

THE NETWORKS

TELEVISION SKIMPS ON ARTS NEWS

TELEVISION BROADCAST JOURNALISTS have three major time slots for their work: the morning programs, the half-hour nightly network newscasts at the dinner hour and the prime-time news magazines. Of these, the morning shows carry the largest number of arts and culture stories, with more than a fifth of their segments devoted to that beat. This is largely due to the fact that NBC's "Today" and ABC's "Good Morning America" have much more time to fill than their evening counterparts. (This study did not include CBS's "This Morning," because its format was more oriented toward local affiliates rather than a national content.) In their seven-to-nine morning time slots each weekday, only the first half hour is devoted to hard news. The remaining 90 minutes are stuffed with a mix of five-minute features and interviews. These include tips on personal health and lifestyle, relationships and family life, consumer and household concerns, as well as a healthy dose of show business and celebrity coverage.

There are two ways in which these programs focus on the arts and culture beat. First, the morning programs act as the networks' equivalent of a newspaper's book section. While the programs generally don't offer critical takes on books, the shows have become an essential stopping point on the publishing industry's book promotion tour. In October 1998, novelist John Updike appeared on "Good Morning America" to discuss his new novel "Bech at Bay." "Today," meanwhile, interviewed Broadway critic Frank Rich about his collection of *New York Times* reviews and author Pete Hamill on "Why Sinatra Matters." Authors are frequent guests, especially

when their area of expertise overlaps a topic that the morning shows are covering. David Maraniss, for instance, appeared on "Today" following the release of the Starr Report to talk about his book "The Clinton Enigma," and Bill Bradley also came by to discuss "Values of the Game," its publication coinciding with the former senator's initial presidential bid. Thus on the 21 weekday mornings of October 1998, "Today" invited a total of 22 different non-fiction authors to discuss their latest publications, and "Good Morning America" hosted 14.

To be sure, many of the topics these books studied were remote from the arts and culture beat: self-help, memoir, biography, public policy, even cooking. But if the publishing industry has decided to diversify away from the world of literature to include these non-fiction fields, that is hardly a trend the guest-bookers at "Today" and "Good Morning America" can control when they recruit authors for their anchors to interview.

Secondly, art and culture was represented by coverage of show business. Celebrity guests lent star power to each program, appearing on the shows to promote their recently released movies. In October 1998 alone, "Today" snagged Sharon Stone, Oprah Winfrey, Sandra Bullock, Danny DeVito and Edward Norton. "Good Morning America" had Joan Allen and Don Knotts. Each program has its in-house movie reviewer: Joel Siegel of "Good Morning America" filed reviews of nine movies during the month; Gene Shalit of "Today" reviewed five. Each program also acted as a promotional vehicle for its own network's entertainment (four prime-time programs during the month

on NBC, six on ABC) in the course of its television coverage.

Other artistic disciplines, such as fine arts and music, received some, though markedly less air time. Both programs sent reporters to Boston for the Museum of Fine Art's Claude Monet show and to Washington, D.C. for the National Gallery's Vincent van Gogh exhibition, while weathercaster Spencer Christian of "Good Morning America" took a field trip to inspect the restoration of the architectural splendor of New York City's Grand Central Terminal. Musical guests were less common in October than in the summer when open air performances are a regular fixture. Nevertheless, "Today" hosted Phil Collins and Teddy Pendergrass, "Good Morning America" invited the "Riverdance" troupe to its studio, and that show's musical contributor, David Sanborn, performed with both Joni Mitchell and Willie Nelson.

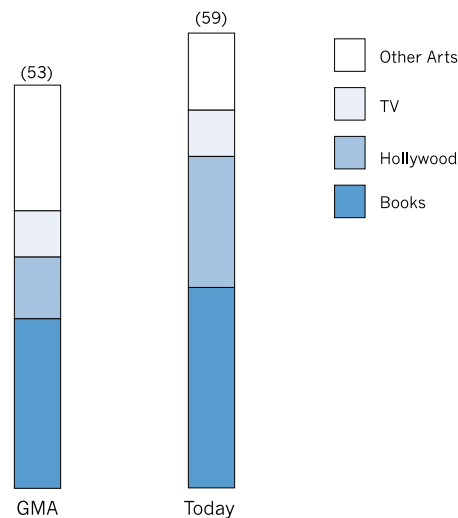
Thus, broadly defined, the arts and culture beat is an indispensable staple of network television's morning journalism. Add the publishing tie-ins to coverage of the arts and entertainment per se, and more than 20% of all segments on either program cover this beat. After 7:30 a.m. that proportion rises to almost one segment in three.

While the morning shows have a varied and lighter mandate, the nightly newscasts—anchored by ABC's Peter Jennings, CBS's Dan Rather and NBC's Tom Brokaw—are mostly dedicated to reporting on the hard national and international breaking news of the day. And in October 1998, arts and culture on all three weekday newscasts combined amounted to a

scant 11 minutes of coverage, less than one percent of their total newshole.

Even in a month with above-average arts and culture coverage, this beat rarely attracts headlines. The top of the evening newscast is usually reserved for weightier topics such as war, politics, foreign affairs, the economy, terrorism and natural disaster. On rare occasions arts and culture does lead a newscast—usually with an obituary. The biggest such death in 1998 was Frank Sinatra's (May 14). With 45 minutes of coverage on the three nightly newscasts combined, it was the fourth-biggest story in the month of May, trailing segments on the India-

Arts and Culture in the Morning



Number of feature and interview segments on art and culture on "Good Morning America" and "Today," with the number in parentheses indicating total number of stories

Pakistan nuclear arms race, the ouster of President Suharto in Indonesia and the ongoing coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. In October the most newsworthy arts and culture death, that of singing cowboy Gene Autry, was deemed much less newsworthy. It garnered a mere five minutes.

If the arts and culture beat does happen to get a mention on the nightly news, it tends to be not as breaking news but as a light feature toward the end of the newscast. There it competes for space with human interest, animal stories and sports features or social-issue trend pieces on topics such as the environment, education, race relations, religion or the war on drugs. October 1998 was an especially skimpy month for the arts on the evening news. Autry's obituary and copy-only stories aside, ABC's Jennings filed a piece on the van Gogh exhibition, the lone in-depth feature on the arts beat in October. "The paintings in the Washington exhibition fill 10 rooms," he voiced over an eye-catching montage. "Here is the story of van Gogh's tempestuous life: his joys, his sorrows, his passion, his pain."

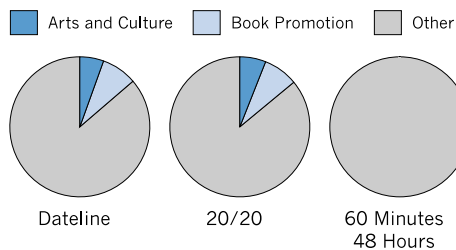
While our study was of network television journalism, public television producers at the nightly "NewsHour" submitted a rundown of their arts and culture coverage during October 1998. The "NewsHour" shares a hard-news format with the networks' nightly newscasts, but it also shares a feature-and-interview format with the morning programs. Only one breaking news story from the arts field received "NewsHour" interview coverage according to its own internal analysis: the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to José Saramago. Just like on the networks' morning programs during the month of October, interviews with authors such as Daniel Boorstin, Shelby Steele and Calvin Trillin were

Assorted Evening News Topics

(ABC, CBS & NBC combined)

	Minutes October 1998
Space, Science & Technology	154
Sports	41
Education	22
Environment	20
Religion	20
Drugs-Alcohol-Tobacco	19
Race & Immigration	15
Animals	13
Arts and Culture	11

Prime-time News Magazines



Proportion of broadcast coverage on "Dateline," "20/20," "60 Minutes" and "48 Hours" assigned to segments on arts and culture, book promotion and other topics

the staple of the NewsHour's remaining arts coverage. But it did, however, include one unusual wrinkle. Baseball's World Series and Columbus Day programs were marked by poetry readings.

During prime time, the networks' news magazines are surrounded by their own sitcom and drama entertainment programming. As a result, journalism about the arts has a low priority. In October 1998, ABC's "20/20" filed only three out of 51 segments on arts and culture topics. NBC's "Dateline" ran only four out of 73. CBS's "60 Minutes" and "48 Hours" filed no segments out of 45. Examples were few. Oprah Winfrey sat down with ABC's Diane Sawyer to promote her movie "Beloved"; NBC's Josh Mankiewicz visited the National Association of Television Program Executives convention to file a jocular survey of the latest syndicated fare; ABC's Bill Ritter warned about the dangers to fans' life and limb in the mosh pit at rock concerts; and NBC's Chris Hansen offered a consumer alert about the poor quality of bootleg videotapes of recent Hollywood releases.

In prime time, just as in the mornings, these seven arts and culture segments were complemented by 10 segments which promoted books on non-arts-related topics such as "Bodily Harm" on self-mutilation, "Coping with a Picky Eater" on child rearing, "The Nine Fantasies" on self-help therapy, as well as Harold Evans' "The American Century" and Edward Klein's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis biography "Just Jackie." But even added together, these two categories accounted for only 10% of all segments. Prime time network journalists preferred health-care and true crime stories to arts and culture.

As far as network television is concerned, arts and culture just does not cut it as a hard news beat. On the evening news and in prime time, the topic is mere filler. But in the morning, arts and culture features and interview segments are indispensable.

—Andrew Tyndall