

THE WIRE

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS: SOLIDLY MAINSTREAM, RARELY HIGHBROW

SINGER GEORGE MICHAEL is arrested in a Beverly Hills public bathroom for lewd conduct. Is that a music story? Actor Robert Downey Jr. is sentenced to prison for substance abuse. Does this qualify as entertainment news? “The Sixth Sense” enjoys a remarkable showing at the box office. Should that be considered movie coverage?

The Associated Press wrestles with these questions every day. Even though the AP is the world’s largest news organization, it has a surprisingly small arts and entertainment staff, and the general news reporters occasionally assigned to write about an entertainment personality are often dispatched to the courthouse instead of the concert hall. Just because the AP is doing a story about Martin Lawrence, in other words, doesn’t mean it’s a profile of the “Blue Streak” star. It could just as easily be an update on the actor’s medical condition in the hospital.

The AP’s arts coverage, solidly mainstream and rarely highbrow, is shaped not only by priorities, which generally favor lists and news stories about events over preview articles and criticism, but also by staffing. The AP has three television writers, a book and publishing writer as well as a movie reporter. And while the AP boasts a full-time farm writer and a full-time tax writer, there is no full-time AP visual arts reporter. The wire service has a drama critic, yet no full-time film critic. There are likewise no AP classical or pop music writers.

Many of the AP’s 1,700 U.S. newspaper members rely on the AP for everything from baseball scores to international news. The AP wire is particularly critical for smaller newspapers that don’t have a bureau in, say, Miami, to

cover a plane crash there, or a way of reporting on a campaign stop by Vice President Al Gore in Chicago. For small and mid-sized newspapers with limited arts and entertainment staffs, the stories transmitted by the AP—or other news services, including those of *The New York Times* or the *Los Angeles Times*—can mean the difference between having some arts coverage in the paper, or none at all. For larger papers, the AP can serve as an electronic tip sheet. Obituary writers and their editors, for example, often receive the first news of a celebrity’s death from an AP dispatch. What, then, are the wire editors who sift through the AP report seeing?

The AP’s arts and entertainment reporting for the first week of October 1998 highlights both the wire service’s strengths and some of its shortcomings. While no single week can be a definitive measure of how the AP covers arts and entertainment, the stories studied for this period certainly offer a telling snapshot of the AP’s predilections.

The AP’s stories tend to feature coverage out of just two cities, New York and Los Angeles, on three primary areas: television, film and celebrities. Within those specific realms, any week’s offerings include an array of results-oriented lists: the top films at the weekend box office runs twice a week, with an early estimate on Sundays and final figures on Monday; the television Nielsen ratings; and the bestseller charts for books, records and video. These are all “fixtures,” stories the AP moves on a regular basis, for which AP member newspapers often will set aside space even before the stories are transmitted.

In any week's batch of AP stories, there are a regular number of very solid "fixture" arts and entertainment columns as well: the "Reel World," a reported weekly column on the movie business, and "AP on TV," which contains several consistently good columns about and reviews of television programming. One of the AP's newer entertainment-related fixtures is the weekly "Celeb" package. During the week of October 4 to 11, that series of stories included five questions and answers with actress Gretchen Mol (Question No. 4: "What was it like working with Matt Damon and Leonardo DiCaprio?"), and a list of celebrity birthdays (Actress Joan Cusack turned 36 on October 11). Even though the AP has 95 international bureaus in 72 countries, there were no arts or entertainment features in the period studied from outside the United States. The AP's most consistent overseas arts news comes out of London, with an emphasis on theater, but there was no London feature in the week we studied.

Stories generally move on AP wires in two ways: as breaking news or as advances (some stories move under both designations). "Fixture" columns typically move as advances. Such advance stories are filed on the wire several days before they are scheduled to be published, and these pieces often are used in pre-printed week-end arts sections. In addition to a timely "Reel World" column about pending films based on the books of J.R.R. Tolkien, multiple TV columns that included looks at actress Pamela Anderson, "Law & Order" and actor Bruce Davison, and the "Celeb" package, there were nine other arts advances for the week of October

4. These relatively lengthy pieces, none of which were regular fixtures, included a profile of actor Jean Reno, a story about Bob Dylan's concert album, an article on a new compilation of country music "cheating songs," a piece on Disney's stage show "Aida," a report on the New York Film Festival, and a story about a book by Apollo 12 astronaut Alan Bean. The two apparent stories about the visual arts were an article about a man who painted a bridge over a Maryland creek, and a story about abstract art collector Donald Nichols and a North Carolina exhibition of his collection.

Most of the stories were well-reported and written with a lively flair. The problem is that's all there was.

Unlike the avalanche of hard news stories it churns out in a week, the AP only moves about the same number of arts and entertainment articles that might run in a major metropolitan paper in a single Friday or Sunday. What's more, there are whole areas that don't receive regular attention, particularly the visual arts. Despite the comparatively small audience that attends New York theater—compared to the number of people who buy movie tickets, listen to music, or read books—the only full-time AP writer with the word "critic" in his or her byline is drama critic Michael Kuchwara, who reviewed Matthew Bourne's "Swan Lake" in the week studied. Reviews written by AP writers who are not regular critics included looks at "Tosca" at the Metropolitan Opera, the off-Broadway play "Til the Rapture Comes" and audio reviews. Film reviews are written by a variety of AP staffers, but none moved in the week studied.

On the national news wire, where spot news is transmitted, there were only a handful of entertainment-related pieces of the nearly 570 stories studied. These included daily, celebrity-heavy “People in the News” compilations, (Sample items featured an update on Burt Reynolds’ bankruptcy and a proposed memoir from a chauffeur for the Spice Girls).

The “People” column is a high-priority package of short items about celebrities that is either generated by AP reporters or culled from other publications, such as a local newspaper or the Hollywood trades *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*. Longer “people” stories run on their own, not as part of a daily package, and the emphasis is often scandal and titillation, not high culture.

Also moving on the national news wire were pieces on the movie box office results, a screenwriter’s death, CBS cutbacks, the suicide of a woman who stalked David Letterman, Marv Albert’s legal troubles, the Nielsen ratings, the cable Nielsen ratings, plans for a *Casablanca* sequel, Ralph Nader’s criticizing “Sesame Street,” a new boxed set from Bruce Springsteen and a story about a Monica Lewinsky book and television deal.

As in AP bureaus in the rest of the nation, news reporters in the Los Angeles office occasionally contribute stories to the arts and entertainment report. But the same reporter who must fight for time to profile Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar is promptly dispatched by her editors to visit the very bathroom in which George Michael was arrested. Indeed, while the week in question showed little evidence of this bias, much of the AP’s coverage of arts and entertainment personalities focuses on deaths,

scandals and legal problems. Restraining orders related to Billy Bob Thornton’s 1997 divorce action, for example, received almost as much attention from the AP as did his 1996 Oscar-winning film “Sling Blade.”

When I was working as the AP’s Entertainment Writer in 1998, I once was asked by one of my editors in New York to “match” (confirm and write) a story about “Titanic” director James Cameron’s marriage that originated in a gossip column called “Internet Cyber-Sleaze.” And a senior editor in New York pushed for a story on a dispute between Cameron and *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan because, he said, it was “ugly, personal stuff. I like it.”

The AP covers scheduled entertainment events—the Academy Awards in particular—with fierce determination, providing thorough and nearly instant coverage. The AP’s coverage of television is also particularly impressive and extensive. What the AP obviously lacks is depth, meaningful arts stories in the daily national news report, and a consistent editorial voice, particularly in criticism.

Given the AP’s small arts and entertainment staff (many of whom pitch in on major stories such as natural disasters), it is remarkable so much copy is generated on a steady basis. The AP has not significantly bolstered its entertainment staff in 10 years, and arts and entertainment coverage is not among the news organization’s highest priorities. Yet the AP could certainly improve the breadth of its arts package if the same reporters who spent so many hours writing about Robert Downey Jr., George Michael and Billy Bob Thornton were assigned to write about them as performing artists, not defendants.

—John Horn

(Louinn Lota contributed research to this report.)