

## PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

Providence is a complicated city, and nowhere more so than in the arts. As the capital of Rhode Island, it's home to many of the state's top arts and cultural organizations, including Brown University, the Rhode Island School of Design, Trinity Repertory Company and the Rhode Island Philharmonic. Yet it's also close to Boston and New York, each with its own formidable array of cultural attractions.

Thanks to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), the city is at the center of one of the largest populations of visual artists in the country. Yet once you step outside the cultural and academic districts of Providence and Newport, interest in the visual arts in general, and contemporary art in particular, drops off sharply.

Even the numbers can be confusing. Though only about 160,000 people live in the city, the Greater Providence area has a population of more than 500,000. Another one million people live within an hour's drive. That should be good news for local arts groups. Yet a 1998 study by the New England Foundation for the Arts found that Rhode Island had the second-lowest number of visits to arts and cultural events per capita of any New England state. Only Maine was lower.

Nevertheless, like many other cities around the country, Providence has embraced the arts as a way to promote tourism and development. Three years ago, for example, Providence became the first city in the U.S. to create a tax-free zone for artists. Other arts-related initiatives include plans for a "museum mile" anchored by a new \$35 million Rhode Island history museum and an innovative program to transform empty office buildings into apartments and artists' lofts. So far most of these projects remain works in progress.

Finally, no discussion of the Providence arts scene would be complete without a reference to the city's colorful (and controversial) mayor, Vincent A. "Buddy" Cianci Jr. Over the past few years, the Cianci administration has spent millions of dollars on local arts groups and activities, earning Providence a national reputation as an arts-friendly city. At the same time, the city's cultural policies depend less on the decisions of professional administrators (Providence has no cultural affairs commissioner, for example) than they do on the personal interests and enthusiasms of the mayor, who seems to relish the role of municipal arts czar.

Now, let's take a closer look at the Providence arts scene.

**Theater:** The Providence theater scene is dominated by two organizations: Trinity Repertory Company, a Tony award-winning resident theater company, and the Providence Performing Arts Center (PPAC), a non-profit venue for concerts and traveling Broadway shows. Founded in 1962, Trinity serves up a mixed diet of theatrical chestnuts (Shakespeare, Ibsen, “A Christmas Carol”) and more adventurous fare (Mamet, Shepard, “Angels in America”). PPAC, on the other hand, is where musical behemoths such as “Miss Saigon” and “Phantom of the Opera” come to frisk and frolic. Providence is also home to a number of smaller “Off-Trinity” theater groups, including Perishable Theatre, Alias Stage, and NewGate Theatre.

**Visual Art:** In many ways, Providence is an art lover’s dream. It has a huge population of working artists, crafts people and designers. And it has an energetic leader in RISD president Roger Mandle, former deputy director at the National Gallery of Art and a passionate spokesman for the arts.

Yet Providence isn’t the easiest place to be an artist. The economy is poor, adventurous collectors are few and far between, and opportunities for arts-related businesses such as commercial photography and graphic design are limited. Even the RISD Museum, Rhode Island’s largest art museum and one of the top college museums in the country, has struggled recently. Since 1990, its annual attendance has dropped from 120,000 to about 90,000.

**Classical Music:** Though it will always play second fiddle to the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Rhode Island Philharmonic has made gains in recent years under new artistic director Larry Rachleff. Indeed, *Providence Journal* music critic Channing Gray says the orchestra has never sounded better.

**Dance:** Providence has one small professional ballet company, Festival Ballet, as well as several

contemporary dance troupes. The best of these is the Everett Dance Theater, a cooperative ensemble that has been well received in New York.

**Rock and Pop:** The last time a Providence band, singer or songwriter made a serious bid for pop stardom was back in the mid-1970s, when the city spawned the art-rock band Talking Heads and hard-driving blues ensemble Roomful of Blues. Both have since moved on, yet the city can still claim a vibrant club scene.

**Movies and Television:** Considering it’s a continent away from Hollywood, the Providence area has gotten a lot of screen time lately. Two years ago, Dustin Hoffman was in town for a film adaptation of David Mamet’s “American Buffalo” directed by Providence native Michael Corrente. Two other Rhode Islanders, Peter and Bobby Farrelly, were behind last year’s hit comedy “There’s Something About Mary,” parts of which were filmed in Providence.

Providence’s television credits are even more surprising. The hit new dramatic series, “Providence,” uses the city and its environs as a backdrop. Meanwhile, a new animated comedy, “Family Guy,” debuted on the Fox network in January. The series, which also uses the Providence skyline as a background, was created by RISD graduate Seth MacFarlane.

**Architecture and Design:** Since 1980, Providence has experienced its biggest building boom since the turn of the century. Rivers have been moved, new hotels and office buildings have sprung up and a wide variety of new public amenities, including parks, bridges, public art works and even an outdoor skating rink, have been created. In the midst of this boom, new links have been forged between the city’s arts, business and political communities. It would be impossible to understand what’s happening in the local arts scene today without taking into account the city’s remarkable physical transformation over the past 20 years.

PROVIDENCE  
METROPOLITAN AREA  
POPULATION: 1,124,044

TOP FIVE CULTURAL  
INSTITUTIONS  
(BASED ON ATTENDANCE)

1. Providence Performing Arts Center
2. Trinity Repertory Theatre
3. Providence Children’s Museum/Children’s Museum of Rhode Island
4. Rhode Island Philharmonic
5. RISD Museum of Art

# The Providence Journal

It wasn't many years ago that *The Providence Journal* had a writer whom fellow staffers dubbed "Mr. Arts." Each day, he dutifully cranked out the needed theater, movie, television and arts reviews. The *Journal's* arts staff has since blossomed. Staff members, though, feel that they are still short-handed and need more critics and writers to keep up with a city that can boast a new arts and entertainment district, the famed Rhode Island School of Design, the Trinity Repertory Theater, as well as one of the largest concentrations of visual artists in the United States.

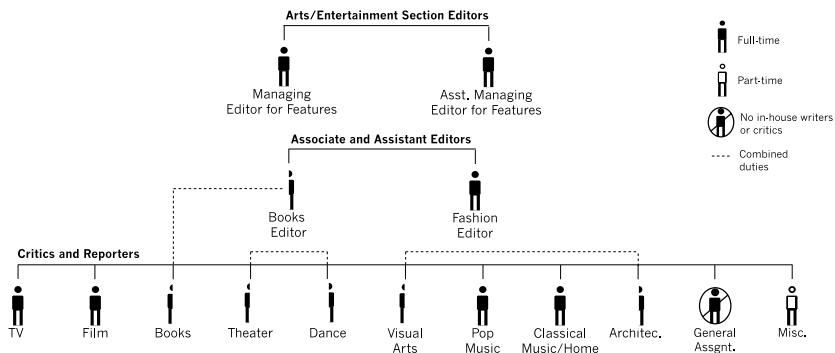
The *Journal* is the only paper in a town that dominates Rhode Island, and many staffers echo managing editor for features Jack Major's observation that "Providence is a city-state." From Monday to Saturday, the "Lifebeat" section runs regular interviews with artists, pieces on local musicians as well as a profiles of theater actors. During the week, the A.H. Belo Corporation-owned *Journal* also places a high proportion of its arts coverage in non-art feature sections. In preparation for the weekend, Friday's "Lifebeat" section is devoted heavily to movies.

The paper does not have a weekend supplement. But four years ago, the *Journal* made the profitable decision to beef up the arts by adding the Sunday "Arts Week," which includes book reviews. This past year, the *Journal* unveiled its Thursday tabloid "Live." It combines features with listings of arts events in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut, as well as restaurant coverage and the ever-profitable classifieds. Much of the work by the staff goes into these two sections.

On the whole, the *Journal* is small. Of the 15 papers in this study, it ran the second-fewest number of column inches on arts stories, and devoted the second-highest proportion of its arts coverage to listings. Television got a disproportionate share of the stories, consuming space that other newspapers on average devote to music and the performing arts. Of all the papers analyzed, the *Journal* also runs the fewest articles and the second-fewest reviews.

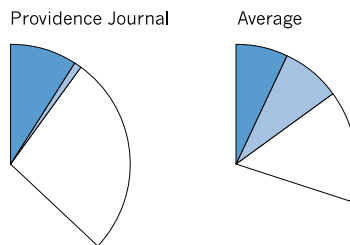
Owner: A.H. Belo Corp. Group Daily Circulation: 170,292 Sunday Circulation: 242,755

## In-house Arts Staff (does not include copy desk or freelancers)



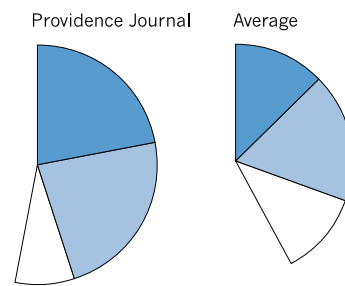
### 1. Pagination of Sections

- Arts & Living (9% vs. 7% avg.)
- Supplements (1% vs. 8% avg.)
- Other Features (27% vs. 15% avg.)



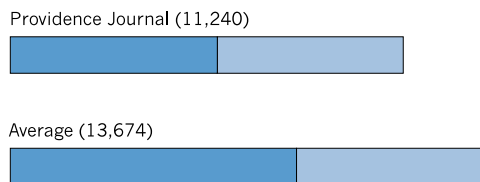
### 2. TV, Music and Performing Arts

- TV (22% vs. 12% avg.)
- Music (23% vs. 17% avg.)
- Perf. Arts (8% vs. 11% avg.)



### 3. Stories and Listings

- Stories
- Listings

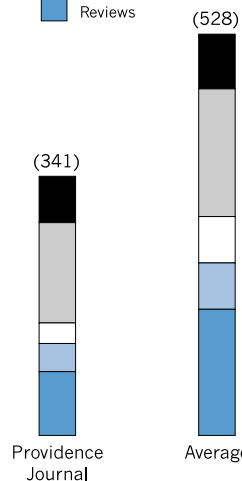


### Notes (All data for October 1998. Comprehensive data available at [www.najp.org](http://www.najp.org).)

1. Percentage of pages devoted to daily Arts & Living sections, weekend arts supplements and other features sections compared with the 15-newspaper average
2. Proportion of editorial space assigned to all arts and culture stories, listings excluded, devoted to television, music and performing arts compared with the 15-newspaper average
3. Volume of coverage devoted to arts and culture compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches
4. Number of arts and culture stories, listings excluded, compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of articles

### 4. Types of Articles

- Other
- Features
- News/Obits
- Gossip
- Reviews



## ARTS COVERAGE IN PROVIDENCE: A CRITICAL VIEW

When it comes to local arts coverage, it's hard to overestimate the impact of *The Providence Journal*, Rhode Island's largest newspaper and its only statewide daily. With an average weekday circulation of 170,000 and a Sunday readership around 240,000, the paper reaches a significant portion of the state's residents. At the same time, it's hard to gauge the full scope of the *Journal's* arts coverage, because arts-related stories turn up regularly in the paper's news pages, including its metro, regional and even business sections. This has been especially true in recent years as Providence and other cities have tried to use the arts to foster tourism and development.

In addition to the *Journal*, the city has a full complement of network television affiliates, as well as several publications that provide local arts coverage. These include *The Providence Phoenix*—a local offshoot of *The Boston Phoenix—Rhode Island Monthly*, the artist-run *Quix Art Quarterly* and *The New York Times* New England edition. Other sources of coverage are community newspapers such as the *Warwick Beacon* and the *Cranston Herald*.

As the city's hometown newspaper, the *Journal* provides regular coverage of Providence's top arts events and organizations. The bulk of the *Journal's* coverage appears in three sections: "Lifebeat," a Monday-to-Saturday arts, entertainment and lifestyle section; "Live," a tabloid-format Thursday section aimed at weekend activities, and "Arts Week," a Sunday section devoted to arts-related features, interviews and listings.

Most of these stories are written by the paper's arts staff, all of whom double as reviewers and reporters. Not surprisingly, most of the staff's time is spent covering local news and events. A smaller, though still sizable, portion of the paper's arts coverage is devoted to the Boston area, mainly in the form of reviews of the Boston Symphony, the Museum of Fine Arts and other big Boston-based arts organizations. Only rarely do *Journal* critics venture outside the Boston-Rhode Island axis, and then usually only in connection with people, events and performances of local interest.

Over the past few years, the hometown focus has become increasingly pronounced, not just in the *Journal's* arts coverage but in its news pages as well. This development has had mixed results. On the one hand, it has meant more coverage for

local arts groups and provided a boost to the city's fledgling arts and entertainment district. On the other hand, the paper has increasingly favored profiles, interviews and other forms of "soft" coverage over critical reviews and commentary. As a result, while overall arts coverage has increased slightly, less of it carries any critical edge.

In fact, if one had to sum up the *Journal's* approach to arts coverage in one word, it would be "contradictory." The paper is obviously proud of its arts staff and, despite several waves of restructuring, has worked hard to keep it intact. Yet within the paper's arts and lifestyle department, there is little discussion of the reviewing staff's role. While many of these problems can be found at other newspapers, they're especially troubling at the *Journal*.

Providence is changing rapidly. It has a new arts and entertainment district. New museums and other cultural attractions are in the offing. Arts tourism is increasing. Plans for new buildings and even whole new neighborhoods sprout almost daily. Yet the paper still has no real strategy for covering these developments.

The Best of the Rest: While the *Journal* is the "Big Kahuna" in the local media market, there are other players on the scene. Their impact, though, tends to be limited. *The Providence Phoenix* is basically a recycle bin for the paper's corporate parent, *The Boston Phoenix*. The only exceptions are the *Phoenix's* theater reviews and club-scene coverage, both sharply written and produced locally. One publication that is devoted entirely to local cultural matters is *Quix Art Quarterly*, an artist-run tabloid. Unfortunately, the four-month gap between issues tends to blunt *Quix's* impact.

An important, though often overlooked, aspect of local arts coverage is the influence of out-of-state publications such as *The New York Times*. The *Times* New England edition, for example, carries a listing of local arts events in its Friday "Weekend" section. *Times* critics and reporters also make the rounds from time to time.

In contrast, the two big Boston dailies, *The Boston Globe* and *The Boston Herald*, are virtual no-shows in the Providence area when it comes to arts pieces. The only exception is the *Globe's* dutiful coverage of Trinity Repertory Company, a practice that dates back to the troupe's glory years of the 1970s and early '80s.

While these New York and Boston papers have limited direct impact on local arts events and institutions and the effect of New York or Boston coverage at the box office is pretty mini-

*"The Journal is its own worst enemy. We are the only game in town. It's one of the reasons why we're both loved and hated."*

Jack Major  
Managing Editor, Features  
*The Providence Journal*

mal, they do make a difference in siphoning off more affluent, educated readers. This is especially true in Rhode Island, where the *Times* and the *Globe* compete directly with the *Journal* on the same newsstands and doorsteps. In theory, head-to-head competition keeps everybody sharp. But in practice, it tends to hurt both local papers (who lose their more educated and arts-savvy readers) and local arts organizations (who find it harder to reach local arts consumers).

Things aren't much better in the broadcast department. Local television stations, for example, rarely cover cultural events except for reasons of scandal (i.e. a controversial public art project) or holiday tie-ins (i.e. Trinity's annual production of "A Christmas Carol").

Finally, a word about the Internet and computer-based media. Both the *Journal* and the *Phoenix* maintain web sites that include local arts links and listings, as does the city of Providence. Meanwhile, virtually every local arts organization, large and small, has gone online. So far, it's hard to tell how effective this has been in bringing people into theaters, galleries, and other venues. But there are signs of its growing influence. Recently a California woman who had heard about Providence's loft-building program from a friend checked it out on the city's web page and put a deposit down on a loft the next day. She is now happily ensconced in her new pad.

So who knows? Maybe technology is good for something after all.

*"The Internet is the only real competition we have now."*

Jack Major  
Managing Editor, Features  
*The Providence Journal*

#### VOICES FROM THE STAFF

We have done a lot of focus groups. Just about every time we put out a section, we have a focus group before we start it. Sometimes we have focus groups to do some later fine-tuning. We're focus-group crazy.

Originally the "Live" section was thought of as something that was going to appeal to our younger readers, those between 18-26 or 18-35. We were going to go heavy on music, thinking that is what young people want to know about. We got people who were under 39 to look at a section with Fiona Apple on the cover. There were four groups with a total of about 42 people. Only three people had even heard of Fiona Apple. Some of the younger members of the group also told us that just because they are 21 doesn't mean all they are interested in is rock music. It changed our thinking. While we didn't end up dropping pop music, we certainly softened its emphasis. What emerged from the groups was that a lot of people went out to eat. When we came out with the final product, the restaurant part of the "Live" section became much more prominent.

We have more than doubled our staff in 30 years, while the number of Providence's arts organization has increased at a much greater rate. So we have twice as large a staff, but we must have four or five times as many things that we have to cover. That's where the frustration is. There is not enough space and not enough people.

Our list of staff members is all male. This country is getting a lot from male voices. I would like to have a female voice someplace in there. A female critic would have a different reaction to arts, TV, movies, or theater. That is something we could benefit from, but we do not get. Take the show "Providence." Everyone panned it, but women love it. I wish we had that female voice. We have one minority hire, the pop music critic. He is not only a minority, but he is the only one on the other side of 30. That's the other voice we've have lost. The staff is getting very old.

Jack Major, Managing Editor, Features, *The Providence Journal*