

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



Because Chicago is one of the country's largest cities, and because it sustains an established and varied cultural life in virtually every art form—from opera to architecture, jazz to standup comedy—what might amount to a seismic shift in the cultural landscape of a smaller city seems to register here as little more than anecdotal change.

It is therefore possible to report that the arts scene in Chicago is the same as and yet completely different from what it was five years ago, when we issued *Reporting the Arts*. There have been welcome changes, ranging from a new Shakespeare Theater at Navy Pier to the expansions of Symphony Center, the Mexican Fine Arts Center, Adler Planetarium and Shedd Aquarium. There were also renovations of dormant downtown theaters like the Selwyn and the Palace and the building of neighborhood facilities such as the Beverly Arts Center on the far South Side. New downtown destinations include the Harris Theater for Music and Dance—a headquarters for many smaller music, dance and theater companies—and a Frank Gehry bandshell near the Loop in Millennium Park. There are statistics of all stripes that register the sheer amount of cultural activity in the city. For exam-

ple, the more than 150 organizations that belong to the Chicago Dance and Music Alliance continue to offer 2,000 concerts a year, this in addition to the group's in-school programs, which reach more than 3.7 million students.

Yet despite the economic strength of non-profit arts organizations—a substantial \$1.96 billion statewide industry that grew 12 percent a year between 1996 and 2002, and during that time brought in \$10.2 billion to the state and \$8.8 billion to the Chicago economies—the last three years have been difficult and have posed financial challenges for many large as well as small institutions. Established organizations like the Chicago Symphony and Lyric Opera have faced deficits and/or drop-offs in corporate and individual donations. Many groups have endured what Julie Burros, director of cultural programming for the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, calls "huge money problems and severe money woes."

Stagnating city subsidies only marginally helped the strained operating budgets at many institutions. Chicago's City Arts program generates less than \$2 million a year, an amount that hasn't changed since the program's inception in 1990. At the same time, the city's lakefront muse-

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general director
Lyric Opera

ums have had their budgets undermined by reduced funds from the Park District, which distributes money from property taxes, providing roughly 15 percent of the total revenue for 10 museums. While operating subsidies for this group remained constant at about \$43 million between 1999 and 2001, there was a catastrophic 75 percent drop-off in subsidies for capital projects—\$4.8 million, down from \$20.7 million.

Chicago, with its seemingly incalculable number of arts organizations, is thus constantly in flux. To say that many music groups or dance companies or galleries or storefront theaters will not be around in five years is only to recognize that those that disappeared over the last five years were replaced by others, and that this loss and replenishment will continue. With the advent of tight times, managers of the city's varied institutions are learning that they must quickly find ways of dealing with financial, marketing and development challenges.

Constant change in the Chicago theater is emblematic of the permutations in the city's arts scene. According to Marj Halperin, director of the League of Chicago Theaters, an organization representing approximately 150 of the metropolitan area's 200 commercial and nonprofit theaters, the city reached an artistic milestone in the last five years. Media, corporate funders and individual donors, along with the theater industry, all "increased their recognition" of Chicago's importance during this period, she says. According to Halperin, the 2001 pre-Broadway run of *The Producers* was a "big signal" that Chicago could become a key city for commercial producers, as was the successful transfer to Broadway of the Goodman Theater production of *Death of a Salesman*, starring Brian Dennehy, which won four Tony Awards.

But those artistic successes were a high-water mark for the city that promised a prosperous future, yet was ultimately undermined by a weakening economy in 2000 and 2001, and by the economic fallout of September 11. Halperin, in common with other civic and arts-institution leaders, is cautious about the financial future. For even though the live-theater industry in Chicago generated approximately \$823 million in direct spending for the city between 1996 and 2002, many theaters have been hobbled by the recession. Production and attendance are both down. "The major issue is the economy," says Halperin. "It was in a tailspin before 9/11, but 9/11 pushed it over the edge. Private, government and corporate funding sources were all hit. Though we're better off than either coast, we may



CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

never recover." And while the number of theater companies in the city—including neighborhood-based storefront theaters as well as world-renowned groups like Steppenwolf—has remained fairly constant, Halperin notes, "they're not the same theaters." Significant groups such as Roadworks, which Halperin calls "one of the bright, upcoming theaters," announced a hiatus. The city has lost iconic companies like Wisdom Bridge and Body Politic. And a starker shift and more telling effect of the economic downturn is that companies once producing five shows a year may now do only three or four.

Such cutbacks and closings do not necessarily mark a trend, however. "Theaters do close, even the great ones," Halperin says. "I get calls every time a theater closes asking, 'Is this the end of avant-garde theater in Chicago?' If a year goes by and there isn't a hot new company from Northwestern or University of Illinois, that's the year something significant has changed in Chicago theater."

Though the Lyric Opera and Chicago Symphony Orchestra have larger endowments than other city institutions, they too have been facing economic hard times. In 2002-03, the opera had a deficit of \$1 million, its first deficit in more than 15 years. The symphony was similarly hobbled. Corporate contributions to the Lyric, according to general director William Mason, fell significantly during the last five years, from about 19 percent to 13 percent of the annual budget. The decline was exacerbated by corporations' moving out of the city and directing their money elsewhere. The shifting direction of the remaining corporate giving indicates troubling long-term problems, Mason says. Young executives with money to give might not even have traditional art institutions on their philanthropic radar. "The direction of corporate giving changes when a company changes its CEO. A generation is coming of age that doesn't believe in the importance of the arts. New money is being made. That's what you want to find." In addition, the older idea of corporate giving as community and artistic support for worthy organizations has

mutated. Now many corporations donate only in return for marketing and branding opportunities.

Corporate giving is also down at the Art Institute, one of the city's premier institutions. Such philanthropy, though, has not been as crucial to that organization, says James N. Wood, the museum's longtime president, who is retiring this year. The institute is in the midst of expansion plans and has commissioned a new building from the Pritzker prize-winning Italian architect Renzo Piano. "We're not there yet," Wood says of concerted efforts to raise the projected \$198-million price tag. "Depending on the pace of fundraising, we may break ground in a year and finish three years from that." But even though the Art Institute appears to have been spared many of the hardships felt elsewhere, Wood knows money is tight not only in Chicago but also across the country. Echoing the thoughts of many others throughout the city, and summing up the challenges of the recent past and perhaps even the long-term future, he admits, "These are difficult times. We are all struggling."

BY BILL GOLDSTEIN

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Marj Halperin
director
*League of
Chicago Theaters*

In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)

Chicago Tribune

1998-2003

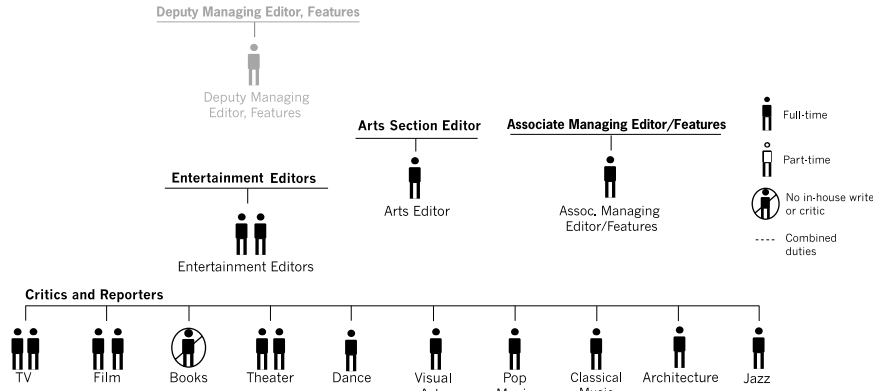
Daily circulation:

Arts-and-culture newshole:

Number of arts-and-culture articles:

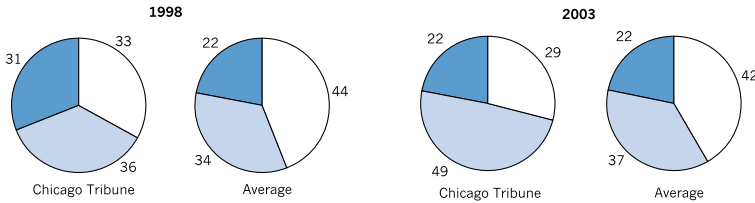
* In-house arts staff:

*Staffing chart and comparison does not include general assignment reporters.



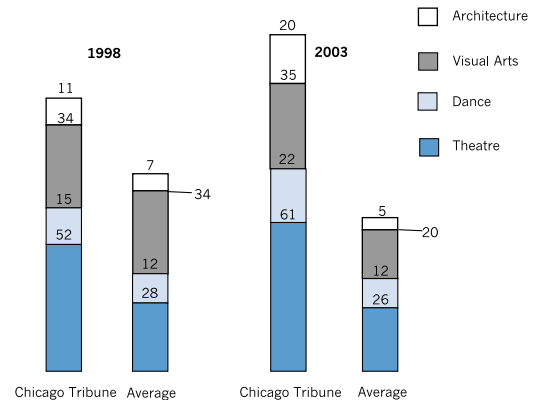
Distribution of Arts-and-Culture

percentage of arts-and-culture newshole (listings excluded) appearing in daily A&L sections, weekend arts supplements and in other sections



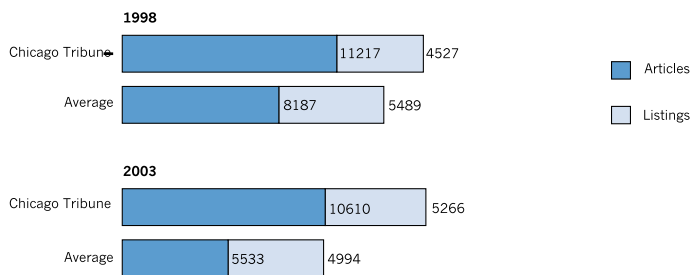
Performing & Visual Arts

number of articles on theater, dance, the visual arts and architecture



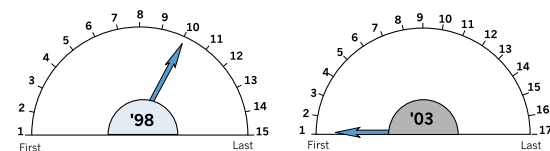
Arts-and-Culture Newshole

space (in column inches) devoted to articles and listings



Books Journalism

ranking among all newspapers studied for percentage of arts-and-culture journalism newshole (listings excluded) devoted to books



THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE was the only one of the newspapers we monitored to increase its overall arts and culture newshole since 1998. All the increase was to be found in its weekend arts supplements, variously titled Weekend Entertainment, Friday, A&E, Books, Movies and TV Week. These articles represented almost half the newspaper's entire volume of journalism devoted to A&C, a higher percentage than in any other newspaper in October 2003.

The *Tribune* provided the most comprehensive coverage of any of the local newspapers in *Reporting the Arts II*, according to an array of key criteria. It ranked number 2 for overall A&C volume (articles and listings combined); and number 1 for the size of its newshole for articles, number of articles published, average story length, number of reviews and the story count on such disciplines as books, the performing arts, the visual arts and architecture. While the trend over the past five years has been toward articles of a shorter length, the *Tribune* was an exception. It was one of only two metropolitan newspapers to

run articles averaging longer than 16 column inches.

The *Tribune's* daily arts-and-lifestyles section, *Tempo*, received little prominence, representing only 5 percent of the paper's pagination in both 2003 and 1998. *Tempo* may have been a small section proportionately, but among the metropolitan newspapers we studied, only the daily newshole of the A&L section of the *San Francisco Chronicle* was bigger. Back in 1998 substantial daily journalism on A&C was found in the *Tribune's* hard-news sections; that has been largely consolidated in the specialist sections in the past five years.

Television and books were the two artistic areas in which the *Tribune* made a major shift of resources. Its newshole for articles on TV was halved since 1998, while books grew from 15 percent to an astonishing 26 percent of the entire A&C newshole. This included a non-journalistic innovation in its books section one weekend: running copious extracts from four different novels. —AT

ARTS COVERAGE IN CHICAGO: A CRITICAL VIEW

THE RIVALRY BETWEEN the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the city's two major dailies, is fought along the traditional fronts—scoops, staffing, circulation. But in probably no other city does the face-off between competitors also occur along architectural lines. For pedestrians and drivers going north along the Michigan Avenue Bridge across the Chicago River, the headquarters of these different newspapers frame the view uptown, in the heart of the city.

The Chicago Tribune Tower, finished in 1924, is one of the glories of the city's skyline and perhaps the most famous newspaper building in the world. Just across the river from this landmark is the uninspiring headquarters of the *Sun-Times*, a low, faceless building of dark-gray metal that will soon be torn down to make way for a Trump International hotel and condominium.

Newspapers, however, are more than just the structures that house them. And though the *Tribune's* architectural superiority is matched by its predominance in circulation and staffing, the journalistic battle is less one-sided than the buildings would make it appear. As some of the *Tribune's* staff suggest, the paper often moves as slowly as tectonic plates. "It pisses me off every day when a paper with 25 percent of our resources scoops us," says Scott L. Powers, entertainment editor for the *Tribune*, of its competitor. The *Sun-Times*—whose future ownership as we went to press was in question since press mogul Conrad Black had been blocked from selling his controlling shares in Hollinger International, which owns the paper—seems always to be getting in the way of its larger rival. As *Sun-Times* features editor Christine Ledbetter says, "We pride ourselves on being aggressive, immediate, gritty on how we cover news in arts and entertainment."

The *Tribune* has more trouble than the *Sun-Times* in reacting to arts-and-entertainment news for a very practical reason. The *Tribune's* daily Tempo section, which contains arts, culture, media and technology stories, is printed not overnight but one or more days in advance—a practice universally condemned by *Tribune* editors, who have waged a long and generally unsuccessful campaign against the money-saving preprint. (The Monday and Saturday sections were recently moved to a normal schedule.) "It

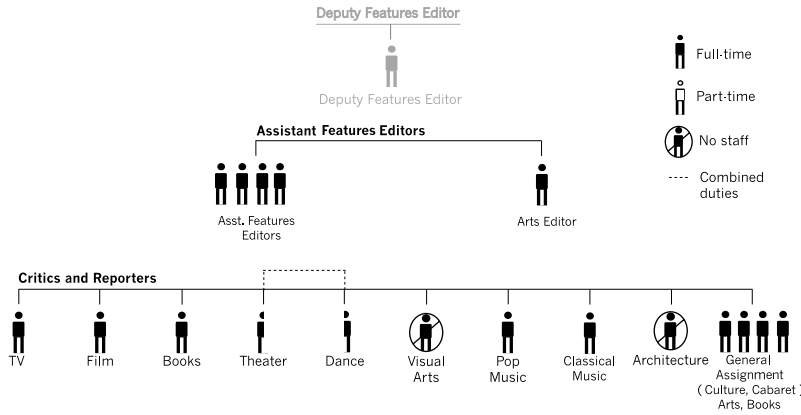


CHICAGO TRIBUNE

dulls our journalistic impulses," says Powers. Tim Bannon, the paper's Tempo editor, adds, "It is unfathomable that a newspaper of this size can't have a next-day features section."

Whether Tempo stories should be on page 1 has also long been a matter of philosophical debate at the *Tribune*. Some have argued that arts stories should be featured prominently in news sections, while others, including current managing editor for features Jim Warren, have called for reserving them for Tempo, thus mak-

In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)



REGION'S BEST-READ NEWSPAPER
Chicago Sun-Times

1998-2003

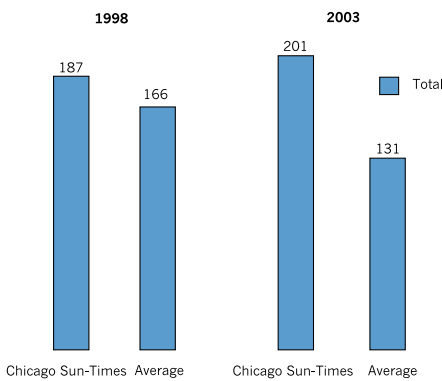
Daily circulation:

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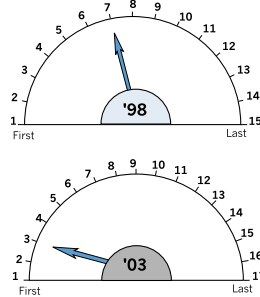
In-house arts staff:

Reviews number of reviews



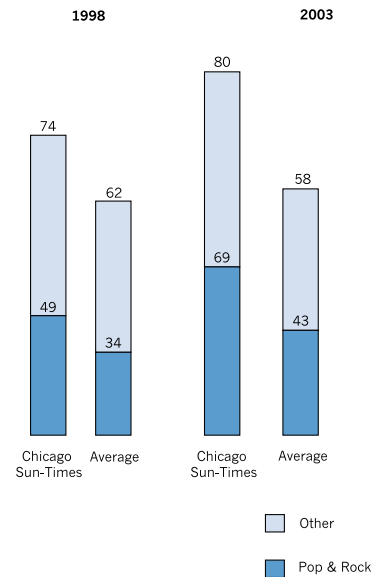
Newshole for Journalism

ranking among all newspapers studied for space (in column inches) devoted to arts-and-culture articles (listings excluded)



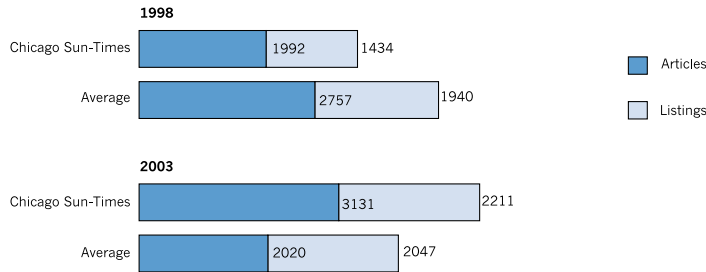
Music Journalism

number of articles (listings excluded) on music



Weekend Supplements

space (in column inches) devoted to arts-and-culture in weekend arts supplements



MOVIE CRITIC ROGER EBERT's national reputation as a reviewer epitomizes the caliber of columnists and the overall review-heavy story selection at the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The newspaper specialized in reviews on cinema and performance. At the *Sun-Times* those two beats combined account for 44 percent of its newshole for arts and culture articles, more than at all but one newspaper we studied.

The *Sun-Times*, like almost every other metropolitan newspaper in our study, has cut back its commitment to arts and culture journalism. But because its cuts have been more moderate than elsewhere, the paper has found itself vaulting to a leadership position in the field. Five years ago the journalism newshole at six of the 15 metropolitan dailies we studied exceeded that at the *Sun-Times*. By 2003 only two of the 17 were larger. On the other hand, the *Sun-Times* filed a lower-than-average volume of listings, which is typical for a tabloid. Listings accounted for only 40 percent of its overall arts and culture newshole.

Tabloids generally give the arts less prominence than broadsheets,

and the *Sun-Times* was no exception, with only 15 percent of its pages assigned to specialist arts sections, the daily A&L Showcase and the supplement Weekend Plus. The skimpiness of the *Sun-Times*'s daily Showcase was accounted for in part by the paucity of full-page ads.

Both the *Sun-Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* have shifted resources over the past five years from their daily arts sections to their weekend supplements. In the case of the *Sun-Times*, this represented a reduction from an unusually high reliance on Showcase—59 percent of the entire arts and culture journalism newshole—to a near-average 41 percent. In the process television journalism was cut substantially, while music and books were boosted. The *Sun-Times*, specializing in covering the pop and rock scene, published more music articles in October 2003 than any other metropolitan newspaper we monitored. However, the paper's transfer of resources toward book publishing has not pushed the *Sun-Times* into a leadership position. Back in 1998 books were virtually ignored; in 2003 the volume of coverage rose—all the way up to below average.—AT

ing that section stronger and more cohesive. But after September 11, the practical reality of news coverage meant that there was a limited chance of getting arts stories on the newspaper's front page. This was further reduced by a redesign and the move to a smaller web. To mitigate the impact of the day-late Tempo section, the *Tribune* prints several reviews every day in Metro. But Powers is convinced that the general public isn't even aware that these pieces exist. "Nobody reads it except for publicists," he says. "I'm sure it puzzles readers why entertainment news is on Page 2 of Metro, but we're thankful it's there." The thinking is different at the *Sun-Times*, where, according to Ledbetter, significant arts-news stories should be put in main news sections rather than being kept in the paper's daily Showcase department.

At the *Sun-Times*, according to Ledbetter, there have been no layoffs in the arts editorial staff during the last five years, and no vacancies were filled, though an assistant features editor, concentrating on theater, was added after October 2003, the month of our study. Similarly, the *Tribune* has had some turnover, but no changes in headcount, according to editors. The January 2002 retirement of Richard Christiansen, "dean" of Chicago theater critics, caused a shift in that essential beat. It is now divided between two people, reporter Chris Jones and critic Michael Phillips, formerly of the *Los Angeles Times*. "Theater—that is the game here," says Powers of the dominant role the stage has long played on the Chicago arts scene. This reality is reflected at the *Sun-Times*, where its theater and dance critic, Hedy Weiss, accumulated about 350 bylines last year. "She's one of our stars," says Ledbetter. "We have to beg her to stop writing. There's not enough space." *Reporting the Arts II* shows how seriously both papers take the arts. The *Tribune* was the only publication studied by the National Arts Journalism Program actually to increase the size of their overall arts-and-culture newshole since 1998.

Neither the *Sun-Times* nor the *Tribune* has the personnel resources to enforce the distinction between reporter and critic; exigencies of time and space require trade-offs. The belief at the *Tribune* seems to be that while losing criticism inches to reporting may run counter to the interests of arts institutions, which thrive on

publicity, the shift makes the paper more interesting to readers. "Newspapers always have to be asking, 'Whom are you writing for? Is a review what the consumer wants?'" says Bannon of the *Tribune*, whose architecture critic, Blair Kamin, won a 1999 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. The *Sun-Times* likewise prides itself on its own stable of voices, from Roger Ebert on movies to Wynne Delacoma on classical music, and Ledbetter notes that, in general, the evolving relationship between critic and reporter means that "Newspapers don't have the luxury of having that distinction." James N. Wood, outgoing president of the Art Institute of Chicago, says he is less concerned about the disappearance of the critic who exclusively writes criticism than he is worried over whether "high culture can get continued coverage."

The circulation figures for the two newspapers reveal a vast divide. Daily circulation of the *Sun-Times* in late 2003 was 486,936, up from 468,170 in 1998; Sunday was 378,371, down from 402,917. The *Tribune's*, meanwhile, was 693,978 daily in 2003 and 675,690 in 1998; Sunday was 1,000,570 in 2003 and 1,005,175 in 1998. The difference might be even larger than it seems. In June, the *Sun-Times'* management admitted that they had overstated circulation during the past few years, though at the time *Reporting the Arts II* went to press in August 2004, the level of inflation was not clear. Publisher John Cruickshank announced in spring 2004 that the paper plans on "getting to the bottom of this investigation." Interestingly, the Web audience for the *Sun-Times* is marginally larger than its more dominant competitor, yet visitors to the *Tribune* Web page spent more than twice as long at that site than those on the *Sun-Times'*.

As at many other major metropolitan daily broadsheets, the arts staff of the *Tribune* works, or senses itself laboring, in the shadow of *The New York Times*—this despite the fact that the *Tribune* is itself a well-financed publication with a large, dedicated staff that holds sway over much of the Midwest. "We have to do true enterprise stories that you won't find anywhere else," says Powers of the need to distinguish the paper from its East Coast rival, which has a small but increasing circulation in Chicago.

In an attempt to lure larger and potentially

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Christine Ledbetter
features editor
Chicago Sun-Times

younger audiences, the *Tribune* in 2002 launched the afternoon tabloid *Red Eye*. In response, the *Sun-Times* quickly started up *Red Streak*, setting off what a *Sun-Times* spokeswoman called at the time “an old-fashioned newspaper war.” It is far from clear to the editors whether the tabloids—whose ostensible audience is the elusive 18-to-35-year-old demographic—are actually building readership. The Tribune Company also bought *Chicago Magazine* in 2002, and has so far kept its editorial operations separate from the paper’s. Yet the consolidation worries observers who fear it will result in a dearth of voices in arts journalism.

There is, additionally, the *Tribune* site, Metromix, which has arts news as well as listings. The listings compete with those found in the *Chicago Reader*, a pioneering leader among alternative weeklies, with a circulation at the end of 2003 of 129,191. According to editor Alison

True, there is “an insane completeness” to the *Reader*’s listings, which are compiled and edited by more than 30 people. True notes that over the last five years the *Reader* has featured more arts coverage because “it’s always been our mission. What we are is a guide to the city.” It also started a suburban edition that contains only listings.

Jim Warren, the *Tribune*’s managing editor for features (and an NAJP advisory board member), acknowledges that the *Tribune* on its own offers its readers a potentially confusing array of choices—the flagship publication, its Metromix Web site and the *Red Eye* tabloid. “We’re giving so many people so many little slices. Is it diversification or fragmentation?” he asks. For Chicago itself, the critical question remains whether the *Tribune*, the *Sun-Times* and the variety of other newspapers and Web sites in Chicagoland will continue to chronicle the diversity of art forms offered in the city.

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Tim Bannon
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BY BILL GOLDSTEIN