

THE PAPERS

ART AND COMMERCE AT THE CROSSROADS

THE FIRST NATIONAL newspapers in the United States were official voices of political parties, and their pages were filled almost exclusively with partisan news. By the middle of the 19th century, those papers had faded. The arts, meanwhile, emerged in the 1830s and 1840s as a regular feature of the new urban press, and reports on theater, painting and literature appeared alongside stories about crime, business and sports. Newspapers and the arts both became more diversified over the years, yet as a *New York Herald Tribune* reporter noted in the 1940s, arts coverage remained “a small show in the larger show of a newspaper’s coverage.”

While a particular newspaper might be nationally known, it would be available on a daily basis solely in its home city. Modern national newspapers are therefore a relatively recent phenomenon, only emerging within the last two decades. There are currently three publications that can make the claim of being true national papers—*The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Each writes about the arts differently, their individual coverage rooted in that publication’s history. In order to gauge how these papers report the arts, the Center for Arts and Culture in Washington, D.C. in association with the National Arts Journalism Program in New York City, analyzed the *Times*, the *Journal* and *USA Today* during October 1998. This was not simply a quantitative audit of the number and size of arts pieces run, but also a qualitative survey and comparison of the type of articles that made it into the papers. And while it was not surprising that the volume of coverage in the *Times* dominated the

field, *USA Today* and the *Journal* took distinctive approaches to their arts sections.

The rise of the national papers needs to be understood in relation to the growing importance of the media and entertainment industries in the years following World War II. For during that half century, the entertainment industry flourished, a general and scholarly debate about the worth of “popular” vs. “high” culture occurred, and the commercial and the non-profit arts sectors drew closer. All such trends simmer under the surface of newspaper arts coverage.

Newspapers today find themselves at a critical juncture. After decades of buyouts by conglomerates and lost circulation to competing media, they have become quite attentive to catering to minor shifts in readers’ interests. This is especially true when it comes to covering the arts. But what, exactly, are those interests? More importantly, what counts as the “arts?” The answers depend on who is asking the question.

Industry-sponsored studies in recent years suggest that stories about the arts are not particularly popular with most readers. Editors asked in the mid-1990s what stories their audience wanted said that 71% of readers had a strong interest in stories about “entertainment.” Only 29% had a similar interest in stories about “the arts.”

A 1998 survey of media usage by the Newspaper Association of America limited the definition of the arts by only measuring interest in “news and information about entertainment available in your area, such as movies, concerts, restaurants, etc.” Those polled had no chance to record an opinion on any other kind of news related to arts and culture. Answers to ques-

tions asked in this way conflict with other evidence and reports that record obvious strong interest in the arts.

Newspapers have responded to such data with what a writer in *Presstime* called a “delicate balancing act”: expanding Friday entertainment sections to emphasize event listings and reviews, leaving Sunday to focus on “trend stories on the higher arts,” and using focus groups to assess reader approval.

This focus on commercial entertainment is a reflection of larger social changes. A 1985 unpublished study by the National Endowment for the Arts found that 80% of the available space in local newspaper articles and advertisements was devoted to commercial entertainment, with broadcast media, film and music taking up the most space. As the report noted: “That overall coverage focused on the commercial, as opposed to the not-for-profit arts, is hardly surprising: Movies and television are among our most profitable industries.”

While the newspaper industry presents its emphasis on listings and commercial entertainment as a prudent response to readers’ demands, others saw evidence of a decline. Long-time press observer Leo Bogart argued in 1990 that “cultural reporting is reduced to purveying succulent tidbits about the transient and irrelevant minutiae of show business.” He assailed papers that “are preoccupied with the personalities of the entertainment world. . . . they accept and even glorify what goes on in that world in terms of its own entertainment value rather than judge it by standards of artistic accomplishments.”

It is therefore not surprising that the 1985

NEA report concluded that “American artists and audiences deserve better” than the coverage most arts received in local newspapers. Notably absent from the study were *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. “These papers were excluded . . . because they cover arts from a national perspective. Certainly even the best of our sample fell short of them in the completeness of their coverage.” A follow-up N.E.A. survey found that arts leaders throughout the nation “supplemented their local papers with *The New York Times*, presumably the Sunday edition.” Many such readers probably desired the national perspective found in the *Times*.

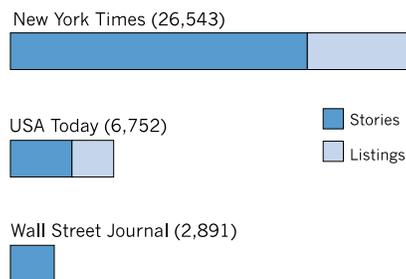
THE NATIONAL PAPERS

THE NEW YORK TIMES

CIRCULATION: 1.06 MILLION DAILY, 1.62 MILLION SUNDAY

A leader in arts journalism for most of the 20th century, the *Times*’ coverage achieved pre-eminence in New York and throughout the

Stories vs. Listings



Volume of coverage devoted to stories and listings on arts and culture in all sections with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches (October 1998)

nation following the demise of the *New York Herald Tribune* in the 1960s. In the last 35 years it has expanded its range of subjects. A study of the Sunday “Arts & Leisure” section by cultural economist James Heilbrun found that from the 1960s to the late 1980s more than half its coverage—between 53% and 60%—was focused on “the high arts . . . theater . . . classical music and opera, dance, painting, sculpture and art museums,” while between 27% and 39% of coverage concentrated on “popular” culture, “motion pictures, live and recorded jazz, rock, and other popular music, and TV and radio.”

By the early 1990s, Heilbrun found that the balance had shifted: 49% of coverage was on “popular” culture, and 39% on “high” culture. This analysis, like any that organizes coverage by category, raises problems of definition. “Theater” is identified as high culture, with no distinction between a presentation at a downtown performance space and a Broadway musical. Jazz meanwhile is identified as popular culture; would the organizers of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and others who call jazz “America’s classical music” agree? This reflects the growing elusiveness of clear markers of “high” or “popular.” Nonetheless, coverage in the *Times* was clearly changing.

Although the *Times* had launched a short-lived Western edition in the early 1960s, its major move toward a national edition began in 1978 when it created a new section for every day of the week. A national edition followed in 1980. By 1997, it had introduced a streamlined national paper and “zoned” editions for New England and the Washington, D.C. area that included local weather, TV and arts listings.

The *Times* currently covers the arts in a vast array of sections. With New York City at the

core of its coverage, it publishes reports on cultural events and trends throughout the nation in a daily section called “The Arts” and a Saturday section called “Arts & Ideas.” In addition, the Monday edition of “Business Day, The Information Industries,” often discusses commercial entertainment. Thursday’s “House and Home” covers interior design and architecture, and “Circuits” deals extensively with the Internet and computers. Much of this coverage seems directed at an upper-income readership that can afford, or aspire to enjoy, custom-designed furnishings and expensive wines and fashions. On Friday, “Weekend” has two sections: one for film and performing arts, the other for “fine” arts, restaurants and other lifestyle features. It can review ballet or a blockbuster movie on the first page of one section, and feature an exhibit of Haitian voodoo objects on the front page of the next. The Sunday *Times* has “Arts & Leisure,” “The New York Times Books Review” and enough breadth, and heft, in the rest of a single edition to offer reports on everything from the Aga Kahn’s influence on architecture to the impact of new regulations on dancers in strip clubs.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

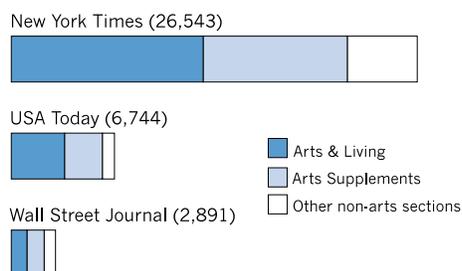
CIRCULATION: 1.74 MILLION DAILY

In terms of column inches, *The Wall Street Journal’s* arts coverage pales in comparison to the avalanche of information available in the *Times*, which devotes close to seven times as much space to articles.

This is not surprising. The *Journal* is a national newspaper that focuses primarily on one topic, business. Founded in 1889, it flourished for decades without a specific section devoted to the arts, inaugurating the “Leisure & The Arts” page in 1968. The *Journal’s* arts coverage has won plaudits for its quality. Arts and Leisure Editor Raymond Sokolov proclaims that he resists the entertainment-driven formula of many arts sections: “We have basically eliminated celebrity interviews. I don’t think it’s journalism. I think it’s falling in with the plan of the movie company.” Instead, stories might mix commentary on opera with a regular television review along with coverage of a range of other art forms, such as an appreciation of a master bluegrass musician.

A new section launched in March 1998 called the “Weekend Journal” expanded the paper’s coverage. Like Friday entertainment sections in local papers, it devotes greater attention to popu-

Arts Coverage by Section



Volume of coverage devoted to arts and culture, stories and listings combined, for each newspaper in its daily Arts & Living section, its weekend arts supplement and all other non-arts sections, with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches (October 1998)

lar culture news. Fine art receives regular notice in a column titled “Art and Money,” with a focus on collecting and acquisition that seems appropriate for the *Journal’s* upscale readership. Popular entertainment also appears in the *Journal’s* regular business pages when it is linked to a business success, as in a story on how rock songs appearing on TV commercials revived sales of older recordings.

USA TODAY

CIRCULATION: 1.65 MILLION DAILY

USA Today has been marketed as a national newspaper since its founding in 1982. Early critics dismissed it as a mass-produced “McPaper.” More recent assessments acknowledge, if grudgingly at times, that the paper is a serious and reliable publication that does offer more than its trademark upbeat features. It is a popular force to be reckoned with, second in national circulation to the *Journal*. Its compressed stories, colorful photographs and graphics, and lively design have influenced the presentation of news in almost every paper in America.

Stories on the arts appear almost exclusively in the “Life” section. Devoted to lifestyle topics, its coverage emphasizes popular entertainment and celebrity personalities. The Friday edition contains an expanded entertainment and leisure section. A recent article in *Opera News* praised the hard work of *USA Today’s* critic, but noted his job was even harder because he was the “only staff critic.”

COVERAGE COMPARED: OCTOBER 1998

At first it might seem that *The New York Times* would easily outstrip the other national papers in sheer volume of attention for any significant story in culture. Frequency, though, does not tell the entire story. More stories appeared during October in *USA Today* about the blockbuster exhibition “Van Gogh’s Van Goghs” at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., than in *The New York Times*. But what kind of stories were they? *USA Today* ran a large front-page color photograph of the show. The accompanying article, in keeping with the cheerful focus of most articles in the paper, emphasized the exhibit’s popularity and how it offered relief to a city plagued by the Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal. And a headline calling Van Gogh “The Elvis of Art” perfectly illustrated how *USA Today* often tries to place high-culture topics in more broadly accessible terms. Another feature in *USA Today* surveyed the continuing popularity of the

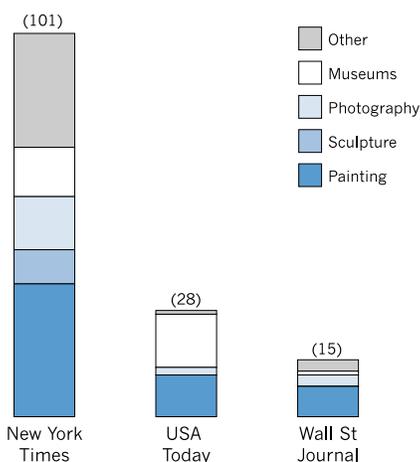
show, highlighting the celebrities who had attended as well as offering helpful consumer news such as the cost of souvenirs at the National Gallery’s gift shop. Yet, with the exception of a book review of a biography of the illustrator N.C. Wyeth, the Van Gogh show was almost the sole reference to the fine arts during the entire month in *USA Today*.

The New York Times offered regular reports on a wide range of visual arts, devoting about ten percent of its overall arts coverage to this subject. Its main review, “Van Gogh, or Beauty and the Blockbuster,” took advantage of the paper’s sophisticated color printing technology. The article was typical of *Times* coverage, combining an assessment of the merits of the show with an attempt to place it in a broader cultural context.

Yet while *USA Today* reported the Van Gogh show primarily as spectacle, and the *Times* blended a traditional review with social significance, the *Journal’s* review treated it as an old-fashioned relic of exhibitions past. It suggested that art audiences had grown more sophisticated and could handle greater complexity than this show gave them credit for.

A New York production of the ballet “Swan Lake” that was notable for its all-male company received both a serious review and a feature in *USA Today*, but pun-filled headlines “Ruffles Feathers” and “Men of a Feather on Broadway” suggested that this story had only appeared because it offered a slightly comical and controversial story about the novel casting choice. The

Stories on Visual Arts and Museums



Number of stories on the visual arts and museums, listings excluded, with the number in parentheses indicating total number of stories (October 1998)

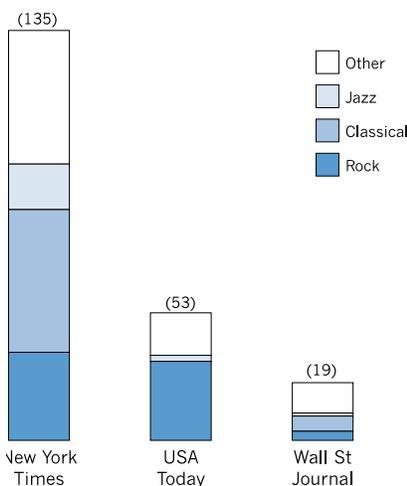
Times reviewed the production prominently, published another review of the ballet's alternate cast, and commented on the work in several related stories.

The Wall Street Journal's reputation for strong and conservative editorial page opinions was on display in its coverage of the show and other artistic events. The "Swan Lake" production received a frosty reception from the *Journal*, as did the awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature to Portuguese novelist José Saramago. The *Journal* commentary made the author's Communist past the centerpiece of its discussion, while the *Times* and *USA Today* integrated that theme into general stories.

Did readers of these three newspapers get the same news? Evidently not.

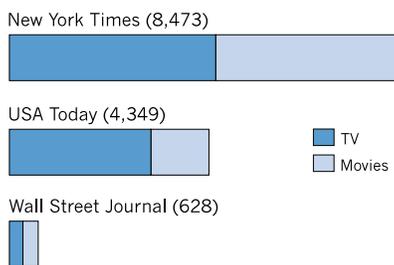
The *Times* overwhelmed *USA Today* and the *Journal* in terms of volume and variety of topics covered, particularly in attention devoted to traditional high-culture subjects. For example, the *Times* was the only newspaper of the three to do any stories on sculpture during the month of October. It likewise dominated in the coverage of classical music. A series of concerts celebrating the 90th birthday of modern composer Elliott Carter received extensive coverage in the *Times* along with other appreciations of his career. The *Journal* did not mention Carter in its October coverage, but gave his birthday serious mention later in the year. No stories about Carter, nor about any classical music

Stories on Music



Number of music stories, listings excluded, compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of music articles (October 1998)

Television and Movies



Volume of coverage devoted to TV and movies, stories and listings combined, with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches (October 1998)

topic, appeared in *USA Today* that month.

What about popular and commercial culture? *USA Today* revels in pop glitz and excitement; about half of all its stories on the arts deal with either movies or television. When listings are included, it devotes almost two-thirds of its total space to these two subjects.

The *Times* writes about popular entertainment with greater regularity and completeness than it did several decades ago, but it retains a distant stance. There seems to be something to an observation by press critic Edwin Diamond that the *Times* has a tendency to "locat[e] . . . the larger social 'issues' in the pop-culture particular." The columns of the paper accept the significance of popular cultural expression but discuss those topics by employing a social-critical vocabulary about culture usually found in academic departments at universities. So, for example, the *Times* review of "Swan Lake" refers casually to the "homoerotic tinge" to the production.

Stories that mix cultural genres reveal the changing relationship between "high" and "popular" in these three papers. The opening of the new Las Vegas casino, Bellagio, was news in all three papers for a number of reasons. It is one of the most expensive casinos ever built and its owner, Steve Wynn, is a colorful and newsworthy figure. The casino also features a small gallery of notable works by such artists as Picasso and Van Gogh.

USA Today took the Bellagio very much on the breathless terms of its promoters; the legendary artists in the gallery appeared essentially as brand names alongside those of the famed boutiques and chefs opening branches of their establishments in the new building. Forms of elite and popular culture, which a few decades ago would never have mixed, now meet without comment on the common ground of the marketplace.

This very juxtaposition was a key part of the *Times* coverage. True to its roots, the paper maintained a cosmopolitan distance from such commercialism, including within its stories an almost anthropological approach of defining a foreign culture on its own terms. The *Times'* national cultural reporter did long features on Las Vegas in two consecutive weeks. He placed the Bellagio in the context of a "mishmash of high art and low, the classy and the crass." A related feature in the "House and Home" section was the occasion for a meditation on new kinds of public space, accompanied by the appropriate critical language: "People who love the messy urbanism of traditional cities may feel profound discomfort at this apparent repackaging of the urban realm." On the other hand, the *Journal* treated the opening primarily as a business story, using the paintings as a leavening touch: "With Picasso as a Lounge Act, Wynn Bets Big on New Casino."

"Casablanca," an Academy Award-winning hallmark of the Hollywood studio system, had become an "art house" favorite of the intelligentsia in the 1960s and 1970s (Woody Allen incorporated it into a play and a film, after all), and by the 1990s was a landmark cinema classic. The October publication of "As Time Goes By," a novel that picks up the characters' adventures at the point where the movie ends, was a moment for the convergence of commerce with high and popular art. *USA Today* began its coverage in a "News and Views" column that discussed potential casting for a movie to be based on the newly published book, "a rattling tale with an exciting twisty climax that should set actors' as well as readers' hearts beating fast." A review of the book the next week called it "a quick, slick read," and concluded: "Thirty-to-

one someone will buy the new movie rights."

The reviewer had apparently not read a piece by the book's author in the previous Sunday's *Times*, in which he explained the novel had been written at the request of the president of Warner Books, a subsidiary of Time-Warner, which also controls Warner Brothers, the film studio that made the original movie. The story did mention in passing that the studio would have first rights at a film or mini-series. While most of the essay is an appreciation of the movie, it is, in effect, a plug for the book.

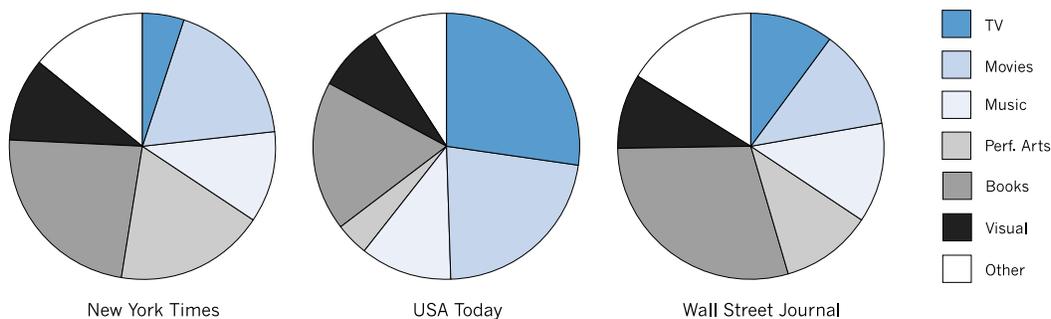
The *Times* returned to "As Time Goes By" a week later in its "Making Books" column on the publishing industry. There it resumed its critical distance by placing the book in the context of "today's popular culture," and observing that "book publishing, alas, is no different in this from movies or television." It described the "huge advertising and publicity campaign" behind the book as if the paper's own role in its promotion had not existed. *The Wall Street Journal* simply made no mention of the book or its attendant publicity.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Arts reports in national newspapers send conflicting signals. As the media universe becomes increasingly splintered into particular niches, the *Times*, the *Journal* and *USA Today* have staked out specific positions in the information marketplace that may well endure.

As the national paper that reminds readers of the paper back home, *USA Today's* offerings seem to reflect surveys by the newspaper industry on readers' interests in the arts. The paper celebrates the merging of art and commerce, and its pages provide ample evidence for those concerned that coverage of traditional high culture is decreasing.

Artistic Disciplines



Proportion of editorial space assigned to all arts and culture stories, listings excluded, devoted to various artistic disciplines for each newspaper

The New York Times, meanwhile, maintains its reputation as the national newspaper of record in its treatment of the arts. Those who feel the mainstream press does not treat popular culture with enough seriousness can point to the fact that the *Times* lavishes considerable attention on popular music, film and television as well as on pop cultural artifacts such as Las Vegas. It is the only one of the three national papers to give sustained coverage across a wide range of the creative spectrum, but this scope is not the same as trying to be all things to all people.

Distinctions between “high” and “popular” culture still matter in the *Times*, even as both corporations and university cultural studies departments—although from very different perspectives—note their decline. The *Times* resolves this dilemma through its use of a critical vocabulary that places issues in terms of a broader cultural context.

The Wall Street Journal is, in a sense, not competing on the same terrain as *USA Today* and the *Times*, given the considerably smaller space it makes available and its declaration that it will not bow to celebrity. It does, though, accept the merging of art and commerce as part of the broader march of business in America. That is not unusual considering the *Journal's* focus. In many ways, the *Journal's* arts coverage does precisely what some critics complain is

lacking in much local arts reporting: It focuses on particular creative works and gives scant emphasis to personalities or gossip.

Regrettably, the convergence of the commercial and non-profit cultural sectors and the impact of corporate consolidation is rarely addressed as the main focus in arts coverage. And while arts reporters and writers in all three newspapers regularly use the language of cultural criticism to discuss the significance of a particular trend in the arts, they are far less likely to consider the important implications of policy issues.

This is surprising considering that changes in the cultural sector and the policy issues they raise have been appearing with increased frequency on the news pages of the national press. While the subject may not at first seem to be specifically related to the arts, everything from conflicts over intellectual properties or content regulations to the rise of new communications technologies will have a pivotal impact on many segments of the cultural sector. Major media corporations, meanwhile, are becoming significant forces in framing agendas in both the arts and the policy sphere, as well as whenever these two worlds interact. As the arts are shaped increasingly by these transformations, newspaper coverage will need to address these themes more explicitly. Editors and readers have much to consider as newspapers embark on a new century.

—Glenn Wallach

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