to do so in the future. At *The Wall Street Journal* the subtle attempts to broaden the paper’s subject matter and its audience that began with the introduction of Weekend Journal and Personal Journal are likely to intensify. “Our art market coverage used to be geared toward the guy who could write a \$100 million check for a

Picasso,” says Peers. “Now we are writing for the frequent flyer who feels that if his IPO goes his way, he may someday be able to buy a Picasso.” While it is likely that *The New York Times* will continue to devote more space and resources to serious criticism of the arts than any other newspaper, the paper is clearly moving toward an emphasis on entertainment news long in evidence at *USA Today*. “In recent years we have had a strong cluster of media reporters occupying the gray world between culture and business,” says Landman. “We will ask some of these people to readjust their coverage a little bit, and in addition plan to add more people.” The editor of the *Times*’s Sunday Arts & Leisure section, Jodi Kantor, says the future mandate for the *Times*’s arts coverage is simple: “It will be more exciting, more journalistic and more reader-friendly.” It remains to be seen whether this strategy will help the paper’s quest to attract readers outside New York.

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Alexandra Peers  
news editor

*The Wall Street Journal*

# ALTERNATIVE WEEKLIES ENTER THE MAINSTREAM

BY CARYN BROOKS

THE WORD “ALTERNATIVE,” as in “alternative weekly,” seems empty these days. Even someone like Richard Karpel—who, as executive director of the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies (AAN), has the term stamped on his business card—says it’s just a tag of convenience. “At the time that we took that name on, there weren’t a lot of alternatives—we were the alternative. The problem is that now we’re just one of many alternatives,” he says.

Media overpopulation is perhaps the most feared stalker of alt weeklies—especially when it comes to arts coverage, the lifeblood of an alt-weekly franchise. And this isn’t just paranoia. They are coming for you, alt-weekly owners. For real. They are coming for your advertising dollars, your young readers, your look and your *je ne sais quoi*. The plunderers consist of a loose cabal of daily-newspaper companies that tinker in basement labs, concocting a range of products designed to sponge up alt-weekly ad revenues, which grew from \$174 million to \$501 million in 10 years. They are Web site commandos and blog buccaneers, who are taking advantage of new technology as a cheap way of speedballing information and attitude, while alt-weeklies dodder from tree to pulp to printer. They are the increas-

ing number of cable channels and video-on-demand features that drain precious leisure-time attention. And these are just a few of the bogeymen haunting the alt-weekly world at present. The question is, will the alts survive? “This is a great time to be begging the question,” says David Carr, who covers the magazine beat for *The New York Times* and was a longtime alt-weekly editor. “Critical information about film and music that have a national footprint is widely available. Having a lippy, fun music-and-movie critic won’t get you there like it used to.”

While doomsday prophesizing about alt-weeklies seems to be at an all-time high, there have always been questions as to the publications’ stability. In the 1980s, daily newspapers realized that the tabloid format—with arts previews and listings in one dynamic, easy-to-flip-through section—appealed to readers and advertisers alike, and started producing weekend pullout tabs that nicked the alt-weekly formula. While this kind of colonization may have had some benefits for daily papers, the pullouts never succeeded in stealing the true alt-weekly audience. “The daily entertainment tabs are butt-ugly. Carry that under your arm and you’re saying, ‘I’m a dork,’” notes Carr. “Most of these tabs are dreadful. It’s meant to cre-

ate clutter and it doesn't go toward the core competency of daily newspapers."

Since the weekend tabs haven't really done their job in sopping up alt-weekly dollars or readers, some daily newspapers have decided to be more blunt about their intentions. In recent years, three new formats that attempt to edge in on alt-weekly turf have hit the market: the commuter dailies, the "faux alts" and the youth dailies. A commuter daily, such as *The Washington Post's* weekday *Express*, offers cocktail-weenie-sized versions of stories appearing in the parent paper and is offered free at mass-transit stops and college campuses. Faux alts are papers placed in smaller markets by a parent company such as Gannett with the sole purpose of mimicking the look and feel of alt weeklies. In Louisville, Ky., Gannett publishes *The Courier-Journal* and in 2003 launched a faux-alt weekly called *Velocity*. AAN's Karpel says this type of paper shouldn't take a bite out of alt-weekly business. "If they're reaching young people, they're reaching dumb young people that we don't want anyway," he says. As Cary Stemle, editor of the *Louisville Eccentric Observer*, describes his competition, "*Velocity* has an editorial staff of 10 or 11, compared to our 5. And they focus only on lifestyle things—music, drunken parties, etc.—where we are doing news, commentary, politics, larger feature stories and A&E." Youth dailies—such as Chicago's *Red Eye*, put out by the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Red Streak*, offered by rival *Chicago Sun-Times*—cost a quarter. Says Karpel of this approach: "They're trying to reach people who don't read and, well, people who don't read, don't read."

It seems the official position is that these clones are annoyances more than long-term threats, but it's hard to tell if that's just bluster. While the alt-weekly market has grown, one has to wonder about the predatory instincts of corporate giants like Gannett and the Tribune Company, which have set their sights on the scattered segment of the market that generates a mere \$500 million. Is it money they're after? Market dominance? Or the media version of betting on futures?

If you ask Karpel to name the major challenges in the alt-weekly world right now, daily-newspaper encroachment doesn't even hit the top four. Karpel is a big-picture guy. He'll tell you that the Web is a real danger zone for the alt-weekly infrastructure, noting, "Many of our papers tend to extend the print metaphor onto the Web, and it doesn't always work." He'll tell you that extending readership to a younger audience is an issue: "If

the average age of the readers keeps getting older, well, eventually those people die." He'll tell you that creating niche media with new technology is problematic. As he explains, "If you want to reach black lesbians between the ages of 30 and 40, there's probably a Web site just for that; from a marketing standpoint, it's hard." About the increasing consolidation of alt-weekly ownership, he'll tell you, "it's not necessarily a bad thing—sometimes it means employees will get health insurance—but it certainly poses challenges when it comes to the idiosyncratic sensibility of papers and the multiplicity of voices."

The consolidation issue is one that media watchers have kept close tabs on. Some feel that large newspaper portfolios being built by a few companies is anathema to the independent alt-weekly spirit. This seemed to be proved in 2002, when two of the industry's biggest players—Village Voice Media and New Times Media—made backroom agreements to shutter competing papers in Los Angeles and Cleveland. The Department of Justice got wind of the plan, forced a deal that fined the two companies, and made them sell the defunct papers to new owners.

What's interesting is that while Karpel brings up larger themes—as does Carr—many journalists in the trenches don't touch on them much at all. The issues that working editors focus on are the eternal ones: small staffs and budgets, constricting page counts, green freelancers, the looming dailies and other alt weeklies encroaching on their markets (see sidebar).

Editors are smart enough to know that alt weeklies' real appeal has always been, and most likely always will be, owning the local scene, especially when it comes to arts coverage. Thus what goes on in the region that's simply referred to as "the back of the book"—a cozy nook housing previews, reviews, columns, listings, think pieces and more than its share of 1-900 ads—is susceptible to many circular debates.

Because the back of the book serves a variety of purposes, arts coverage often loses focus. While the front-of-the-book mandate is frequently chiseled in granite—to deliver well-reported, hard-hitting, independent journalism that covers the institutions and people that power the city—a back-of-the-book assignment often seems written on blackboards. Is the main job of these arts-and-culture sections to provide readers with a quick guide on what to do this weekend? Is its fundamental role to set the cultural agenda for the city? Is its responsibility solely to the reader or to the upkeep of the arts as an institution? Often, arts

sections are home to dueling ambitions and, as such, internal debates more often than not get tangled up in the mundane: how to get accurate movie times from theaters, how to set up music listings so they're the most user-friendly, how to select events for a picks page.

At the same time, within the paper as a whole are the turf battles between the front and the back of the book. While the arts-and-culture ads are the cash cow, alternative newsweeklies generally place muckraking first. As page-counts drop, there can be an uncomfortable tug-of-war between competing departments.

And what about the arts-news exposé? Alternative newsweeklies generally operate close to the bone. Staffing is tight. The guy they've hired as a freelancer to write about theater may be a great reviewer, but his interest and experience in hard news is limited at best. The star staff investigative reporter, who can deconstruct a financial report with the finesse of chef Mario

Batali throwing pizza dough, thinks writing about arts institutions is a demotion from city hall and ignores it. Plus, the arts scenes that alt-weeklies cover are often insular and the writers young and active. It's not unusual for a music editor to play in a band, date someone else in another band and share an apartment with the town's rock-club owner. This kind of coziness often inspires passionate writing but at the same time prevents the kind of watchdog qualities we hope for in the fourth estate.

With insiders blogging away on the often-amusing but equally often mundane, it seems that the best strategy for alt-weeklies would be to stake their claim on the arts territory they helped build, the one that isn't easily transferable— informed, impassioned, independent arts coverage that seeks not only to comment on the local scene but to affect it as well. Basically it all comes down to old-fashioned reporting. The end may be near, but then again, isn't it always?

## VOICES FROM THE ALTERNATIVE FIELD

### CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES

"It's difficult to find talented writers interested in, say, the local theater scene who aren't somehow in bed with the local theater scene, much less who can and will stick with it long enough to get sourced in and develop really good stories."

Lee Gardner, *Baltimore City Paper*

"Because our competition brings Gannett's muscle to the table, they can focus on whatever they choose and have a staffer cover it."

Cary Stemle, *Louisville Eccentric Observer*

"As editor of a weekly, I deal with the eternal pull of what to do for weekend events that might deserve reviews (dance, classical), but are impossible to review in a timely way. Lord knows, I've tried a variety of approaches, but it always felt like I was setting up a special "gifted and talented" section."

Patricia Calhoun, *Westword*

"Perhaps too many of our free-lancers are enamored with white boys with guitars, and not as comfortable touching jazz, hip hop etc."

Cary Stemle, *Louisville Eccentric Observer*

### DAILIES VS. ALT-WEEKLIES

"We try to—and often do—beat the daily at finding emerging artists."

Ken Edelstein, *Atlanta Creative Loafing*

"The arts supplement put out by the daily consists almost solely of positive previews, soft-ball interviews and non-opinion-derived listings."

Julia Goldberg, *Santa Fe Reporter*

### OWNERSHIP ISSUES

"Being part of a chain has given us access to some shared arts copy—movies, music—freeing up cash and writers to do more coverage of other local arts, including local music."

Patricia Calhoun, *Westword*

"I can say with some assurance that the politics, views, interests, and tastes of *City Paper* don't jive with the politics, views, interests, and tastes of the owners, but they are smart enough to know that's not the point. As long as the paper makes money and runs smoothly, they know better than to interfere."

Lee Gardner, *Baltimore City Paper*

# NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO

## CHANGES TO A TRUSTED FRIEND ON THE DIAL

BY GAL BECKERMAN

To many of its 22 million listeners, National Public Radio is the very definition of “comfort zone”—the familiar voice calmly conveying the morning news, the music review on the drive home from work, the Sunday-morning feature playing in the background as bagels are schmeared. For devotees, the idea that NPR might be changing is stomach-turning proof that one more beloved institution is bound for ruination. But changing it is, and nowhere was the tension between NPR and its listeners more evident than in the recent ouster of Bob Edwards, the longtime host of its flagship show, *Morning Edition*. More than 35,000 e-mails flooded in protesting the decision. But NPR stood firm. This was a “natural evolution,” declared the press releases, a response to “changing needs.” Listeners beware, it seemed to say; this is only the beginning.

Change at NPR is coming for two reasons. First, the listener base has doubled over the past five years, and programming has to transform to fit this larger, more diverse audience. But the more immediate reason is the \$235 million endowment bestowed on NPR last year by the late Joan B. Kroc, widow of Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald’s. According to the *Los*

*Angeles Times*, it is the largest gift ever made to a journalistic or cultural institution. Perpetually plagued with financial burdens, NPR suddenly has the chance to “be aspirational,” says Jay Kernis, NPR’s vice president for programming and a National Arts Journalism Program board member.

What will this mean for arts coverage? Since NPR is one of the few sources of intelligent reporting on books, films and music, many listeners are happy with the NPR they know and love. To them, “aspirational” may therefore sound like a move towards the dumbed-down and the bland. But the nature of the change is, in fact, much more nuanced and hard to qualify quite yet as positive or negative.

In order to look at NPR’s arts coverage, it’s first crucial to understand what NPR is. The name is often used as an umbrella term to describe the 679 stations or signals that call themselves members. But the stations are totally autonomous, deciding on their own what programs they will run. NPR simply produces shows and these stations decide whether to air them. The flagship shows—*Morning Edition*, *Weekend Edition* and *All Things Considered*—are played on most stations, but members are not obliged to

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Jay Kernis  
vice president  
for programming  
NPR

carry even a minimum amount of NPR programming. What you end up hearing when you turn on your local public radio station is a cocktail of NPR offerings, locally produced shows and programs put together by a number of other companies, such as Public Radio International, the creator of *This American Life*.

Arts coverage on NPR comes from two places. Some segments are created by show hosts, often middle-aged and white, with their own idiosyncratic tastes. “Think Eric Clapton and Diane Keaton,” says one NPR producer. The more diverse and ambitious coverage tends to come from the arts desk. NPR’s was reconstituted a year and a half ago when assistant managing editor and seasoned journalist Bill Wyman was put in charge with the idea of making the reporting harder, sharper and more enterprising.

NPR staffers were weary of a certain type of arts story that was overwhelming all others, one they dubbed the “there’s a guy who . . .” story. In a recent memo Wyman sent to staffers and freelancers, he went some way towards characterizing this pervasive genre: “There’s a guy who made a movie. There’s a woman who wrote a play. There are these guys who formed a dance company,” Wyman wrote. “This being NPR, the variations on this theme were crushingly predictable. There’s an African-American guy who wrote a book of poetry. There’s a disabled Native-American who wrote a play.”

Wyman says these “time-honored clichéd stories” were dominating the air. He thought they were predictable, lazy and stale; he and Kernis described them as having no real story to them, no compelling characters or eye-opening discoveries. They also lacked what Kernis calls “not enough driveway moments”—a story so intriguing you can’t leave your car.

Besides Wyman, NPR also hired two new reporters last year: Kim Masters, covering the film industry from Los Angeles, and Neda Ulaby, who focuses on investigative pieces. Wyman and Kernis both say they are determined to do “hard” arts stories; in a sense, the arts desk would be an extension of the news division.

By Kernis’ account, they are halfway there. A look at a typical month’s worth of stories generated by the arts desk in February 2004 shows that there is certainly a new direction. “Halfway there,” though, might be a bit too generous. Forty-five stories were produced that month, airing on either Morning Edition, Weekend Edition, Day to Day or All Things Considered. Twenty dealt with film; thirteen were on music; four had to do with books; and theater, televi-

sion, visual arts and architecture got only one or two stories each. Apart from these genre-specific categories, three stories looked at general media issues: One was a profile of the media company Comcast, another examined patent law and a third considered the FCC and the drive towards media consolidation.

Of the film pieces, five were reviews. Six of the film-related stories were tied to movie releases such as the NC-17 rating for *The Dreamers*, a racy new film by Bernardo Bertolucci; *Osama*, the first film to be made in post-Taliban Afghanistan; and the marketing of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. Between the reviews, the features, and the four pieces on the Oscars, there was still a tendency to follow the lead of the PR gods. But there were also a few stories that broke this mold. Ulaby created a segment on the decline of the blockbuster, while Masters contributed two pieces on Michael Eisner and the troubles inside Disney.

The other big category, music, had a similar ratio. A little more than half the stories were light profiles—one about guitarist Sam Miltich, another on Jenny Toomey, a rocker turned activist. And then there were a few enterprising pieces, like the skeptical analysis of the business of the Grammys and a look at rock-concert safety a year after the deadly Station club fire in West Warwick, R.I. The rest of the sections were all pretty much made up of “there’s a guy who . . .” stories such as an architecture piece on the man reconstructing Montpelier, President James Madison’s home, and a profile of playwright August Wilson.

Wyman and Kernis acknowledge that there is a long way to go if they want to change the nature of NPR arts stories. The kind of enterprising pieces they desire take more time to report and are more expensive to fund. Although the Kroc money might help solve these problems, it isn’t clear that any of it has been earmarked specifically for arts coverage.

The bulk of the money, \$200 million, will be used for long-term growth. The remaining \$35 million will pay immediate operating expenses and fund an ambitious three-year plan to expand the newsroom by 45 reporters and other staffers. The good news for those advocating “harder” arts coverage is that NPR has recently hired William Marimow, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter from the *Baltimore Sun* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, to help run the news operations. Marimow is intensely focused on bringing an investigative edge to all coverage, including culture. The bad news is that aside from a new

*“It’s not just covering the arts from a news standpoint that you need. It’s also celebrating the arts.”*

Tony Dec  
adjunct professor  
Columbia University’s  
Graduate School of  
Journalism

media beat—part of nine new beats including workplace, police and prisons, international economics and West Africa—Wyman and Kernis say there are no plans to use the money to hire new reporters or critics for the arts desk.

As could be expected, the changes haven't pleased everyone. Not just the decision to leave the arts desk out of the Kroc bonanza, but also the idea of sacrificing cultural coverage to the imperative for hard, breaking news. Critics seem content with the status quo and just want more of it. "Here's the junk-food queen leaving her money to the news junkies at NPR," says Tony Dec, onetime cultural programming director at Long Island Public Radio Network and currently an adjunct professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. "It's not just covering the arts from a news standpoint that you need. It's also celebrating the arts, letting listeners know, 'This is what's going on, listen to this.'"

The other main source of unhappiness is the almost complete lack of full-throated, diverse criticism, of regular voices cutting through the

immense cultural output of American society. There are a handful of guest critics who appear on the shows, but only one full-time reviewer, Bob Mondello on film. Wyman sees this need as well: "One thing we have not done yet but we are looking at now is how to do criticism with an eye towards developing really strong voices who are fun to listen to just to hear what they say."

An institution like NPR enjoys the love and devotion of its audience. But this can be both a blessing and a curse. For NPR, change might mean losing the very qualities that make it so adored. Should it cover the arts more aggressively or run tried-and-true profiles? Harsher critiques of film and music or reviews that simply point out what's good? More or less architecture or theater? For now, NPR is just happy, for the first time in its history, to have the money to develop a long-term, comprehensive vision rather than simply reacting to financial constraints. As Kernis puts it, "Suddenly someone says, 'I'm going to give you a little cushion so maybe you can stop for a second and think.'"

# REVIEWS AT A CLICK OF A MOUSE

## ONLINE COVERAGE COMES OF AGE

BY BILL GOLDSTEIN

In October 1998, the future of Web coverage of the arts seemed limitless. The city of the Internet age, as laid out by such sites as Microsoft's Sidewalk.com and CitySearch.com, was a cultural candy store of what to do and see, where to go, shop or eat. Among the first Web sites to break through to mainstream consciousness was Amazon.com—a bookstore, of all things. People on the Web were readers, likely theatergoers, and maybe they'd even buy art. Remember Art.com?

Looking back from 2004, it is almost surreal to view the time of the Internet boom. But for newspapers it was a whole new era. Traditionally, alternative weeklies like *Chicago Reader* and *The Village Voice* held the listings franchise, culling the necessary information on movies, theater, musical events and other happenings. With the creation of the Web, the press realized they could build sites with no limitations on space. Publications like *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Jose Mercury News* and others thus eagerly set out to expand their arts coverage to include more comprehensive listings than they could offer in print.

The Web could take the Friday or weekend sections, expand them indefinitely, and create

one-click entry points to a universe of comprehensive content devoted to books, theater, dance, classical music, jazz and museums. "It seemed essential, if you aspired to be a regional Web site, to have complete listings," says Jeanne Carstensen, a member of the NAJP advisory board and senior arts and culture editor of SFGate.com, the Web site of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "It made so much sense to serve up listings on the Internet—and there might be profits down the road."

Businesses like Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com also paid millions of dollars in fees to sites belonging to AOL, CNN, the *Times* and Time Warner in order to become their exclusive cyber booksellers. The driving force behind these lucrative contracts—which for a time turned the arts sections of many sites into reliable sources of revenue—was the idea that the Web audience would buy books, and by extension, movie tickets and other products after reading reviews and other coverage. And why not? Early Web audiences seemed both highly educated and rich. What better way than the arts to fulfill the lifestyle choices of a readership hungry for everything?

Yet the lesson of the last five years is that,

*"We wasted years, years. Listings is still a work in progress—they seem incredibly important but ironically, in the age of the database, most newspapers are not doing them well."*

Jeanne Carstensen  
senior arts and culture  
editor  
SFGate.com

overall, the Web audience is no more culturally savvy than the public at large. It is also just as interested—or not—in the arts. “We wasted years, years,” says Carstensen. “Listings is still a work in progress—they seem incredibly important but ironically, in the age of the database, most newspapers are not doing them well.”

Editorial budgets at the Web editions of newspapers are, perhaps necessarily, more focused on the national and international desks. “Breaking” arts news continues to be an elusive commodity in print or on the Web. Many publishers also find that most advertisers want news and sports over culture. Because of these hard-learned realities, spending for online arts coverage is today more closely tied to the advertising revenue it generates. Arts have therefore returned to their traditional place—the icing on the cake, not the editorial engine.

The breadth of arts content available in the late 1990s is now gone from many sites. Even so, some areas do work. Movie advertising is a particular strength at the *Times* online, the number one newspaper site. It redesigned this section in 2003 to accommodate larger advertising spots as well as added critics’ picks and archived movie and user reviews, and drew 1,088,000 unique users in the U.S. in June 2004, according to Nielsen/NetRatings, which measures domestic U.S. traffic. Its competitors are not other newspaper sites, per se, but portals like Yahoo, where ads are less expensive and the audience is larger. In June 2004, the movie section of Yahoo drew 8,647,000 unique domestic users, nearly as many as the 9,027,000 who came to the *Times* site itself. The difference in page views is even more vast—127,163,000 for Yahoo movies; 4,052,000 for the movie area of *Nytimes.com*.

Arts journalism is further hamstrung by a structural flaw in the relationship between many sites and their newspaper parents. Sites were set up quickly in the mid-1990s with separate staffs, often hired more for tech saviness than journalism experience. Though today the papers and their online editions clearly sink or swim together from a financial point of view, the editorial separation and inequality in staff experience leaves most sites in the position of stepchild: Part of the family, yet not quite fully integrated. They are, as it were, at the back of the bus in the back of the book.

This is not to say that the sites do not do important work in bringing information to readers. At the *Tribune*, the *Times* and other sites, some reviews are first published there or posted only on the Web when space is tight. In that

#### THE MOST WIDELY FREQUENTED WEB SITES

BRAND OR CHANNEL	UNIQUE AUDIENCE thousands
All Current Events & Global News	72474
CNN	22405
Yahoo! News	20966
MSNBC	20601
AOL News & Weather	11733
Gannett Newspapers and Newspaper Division	10423
NYTimes.com	9337
Internet Broadcasting Systems Inc.	9330
Knight Ridder Digital~	8638
Tribune Newspapers	7845
USATODAY.com	7374
Google News	6325
Hearst Newspapers Digital	5882
washingtonpost.com	5796
ABCNEWS Digital	5753
Associated Press	5730

sense, the online editions are only minimally different from print, and reflect rather than extend the journalistic mission of the papers that gave rise to them.

Although in these ways the Internet has not lived up to the expectations of its pioneers, it has thrown into relief a paramount challenge for newspapers, which historically have used critics’ and reporters’ expertise as a filter to guide and educate readers. As message boards, listservs and blogs have demonstrated, people don’t need supposedly authoritative voices for either listings or reviews. The simple availability of user critiques may account for some of their popularity, and as *Reporting the Arts II* documents, the print space allotted to reviews continues to shrink. But the shift in editorial attention at many newspapers may reflect the growing number of review choices, even as it creates new difficulties as well as opportunities for the journalism profession. The number of people going to Yahoo instead of newspapers for news and information—as suggested by the size of the audience for Yahoo movies—is a stark and frightening problem for newspapers on the Web and in print.

Arts organizations face new challenges as well—including, as this report notes, the difficulty of getting print and/or online coverage. Fortunately the Web offers new ways to get the message out, including the ability to bypass

newspapers. It gives those that can afford a significant online presence the tools to e-mail customers, fund-raise, sell tickets or even stream performances to a wider audience.

New York's Metropolitan Opera, which first launched a site in 1996, is a case in point. At press time, the Met was planning on opening a new site by late summer or early fall 2004. Its aim is to improve its online-ticketing capabilities, do Web broadcasts, and possibly, at a future date, distribute archival performances "both as a revenue stream and as a way of getting the Met's name out there," says Stuart Pearce, assistant manager in charge of planning and marketing. The new site will function as a source of "audi-

ence development, even if it does not mean attending a performance here." As Suzanne Gooch, the Met's director of presentations, notes, the site "is our way of getting to a new audience. That's our long-term concern. I grew up in New Jersey when there was an emphasis on musical education in public schools. A lot of performing-arts organizations are striving to replace that."

Many small groups may not see themselves in the same boat as the Met. But in spite of differences in size and reputation, the challenges are similar. What public schools—and arts journalism—fail to offer today, the Met and other organizations must provide tomorrow. The Web may be the medium in which to try.

*As message boards, listservs and blogs have demonstrated, people don't need supposedly authoritative voices for either listings or reviews.*

# CULTURE ON TELEVISION

## CELEBRITY MUSCLES IN

BY ANDREW TYNDALL

Popular fascination with celebrity grows from strength to strength. And since many celebrities climb to fame through show business, it is appropriate, and inevitable, that reporting about arts and culture should ride on the coattails of celebrity culture. Television journalism about the arts—specifically mass entertainment—has joined in this groundswell over the last five years. However, TV’s increase in arts coverage was not evenly distributed throughout the broadcast day. Nor did it provide airtime to all kinds of cultural activity.

Since 1998 the morning shows—NBC’s *Today*, ABC’s *Good Morning America*, and CBS’s addition *The Early Show*—have doubled the volume of their A&C segments. At the same time, coverage in prime-time magazine programs has gone from negligible to noticeable. However, on the hard-news-oriented evening newscasts—*ABC World News Tonight*, the *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News*—A&C continued to be a minor beat.

For *Reporting the Arts II* we have expanded our analysis of TV coverage to include the syndicated tabloid news shows that immediately follow the nightly news programs. If *Entertainment Tonight*, *Extra* or *Access Hollywood* are consid-

ered, as it were, the second half of an hourlong evening news block that starts with serious national and international news, then there can be no doubt that TV viewers receive ample entertainment coverage in the early evening as well as at breakfast time. However the “entertainment” and the “Hollywood” in their names were somewhat misleading: More than 40 percent of their content concerned celebrity news, gossip and scandal unrelated to any specific show-business production.

We have further broadened this study by adding CBS’s idiosyncratic 90-minute *Sunday Morning* magazine show. It devoted almost half its editorial content to arts-related topics. With its unflagging commitment to so-called high arts, *Sunday Morning* was unlike any other TV news show, and something of a lone television champion of the arts outside the realm of show business. Unlike the weekly morning programs, in October 2003 it paid only passing attention to movies, television and popular music. Instead we saw features on such topics as art photography coffee-table books, artisanal master woodworkers and the novel that inspired Clint Eastwood’s newly released *Mystic River*, not the movie itself.

For this study we did not include TV journal-

ism on cable or on public broadcasting, so PBS, CNN, FOX (broadcast or cable) and MSNBC are not represented.

#### CELEBRITY CULTURE

The evening news programs contained minimal arts coverage. In October 1998 the three news-oriented evening shows devoted a mere 11 minutes out of a combined newshole of some 20 hours to covering arts-related stories. Five years later the coverage was a similarly paltry 18 total minutes—that’s six minutes, on average, per month for each evening news show. Only two events merited serious attention: the much anticipated opening of Frank Gehry’s Disney Hall in Los Angeles (which was also featured on CBS’s *Sunday Morning*) and the maiming of *Siegfried & Roy*’s Roy Horn by his own tiger in Las Vegas.

Elsewhere celebrity was the rule in attracting coverage. But celebrities are not quite identical with mass entertainers and celebrity culture is not precisely the same thing as show business. In October 2003 we found numerous examples of coverage of show-business stars who were newsworthy for their non-showbiz activities—the most notable was Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was elected governor of California. We also came across non-showbiz personalities suspected of scandalous behavior that qualified them for the sort of treatment usually reserved for their entertainment-industry brethren. The early evening entertainment tabloids reported heavily on the pretrial wrangling in the rape prosecution of Los Angeles Lakers star Kobe Bryant. They also searched for a celebrity angle in non-show-business stories. When wildfires raged in Southern California, segments were devoted to which movie sets or star residences might be threatened.

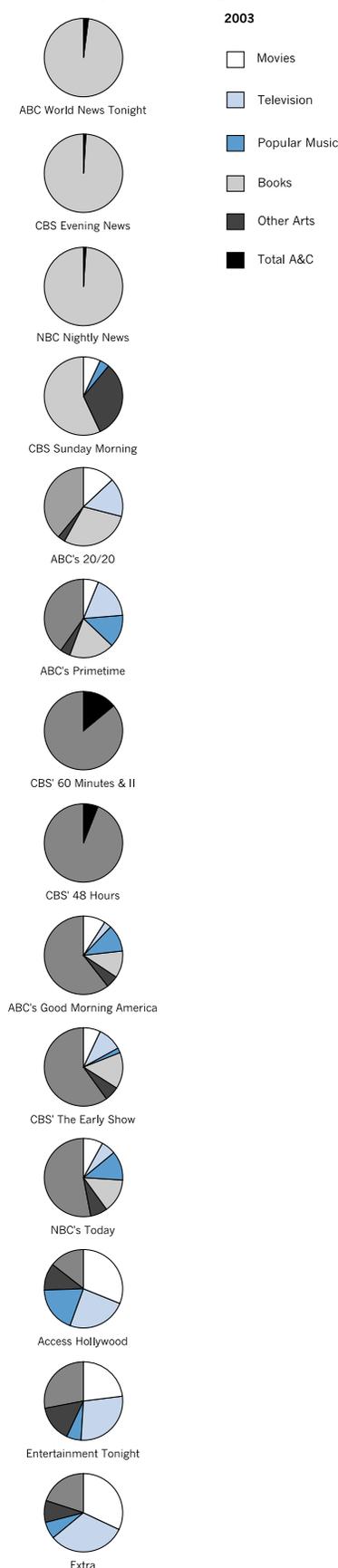
#### FOR THE TABLOIDS, IT’S ALL IN THE PACKAGING

Not that the tabloids strayed too far from their roots as buzz machines. Fully one-third of their content did consist of showcasing new movie releases, TV shows and the latest pop-music videos. There were some variances in emphasis. *Extra* spent more time on promotion. *Access Hollywood* focused more on gossip. *Entertainment Tonight* contained more coverage on nonarts media, including magazine journalism and advertising.

The journalistic style of the programs underscored their origins in the mass entertainment industry. Unlike the evening newscasts, which are a correspondent’s medium consisting of

### Arts-and-Culture Newshole

percentage of time assigned to arts-and-culture coverage



reporters' taped packages, the tabloids are a video editor's medium. They aired a dizzying montage of clips and soundbites. In October 2003 the three programs combined ran 629 separate clips from movies, 914 from TV and 109 from music videos—an average of 24 clips per program. *Extra* led the way, averaging more than 2.5 clips per minute in its promotional pieces.

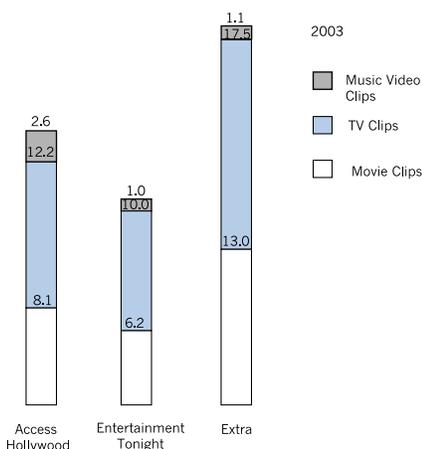
As for soundbites, the tabloid programs were predictably populated by celebrities. On average, every minute of coverage, excluding commercials, internal promotions, titles and teasers, contained a couple of soundbites in addition to the clips. A remarkable 76 percent of all the soundbites came from the mouths of celebrities and performers. Show-business professionals responsible for the creation of much of the entertainment fare featured in these programs—producers, writers, executives and so on—received hardly any attention, accounting for less than 3 percent of all soundbites.

#### THE ARTS GAIN IN THE MORNING

Arts and cultural coverage has become more prominent on the morning shows. In our last study we noted that as the two-hour programs progressed from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., the hard-news content waned while show business and celebrity coverage increased, with a mix of personal lifestyle, consumer concerns and household tips. We noted that the publishing industry was particularly well-represented. Books were publicized for their own sake, and authors were interviewed as well in their capacity as experts to comment on current news developments, to provide self-help advice, or even to share recipes from their cookbooks.

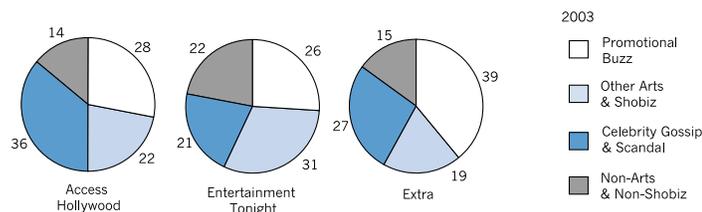
#### Tabloids Entertainment Clips

average number of entertainment clips aired in each day's editorial content from movies, television and music videos



#### Tabloids Buzz, Scandal, Gossip

percentage of time assigned to promotion of current releases (movies, television and popular music), other arts and showbiz news and features, celebrity gossip & scandal, and non-arts coverage



In October 1998 we found that 20 percent of the feature and interview segments on *Today* and *Good Morning America* covered A&C. Five years later we measured three networks' segments (CBS's *The Early Show* launched in 1999)—and found that that proportion had doubled. The amount of book-related segments had increased proportionately. Self-promotion for each of the networks' programming rose even faster.

Some news segments on the morning shows contained significant reports on the arts. For example, *Good Morning America* went on the road to the Vatican to cover Pope John Paul II's 25th anniversary as pontiff. While we classified this as religious coverage, it also contained significant reportage on architecture and art history.

Like the tabloids, the morning shows gave priority to the show-business-celebrity-news crossover, devoting headline attention to Bryant, Horn and Schwarzenegger. Another noteworthy morning trend was the rise in music programming. All the networks assigned large blocks of morning air time to live concerts. *Good Morning America* showcased Brit pop veterans Tom Jones and Rod Stewart; and, along with CBS's *Early Show*, it welcomed Clay Aitken, who was elevated to stardom by rival FOX on *American Idol*. *Today's Superstar* was the title of an *American Idol*-style contest staged by NBC for pop star wannabes from its audience in its 8:30 a.m. half hour (*Today* also features a third hour that we didn't monitor for consistency's sake). By no stretch can such concert segments be labeled "music journalism." Nevertheless, these segments show how eager news executives are to violate traditional boundaries where the arts are concerned. In this instance, their so-called news programs became actual producers of entertainment rather than the source of journalism about it.

#### PUBLISHING IN TELEVISION, A HAPPY ALLIANCE

As noted, success in show business is one path to celebrity status, which is why A&C coverage and celebrity coverage frequently overlap. When it comes to trying to attract the attention of TV

journalists, the publishing industry benefits from a different relationship to celebrity. A tell-all book, unlike a movie or TV show or hit single, is not the origin of a celebrity's fame. The memoir deal and subsequent promotional tour is instead an imprimatur that those 15 minutes of fame have been achieved. If the author or the subject of a book is famous enough, the exclusive material contained in its pages make it irresistible for TV coverage.

October 2003 offered two such examples: Elizabeth Smart and Princess Diana—two non-show-business celebrities—were both showcased as central characters in newly released books. The “exclusives” these books offered made them newsworthy fodder for both the morning programs and the networks’ prime-time shows. Diana’s butler, Paul Burrell, received prominent airtime from ABC’s Barbara Walters on *20/20* and on the same network’s *Good Morning America* for his tell-all book *A Royal Duty*. NBC’s Katie Couric landed exclusive access to Smart’s parents for *Dateline* and *Today*, where they recounted their successful nine-month search for their teenage daughter in *Bringing Elizabeth Home*.

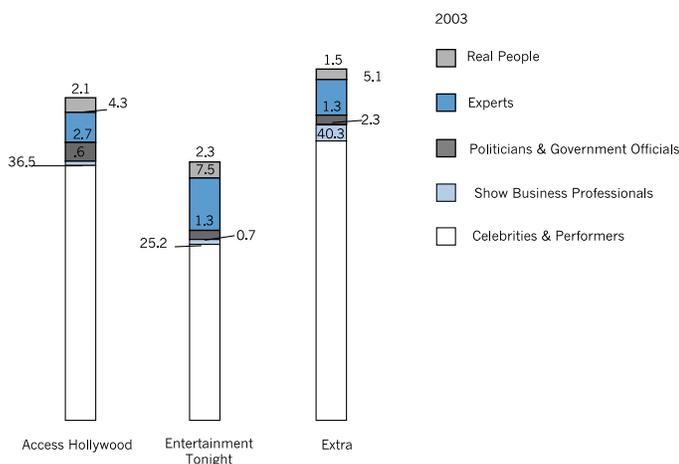
The month we studied did not include such similar mega-events as the book tour for Jessica Lynch’s Iraq war memoir or Bill Clinton’s sprawling autobiography, but as these examples show, October 2003 was no aberration.

#### IN THE FUTURE: 15 SECONDS OF FAME

In October 2003 we saw the fault lines between mass entertainment A&C and celebrity culture exposed in two contrasting directions. The head-

### Tabloids Soundbites

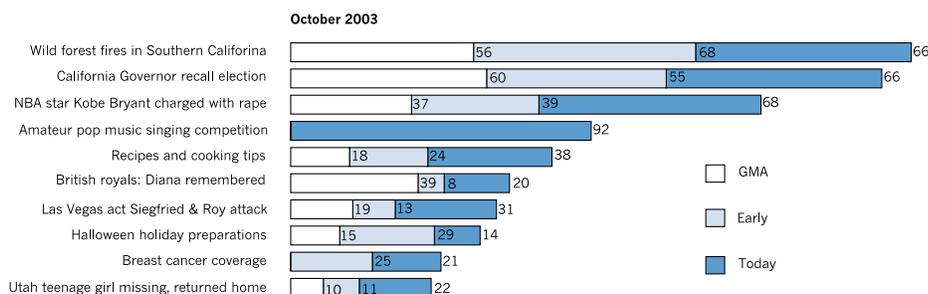
average number of soundbites quoted in each day's editorial content by celebrities and others



lines granted to Arnold Schwarzenegger showed how a celebrity can exploit his origins in entertainment stardom and then shuck them off to enter unrelated fields (a development not without precedent in California’s gubernatorial politics). The ability of the publishing industry to turn non-show-business figures into media-accessible celebrities proved yet again that the two fields will inevitably find common cause. As much as television journalism, at least in the mornings and in tabloid syndication, tries to pry celebrity culture away from A&C coverage, the media world of publicity, promotion and buzz proves them to be inseparable.

### Morning Programs

top ten most heavily covered stories (ranked in order of time on all three morning programs combined) in interview and feature segments



# SPANISH-LANGUAGE ARTS COVERAGE

BY ANTONIO MEJÍAS-RENTAS

ACCORDING TO THE U.S. Census, America's Hispanic population reached 39.9 million in 2003, accounting for nearly half of the nation's population growth since 2000 and making it the nation's fastest-growing minority group.

Those numbers help explain a recent boom in Spanish-language daily press, long served by three major dailies, New York's *El Diario/La Prensa*, Miami's *El Herald* and Los Angeles's *La Opinión*. Now it boasts four times as many publications and has spawned assorted newspaper battles. Last September, after *The Dallas Morning News* publisher Belo Corporation launched the six-day-a-week *Al Día*, competitor Knight Ridder, publisher of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, responded by transforming its twice-weekly *La Estrella* into the five-day *Diario La Estrella*. And, as this article was going to press, a U.S. subsidiary of Spain's Recoletos publishing group was expected soon to enter the American market with four newspapers in Houston, San Antonio, Austin and the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

These Spanish-language dailies face further competition from an assortment of smaller weeklies, dailies and alternative publications.

"The industry is definitely hot now," notes Kirk Whisler, president of Latino Print Network, the research and marketing arm of the National Association of Hispanic Publications.

Competition became especially heated early this year in southern California, when the Tribune Company sold its 50 percent stake in *La Opinión* back to the heirs of founder José Ignacio Lozano. Tribune—which owns the *Chicago Tribune* and has long run a *Hoy* newspaper franchise in Chicago and New York—then unveiled a Los Angeles edition of *Hoy*, making the 78-year-old *La Opinión* compete against another daily for the first time in decades. In response, *La Opinión* joined forces with *El Diario* publisher CPK Media to form Impremedia, which created and acquired other regional Spanish-language newspapers. "It's significant that Tribune and other companies are trying to find a broader base in the Latino community," says Felix Gutiérrez, professor of journalism at USC's Annenberg School for Communication. "It makes *La Opinión* a better newspaper, and the competition will make it more lively."

But while it may eventually help *La Opinión*, the increased competition has been hard on the

nation's largest Spanish-language paper. Soon after the merger, management restructured the paper's various departments and realigned workers' duties. As a result, nearly 50 noneditorial employees lost their jobs.

Life has since calmed down at *La Opinión*, a 126,000 daily-circulation paper—103,000 on Saturdays and 71,000 on Sundays—that constitutes the main source of Spanish-language coverage for a limited, albeit economically strong portion of southern California's Latino community. *La Opinión's* readers consist almost exclusively of recent immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, blue-collar workers who speak little or no English.

They are served by *La Opinión's* 82 editorial employees, eight of whom work full-time in the entertainment section. Staff assigned to covering the local scene is complemented by a regular team of half a dozen freelancers, mostly charged with reviewing music and the performing arts.

Arts coverage consists of the six- to eight-page *Espectáculos* section Friday to Wednesday. It is replaced on Thursdays by the tabloid *La Vibra*, which is aimed at 18- to 34-year-olds, and contains stories on the alternative music scene, Spanish-language rock and profiles of up-and-coming artists. On Friday as many as two pages are taken up by listings or short previews of weekend activities. A major personality profile or arts story normally dominates the Sunday cover, with roughly half of the remaining newshole devoted to museum and gallery listings.

Accessibility is the overriding factor in determining coverage in *Espectáculos*, which balances an editorial goal of covering the major cultural events in Los Angeles with an obligation to provide information on the art forms its readers are interested in. And since 81 percent of readers are drawn to Spanish-language music, radio and television as well as films and videos, *Espectáculos* devotes a major portion of its coverage to pop culture.

Overall, 62 out of 141 articles published in October 2003 were about music. The biggest such story was on Mexican pop superstar Luis Miguel, who released "33," his first album in several years, and launched an international tour beginning in Los Angeles. Miguel received three *Espectáculos* front-page features, including a staff review of his L.A. concert. Most of the other music-related pieces also dealt with Spanish-language performers. The three exceptions were a profile of bilingual rapper Fat Joe, a review of a concert by Luciano Pavarotti in the Mexican bor-

der town of Mexicali and a feature on the Los Angeles Philharmonic's much-touted Walt Disney Concert Hall, which also received two front-page stories in the news section.

The next most frequently covered subject was film, accounting for a total of 31 stories in October, 18 of which had non-Latino subjects. Of those 31 articles, more than half were box-office reports and four were reviews, all from wire services. Other major subjects covered in *Espectáculos* were books and literature: 13 stories, though not a single book review; eight TV pieces; seven dance articles and four theater write-ups.

Despite *La Opinión's* ongoing commitment to coverage, its limited staff is unable to fully portray the richness of the artistic endeavor in the community it covers. This is unfortunate. For while *La Opinión* is not alone in delivering cultural news, it has an almost exclusive hold on the region's daily arts coverage. Readers therefore don't have much else to turn to. The Tribune Company's newly launched Los Angeles *Hoy* has a promising weekend pullout section, but most of its arts-and-entertainment coverage comes out of New York. "While we have many quality journalists in hard news," observes Whisler of the growing Spanish-language press, "we still have relatively few trained journalists in the arts and other specialized fields, such as sciences and the environment."

Several southern California papers have also made forays into the market, producing some sort of weekly or monthly Spanish-language publication such as the *Orange County Register's* weekly, *Excelsior*, with its strong *Pura Vida* entertainment section. Other newcomers include the Los Angeles Newspaper Group's *Impacto USA* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune's* *Enlace*. *Teleguía* and *El Aviso Clasificado* are among a handful of free weekly shoppers papers that provide some entertainment advertorials and wire stories in addition to their classified ads.

Not surprisingly, coverage of Latino arts is not limited to the Spanish-language media in southern California. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Register* have shown interest in the subject. In order to attract some of the Hispanic market, the *Times* launched a Latino Initiative in 1998. Its intent was to increase coverage of Latino subjects throughout the paper, and it has met with noticeable success. "To the extent that the *Times* is the ultimate moderator of what is important to the people who live in Los Angeles, the fact that the Latino initiative included

*"It's significant that Tribune and other companies are trying to find a broader base in the Latino community."*

Felix Gutiérrez  
professor of journalism  
USC's Annenberg  
School of Communication

improved arts coverage was a step in the right direction,” says Professor Gutiérrez, who notes that coverage of Latino arts may also help newspapers in metropolitan areas boost their dwindling circulations.

Both papers need improvement. While the *Times* and the *Register* report on Spanish-language electronic media, neither gives equal time to Spanish-language literature or theater. And at present, the most prominent Latino arts coverage at the *Times* comes from a single writer, Agustín Gurza, who mostly covers Spanish-language music for the paper’s Calendar section. In recent years he has explored such subjects as the explosion of a homegrown Mexican-musical style known as “Urban Regional” and the waning popularity of salsa among younger audiences.

At the *Register*—which was the area’s only other daily to review the Luis Miguel show—Justino Aguila covers a broader local and national Latino-culture beat that includes music, film and television. “The reality is that I am writing for an English-language newspaper,” says Aguila, who is very much aware of the need to make stories accessible to his non-Hispanic audience. “Although we have many Latino readers, my audience is mostly English-speaking. Non-

Latinos are being exposed for the first time to people like Luis Miguel, Gabriela Beltrán and Juan Gabriel.”

For the most part, arts coverage is absent from Los Angeles’s hugely successful Spanish-language FM radio stations, which long ago traded their news departments for all-music formats. There are nine such stations in town, and aside from celebrity-driven gossip by morning DJs, about the only on-air time given to arts discussion is the occasional publicity-driven visit by a recording artist plugging a new CD.

Almost all of the daily TV newscasts from the area’s six Spanish-language stations include some sort of entertainment report. They are largely dominated by self-serving interviews with actors appearing on shows aired by those same stations or musicians who record for labels owned by the parent company of the outlet.

“I think there’s a lot of room for really authoritative criticism of music, theater and the visual arts,” says Professor Gutiérrez, who notes that there is still a need for improvement in Spanish-language coverage. “If newspapers want to grow, particularly as they look at bottom-line issues, the arts is clearly the area where they can attract younger readers.”

# ASIAN-AMERICAN ARTS AND THE MEDIA

BY LILY TUNG

While mainstream media outlets throughout the country work to attract Latino readers, few are making concerted efforts to reach out to Asian readers. What may seem like an oversight, however, is due more to the nature of America's Asian population. Most non-English-speaking Latino readers, regardless of ethnicity, are tied together by the Spanish language. Non-English-speaking Asian-Americans, though, do not share a common tongue. In addition, artistic tastes and cultural trends vary widely within Asian-American communities.

That makes this minority group, nearly 12 million strong, difficult to pin down as a newspaper-reading audience. This is true even in cities where they compose a large segment of the population. As a result, mainstream media coverage of Asian-American artists is often inconsistent and simplistic.

Tony Award-winner David Henry Hwang (*M. Butterfly*, *Flower Drum Song*) notes that since he began writing plays, times have improved for Asian-Americans in art and entertainment, but they still face a continuing lack of media attention. "It depends on your visibility. It's not hard for Jackie Chan to get press coverage," says

Hwang. "But if you're not doing work acknowledged by the mainstream, then it's more difficult. It's hard to find Asian-American actors who are 'bankable' outside the action genre."

Indeed, Asian-American artists say journalists tend to offer more coverage when their projects appear ostensibly "ethnic." Mia Katigbak, artistic director of the National Asian-American Theatre Company, has found that shows featuring Asian actors in traditionally Western roles garner considerably less press than those with Asian themes. "We put up American and European classics. And then people say, 'Why aren't you doing kabuki? Why aren't you portraying something Asian?' It gets complicated because, on one hand, I want to choose more newsworthy material, but then I don't want to do that because it goes against my vision."

"It's easier for studios to think that if they're using an Asian actor, that person should be doing something Asian," notes Hwang. "Otherwise they think, 'Why don't we just use someone else.' The media likes to type people because the nuances about the way people exist between different categories is harder for people to grasp and reporters to capture."

Consequently, Asian-Americans also find

*"We put up American and European classics. And then people say, 'Why aren't you doing kabuki? Why aren't you portraying something Asian?'"*

Mia Katigbak  
artistic director  
*National Asian-American  
Theatre Company*

themselves competing with what Bay Area visual artist Indigo Som calls “imported” people of color. “There’s a whole layer of the art world who are international people who have grown up in other places of the world,” says Som. “It seems less threatening to a white audience if it can go into tourist mode and hip international mode than go into its own very unglamorous working class. It’s as if people are more comfortable with some exotic African prince than some American in Oakland.”

Some artists believe the importation of Asian talent actually allows producers to say they’re achieving greater ethnic diversity even if only a few minority Americans are getting work. Such a move, though, feeds into longstanding stereotypes of Asians. “Chow Yun Fat is a great actor, but it’s very difficult to push that,” says filmmaker Justin Lin, whose controversial film *Better Luck Tomorrow* was arguably the biggest Asian-American arts story of 2003. “He’s there for one reason—to be an action and kung fu star. Until we can see three-dimensional characters, then any progress we’re making is just sideways.”

Adds Hwang: “It’s also difficult when the media decides to designate one official ethnic person. It’s been me, it’s been Amy Tan. If you’re not the official ethnic person, then it’s difficult to get coverage. Journalists do want to represent minority groups, but it’s easier for them to just focus on one person.”

Another major obstacle Asian-Americans face is the lack of their own voice in the press. Besides book reviewer Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times* has no other Asian critics. According to a recent report by The Knight Foundation, the situation is not much better in the rest of the country; at least 374 American newspapers admit they have no minority staff members. In that report, The American Society of Newspaper Editors stated that only 13 percent of the 1,413 newspapers surveyed reached the goal of parity between U.S. newsrooms and nonwhite communities.

When dealing with such abstract and complex issues, many Asian-American artists are at a loss to determine what they can do to get better coverage. But there are growing outlets. Lin says the Internet has been a good alternative method to disseminate information, partly because it is highly populated by Asian users. Niche publications such as *Hyphen Magazine*, *Giant Robot* and *AsianWeek* also cater to an Asian-American readership.

Som says developing creative story angles, like those with human-interest themes, can help

attract mainstream media attention. She accidentally discovered this while pursuing her latest art project, which looks at the relationship between Chinese restaurants and American identity. She received a great deal of press after collecting hundreds of menus from restaurants around the country and opening a photography show of some of her work. But it seemed journalists were more interested in what the project said about Americana than what it said about art per se.

Lin, who reiterates that the issues of race in the media are often more complicated than can easily be grasped, says playing a specifically Asian-American angle can be a double-edged sword. “When publicizing a film like *Better Luck Tomorrow*, for example, you could use the angle that this is the first Asian-American film to get picked up by a major studio,” he says. “But when Caucasian viewers read that, many might think they don’t want to see the film because it sounds preachy, instructional or outside their experience.”

Whatever the angle, however, successful Asian-American artists warn their peers against resorting to a victim mentality. “I’ve noticed that the marginal status can become an excuse for lower levels of professionalism and quality,” says Som.

When the quality is there, artists can then start thinking about gathering support. “One simple thing Asian-Americans can do is support the artists whom we want covered more,” says Hwang. “If people go to see a show, the media will follow.”

That, however, may be more difficult than it sounds. “Many Asian-Americans aren’t interested in their own artistic work,” notes Lin. “At the Sundance Film Festival I went into a studio marketing meeting. They had pie charts, and I saw slices labeled African-American, Caucasian and Latino. When I asked, ‘Where are the Asian-Americans?’ one executive said, ‘Look, Asian-Americans put a lot of money into the community, but their spending patterns are white, so we consider them Caucasian.’ We’ll go see a white actor in a film; we’ll go see an Adam Sandler movie. Studio executives don’t think about racial politics, they think about making money. African-Americans will support their own films, so studios make specifically African-American films because they know they can make at least \$7-8 million in one weekend. That’s where I see a glimmer of hope. If 10 percent of the Asian-American population came to an Asian-American movie, film executives would see a market there and start paying attention.”

*“One simple thing Asian-Americans can do is support the artists whom we want covered more. If people go to see a show, the media will follow.”*

David Henry Hwang  
*playwright*

# COVERAGE OF ARTS ABROAD

BY SANDRA HEERMA VAN VOSS & JOWI SCHMITZ

**D**OES AMERICA HAVE it all? Artwise, it certainly appears that way. At first glance the nation's cities seem to have not only an abundance of homegrown arts, but foreign movies, exhibitions and performances as well. American newspapers carry foreign news and business articles right alongside foreign arts stories. And the numbers in this year's *Reporting the Arts II* study reveal a seemingly equal level of interest in both American and foreign arts. In October 2003 each of the local and national papers studied by the National Arts Journalism Program ran an average of 33 such pieces (see chart).

A closer look, however, reveals that they're generally short and news-oriented, and only 39 percent were written by staffers. Of the rest, 16 percent were composed by freelancers or syndicated columnists, and the rest were taken from the wires or other sources. When it comes to pieces of any breadth, 22 percent of them focused on film and actors. Staff-written pieces on foreign arts are rare. The average paper had less than one every two days. *The Charlotte Observer* and *The Oregonian* each published only one staff-written foreign arts article; the *Oakland Tribune* and *The Providence Journal*

had none. The one big exception was *The New York Times*, whose writers turned out a stunning 120 pieces.

As Dutch arts journalists staying in New York City, we were puzzled by the enormous difference between local and international arts coverage. We thus decided to look into this disparity, and in interviews with local arts editors we learned that covering foreign arts is far from a top priority at the papers. "Our mandate is clearly to cover the local arts scene first," says *The Houston Chronicle's* arts-and-entertainment editor Lindsay Heinsen. "Then come regional and national arts."

When local papers pick up international arts news stories from the wires, they can end up in the arts or foreign-news sections, or even on the front page. Recent examples include the destruction of the towering Bamiyan Buddha statues by the Taliban in 2001. And then there was the juicy scandal of the overweight Russian ballerina who sued the Bolshoi Ballet, which ended up being the most widely covered international-arts story in October 2003. A local angle always gives stories a sense of urgency, for instance when *The Providence Journal* expanded its coverage of the 2003 looting of the Baghdad Museum after

some of the stolen artwork turned up in town. Similarly, *The Houston Chronicle's* interest in Nazi-pilfered art increased when it was revealed that a Matisse at the local Menil Collection had been stolen during World War II.

With recurring events like the Venice Biennale or the Cannes Film Festival, arts editors find themselves in a difficult bind. They want to cover the events. Yet articles written abroad can cost several thousand dollars, and most budgets don't allow for a reporter to travel that far. "The way things are now," notes Ed Smith, *The Denver Post's* arts and features editor, "I'd rather cover Cannes with two extensive wire stories, like we did last year." There are of course exceptions. Both the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Chicago Tribune* sent reporters to Cannes in 2003. "We felt that that's where the news was," says *Tribune* arts editor Scott Powers.

A local angle sometimes opens up additional opportunities. An editor from *The Providence Journal* once accompanied a city high school class to the Edinburgh Theatre Festival in Scotland. *The Houston Chronicle* recently sent its art critic to Moscow's Pushkin Museum to cover the display of works from Houston's Museum of Fine Arts. The *Chicago Tribune* meanwhile covers London stage premieres involving local celebrities and also keeps close track of Daniel Barenboim, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's globe-trotting artistic director.

A common and relatively inexpensive way to get foreign arts coverage is for staff writers or trusted freelancers to travel abroad on their own and cover arts events along the way. In return, writers pick up a modest freelance fee to cover part of their travel expenses. According to Smith, *The Denver Post's* young pop critic receives a \$2,000 travel budget when he visits European concerts and "sleeps on his friends' couches for a long time." The *Chicago Tribune's* visual-art critic, Alan Artner, writes from wherever he's holidaying. Cities like Chicago and San Francisco also get a steady influx of international art companies and exhibitions, so there is often more than enough to cover in town without

going away. "They have trouble covering everything here," notes Powers.

The editors we spoke with all agree that globalization has made the world a smaller place, but

### NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF FOREIGN ARTS, OCTOBER 2003

	ARTICLES BY NON-STAFFERS:	ARTICLES BY STAFFERS:
Charlotte Observer	27	1
Chicago Sun-Times	25	21
Chicago Tribune	23	9
Cleveland Plain Dealer	25	7
Contra Costa Times	12	2
Denver Post	21	5
Houston Chronicle	43	8
Miami Herald	46	15
New York Times	26	120
Oakland Tribune	6	0
Oregonian	16	1
Philadelphia Daily News	8	8
Philadelphia Inquirer	18	17
Providence Journal	12	0
Rocky Mountain News	17	4
San Francisco Chronicle	30	13
San Francisco Examiner	2	2
San Jose Mercury News	31	3
Wall Street Journal	8	8
USA Today	15	12
Average:	20.55	12.8

they don't seem to assign themselves a big role in this "global village." Their main concern is to inform readers about their own particular region. The underlying and widespread assumption is that readers with international artistic interests will turn to *The New York Times*. Half of the *Times's* readers now live outside the New York City metropolitan area, and for this audience the

*Times* has become the main source among newspapers for foreign arts features and reviews. According to Richard Pena, program director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and director of the New York Film Festival, the *Times*' power over the fate of foreign films, for instance, is "almost absolute." No attention from the *Times* means instant death, since most foreign films get very limited distribution and therefore attention.

This doesn't mean, however, that the *Times*' foreign arts sections are truly global. As senior arts writer John Rockwell notes, "London gets the most coverage by far. There's a natural English bias, and there's always been a constant cultural flow between London and New York." Steven Erlanger, the *Times*' culture editor from January 2003 to May 2004, admits that the paper's correspondents should travel more. "There should be more arts stories from Russia, Spain, Italy. There's not enough Asian culture either, and we could do better on national sub-cultures like Latin art."

Rockwell says that the process of deciding what gets covered is "pretty helter-skelter." Critics sometimes get tips from the *Times*' London bureau and other sources. Suggestions have to then make it past the culture editor, who is always mindful of tight travel budgets.

Rockwell believes the *Times* currently covers more foreign arts than when he joined the paper 20 years ago. The nature of the coverage, though, has changed. Criticism has given way to more, and briefer, reported pieces. But the

*Times*' overall devotion to culture remains impressive. Negotiations are taking place for later deadlines, more newspaper space and, most importantly, an increase in the number of culture reporters. Rightfully so, says Erlanger. "The arts section brings in 35 percent of the paper's revenue. We know there is a large, interested audience out there."

But the *Times*' arts section stands out not only in its resources but also in its approach. The paper prides itself on being an arbiter of world events, an attitude reflected in its cultural coverage. Many European papers operate in the same way. The Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad*, Britain's *The Guardian*, Germany's *Die Zeit* and France's *Le Figaro* all regularly publish internationally oriented arts articles, and even if their writers don't always report from the site of a story, the papers strive to make these pieces relevant to their readers. If there isn't a local angle, they'll create one. A *NRC* article might use the skillful organization of an exhibition in Washington as a model for the Netherlands; a British news story on Spanish surrealist Salvador Dali can be spiced up with local examples.

American regional papers would greatly benefit from using this strategy more often. It could broaden their readers' outlook without cutting them loose from their local roots. In a world so grimly filled with the fear of anything "foreign," that appears more than ever to be an urgently important goal.