

## INTRODUCTION

More than 100 cultural journalists from around the country convened in May in the San Francisco area for a reunion and symposium of current and former fellows of the National Arts Journalism Program. They were joined by arts journalists and news executives from *The Washington Post*, *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *The San Jose Mercury News*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The New York Times*, National Public Radio and several alternative-weekly publications, as well as concerned artists, scholars and funders. After a weekend of ardent discussions and focused working sessions on the future of arts journalism, the symposium participants left inspired and rejuvenated, but not blindly optimistic.

Even as the arts in America blossom in record quantity and endless variety, the field of arts journalism has suffered a painful retrenchment over the past several years. Cultural desks have been hit as badly as any news department during the recent period of media-industry downsizing. Publications large and small are replacing staff arts writers with freelancers at an accelerating pace, depriving their readers of a consistent voice on the arts page (too often, it is only a single page). The demands of reporting on conflicts abroad and on homeland security have pushed arts criticism and reporting to the margins. National Public Radio, *The New York Times* and other major media outlets have initiated structural changes in their cultural coverage, leading to shake-ups of mission and uncertainly among arts staffs. Experienced arts writers are encouraged to take euphemistically titled “early retirement” packages. Newspaper chains are eliminating local staff critics to exploit “economies of scale” by feeding a single writer’s pieces to a network of affiliates. And the financial belt-tightening often leads to the slashing of coverage of books and classical music—subjects that draw limited advertising support. Arts writers and editors are struggling with the thankless task of making a quantitative, bottom-line-driven case for their beats. Alarm bells are ringing.

And yet, the story in arts journalism is not all doom and gloom. Signs of creativity and ambition are everywhere. Arts journalists are constantly reasserting their indispensability and adaptability—whether in the form of a newsmagazine exposé of a film studio’s manufacturing of false quotes to hype blockbusters, the flourishing exploration of the intersection of art and politics, or innovative approaches to arts coverage on web sites such as *Andante.com* and *ArtsJournal.com*. Coverage of the arts remains vital to communities, business, recreation and intellectual development, even more so during this time of national reassessment and introspection. In short: the chronicling of culture strikes at the core mission of every news publication.

These transcripts illuminate the tensions in arts journalism, but also the opportunities for growth and invention. The first two panels, which took place on May 10, 2002 at the University of California/Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, featured members of

San Francisco's artistic vanguard discussing media coverage of their art forms and the perspectives of top executives in the newspaper, magazine, radio and online journalism fields on trends in various corners of the news industry. The third panel, on recent turmoil in book coverage, took place May 11 at San Francisco's Mark Hopkins Hotel, and featured literary journalists, authors and book-industry experts.

In publishing these transcripts, the editors would like to thank the moderators and participants in these panels, the Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, and The Pew Charitable Trusts for their continued support of the work of the National Arts Journalism Program and its fellows.

*The Editors*

**Views from the Top: Industry Trends  
Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism  
May 10, 2002**

**Moderator:**

Ileana Oroza, professor of journalism and photography, University of Miami; NAJP board member and 1995-96 mid-career fellow

**Panelists:**

Jay Harris, president and founder, Deep River Associates

Kevin Klose, president and CEO, National Public Radio

Doug McLennan, editor-in-chief, ArtsJournal.com; NAJP 1996-97 mid-career fellow

Steve Proctor, deputy managing editor, features, *The Baltimore Sun*

Kit Rachlis, editor-in-chief, *Los Angeles Magazine*

Jim Warren, deputy managing editor, features, *Chicago Tribune*

**Oroza:** If we had to have a headline for the conversations we've had the last couple of days, it would be: "The arts: Our newsrooms are in crisis, and the arts journalists are particularly vulnerable."

But I'm looking around and I see 105 pretty smart people, and maybe it's because I am at Berkeley, but I think maybe we can take it back. Maybe we can do something about this.

On this panel, we have some distinguished editors, publishers, people who have been dealing with these issues for a long time. They are going to help us come up with some strategies, figure out what we need to do to fulfill our calling, and see how we can make arts journalism count in this country and take on all these people who say, "It's not important, we can't afford it." Let's see what we can do.

**Klose:** I am the president and CEO of National Public Radio. We are rethinking some of our cultural presentations, the way we cover and the way we present art and art news and what art is and what culture is in this country. We are doing that because we are an organization that provides programming to 650 independent, community-based, autonomous nonprofit stations—most of whose licenses are held by universities and colleges across the country. The last third of the licenses are held by community foundations, which evoke and reflect the values, the perceptions and the realities of every community of America.

What we can do at NPR is provide a unifying fabric of presentation of national and international news, threaded and interwoven with local news. We do that, and after 32 years, we've hit a place in society that is unique. I've been at NPR for three and a half years, and in that time, our audience has grown. Our weekly audience has grown from about 12 million a week to about 20 million a week. Every time it goes up, it stays up. It went up after 9/11, for obvious reasons. It stayed up, because that is the unifying power of radio.

Radio is intimate. It is the most creative, the most imaginative of the mass media, because it's a medium you cannot see: you can only imagine it. That's why Susan Stamberg says you can paint the best pictures of all on radio. Radio has a unique intimacy with every individual. Public radio has a uniqueness inside that, because it doesn't promote itself and doesn't advertise itself. You aren't going to see any public-radio billboards on Highway 101. We're talking about real news and real talk on KQED, or any of the other stations hereabouts.

When people find public radio, it is a personal discovery of their own. It becomes a personal, specific relationship that plays exactly to the strengths of public radio. The people at NPR, and the member stations, have viewed sound as a serious engagement that had no limits: using sound, the human voice, the spoken word, non-spoken communication, and silence as a way to communicate.

The geniuses at NPR do that everyday, produce programming everyday, in the context of the newsmagazines "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered." They are the second- and third-most listened-to radio programs in America today. "Morning Edition" has an audience of about 10 to 13 million weekly, and "All Things Considered" has an audience near 10 million weekly. The audiences overlap. These national presentations stand on these two very tall poles in the tent. No other public-radio program comes anywhere near the power and the community that is created by these two major newsmagazines.

Part of our effort at NPR is to rethink and reshape our cultural programming. We want to see how we can get more access to those extraordinary places where people come and listen, and interact, and think, and take away ideas, and contact, and are touched in their brains and in their heart in very particular ways. That is the power of public radio.

So we are rethinking our cultural presentation. We are rethinking how we describe and interact with the news about the world of art and culture. And we are also doing several other things to expand the horizon in which we have always operated. Part of the challenge of radio is that because it is a

virtual medium—it's here, it's completely ephemeral, and then it's gone—it's very hard to recapture, unless you go to a web site, and even then you have to click around to find the stuff. We are trying to make the web site easier: that is part of our presentation.

We are expanding the envelope in a variety of ways, and I want to describe them. We have just signed an agreement to take ownership of a property in Culver City where we will create a West Coast production center. We now have a small bureau here in San Francisco, which operates out of KQED, staffed by six or seven or eight people. We have eight people in Los Angeles. We have one in San Diego. We have two or three people up in Seattle, and that's it for the West Coast. This time next year, the West Coast production center will have about 50 people in it, and our eventual goal is to have more than 100 people. That will give us the intellectual and creative opportunity to discover, and cover, and report on culture and arts and news in the West in a whole new way.

We are talking not just about the coast, and about Northern and Southern California—although these audiences comprise almost 15 percent of our national audience. Public radio is a huge reality in California, in part because of its great diversity, but also because California is at the forefront of this very information: it's using information, discarding information, soaked in information, grasping the reality of this nation. So we are going to be in California in a different way. We want to connect with you all in different ways, and we want to find ways to realize extraordinary stories and to use radio to do it. Ultimately, art is powerful, culture is powerful, it is political, and it is a debate every step of the way.

Finally, art is local in nature, because the people you depend upon to touch are local. Where is the audience going to come from? It ain't going to fly in from Peoria. It might, if we can get it out there. But by and large, it is going to be a local issue.

I would say to everybody who is interested in projecting the power and the reality and the importance of art in this culture and society: Interact with your public radio station, whether you are from the written press or not. Because the local public station is more likely to be in contact with, and have the capacity to present in an imaginative way, the reality, the power, the enthusiasm and the excitement of the arts, whether they be the lively arts, or arts on a wall, or arts in a gallery, or arts in a garden.

I think there is a lot of terrible criticism in the print media of local art, and I find it snide. It isn't engaged the way it should be. Go to your local public radio station. You will find people there who are burning with their knowledge of the power of the spoken word, burning with their knowledge of encounters with human beings, in the context of their daily lives.

And that's the kind of art you all are talking about. That's what the people in these panels are trying to present to you. Public radio can do it in a way that nobody else can. We are there for you at a national level—every local public radio station is community-based, community-supported, in an absolutely counter-intuitive relationship. If you could get *The New York Times* for free on your doorstep, would you pay for it? Maybe you wouldn't pay for the arts section: maybe you would pay for the A section. Maybe you *would* pay for the arts section. The point is, if you get that kind of quality everyday for free, why would you pay for it at all?

But people by the millions are supporting their public radio stations—voluntarily. That evokes the reality of the power of public radio. But ultimately, national radio can only present a national fabric. Seventy-five percent of what's on the air on public radio, 75 percent of that audience bill, is what is produced locally. *There's* your place to go if you are going to present the arts.

Harris: This panel is called 'Views from the Top,' but for me, it is the view from the outside. I used to be at the top [as chairman and publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News*], but I quit. Ileana Oroza called the other day to ask if I would tell hard truths, and also offer suggestions. I will try to do both succinctly.

I will start with the hard-truth part of it. What is happening to you, and to your fellow journalists, is a function of what has happened to the companies that you work for, which—like almost all other companies in almost all other institutions in our society—have been impacted for the worse, in some very sad ways, by two powerful and related forces in our culture: One is commerce, the other is competition. And those two forces, as they have affected news organizations, have changed substantially.

Maybe two of the defining questions for journalistic organizations are: *To whom* are we responsible, and *for what* are we responsible? Those two questions draw very different answers today than they did, say, 30 years ago. I do not have an idealistic view of the world 30 years ago, but I do know that the general answer was quite different then.

It seems to me today that for too many of the leaders of our institutions, the answer is that they are responsible to a variety of commercial interests. They are responsible for satisfying those commercial interests, be they the investors, or people with stock options, or whatever. And from that, those twin definitions of responsibility form, and flow out of, priorities for the organization. From the sense of what you are responsible for, and to whom you are responsible, flow the priorities that eventually affect you.

One of the consequences of the ascendancy of commerce is that there has been a heightened priority attached to financial results. And sadly, over time, those have become financial results measured first in the short term, and secondly measured peer-to-peer, company-versus-company. In the good times, when the economy is roaring, that is not much of a problem. In the bad times, when the economy is weak, as it has been for the past two years, it is enormously problematic. It forces people—here, I talk about section editors, producers, people at the mid-level—to make choices. And most of those whom I know are women and men of good will, and their instinct is to make the choice that is least harmful. But a series of choices, each of which is least harmful, in the aggregate produces a very harmful result.

There is also a problem in job definition. If the nature of your job as a manager, the way you are evaluated as an editor, is the skillfulness of your trimming, you begin to define “doing your job well,” almost subconsciously, as “doing the very best job you could, under the circumstances.” And that is a very damaging thing for a profession or for a society, because then we slip into a world of relativism, in which there are no absolutes. When most of us came into the business, what attracted us to the business was a different sense of responsibility, part of which was to be a chronicler of the times. And I would like to talk about that, just for a moment, as it relates to the specific work that you do.

Increasingly as a profession, we are better and better—or at least competent in a sustained way—in covering stories that break, and less and less good at stories that ooze. And yet the most important stories are those stories that ooze, the broad social change in our life. And I would say that the ultimate oozing story is the culture writ large.

—Jay Harris

When I was a youngster growing up in Washington D.C., there was a disc jockey on a black radio station who would say repeatedly through the night that it is not the direction of the waves that counts, but the motion of the ocean. I am reminded of that, because increasingly as a profession we are better and better—or at least competent in a sustained way—in covering stories that *break*, and less and less good at stories that *ooze*. And yet the most important stories are those stories that ooze, the broad social change in our life. And I would say that the ultimate oozing story is the culture writ large.

I think that one of the problems that you face, that we all face, that our whole society faces, is that it seems that we have lost part of the definition, or the appropriate definition, of the word “culture.” And so there are many people who think that culture is things that “artsy” people do. Culture is actually in the larger sense—that which we *are*. It is constantly oozing, if you will, and it seems to me that if you are a responsible and dedicated chronicler of the times, covering it is one of your highest responsibilities and greatest challenges.

I would like to argue something that at least some of you would agree with: You need to make the argument to those for whom you work, those whom you cover, and most of all the people whom you serve, that covering the arts is really more than covering entertainment. Now, “Star Wars” is entertainment, and “Spiderman” even more so in some ways, but I will include them in this definition. I think that art is frequently the first clue, and maybe the best detector, of the motion of that ocean which is our culture and how it is changing. And I think that frequently, too many stories about the arts, or the decisions to trim the investments we make in covering the arts, are viewed only in terms of art as entertainment, art as “how many people see or do a particular thing.”

We are at Berkeley—there are many ways of “taking it back.” I am old enough, traditionalist enough, to still believe in the power of ideas and the marketplace. And it seems to me that one of the things that we need to do is to find a way to make the case articulately to our colleagues, to our bosses and to our communities that the coverage of art is central to understanding the evolution of our culture. And there are many examples that one could turn to, from jazz and free-verse poetry, to Jacob Lawrence and the Harlem Renaissance, to the publication of “The Grapes of Wrath” or “Our Town.”

One of the things that we need to do is to find a way to make the case articulately to our colleagues, to our bosses and to our communities that the coverage of art is central to understanding the evolution of our culture.

—Jay Harris

I want to conclude with a contemporary example. Yesterday, on “The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer,” there was a news report—not an arts report—on a musical now being performed in New York called “Urinetown.” And I



was struck that it was done, if I recall correctly, by the business and economics correspondent for “NewsHour,” who had been trying to work it, he said during the piece, into his Enron story, but could never find a way to do that. That piece was about more than just a play people pay too-high prices to see when they are in New York: it is an insightful commentary on something that is oozing in our culture. So I would encourage you to take what you do seriously enough to make the argument that you’re not just writing about a movie or a dance or a performance of whatever sort, but instead, in the best of what you do, in the most important of what you do, you are writing about something much more important than that which is entertaining. You are writing about the way in which we can come to know ourselves better – which, I think, is what arts journalism at its best is capable of doing.

**Warren:** I’m the deputy managing editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, in charge of all our feature sections. I previously was the Washington bureau chief, so I’ve probably got less experience in this area than most of the folks, though I had a brief period running our main features section before going to Washington. Now, I’ve been given this big magilla of an operation of 140 full-time employees and about nine or 10 different sections.

Let me start by mentioning the recent Pulitzer Prizes and National Magazine Awards. Even factoring in the incredibly incestuous nature of journalism-award competitions, I do think that you saw a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, particularly among the mainstream media: small groups of papers and magazines doing superior work, and most of the others exhibiting a mushy mediocrity.

The *Tribune’s* own exhaustive nationwide search last year for a new theater critic – because our star guy, Richard Christiansen, at age 69 was retiring – resulted in our hiring not one, but two candidates because they were so good. And at a rather substantial expense, two big salaries. I think that was admirable, but sadly atypical. Same goes with several lengthy investigative series in the arts that we did in the last two years: “Jelly Roll” Morton getting screwed out of royalties; a big series on the theft of art by the Nazis; previously unheard Louis Armstrong tapes, which resulted in a collaboration between us and Nightline; and finally, on how a very shadowy network of dealers controls a high-end slice of the musical-instrument world.

Broadcast television – the key medium in our society, I think – will remain a disaster area, especially on the local level. But I think niche cable networks may well continue to offer substantial relief, as well as alternative non-English media. The mainstream print medium’s focus on the more superficial elements of popular culture will unavoidably be driven by television, be it puffery for the latest blockbuster flick or word of a star’s divorce or a rapper’s drug addiction. Entertainment, rife with its press releases and its

junkets and its freebies, will continue to be much easier to cover than arts and culture, which are harder and deeper and more nuanced.

I've tried to alter, a little bit, the way we do some of these things, and it has caused some problems. Last week, all the Hollywood publicists were yelling bloody murder because—recreating something I did in my earlier tenure running a feature section—I essentially decided to ban hotel-room interviews with actors. Now, there are some cases in which you just can't avoid it. But two weeks ago, we took a pass at Mira Sorvino, who was sitting there in the goddamned Ritz-Carlton or something in Chicago, who was willing to give us 20 to 25 minutes. I said "no," and they were furious. And that resulted in a big, big meeting last week, with veiled threats of pulling their advertising, blah blah blah.

Basically, we are telling the publicists, if you can't figure out something interesting with us, screw it.

—Jim Warren

But I did that, and I am doing it out of a belief that readers are much better served, in theory, if we get some of these people out doing something interesting. It started with me sending a freelancer eight or nine years ago. Peter O'Toole was in town with his autobiography. And we said "no" to the hotel-room interview. We took him on a Saturday night to Comiskey Park, to a Chicago White Sox game. In Comiskey Park, there are exploding scoreboards: a guy gets a home run, the exploding scoreboards go off. And for 10 minutes, O'Toole is on this rant about the Nazi rallies in Nuremberg and how this reminded him of it. That made that piece. Similarly, we took Andie MacDowell to a church a couple of weeks ago. And we've done similar things, like taking authors dancing. But basically, we are telling the publicists, if you can't figure out something interesting with us, screw it.

Of course, there will be some instances where it is just impossible. We sent a guy to wherever George Lucas and everybody was talking about "Star Wars." We're not *The New York Times*. We're not going to get the special, special interview. If there is something so big it would be absurd for me to say, "No, we are not going to do that," we'll consider it.

Also, we put interesting people together. The last one I ran, in our main feature section eight or nine years ago, John Updike was in town, and again, we refused to do the hotel-room interview with Updike, who was there to receive some award. We had known that the then-coach of the Chicago Bulls, Phil Jackson, is a very, very well-read guy, and a big fan of Updike. Updike turns out to be a big fan of basketball. So we stuck them in his white stretch

limo in front of the Drake Hotel, and got them up to Deerfield, Illinois—the god-awful suburb of Chicago where the Bulls practice—and put a tape recorder down between the two of them, the basketball coach and famous author, and just let them talk. And it was far better than anything we could have gotten in the hotel room, particularly in this case, since Jackson kept correcting Updike on particular characters in his books.

Now, there are also flaws. A month ago, I came up with the idea of doing virtually that same thing again, this time with Wynton Marsalis, and the current coach of the Bulls, Bill Cartwright, who was a graduate of the University of San Francisco and who's a big jazz fan. So after a huge hassle—this stuff is administratively very challenging—we got Marsalis up to the Bulls training facility. Turns out the Bulls' plane was late coming in. Cartwright walks into the room, announces he's got to look at videotape for that night's game, and blows off one of the world's most famous musicians. We are going try again with him.

But the notion, again, is to bring in a little bit of creativity. The establishment outlets will struggle mightily to report the dramatic diversity within their communities, including that in the arts. The mainstream will generally not acknowledge those forms until they have so obviously infiltrated the popular culture that even 50-year-old male newspaper editors with receding hairlines who live in the suburbs—even *they* will acknowledge that something is happening in their communities.

A few of us do very well covering the arts as  
entertainment and as a cultural influence. But the  
reality is that all too many arts reporters and editors  
verge on the clueless when it comes to economics  
and any vaguely sophisticated understanding that  
they are covering a mammoth industry rife with its  
share of scoundrels and scalawags.  
—Jim Warren

Let me close by saying my main hope rests on economic necessity. While editorially I think a dramatically improved understanding of economics would help arts journalism, many news executives—faced with declining circulation, viewership, and listenership—may mull improved coverage of the arts not out of any high-mindedness, but only out of desperation that it

provides a vehicle to lure more consumers. There could be no starker incentives.

Finally, having spent eight years as a Washington bureau chief and being plopped into this new realm last fall, I am struck by the apparent failure of much of the mainstream's arts coverage—and here I include us, NPR, *The New York Times*—to report on the arts as business. A few of us do very well covering the arts as entertainment and as a cultural influence. But the reality is that all too many arts reporters and editors verge on the clueless when it comes to economics and any vaguely sophisticated understanding that they are covering a mammoth industry rife with its share of scoundrels and scalawags. On that score, I don't think that arts journalism can do anything but get much better.

Kit Rachlis: I'd like to change the conversation a bit and suggest that there is a fundamental contradiction occurring with arts criticism in this country right now, which is that the quality of criticism is considerably higher than it was 25 to 30 years ago. If you walked into any newsroom 25 to 30 years ago, the reigning ethos was that anybody could be an art critic. So it was often the dumping ground for the drunks and the incompetents. It was the gulag of the newspaper world. In the hierarchy of newspapers, it ranked somewhere near the women's pages. Investigative and political reporters were on top, sports reporters were right behind, but cultural writing was, for the most part, at the lowest point of the hierarchy. If you wanted to rise at a newspaper, being a cultural reporter was not the place to be.

Though I think the professionalism and the quality of criticism is much higher now than it was 25 years ago—you can't be a movie critic now without knowing about movies, which was not true then—the effect that you all have on the culture is far less than critics had 25 years ago. And I mean *far* less.  
—Kit Rachlis

However, though I think the professionalism and the quality of criticism is much higher now than it was 25 years ago—you can't be a movie critic now without knowing about movies, which was not true then—the effect that you all have on the culture is far less than critics had 25 years ago. And I mean *far* less. There are a lot of reasons for this.

One of the principal reasons, particularly in the popular arts, is that you are grappling with—whether you are talking about movies, or pop music, or TV—among the most sophisticated marketers in the entire world, for whom critics and arts journalists and feature writers are simply the extension of their marketing arms. That’s how they view you. The whole point of movie studios (and I live in Los Angeles, so I am extremely cynical about this) is to marginalize and corrupt all of you. When [*Newsweek* reporter and 1996-97 NAJP alumnus] John Horn broke the story of Sony putting the fake quotes from the people who [pretended to love the movies], this was the ultimate dream of the studios—the fake critic was exactly what they wanted. They didn’t need any of you. What they wanted to do was manufacture their own critic and have him or her say what they wanted to say. I think it is quite cynical. It is quite deliberate. To try to write about this in the face of that kind of marketing means that you are less and less important. It doesn’t really matter whether [*New York Times* film critic] A.O. Scott trashes “Star Wars”: it’s not really a part of the conversation. You guys are less and less a part of the conversation.

The second thing is: Arts journalists are partly responsible for this. The kind of language that too many critics write in is a language of a very rarified nomenclature. Just take art critics, or most rock-’n’-roll critics. For most lay-readers outside the field, it is extremely difficult to read. It makes references that most people don’t understand. It makes allusions that are not explained. It becomes a private language.

The third thing is: We live in a culture, a newspaper culture and a media culture that is entirely interested in “what’s in and what’s out,” “what’s up,” “what’s down,” a culture for whom the actual conversation is not very important.

All these forces combined have made the critic’s job much more marginalized than ever before. I wish I could leave you on an optimistic note—I just don’t have much hope for it. I believe in great cultural criticism. The first thing that I did when I became editor of *Los Angeles* magazine was create an arts section. The average length of the pieces in the arts section is between 1,500 and 2,000 words. I believe seriously that even if a conversation only takes place among a handful of people, it’s really important to do, because eventually, it expands. But I also fear that it’s in the face of a huge wind, a huge storm, forces that have made most of what we do less and less important.

Doug McLennan: I run a site called ArtsJournal.com, and we look at 200 publications and try and find some interesting thing from them to put up everyday. Some days, that’s really hard; a lot of days, that’s pretty easy. One pet peeve of mine is those zippy little titles that they call our sections. You know, “Time Off,” “Going Out”... When I was setting up ArtsJournal and

trying to find the index pages for where the arts stories were, one of the hardest things to find on the web sites was where arts stories actually lived. In some publications, it still is really difficult to find arts stories, and that's too bad, because they should be more accessible.

The way that we do general news, the way that a newspaper or a media company covers the community in which they live: it's through a political lens, it's through a business lens, it's through a celebrity lens. Why isn't it through a cultural lens?  
—Doug McLennan

I want to refer to something that Jay Harris said earlier, which was that arts coverage—at least in a lot of places that I look, anyway—is marginalized as a satellite event in a publication. And it isn't part of an ongoing conversation that we have about the communities in which we live—which is too bad. The way that we do general news, the way that a newspaper or a media company covers the community in which it lives: it's through a political lens, it's through a business lens, it's through a celebrity lens. Why isn't it through a cultural lens? Because coverage of the arts shouldn't just be a *Consumer Reports*.

And what I see in so many publications is that it *is* a *Consumer Reports*—it's listings, it's "You should check this out because it is a good show about this..." It's got to be more than that. The guide aspect of it has to be a component, certainly. But if you are going to have a conversation about culture that matters, it has to be way more than that. It has to make connections to every aspect of the news.

Somebody on the earlier panel was talking about the Jewish Museum show in New York, and how all the coverage seemed to happen in front of it, without the writers seeing the show. But how can you expect to have anything more if there isn't an ongoing conversation that makes the media able to put a story like that into context? What happens is that something happens in the arts that everybody wants to know about—like the [1999] "Sensation" show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art—and it immediately gets polarized into "this corner" and "that corner." We go to the suspects that we are familiar with, and it becomes this conversation that isn't a conversation anymore: it's just a lot of yelling.

If there were some sort of conversation along the way, when something controversial happens, you would have context in which to put it. And what I see, as I am looking out over a lot of publications, is that there are very few places in which those conversations are going on that make the context of arts and cultural reporting meaningful. Often, we don't treat cultural news or cultural coverage in the same basic journalistic way that we do for other kinds of news.

Somebody was talking about the ethics of how we cover things—it's different in the features and arts sections than it is anywhere else. And part of it is, I think that in smaller communities, people feel that if they are not boosting the arts, writing about the positive things that happen, that they are somehow damaging the arts. I think what it actually does is it devalues everything else that you write, because people are very sophisticated these days about the media messages that they get. They know that people are constantly feeding them something that they want you to pay attention to. Very quickly, you get to know the message behind the message that they are trying to give you. And if the message is always positive in some way, then you're going to distrust it.

I spent a year in China and spent a little time editing at *China Daily*, which we called the "good news" newspaper. An earthquake would happen, or a riot, and you would never hear about it. But six months later, you would hear about the solution to the riot, or the way we managed to fix the buildings after the earthquake. In other words, you couldn't say that something was bad and unresolved: you had to report that something had been solved. And so often, that's what cultural coverage seems to be.

The last thing that I want to say is that it's hard for readers to tell when a publication has changed its focus. You don't know that editor X has left a publication, because the same people are still writing, the same bylines are still there. But you start to notice, over time, that the focus of that section has changed somehow.

We all bitch about editors. I used to be a classical music critic, and I did my share of that as well. But it's interesting to me how there are publications where there are very talented people, but you have the sense that the coverage drifts along. Even if they are talented, even if they can say something important or interesting within a piece, it is without some kind of focus, without somebody back there directing things—and I'm not saying, "Go do this story, go do that story," but asking the questions or pointing the attention in some way. And you end up having cultural coverage that lacks context.

What an editor does is help to direct the context and listen to the writers and the people in the community who are out there paying attention. Unless

there is somebody thinking about what things mean in a much wider way than a critic covering a very narrow specialty, you don't end up having good coverage.

We don't expect that a visual arts critic can come in and cover visual arts without any experience.

But there is no stricture like that for editors. Editors are moved from one beat, to another beat, to another beat, without any knowledge about what they are doing. And if they don't have that context, then what the hell are they doing there?

—Doug McLennan

So, I would say it's not just that we don't have good critics at smaller publications—it's that we don't have good editors. We don't expect that somebody can come in and just cover politics without knowing anything about it. We don't expect that a visual arts critic can come in and cover visual arts without any experience. But there is no stricture like that for editors. Editors are moved from one beat, to another beat, to another beat, without any knowledge about what they are doing. And if they don't have that context, then what the hell are they doing there?

**Steve Proctor:** As Jay mentioned, there really has been a fundamental change in American newspapers that has made them a lot more bottom-line-focused. I think that has been felt all throughout the newspaper, particularly in the arts and features sections. I do think, though, that you can make very powerful arguments for the sustenance of art coverage. I want to talk about a couple of those to start with.

One is that a lot of cities—and I will use Baltimore as an example—are really struggling to maintain some life in the downtown area. And one of the few things that keeps a city like Baltimore alive and vibrant is that we are blessed with a really strong cultural community: a wonderful symphony, terrific art museums, a fabulous theater scene. And I think that a person in upper management who is looking to sustain the metropolitan newspaper ultimately might be persuaded that arts coverage is important not just to the commerce with the reader, but also to the sustenance of Baltimore as a place to live. And I think that if Baltimore isn't a wonderful place to live, the newspaper ultimately won't survive.



Secondly, every newspaper I know of is desperate to get more women and younger people to read it. I think a strong argument can be made that coverage of the arts is a way to do that. Every study you look at will show you that the decision-makers in most households about where to go and do things are women. If you provide better coverage of the arts, I think there is a strong chance you will attract more women readers.

The equation is a little more difficult with younger readers, because 18-year-olds, in particular, don't look at a major metropolitan newspaper as—if you will pardon the marketing phrase—a brand that they associate with what they are interested in. But I think that potential spin-off publications aimed at younger readers could be very beneficial to the franchise of a newspaper.

**A lot of newspapers are not doing much with their arts coverage beyond reviewing and previewing. While I am a strong believer in the importance in the criticism and reviewing, I think that's first base as far as arts coverage goes.**  
—Steve Proctor

I think that all of us who are involved in arts coverage have to look at ourselves a little bit as to why arts coverage may not be as valued at the newspaper as it ought to be. One of the reasons for this is that it's too one-dimensional at too many places. A lot of newspapers are not doing much with their arts coverage beyond reviewing and previewing. While I am a strong believer in the importance in the criticism and reviewing, I think that's first base as far as arts coverage goes.

What you really have to attach much more energy to as arts writers, is, for one thing, covering the cultural landscape. I talked in the beginning about this: being part of a vibrant city, covering the institutions as institutions, the struggle to get money, the importance of adding new things. For instance, if your symphony takes a tour of Europe or Japan—as our symphony is about to do—I think it is important to write not just about what the program is going to be, but to write about how touring is vital to the health of a symphony, and how it is economically important for a symphony to tour and record, and to maybe throw in some stories that make for interesting cultural A1 news, like “Why is it that Japan has become the world's largest consumer of classical music? What is that about?”

Those are the kinds of things that put the arts and culture on Page One, and that change the nature of the newspaper in a way that is fundamental and important. Every newspaper is struggling with the notion that the front page is often death, dying, crime—you know, bad things. And if that cultural vitality of a city is on the front page of the newspaper, that can make a big difference. To the extent that arts editors and writers are able to provide that, it creates a great argument for spending more on covering it.

Secondarily, I think there are not enough stories of deeper meaning being done in arts sections in America today. I think it's very superficial. The fundamental reason why artists create art is because they have some idea they want to impart to the culture, or something to say to the culture about who we are. And you can count on one hand in most papers how often they're getting at a story that goes to the deeper idea of the artist. What is it the artist is talking about? What is it that they want us to talk amongst each other about? At the *Sun*, I like to try to make the coverage, from the criticism on up, idea-focused. I would like it focused not on the event, but on the idea of the person who is putting the event on. What is it they want to talk about? What do they want us to think about? For instance, I'm not that interested in a review of the newest reality-TV show. But I *am* pretty interested in a story that looks at why we as a culture have become so fascinated with reality television. It points to some vacuum in our lives that we are filling up with desperate little games on islands far away.

Those are the things we have to address as arts critics and arts writers if we want to get more money out of management. The bottom line is: We have to do better work, work that is more substantive and thoughtful and that gets out onto the front page. Even if it doesn't get out onto the front page, we have to present a Sunday arts section that has work of real substance in it. I think if we did more of that, we would have fewer blows inflicted upon us.

[Audience member]: One of the big issues in newspapers is at the editing level. I agree with Doug that one of the biggest problems is that the people who set the agenda not only don't think strategically: they don't think, period. About a lot of things.

The first thing we really need to do as newspapers is put more thoughtfulness into editing positions. One of the fundamental failings of a lot of newspapers is that they want to cover what has already been covered elsewhere. I don't say this to disparage any of the pop critics in the room, but I do think that newspapers have to have a special place in their hearts for the high-end arts. They are the last bastion of people that cover it with any degree of seriousness.

And I think you have to be open to discovery. I don't think the high-end editors of the newspapers think about it a whole lot, strategically or

otherwise. So if you are the arts editor at your newspaper, if you are in the arts department, you pretty much have free rein to do what you want to do. I don't think that anybody at the upper levels is going to pay a whole lot of attention to it. As far as the specific details of what you assign or don't assign, you have a lot of freedom. It's just not well exercised.

[Audience comment contesting implication that reviews are the appropriate place to expound about reality television]

**Proctor:** I didn't mean to suggest that it couldn't be done in a review. I *do* think it is difficult to do in a review of 12 inches. And I think editing is a series of choices, so you have to make the choice to cover a few things extremely well, or at least to pick your spots where you can do something substantive.

What I see happening at a lot of places is that everything is just a 15-inch review. I think it is very difficult to get very deep on that level. That was my point—not that it can't be done in a review. I apologize if implied that.

[Audience question about how arts editors make the case to numbers-conscious upper management for increased arts coverage]

**Warren:** This is a source of tremendous frustration for me. There are so few industries in this country that are as bad as newspapers in terms of the lack of decent research about what their consumers like and don't like—whether you talk about *The New York Times* or the *Chicago Tribune*. People in television—those people know the next morning that half of Tom Brokaw's audience left after he did his story on such and such. We don't have any clue. There has been no research done on the *Chicago Tribune's* features section, and we have the reputation in the business for being one of the smartest operations around. No research in five years, except for occasional focus groups, where we run out to the suburbs and watch some nut-case guy take the rest of the group down some weird path.

In a time of tremendous economic anxiety, top management errs on the side of caution again and again. One thing I have been struck by is how little it takes for one reader of our paper to get everybody scared. It could be one lady in Lake Bluff, Ill., who was furious with a piece I assigned the day before the Bears/Eagles game last fall. I raised the question, "What is the deal with Soldier Field's bathrooms? They are the most disgusting men's rooms." So our main features section, the day before the game, had a story that everybody on the radio was talking about: What is the deal with the goddamned men's rooms? One letter from a bluenose in Lake Bluff, made it to the CEO of the [Tribune] company. Finally, it makes it down to me, and it has been signed off on by a whole bunch of guys with lots of stock options, and I am nervous.

The point is, it doesn't take much in this climate to exacerbate that tendency toward caution. And that is just awful. We just cut out a lot of comics for space reasons, and there are few things that have as much of an emotional connection to readers as those. We were all nervous after a week or two. My subordinate who was overseeing it got over 250 e-mails, half of them clearly orchestrated by the artist—how else would they know my name? And my view was, "Hey, we sell about 680,000 copies a day, a million on Sunday. That doesn't strike me as too formidable a response."

But real data is absent, whether you are talking about the Martha Stewart column we run on Sunday or one of your high-profile local columnists. A lot of our decisions are driven by a mix of fear and anecdote.

**A lot of our decisions are driven  
by a mix of fear and anecdote.  
—Jim Warren**

[Audience question about recent changes in NPR's cultural coverage]

Klose: We've been doing two types of cultural coverage. One, there's been a cultural unit in the news division, which has been making content for the newsmagazines. I consider that separate from the arts and presentation division, which we call the cultural division. So it's already a weird division, the way people think about it.

Our main classical music program, "Performance Today," has the largest national audience for cultural programming of any nationally produced and distributed classical music show in the country. Listenership to that program—and the ways in which stations use it—has been a very confused and contradictory picture. We put a lot of resources into producing it on a very high level. There are a lot of stations that play it at 10 p.m., when there is almost no audience they can actually reach. And we are not in the business of doing elitist presentation. We are not in the business of doing shallowing and narrowing. We want to make sure that what we produce can be accessible to the stations in ways that can help them touch their audience in a meaningful and wide context.

So for "Performance Today," we are probably moving toward less talk. It is a two-hour show, and it's like, 12 minutes, 12 minutes, 12 minutes. It is hard to stay with that show, in my estimation, because a lot of the music is interrupted by a lot of conversation by Fred Child. We are going to ask Fred to do cultural news so we can do segments that stations can use on the news

side, so they can have enormous contact with the audience and refer it back to the music stream.

At the same time, there are a number of stations—in California and in Colorado—who are experimenting with creating a high-end-quality, classical music stream that will play 24 hours a day, “C24.” It’s a stream with very high presentation quality—not just needle-drop, but actual live production, aggregating the very best performances from around the country and around the world. And it could be produced as a 24-hour stream, and member stations can use it as flexibly as they wish to. They can come in and out as they wish, because we believe that is very helpful to the way the stations present their content to their audiences.

On the jazz side, we have had extensive conversations with our jazz member stations. The trend in public radio, at least among the NPR stations, has been to reduce music presentation in the morning hours because the news and talk formats are so powerful. Nobody in American broadcasting is doing news and journalism on the air like we are, so people need to go there, because they can’t find this stuff anywhere else. So we are talking with the stations as well. There also are efforts to create a jazz stream that stations can come in and out of, and to take the knowledge we have from the presentation side of NPR, the arts and performance side, and bring it over into an arts-information desk that will operate and record on arts as a business, on arts as a creative power, on arts as part of what the community is. Our idea here is to help our member stations together create a wider presentation of arts and cultural encounter in their community.

[Audience question about regionalization of NPR]

Klose: NPR now has 750 employees. Almost 600 of them are in Washington D.C. Getting access to how the rest of the nation is thinking, I think, is going to be eased. We are going to have more producers, more creative people, more journalists, more contact, more editorial strength out on the West Coast. It’s a little bit like the national bureaus of *The New York Times*. They have discussions, sometimes struggles, and sometimes fights. It is historical, and has been written about plenty of times.

But when you are on the scene, you know more. We have more journalists coming across the West, to the Mountain West, to the Northwest. We will have more access to them, and to what’s going on at our member stations, and what they are reporting. From them, we can bring a more powerful diversity of arts and culture to the national shows, and therefore link together the network of conversations that goes across public radio everyday.

**Views from the Other Side  
Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism  
May 10, 2002**

**Moderator:**

Susan Stamberg, special correspondent for the arts, National Public Radio, and NAJP board member

**Panelists:**

Sydney Goldstein, executive director, City Arts and Lectures  
Rhodessa Jones, co-artistic director, Cultural Odyssey  
Carey Perloff, artistic director, American Conservatory Theater  
Brenda Way, artistic director, ODC/San Francisco  
Connie Wolf, director and CEO, Magnes Museum, San Francisco

Orville Schell, dean, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism: This is an auspicious moment to get together, because culture is one of the first things to go when the bottom line gets scarce, even though in the long run, culture is one of the most durable things we have. I doubt we will have much of a recollection in 50 years of which dot-com mogul was defrocked and fell from grace but who made it to the headlines on a regular basis. But we may remember a great film director, an author or a painter. I urge you all on, and it is indeed the Lord's work.

Stamberg: Good morning. I think we *do* do God's work, probably, all of us. For the first time—as somebody who adores the arts first of all, and then ends up covering them—I suddenly am beginning to feel like an artist. You [artists] understand what it's like to be part of an endangered species: particularly you people who deal with performance, getting things out there in front of the public, and always worrying about money and where it's going to come from. Suddenly, those of us in the newsrooms trying to do this kind of coverage thoughtfully are feeling similar amounts of stress. So, it's not a happy club to be in, but here we all are. Let's make the most of it.

[To the panel] This is not a news conference, and we know you are passionately devoted to the work that you do. Tell it to us, in a way that doesn't lead you to expect that we are going to rush out and write stories about it on deadline: that's not the point today. We need you to help us think in terms of big changes that you are perceiving, not only in your field, but in other fields, things you see that are bubbling up in the culture. Let us all pretend that we are living in the best possible world—a world in which our

editors are dying to hear from us, will give us miles and miles of space in which to tell these wonderful stories that you are noticing. Let's pretend that this is the heaven in which we exist. Just think aloud with us about new and innovative trends.

**Perloff:** I'm the artistic director of the American Conservatory Theater, a 35-year-old theater in the Bay Area that's also a major training program for young actors. So, in no particular order, here are three trends that are probably as challenging for us in the field as for you all who cover it.

One, my field has become much more interdisciplinary. I'll give you an example. We just did at ACT—and we are a theater company—a new opera [“The Difficulty of Crossing a Field”] that we commissioned by an important composer named David Lang and a playwright named Mac Wellman, with the Kronos Quartet. And the minute we started to develop this piece and talk to the media about this, I noticed this blank terror on most people's faces: because *who was going to cover it?*

This is happening all over the country, in very interesting ways. Visual artists are working with dancers. This has happened since Rauschenberg and John Cage got together [in the 1950s]. More music and text and theater collaborations are happening. Artists from the pop-culture world are starting to work with [“high-culture” artists]—you have Tom Waits and Robert Wilson—and so the traditional disciplines have blurred. And writing intelligently about a mixed-media piece is an enormous challenge. It's a challenge for the people who produce it to figure out how to articulate what the impulse of the piece is, and how these artists came together. And, I think, it's a challenge to write about it.

The second thing that's important to look at right now—and I think it is very under-examined in this country—is the training of young artists. One of the things that most distressed me under former National Endowment for the Arts Chairwoman Jane Alexander was that the first thing that got cut by the NEA—it's sort of amazing to me—was training. The NEA used to support artists' training, and that's over.

One of the things that worries me in this country is: we have Little Leagues, and we believe in athletic training, and we think children should do these things. But the notion that it is the responsibility of this culture to nurture, in a rigorous way, the education of artists doesn't seem to exist anymore. Our young students coming out of a very elite MFA training program at ACT graduate with about \$40,000 in debt. And they are entering a profession of 85 percent unemployment. So, be glad you are a journalist.

And yet, I had this interesting conversation with [theater critic] Bruce Weber from *The New York Times* about actor training, and he said, “I'd like to come

and take a class at ACT.” And I thought, “Oh, that would interesting... why?” I told him, “If you want to take the class, you can’t observe it. You have to *take it*,” because learning what it is to actually *transform* as an actor is an alchemy that is worth experiencing.

He said that as a drama critic, he was never quite sure what the nature of acting really was. What is the contribution of the actor, what is the contribution of the director, of the script, and how do those things work together? These are not stupid questions. I’ve been doing this for 25 years, and it’s still fascinating to me to go to the theater to try and tease that out. But we don’t talk about it in our country, because we consider it “elitist” to say that some people have artistic talent and other people don’t. As I’ve said, we say it about sports, but we don’t say it about that arts, and I think there are very exciting things happening in artists’ training all over the country, major, important things for young conductors, for visual artists, for people in the theater. I think this would be an interesting thing to explore.

You have to find a way for audiences to feel as if they have a chance to talk about it, and to plug into it in a broader way, rather than just consuming it as a piece of culture.

—Carey Perloff

My last one is philanthropy. I say this seriously: this is a town in which individuals have shaped the aesthetic conscience of the town—not in a bad way, but in an incredibly progressive way. One thing I have learned—and this may seem obvious, but it is rarely covered—yesterday on National Public Radio, on [KQED program] Pacific Time, they did a story on Chinese-Americans and philanthropy, and why we don’t believe that Chinese-Americans actually contribute beyond their own community. It was very interesting to me, because what needs to be recognized about the performing arts today, I think, is how interactive it is. I don’t mean in any way “video-game interactive,” but what an audience wants *now*. What I’ve found about audiences in the past five years is that they want to come before [the show], they want to talk about it, they want to read everything on your web site, then they want to see the play, then they want to meet the actors, then they want to do a backstage tour—because, at least in this community, people spend their days alone behind computer screens so often that the hunger for something live is enormous.

So I feel very optimistic about the future for the theater, because I think that hunger is going to propel people back into it. But what we who are interested



in the arts have to realize is that the engagement goes beyond the actual performance. And what I've found in talking to philanthropists who are interested in supporting the arts and audience members is: You have to find a way for audiences to feel as if they have a chance to talk about it, and to plug into it in a broader way, rather than just consuming it as a piece of culture.

**Connie Wolf:** The Jewish Museum of San Francisco has recently merged with the Judah L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley to form the Magnes Museum. We are in the process of a major expansion. Just about every museum in the San Francisco Bay area is in the process of a major expansion. We have a site in the Yerba Buena District, and we are working with architect Daniel Libeskind on a design for that facility. We are also working with a local architect on a building not far from here to create a scholarly research center associated with our collections in Berkeley.

Once all these museums open, and there's 20 times more square footage of art on view, what is the public going to do, and what are the journalists going to do, and how are we going to pay for all of these facilities long-term? That's something that has to be looked at.

—Connie Wolf

Regarding my sense of trends in the museum world: One, I want to talk about booms, because what I find fascinating in San Francisco is, we have the Asian Art Museum [to open in Fall 2002], with Gae Aulenti as the architect. We have the De Young, with Herzog and de Meuron doing that architecture. We have Legoretta doing the Mexican Museum. We have Libeskind doing the Jewish Museum. The Academy of Sciences is being done by Renzo Piano. And there is going to be another museum, The Museum of the African Diaspora, which will also be in the Yerba Buena Gardens [arts] district. This is remarkable for one small community that isn't known for being a visual arts center.

So the fact that this community is looking at the relationships between distinguished architects and its programs is quite interesting. What concerns me is that once all these museums open, and there's 20 times more square footage of art on view, what is the public going to do, and what are the journalists going to do, and how are we going to pay for all of these facilities long-term? That has to be looked at. I think New York is the only other city with this density of building projects.

The second issue is popularity. I think some of you know, or saw, the Eva Hesse show [at SFMoMA]. That show—which was fully funded—has not been a blockbuster. And the smart thing that happened under [former SFMoMA director] David Ross, when he was the one that actually put it in the calendar, was that he put it on the same year as [“Ansel Adams at 100”]. In California, you can’t get much [more populist] than Ansel Adams... well, maybe Georgia O’Keeffe. They balanced the season, which was really a great way of doing it.

But the reality is, there isn’t much motivation to keep doing shows like Eva Hesse when you don’t have a large audience for them. Without a large audience, it means your store is not doing as well, your membership isn’t doing as well. All these things percolate to the economics of the facility. So I worry about whether shows like Eva Hesse will happen in the future. That will be a major loss, in terms of understanding the complexity and diversity of art in our time.

The third issue is the role of ethnically specific institutions. In this day and age, in which boundaries are constantly being crossed, what is the role of an ethnically specific institution? I think about this every day. What is the role of a Jewish museum? And so, because there *is* a Jewish museum, I now think about ways in which we work with other constituencies to expand those boundaries. For example, we are working with an artist named Lee Mingwei on a project about memory. He has nothing to do with Judaism, but he is a Buddhist. So, there is an interesting way to look at those cross-disciplinary ideas. I think this is a critical issue around the country.

Finally, I just wanted to say one thing about Carey Perloff’s notion about cross-disciplinary art. We have a show up right now of the work of Ben Katchor. And of course, we pitched it to the *San Francisco Chronicle’s* arts section. With limited visual arts coverage, our options were limited. We found one person on staff who was really interested, and he was all set to do it, and then they discovered that Ben was going to do a lecture on museum cafeterias. So where did we get reviewed for this show? The food section. It was a huge disappointment. It was a great piece, but here we have a show for this community, and there it was in the food section and not really even mentioned in the arts section. So there are complications in the cross-disciplinary, and in making it successful and productive.

**Way:** I agree with everything you said about the educational aspect. I run ODC/San Francisco, a dance company that moved out here 30 years ago. We have a school and a performing theater where we present about 230 events (not ours) a year. And we perform six weeks a year in town, and tour the world the rest of the year.

When I first came out here, I used to go to the theater absolutely every night. I saw ballet, and modern, and postmodern, and ethnic, and jazz, and tap—the place was absolutely hopping. Dance was in its ascendancy. There were no fewer than 11 people covering the dance beat in the various newspapers, three in the *San Francisco Chronicle* alone. Of course, everyone hated them all, that goes without saying, but the truth is that the argument between one and the other created a very dynamic conversation, of which we were a part. One thing we knew was, we were poor, but we were important. That was the sustenance that kept us all going. And in the last 30 years, as I've moved along the institutional path—I'm the big endurer in the dance world out here—the conversation about dance has dwindled to a whisper. There is currently one [dance] writer left on the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and one person doesn't make a conversation. So I thought, "Maybe it's not a story anymore." But, of course, I know it still is, because that's how you've got to be if you want to keep going.

There is currently one [dance] writer left  
on the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and one  
person doesn't make a conversation.

—Brenda Way

There was a survey four years ago by the NEA, and they looked at all the performing arts audiences in seven cities in America. San Francisco was one of them. They discovered that 7 percent of a random sample of our population went to ballet. And I thought, "Well, that's not too impressive." But 19.4 percent went to other kinds of dance. That was news to me. That's a lot of people—19.4 percent. And it occurs to me that other kinds of dance are by and large the province of women and non-whites.

My theater is producing 230 things a year. About 74 percent are women-led, and a majority are non-white-led events. And of the reviews in the *Chronicle*, 61 percent were dedicated to ballet and 39 percent to other kinds of dance. Of the 73 percent female-led events in my theater, which is emblematic of other alternative theaters—we are not an "identity-based organization," so there is a randomness to our programming—of the 112 dance reviews in the *Chronicle*, 76 percent focused on male-led companies. So it's exactly the reverse of what my dance experience is. My story is not just to say, "Oh damn, they always win," but that the paper is missing the story. And it's a very major story of our area. I think that the culture of the Bay Area and the lifestyle and diversity is our unique story. So to let that die down, it seems to me, is to miss the point. How do we solve that? I don't know. But it seems to be something that needs solving.

Finally, I think that dance has a particular relationship with written criticism. I'm going to read this: "Modern dance has very short performing seasons in the current dance-touring economy. Much of the work being produced will only be seen here. No CD recording, script or score encodes our performance, and, unlike ballet, we don't work with a received vocabulary. You can't use those nice French words. The words of our regional critics therefore function not only as contemporary commentary, but as our only historical artifact. Our need today, even greater than need for artistic subsidy – and what could be greater, really? – is to regain a dynamic presence in the broader cultural conversation. For this, we are dependent on the press. They (you) are literally our voice."

If writers are passionately interested in the artistic enterprise, the public will assume its importance independent of the praise or censure about a given piece or concert. Snide, dismissive or demeaning language doesn't simply affect the artist and the size of his or her audience. It depresses public interest. It undermines the respect with which the field itself is perceived.

—Brenda Way

What I would really like to see—and this is my dream—are critical writers with the gift of sight and insight who: one, know what groups, artists, issues and events to write about; two, are able to see and describe with clarity what they see on the stage, to see the dance as well as describe the setting and the music; three, are able to set an intellectual or social context and evoke the appropriate standards for that particular event—if it's Kathleen Hermesdorf doing her release technique, we really don't care if she points her toe; four, can write lucidly and engagingly about the experience.

Finally, the writer's attitude toward the art form he or she covers casts a light or shadow over the region. If writers are passionately interested in the artistic enterprise, the public will assume its importance independent of the praise or censure about a given piece or concert. Snide, dismissive or demeaning language doesn't simply affect the artist and the size of his or her audience. It depresses public interest. It undermines the respect with which the field itself is perceived.

So, I think we need a diversity of critical perspectives, a broader range of events covered, and a heightened respect for the creative endeavor. One thing I know for sure is that we will all share in the outcome of your work.

**Goldstein:** About 22 years ago, I was running the Public Events program at the College of Marin, and I was producing everything from Susan Sontag to Ella Fitzgerald to children's film programs and comedy festivals. And I was invited to see a performance of opera or symphony or ballet in the Herbs Theatre in San Francisco—which is across from the opera house and the performing arts center, a 950-seat theater that had just been renovated to look older than it looked in the first place, this beautiful facility that the United Nations charter was signed in, that Isaac Stern made his debut in. The theater was just celebrating the renovation, which I think was a huge renovation, and I sat in a box and thought, "Wow, wouldn't it be great to see Susan Sontag speaking from this stage?"

I decided to do an experimental series of programs. I actually thought 22 years ago that there was so much going on in San Francisco that there was no way a series of programs (it was primary writers at that time, it was Susan Sontag and Jerzy Kosinski and Ray Bradbury and Fran Lebowitz) would attract enough people.

But they came. In that first season, people came in droves. They bought tickets. I thought a lot of them bought tickets out of sympathy, but I don't have that many friends. I think what they came to was a beautifully produced, elegant setting, quiet, almost like a church. For me, the Herbs Theatre is my synagogue, because it is a place that celebrates ideas and the arts.

We did specialize in writers at first, but it is not uncommon for us now to do Terry Gross hosting Rosemary Clooney, singing, talking, singing, or Gladys Knight. Even Ben Katchor did a wonderful program for us. He was hosted by Michael Chabon.

We are also on about 150 public radio stations around the country. We get no income whatsoever from those radio broadcasts, and I am so proud of them because they go to places that I haven't been to, or that some of the writers haven't been to. They go to some major cities also, and our on-air host is Linda Hunt, who could make a potato-chip commercial sound elevated. I think the kind of producing we do is partly what people respond to. When we started, bookstores hadn't started doing author readings. We don't do author readings. But if you're going to come to hear Garrison Keillor with us, or if you are going to come to hear Susan Sontag, or to hear some other well-known or not-so-well-known writers or performance artists or social critics, they are probably there being interviewed by [2000-01 NAJP Fellow] Wendy Lesser, by Orville Schell, or even [2001-02 NAJP Fellow] Francis Davis, who

came with me to Great Barrington, Mass. the year before Pauline Kael died. Francis interviewed her over a two-day period, and those programs ran on public radio several times, and it is now being turned into a book that will be published in the fall.

[To other panelists] We are so different from all of you. You've got big organizations to support you. We're just a little nothing. We are also below the radar screen of journalism, because we're a hybrid. We're a dinosaur. We are one of the smallest arts organizations in San Francisco doing the greatest number of programs, but we don't have a cast or a crew or stagehands to support on an ongoing basis. We're what colleges and universities used to do for their communities. Thomas Mann would go on tour—he gave lectures. We don't do that. But there are events that we have done—I.F. Stone coming to the Herbs Theatre on probably a half dozen occasions and saying to the public, "There aren't really good guys and bad guys. Everybody bears watching." There are moments that are so memorable, I don't mind that we are not covered.

I think it's great we can affect ticket sales. I'm proud that I am the first person ever to have presented an event with Fran Lebowitz when nobody had heard of her. That was more than 22 years ago. I'm really proud that with Wendy Lesser, we've done some people who've had a small audience, like Adam Phillips, the British psychoanalyst. I'm really glad that we can afford to give voice to people who don't always get heard. And we do a lot of balancing. If you see a series of ours, there are lots of single tickets sold. I like that people come the way they go to the movies. They may go to 20 in a year. If there's somebody on the Friends of the Library series, if it has John Updike on it, and you think you want to see him, you may also come to see a writer you have never heard and think, "Oh my God, this is really interesting." We're part of a little nonprofit "retailing of ideas" business. It's so different, and I don't mind that we're not covered.

**Stamberg:** Sydney, I just want to follow up on this: You're not covered, except that when you bring these enormous names to town, the newspapers do want to get in touch with those authors and do profiles.

**Goldstein:** Yes, they do. To say that we're not covered is not entirely true. When Stephen King comes shortly after somewhat recovering from a horrible accident, that gets covered. Big piece. Jonathan Franzen comes in the wake of his getting in a little spat with Oprah, and we get a big piece. It gets covered. It gets covered like theater, actually. Art Spiegelman comes, and it gets covered in a very imaginative way. One of the cartoonists from the *Chronicle* did a cartoon strip about Art Spiegelman. But we don't need to get covered. When you are running a dance company or a theater company and you're doing a six-week run of something, you need to build an audience. We are one-night stands, with very few exceptions.

**Jones:** I am the artistic director and founder of the Medea Project, a theater for incarcerated women. I am also a performing artist in the Bay Area. I have a body of work that I've made myself. I don't think it's homegrown, I think it's simply a signal that the world is changing, and in the face of diversity, there's going to be different folks arriving at the table with their voices, and their voices come through their own efforts of making a statement for the stage.

I just got back from Yale. I have a show called "Hot Flashes, Power Surges and Private Summers," which is about... that. Menopause and sexuality. It's not apologizing at all. It's about the reality that we are all big kids. And I'm not ready to retire. I'm about to really *drive*, because now I know what to do, being 53 and all that. I am a grandmother, a writer and a director here in San Francisco.

The Medea Project is a theater project housed at the county jail here in San Francisco. It is 12 years old. And it examines the incarcerated woman's participation in her own incarceration, with the center of it using storytelling, dream-gazing, journal-writing. It brings in artists—I've have Lucille Clifton come in and talk about her work, Susan Sarandon has come in and raised a lot of money for us at the press club here in San Francisco. I wanted to make state-of-the-art work with incarcerated people. One critic told me this was "art as social change."

I do not have degree in theater. Theater simply just saved my life. This little colored girl, at age 16, had a baby and had a brilliant brother—not Bill T. Jones, but my other one—who suggested that I join him in meeting a group of theater people. And it was there that I found my voice and made my first theater piece, about nude dancing. I have a daughter, who is now 38 but at the time she was 13, and she had won a scholarship to Marin Academy in San Rafael. And her father had flaked on me. I got a job dancing nude downtown, dancing all the while as a professional dancer with a company here in San Francisco, Tumbleweed. This is 1978. I started to write about it, and I had feminists and other political artists get up in my face and tell me that they was so disappointed in me because you know, Rhodessa Jones was a star, a colored girl at any rate, and I had politics and what was I doing in a tawdry place like that? I said, "Honey, I am paying the rent and for my daughter's incidentals so that she can go to a private school."

But while there, I started to write down the realities of the place, and I made my first solo work, "The Legend of Lily Overstreet," which was really about nude dancing in America, and what do men want from women, and what do women want from men, and what is eroticism in this age of mercenary sexuality. And this piece became my entrée onto the main stage, and it is autobiographical, and that is what I teach. That's my work with incarcerated women—it's about teaching, helping them to tell their story, because more

and more women are going to jail than ever before, and we need to, as a culture, find a way to have a conversation about what this is. Because women are going to jail, and what is happening to the children?

I'm not a psychotherapist. I'm not even interested in psychotherapy. I was hired as an aerobics teacher. The California Council for the Arts called me and asked if I would be interested in working with incarcerated women. I said, "Sure," and they said, "Would you teach aerobics?" And I thought, "What does aerobics have to do with rehabilitation?" But then I thought, "What the hell, this is too good to pass up." So, I went into the jail and I started to work with incarcerated women. I brought Viola Spolin's "Improvisation for the Theater," and that became the handbook I used as a teacher in jails. The women were so open about talking about their lives. It made for such great drama. Then one of my main students had been murdered. Her body was found in McLaren Park, and that inspired "Big Butt Girls, Hard-Headed Women." I thought, "I have to step on stage and bring these women, and the drama of their lives, with me."

In jail, I met everybody. I met the Valkyrie, I met the Siren, I met the Virgin, I met the Crone. And they all had an incredible story to tell. [1996-97 NAJP Fellow] Danyel Smith had been following me the whole time, and she was very curious about this black woman, and the rumble in the community.

There was one critic I remember earlier in my life, around the time of "The Legend of Lily Overstreet." When he saw "Lily" — which was a multimedia montage about my life dancing downtown — he said to another black director in town, "I can't write about her, because she doesn't sing enough. I don't know what to call it." Which brings me to my point: As an arts journalist, be interested in everything. Engage in the world around you. Mr. Pinter and Mr. Shakespeare, and Jerome Robbins and all those people on Broadway — they are lovely. I think that is wonderful work. But the theater of the oppressed is very real, too, in America. That is some of the work that artists are doing, and it should be examined. I actually make my living as an artist, I really do. I like the young journalists who find me. When they get the press release, if they don't know what it is, they come and interview me, come and do a preview first.

As an arts journalist, be interested in everything.  
Engage in the world around you.  
—Rhodessa Jones

Things have changed. We are no longer just "the empire" — the peasants on the outside are not having it. In the empire, there are people who need their



stories to be told. And there are artists who are interested in this. I am interested in the state-of-the-art. I'm not interested in the Negro Auxiliary Ball. I want my stuff to be center-stage in San Francisco, with the help of Lorraine Hansberry, the African-American Cultural Society, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. The big stage is where I put these women after four to six months' training. And they do their work on stage.

One critic, who was very faithful at first, said to me about four years ago—because the work kept coming, and he didn't get it—"Why do you think anybody would want to come see the Medea Project again?" I said, "Why do people come and see 'Hamlet' over and over again?" And *these* stories vary. The cast varies. He said, "Well, you know, well, it's just, just..." I said, "It's just what? How dare you decide that this gets thrown on the trash heap of society, because there is always something new!"

The faces of the incarcerated women are changing. Yes, African-American women are there in large numbers, but I get so many women, Anglo-Saxon girls, who are 17, 18 years old, who thought that to be homeless was fun. I end up with a lot of them in jail. So it involves all of us. And I would just say: Be interested in all of the work, because you may find some jewels out there. I think that you've got work to do, but I'm interested and glad that you're here to find out what's happening.

[Audience member]: How do you regard the *Chronicle* and the alternative press?

Way: That may affect us more than others at the table. The alternative press is absolutely crucial for us. They have fewer and less-experienced people covering it, however, than they used to. I actually find the conversation there, to the extent that we have it, and the Internet is a big part.

The thing that I am disappointed by is their lack of historical scope. For dance in particular, if the person writing about it doesn't set the context, the audience will never know it. And our audience is young. They haven't seen things in New York for the past 40 years like some of us. That's the part that I have trouble with. But they're critical, and I encourage them.

Here is another interesting thing. We survey our audience all the time, and I feel often that the people writing about it don't know whom they are talking to. When they say, "Oh, you don't have to describe that piece in your program. You don't need to have that 'Unplugged' series that talks about how works are made": well, they're wrong. Because the audience completely wants to be involved in that, whether they think that is entertaining or not. They are hungry for it.

Perloff: Do you know what I think is interesting about the alternative press here?

There are two golden rules for arts journalists, depending on whom you write for: Either you hide behind this notion of “objectivity,” which means never talking to an artist, or you’re from this Robert Bernstein/John Lahr school, which means you hang out with them all the time and get criticized for nepotism and insidious friendships and other things. It’s an interesting debate. It seems to me that the more artists you talk to, the better a journalist you are. It doesn’t mean you have to like them. It doesn’t mean you are unbiased. There is no such thing as objectivity. You are who you are. Every one of you has your own cultural heritage, your own family life, your own interests, your own aesthetics. Who are we kidding here?

What is interesting about the alternative press is that they are less frightened to have a relationship with the artists.

—Carey Perloff

What is interesting about the alternative press is that they are less frightened about having a relationship with the artists, partly because Brad Rosenstein, the theater critic for the *Bay Guardian*, also runs the educational program at the Performing Arts Library here. He’s fabulous. He knows everybody, he puts together symposia, he listens to artists talk about their work. I think that can only make you a better critic.

The other thing [about the alternative press] is you actually have to *read* them, because they don’t have what is, in my field, the most insidious and repellent thing about arts criticism at the *Chronicle*: the “little man.” It’s the most humiliating thing for both artists and critics. We have an icon here in the Bay Area for theater and movies—just as when you look at the weather page and it has a sun, or it has a little leaf blowing if it’s windy so you don’t have to read that it’s windy. In the theater, you can work on a piece for three years, and put it up there, and a critic can actually write seriously about it, and the only thing that matters is this little icon (which is copyrighted, of which the *Chronicle* is fabulously proud)—which is a little guy on a chair, and he is either clapping and falling off his chair, or he’s clapping and sitting in his chair, or he’s sitting staring in his chair, or he’s sleeping in his chair, or he’s not even in the chair. I cannot begin to tell you how disheartening it is to make work for a major paper that views theater that way. And I think it’s disheartening for the critics. It’s not their fault: they write as absolutely thoroughly as they can. But who reads a review when you can just look at the little man?

[Audience member]: What's the difference between the little man, and star or letter grades, which most papers use?

Perloff: It's much more visibly aggressive and horrible. We all hang up the little man with an axe in his back.

[Audience member]: A question for Brenda. I think I saw the NEA study you referred to, and I was a little skeptical about that. The percentage of people who attended events other than ballet—that also included other things, like people who attended aerobics classes.

Way: That's not how I read it.

The participatory number, which includes aerobics, in contrast to the attendance number, was interesting. Seventy-five percent of people polled in this region participate in the arts.

Wendy Lesser, editor, *Threepenny Review*: I wanted to pick up on what Carey said about artist's training, and think about it in terms of critic's training. I think, particularly for the performing arts but even for the literary arts, that when the interviewer or the critic or journalist has actual experience in the field they are writing about, it is much more useful to the audience or readers. For instance, when you have Michael Chabon interviewing people, it's a whole different experience than when you have anybody else doing it. He sees things from the inside, and he asks wonderful questions, and when somebody who has taken dance can actually describe physically for the reader what's happening on stage, then their little-man comments at the end may or may not have an effect, because the writer has actually given you the gestures of what's happening, which is very important.

Peter Plagens, art critic, *Newsweek*: I want to ask one specific question and one general overview question.

To Brenda's point, about the ratio of what is actually covered to what actually is being done and by whom: There is a sort of "outer-ring" problem with this, at least in my field. If I were to do that, I would spend a lot of time writing about Thomas Kinkade and things in galleries in Scottsdale and Carmel, etc. Because if you took some statistical measure, that might be the stuff that people are buying and putting in frames and going on their wall. And I stay within a circle.

And my overview thing is—and I just want to put this on the table for consideration—that one of the ongoing assumptions of this whole gathering seems to be that artists and arts journalists are engaged in the same kind of work, working in the same direction.

Way: I'll say briefly that I don't think we are doing the same thing, and I certainly don't think the job of the newspaper critic is to advertise my new season. I think the job of the newspaper critic is to pick up on the ideas that I am struggling with that are important, and that I assume will be of importance to the readership. For one, I have to say that our audiences are very smart. They would rather buy their local paper if there were a good conversation going on in it, but they're all getting *The New York Times*. There's a reason for this. But, it's not about you doing my advertising for me—I pay the papers a lot to do that. I expect the conversation to be what we are part of.

I certainly don't think the job of the newspaper critic is to advertise my new season. I think the job of the newspaper critic is to pick up on the ideas that I am struggling with that are important, and that I assume will be of importance to the readership.

—Brenda Way

Jones: I agree, I think that the critic's job is to play it back. Play it back, look at it, take it in, and give me some feedback on it. I'm one of these people that if the little man gives it a thumbs-down, I'm going to go see it, because that's how I am. I don't always assume that the critic is very bright.

Wolf: In the visual arts, I just want to use the example of "Mirroring Evil," which is up at the Jewish Museum in New York. What I found very difficult there was that in the initial criticism, no one had seen the work. The work had not been seen by anyone who was writing about it. I found it really disturbing that a whole show could be discussed and debated, a show about art, and the art is not even looked at by the people writing about it. I think that is your responsibility as journalists: to look at the work.

Way: The other thing to be stressed, lest you get really depressed, is that I don't think we *are* in a dinosaur field. I don't think it's true, despite the fact that everyone says, "Everyone only wants to read about popular culture." I actually think our culture is going in the opposite direction. This is an extraordinary time of cultural discourse, of people hungering for things that are more than sound-less sound bites.

And I think that arts journalism can play a vanguard role in pushing the American arts forward. You don't always have to be on our team. You have to ask good questions. Like, why is it, given the world's view of America,

that we don't have an actual cultural-export policy, like we had during the Cold War? Why is there no funding in America to actually send the arts abroad – which is one of the best ways of showing who we are? These kind of things. You have to realize that most of the time, artists are exhausted and overburdened and trying to keep their institutions going. When there's a critic or journalist who says, "Why don't you think about *this*?" or, "Look at what's going on in the world," or who writes about something somewhere else that we didn't know about – that is a huge service to the field.

**The Crisis in Book Coverage: A Roundtable Discussion**  
**Mark Hopkins Hotel**  
**May 11, 2002**

Moderator:

Carlin Romano, literary critic, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*; 1997-98 NAJP senior fellow

Panelists:

Gayle Feldman, 2001-02 NAJP research fellow; contributing editor, *Publishers Weekly* and *The Bookseller* (London)

David Kipen, book critic, *San Francisco Chronicle*

Jerome Weeks, book critic, *The Dallas Morning News*

Lawrence Weschler, 1998-99 NAJP senior fellow; author; and director of the New York Institute for the Humanities

**Romano:** My original idea for this session was to have a meeting like the one we are having—not a big public session, but a little brainstorming among arts journalists about the crisis in book coverage. As it turns out, the timing isn't bad. In *U.S. News and World Report* this week, they talk about the crisis in book coverage. For better or worse, it is focused on my section [at the *Inquirer*], which has been cut back severely. My thought has been that this is, in fact, an issue for all arts journalists, not just book people.

What's been happening, as a lot of you know, is that book sections have been getting cut back at a lot of places. I'll give you the short history of my section. When I came in as book editor in 1984, I had a 16-page tabloid section. In subsequent years, that went to 12 pages, then eight pages, then six pages, then four pages, then two pages, and now, the book section is one page. And you don't have to be Stephen Jay Gould to figure out where that evolution is going.

A lot of places have seen similar downsizing. But there is good news. One of the good-news stories is at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, as David Kipen will tell us, where the book section was cut back but then restored in the wake of protest, strategizing, maneuvers and so on. At the *Los Angeles Times*, it was announced at the *Times* book fair, they are adding four pages to their book section. Steve Wasserman, the book editor there, was quoted as saying they were going to take advantage of the short-sightedness of their peers elsewhere.

But it is, I think, a genuine crisis. My original thought in pulling together some people was that if arts people in the trenches—not executives, and not necessarily arts editors either, but arts writers—could bring this problem to their editors and present it as a problem not just for the book sections but for the arts generally, then we might have a little bit more influence within our publications.

Why don't we start by having David tell us what happened at the *Chronicle*, since it is a story with a happy ending.

Kipen: Yes, a real one. A year ago, when all of this started coming down on our heads on my end, I didn't expect to be standing before you today as a motivational speaker for arts journalists. But things have proceeded in a rather inspiring fashion. So who am I not to evangelize a little bit?

About a year ago, the Hearst Corporation, which was the *Chronicle's* long-time nemesis because it was the owner of the *San Francisco Examiner*, bought the *Chronicle* from the family who had owned it since 1865, then sold off the *Examiner* to a local publishing family, which has since been looking more local by the day.

I have been at the *Chronicle* for about four years, three as the book editor, and one as the book critic. And Oscar Villalon, whom I had groomed to take my place, has done so in high style. We're living happily ever after, until the next management shake-up, which is completely hypothetical at this point in time.

The book review section has been around for 16 or 17 years. It was started by a gifted, tireless woman named Pat Holt, who now has an Internet book column, "Holt Uncensored." It ran more or less along the tracks which had been set for it until Hearst bought the *Chronicle*. There was a tremendous management shake-up upstairs, which I tried to stay out of the way of—especially since as I was gradually becoming the critic, I wasn't coming to the office all that often anyway.

But basically, the *Chronicle's* book review section used to look more or less like this. [Holding up a copy of the book section] This is our Sunday entertainment section, affectionately known as "Pink." Periodically, they do market research to ascertain whether or not we can change it to the same color as the rest of the paper without antagonizing our readers. The answer invariably comes back, "Don't you dare harm the pinkness of the pink!" The same thing happened awhile back to the sports section, which used to be known as the "Sporting Green" because it was on green paper. Now, it is still known as the "Sporting Green," and there is a green stripe at the top, but it is on regular paper—I'm sure there was tremendous flak for that change,

although I wasn't here for it. Anyway, you would get the Sunday Pink every week, and out of the middle would fall a free-standing 12-page tabloid book review section.

After the new system was handed down about a year ago, what would happen instead is, you would get to a section head, like "Screen," and for the next six or seven pages (maybe eight in a good week), you would have stuff about books, but it would be less space and it wouldn't pull out. Advertisers—quite a few of them, if there ever were any—were up in arms. More importantly, readers were furious. Letters, e-mails, protests floated to the *Chronicle* in the high three figures. Of course, because as newspaper journalists we are so desperate for feedback, any contact from the outside world is magnified abnormally. Every letter you get, you think, speaks for 500 other people who aren't writing the same letter. So, the *Chronicle* pretty rapidly discovered it had made a big goof.

It also didn't hurt that the woman named Narda Zacchino, who had been the valiant protector of the *Los Angeles Times* book review section, was now the *Chronicle's* features editor. She had just come after being wooed by our executive editor, Phil Bronstein. And so she goes from being the champion of book coverage to—in her first week of the job, I swear—running damage-control for somebody else's bonehead decision to cut the book review section.

She made up her mind that this aggression would not stand and talked to the circulation people, the people who managed the print run. She basically wrangled this whole thing in such a way that now, as of about six months ago, what happens when you open up your Sunday paper, leaf through the A section and get to the entertainment coverage, what you see is this. [Holding up a section] This is a six-page broadsheet devoted to books. It's following a model. We consulted with Elizabeth Taylor, who edits the book section at the *Chicago Tribune* and is the president of the National Book Critics Circle. She found that if you convert from a 12-page tabloid to a six-page broadsheet, you get the exact same amount of text—and yet it is somehow more desirable to readers, advertisers, upper management and editors.

I hope you might discover that we have something to be proud of here. Whether it turns out to be a brief shining moment or (as we hope) the ground floor, we'll see.

**Romano:** Very good news. But of course, that victory has not been won in a lot of other places. And one reason I asked Gayle Feldman and Ren [Lawrence] Weschler to talk is that I'm wondering, as the cutbacks go on elsewhere, how does the New York publishing business look at this? For instance, do they care if every book section disappears except *The New York Times*, maybe *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*? Do regional reviews answer to them at all? Obviously, they've never put their advertising into regional



places. Even *The New York Times* Book Review doesn't make money, the way they cost it out. Are they going to think, "Look, if we allow all the regional book sections to disappear, it is going to cost us more down the line. We are going to have to put advertising into the rest of the country"? Or will they think, "Oh, the bookstore revolution is taking place just fine. People will go in and browse. They will hear about our books on radio, and other places. Not a problem"?

**Feldman:** Before I talk about that, I do think it is important to talk a little bit about the background of what's been happening in the book business. There have been big changes, big structural problems, and the background is important to understand.

I'm going to throw a couple of statistics your way. For years, people have said that there are 50-something thousand books published every year in America. But in fact, that is not the case. There are a lot more books published in America every year. Statistics in the book business are terrible—there are not reliable global numbers available. But *Books in Print* recently reported that in 2001, approximately 135,000 new titles were published in America. And that doesn't include translations or reissues. And that was 10 percent more new books in 2001 than in 2000. So that's a lot of books.

But the Book Industry Study Group [BISG] has said that 10 million fewer copies of books were sold in 2001 than in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

You have, because of the number of books out there, a lot of white noise. You have all of these books clamoring for attention, and there's only so much attention that they can get.  
—Gayle Feldman

You also have to think in terms of units sold versus revenue. Many statistics talk about *growth*—growth in bookstore sales, growth in this, growth in that. Using dollar figures is extremely misleading, because publishers are hiking up the prices of books but not necessarily selling more units. Last year, as I've said, according to BISG, 10 million fewer units were sold. For the five years

---

<sup>1</sup> The BISG statistic has been disputed by another study by publishing-research firm Ipsos-NPD, which claims on the contrary that one million *more* books were sold in 2001 than in 2000. With such disparities, the need for reliable statistics is all too clear.

before that, it's generally accepted that the business was stagnant. That's new books—not used.

Within the book business, there has been tremendous consolidation. There are a gazillion publishers out there, including many tiny publishers who are not even on the radar screen. But you have tremendous consolidation in the major houses. You've got the big chains, and fewer and fewer independents. And you also have the warehouse clubs. You have, because of the number of books out there, a lot of white noise. You have all of these books clamoring for attention, and there's only so much attention that they can get. So it's a rather interesting situation that we find ourselves in. I don't think publishers are very happy about what is happening at all.

It used to be received wisdom that reviews could really make a book. Now, reviews can make a book—if they are appearing all over the country at the same time. And other lucky things have to happen as well. It's the timing of a lot of things at once. But I don't think that publishers believe as strongly that reviews are going to make a book. For certain books, they will spend a great deal of marketing dollars and do whatever they have to do to make that book. But for others...

It used to be received wisdom that reviews could really make a book. Now, reviews can make a book—*if* they are appearing all over the country at the same time. And other lucky things have to happen as well.

—Gayle Feldman

A mid-list study was commissioned by The Authors Guild a couple of years ago that received a lot of attention, because there was an idea that the mid-list is in crisis, that mid-list books are not being published. That is not the case. The problem is, the books *are* being published, but they are not being published *well*. There are so many books being published without any money behind them, without care and attention. Because of consolidation, publishers have been cutting their staffs. For example, at Random House, the biggest U.S. trade publisher, there have been a lot of cuts. A lot of other houses are bleeding slowly. You don't have people with the time to push every book the way it should be pushed. So, New York publishers are not happy about the situation.

Publishers are also not spending much in advertising to help the book review sections. There are not spending as much in advertising dollars at *The New York Times* Book Review. They are not spending much at *Publishers Weekly*.

*Publishers Weekly*, which I have been associated with for 16 years, is the thinnest I have ever seen it. *PW* reviews more than any section of any newspaper, because it has its short “Forecasts,” which are critical to the industry. And effectively, the Forecasts pages have been cut because they cannot possibly keep up with title output. The author interviews have been cut—all because advertising is down. Many publishers will now say that they will spend for a targeted ad in the daily *New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, rather than in the Sunday section. Whereas if you look back and read the correspondence of Alfred Knopf, or Bennett Cerf, or publishers in the '40s, '50s and early '60s, advertising was tremendously important. That was how books were sold.

That money is now being used in other ways. It's being used in promotion. A lot of publishers are investing in the Internet. They think that niche marketing via the Internet will be a much more effective way to use their money.

**Jan Herman, senior editor and producer, A&E, MSNBC.com:** You start your contract, you write your book. They've scheduled when you publish, but before that happens, they give your title to their sales reps. Those reps go out and get a number of orders—8,000, maybe 6,000, maybe 12,000—then they cut their print run to that amount, unless there is speculation that there might be a big boom for that book that they hadn't expected. And if they saved up 10,000 orders for a book and they publish 12,000 or 15,000 copies, they don't want to—or care to—market that book beyond that small print run. They've already made their money back on the 10,000, so they don't have to market. Those mid-list books don't get marketed.

**Feldman:** One other thing I meant to say: What publishers have been doing as well has been to try to get off-the-book-page attention more and more, for all kinds of books. Sometimes, though, it's not a very good match—a book will be written up in a section where no one is actually going to buy the book based on reading an article in that section. At the Book Expo, which took place in New York City last weekend, I was talking with a couple of very prominent independent booksellers who said that they feel that in addition to the crisis in regional book sections, they are now seeing less off-the-book-page coverage in regionals.

**Romano:** We have Jerome Weeks of *The Dallas Morning News* to tell us what's happened at his shop.

**Weeks:** I was the theater critic for 10 years, and then I moved over to books. At the time, the book section appeared in what is called the Sunday Reader, fondly known as our Weekly Reader. It's our Week in Review section, and books took three to four pages in the back of that. There had long been an impetus to put books into the Sunday [Arts] section, which I supported. But

many readers, we found, preferred it in the Sunday Reader, because they felt that it suggested a certain degree of importance, being over there with the big political think pieces.

But they did switch it over to Sunday Arts. And when I went on an NAJP fellowship in 2000, they had developed what I thought was the first ingenious plan for a free-standing book review section. It was going to be called “The Review,” and it was going to get around the whole problem of the lack of advertising. It would support book coverage by including CD reviews, video reviews and book reviews, and they were going to rotate what was featured on the cover, so it would be CDs one week, videos the next week, books the next week, and the video ads and CD ads would basically support the book coverage.

It was the first time I’d ever heard what was actually a fairly smart answer to the problem. In effect, they said, “This will be a Borders in print. All the things you can get at Borders, you would have it in print, in a weekly free-standing tabloid section.” When I went off to the fellowship, that was what I was coming back to help create—in fact, we had already done mock-ups.

**The National Football League doesn’t support the sports section. The NFL has rarely bought an ad in a paper, as far as I know. They don’t need to. Other advertisers want that audience.**  
—Jerome Weeks

What happened during my fellowship was not the dot-com bust, but the awareness by the *Morning News* that the dot-com bust was coming. They track employment ads, and employment ads are one of the first indicators that the economy is going down. And it’s true that a lot of employment ads were switching to the Internet, but they were not finding many on local employment-ad web sites. They were not finding any compensatory rise in ads on the web. So while I was on the fellowship, they killed the planned Review section.

When I came back, they had invested in a new printing press. This happened at a number of papers around the country. The paper is now printed on a smaller stock—it basically shrank. At any rate, they kept the idea of the Review, but put it in Sunday Arts.

[Holding up a section] This is our Sunday Arts package. And you will see the back page is called “The Review.” And it has books in it: book columns, book

reviews in it on the last three pages. But these are interspersed with CDs, which apparently drives some of our readers crazy. They can't tell the book review ads from the CD ads, even though they keep saying "Books," or "CDs" or whatever. They intermingle.

The shrinkage was no single, dramatic jump. But they have been whittling away at it. Only two years ago, we would run eight full-length reviews, on average, in the section. Now, we are running about half that. That's within the space of just two years. There is a sense among the general population that the reviews have diminished, gotten smaller. But unlike the *San Francisco Chronicle*, there was no sharp break that people could point to.

One of the frustrating things I learned in all the discussions about book reviews and advertising was that the whole idea that "book sections are not supported by publishers; therefore, they don't get any space" is not entirely true. It is a false paradigm. The National Football League doesn't support the sports section. The NFL has rarely bought an ad in a paper, as far as I know. They don't need to. Other advertisers want that audience. For better or for worse, the book section is seen, even by publishers, as something for the old, the feeble and the dead. The other advertisers want this young, hip audience with lots of cash and poor impulse control. And no matter how hip or lowbrow you pitch your book section, the Sunday book section is in the neighborhood of the retiree. The fact that the publishers aren't putting money in it really doesn't matter: it's that the other advertisers don't want to put any money in it, either.

For better or for worse, the book section  
is seen, even by publishers, as something  
for the old, the feeble and the dead. The other  
advertisers want this young, hip audience  
with lots of cash and poor impulse control.  
—Jerome Weeks

The weird thing is, we actually started getting more ads in the Sunday Arts after these changes. But that actually cut our space. Because we had more ads, we had to have smaller reviews.

Sydney Goldstein, executive director, City Arts & Lectures: I buy a lot of advertising, and I was wondering: When the economy started going south and the paper started suffering, did your paper raise its advertising rates?

Weeks: I don't know. I do know that the *Morning News* has some of the higher advertising rates.

Goldstein: [To Kipen] Do you know if that is the case at the *Chronicle*?

Kipen: I don't know.

Sydney Goldstein: It's interesting. As a long-time advertiser, I noticed that what the paper did when it was in financial trouble was raise its advertising rates, at a time when everybody else was in the same economic trouble. It's a very interesting way of handling something.

Kipen: They also lowered the cover price to a quarter.

Goldstein: So it's kind of like "gouge the captive advertisers."

Feldman: Another thing, in terms of advertising money and where publishers' money goes: a lot more of it now has to go toward co-op advertising with stores. And that's not just the ads in the papers – we are talking about buying display space in Borders or Barnes & Noble. That's where a tremendous amount of publishers' money goes these days.

Romano: Apropos of what Jerome Weeks said regarding the attitude of publishers toward older readers: I always find the difference between publishers and development officers quite comical. Development officers think of old people of having so much money that they might pass it along at some point. But publishers don't seem to think old people have money, or that they want to spend it.

I always find the difference between publishers  
and development officers quite comical.  
Development officers think of old people of having  
so much money that they might pass it along at  
some point. But publishers don't seem to think old  
people have money, or that they want to spend it.  
—Carlin Romano

I asked Ren Weschler to speak because in my years as a book editor and literary critic, I've gotten conflicting signals from New York publishers about the importance of a review in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, or the Memphis paper, or the Chicago paper, as opposed to *The New York Times* Book Review. In our

part of the business, we all know that sometimes part of the contract with an author is to have an ad in *The New York Times* Book Review. And many authors live and die for that. But is it going to make a difference to the publishing industry if there are no longer reviews in San Francisco, or Philadelphia? That there is a *New York Times* Review, maybe a *Washington Post* Book World, but not much else. I thought maybe Ren, as an author, could speak to that.

**Weschler:** In my experience as an author, I am finding *The New York Times* Book Review less and less important, partly because I generally think *New York Times* book reviews are getting more boring. By contrast, I think *Los Angeles Times* book reviews are much more exciting, much more interesting. You get the sense that *The New York Times*' reviews are done by rote at this point. The reviewers completely sleepwalk through their assignments. And I get more excited about the idiosyncratic assignments, where they really find the right person to review it. That's more exciting.

Radio is increasingly where the discourse on the sort of thing I do gets perpetuated. One thing I find very interesting in this country—which hasn't been talked about in terms of the news side of all this—is that in our country... an anthropologist or an archaeologist, years from now, may look at how issues got on the agenda. How did public discourse take place? And it wasn't because bills were being moved through Congress. It was because books were being published on that subject. So when Michael Massing's book on drug control gets published, that's the month we talk about drug control. And that's whether it's a great work of fiction on that subject, or a great work of nonfiction, or at least a juggernaut work of nonfiction. That is how things get discussed in this country. And they get discussed partly in the book review section, but also maybe on the radio circuit, and there's a little bit of overlap into "Nightline" or cable TV.

An anthropologist or an archaeologist, years from now, may look at how issues got on the agenda. How did public discourse take place? And it wasn't because bills were being moved through Congress. It was because books were being published on that subject.  
—Lawrence Weschler

Having said that, as a person who goes on tour to the hinterlands, the publishers always buy me out that way: "We'll put you on tour. We won't buy you any ads. But if you can find places where you can stay in people's

homes, we will put you on tour.” I have a network of bookstores where I do have contacts, so they’ll take me on. But what’s frustrating to me—this is more as a consumer than as an author—is that if I hear a radio interview of somebody for whom I think, “God, I’ve got to get this book,” I tend not to do it, unless there is an ad or a review the next day. I have to see it in print. You have to see the name and a little picture of the book. The radio side is ephemeral, and is already passing Pluto. That is part of the dynamic. Reviews by themselves don’t matter. Actually they *do* matter, to some extent, but I want to make a case for ratcheting up the provocativeness of the review. Interesting reviews matter.

In terms of my feelings about publishers: Years ago, people used to complain about how they were selling books like soap. To which I would say, “I wish!” The marketing departments of publishers are absolutely pathetic. They would not survive in any other industry. It’s insane. There are obvious things you can do, and they just don’t do them.

Years ago, people used to complain about how they were selling books like soap. To which I would say, “I wish!” The marketing departments of publishers are absolutely pathetic. They would not survive in any other industry.  
—Lawrence Weschler

It’s too bad [the book coverage in] Washington has diminished, but I think the *L.A. Times* has been exemplary. I am also a devotee of the *San Francisco Chronicle* from way back. But the *L.A. Times* Book Festival is absolutely a mind-boggling thing. First of all, Los Angeles has the highest book readership, I’m told, in the country. And you go to that book festival—it’s invariably a sunny, beautiful, southern California weekend—and there are 100,000 people milling around, going to the stalls, listening to author interviews, buying books.

I am always brought out as the interviewer for these people. I interviewed Jane Smiley and Michael Chabon, and we had 1,500 people in the room. Afterward, the panel was taken out to sell books, and there was Chabon, with hundreds waiting in line, and Jane Smiley, with more hundreds waiting in line, and me, with, well, like four people waiting in my line. It got even funnier. I was interviewing the magician and antiquarian Ricky Jay the next day, and it’s 90 degrees, and afterwards, 500 people are in this line to get Ricky Jay to sign their book. I lean over to Ricky and say, “If they step up



here now to buy my book, would you be willing to sign their copy of your book as well?" He said, "OK." So I shouted out, "If you'll go buy *my* book, you can come to the front of the line and *he'll* sign your book." And nobody did it. They would rather sit in 90 degrees than buy a copy of mine so as to be able to take cuts in line. Anyway, these are exercises in humiliation.

But what was interesting is that this happened to be the first book fair after *The Chicago Tribune* bought the *L.A. Times*, and they had the big honchos from the *Tribune* come, and they were literally drop-jawed. They were walking around, and they could not believe their eyes. By the way, it is a complete joy for the writers, too: they've got a really nice operation. They've got the green room back there, people are talking to each other and so forth. It seems to me that it's something that would be really worth putting effort into in other places. Philadelphia should do that, because people are longing for that.

The final thing I would say is: Newspapers are about reading. It is in the interest of newspapers to make sure that reading culture stays alive. And as such, it is in their long-term interest to develop cheaper advertising for books, for example, or different ways for ads to be sold, smaller ads or something, to keep that book section going. And the refusal to do that seems, to me, blind – no more blind than all sorts of other things they are doing, but part of a pattern of what, in bigger cultural terms, is the thinning of the ozone layer. And we are all just staggering around blind down here.

Feldman: Carlin, do you know how [book editor Steve] Wasserman managed to get the extra pages for the *L.A. Times* book section?

Romano: Well, I think they have smart executives there. Some of you saw the *U.S. News and World Report* article ["Read it and Weep – Newspaper Book Sections are Shrinking"] that's out this week. Just to say a couple of things about my situation: My editor is quoted as saying he cut the book section because it was the only part of the newspaper he could cut without loss in circulation. The publisher said, "You show me any newspaper research that says people who read newspapers want to read about books." They're not getting it there, actually. And those book executives in L.A. got it, because with a book festival, you can really show that kind of interest.

I remember when I was at *The Washington Post* in 1979 or 1980, and [then-Book World editor] Brigitte Weeks was constantly getting condescension from the publishers vis-a-vis *The New York Times* Book Review. Even *The Washington Post* Book World was treated as second-rate, in regard to advertising and other respects, compared to *The Times* Book Review.

[Recently in Philadelphia], we had a new editor-in-chief who came from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. Our editor had been fired in November. He asked me,

“Why does anyone interested in books need to read anything but *The New York Times* Book Review?”

And so I worry about a gathering storm here, in which people think, “Look, there is a certain area of coverage that we will concede to the nationals, the ‘first-ranks’ so to speak. You’ll go to *The New York Times* to read about books.” But there is one other aspect I want to mention. There seems to have been a historic change in the way people look at book coverage. It used to be that book coverage was like foreign coverage: You did it because readerly people were interested in it. That brought readers to the paper, then you sell them as a package, a whole paper, to advertisers and so on.

I worry about a gathering storm here, in which people think, “Look, there is a certain area of coverage that we will concede to the nationals, the ‘first-ranks’ so to speak. You’ll go to *The New York Times* to read about books.”

—Carlin Romano

I think [the changed attitude toward book sections] was the result of the advent of Tech Life sections [in the '90s]. Books were traditionally covered, and computers weren't. But during the computer revolution, all the papers started Tech Life sections, because there was advertising. When advertising disappears, they kill the Tech Life sections. It's a form of minuet journalism. You have to have the advertising for the editorial. I think after they went through that Tech Life thinking, they retroactively applied it to books. They said, “Well, why do we have a book section if we don't have advertising? We don't have a Tech Life section.”

[Audience member]: I read that quote in the *U.S. News and World Report* piece, “We cut [the book section] because it was the one part of the paper we could cut without losing circulation.” My analogy when I read that was, basically, they are saying we can amputate a digit, and that's okay. But that not the right analogy. What they are doing is leukemia, because they are not devoted to readerly culture. But the statement they are making by that gesture is indicative of a profound loss of vigorousness.

Weeks: In reference to the publisher's remark that “no one reads the paper for book reviews”: Well, in what little market research there has been done for newspapers, they've found that many people don't read the paper for the Op-Ed section, either — which also doesn't generate any advertising. In other

words, there are certain things that the newspaper has traditionally done that were loss leaders. They did it because this was something of importance that newspapers did. Investigative journalism. Foreign reporting. Op-Ed pages. Letters pages. And book reviews. Think pieces. None of those things make any money. But to be considered a significant paper, a major daily paper—newspapers ran those. They don't do it so much anymore, even after 9/11. Foreign reporting has gone down. Investigative reporting is incredibly costly—very few newspapers invest in it wholeheartedly. And now book reviews are seen in the same manner. It's a redefinition of what's important in the newspaper world.

There are certain things that the newspaper has traditionally done that were loss leaders. They did it because this was something of importance that newspapers did. Investigative journalism. Foreign reporting. Op-Ed pages. Letters pages. And book reviews.  
—Jerome Weeks

Feldman: In terms of *The New York Times* Book Review—many New York publishers are not exactly thrilled with *The Times* Book Review these days. I think many would agree with what Ren said. There is a lack of advertising support there.

Laura Sydell, NAJP 1998-99 mid-career fellow; senior technology reporter, "Marketplace," Minnesota Public Radio: I was curious about one of the statistics you threw out: that people are buying fewer books. I want to ask about used books, because the big controversy right now has been what's been going on at Amazon—that you can buy a used version of the same book for a lot less money. I don't know what effect that is having.

Feldman: The used business is doing well.

Sydell: So I don't think necessarily that drop is a sign that people are reading less. Because these days, when I go to Amazon, a lot of times I am buying the used version, because it is cheaper. It's true. It's so easy. It's a problem. But to me, though, it says that quite possibly, people are reading just as much as they ever were.

Feldman: I'm saying that the publishers are churning out titles—hugely inflated numbers of titles. That's what is happening.

Sydell: Another thing I wanted to throw out was a conversation I had with Susan Stamberg about what they tend to do at NPR when they are about to do a book interview. They always look at where the book is—this is their own rating system—on Amazon. After the interview is over, at the end of the day, they look again. And the book might go from, say, 5,000 up to 500. So radio, there's absolutely no doubt in my mind, has a big impact.

Feldman: Oprah Winfrey was the biggest way that a publisher could sell huge copies. But it was for very few books. Now that Oprah has bowed out, it is NPR. It's "[Fresh Air with] Terry Gross." It's "All Things Considered."

Julie Lasky, freelance journalist: I'm wondering if Oprah and the rest of these pundits haven't represented the kind of consolidation seen in the superstores, or even the consolidation of the publishers themselves: the getting one voice that is selling millions of copies of just a few books to people who have limited leisure time.

[Audience member]: I went to Book Expo in New York City last week and snuck into a panel for publicists, "What do Reporters and Editors Really Want?" The panelists were, of course, entirely New York-based, except for Terry Gross of "Fresh Air." But they were mostly from the [network] morning shows. And the overwhelming message they gave to the publicists was that it doesn't matter if it's a great book: The person has to be a great story. The problem with radio and television coverage is that it tends toward the author who can present herself or himself as an interesting story, regardless of what the book is about.

Feldman: If you ask any editor now, I would say the most important research tool is Amazon. You ask any editor, and that editor will certainly spend some time every week on Amazon, looking, looking, looking—at his or her author's books, and at the competition's. They will look when they are thinking of signing up a book.

There is a drive to have a lot more features, to become  
a part of the promotional aspect of the publisher.

—Carlin Romano

Romano: We started, after our cutbacks, to run reviews only on the Internet. The assumption that it didn't cost anything. We even got some major reviewers to agree to just have their review on the Internet, and not the print edition. And then [the publisher] told us we couldn't do that.

I just want to comment on something, which I think is part of the problem: We are beginning to talk a lot about the business almost as if we are *in* the publishing business. I am not a part of the publishing business. I'm a critic. And I'm often hostile, in some ways, to the publishing business. I'm not there to sell their books. I'm not there to be an impresario for the publisher. Maybe when I write my own book, I want to be pushed. But when I'm a critic, I am not playing the same game that they are playing. And what's really under attack, it seems to me, is criticism. Because there is a drive to have a lot more features, to become a part of the promotional aspect of the publisher.

**Weschler:** I don't want to sound Luddite, but what the hell: I want to talk about a hankering that does exist. The trouble with the Internet is that it gets increasingly niche-slotted, attention-squeezed. People feel this incredible pressure. And there is a hankering for forms of address where you are not being addressed as a consumer, but rather with the implication that you are capable of attention and duration, that you are part of a general culture. I am absolutely convinced that, in the face of the hot dry blast that we are all subject to continuously, there is a longing for that.

A critic addresses you as a thinking mind, as opposed to a crack user. In a piece I wrote some time ago, actually, for the NAJP's *ARTicles* journal, I quoted a friend of mine as saying how increasingly, all the entire culture industry is offering anymore is a short, sharp whiff of titillation, followed up by a hand in your back pocket—in other words, crack. And there is a hankering not to be addressed in that way. And to the extent that the newspaper industry is trying to respond to that hot, dry wind by running faster than the wind, it is running away from that hankering. Instead of building a bulwark—a place of shelter, where if you built a shelter, people might show up there—they are busy tearing down shelters to get in front of the wind. And there is only a cliff there.

A critic addresses you as a thinking mind,  
as opposed to a crack user.  
—Lawrence Weschler

**Eddie Rollins, producer and reporter, Alabama Public Television:** I saw an interesting commercial recently, I think it was for *Mypublishing.com*, in which the pedantic instructor is up at the chalkboard, and he's saying, "This is what you need to do to get published." And a kid in the classroom raises his hand and says, "No, you don't. You just have to go to *Mypublishing.com*."

I remember about five or six years ago, there was this whole idea that publishing could be done on the Internet. But maybe we have a fetishistic attraction to the hard-copy book. I was wondering if you all have the sense that this is going on.

**Weeks:** People—even on the Internet, eventually—start to look for gatekeepers. You look for guides. That used to be my argument against the universal, everyone’s-an-expert mindset on the Internet. My argument is that people still look for guides, too.

**People—even on the Internet, eventually—  
start to look for gatekeepers. You look for guides.  
—Jerome Weeks**

But what’s happened is that the movie industry and the pop music industry have done so much to debase the whole profession of criticism. A review could be, like on Amazon.com, just a hired voice, a hired skill. There are fewer and fewer guides.

**Feldman:** You know, AOL Time Warner invested a lot of money in their e-publishing adventure, which failed abysmally. One aspect of that was a sort of self-publishing unit. The hook was, “You could arrange to publish your thing here online with us, and if it is really good, maybe we will put it into print.” Well, it failed abysmally. I think people do want the gatekeeping.

**Weeks:** Most of the e-book imprints of major publishers have folded.

**Romano:** If you come back, though, to what Ren was saying about the *L.A. Times* Book Review, I would agree that most smart, sophisticated people on our side of the field think of the *L.A. Times* Book Review as the best book review right now. Why? Because it’s quality, because it’s smart, because it’s sophisticated, because it makes a difference who’s reviewing a particular book. Because Steve Wasserman does have expertise, and recognizes expertise and credentials, you look at a book review and most sophisticated readers think, “Oh, I really want to know what *that* person thinks.” Sure, you want to support freelancers to a certain extent, people breaking in. But you also want to draw in the sophisticated book reader. I think that is an example of that gatekeeping, that quality control. But that is what’s under assault, in a lot of ways.

**Goldstein:** I had a comment that may be naïve, but for those of us who are Luddites and can’t help it: There is something that is so cold and fast about the Internet, in an aesthetic way. And people *do* care about ideas, and about

language, and about the shapes of things. Maybe there is an underestimation of how much care there is in something taking a while to get finished, and in print, and the smell of print. I think there is an underestimation of the value of that. And even with my own kids, who are of an age that you would think likes to have stuff fast—they've become very antagonistic toward the Internet. They are going to continue to buy books, I think. They are going to continue to like old records.

**Weschler:** It is often cited, but Borges' story about the land of the cartographers is a good allegory of the Internet. It is a single paragraph, a story of a land where the art of cartography had reached such heights that the map of a province took up an entire city. In fact, within a generation, the map of the country took up the entire country, and corresponded with the country at every point. When people talk about that story, they usually forget the last sentence of the story—which is, of course, that this was completely useless, and within a generation, all interest in the art of cartography was lost completely. And now the map is abandoned, except for the camels and beggars in some of the nether regions.

I think that is an allegory of where the Internet can go. I don't think the Internet is an inevitable evolution. If we were having an Internet conference instead of a book review conference, I would think that the Internet is in crisis, too, because it can become completely useless.

**Romano:** I want to see if some of you would agree that the problem of space for book coverage is not just how many reviews, but the size of the review, and the capsulizing process that is going on.

**If every marketing director in New York gets your book section, you can be damn sure they're not going to forget your book section when they are allocating their budget for advertising.**

**—Carlin Romano**

I even encountered this in the '80s, when I was a book editor at *The Inquirer*, with daily reviews. The daily reviews were shrinking in size. They started at 13 inches, and then they were 10 inches, and then they were eight inches. But when they hit six inches, the editor at the time, Gene Roberts, said, "What do you think, Carlin? I don't think these reviews are worth a shit anymore, you know, at six inches." And I said, "I agree. I'm not interested in capsules. If you can't find space for a regular-sized review, just kill it, maybe put all the space together, and we'll have one good review over three days."

I think that's one of the reasons a lot of sophisticated readers like the [L.A.] *Times* book review. Steve Wasserman is very smart at marketing, too. We are all on the comp list. Everybody in New York is on the comp list. That's smart for advertising, too. One of the interesting things about Steve's accomplishment, I think, is that he is a difficult personality, but nonetheless he is succeeding because with that difficult personality comes standards, and smartness. He is a former publisher, so he knows how publishers work. If every marketing director in New York gets your book section, you can be damn sure they're not going to forget your book section when they are allocating their budget for advertising. So he is getting more advertising than he would if they were looking at the *L.A. Times* book section. One of the things he is doing is running these enormous pieces, *New York Review of Books*-type pieces. You can't absorb a lot of those on a Sunday morning, but you like that there are one or two.

So I wonder if those of us within newspapers, in the trenches, can maybe band together a little bit as arts people, not just as book people, and try to—I don't mean this in a condescending way—educate our bosses. Our bosses are well-educated and smart, too, but they are very busy. We could bring the truth that length matters, and also, that there are certain things you need to do in a good critical piece.

**Weschler:** My experience is that when a piece of mine is being cut, it screams. And it screams, and it screams, and it screams more and more. And then it suddenly goes silent. When you break the back of the piece, at that point, I don't care—do whatever you want. And if I don't care, I don't expect you, or the reader, to care.

When a piece of mine is being cut, it screams. And  
it screams, and it screams, and it screams more  
and more. And then it suddenly goes silent. When  
you break the back of the piece, at that point, I  
don't care—do whatever you want. And if I don't  
care, I don't expect you, or the reader, to care.  
—Lawrence Weschler

But in regard to what we were saying about the Internet, Artkrush.com is one of the few sites I know of that has solved the problem of publishing long pieces in a way that they can be read on the Internet. And it consciously designed itself for that.



Romano: Clearly, if we reach the stage 10 to 20 years from now where newspapers abandon print—this could be a savior, if the Net expands space. I did not quite understand the economic and strategic reasons why my company didn't think it was a no-brainer just to run reviews on the Net. But it has to do with the standardization of the web pages throughout the Knight-Ridder chain. Obviously, space might open up if we all go digital at some point. But will we then have lost the habit of reading longer reviews? Will people be accustomed to reading capsules? Again, Steve Wasserman is getting a very high-end audience with what he's doing, and I think that's a good audience for advertisers.

Herman: I think people who believe they know have decided that people don't read long pieces on the Internet. I think I published one piece that was [7,000 words], and there were space restrictions there, too, because the editors said there are studies that show that people wouldn't read a piece longer than 7,000 words, or something like that.

Romano: I wonder if people think that's as true of book-related pieces as of other pieces, or whether it's not the case that people who are very book-oriented cut against that cliché. In other words, they can read longer pieces just as they, in fact, can read books—which are very long pieces.

[Audience member]: I think it would be a different dynamic. You carry a book around.

Rollins: Well, I'm taking a cue from Laura Tuchman of MSNBC.com. I think she said this morning that 9 percent of the readers actually go on to a second page.

Weschler: We are talking about a particular article that was written for *The New Yorker*, but *The New Yorker* had no interest in it. So I didn't know what to do with it—it was a piece, it was something like 10,000 words, and it had 50 illustrations. I had said to [*New Yorker* editor David] Remnick, "What you could do is publish four of the illustrations in the magazine, but put a little star by each of the others as you go through, and say, "At our *New Yorker* web site, we have all these images," and you could even sell advertising for it, if you wanted. People will want to go look at these images, be able to blow them up and so forth. Because in the text, it was all about, 'Look at this closely, now look at this,' and so forth." And he had no interest in that.

In any case, when Artkrush ran it, what Artkrush was able to do was to have all 50 images exactly where they fell in the text. And basically, the images carried the people through the text on the Internet in a way that works for that kind of thing.

**Romano:** There is an interesting experiment happening in Minneapolis—John Habich sent me an e-mail about it. I don't entirely understand it, and I don't particularly understand what relation it may have to increasing the space for criticism and print coverage generally.

**John Habich, senior culture editor, Minneapolis *Star Tribune*:** Over the past two years, we have increased our book coverage in relatively minor ways by adding a Books page inside the Wednesday features section every week, by moving the book events calendar off the book review pages to free up another column and a half for book reviews.

We also started a book club. Many newspapers have book clubs across the United States, at least a dozen or so. But we partnered with Minnesota Public Radio to go out to the audience. We work with new hardbacks and new paperbacks every month, nine months a year, and we work it on the radio and work it in print. We do it as a community service project, basically, whose slogan is "Building Community Through Reading"—which is the newspaper's traditional function. It has been a huge success for us, a result of which is that my newspaper is very much positioning itself promotionally as "A newspaper for people who read"—which is one slogan.

We run a profile in the newspaper, in the Sunday features section. There is a talk-show interview on Minnesota Public Radio. We follow the profile with a week's worth of serial excerpts from the book. We did a poetry collection this past winter, for which we ran a poem every day for a week, along with commentary from the poet, helping the reader through the poem in terms of abstruse terminology and forms and so forth. Even with the poetry collection, we had 600 people come out for an event with the author. The book club ends up with a live event, for which we bring the author to the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, where Garrison Keillor does his "A Prairie Home Companion" Show, and we generally draw between 600 and 1,100 people for those events. So it's been hugely popular among readers. They've been very vocal about it. As a result, the newspaper's executives have begun to see anew the newspaper's connection to reading.

The book club doesn't have any effect whatsoever on book reviews, but it's part of a renewed commitment to books coverage in the paper.

**Romano:** In regard to the publisher's commitment to this: Could you show us some examples of just what the paper does?

**Habich:** The paper does an advertising campaign around the book. We've worked with a wide variety of books. Unlike the Oprah principle, we are not going after a particular broad demographic. We've done everything from Maureen Howard and John Edgar Wideman on one hand, and Amy Tan and Robert Bly on the other. And we provide support materials for booksellers

within this program. Minnesota Public Radio provides us with a unique opportunity, as a network of 35 stations. We work with their 15 news and information stations, and it gives us a reach all across the Upper Midwest. We post all of the stuff on the Internet in turn, so that we get people participating in this program from International Falls, for example. Sometimes, people come to our live book events driving since dawn from western South Dakota.

**Weeks:** We had been talking about this for a while. I tried to explore a similar thing [in Dallas]. There is a very successful series in Dallas called “Arts and Letters Live,” and they produce a program called “Texas Bound,” in which Texas actors read Texas short stories. It’s syndicated on NPR stations, and it’s very successful in Dallas. I thought: If John could do this in Minneapolis, why can’t we do this here? And the reason John’s program is unique is that Minnesota Public Radio is a statewide network. There’s nothing remotely like it in Texas. I tried to talk to people at the different stations to see if they were interested, and they don’t have the time. They are so busy just trying to stay alive. The idea of trying to hook up with somebody in another city, five hours away, is not at the top of their agenda.

**Habich:** We are about to be visited in a few weeks by a bunch of French publishers who are interested in starting a similar program in France. Because they have national public radio, they can do it in a similar way.

**Weschler:** By the way, there is an interesting thing in Canada that I am a part of, a great radio show called “The Ian Brown Show.” He has a thing called “Talking Books,” and I am a contributing editor. If I see books that I like, that I think are interesting, that are coming down the pike, I call him up and say, “We should do this thing.” And for a half hour on the Sunday program, they feature that book—but not the author. They have three critics talking about the book. And it’s always hilarious, because we have Lawrence Weschler from New York, and we have Eddie Smith from Newfoundland, and from Saskatchewan we have so and so. And you just have a conversation, three people, talking about the book.

**[Audience member]:** Why doesn’t the National Book Critics Circle put together a half-hour radio program, and offer it to NPR? It would be fairly cheap to put together, I should think. You choose a book every week, and you just have people from around the country talk about it.

**[Audience member]:** They’re too busy staying alive.