

# A vulnerable art

*Arts coverage offers a unique opportunity for creative, exciting and engaging journalism. Yet it has turned out to be one of the most marginalised and vulnerable beats in the newsroom, says researcher Alan Finlay, who worked on Hisses and Whistles, an investigation into arts journalism in South Africa.*

A strange thing happened while completing this research: everything changed. Well, almost everything, it seemed. The *Mail&Guardian* admitted publicly that its arts coverage was not quite what it had been in the past, and promptly made some sort of amends. Independent News and Media consolidated its entertainment supplements into a single content hub, so that only the best copy would be published. Just launched, *The Weekender* promised to beef up serious music coverage, and added one or two more books pages to the weekend read. And rumour had it that an unnamed Afrikaans newspaper intended to revive its arts section.

The optimist in me said this had something to do with our research; awkward questions were being asked, throwing a spotlight on a rather obvious blemish in the newsroom: the lack of space, time and resources given to good arts coverage. The cynic in me knew better; that it was merely a coincidence, a freak storm that would pass and everything would soon settle back to normal. This was arts coverage, after all; and as one journalist put it, the arts are always “the first to go”.

The research I’m referring to is *Hisses and Whistles*, the first baseline study into arts coverage in the mass media in South Africa, conducted by the Media Monitoring Project and Open Research, and sponsored by Business and Arts South Africa. The research aimed to assess the state of arts coverage in the media by quantitatively monitoring the arts content in 23 newspapers, 10 television shows and six radio programmes over a one-month period (June–July 2005). To complement the quantitative findings, 29 interviews were conducted with a range of players in the media ‘production line’, including media managers (or those who represented the business side of media production), arts journalists, arts editors, subeditors, publicists and presenters. Of these, 21 were in-depth, face-to-face interviews.

The arts community was also asked for its response in an email survey. A total of 49 responses were received from artists, academics, entertainment lawyers, gallery managers, publicists and events organisers, from across the arts disciplines.

One of the most important findings of the research was that arts coverage offers a clear example of how advertisers and media markets can defeat the ends of good journalism. Arts coverage, which offers a unique opportunity for creative, exciting and engaging journalism, is one of the most marginalised, and vulnerable beats in the newsroom.

A total of 4 499 content items were monitored during the research period. The range of content was broad, and included coverage of all key arts genres, as well as television, fashion, pop culture and lifestyle content, which we considered ‘not arts’ content. Nearly a quarter of the content items monitored were advertisements. Music (20% of the items) was the most frequently covered topic, followed by television (16%), film (15%), theatre (12%) and books (10%). Celebrity gossip accounted for a surprisingly low 7% of the content items, and pop culture and lifestyle 5% of the content items.

On average 40% to 60% of the space in arts and entertainment supplements in newspapers was set



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aside for advertisers. Of the remaining editorial space, sometimes as little as 15% was given over to a serious attempt at arts coverage.

A number of informants said that arts coverage needed to be packaged alongside other kinds of content, such as lifestyle, travel or celebrity gossip, to keep audience interest and attract advertising. Despite research to the contrary, few in decision-making positions in the media felt there was a general public interest in the arts, and few attributed this perceived disinterest to the quality of coverage or simply the lack of coverage (the idea that the media can grow audiences was only partially acknowledged).

The findings showed that arts genres receiving the most coverage overall tended to be those that could be more readily presented as entertainment. After we had stripped out all the 'not arts' content, such as television coverage and lifestyle content, we found – mirroring our initial broad content sample – that music (33%) was the most frequently covered arts genre, followed by film (23%), literature (fiction and poetry only – 13%) and theatre (12%). The visual arts accounted for 8% of the arts content items, and dance, the orphan of arts coverage, only 3%.

At the most, 25% of all arts coverage could be said to be analytical. Publicity, whether straight cut-and-paste from media releases, or disguised rewrites, accounted for as much as 60% of editorial. In one instance, four out of five interviews aired in a programme's arts slot were organised by the same publicist – a feat the publicist was understandably proud of.

Our quantitative findings showed that race played an important part in who was most frequently covered. 62% of the artists covered during the month-long monitoring period were white, 32% black, 3% Indian, 2% coloured and 1% Asian.

Similarly, the arts in Africa are under-reported. While coverage of South African arts accounted for 65% of content items monitored, the arts from Europe and the United States accounted for some 32% of coverage, the arts from Africa only 2%, and Asia 1%. Tom Cruise, Michael Jackson, Bob Geldof (there is some irony here), and Angelina Jolie were among the most frequently mentioned artists during the monitoring period. Of the South African artists, only kwaito star Zola and theatre veteran Janet Suzman made the top 10 artists covered.

### The arts journalist

Informants saw the role of the arts journalist differently. Some felt "cultural journalism" better described their work. Their job was to tap into a dynamic, fluid and changing cultural space (where "Black is the future. Black is multiple identities and attitudes"). This entailed a broader, inclusive approach to arts reporting; something more akin to the role of the journalist as cultural activist seen in the 1980s. There was also a need to serve as a kind of cultural archivist by resurrecting forgotten or marginalised cultural icons. Formal distinctions between the arts genres, between art and society more broadly, and formal conventions such as arts criticism (the "cri-tick", as one informant put it) were seen as eurocentric and divisive.

For others, crumbling distinctions between arts criticism, reporting (including investigative journalism) and publicity, did not reflect an evolving role for the arts journalist, but were instead indicators of a lack of training and professionalism.

The interviews also showed that the constraints in the newsroom affecting arts coverage are very similar to the constraints affecting other kinds of reporting, such as health reporting. These included

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a lack of space for arts coverage; a lack of time to properly investigate and report on arts news; a lack of resources, which impacted on hiring skilled freelancers; and a lack of skills in the newsroom. Many of these are symptomatic of media under financial and shareholder pressure to perform, but also suggest an unwillingness to invest properly in good coverage of the arts, and a tendency not to take arts coverage seriously.

Informants spoke of a lack of professional recognition in the newsroom (including lower salaries compared to colleagues on other beats), and a glass ceiling: most thought it extremely unlikely that an arts editor would become the editor of a newspaper. These, combined with limited job opportunities (for instance, if it was felt that there are more opportunities in sports reporting), made arts journalism an unattractive career option for new journalists.

Several informants pointed to a lack of up-and-coming talent in the profession, in particular among black journalists. Talented black arts journalists were often offered more lucrative positions on other beats, such as politics or economics. This, combined with a lack of commitment in media houses to train journalists in arts reporting, meant that many felt the future of arts journalism in the country was bleak.

The responses from the arts community were, on the whole, balanced and fair. Some offered good solutions (such as "Get the various editors of the poetry journals to advise you... give them guest columns in your arts pages, and they will point you to the country's poets") while others offered first-hand examples of being at the green end of journalism: "Instead of a question, 'How did you come up with those radical harmonies between the guitar and bass?', we get instead, 'How would you describe your music?'. The latter question is obviously up to the journalist to describe and NOT the musician – but this question is asked at every interview; because, simply, they have no clue."

Others spoke of a lack of risk-taking among established critics and editors, suggesting a struggle for new art to be recognised and properly understood. Of the 49 respondents to the email survey (a reasonable response rate), 14% felt positive about arts coverage, 61% said it wasn't very good, and 25% were neutral.

The SABC says it is serious about the arts. Interactions with senior management suggested there is a commitment – and even a personal interest – in the arts. There is also a recognition that the public broadcaster needs to do more for the arts. The SABC also says that the arts community is free to approach it with any suggestions for programming ideas. However, while the Broadcasting Act provides some direction for arts coverage, it is vague enough for the corporation not to be held directly

accountable by the public on its arts programming. Little of the good will towards the arts evident at the broadcaster is on paper; it lacks a written policy strategy on arts coverage to support and guide decision-making around arts programming.

This means that the arts are vulnerable. Even at the public broadcaster arts coverage faces a similar fate to coverage in the commercial media. The SABC says licence fees and government grants do not cover all programming costs and that advertisers shy away from arts-only programmes ("the mindset is not there"). The result is a preference for the more "popular" arts, and the light lifestyle and entertainment mix that can be easily sold to advertisers. (Even in the absence of this commercial imperative, it was suggested, the SABC would not change its broadcasting approach to arts coverage because the arts are "niche" and the public broadcaster has a mandate to appeal to the broad population.)

The potential for further research suggested itself. While broadcast holds largely unexplored potential for good arts coverage, research limitations meant that we could only monitor a sample of arts programmes on radio and TV. Other media, such as community radio, websites, magazines and journals, could also be considered to complete the picture.

The state of arts coverage in Africa needs to be better understood. Why is it that coverage of the arts in Africa is so poor? Is it because the arts in Africa simply aren't being covered? Is it a language issue? Or is the South African media simply not interested?

The research also suggested space for advocacy: newspapers and radio stations need to be made aware of the demand for good arts coverage (as one person put it, at the very least write letters to the editor when coverage is dropped). The SABC's lack of a written policy on arts coverage needs to be addressed. Leadership is needed to make collective demands on the public broadcaster so that its real potential to support and document the arts can be unlocked. ■

*Alan Finlay writes here in his personal capacity. Download the research report at [www.openresearch.co.za](http://www.openresearch.co.za)*