THE STATE OF ARTS JOURNALISM: A PANEL DISCUSSION

This is an edited and abbreviated transcript of a National Arts Journalism Program panel on the state of arts journalism held at The National Hotel in Miami on May 1, 1999.

Panelists:

Bruce Weber, National Cultural Correspondent, *The New York Times.* Weber has also worked for the *Times* as an editor for the Sunday magazine, metro reporter, and theater beat reporter. Previously he was a fiction editor for *Esquire* magazine, and the editor of *Look Who's Talking*, an anthology of American short stories.

Cheryl Kushner, Entertainment Editor, *Newsday*. At the time of the panel discussion, Kushner was the entertainment editor for *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. She was a 1996-97 National Arts Journalism Program Fellow.

Danyel Smith, Editor-at-large, Time, Inc. At the time of the panel discussion, Smith was editor in chief of *VIBE* and editorial director for *Blaze*. Smith has also worked as rhythm and blues editor at *Billboard*, music editor at *SF Weekly*, and columnist at *Spin*. She was a 1996-97 National Arts Journalism Program Fellow.

Raymond Sokolov, Arts and Leisure Editor, *The Wall Street Journal.* Sokolov has worked as a reporter, book reviewer, and columnist for various publications including *The New York Times*, where he was food editor and restaurant critic, *Natural History*, *Travel and Leisure*, *Food and Wine*, and *Cuisine.*

Moderator:

Ileana Oroza, Assistant Managing Editor, *The Miami Herald*. Oroza has also worked for the *Herald* as editorial writer, foreign editor, arts and entertainment editor, and at *El Herald*, city editor, features editor, and general assignment reporter. She was also a producer of public affairs programs at *WPLG*-Channel 10. She was a 1995-96 National Arts Journalism Program Fellow.

Opening Remarks

OROZA: I have a nephew named Alfie, and he was born here in the United States. Next week he starts a job as an assistant producer for major league baseball. He's staying with me this weekend, and when I got home last night, he was listening to *Enanitos Verdes*—the "Little Green Midgets." You never heard of them, but that's a group that a huge number of people in this country are listening to. They're Spanish rock 'n' roll singers, and to me it's a symbol of what we're looking at as we try to work in arts journalism in the next five or ten years.

We know the problems of arts journalism—we don't have enough space, the editors don't care, deadlines are terrible—but we've known that for 20 years. That's what we live with. I don't think we can change that. What we need to look at is how we can make a difference with our work and how we can make arts journalism matter.

For newspapers, and I think it's the same in other media, we're in revolutionary times. If you don't want to call them revolutionary times, we've got to at least talk about redefining times. Here in Miami, for example, we've redefined the concept of *mañana*, because here we know we are *mañana*. This is what you're going to see in the United States in 10 or 15 years. *Mañana* is young; *mañana* is fast. *Mañana* is very impatient with old things. *Mañana* thrives in a multiplicity of cultures and languages. [*Miami Herald* theater critic] Christine Dolen's son has grown up celebrating *Noche Buena*. My nephew, as I said, listens to *Enanitos Verdes*. In *mañana* we read in English, Spanish, and Creole. We want to read *about* people who read and write in English, Creole, Spanish, and Portuguese. We drink Red Stripe beer and we dance *merengue*. When we're very sad, we put Jose Alfredo Jimenez in the CD player and we cry a lot. We put guava on our cheesecakes. Our metaphors are written in the accents of the Andes, in the accents of the Caribbean, and in the accents of the Mississippi delta. That's what we have to try to write about. That's what we have to cover in arts journalism in the next 10 or 20 years, if we're going to survive. That's my little soapbox speech.

Culture between the Coasts

WEBER: It's very possible that I've got the best job in arts journalism in America and maybe even the best job in journalism. About a year and a half ago, the *Times* shipped me off from New York to Chicago with the mandate to travel around the country and write about the arts, basically between the two coasts. This was an acknowledgment that cultural life does in fact exist between the two coasts—an acknowledgment that we have readers in a growing national circulation who turn to the *Times* for their arts coverage, and they like to see themselves reflected in the pages of the newspaper that they read. Like most people who have lived most of their lives in New York, I'm a very provincial fellow, and although I was excited about the job, I wasn't certain about what I was going to find.

In the last year, I think I've been to 25 states and 45 cities. What's extremely clear is that no matter where you go, cultural life is vivid, it's active, it's important to people. Orchestras, choral groups, reading groups, dance troupes, theater companies—they're all over the place, whether or not the N.E.A. is cutting back their funding. But not many local newspapers are keeping up with the sort of vividness in the arts that's going on right under their noses.

Granted, I have the advantage of dropping in as an outsider and taking a look at things from an outsider's perspective; things probably jump out at me in a way that they don't when they're right under your nose. I think of half a dozen stories that I've done in places like St. Joseph, Missouri, which is a small and struggling city just north of Kansas City where there just really isn't much going on. But last summer, on the campus of Western Missouri State College, 600 barbershop quartet singers gathered to have a barbershop quartet convention—and there was no story in the local newspaper about it. If there was, I didn't see it. I certainly didn't see a local reporter, and I was there for four days.

I've written a series of profiles on how the arts function in some small cities: Wilmington, North Carolina; El Paso, Texas; Fairbanks, Alaska; Madison, Wisconsin. What happens is a *Times* reporter shows up in these places and starts talking to the artists, and it takes about an hour and a half and people know there's a reporter asking about them in their midst. They all seem to be aware of their own local reporters who are doing this, and half a dozen times now, *I* have become the subject of a story in the local newspaper. That strikes me as wrong. The reporters invariably ask me what have I found in the local culture that I think is worth writing about.

WHEN I READ THE LOCAL ARTS PAPERS, I END UP FEELING THERE IS A SERIOUS LACK OF IMAGINATION GOING ON IN TERMS OF EDITORIAL ASSIGNMENTS.

I'm aware that newspapers have terrible budget restrictions, particularly in the arts sections. But when I read the local arts papers, I end up feeling there is a serious lack of imagination going on in terms of editorial assignments, and in terms of the ideas that the writers themselves seem to be coming up with. There are obvious exceptions. But most arts sections seem to be about whichever show was passing through town, or whichever movie happens to be opening this week. When Cathy Rigby came through town with "Peter Pan," there was a Cathy Rigby profile. That's necessary and OK, but I end up scratching my head and wondering where is the profile of the assistant concert master in Fairbanks, Alaska—they have a terrific local symphony—who also plays the tuba? I asked

the conductor if there had ever been a story about him, and no, there hadn't been. That strikes me as odd, given the restrictions that all culture sections have—you listed them very well—budget, space, stubbornness of editors, present company excluded.

There's a certain imagination, scrutiny, and power of observation that we reporters are supposed to have that maybe we don't deploy often enough. I think that one very quick way to improve the arts coverage in any local newspaper is to come in one Monday morning and write down a list of 15 ideas. That would be the first thing I would do if I were running a local arts section. Not a very great exit line, but there it is.

OROZA: We can't sell more ads to Bloomingdale's, but we can certainly work on doing that.

KUSHNER: I work for a newspaper that has made a real strong commitment to arts and entertainment journalism. Both the publisher and the editor realized about five years ago the value of what we have in our community. Cleveland is a Midwestern city that has a world-class orchestra, a world-class art museum, and a lot of theater and dance. We also have the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Out of my fellowship came a separate daily entertainment section that looks at entertainment as news and covers a lot of the things that are coming into town, but also has specialty pages that deal with the lively arts, movies, music, and television.

We have a strong Sunday section that gives the critics the opportunity to really explore issues they can't in the daily paper. But this is something that we worked really hard for. I have a full complement of critics and also some freelance writers and general assignment reporters to fill in the blanks. I realize this is unusual for a paper to mask this kind of commitment, but the staff is really passionate about what they do. We cover local arts. We write about the orchestra and the people in our community. We write about the theater people. We really care about what's happening in our region. We don't have a lot of daily competition. *The Beacon Journal* has not really picked up the lead; they've cut back their coverage and their staffing. But we have a ring of suburban newspapers that have started a lot more cultural reporting. That's our competition.

We've figured out ways to make stories interesting. We have cut back on reviews because our space has been trimmed, but we find different ways to do reviews. We use the Sunday paper to look at issues in the arts, whether it is art, music, or dancing. We're trying to figure out how to cover our beats in ways that appeal to our broad readership.

We are losing circulation. It churns—some days it's up, some days it's down. We've lost 10,000 readers in the last three months, then we picked up 5,000. It's very frustrating for us because the more that circulation drops, the more they

come to you and ask you to try to redefine what you're doing and appeal to younger readers. We're finding it very difficult to try to appeal to everybody because we realize you can't. We're not a niche publication; we're a mainstream newspaper in a middle-class / upper-class town.

It's very exciting for us right now. The section's a year old and we've picked up a lot of new advertising and new readership. We hear that people are reading us. So it's not all gloom and doom in the hinterlands. As reporters and editors, it's really up to us to change the environment and to change the atmosphere. We need to go to our editors and make them realize why arts and culture really mean something to our community. But we should not ignore what's happening in the celebrity world, because we know our readers want that too.

OROZA: In the arts section, we've been so used to covering the arts one particular way for a long time. It might be time to start thinking of new ways. Danyel has a whole other perspective, from a national magazine.

I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD BE IN DEPARTMENT HEAD MEETINGS ARGUING FOR BETTER AD-TO-EDIT PAGE RATIO AND TRYING TO HIRE A REALLY GOOD ART DIRECTOR FOR 75 CENTS.

Redefining the Workplace

SMITH: I'm the editor in chief at *VIBE* magazine, and have been so since I finished my fellowship. I was promoted from music editor to editor in chief. Before I got the fellowship, I looked at Alan Light, who's now editor in chief of *SPIN*. He's a man who taught me a lot about journalism and whom I admire. I told him a million times I was coveting his job as editor in chief of *VIBE*, and he would always tell me, "Don't covet. Be careful what you wish for." Like so many other times, he was exactly right. It's a great job, but it is much more about business than it is about journalism. When I was younger and in college, I dreamt of being a writer, but you never know what path your life is going to take. I never thought I would be in department head meetings arguing for better ad-to-edit page ratio and trying to hire a really good art director for 75 cents. There's drama when you're the person in charge of people who are, to me, kids on their first jobs. A lot of them don't know how to act at a job—it's a little insane sometimes.

It is a struggle to maintain a multicultural workplace. It is a struggle to maintain a workplace that is open and friendly to everybody's sexual orientation and to young people who don't really have an idea of how to work. I can't believe I'm saying this, but we have to teach people how to answer the phone. We have to

teach people how to write a memo. And these people are black, white, Asian, Latin, everything. I don't know what they're teaching these kids in college anymore, but it's a tough sell, and I think it's important, because a youthful, multicultural workplace is the workplace of the future, whether we like it or not.

I've had this conversation with Abe [Peck, Associate Dean, Medill School of Journalism] many, many times. Who goes to college for journalism anymore? When I was at Medill, it was just a small group of people who were really interested in pursuing excellence in this field. I think that's something that we really have to take a look at as far as bringing in people who really want to do this well. When I started at Berkeley back in 1983, the motto of my incoming class was "Excellence in Diversity," and I really feel that's what we have to strive for. We're obviously a very proactive group of arts journalists. We apply for fellowships; we come to stuff like this, so obviously we're interested in what goes on. I feel if we could come up with a motto for ourselves, that's what I would choose.

Anthony [DeCurtis, Contributing Editor, *Rolling Stone*] taught me how to write a 300-word record review, and I can do it with my eyes closed and my hands tied behind my back. And I'm trying to make sure I teach people how to do that. People do not know how to write a really good 300-word record review—it's a dying art. I think it's up to us to teach young people of all races how to do something as simple as that, because from a good 300-word record review comes a good 600-word book review, comes a good 800-word arts profile, comes a good cover story about the guy in Alaska.

A YOUTHFUL, MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACE
IS THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE,
WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT.

I think we have to embrace young people. We're not going to be here forever, and young people have to realize how important it is to cover the arts and have people of all races and sexual identities comfortable with each other in the arts newsroom.

OROZA: Danyel is adding to our task of being arts journalists by educating future arts journalists and bringing them up to think of new ways to cover the arts. Ray has the joy of being able to choose la crème de la crème from the rest of the country.

A National Perspective of Local News

SOKOLOV: First I'd like to say that I'm one of those people who doesn't know how to behave in the workplace, so when this panel is over, I want to meet with you privately on that point. On the other hand, the *Wall Street Journal* has mentioned *Enanitos Verdes* on my page and on its news pages this week. We did a feature on Latin American rock, and the Mexico City bureau chief volunteered a piece. They did a marketing piece about the same thing in the "B" section this week or last week. That really speaks to Bruce's point about alertness to what is actually happening in this world we cover. I think there are probably two or three reasons that happens in general, and one of them is just laziness—the ease of using a formula—falling into local reviews. The only way to get around that is to think and work harder.

There's an inherent problem about being the local paper, where there are things you simply can't cover adequately, or are discouraged by. In the eyes of many newspaper managements, local arts institutions are part of a network of important civic institutions. They are not covered in the way that news should be covered, because it's just too close. You have to live there; you are on their board. If you are the publisher of the newspaper, you are almost certainly on the board of the museum. In New York, the *Times* did an extraordinary attack on the Metropolitan Museum's deaccessioning policy, but I doubt that would have happened when Mr. Sulzberger was the chairman of the board. That's pure speculation, but as a general matter, the closer you are to the story, the more difficult it is to adopt an aggressive posture. As national press, you can do things—not only see them, but do them—in a kind of normal journalistic way that is impossible, or unlikely, that local press will do.

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The example I think of is Detroit. I'm from Detroit, so I was particularly interested in the fate of the museum there, the Detroit Institute of Arts. For a variety of reasons it was in terrible financial shape and really risked closing and disbursing what is the largest art collection in the United States west of Philadelphia. I was aware of this largely because of reporting in *The New York Times*. Before I went there on a visit, I did a database search on what reporting had been done. There was the most truly meager, uninformative, obfuscatory writing in the Detroit press. The city of Detroit owns the museum, so every possible major institution in the city was enmeshed in a major scandal, given the importance of the museum. It was also the only tourist magnet that Detroit really

has inside the city. In my view, it was a crucial story that was not covered locally at all.

The local bureau chief of the *Times,* Keith Bradsher, did a couple of pieces. I did a piece—an Indianapolis paper did a really good piece—and the situation was resolved. The *Detroit News* reprinted my piece in its paper, and it was the first news anybody there had about the actual nuts and bolts of the situation.

The *Journal* is trying to cover the whole country in space, which I assure you, is smaller than any of your papers have for the arts. Rather than having a roving correspondent, we've done it by finding people in cities. We have a theater critic who writes from Chicago. I've got somebody in California who writes pieces about the arts as though we were everybody's local paper. I was able to figure out that on a truly minor budget we could continue to operate by exploiting freelance writers—and I mean that in the good and the bad sense—and by diving in when there was something first-rate to write about. Clearly you don't get this right as much as you would like to.

My perspective is developed by the mail that comes in every day—a stack of press releases from around the country. It doesn't seem all that difficult to know what is going on in any city. We're bombarded by it all the time. The *Journal* has made a kind of offhand commitment in the 16 years that I've been doing this—offhanded in that they simply set an irresponsible eccentric like me free to have a minor amount of space buried in their "A" section. Once they discovered that one in three readers were reading it every day, they said, "Fine, now we'll do what we really want to do and cover subjects like the long bond," which is what they're about, and should be about.

The first reader's survey showed we had twice the readership of the entire foreign coverage and foreign business sections. It was a little embarrassing. The investment in 75 foreign reporters all over the world—bureaus in Beijing and so on—probably cost more than however many lunches I could have with freelance writers in New York in the course of a year. I calculated that if we did any better, there would be something truly corrupt about the way the paper was being run, which was, after all, a business newspaper.

Recently they've upset this apple cart by creating a weekend section called "Weekend Journal" on Fridays. For reasons of rigid ad layout, we were disbursed into that section. But as a reward we're getting two-and-a-half extra columns every week, Monday through Thursday. I see a lot of this "how to operate" situation not in terms of a righteous role, but as a way of operating in a crowded and hostile territory. There was lost space in the paper. We've designed the *Journal* more and more like a magazine, so there aren't a lot of places to put odd-shaped ads. The jigsaw puzzle of this layout has left lots of little spaces that have been filled with house ads, which don't help anybody. So we're getting all the house ad space, and we've agreed we'll decide how much space we have at

noon the day before. So someone will have a nervous breakdown, but we will be having slightly more arts coverage in the *Journal* starting this summer.

THERE ARE MINI-SEMINARS ON EVERYTHING FROM ADVERTISING TO THE COVERAGE OF THE MIDDLE EAST, BUT VERY RARELY DO YOU SEE A PANEL DEDICATED TO ARTS COVERAGE.

OROZA: One thing that keeps coming up is the idea of education, training, and redefining. That's a good thing for a group like ours to have to deal with, because we're in a perfect position to teach ourselves, teach others, and make it happen. You go to journalism organizations like the Unity Conference or editors' conferences, and there are mini-seminars on everything from advertising to the coverage of the Middle East, but very rarely do you see a panel dedicated to arts coverage. Maybe we can take an active role. Every time there's a conference, suggest a panel or talk to the organizers and suggest three speakers and a topic that we can do some proselytizing on. I think that would render many benefits.

[Questions and Comments from the Audience]

Local vs. National Coverage

VOICE 1: There's an interesting dichotomy here between the need for grassroots coverage and multicultural coverage. On the other extreme, I feel there's a kind of elitist attitude on this panel. I'd love to have the editor of the St. Joseph newspaper here, and I'd love to have the editor of the *Detroit Free Press* here. This idea of the big city journalist sweeping into the small town and telling everybody what's going on—it could be that St. Joseph covered the barbershop quartets thoroughly over a 30-year span. It had become a part of the fabric of the area. I think it hurts the debate when we think that we're bringing the "word" to the hinterlands. We really need the debate to be more open than that.

SHARON MCDANIEL (Classical Music and Dance Critic, *Democrat and Chronicle*): I thoroughly disagree. I had a similar situation. I cover classical music and dance. Children's dance is not considered to be a "fine art." You might even call it "talent show" dance. It might seem to be a very low form of art, but when it involves 6,000 kids in the city, it's something that should be covered. And it's routinely *not* covered because it falls between the cracks. It's not fine art, so arts and entertainment is not going to cover it. But it's not really news. The educational desk doesn't want it because it falls into dance. It's one of those things that no one will own, but it's still news, and the public at large doesn't know about it. I'm really grateful when someone comes in and says,

"This really *is* news." It confirms it on some level for editors who don't have the imagination.

CHILDREN'S DANCE MIGHT SEEM TO BE A VERY LOW FORM OF ART, BUT WHEN IT INVOLVES 6,000 KIDS IN THE CITY, IT'S SOMETHING THAT SHOULD BE COVERED.

OROZA: That's an interesting issue. There are all kinds of "cultural expressions" that are not quite art, but are at the periphery of art. How do you integrate them into the arts coverage in a meaningful, exciting, and creative way?

ANTHONY DECURTIS (Contributing Editor, *Rolling Stone*): When I started out in music journalism, I was living in Georgia. There was this whole music scene going on in Athens with R.E.M., the B-52's, and bands like that who really were not getting coverage in the local newspapers. Part of the reason was because national writers had picked them up very quickly. There was almost a resentment on the part of the local papers for what these bands represented in relation to the culture that had come before that, which they were subverting in one way or another, and because local journalists thought they had been beat on the story. For years, R.E.M. was a huge national act, but they did not get regular coverage in the local papers. An odd tension came out of that.

On the other hand, bands in New York could go begging for coverage, but somebody from a quirky little place like Athens, Georgia could put out one record and that was a story. There was a "cuteness" factor that entered in as far as national coverage was concerned. I very specifically remember getting a phone call when I was in Atlanta, from an editor in New York saying, "There's a concert in Miami tonight. Maybe you could get over there and cover it, and get me something in the morning." That was a thousand miles away.

The way that places are perceived from the vantage of New York—Bruce, what you were talking about before—I'm sure those people felt flattered that you were there. And they were being gracious.

WEBER: I've apparently given the impression that I'm elitist. I hope that's not the case. I tend to walk into these places thinking I'm going to trot over territory that has been well trod by the local press. It turns out frequently not to be the case, to judge by the people I end up interviewing. They are very grateful for the attention. The arts organizations in these cities are often thrilled to show me around. They are unbelievably gracious and happy that I'm there.

CALVIN WILSON (Arts and Entertainment Writer, *Kansas City Star*): I guess if you're an arts organization somewhere out in the hinterlands, it's nice to be noticed by *The New York Times* or *The Los Angeles Times.* On the other hand, there tends to be a kind of condescension on the part of the East and West Coast press—sort of like, "We're on safari, and we're going to find out what's going on out here."

There's a jazz singer named Kevin Mahogany who was originally from Kansas City. Now he's an international figure. Before I could write about Kevin Mahogany in my newspaper—this was five years ago, before he really hit big—my editors wanted to know what *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine thought of Kevin Mahogany. It works two ways. Everyone wants *The New York Times* to pay attention to what they're doing, but to also attribute a certain cultural validity to that that's in excess of what the local arts reporter or the local arts establishment attributes.

KUSHNER: I read what Bruce writes and some of the other "arts abroad"-type stories, and it gives me a different feeling—a different perspective about what's going on. I think as local journalists we're faced with the dilemma of covering the local scene and the local community, and also trying to be regional and national. I use wire services, probably from everybody in this room in some way, shape, or form. I don't think it's an East Coast / West Coast thing. Bruce writes for a national publication. We're really focusing more on what's happening in our local communities. Each of us has different roles to play in our communities. Some of us are really small; some of us are really large. Some of us have strong art scenes; some of us have art scenes that are really struggling. I don't see it as East / West or national vs. local.

THERE IS NO MASS MEDIUM, NOT ONE, THAT CAN MORE QUICKLY, MORE EFFECTIVELY, AND WITH MORE ENERGY AND IMPACT INVOLVE CITIZENS IN THE LIVELY ARTS LIKE RADIO CAN.

KEVIN KLOSE (President, National Public Radio): I spent most of my life in journalism as a scribbler at the *Washington Post*. Since I came to National Public Radio, I've been astonished at how little the national media pays attention to or has any understanding of what public radio does. In virtually every community that's represented in this room, there is a local public radio station that is deeply engaged in the arts and local performances. I will encourage you to take the view that there is no mass medium, not one, that can more quickly, more effectively, and with more energy and impact involve citizens in the lively arts like radio can.

I really encourage a dialogue with public radio stations. I've been to big ones, little ones, medium-sized ones. The culture editors, the music producers, the librarians there—these people are culties. They're smart, hip, and they know a hell of a lot about what they're putting on the air. They're reaching people across your communities in a way newspaper people should pay attention to.

HOLLIS WALKER (Assistant City Editor, *The Santa Fe New Mexican*): I'm Hollis Walker, from *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, probably the smallest paper here. We often pick up stories about Santa Fe written by national journalists or other newspapers. Not because they've discovered some story we don't know exists, but because as Cheryl said, they represent an entirely different perspective and we feel readers deserve to have that perspective from an outsider. My only problem with the national journalists that come in is unfortunately, that kind of journalism usually offers access only to the kind of people—for example, you, Bruce—will find access to easily. You're not going to come into my community and immediately tap into the Hispanic community and cover those very lively arts, which is a huge part of what my community is about. But I don't see it as an argument between national and local coverage and which is better. We have different roles in what we're doing there.

Educating Editors

PATTI HARTIGAN (Cultural Reporter, Living Arts, *The Boston Globe*): We also have to think about how we're going to educate our editors. We have two sitting up here who are very enlightened, but that is not the case everywhere. The example I like to use is when we did a package in October 1992 on the sesquicentennial of Columbus. We thought it was great. It was local, national, and international. We interviewed more than 30 people. The Sunday that it ran, the top three-quarters of the arts section was Madonna in various stages of undress, and 500 years of history was five inches long. How do you fight our celebrity culture? How do we convince editors that these grassroots articles are important?

MCDANIEL: I think arts editors are unwilling to trust their staff to tell them that indeed, Mahogany is the hottest thing, or Columbus' history is of major importance, or the 600 barbershop quartets are an item, or 6,000 kids showing up to dance all day long in school is something that needs to be covered. I'm hearing that the editors' mistrust of what we're telling them is a major issue, not the filtering through past that editor.

SMITH: The reason a lot of us have a strong distaste for coverage of pop culture—the Madonnas of the world—is because it's done so poorly. I like celebrity coverage. It's pretty much the whole reason *VIBE* exists. What sets *VIBE* apart, especially in covering music created by African-Americans and Latin Americans, is that those musics have never been taken seriously before. God bless *Rolling Stone* and *VIM*, but it was only every once in a while. This is the first time that 96 pages of edit every month are devoted to this kind of thing. It's written about in a very smart

way. We take it seriously. I think you can deal with Madonna. I don't think it should take precedence over something important, but there is a way we can cover pop culture that is smart and can make us come to terms with it. It's what young people want to read about.

THE REASON A LOT OF US HAVE A STRONG DISTASTE FOR COVERAGE OF POP CULTURE—THE MADONNAS OF THE WORLD—IS BECAUSE IT'S DONE SO POORLY.

It frustrates me too, because it's hard for me, as editor in chief of *VIBE*, to convince my younger editors to put jazz in the magazine. I'm dealing with readership that thinks Barry White and Menudo are old school. It's about a hook. Maybe that's crass and ugly. But if you tell me there is a classical group that has a sample in a hip-hop song, or an old blues artist who listens to today's music, then it's going to make it on to the pages of *VIBE*. I'm definitely one of those editors that says, "Is it a cover line? Tell me how it's going to sell this magazine." And as I tell people, "We can cover these grassroots things, but then it will not be a national magazine. I won't sell any issues, and none of us will have jobs."

OROZA: Newspaper circulation is going down, and there's a fight for survival. The old formulas don't work, and we're out searching for new formulas. We have to change the way we think and the way we do things, and we have to help the editors and our colleagues. *The New York Times* may be able to exist without change, but most of us won't.

ESTHER IVEREM (Arts Writer, Style Section, *The Washington Post*): I was really struck when Calvin said that his editor needed the validity of the national press for him to exert his voice. I think that's disgraceful. One of the things that we all have to do is demand that voice. As writers, we are trying to establish who we are and our authority to write about what we want to.

As someone who lived in New York for a long time and worked at *New York Newsday*, which covered the city very differently than the *Times*, I might bring a different perspective. The *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* may go around nationally to different communities, but many people in New York wouldn't feel that the *Times* was covering anything outside of Manhattan. So you have a different sense of the local debate issue. There are papers like *New York Newsday* that made the *Times* go "over the river" more often. Its coverage has changed a lot. *New York Newsday* forced it to go to Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens.

There's a different side to it. The question has to do with what kind of people are you—do you have a commitment to local coverage in your neighborhoods? Are your neighborhoods important? Or are you a national paper? Is the sweep of the national culture what you're trying to follow? And as we try to have this conversation with our editors, that's one of the things we might impress upon them. If you're about local coverage, and building voice, you need to demand them to respect that voice, and to take a look at what's in their own backyard in a different way.

MARTY HUGHLEY (Popular Music Critic, *The Oregonian*): I wanted to address the divide between high and low culture. There's a meeting point we can try to shoot for where we cover the popular arts with more insight and substance, and at the same time write about the high arts with more a view to the hook, as Danyel puts it, and with some flair that draws readers in. If we were to bring the two approaches toward one another, maybe the readers who turn to the page to read something on Madonna actually get engaged in critical thinking about that issue. The sesquicentennial piece down the page is not as much of a jump for them, and they are able to get into that story as well. You would keep more of those readers for a broader view of the culture at large.

JUDY GERSTEL (Entertainment Writer, *The Toronto Star*): I was the film critic for the *Detroit Free Press* until the strike, and now I'm at *The Toronto Star*. Given the choice between *Star Wars* or films by the Canadian Film Center's new class of graduates—which I think show the sensibility we can look forward to in film for the next few years—which do you think my editor wants?

VOICE 2: We need to be fair here about editors. You're going to find some really dumb editors. I have edited a lot of boring stories. I think there's going to be good and bad everywhere, and we have to live with that. We're going to have bad editors, bad arts writers, and bad reviewers. But *we're* not. It's our choice, and our opportunity to make it work. If you happen to have a bad editor, you work with the editor. When I have a bad writer, I work with him and make sure what gets in the paper is written a little better. It's a matter of being aware that not everybody is Francois Truffaut.

MARY MCCAULEY (Arts Writer, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*): I'm not going to speak up in favor of editors. I'm going to second both what Judy said, and what Patti said earlier. My single biggest frustration is getting my story idea approved. My editors and I have somewhat different takes on what's interesting. There was one occasion where it took me three years to get a story into print, another took me two years. I've had story ideas I thought were great but my boss thought were boring. And they ended up on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune.* I've gotten to the point where I'm giving story ideas away to newspapers because I'd rather see them in print, even if I don't get to do them.

I'VE GOTTEN TO THE POINT WHERE I'M GIVING STORY IDEAS AWAY TO NEWSPAPERS BECAUSE I'D RATHER SEE THEM IN PRINT, EVEN IF I DON'T GET TO DO THEM.

On another issue, one of the pieces I wrote—the one that took me two years to get in the paper—was on what sports and the arts have in common. We get readers' figures and the entertainment and arts coverage always ranks higher than the sports coverage. So I called the editor of the paper and I asked, "Does this mean you're going to increase our budget?" There's a huge disparity. If they want to grow circulation, wouldn't it make sense to increase arts coverage if that's something that readers read the most? Like Cheryl, I work for a paper that has a daily entertainment section six days a week and a staff of 21. For a local paper that's as large and as good a commitment as you're going to get, and even then it's nowhere close to adequate.

OROZA: About a year ago I was placed in charge of the business section of the *Herald*, and the first thing I heard from business reporters was "They don't care about business. We don't have enough staff. We don't have enough money. We don't have enough resources." I think that's common. The days when newspapers were flush and had huge travel budgets and huge space allocations are over. It's a struggle to survive. The sports editor will tell you the same thing. The deadlines are terrible and they can't get West Coast scores in the paper; they had to dump five games because they didn't have the room.

KAREN MICHEL (Independent Radio Producer, National Public Radio): What I'm hearing here is a discussion about hierarchies rather than equivalents. I started in journalism in radio in Fairbanks, Alaska, and did cover people like the tuba player. I've found in local radio that there's a lot of acceptance of and interest in arts coverage that is not reflected in national radio at this time. Hopefully this will change with the journalists that are in charge now. But we are looking at high vs. low, local vs. national, as opposed to all of this being part of the same arts coverage. What's done on the local level is at least as valid as what's done on the national level. It's in no way inferior. What's done about synchronized swimming or the children's dance group is as important as what's done about the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. All of these feed into the national dialogue. It's not a matter of dividing up, but looking at all of this as part of the same coverage. Possibly this will change with electronic journalism—this notion of the fiefdoms of geography and of type.

DOUG MCLENNAN (Arts Writer, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*): I'm just curious. It's been about a year and a half since *The New York Times* dramatically escalated its arts coverage, and I'm wondering what kind of feedback you got.

WEBER: They don't tell me very much from New York. I can't give you any figures, except that many more people read the paper for the arts coverage than for the sports coverage or business coverage. This makes sense given that outside of New York, the *Times* ends up as a second read. If you have a second read for business, chances are it's the *Wall Street Journal*, and if you have a second read for sports, it's not going to be the *Times*.

MICHAEL JANEWAY (Director, NAJP): I want to put a question on the floor. There's another player here. It's not just arts writers and arts editors. A number of you have to deal with the PR machines in the mass entertainment field, and I'd love to hear a few words about that.

ONE OF THE ISSUES THAT REPORTERS HAVE TO DEAL WITH IS THE ACCESS AND CONTROL THAT PUBLICISTS NOW WIELD OVER THEIR PUBLICATIONS.

Celebrity Journalism

JOHN HORN (Senior Writer, *Premiere*): That's a very broad topic that could be the subject of an entire panel. It's especially true in the magazine world. The *Observer* did a really good story a few weeks ago about celebrity wranglers and their influence on magazine coverage of the arts. One of the issues that reporters have to deal with is the access and control that publicists now wield over their publications—and the relationships between the editors of those publications and the publicists.

Going from a wire service to a monthly magazine was a real shock to my system, based not on newsworthiness, but access. Access is an issue we really haven't talked about. At our magazine, I think we truly try to be aggressive about it, but there's also a lot of horse-trading. If you don't get access to a certain personality, you take a lesser personality. If you get your cover first, you'll do the story, and if you don't, you won't do the story. A lot is about marketing; a lot is about sales. Danyel talked about cover lines. There are a lot of influences that really dictate the kinds of stories I can and cannot do.

SOKOLOV: I completely agree with that, to the point that we just don't do those interviews. There's simply no way I'm going to assign someone to do an interview with someone who's selling something—who is going to speak to 75 other journalists that week and never again that year. We have basically eliminated celebrity interviews. I don't think it's journalism. I think it's falling in with the plan of the movie company. We've got other things to do. I'm now in a

slightly mixed environment, where they're deeply interested in celebrities in a way that troubles me.

WE HAVE BASICALLY ELIMINATED CELEBRITY INTERVIEWS. I DON'T THINK IT'S JOURNALISM. I THINK IT'S FALLING IN WITH THE PLAN OF THE MOVIE COMPANY.

Someone went into a meeting recently with a celebrity story in the world of books—the new Salman Rushdie novel. Rushdie was certainly available for interview. We had an excellent review, and we thought it should be on the cover of the section. The person who went with this was immediately asked, "Is he big?" And she said, "He's been under a death threat from Iran, he's probably the most famous novelist of his day, and it's an interesting piece." The response was "How many did they print?" We didn't know, but we should have said a million. But the answer to that would have been "Is that a lot?"

If you're in the hierarchy of the arts, you would have to deal in a dialogue like that. It's the same thing in the record business, where the number of records sold for a classical music title would be compared with what a new rock record would sell. It's a completely meaningless comparison if you're doing journalism, but if you're doing celebrity journalism, or something that responds only to sales, you have to consider that. That is the truly fundamental problem we face here. Of course you're going to be interested in sales—any editor would be—but you have to see those differences among the arts, or you'd never do a dance piece at all if that was your interest. There'd be virtually nothing about the arts if that were the only standard. I am very glad we've been able to ignore the celebrities almost entirely for 15 years.

VOICE 3: The other problem with celebrity journalism is that it tends to belittle whatever is not celebrity. The more space that gets devoted to Madonna, the less space that gets devoted to the history of the last 500 years. We end up with a shared body of knowledge that is so small and so shallow that nothing can impress anybody anymore as important enough to be in the newspaper that hasn't already been in. This is even more of a reason for us to look locally to the degree that we can, as opposed to nationally—to look to stories about the way people live in our communities as opposed to other things.

VOICE 4: I want to speak to the point about celebrity journalism, because I report on it. The only difference is that my celebrities are dead. I do reports on Van Gogh and Vermeer. Why can't we, as journalists of the living, take the approach I take? I don't have a problem with people trying to sell things—to sell records. What I

will assume is that they are artists. I speak to them about their art: what it is they are trying to get across, what's different about this album from something they've done before. I don't care really who they slept with or what they wear to bed.

NOEL HOLSTON (Television and Radio Columnist, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*): I wanted to point out that what Bruce is talking about can and should be done on the local level. As an example, I worked for the *Orlando Sentinel* before moving to Minneapolis. In the early 80s, we had a new restaurant critic who made it a point not to review any of the fancier, well-known restaurants, but instead searched out little hole-in-the-wall places like hot dog stands and barbecue joints. Because he wrote about it with a lively touch and brought out the personalities, it became a tremendously popular feature. It opened up the paper, which was then growing in the wake of Disney.

I really think this approach works for every facet of the arts or culture. If we can look at the community with those fresh eyes, if we can act like we're Bruce—like outsiders coming into a community—it will work. You may not be able to sell it to the editor, but it is a workable approach.

SMITH: At *VIBE* we tend to have extremely adversarial relationships with publicists of all kinds. When celebrities will not give you the access you desire—that you think you deserve—you have every right to put them on the cover anyway and interview everyone around them. We have gotten such good response to these stories where you talk to every person they've ever known.

I'm a big fan of getting your secondaries. Then it's a whole piece of secondaries and they become your primaries, and you end up finding out more about this person than you would have from the interview. Often in the interview they don't have anything interesting to say anyway. We've done this type of story with R. Kelly and with the new white emcee Eminem. We talked to all the other white emcees and they said crazy, bizarre, intelligent things about what it's like to have a white emcee that people actually think is good. It's in the current issue.

When R. Kelly married a 14-year-old girl a few years ago, I followed him around Philadelphia. I went to Chicago and talked to the woman who taught him music as a high school student. I talked to his teachers and people who saw him singing in the subway station. It was such a better portrait than I would have gotten if I had talked to him. There's ways we can do celebrity journalism and make it interesting.

IVEREM: I wanted to say something about hype. I've actually run into a few people here who have admitted that arts journalism has a certain life span, and that you kind of run to the end of it at some point. I think celebrity journalism is one of the things that runs you out of arts journalism. From my experience, if you're interested in doing good journalism, no celebrity wants to talk to you. If a publicist knows that you do serious profiles, you are not going to get that interview. You can call them every day for three weeks, and you're going to find

that the magazines are going to get the interviews first. They want that big color picture, and they want that newsstand face. They also get the sense that the newspapers aren't going to pitch them as hard as magazines. I know that some magazines hit harder than others, but I've found that celebrity journalism can end your career.

CELEBRITY JOURNALISM IS ONE OF THE THINGS THAT RUNS YOU OUT OF ARTS JOURNALISM.

We do have this conflict between the newspapers and magazines. When I tried to get Lauryn Hill after she did *VIBE* and *Essence*, I was told, "We'll get to the newspapers some time later this year." I said, "I'll be on leave by then. I won't be here." And when they called, I wasn't there. It's really very pernicious for us as newspaper journalists. I'm glad Ray, as an editor, has the clarity to say, "I'm not doing this," because a lot of our editors are basically weighing our success over whether we can get someone on the phone. I'm glad he had the clarity to say, "I'm not dealing with the madness."

OROZA: Here's one parting thought: Consider becoming arts editors.