

**THEATER COVERAGE IN DALLAS AND FORT WORTH:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE LAST 14 YEARS AND
FEEDBACK FROM THEATER PRACTITIONERS**

by

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the American nonprofit arts world and among serious American arts journalists, there is an inescapable sense that American culture coverage is in dire straits: that serious arts criticism and reporting have become victims of bottom-line, lowest common-denominator-driven entertainment, publicity, and celebrity frenzy. (Janeway and Szanto 2003, 279)

This quote is taken from the National Arts Journalism Program's 2003 groundbreaking study of arts coverage in the media. It expresses the idea that arts coverage is dwindling in the United States media due to our consumer-driven culture and movement toward more entertainment-based media. Arts are a vital part of the intellectual development of our society. Coverage in our news media should reflect its importance and provide our communities with a sense of artistic civic identity.

This study takes a local look at this pertinent issue through a quantitative examination of press coverage of five major live theaters in Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas, and through a qualitative examination of the potential effects of this coverage. It is hypothesized that theater coverage has declined in the last fourteen years and that listings have increased as in-depth articles and reviews have decreased. A possible effect of this deficit in arts coverage may be the rise of simplified coverage. This simplistic coverage is quantitatively assessed by analyzing topics in theater coverage. The impact of this suggested decline is examined qualitatively through interviews with local theater producers and communication directors. This study is an attempt to measure theater coverage in Fort Worth's primary print media source, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, and Dallas' primary print media source, *The Dallas Morning News*.

Arts coverage refers to any mention of the arts in the media including reviews, listings, feature stories, previews, and news stories. Critics of arts coverage in the news media today suggest that true arts coverage is dwindling as our society becomes more commercial and our news media become more entertainment-driven. A renowned theater critic for *The New York Times*, Frank Rich, suggests that the state of arts in America is in “tremendous peril” (Rich 2001, 21). Rich believes the biggest threat to the arts comes from the mass entertainment media (21). He goes on to say, “There has been a big change in this media world in recent years that radically affects the relationship of the entire commercial culture to non-commercial culture, otherwise known as the ‘high arts’” (Rich 2001, 21). “High art” forms include classical music, jazz, dance, opera, theater, photography, sculpture, and painting (Janeway & Szanto 2003, 288). Rich concludes that these changes in the media involve replacing true arts coverage in daily papers with popular culture forms such as syndicated gossip, mechanized listings, recitation of movie grosses, and TV ratings.

In 1999, Columbia University’s National Arts Journalism Program released a landmark study concerning the status of arts coverage in local and national US media. The 2004 follow-up study revealed some alarming results, which confirm Frank Rich’s assumptions regarding the reporting of “high arts.” “Reporting the Arts II,” the title of the study, revealed that although more Americans are participating in cultural activities than at any other time in our history, the resources that newspapers are devoting to the high arts are stagnant or shrinking (2003, 10). Of the 15 metropolitan papers that the study covered, seven cut back severely on their space devoted to arts coverage, five cut back

moderately, and three maintained the same levels (National Arts Journalism Program 2004, 11).

Furthermore, through in-depth interviews, the authors found that throughout the nation's newsrooms there is an overwhelming awareness that arts journalism resources are "overloaded and outmoded" (11). The shrinking space and resources devoted to arts journalism has resulted in "arts news reporting" as opposed to "arts criticism" (13). As newspapers become more entertainment-driven, arts criticism shrinks, and newspapers are saturated with what critics call "infotainment." The authors of *Reporting the Arts II* refer to "infotainment" as "mass preoccupation with personalities and celebrities and with issues reflecting lifestyle and personal identity" (Janeway & Szanto 2003, 279-280). The focus on infotainment in the news media results in a shorter, simplified version of "high arts" criticism.

This groundbreaking study was the first empirical study to examine arts coverage in the media; besides this single study, there is a serious lack of research in this field. Furthermore, out of the 15 local newspapers examined, the study only looked at one Texas newspaper, *The Houston Chronicle*. This present study is an attempt to locally measure the effects of the shifting arts press in America by examining theater coverage in *The Dallas Morning News* and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. Taking the ideas that *Reporting the Arts II* has revealed, the local press is examined regarding content of theater coverage, the amount and length of theater coverage, and the percentage of coverage devoted to each type of coverage. While *Reporting the Arts II* looked at arts coverage as a whole and the space devoted to the arts within newspapers, this study differs, as it focuses only on theater coverage and actual content of this coverage. Taking

these ideas a little further, this study also qualitatively explores how this potential change in the press affects local theaters.

The following studies presented in the literature review suggest that several interrelated factors contribute to dwindling arts coverage and negatively affect the coverage that makes it to print. These factors include: readership decline, profit pressures, and the need to appeal to younger audiences. Presented literature attempts to set up the status of arts coverage in the media today. It briefly touches on the huge journalistic issue of profit pressures and how the need for readership among younger audiences has affected the news media in general. More specifically, it examines how this has affected arts coverage. It also discusses some basic agenda-setting principles, and how these ideas can help explain influences on audiences' perception of the arts. The literature review concludes with some basic information about the current status of local media and arts coverage. It also addresses the importance of the arts in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex to cultural and economic development.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Profit Pressures and Declining Readership

When the interests of readers and shareholders are at odds, which takes priority? When the interests of the community and shareholders are at odds, which takes priority? When the interests of the nation in an informed citizenry and the demands of the shareholders for ever-increasing profits are at odds, which takes priority? (Laventhol 2001, 18)

This is an excerpt taken from the resignation speech of Lee Harris, former publisher of *The San Jose Mercury News*. Shaking the media world, Harris stepped down from the paper rather than agree to cuts that he felt would compromise the paper's commitment to journalism. The growing issue of profit pressures within newsrooms and cutbacks has affected the entire newspaper industry. While newspaper industry margins grew from 14.8% in 1990 to 21.5% in 2000, the stock market decline that followed has seriously threatened the news media (Laventhol 2001, 19). More recently, according to a 2005 article, newspaper profits and the stock prices of their parent companies were down during the first half of 2005. The author goes on to say "the biggest newspapers are cutting staffs, closing foreign bureaus and taking other steps to meet their owners' profit goals" (Black 2005, 1A).

This setback for the newspaper industry is made worse as readership declines. Between 1997 and 2001, newspaper readership among Americans dropped from 39 percent to 26 percent (Cornog 2005, 43). Furthermore, according to *Editor & Publisher*, 55 million newspapers are sold nationally on a weekday, down from 63 million in 1985 (Black 2005, 1A). Clearly, the loss of readership and the growing need for higher profits

put the newspaper industry in a difficult position. Many papers have tried to combat this difficulty by attempting to appeal to younger audiences.

According to a recent Carnegie Corporation study, the average age of a newspaper reader is now 55 (Black 2005, 1A). This is quite an increase from the average age of 38 in 1995 (Moses 2002, 14). As profit pressures build, the need to appeal to younger audiences increases. This need for increasing readership among all audiences, including younger readers, leaves little room for arts and cultural coverage as these topics appeal to a smaller segment of readers. According to a survey found in *The Columbia Journalism Review*, younger audiences are not interested in arts and culture. Researcher, Andrew Kohut, concludes: "Entertainment attracts a younger but less well-educated segment of the news audience. Coverage of culture and the arts appeals to fewer people, and its audience is older, though better educated" (2001, 59). Another study confirms these findings by citing that reading newspapers is ranked lowest among teens for their choice of media. Roughly 75 percent of teens spend 2.5 hours a week reading newspapers (Pardun and Scott 2004, 77). The authors go on to report that teens' favorite sections included comics, sports, entertainment, and horoscopes (79). The authors, Carol J. Pardun and Glenn W. Scott, state that the American Society of Newspaper Editors has "renewed a focus on capturing the interests of younger news consumers" (77).

These findings suggest that younger audiences are primarily attracted to entertainment in the media. Critics suggest the attempt to increase profits and attract younger readers has led to more entertainment-based news as journalists are forced to cover soft news. Furthermore, to increase readership overall, newspapers are devoting less space to in-depth stories and making the move to easy-to-read reporting.

How Profit Pressures Negatively Affect the Media

During the last decade, the culture of the press has changed from that of an institution dedicated to the education of the public to that of its rival, television, which is dedicated to entertaining consumers for a profit. (Squires 1993, 211)

This is a quote taken from former *Chicago Tribune* Editor Jim Squires' book, *The Corporate Takeover of America's Newspapers*, one of the forerunners of material written on this topic. Clearly the combination of declining readership among younger audiences and profit pressures has led to changes in the media. It is no surprise that these issues have influenced what the media choose to cover. In an attempt to increase readership, many media critics suggest that media content suffers. In her article, "Journalism's Proper Bottom Line," Bonnie Anderson suggests that this motive for profit is driving journalism and affecting it negatively. She states: "The mega corporations that devoured the major news organizations care only about doing whatever it takes to increase readership and viewership...they are resorting to even more entertainment and opinion programming in a futile attempt to lure viewers" (2004, 51).

The Pew Research Center and the Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted a study that confirms the fear that profit pressures have seriously affected the news media. The surveys showed that a majority of the 547 national and local journalists interviewed felt that profit pressures are seriously hurting news coverage ("Can Journalism Survive..." 2004, 47). The study goes on to say that news coverage is becoming increasingly fragmented and journalists in the study felt the pressures of economic constraints and a push towards more entertainment-based content. As the

media feel these pressures mounting, the obvious solution is to shape the news coverage to appeal to more readers; this results in shorter, more simplistic coverage.

Commercialization and the Effects on Arts Coverage

Cultural coverage is drastically affected by these changes in the media because it appeals to a smaller market. To appeal to a wider market of readers, literature suggests that cultural coverage is simplified. Several critics and authors refer to the term “dumbing down” when explaining these changes in the media. In her article, “Born Again or ‘Dumbing Down’? Cultural Trends in the 1990’s,” Sara Selwood ties this term back to American philosopher Alan Bloom. She expands on this idea: “Dumbing down not only strips out intellectual content, but lowers our attention span, promotes a preference for style over content, and choice over quality” (1998, 8). She goes on to tie the phenomenon to the media and the idea of “infotainment,” mentioned earlier. While Selwood’s study concerns British arts and media, it is clear that the relationship between declining funds and arts participation and the media in Britain is similar to that of the US as arts funding has also been drastically cut in the US in the last ten years (Peterson 2004). Similar to arts critic Frank Rich’s ideas, Selwood implies that the “dumbing down” of our culture is an outcome of the media placing as much importance on the popular arts as in the high arts (1998, 8). While Selwood’s opinions about “dumbing down” only refer to cultural coverage, this idea can be applied to any kind of media coverage.

Sandra Macleod writes about this same idea in her article “Danger: Inflammatory Media.” Referring to these changes as “tabloidisation,” she feels that by putting so much emphasis on popular culture, the media have not fulfilled the powerful duty of providing

the public with responsible news. “Research recently highlighted the dumbing-down trend: 1 in 10 UK citizens cannot name a single world leader, but nearly 50% can list five characters in a leading TV soap opera” (2003, 19). Suggesting that the need for profit is the driving force behind this trend, she states, “‘Dumbing down’ has accelerated to the point of sacrificing a sober assessment of many serious aspects of life to over-simplification in order to entertain” (2003, 19).

Another article from the *New Statesman* uses the expression “dumbing down” and reinforces this idea. While the author, Ian Hargreaves, is actually making a case that all media have *not* been “dumbed down,” he does support the idea that newspaper quality is compromised in an attempt to appeal to a broader audience.

And we all know very well why the broadsheets have become less serious: they have done so because the daily newspaper market for the well-informed, serious reader interested primarily in public affairs is shrinking, along with the market for all daily newspapers. When there are fewer customers, the techniques used to attract those who remain inevitably become less dignified. (1999, 51)

This is similar to the idea presented in the groundbreaking study, *Reporting the Arts II*, where the authors also express that the media are being “dumbed down.” They state, “The American news industry has shifted steadily away from commitments to news gathering in the spirit of public interest toward bottom line management based on short-term profit goals. The frequent, unhappy result is lowest common-denominator journalism, also known as ‘dumbing down’” (2003, 280). The study suggests that an effect of this “dumbing down” is that in-depth feature stories and critical reviews are being replaced by simple listings of productions (Janeway & Szanto 2003). In the daily and weekend sections of the papers examined in the study, listings amounted to between

a third and half of all the space allotted to arts and culture. This was also a key finding in their 1998 study, which served as the basis for the 2004 study.

Michael Janeway spoke to reporters about this finding for an article in *The New York Times*. “If 50 percent of what they (arts editors) are doing is listings, what does that also say about how much they have thought through what they are doing,” he said. “That is a lot of ink and paper, and maybe it is what you want to do, but that’s not journalism. Maybe they ought to be defining what their journalistic role is” (Barringer 1999).

Janeway’s feelings about the increase in mechanized listings and the role of arts journalists are reinforced by another finding in *Reporting the Arts II*. Out of the fifteen papers examined, all but one saw cutbacks in the number of bylined articles (National Arts Journalism Program 2004, 27). “Some of the slack was taken up by wire services, and the resultant shorter articles led to an increase in unbylined material. One group that survived relatively unscathed, understandably, was freelancers, they increased their story count at 10 of the 15 newspapers we monitored” (27). The authors suggest that by increasing simplistic, mechanized listings, arts journalists are not fulfilling their duties to act as critics of the arts. The effect is “dumbed down” arts coverage.

The Effects of Declining In-Depth Coverage

The suggested decline in in-depth cultural coverage affects the amount of potential theater-goers. The literature presented next suggests that in-depth reviews and feature stories attract readers who might not typically read about theater. These are the types of stories that get the community involved. The idea that quality and depth of arts journalism are declining is mentioned in Chris Lavin’s article titled, “Why Arts Coverage

Should Be More Like Sports.” Lavin begins the article by suggesting that newspaper editors devote more space to sports than arts coverage because sports have earned a strong and defining place in the community. The arts, on the other hand, attract a narrow segment of the community (2003, 28). Lavin goes on to say that newspapers should include more stories covering all aspects of a production as opposed to simply reviews. The main idea is that reviews are targeted towards people who attended the show or who are considering seeing a show, so arts coverage is not written to appeal to a more general audience (potential theater-goers). What Lavin suggests is that feature stories and in-depth stories about the creation and production of a performance are more effective types of coverage when trying to appeal to larger audiences as opposed to reviews or listings. This innovative idea is important to note as it emphasizes the importance of the presence of in-depth stories in the media.

A December 2002 article in *Quill Magazine* supports the idea that feature stories encourage communities to think more about a particular issue. While this article focuses on a different issue, reporting on ethnic minorities, the idea is the same. The author, Virginia Whitehouse, suggests that increasing feature stories is a reporting change that would improve coverage of ethnic minorities in communities. Discussing the difference between the nature of news stories and feature stories, she quotes University of Texas Journalism professor, Mercedes Lynn de Uriarte, “[in a news story] The reporter doesn’t have time to think and sometimes not even to spell. A feature story by its nature provides the writer with more time to think and more time to listen” (20). Whitehouse goes on to emphasize the humanization that a feature story provides on a topic and how this

humanization would improve coverage of minorities. Again, while this article focuses on a different topic, this idea can be applied to cultural coverage.

Another article by Tom Hallman touches on the importance of feature stories in getting communities involved in topics. He suggests that feature stories have the ability to get a reader interested in a topic that he/she would not typically care about. “What resonates with readers is the quiet story. The feature. As the world around us becomes more splintered, the in-depth feature fills a unique, and increasingly important, role in our community” (Hallman 2003, 34). Another article about feature stories reinforces this idea. The author, John Beale, states, “Good feature stories communicate with readers on a different level than other types of reporting. They engage viewers to think about and feel for their subjects” (Beale 2001, 48). While it has not been empirically supported, this anecdotal commentary suggests that feature stories are what appeal to an average reader who would not normally read the arts pages as opposed to a regular arts reader.

Unfortunately, the fact that overall arts coverage may be decreasing suggests that the types of stories that draw in readers are being cut as cultural coverage becomes shorter and more simplistic. Another article, titled “Arts Journalism Longa, Space Shorta,” brings up this problem. The author reflects on a 2002 symposium of arts journalists. Arts supporters in the community “urged journalists to resist the growing bent of newspapers to see arts coverage as a consumer service – heavy on the ‘If You Go’ listings, light on savvy reflection and commentary” (Romano 2002, B16).

Aside from the theoretical ideas as to why arts coverage is changing, there is the logistical fact that mass-produced listings are easier to report than critical commentary. In his article “Bridging the cultural gap: how arts journalists decide what gets onto the arts

and entertainment pages,” Robert Dawson Scott comments on this idea. He states that the “backbone” of arts content is information that is readily and widely available such as reports on film, TV, and popular music, due to powerful distribution systems (1999, 50).

Clearly, the idea that listings may be dominating arts coverage above in-depth articles is a major concern. Many critics and journalists see depth as one of the most important attributes of journalistic quality (Bogart 2004, 47). This is especially true for a subjective discipline such as the arts. The decline in these types of stories creates a serious threat to arts coverage.

One way this change in cultural coverage can be seen in theater reviews is by looking for a decline in interpretive criticism. In his book, *The Theater Experience*, Edwin Wilson explains the difference between a reviewer and a critic. A reviewer “reports on what has occurred at the theater. He or she will tell briefly what a theater event is about, explaining whether it is a musical, a comedy, or a serious play and perhaps describing its plot. The reviewer might also offer an opinion about whether or not the event is worth seeing” (63). A critic, on the other hand, “attempts to go into greater detail in describing and analyzing a theater event. The critic also attempts to put the theater event into a larger context, relating the play to a category (nonrealism or realism, for instance) (64).” A critic might give more background on a playwright or the message that a playwright attempts to convey. This type of criticism, referred to as interpretive criticism in this study, that is offered by a critic as opposed to a reviewer, is what tends to be missing from a simplified or “dumbed down” review. Going back to the article reporting on the 2002 symposium of arts supporters who “urged journalists to resist the growing bent of newspapers to see arts coverage as a consumer service – heavy

on the ‘If You Go’ listings, light on savvy reflection and commentary,” this idea that reviews are light on “savvy reflection and commentary” is directly linked to the lack of interpretive criticism found in “dumbed down” reviews (Romano 2002, B16). It is idealistic to think that every review should have an element of interpretive criticism. Due to the lack of time and space, it would be impossible for a journalist to include interpretive criticism in every review. However, the data analyzed in this study will be coded for interpretive criticism in order to detect a possible decline from 1991 to 2005. This will be described in more detail in the method section. Basic elements of the agenda-setting theory are discussed next to explain how this “dumbing down” of arts coverage might affect audiences.

Agenda-Setting and the Effects on Audiences

Arts journalists have a huge responsibility in reporting the arts. Robert Dawson Scott notes the power that arts journalists have because of their significant role in the entire cultural process (1999, 48). He goes on to suggest that because of the element of subjectivity in the arts, critics must make assumptions about the tastes and cultural values in society. With such an important responsibility and potential effect on the intellect of readers, agenda-setting ideas must be examined here. How are these suggested changes really affecting readers?

One of the forerunners of the agenda-setting theory, Bernard Cohen, observed that while “the media may not be successful in telling people what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling their audiences what to think about” (Cohen 1963, 13). Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw confirmed the idea that the agenda-setting role of

the media is their influence on “the salience of an issue” (McCombs 2004, 2). They take this idea even further by commenting on the salience of attributes of an object. “Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of attributes for picturing those objects are powerful agenda-setting roles” (McCombs 2004, 70).

The idea of what objects and what attributes of an object are deemed newsworthy to the media is important to note. As arts coverage is perhaps becoming increasingly simplistic and “dumbed down,” this could affect the perceived importance of the arts for audiences. This could be even more of an issue when examining the local press. A 1987 article about the effect that local television stations have on the communities they serve suggested that newspapers, more so than television stations, have a greater impact on communities. The author, Steve Barkin, states,

American newspapers, despite the clear trend toward absentee ownership, are still regarded as having a distinctive local mission, whereas television, possibly because of its historic roots in a network-affiliate structure, is thought of as somehow more centralized, less local. In Baltimore, newspaper editors we interviewed were likely to emphasize the importance of local coverage and civic responsibility more strenuously than their television counterparts. (1987, 80-81)

This assessment suggests that the local press have a profound impact on the communities they serve. Another quote from a 2004 article, “Reflections on Content Quality in Newspapers,” also emphasized the impact that local dailies have on a community:

[Newspapers] are unchallenged in their ability to provide the unique information services made possible by daily publication and a wide readership base. The monopoly position that most dailies enjoy derives from their unchallenged ability to provide a town or metropolitan area with the comprehensive information that provides residents with a sense of civic identity. (Bogart 2004, 42)

These ideas reinforce the idea that the local press has the ability to deeply impact the communities they serve. Another study in a 1984 *Journalism Quarterly* reinforces the

power that agenda-setting has at the local level . The author, Ardyth Broadrick Sohn, studied a community's attitude regarding the sinking of two new coal mines. The residents had first-hand knowledge of what the sinking of new mines had meant in the past, making this an "obtrusive issue" (1984, 893). Sohn indicated that previous agenda-setting studies suggested that the impact that the media can make on opinions regarding obtrusive issues is minimal. However, Sohn found that although the community had previous negative feelings regarding the sinking of the mines, positive coverage of the issue in the local press positively affected the community's opinion.

Respondents expected the same things from the new mines as had been emphasized in the newspaper, suggesting support of the agenda-setting theory-even for an obtrusive local issue. Nearly 80% of the respondents said they expected changes in the community because of the mining industry. Nearly all of the changes expected were seen as "good" by the respondents. (1984, 896)

Another *Journalism Quarterly* article further expands this idea. In the article titled "Daily Newspaper Contributions to Community Discussion," the authors suggest that topics covered in the local press can be directly tied to what the community it covers is talking about. "What these respondents say they have been talking about at the local and national levels is, in part, dependent upon what they have been reading in the local newspaper" (Sohn 1978, 574). Several studies have tested elements of the agenda-setting theory and many of these focused specifically on local media. There are a large number of agenda-setting studies that have used politics to assess agenda-setting affects. Other agenda-setting studies have looked at questions such as how the media influences a community's perception of local environmental issues, how the media affects local crime policies, and how the local media can influence a community's attitude regarding various economic and real estate developments (Williams and Larsen 2004, Golan and Wanta

2001, Young and Weaver 2006, Salwen 1988, Pritchard and Berkowitz 1993, and Sei-Hill, Scheufele, and Shanahan 2002).

These agenda-setting ideas can be directly tied to this study and examined at a local level. The studies suggest that there is a strong link between how and what the local press report and how local readers and viewers perceive local issues. Janeway and Szanto, the authors of *Reporting the Arts II*, found that the amount of cultural activity was not accurately represented in local media when compared to other coverage.

“Although American nonprofit cultural activity has swelled since the 1960’s, with all manner of local and regional arts activities taking hold in cities beyond New York and Chicago, the scope scale, and penetration of American commercial entertainment border on the overpowering” (Janeway and Szanto 2003, 279). If the local press has reduced its coverage of local theaters, then it is not accurately portraying the theater community. As these agenda-setting ideas have suggested, this could affect the community’s perception of the importance of the local theater scene. This study will touch on elements of the agenda-setting theory by qualitatively examining how theaters and audiences might be affected by suggested changes in cultural coverage.

How this study addresses the effects on audiences

As mentioned previously, *Reporting the Arts II* was the first study to empirically examine the suggestion of declining cultural coverage. *Reporting the Arts II* also stands out in its attempt to address the issue from the arts practitioners’ side. The creators of *Reporting the Arts II* interviewed two to three local arts practitioners in each of the fifteen cities whose daily newspaper was examined. These interviews were primarily

used to gain an understanding of the arts scene in each community. The interviews addressed questions such as how much growth there had been in recent years, how the arts affected the economy, and how involved the communities were in the arts. This study will differ, as it will attempt to gain an understanding of how the local theater scene might be affected by changes in theater coverage. This study is even more specific in that it is only addressing the local theater scene as opposed to all cultural activities.

Literature Review Conclusions

In conclusion, findings from The National Arts Journalism Program's groundbreaking study show that popular art form coverage, as opposed to "high arts" coverage, dominates the media. Several critics presented suggest that this is an effect of the "dumbing down" of the media. Arts coverage has become more entertainment-based due to profit pressures and attempts at appealing to younger audiences. This "dumbing down" has greatly affected the quality of coverage as mechanized listings dominate the arts and entertainment pages. Some authors presented feel that feature stories and in-depth stories are the types of coverage needed to pull in readers who would not typically be interested in the arts. The decline in space devoted to arts coverage and the simplification of coverage would suggest a decline in true criticism. An explanation of "interpretive criticism" was presented as an element to examine in the data. Furthermore, agenda-setting principles were examined to help understand how these changes might affect audiences, especially at a local level.

CHAPTER 3

Rationale and Site Selection

The literature reviewed presents some insight into the current situation in America regarding arts coverage and possible ideas as to why the media may have changed, and how this has potentially affected arts coverage. Unfortunately, there is little research about arts coverage in the media. The study presented in the literature review by The National Arts Journalism program is the first and only quantitative study regarding arts coverage in the media. There is a huge gap in the research. Furthermore, while Janeway and Szanto do include *The Houston Chronicle* in their study, it is the only Texas newspaper examined. Furthermore, while the National Arts Journalism Program study looked at the amount and length of coverage, this study will examine actual content to see how and if it has been affected by changes in the media.

An unpublished pilot study by the author examined coverage for five Fort Worth theaters in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. This pilot study suggested that word count has decreased and that features and in-depth reviews are being replaced by listings (see appendix A for results). This study will serve as a follow-up study in several ways. First, aside from measuring length, this study will take a critical look at actual content to determine exactly what is changing as a result of the “dumbing down” of the press. This study will also take a broader look by including Dallas theaters and press. The qualitative aspect of this study will offer a more in-depth look at the effects of the changing coverage. There is also a significant gap in research that addresses these issues from the practitioners’ perspective. Hearing the thoughts of theater practitioners will provide unique input to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding arts coverage in the media.

Addressing the ideas presented in the literature review regarding the impact that local dailies have on the communities they serve, selecting an ideal research site is an important element of this study. The Dallas and Fort Worth metroplex is an ideal location with its thriving arts scene and successful dailies. There are roughly 50 live theaters in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex that serve a population of roughly 5,476,351 (Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau website). Dallas has the largest urban arts district in America and more than 110 live performances take place nightly (Dallas CVB). Furthermore, in 2004, Fort Worth was named one of ten “most livable communities” in the country (Burgeois 2004). Its rich cultural heritage and emphasis on the arts were cited as a factor in the decision.

A March 2006 article in *D Magazine* examined the local theater scene and posed an interesting dilemma. “The whole theater scene is exploding. In the past three years, six new professional companies have sprung up, and the actors and directors in them are as talented as any in New York or Los Angeles” (Arbery 2006, 102). The author goes on to ask: “Why isn’t anyone watching?” Through interviews with several theater producers, Arbery suggests that the local theater scene simply does not receive enough attention. Many of the producers interviewed felt that the thriving scene is not adequately covered. “Even awful movies get mammoth hype, and consumers depend on it to create a sense of importance...for live theaters, ‘unhyped’ too often means ‘unattended’” (2006, 103).

This article reflects the idea that the local press is not giving the local theater community the attention it deserves. With such a rich culture and emphasis on the arts, the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex is an important area to examine. Information available to the 5,476,351 citizens in Dallas and Fort Worth and its surrounding communities

should represent these cities' emphases on the arts. Furthermore, the arts are an integral part of the economy. The United States Bureau of Economic Analysis reported that in 2001, consumers spent \$10.6 billion, or \$37.20 a person, at a performing arts event (National Arts Journalism Program 2004, 16). Furthermore, according to the US Economic Census, citizens who work in the arts constitute an increasingly larger portion of the US work force. Between 1990 and 2000, artistic occupations increased by 31.2% (National Arts Journalism Program 2004, 20). While these figures are representative of the entire US population, it is clear that the arts have an important and strong presence in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. It is important that the press adequately portrays these institutions as they provide cultural and economic enrichment to the cities they serve.

This study will examine *The Dallas Morning News* and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, the two dailies that serve the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex. *The Dallas Morning News*, owned by Belo Corporation, has won eight Pulitzer Prizes since 1986 and is considered Belo's flagship newspaper (Belo Corporation Website). Its circulation is nearly 400,000 and over 500,000 on Sundays (NewsBank Inc.) There are approximately 17 arts and entertainment critics on staff (*The Dallas Morning News* Website). The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, owned by The McClatchy Company, has a circulation of 237,318 daily and 332,861 on Sundays (NewsBank Inc.). There are approximately seven staff members devoted to Life and Arts (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram* website). It averages 96 pages daily, 154 pages on Saturday and 230 pages on Sunday (NewsBank Inc.). These thriving dailies and flourishing cultural markets make the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex an ideal site for this study.

CHAPTER 4

Hypotheses, Research Questions, and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of the issues presented in the literature review in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex. The literature review presented suggestions that the media have become more entertainment-driven; this has likely affected Dallas and Fort Worth newspapers. As newspapers have “dumbed down,” arts coverage has likely changed and evolved. An effect of this evolution might be the transition from in-depth features and reviews of theater productions to simple listings of these productions. Because there is a gap in empirical research on this topic, this study will address these issues by testing the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The amount of theater coverage has declined in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News* from 1991 to 2005.

Hypothesis 2: In the last 14 years, the percentage of feature stories, news articles, and reviews has decreased and the percentage of listings has increased from 1991 to 2005.

Hypothesis 3: Theater coverage has become more simplistic in the last 14 years.

3A: Word counts for reviews, news stories, and feature stories have decreased in the last 14 years.

3B: The percentage of reviews that discuss design elements has decreased in the last 14 years.

3C: The percentage of reviews that includes interpretive criticism has decreased in the last 14 years.

3D: The percentage of reviews that includes a rating has increased in the last 14 years.

While the effects and influences of these potential changes cannot be quantitatively measured, a focus group with theater practitioners will be conducted to

examine how they think changes in coverage have affected their audiences and their theaters. Results from the focus group will be examined from the perspective of the agenda-setting theory. Research questions that will be investigated are:

RQ 1: How has coverage of local theaters changed in the last 10-15 years?

RQ 2: How does lack of coverage affect the perception of importance on the arts?

RQ 3: How does simplified coverage affect audiences and theaters?

Method

The hypotheses were examined through a content analysis, and the research questions were explored through a focus group and interviews. The content analysis quantitatively tested the hypotheses that theater coverage is declining and becoming more simplistic. The method partially replicated a previous unpublished study by the author (Kincaid 2005). In addition, topics were selected for coding based upon input from theater professionals in Fort Worth, Texas. A focus group and interviews with local theater practitioners explored their opinions on potential changes in coverage and the effects of these changes.

Content Analysis

This study compared five Dallas/Fort Worth theaters' coverage in 1991 and 2005. These years were selected because the database that was used contains archives only back to 1991, and 2005 is the last available complete year. The two Fort Worth theaters that were analyzed were Circle Theatre and Stage West Theater. The two Dallas Theaters that were examined were Theatre Three and Undermain Theatre. One Arlington theater,

Theatre Arlington, was analyzed. These theaters were selected because they are the most established and they have all had a consistent name from 1991 to 2005.

Each theater was examined individually using the database, Newsbank Inc (NewsBank Inc.). All five theater names were searched in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News* in 1991 and 2005. This yielded an approximate sample of 840 “returns” in the database. After removing irrelevant “returns” a sample of 497 articles remained. Irrelevant returns included duplicate stories or stories that contained a portion of a theater’s name, but the theater was not the subject of the story.

First, each article was coded for featured theater. A sixth category was added for stories that were about more than one theater or the theater community. There were few articles that fell into this category. If an article was about more than one theater, it would be placed only in that category and not in a category for an individual theater. There was no overlap among categories.

Second, each article was coded for type of story (listing, preview, feature story, news, or review). A listing is less than 200 words and includes basic information about a production (time, date, location, ticket price, box office number). A preview is between 200 and 300 words and is printed prior to a production’s opening. It gives basic information about the opening of a production. A standard review is printed after the production’s opening and evaluates a production. A feature story is a story about a current production or current production issue. It differs from a review in that it covers a production from a different or more personal angle as opposed to simply assessing it. A news story is a story about a current issue involving the theater or production, but does not evaluate a production. Listings were not coded beyond documenting the date and

theater. Feature stories and news stories were each coded for word count and the subject of the story was documented.

The following items were then coded for each review: word count, discussion of set, discussion of sound/light, discussion of costume, interpretive criticism, and a rating. The presence of design elements (set, sound/light, and costume) in a review is a good indication that a review is fairly in-depth. A decline in the amount of reviews that address the elements will also help test hypothesis three which suggested that theater coverage has become simplified. In preliminary interviews, theater professionals suggested that a rating is an indication that a review is more simplistic as it prompts the reader to see the review as more of a listing than a thoughtful analysis. Coding for the presence of a rating will also help assess hypothesis three. The last thing the review was coded for was the presence of interpretive criticism. As discussed in the literature review, interpretive criticism is the most in-depth criticism a review can provide, and a decline in its presence would also indicate more simplified coverage. Appendix B contains protocol with more detail and examples.

Reliability and Validity

To determine reliability of the content analysis coding categories, a pilot study was conducted with 20 articles. An independent coder and the primary researcher coded 20 random stories from 1995. Ten were from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and ten were from *The Dallas Morning News*. Out of the 140 items to be coded, three discrepancies were identified: one concerning the type of a story (a news or a feature), one regarding the presence of interpretive criticism, and one in which one coder noted an instance where the writer attempted to develop a relationship with the reader and the other coder

did not. These problems motivated the primary researcher to better define what constitutes a news story, feature, or review. These problems also prompted the researcher to more clearly define interpretive criticism. The category “is the writer attempting to develop a relationship with the reader?” was removed because it was too difficult to code reliably. In addition to these measures, the primary researcher also made a very clear set of definitions with key words and rules for each category. Amending these items increased the reliability and validity of this study. See Appendix B for content analysis protocol.

A posttest was conducted after the data were coded. Ten percent of the first half of the data, or 26 items, was recoded. Out of the 26 items coded, there was a discrepancy with two stories. In one instance, an article could have been coded as a story about a particular theater *or* a story about more than one theater or the theater community. The article began as a story about a particular theater, but became a story about the entire theater community in the second half. In another instance, an article’s type was originally miscoded. Using Holsti’s (1969) formula for reliability, the intracoder reliability was 92.3%.

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted with 13 participants at a Live Theatre League of Tarrant County monthly meeting. There are 16 theaters in the League, and its mission is to “insure the future of live theatre as a cultural asset to the community through promotional, collaborative and educational endeavors” (Live Theatre League website). The moderator was welcomed to the meeting as the president of the Live Theatre League felt that this issue contributed to theater awareness and education within the community.

The participants of the group are leaders in the Fort Worth and surrounding cities' theater community. There were 5 males and 8 females present, and 6 of the 13 participants were executive directors of Fort Worth theaters. The other 7 participants were board members, box office managers, or other various leaders in local theater. The focus group, which lasted approximately 45 minutes, was videotaped and recorded. The moderator also occasionally took notes of key ideas. Participants were not informed about the hypotheses of this study; they were only asked to discuss their thoughts about the coverage of their theaters.

Because the focus group was limited to theater practitioners only in Tarrant County, two Dallas theater producers were interviewed to gain a perspective from the Dallas theater community. One producer was male and has been in the Dallas theater scene since 1961. The other was female and has been in the Dallas theater scene since 1983. These interviews lasted around 30 minutes and were recorded by notes. These comments will be grouped with the results of the focus group.

The large amount of feedback from the focus group and interviews was analyzed using Glaser and Strauss' constant comparative technique (Glaser and Strauss 1967). After the focus group was transcribed, similar comments were grouped into 5 large categories primarily created around key questions presented to the focus group. These categories were revised and broken down into smaller groups until each group of comments sufficiently described the main idea. Relationships were then found among the groups, and they were arranged and ordered accordingly. The follow-up interviews with the Dallas producers yielded comments that fell into the existing categories. These

comments were strategically placed among the original focus group data. Appendix C contains the focus group questions.

CHAPTER 5

Content Analysis Results

Hypothesis One

Hypothesis one predicted that theater coverage overall has declined in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News*. Hypothesis two predicted that the percentage of feature stories, news articles, and reviews has decreased and the percentage of listings has increased. Both of these hypotheses can be examined by looking at the amount of each type of coverage in 1991 and 2005.

Table 1: Coverage Breakdown for each Newspaper, by Coverage Type

	<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>		<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>	
	1991	2005	1991	2005
	N/(%)	N/(%)	N/(%)	N/(%)
Reviews	22 (16.8%)	18 (18.4%)	16 (20.5%)	31 (15.8%)
Features	21 (16.0%)	3 (3.1%)	18 (23.1%)	9 (4.6%)
News Stories	23 (17.6)	14 (14.3%)	16 (20.5%)	7 (3.6%)
Previews	5 (3.8%)	6 (6.1%)	10 (12.8%)	12 (6.1%)
Listings	60 (45.8%)	57 (58.1%)	18 (23.1%)	137 (69.9%)
Totals	131	98	78	196
Word Count Totals*	51,862	21,805	51,269	47,610

*Listings word counts based on average of 10 listings

Tables one illustrates the amount of each type of coverage in 1991 and 2005 in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News*. These results show that hypothesis one is partially supported. While the amount of coverage in the *Fort Worth*

Star-Telegram decreased from 131 to 98, the amount of coverage in *The Dallas Morning News* actually increased from 78 to 196.

Taking a closer look at the amounts of each type of coverage, the most significant finding is that both newspapers had a drop in the number of feature stories and news stories from 1991 to 2005. While reviews decreased in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, they actually increased in *The Dallas Morning News*. Previews slightly increased for both newspapers. Reviews decreased from 1991 to 2005 in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* supporting the hypothesis, but actually increased significantly in *The Dallas Morning News* going from 16 in 1991 to 31 in 2005.

Appendix D details the results for each theater. Some significant findings are important to point out. Regarding the decline in feature stories found for both newspapers, in *The Dallas Morning News*, three out of five theaters had a drop in feature stories. The most established and well known of the Dallas theaters, Theatre Three, had a 54.5% decrease (from 11 stories in 1991 to five stories in 2005). In the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* four out of five theaters had a decline in feature stories.

Regarding the decline in news stories, three out of five theaters had a decrease in the number of stories from 1991 to 2005 in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. While *The Dallas Morning News* data showed a decrease in only two theaters, once again, the most prominent Dallas theater examined had an 87.5% decrease in the number of news stories from 1991 to 2005 (from eight stories in 1991 to one story in 2005). The high number of news stories in 1991 can be attributed to the fact that Theatre Three was going through a major financial crisis in 1991 that was extensively covered. This crisis accounted for four of the eight news stories. However, a drop from four stories in 1991 to one story in 2005

is still a significant decline. While Theatre Arlington also had a decline in news stories, three stories from 1991 can be attributed to coverage about Theatre Arlington's move to a new location. Another important element to point out is the decline in stories about the theater community; all types of coverage about the theater community declined by at least 50% in both newspapers.

In conclusion, hypothesis one is partially supported by the data. The majority of declines were found in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, while *The Dallas Morning News* actually had some increases in coverage from 1991 to 2005. Perhaps the most significant decrease to note is the decline in feature stories and news stories. Both the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News* had significant drops in feature and news stories from 1991 to 2005. Another major finding is the decrease in stories about the theater community in both newspapers.

Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis two predicted in the last 14 years, the percentage of feature stories, news articles, and reviews has decreased and the percentage of listings has increased. As illustrated in table one, although the number of listings actually decreased from 1991 to 2005 in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, the percentage of listings actually increases from 45.8% in 1991 to 58.1% in 2005. The percentage of listings in *The Dallas Morning News* increased dramatically from 23.1% in 1991 to 69.9% in 2005. When combined, the amount of coverage devoted to reviews, feature stories, and news stories decreased from 1991 to 2005 for both newspapers. This percentage went from 50.4% in 1991 to 35.7% in 2005 in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and from 64.1% in 1991 to 24.0% in 2005 in *The*

Dallas Morning News. The most significant finding is the drop in the percentage of coverage devoted to feature stories. In the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, the percentage decreased from 16% in 1991 to 3.1% in 2005, and in *The Dallas Morning News*, this percentage decreased from 23.1% in 1991 to 4.6% in 2005. Hypothesis two is fully supported. Both newspapers had an increase in the percentage of coverage devoted to listings and a decrease in the percentage of coverage devoted to features, news stories, and reviews. Appendix D shows the breakdown for each theater.

Hypothesis Three

Hypothesis three predicted that theater coverage has become more simplistic in the last 14 years.

Table 2: Word Count Averages for Each Coverage Type, by Newspaper

	<u><i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i></u>				<u><i>The Dallas Morning News</i></u>			
	1991		2005		1991		2005	
Reviews	N=22	579.7	N=18	350.9	N=16	874.0	N=31	498.9
Features	N=21	748.0	N=3	1035.0	N=18	1054.9	N= 9	703.2
News Stories	N=23	634.0	N=14	428.9	N=16	799.3	N=7	551.1

Hypothesis 3A predicted that word count averages for reviews, feature stories, and news stories would decrease from 1991 to 2005. As illustrated by table two, both newspapers had a decline in the average word count of reviews from 1991 to 2005. While the number of reviews actually increased in *The Dallas Morning News* (as discussed in

hypothesis one results), the average word count of reviews decreased by 376 words – a significant decline. Appendix D shows the breakdown for each theater.

Regarding feature stories, the average word count for feature stories in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* actually increased from 1991 to 2005. However, this number is slightly skewed; there were only three feature stories in 2005, and one of those stories was nearly 1,600 words. The average of the other two features is 765 words. The average word count for features in *The Dallas Morning News* decreased significantly going from 1054.9 in 1991 to 703.2 in 2005.

News story average word counts also decreased for both newspapers. As illustrated in appendix D, which shows this breakdown for each theater, the average word count for news stories about the theater community decreased from 1991 to 2005 in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News*. This decrease was significant in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* going from an average of 1781 words in 1991 to 417.5 words in 2005. Average word count for news stories about the theater community decreased from 1097.4 in 1991 to 795.7 in 2005 in *The Dallas Morning News*. Hypothesis 3A is confirmed.

According to hypothesis 3B, the percentage of reviews that discuss design elements has decreased in the last 14 years. All of the theaters examined had approximately the same amount of productions in 1991 and 2005. Each review was individually coded for several variables that were outlined in the method. A decrease in the percentage of reviews that discussed set, sound/light, and costume indicates that reviews have become less in-depth in the last fourteen years.

Table 3: Analysis of Design Elements in Reviews, by Newspaper

	<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>		<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>	
Total Reviews	22	18	16	31
Percentage of reviews that discussed:	1991	2005	1991	2005
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Set	8 (36.3%)	6 (33.3%)	9 (56.2%)	11 (35.4%)
Sound/Light	4 (18.2%)	0 (0)	5 (31.2%)	7 (22.6%)
Costume	7 (31.8%)	2 (11.1%)	5 (31.2%)	5 (16.1%)

As highlighted by table three, the percentage of reviews that contained the design elements set, sound/light, and costume decreased from 1991 to 2005 for both newspapers. The most significant decline was the percentage of reviews that discussed set in *The Dallas Morning News*, which decreased from 56.2% in 1991 to 35.4% in 2005.

Hypothesis 3B is confirmed.

Hypothesis 3C predicted that the percentage of reviews that includes interpretive criticism has decreased in the last 14 years. Table four illustrates the results of this hypothesis.

Table 4: Percentage of Reviews that Include Interpretive Criticism, by Newspaper

<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>				<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>			
1991		2005		1991		2005	
Total Reviews: 22		Total Reviews: 18		Total Reviews: 16		Total Reviews: 31	
N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
10	45.5%	7	38.9%	9	56.2%	17	54.8%

While the declines are not significant, there was a decline in the percentage of reviews that included interpretive criticism for both newspapers. Hypothesis 3B is fully supported.

According to hypothesis 3D, the percentage of reviews that includes a rating has increased in the last 14 years.

Table 5: Percentage of Reviews that Include a Rating, by Newspaper

<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>				<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>			
1991		2005		1991		2005	
Total Reviews: 22		Total Reviews: 18		Total Reviews: 16		Total Reviews: 31	
N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
0	0	15	83.3%	0	0	0	0

As illustrated by table five, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* had a substantial increase in reviews with a rating. However, *The Dallas Morning News* had zero reviews with a rating in 1991 and 2005. Hypothesis 3D is thus only partially supported. The review analysis for each theater is illustrated in appendix D.

Hypothesis three is partially supported. Overall, the suggestion that theater coverage has become more simplistic is partially confirmed with this study. While two of the sub hypotheses were fully supported, the other two were only partially supported. Perhaps the most significant finding was in regards to hypothesis 3A, which suggested that word counts of features, reviews, and news have decreased in the last 14 years. All three categories of coverage had significant declines in average word counts in both newspapers.

CHAPTER 6

Focus Group and Interview Results

The research questions to be explored in the qualitative portion of this study are: How has coverage of local theaters changed in the last 10-15 years? How does lack of coverage affect the perception of importance on the arts? How does simplified coverage affect audiences and theaters? To explore these research questions, a focus group and two interviews were conducted.

The focus group and interviews yielded some interesting comments that support the idea that theater coverage is changing. Participants shared common feelings that the coverage of their theaters has drastically changed within the last ten to fifteen years. The first question presented to the participants was, “What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the coverage of your theater?” One focus group participant said “lacking,” and another added “non-existent.” This was the first indication that the participants had strong feelings about this topic. The input from the participants describes exactly how theater practitioners feel about the coverage of their theaters and how potential changes affect local theaters and the communities they serve. The feedback also contributed some valuable information about how theater professionals have learned to adapt to these changes. See appendix C for focus group questions.

The Thriving Theater Community and Competition for Coverage

One of the first topics that the participants brought up was the growing competition for coverage in the Dallas and Fort Worth press. One participant jokingly said, “We’ve created our own competition,” implying that in being successful, the

theaters in the area have made obtaining coverage more difficult. Another responded, “I think there is so much happening in this community. There is a high competition for any kind of space. Because of the incredible amount of music, dance, theater, there is just so much that it feels very competitive.”

Another problem that the participants brought up was that the theater community has grown, but space devoted to theater coverage is shrinking. One participant said, “The theater community has grown in size but there is less in coverage. So it’s very ironic that that is happening.” This idea that coverage of theater does not reflect the thriving theater community was also a concept that came up in one of the interviews with a Dallas producer. This producer, who has seen the Dallas theater scene evolve since the 60’s, expressed his disappointment in this phenomenon.

It’s disappointing because the theater scene is tons richer than it used to be. In the 60’s and 70’s it was us and the Theater Center. Well Lord, look how that’s changed. There is such little coverage of the industry and how it helps the community and the economy. I think the Dallas arts scene is in trouble and the way the arts are looked at is just in decline.

Another producer who started a theater in Fort Worth in 1977 also commented on this significant growth in the number of theaters in Dallas and Fort Worth, and how this affects competition for space.

When Hip Pocket [Theater] began just 30 years ago, there were two other theaters in town and in Dallas there were maybe three theaters. And since that time period there have been however many we have now- a rather large number.

The fact that the number of theaters in the Dallas and Fort Worth area is growing can be viewed as a positive reality. However, if the press is not reflecting this growth, the community is not aware of this thriving interest. This will be discussed further in the discussion.

Changes in the Local Press and the Effects on Coverage

Participants seemed to feel that the local press has drastically changed, and that there had been a direct effect on newspaper content. For example, several mentioned that they have noticed an increase in advertisements in the local press, and they seemed to believe that these changes were due to the fact that large corporations were buying out the local media. They also brought up another idea that was explored in the literature review, which is the idea that newspapers are adjusting to declining readership by attempting to appeal to younger audiences by becoming more entertainment-driven.

I think too that the newspapers are in great jeopardy right now, and we can see in the future that there may not be newspapers. That's a big big issue. When you pick up the newspaper and particularly section "A", you open it up and there are all these full-page ads, there's like four pages of full-page ads, for Foley's or Mattress Giant or whatever, so news is diminished. It's just kind of a sell out.

Participants seemed concerned about declining readership, and they felt that newspapers are simply not as well read as they used to be. Some practitioners made comments that suggested that technology has seriously affected the importance of newspapers.

Respondent 1: I'd like to comment on the technology aspect of it. I don't know how many people in this room do that (read the newspaper front to back). I find myself with a closed up newspaper that hasn't been read at all at the end of the weekend. The newspaper is there and we hope for it and we like it, and when it's not there, we're disappointed, but I think that maybe we won't have newspapers pretty soon. Technology is what's the big change.

Respondent 2: What's interesting is the corporate community is making the same decisions simultaneously. There's a woman who runs a car dealership. They have pulled all of their ads from the *Star-Telegram*. They're going to spend all the money they spent there differently cause *they* don't even feel the same about how it's selling cars. So it's not just the arts. Everybody is feeling that way. They're not getting the bang for their dollar from the newspaper and they're the ones with those huge half-page and full-page ads and somehow people aren't looking there anymore.

Participants felt that the effect of these changes in the media is that resources devoted to arts coverage are dwindling. One Executive Director of a theater in between Dallas and Fort Worth felt that his theater had been “dropped” due to changes in the press.

Those of us that aren't in the immediate Fort Worth vicinity have been dropped. So, even fighting for the local paper or seeking representation in the local paper is sometimes an additional struggle because the outer lying areas, communities, mid-cities, even some of them are Fort Worth proper but they are losing recognition. A city such as Arlington, which has a couple of theaters, does not have its own paper. We have a division of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, but even still it's not necessarily wide coverage.

This is an example of a theater that has been affected by the decline in the actual number of newspapers. The Dallas producers also had very strong feelings about this matter because of the loss of the *Dallas Times Herald* and the decline in the presence of the arts in the electronic media. One producer commented on these changes.

We had a fairly regular presence for each show as a TV news feature. Channel 8 would run a feature with somebody sitting at a desk. The loss of that was profound because people get 95% of information from TV rather than newspaper. We used to have a lot more coverage from the electronic media. The arts have been frozen out of the electronic media. Channel 13 has no local programming. I find that flatly irresponsible.

Regarding the loss of the *Dallas Times Herald* and changes in ownership of the *Dallas Observer*, the other Dallas theater producer felt that *The Dallas Morning News* has a huge responsibility in being the only local paper. She also brought up the idea of coverage being affected by changes in corporate ownership, which is very similar to the feelings expressed in the focus group.

Initially we had two papers when I started. One of those closed. The *Dallas Observer* was more independent and had some very good reviewers. New Times took over and everything changed. It is viewed as a tabloid. The *Observer* reviews were valuable and long and a little more alternative. What's interesting is *The Dallas Morning News* has pushed itself to perform as the town's only paper. The

Morning News has made a commitment to cover the community; it's a very Dallas thing. The "Dallas-ites" like taking care of Dallas' own stuff.

Another problem with the growing amount of theaters and shrinking resources is the decline in full-time theater critics. Participants seemed to feel that writers don't have time to cover all of the theaters' productions. A producer of a theater in Fort Worth talked about how her theater was affected by the decrease in theater critics.

A recent happening over at *The Dallas Morning News* that I think is affecting us in a pretty big way now is that over the past few years there was a little bit of competition going on between the Fort Worth paper and the Dallas paper. And Dallas said, 'I give up' and so it was lovely for us while they were trying to court the Fort Worth readership, and now that they are no longer courting the Fort Worth readership the mandate has been not to bother to review as many Fort Worth shows and do as many features on Fort Worth. Whereas, they were giving it some precedence in the past. So now basically they have one arts reviewer at *The Dallas Morning News* and he will only come over if he feels the show has some merit and not having been done time after time or he happens to be wanting to see it. And he's very spread. I mean he's doing less and less. Some of it is going to stringer reviewers, but the coverage is dropping.

There is no question that the number of theater critics in the area has decreased. The producer quoted earlier who founded the Fort Worth theater in 1977 commented on this change over time. Mentioned earlier, not only has the number of critics declined, but the number of actual newspapers has also decreased. "We were getting a lot of stories and there were also two editions of the *Star-Telegram*. There was also a second newspaper in Dallas with big staffs of people who were writing... who were arts writers. There were very extensive feature stories. It wasn't just the review."

In summary, the participants think newspapers themselves and the coverage of their theaters have changed. While the number of theaters in Dallas and Fort Worth has increased in the last ten to fifteen years, the resources devoted to theater coverage are

shrinking. The participants identified ways that the local press has changed and how this has affected the way theaters in the area are covered. More importantly, they discussed exactly how shrinking space has affected the coverage of their theaters.

Changes in Theater Coverage

Participants talked about specific ways coverage of their productions has changed. Two respondents mentioned the fact that their reviews are less likely to come with a picture. “You get a written, but those of us that are more visually inspired would like to see a photo or like to see something in addition to that, but there is just no space.” Another participant added, “Everybody just loves to have a picture in the newspaper of their show and I’d have to say that a majority of the people that don’t read a whole lot they look at the picture and then they’ll read. If you didn’t get a picture, you’re lucky if they do read.” One of the Dallas producers shared similar sentiments, but specifically regarding changes in pre-production coverage.

The Dallas Morning News started out trying to do a better job covering the arts. In the early days we had pre-opening story and a photograph. Now we get them sometimes, but it is going to be much shorter and *we* have to provide the photograph. Sometimes the critic will actually write something if they are interested in a certain aspect [of the production], but they usually just edit what we have sent them.

An issue that participants brought up that pertains to the content analysis portion of this study is that reviews are less in-depth. “I think there is a lack of depth. It is more shallow ‘who, what, where, when’ but not a lot of in-depth study about the subject.” Another producer expressed this idea that not only has the amount of coverage declined, but the depth of reviews has also changed.

Plus the reviews themselves- I'm actually taking up for the writers because I think they feel the same way. They used to write more in-depth discussion and things about the play and all of that. A 60 second review does not do justice to what somebody wants to know about it [a production].

This lack of depth that producers feel so strongly about reinforces the idea that reviews are simply shorter. One of the producers in Dallas felt very strongly about this problem, and he gave an example by comparing coverage of a play in New York that his theater also produced in Dallas.

Reviews have gotten shorter, shorter, and shorter, which seems very disappointing. If you read *The New York Times*, you realize how pathetic theater coverage is here. We did a production in New York at a 99-seat theater, and you should have seen the size of the review. It was longer than anything we have ever had here. It was a 99-seat theater, and they were paying attention.

In addition to talking about shorter and less in-depth reviews, several participants brought up the concept of "infotainment" discussed in the literature review. Many responses revolved around the idea that the media have become more entertainment-driven, and that this has had a negative impact on theater coverage.

Due to the pop culture phenomenon of our society, everyone just wants quick bytes of information and the reviews themselves have been cut down. The coverage itself not only has become lacking, but within itself has changed very inconsistently to the point where they may read a review and it's only a paragraph long with a grade and that's it.

One of the Dallas producers had some interesting comments about how the coverage of her theater has changed to be marketed in a more entertaining way in the press. While her perspective on these changes was not negative, it is an interesting example of how theater coverage has changed to be an example of this idea of "infotainment."

They [the local newspapers] try to get blogs to catch fire, and they try to be kind of dishy and get blogs fired up. We get more above the fold things about a production- they need little nuggets of information. There is also a column called

‘Stage Whispers’ that is in a dishy format. Reviewers will be doing a puff piece or profile, and they will go back looking for dish. That has been a bit of a change.

Both participants in the focus group and the Dallas producers brought up the idea that the media have placed more of an emphasis on pop culture. Again, the idea that the local press does not focus on local issues was brought up. “I also feel like the mentality of the media has moved to pop culture: coverage of the movies and television, which are nationwide and have no specific ownership in this community. I see when I go to the overnight section nine times out of ten it will not be something that is local.” One of the producers interviewed in Dallas had a similar comment, “I think the media focuses on music and concert and club-going. There is a huge emphasis on music in the press. It’s mysterious to me. The media would lead us to think that our community is only interested in pop music.”

Another interesting idea that was mentioned is that the changes in coverage have affected the types of theaters being covered in the press.

I was always amazed how much when they [*The Dallas Morning News* reviewers] were trying to court the Fort Worth and Tarrant County readers and how much time was spent coming to everything- not just professional theater but everything- and now they are pretty much saying it has to be professional [theater], and there has to be something special about it. And we have seen at the same time a drop in equal coverage of professional and non-professional theater so the educational theater and community groups are getting less coverage.

This expands on the idea that not only are reviews themselves becoming less in-depth, but that the type of coverage is becoming streamlined to include only a particular type of theater and a particular type of production. This is another way in which shrinking space affects coverage of local theaters.

Overall, the opinions of the participants in the focus group reflected the idea that theater coverage has been simplified. This is clear from the complaints of shorter, less in-

depth reviews, and the rise of “infotainment.” One of the Dallas producers felt very strongly about this change in theater coverage.

I think the newspapers are making wrong decisions. What is making up the newspaper is nothing like news- it’s just appalling. It’s so dumbed down, and they think that is what people want to read. They have an obligation way above what they think people will read. You lose faith in the record of what is happening in your community. I find celebrity news just appalling.

Rating System in Reviews

In the focus group and interviews, there was a unanimous dislike of the rating system that is now found with most reviews. Regarding the rise of “dumbed down” coverage, participants seemed to feel that an element of a simplified review is the presence of a rating system. When asked about their opinion of rating systems, the focus group participants had a unanimous answer.

Respondent 1: “Quickly, does anybody like them?”

Several Participants: “No”

It was clear that the participants did not like rating systems for reviews. Many explained why they did not like the idea of a live performance being graded.

Respondent 1: Live performances change from one performance to the next. Audiences change. So one performance one night might be quite different from a performance the next night. So the night the reviewer is there if you’re lucky it’s a great night and you’ve got a great audience and you’re really on and so you get a good rating, or it might be one of your off nights. Well, it might be one where things aren’t quite clicking. It works for movies ok because you see the same thing every time you see it and it never changes. But live performances change. The atmosphere, the weather, what you ate for dinner. Things change and that’s why I think it’s just not a valid measure for live performances.

Respondent 2: We’ve gone everywhere from having, it’s been very inconsistent as far as we’ve had stars and they started grading the production which is horribly unfair. I mean that’s not what it’s about.

Others expressed how the rating system affects the readership among their audiences and also, how subjectivity affects a rating.

Respondent 1: I think it means that people don't read the review they just look at the grade on it.

Respondent 2: That's unfortunate. It's a quick permanent stamp on something that's subjective.

Respondent 3: And also I think that the critics have their own agenda, whether they are really conscious of it or not. Right now, for example, I see a growing movement among critics to value experimental, edgy and off beat as opposed to strong productions of the human warmth such as *Over the Tavern*, for example. So they are inserting their own bias. Now, can you grade a show because you happen to like drama or don't like drama? I mean that becomes how they feel about the play. Was the play worth the theater doing it becomes part of that grade, and that's very subjective.

These comments also relate to the idea that coverage has become simplified.

The producers interviewed in Dallas shared similar feelings regarding the rating system. They both seemed to feel that the presence of a rating system was almost an insult to readers. One producer tied the rating system back to the idea of simplified theater coverage.

I think it is more of the dumbing down- it's a shorthand way of covering theatre. I think it's laziness on part of writers and they think laziness on part of the readers. But I don't think that that is necessarily the case. People who read reviews are ready to have a discussion or else they wouldn't read it.

The other Dallas producer took up for the arts writers, as she seemed to feel that the presence of a rating system was the sign of more corporate based media. "It's ridiculous- it's just stupid. It's just like, God Almighty. I think reviewers would get rid of it, it's corporate forces that drive that."

Press Portrayal of Local Arts Appreciation

The next question presented to the focus group participants was “Do you think that the press accurately portrays our community’s appreciation of the arts?” Two participants brought up the idea that the Dallas and Fort Worth community is well known for its museums and other artistic venues, but not theater. “In some artistic venues, the museums, which are on more of a national level and we are very fortunate to have those here. I think in ways they do cover arts in that way, but in live theater I don’t think we even begin to rival that at all.” Another participant replied with a comment about the public’s perception of theater versus other forms of high art.

I think there’s a real difference in the attitudes of people about theater as compared to the symphony, the ballet and museums. You know, those are considered fine arts. Theater, I think, is considered popular arts to a lot of places and for years I know the mentality was that it should pay for itself. And you know, donations and public support for theater was much less easily gotten than say the ballet or for symphony. People expected that the symphony needed to have almost 50% support and could only bring in say, 40 – 50% in ticket sales to cover their expenses. Theater is almost like a sub-level of fine art.

Others brought up the idea that the media do not cover theater because they do not believe it is what people are interested in reading about. They expressed feelings that the city and the media do not understand the appreciation for the arts among residents.

Respondent 1: There’s been a reoccurring discussion in the Live Theater League that there’s a misconception perhaps by the media and others in that more people are going to sports events than theater. A study was done and there were actually more people going to theater events than sports. So it seems there is an inequity there in terms of what’s being covered.

Respondent 2: We individually spend so much of our time marketing to our current patrons and you know it’s about increasing demand in the other people and the only way to do that really is to engage the public realm and if that’s not happening we don’t seem to be growing and you know Fort Worth hangs its hats on cowboys and culture and I see that all the time and it’s like ‘that’s weird,’ but there’s no sort of cultural policy, there’s no dedicated revenue stream or anything

that the city does to back up that claim. And so perhaps the newspapers don't, you know, latch onto the importance of it either.

The opinion that the participants hold about how changes in the local press have affected theater coverage is clear. They were able to speculate how the press has changed and how these changes have affected coverage of local theaters. The participants were also very observant of how the community is affected by these changes.

Adapting to these Changes

Perhaps the most interesting part of the focus group was when participants talked about how they have adapted to the changes that were discussed. One participant said, "Individually and collectively I think we have had to kind of bond together." It seems that the changing media have made theater practitioners realize that they must work together to come up with ways to promote theater in the community without the media.

I hate to be a fatalist, but we both remember from the old days...the lovely coverage. My God, I remember those gorgeous four colored features and everything with pictures and we too got some lovely coverage. And you get so used to struggling for what you are used to in the past, and suddenly I know we are beginning to realize that the newspaper just isn't as important as it used to be. I mean there's a strange kind of freedom coming from neglect and what it's leading us to do is start thinking more and more about how to market ourselves without the print media. There was an article in TCG (Theater Communications Group) about how everybody knows press coverage is gone. . . is going, going, gone. And so what are you going to do about it and to use more of your resources at hand. We all have lobbies, we all have programs, we all have e-newsletters and we're starting to create our own media blitz, which in a way... is a good thing.

Many participants shared this feeling that they have learned that they cannot depend on the media alone to promote their productions. They seemed to feel that the local press is simply not as important or influential as it used to be, and they have learned not to rely on it. All of the focus group participants and the producers interviewed shared this opinion.

The Dallas producers had interesting comments about the importance of a review in attracting audiences.

Dallas Interviewee 1: We produced a show that wasn't reviewed, which is pretty unusual for us. But you know, it didn't make any difference. We had a review where the critic said, "go if you have to beg for a ticket," and it didn't make that much difference. I think reviews matter a lot less. The press isn't all-powerful here.

Dallas Interviewee 2: We don't really rely on the media...you can't. A good review does not mean people will walk in the door. Marketing and media are two different things. Look at *FootLoose*. The critics were like barfing, but the marketing people did their magic. Press is part of marketing, but the press will not market a show for you. I never really expect reviews to drive people in, but I use it as a part of marketing.

The Tarrant County participants expressed the same idea that theater staffs have learned not to rely on the media and how to use other forms of marketing.

We're definitely coming to the understanding that media coverage, news coverage is not what we can rely on, and that we have to expand into other areas: into the internet, into things in each other's programs. We have to find other ways of getting the message out and that the newspaper part of it is a declining area. As they move more online – perhaps there is an opportunity for expanding online coverage through the newspapers.

The concept of online coverage brought up some interesting remarks. The participants were well aware of how technology and the Internet have affected their coverage. "Well, the thing about the newspaper- it's not as immediate anymore, and it takes the newspaper a couple of days to come out with a review whereas that same night you can see a blog pop up immediately and get immediate information." This caused another producer to speak up about how blogging has changed promotion of her theater's productions.

A completely different kind of review that we've seen is people come to our shows and create a blog, and we see all kinds of hits going to the blog. So I think more people are looking to who they know, to give them a review and they are

looking online to look at their friends and rely on word of mouth more than in some cases, the critics.

Many participants brought up this idea that theaters have had to learn how to market themselves without the media. They have joined together to come up with these ideas and to promote each other. Theater practitioners have been forced to learn more about marketing to adjust to the decline in coverage of their theaters.

Respondent 1: The other thing I think it has caused us to do is to find other ways. In other words, I think we were depending on what the newspapers were doing and that was it. And I think when that sort of began to diminish then we begin to go “how do we get ourselves out there?” And I think it caused us to do more marketing. Things like mailings, audience development, and things that were there before, just not as imperative.

Respondent 2: We ought to be coming up with business solutions that connect us. It ought to be an opportunity to solve it together. It should be an opportunity for us to create solutions.

Participants repeatedly brought up the concept of mailers and newsletters. It is as if they have created their own media in place of the local media. Regarding the popularity of mass mailings among theaters, one participant said, “The rise of these mailers...back in 1991 -- I think very few were sending out these cards. Now, I think almost every theater does.” Several participants brought up the idea that theaters can no longer depend on the media to publicize productions.

Respondent 1: It’s kind of interesting I think we all have e-letters and we have constant contact so we’re kind of creating our own newspaper. We’re sort of taking it into our own hands like we’re saying “ok, I can’t really count on this” (the media). And I would say for Hip Pocket [Theatre] it was always an extremely important part of our marketing because we couldn’t do the ads and so it was always wonderful to have a big story and reviews and so forth and it’s diminished.

Respondent 2: I think we rely too heavily on the newspaper as a means of getting our information out on the show. Also, what I’m getting at is we’ve got to get our information out on the internet and with mailers and word of mouth. From 1991

to now it has grown tremendously where we're all vying for the same audience and the same capital dollars and everything else. So that's the thing that has changed.

One of the Dallas producers brought up this idea that theaters are almost creating their own media. He also views this new communication as an alternative to relying on the media.

The new thing is being able to publish on the web and e-mail. This is a huge 'make up the difference.' Now it is what the public is beginning to depend on. On the up side, everyone welcomes stuff coming by e-mail. You don't have their e-mail unless they've come to you as a customer.

How the Community is Affected

The participants of the focus group and interviews not only talked about how these changes have affected their theaters, but how they have affected the community as a whole. The practitioners discussed the fact that the decline in coverage negatively affects awareness of theater in communities. They also were concerned about the education of their audiences.

Because of the lack of coverage, it's not continuing to educate the reader of what is out there. So, new audiences and the new people that move into the metropollex, and specifically Tarrant County, as they come in and they pick up the local paper- if it is not educating them of what's really here, they are not necessarily going to go out and seek it. Unless they were die-hard theater advocates before.

One of the Dallas producers made a very similar comment. He feels that newspapers are no longer reaching a broad audience. "I think it has rare-ified the audience. I think they used to reach a broader cross-section. It's like they're preaching to the choir."

One particularly interesting idea that the participants brought up was the idea that newspapers are "shooting themselves in the foot" by cutting back on theater coverage.

Participants feel that readers are not being trained to care about the arts and therefore would not be interested in the arts or reading arts coverage.

Respondent 1: I think the newspapers are doing a great disservice to themselves and to everyone who would read the newspapers by not covering their communities. People want to read about people in their community. People here in the metroplex. Oh, it's nice that there's New York, but the people here are what's important to us, and the readers that read the newspaper. People want to know the people who are in their plays. They come because of those people.

Respondent 2: They've shot themselves in the foot by not creating the readership that's interested in local community arts and events.

Another participant felt that this problem might even stem from the education system.

She felt that readers and audiences were not interested in reading about theater due to the lack of arts education in the system.

It goes back even into the education system. There was no fine arts department in the education until in Mansfield, where I'm from the director came to me and he said – you're going to be thrilled to death, we now have now instituted a fine arts director. Well, it's about time – we had lost it because I used to volunteer to teach arts appreciation because it was not done in the school, as well as drama and now it's back. So, I don't know if that has anything to do with it, that people aren't used to dealing with theater and live theater and the fine arts. I'm not sure how to equate that.

One of the Dallas producers mentioned noticing changes in appreciation among the Dallas business environment. “The business environment has changed. We don't have as many people serving on boards and the boards are our most important audience. They represent us in the community. That shift has been a disaster.”

Positive Feedback about Theater Coverage

One outlook that all of the participants and interviewees had in common was the feeling that the few arts writers that are left truly care about their theaters and are also

concerned about the decline in coverage. Participants seemed to feel a bond with the few arts writers in their love for theater. They see the devoted critics as arts advocates just like themselves. The most positive feedback was from one of the Dallas producers. Perhaps because *The Dallas Morning News* is a larger paper or perhaps it is because in the past, this particular theater did not include the media. In any case, this producer had the most positive outlook on the issue.

Undermain [Theatre] is given an unusual amount of coverage for our size and shape. In the beginning we kind of stayed away from the press. We didn't really need coverage, but now I think we get an enormous amount of coverage- it's Ungodly. You would think that *The Dallas Morning News* would just cover big companies, but they cover even little tiny companies. Our coverage has just exploded. The arts editors at *The Dallas Morning News* fight very hard to keep theater coverage. I think *The Dallas Morning News* is all about it. I think they do a great job. People are interested in people in the community, and I really see that in *The Dallas Morning News*.

This producer's comments about the arts writers and editors fighting for theater coverage are very similar to the opinion expressed by the focus group participants. There is almost a feeling of "we're all in this together" regarding these theater producers and the arts writers of the local press.

Respondent 1: I think that the current small staff of reviewers that we have, which have diminished within themselves, I think are, to their credit, strong art advocates and are trying to fight the writers because they are writers and they want their information there. And they have a knowledge of the arts and they do want to put it out there, but again, it's the big man, the big corporate ownership that's going 'no no no, we want to hear about Brittany Spears, not that.' I think we're fortunate with the few that we have right now. But we've got them and they are aware of what we're doing, but I think sometimes the writers are fighting for it just as much as we are.

Respondent 2: It's interesting because the critics become the advocates for live theater. It's not really coming from the editors, it's coming from somebody like Mark Lowry. [Mark Lowry is the theater critic for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*]

Respondent 3: It feels desperate, and when you talk to Mark Lowry it's just like, we worked really hard to get that story for you and you go 'Jesus Christ.' What is this, what's happening? It's just a real distorted thing that's occurring.

Focus Group and Interview Conclusions

The participants in the focus group and interviewees clearly feel very passionately about these issues and were each able to offer a unique response to the research questions that were explored. One of the first topics discussed was the idea that there is serious competition for coverage in the local media. An important part of this discussion is the idea that the number of theaters in the area have increased, yet the coverage devoted to theaters has decreased. Participants in the focus group and interviews are very observant of the changes in the local press. They brought up increases in advertisements, decreases in theater critics, and decreases in the number of newspapers locally. The "lack of depth" in reviews is something that came up several times among focus group participants. They seemed to feel that information had been simplified to the point that reviews simply included "who, what, when, and where." The idea that the press does not accurately portray the theater scene was also mentioned. The implications of this idea will be expanded upon in the discussion. The participants expressed the idea that they have had to learn to work together and use their own communication channels as opposed to relying on the media. Despite the changes and decreases in the media, the participants feel a loyalty to existing theater critics.

CHAPTER 7

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to fill a major gap in research regarding theater coverage in the press. While there is a plethora of anecdotal evidence that suggests cultural coverage has decreased and become more simplistic, this topic has only been empirically examined in one previous study. This study not only examined this phenomenon empirically, but also went one step further by reaching out to theater practitioners to gain their perspective. The main point that can be concluded by merging the ideas presented in the literature review, the results of the focus group, and the perspective of practitioners is the fact that theater coverage does not sufficiently represent or support the local theater scene.

The literature review first established the idea that cultural coverage has declined due to profit pressures and the commercialization of the media. This has led not only to the “dumbing down” of cultural coverage, but also to a decline in in-depth coverage and feature stories. The literature review then supported the idea that these are the types of stories that would appeal to broad audiences or readers who might not typically attend the theater. Furthermore, these types of stories tend to encourage community involvement. Tying in the agenda-setting theory, several studies were reviewed that suggest the local media is particularly influential in community discussion and interests. Finally, the rationale and site selection integrated these ideas by pointing out the fact that the local theater scene is booming, and the press should portray this interest, especially when noting the influential nature of local media.

These ideas were tested through the content analysis portion of this study. The most significant results from the content analysis confirm the idea that feature stories, news stories and stories specifically about the theater community have decreased. Feature stories decreased for both *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News*. More specifically, four out of the five theaters examined had a decrease in feature stories from 1991 to 2005 in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and three out of five theaters examined had a decrease in *The Dallas Morning News*. For both newspapers, the percentage of coverage devoted to feature stories and news stories decreased. Furthermore, taking a more detailed look at the results broken down by theater, all types of coverage about the theater community (features and news) decreased in both newspapers from 1991 to 2005.

There was significant coverage in 1991 in the form of feature stories about the five theaters and the local theater scene in both newspapers. Not only was there more coverage, and longer coverage, there was a noticeable richness in the topics of these stories that could not be found in the 2005 story topics. Many of the feature stories and stories about the theater community had personal touches and unique angles that are missing in the 2005 coverage. For example, there were stories about how theaters help the local economy, cooperation among the theaters, profiles of producers, how theaters pick their seasons, and actors' equity union. There were obscure, yet personal topics like a local celebrity coming to a play for an actor's birthday, an interview straight from the green room, and even a 1,300 word story about the costuming of Shakespearean plays. The writers of these stories clearly had personal connections with the theaters that were

covered. These stories truly reflected a bustling theater scene and the unique angles likely captured potential theater-goers.

The focus group and interviews with theater professionals reflected this shift in cultural coverage on a personal level, and reinforced the suggestion that feature stories and stories about the theater community have declined. The participants expressed the problems with drops in this type of coverage. One participant put it perfectly when he said, “It’s like they’re preaching to the choir,” when speaking of theater coverage in the local press. Many of the respondents expressed the feeling that the media do not cover local theater in a way that would attract a potential theater-goer. Another participant expressed this idea with the following quote:

I think the newspapers are doing a great disservice to themselves and to everyone who would read the newspapers by not covering their communities. People want to read about people in their community. People here in the metroplex. Oh, it’s nice that there’s New York, but the people here are what’s important to us, and the readers that read the newspaper. People want to know the people who are in their plays. They come because of those people.

This quote sums up the idea that a more personal approach in coverage, like the type of coverage that features and stories about the local community offer, is what appeals most to readers and might attract a potential theater-goer. These are the types of stories that truly get the community involved and interested in the local theater scene.

The content analysis results demonstrating the decline in stories about the theater community are also important to discuss due to the ideas presented in the literature review about agenda-setting theory. One article in the literature review by Ardyth Broadrick Sohn found that what the local press covered was directly tied to what people in the community were talking about (1984). This is a troubling piece of information

when the content analysis results show a decline in stories about the theater community. If what the local press is focusing on is directly tied to what people are talking about, and the number of stories about the theater community is declining, this negatively affects the local theater scene. Furthermore, if these are the types of stories that draw in wider audiences and get the community involved, then the theater critics really are “preaching to the choir” by only presenting theater news in a mechanized, impersonal way. Focus group participants and interviewees reflected the idea that the theater scene is bigger than ever; however, a look at the 2005 coverage suggests that the average reader would have a difficult time discerning that. The absence of these types of stories that would get the community involved reflects the idea that the media do not adequately support or represent the local theater scene.

Review of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

While this decline in feature stories and stories about the theater community is a significant finding, the other hypotheses and research questions that were examined yielded some interesting results. The first hypothesis predicted that theater coverage overall has declined in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News*. This hypothesis was partially supported by the results. In the aggregate, while the amount of coverage in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* declined, the amount of coverage in *The Dallas Morning News* actually increased. However, for both newspapers there was a significant decline in features and news. While reviews and previews did not have significant declines, it is important to point out that in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, three out of the five theaters examined had a decrease in reviews. This is a troubling

finding for the theater community. The implications of the declines in features and news have been discussed. While it is positive to note that the other categories of coverage did not have major declines, as shown from the literature review and focus group, the decline in features and news is a serious problem for the theater community.

Hypothesis two suggested that in the last 14 years, the percentage of feature stories, news articles, and reviews has decreased and the percentage of listings has increased. The premise for these hypotheses came from the ideas presented in the literature review that suggested news coverage has become more mechanized and simplistic i.e., a decline in in-depth coverage like feature stories and lengthy reviews and an increase in streamlined coverage like listings. It was clear from the focus group and interviews that the theater practitioners feel that coverage of their productions has become simplistic and increasingly mechanized. One participant summed up this idea by stating,

Due to the pop culture phenomenon of our society, everyone just wants quick bytes of information and the reviews themselves have been cut down. The coverage itself not only has become lacking, but within itself has changed very inconsistently to the point where they may read a review and it's only a paragraph long with a grade and that's it.

Another interviewee tied this idea to the rise of celebrity news in the local media and felt that an increase in such coverage negatively affects the community. He stated, "You lose faith in the record of what is happening in your community." Clearly, the theater community expressed a concern regarding the rise of simplistic coverage.

This idea was tested quantitatively in several ways in the content analysis portion of this study. First, regarding the amount of each category of coverage, as seen in the results, both newspapers had an increase in the percentage of coverage devoted to listings

and a decrease in the percentage of coverage devoted to reviews, features, and news stories. These results fully support hypothesis two.

Hypothesis three, which predicted that theater coverage has become more simplistic, was examined in several ways. First, word counts were examined. While feature story average word counts did not decrease, reviews and news story averages decreased from 1991 to 2005 for both newspapers. More specifically, looking at reviews, four out of five theaters had a decrease in review average word counts from 1991 to 2005 in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and three out of five theaters had a decrease in *The Dallas Morning News*. A decline in word count is a clear indication that reviews are becoming more simplistic. Looking at the content of the reviews, there are several ways to determine if reviews are becoming simplified that were also examined with hypothesis three. The percentage of reviews that contained the design elements set, sound/light, and costume decreased from 1991 to 2005 for both newspapers. Furthermore, there was a decline in the percentage of reviews that included interpretive criticism for both newspapers. The percentage of reviews that contained a rating did not increase in *The Dallas Morning News*, but increased dramatically in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

There are several implications regarding the rise of this simplified coverage. While a lengthier, more in-depth review that is full of interpretive criticism and discussion of design elements might not appeal to the average reader, the decline in this type of coverage concerns the theater community. Tying in comments from the focus group and interviews, it seemed that a cutback in these elements is almost an insult to the producers, actors, and designers of a production. They also seemed to feel that it was an insult to readers who wanted more information about a production and are really

interested in theater. Furthermore, the addition of the rating system was unattractive to the participants. They felt that this presence of a letter grade might prompt readers to not even read the entire review. Once again, they seemed to feel that the presence of a letter grade was insulting to a reader interested in theater. It is the perfect example of a “dumbed down” review and a reflection of the suggestion that all cultural coverage has been simplified with the rise of “infotainment.”

Implications

The implications of this study are twofold. Not only do the findings contribute to the body of knowledge regarding arts journalism, but they also have implications for the local theater community. One of the most interesting aspects approaching this study was the lack of research regarding arts journalism. As mentioned in the literature review, the only empirical research on the topic is the National Arts Journalism Program’s Reporting the Arts II, which looked at cultural coverage as a whole. My study was a departure from previous research in that it looked specifically at theater coverage and more closely at the stories themselves as opposed to cultural coverage as a whole. My study also stands apart from previous research due to the detailed analysis of reviews. The content analysis protocol that was created for the review analysis can be used by other researchers interested in studying theater reviews. Furthermore, while the literature review established the fact that cultural coverage has been “dumbed down,” the analysis of reviews actually attempted to measure that suggestion with a unique research design.

While Reporting the Arts II looked at one Texas newspaper, this study built upon that and contributes to the knowledge regarding cultural coverage in Texas. It is clear

from this study that the Dallas/Fort Worth theater community is thriving. This was seen in the comments from practitioners and the facts presented in the site selection. This is the first study to address the issue of declining local coverage at a local level.

Furthermore, while Reporting the Arts II analyzed cultural coverage from 1998 to 2003, this study covers a more extensive time period by going back 14 years.

This study also contributes to advertising/public relations practitioners working in the communications field. One of the most surprising things that came out of the focus group results were the conversations regarding how the theater community has adapted to the changes in their coverage. This was a surreptitious, but important finding of my study. The theater professionals have created their own channels to communicate with patrons and have learned to rely more on marketing to publicize their productions.

Theater professionals have learned to use what press coverage they do get as part of an overall marketing initiative as opposed to purely relying on the media like they were able to do in the past. The unique bond between the theaters is also important to point out. While at the root of it, the theaters compete with each other for patrons, they have learned to work together to market local theater as a whole.

This study is also important to share with the theater community. There was a hunch among the theater community that theater coverage has declined. This study partially confirms the practitioners' feelings. With few resources to devote to public relations research, this study gives these practitioners a breakdown of their coverage, and gives them an idea of what has changed in the last 14 years. These results can also shed some light on the issue of declining coverage. While feature stories and new stories

decreased, this study did not find that reviews have substantially decreased; this is a positive finding to point out.

This study suggested the importance of human interest stories and stories that educate the public about the theater community. Perhaps in their own communications, theater communications practitioners could focus on human-interest aspects of a production as opposed to just the basic information. If the local press is cutting back on these types of stories, perhaps the theater staffs themselves could focus on getting this type of story out to patrons. Also, perhaps theater staffs could pitch shorter feature ideas to arts writers. Because there are a larger amount of theaters to cover and fewer arts writers, critics may not have the resources to research feature story ideas. Theater staffs are more in touch with the theater community and therefore would be more aware of feature story ideas. These are pieces that practitioners could include in media kits. Furthermore, if arts writers do not have adequate space for feature stories, they could attempt to increase shorter profiles or mini features.

Limitations

While this study contributes to the bodies of knowledge regarding arts journalism research and the local theater community, there are some limitations. The largest flaw is that the study did not sample years between 1991 and 2005. While real world indicators were taken into account, the results represent a snapshot of two points in time; they do not fully represent all of the coverage from 1991 to 2005. Furthermore, this study does not take into account that there are other publications that review local theater. Another limitation is that there are several other theaters in Dallas and Fort Worth that were not

examined in this study. Although the five theaters that were picked are well-established theaters, they are not representative of the entire Dallas/Fort Worth theater scene. Furthermore, the stories about the theater community that were analyzed for this study were only pulled due to the presence of one of the five theater names in the story. There could be other stories about the theater community from 1991 or 2005 that were not included in this study. The method by which the stories were pulled should be refined in future research.

Future Research

Several interesting ideas for future research can be taken from this study. The relationship between theater coverage and ticket sales would be an ideal agenda-setting theory or media effects theory study. How much does this decline in coverage really hurt theaters? Another exciting project that could stem from this research would be to measure how a positive or negative review affects the attendance of a production. This was briefly mentioned in the focus group, but a quantitative study of the effects would be useful to practitioners. Another agenda-setting idea to measure would be to compare the relationship between how the local media portrays the theater community and the public's perception of the theater community. Taking the idea mentioned in the literature review that what the local press covers is directly tied to what people in the community are talking about, this would be one way to address that idea.

Another interesting local issue that could follow this study is the question regarding the amount of coverage of Fort Worth theaters in the Dallas press and Dallas theaters in the Fort Worth press. Do writers feel obligated to cover theaters in their

community? Do *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* critics tend to cover Fort Worth theaters more so than Dallas theaters and vice versa? Again, this research question could tie in elements of the theory regarding the relationship between local press coverage and the communities they cover.

Conclusions

Overall, the results showed that theater coverage has become shorter and more simplified. The types of stories that would attract potential theater-goers and get the local community interested in the theater have declined. The decline in this type of coverage is detrimental as it does not reflect or support the local thriving theater community. This affects the theater practitioners as it forces them to find other ways to get their information to the public. This decline in coverage affects audiences as it does not accurately and completely inform them of an important aspect of the local community. It is evident that the citizens of Dallas and Fort Worth truly value the cities' strong cultural roots. With such a strong emphasis placed on the arts, the Dallas/Fort Worth press should reflect the thriving theater community and provide citizens with a sense of cultural civic identity.

APPENDIX A

Table 1: Results from 2004 unpublished study by author

	Hip Pocket Theatre	Circle Theatre	Jubilee Theatre	Stage West	Casa Manana
Total Hits 1991	48	43	35	76	203
Total Hits 2004	44	32	29	50	112
X ² Critical Value= 3.84 (p < 0.05)* 6.63 (p<0.01)**	X ² =0.087	X ² =0.8067	X ² =0.28	X ² =2.6825	**X ² =79.8479
Features/Reviews Coverage Percentage 1991	43.75%	58.1%	42.8%	60.5%	51.7%
Features/Reviews Coverage Percentage 2004	38.6%	46.8%	44.8%	50%	35.7%
Not presented in results: % of coverage made of news stories					
Listings Coverage Percentage 1991	33.3%	32.5%	51.42%	28.9%	23.6%
Listings Coverage Percentage 2004	29.5%	37.5%	44.82%	36%	34.8%
Features/Reviews Average Length 1991	774.85 words	711.76 words	673.9 words	705.52 words	657.7 words
Features/Reviews Average Length 2004	587.47 words	648.8 words	568.46 words	467.12 words	586 words
X ² Critical Value= 4.49 (p < 0.05) * 13.28 (p < 0.01) **	*X ² =12.8866	X ² =1.4207	X ² =4.47	**X ² =24.23	X ² =2.0667

APPENDIX B

Content Analysis Protocol**Story Number****Primary Theater**

Circle Theatre= 1

Stage West= 2

Theatre Arlington= 3

Theatre Three= 4

Undermain Theatre= 5

More than one theater= 6 (list theaters in comments)

Newspaper

Fort Worth Star-Telegram= 1

Dallas Morning News= 2

Year

1991= 1

2005=2

Word Count**Type**

- Listing (Less than 200 words)= 1
- Preview (Between 200-300 words)= 2
- Standard Review (After the show)= 3
- Feature about current production or current issue= 4
(Write Subject in comments) Examples: Interview with director/Actor or feature about the theater itself
- Standard News Story= 5
Story about a theater(s) but not about a production (Awards or Year end best lists)

Design Elements:**Set/Sound & Light/Costume**

- Set
- Sound and Light
- Costume

No it does not mention= 0

Yes it mentions= 1 (Will be coded “1” based on mention only)

Is there any kind of rating system (letter grade or star)?

No = 0

Yes = 1

Is there any interpretive criticism?

Does the reviewer offer some form of formal criticism?

Does he/she play the role of a critic as opposed to just a reviewer?

One of these criteria must be met:

-Is there background information about the playwright (more than name) or explanation of what playwright is trying to express?

Example: “On the surface, *Once in Arden* deals with the approaching valedictory of Helena Modjeska, the Polish American tragedienne who was a contemporary and rival of Sarah Barnhardt. At a deeper level, Richard Helleesen’s new play chronicles a dawning rather than a twilight”

-Is there any interpretation of the direction or script?

More than “Nicolas Sandys’ direction is inventive”

Example: “Theatre Arlington’s current production takes a humorous look at death. But it is life - real life - that director J. Kathryn Rehders wants to bring to the performance.”

-Is there any interpretation of the script (more than plot synopsis)

More than: “If the raunchy tone of *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress* doesn’t offend, Alan Ball’s script has some mildly amusing moments.”

Example: “With all of the big chill summations of baby boom upheavals since the ’60s, it was about time someone examined what’s happened to women during the past decades. Wendy Wasserstein did it with *The Heidi Chronicles*, winning a Tony Award and a Pulitzer Prize for her episodic comedy about Heidi Holland’s life and troubles.”

No = 0

Yes = 1 (Put detail in “comments”)

Type:

Playwright background information or interpretation of the script= 1

Interpretation of direction= 2

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Questions

Introductory

1. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about theater coverage in the local press?

Transition

2. Have you noticed any changes in coverage of your theater within the last few years?

3. How satisfied are you with the coverage of your theater?

Key Questions

4. Do you think that the press accurately portrays our community's appreciation of the arts (theaters specifically)?

5. How do you think that the theater community is affected by changes in coverage?

6. Can you think of any specific ways that your theater has been affected by changes in theater coverage?

7. How do you think changing coverage has affected your audiences and our community as a whole?

8. What is missing from theater coverage that you would like to see?

9. What do you like best about coverage of your theater?

10. What do you think about letter grades in theater reviews?

Ending Question

11. Is there anything that you came wanting to say that you didn't get a chance to say?

APPENDIX D

Table 2: Coverage Breakdown in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, by Theater

	Circle Theatre	Stage West	Undermain Theatre	Theatre Arlington	Theatre Three	Theater Community
All types of coverage (total returns in database)						
1991	26	34	2	43	20	6
2005	10	19	3	47	16	3
Number of Reviews						
1991	5	8	0	6	3	N/A
2005	4	6	1	4	3	N/A
Number of Features						
1991	6	1	0	7	3	4
2005	0	0	0	2	0	1
Number of News Stories						
1991	0	5	0	12	4	2
2005	1	2	0	9	0	2
Number of Previews						
1991	1	2	0	1	1	N/A
2005	1	3	0	1	1	N/A

Table 3: Coverage Breakdown for *The Dallas Morning News*, by Theater

	Circle Theatre	Stage West	Undermain Theatre	Theatre Arlington	Theatre Three	Theater Community
All types of coverage (total returns in database)						
1991	0	6	16	8	34	9
2005	20	20	25	29	97	4
Number of Reviews						
1991	0	5	5	0	6	N/A
2005	5	6	4	1	15	N/A
Number of Features						
1991	0	1	1	1	11	4
2005	2	0	1	0	5	1
Number of News Stories						
1991	0	0	2	1	8	5
2005	0	1	1	1	1	3
Number of Previews						
1991	0	0	5	0	5	N/A
2005	1	2	2	0	7	N/A

Table 4: Coverage Percentage Breakdown for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, by Theater

	Circle Theatre	Stage West	Undermain Theatre	Theatre Arlington	Theatre Three
Percentage of coverage made of:					
Listings					
1991	53.8%	52.9%	100%	39.5%	45%
2005	40%	42.1%	66.7%	66%	75%
Reviews					
1991	19.2%	23.5%	0	14%	15%
2005	40%	31.6%	33%	8.5%	6.2%
Features					
1991	23.1%	2.9%	0	16.3%	15%
2005	0	0	0	4.3%	0
News Stories					
1991	0	14.7%	0	27.9%	20%
2005	10%	10.5%	0	19.1%	0

Table 5: Coverage Percentage Breakdown for *The Dallas Morning News*, by Theater

	Circle Theatre	Stage West	Undermain Theatre	Theatre Arlington	Theatre Three
Percentage of coverage made of:					
Listings					
1991	0	0%	18.8%	75%	11.8%
2005	60%	55%	68%	93.1%	71%
Reviews					
1991	0	83%	31.3%	0%	17.6%
2005	25%	10%	16%	3.4%	15.5%
Features					
1991	0	16.6%	6.3%	12.5%	32.4%
2005	10%	0	5%	0%	5.2%
News Stories					
1991	0	0%	12.5%	12.5%	23.5%
2005	10%	5%	5%	3.4%	1%

Table 6: Average Word Counts of Features for Both Newspapers, by Theater

	<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>	<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>
	Average (N)	Average (N)
Circle Theatre		
1991	854 (6)	0
2005	0	356.5 (N=2)
Stage West		
1991	600 (1)	1351 (1)
2005	0	0
Theatre Arlington		
1991	493.3 (7)	560 (1)
2005	1146.5 (2)	0
Undermain Theatre		
1991	0	1128 (1)
2005	0	862 (1)
Theatre Three		
1991	756 (3)	957 (11)
2005	0	777.2 (5)
Theater Community		
	1065.5 (4)	1355.5 (4)
	812 (1)	868 (1)

Table 7: Average Word Counts of Reviews for Both Newspapers, by Theater

	<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>	<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>
	Average (N)	Average (N)
Circle Theatre		
1991	573.4 (5)	0
2005	397.25 (4)	476.4 (5)
Stage West		
1991	638 (8)	909.2 (5)
2005	346.7 (6)	492.5 (6)
Theatre Arlington		
1991	540.7 (6)	0
2005	333 (4)	425 (1)
Undermain Theatre		
1991	0	867.2 (5)
2005	317 (1)	589.3 (4)
Theatre Three		
1991	513 (3)	850.3 (6)
2005	337.3 (3)	489.9 (15)

Table 8: Average Word Counts of News Stories for Both Newspapers, by Theater

	<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>	<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>
	Average (N)	Average (N)
Circle Theatre		
1991	0	0
2005	0	408 (1)
Stage West		
1991	455.6 (5)	0
2005	576 (2)	305 (1)
Theatre Arlington		
1991	597.8 (12)	464 (1)
2005	401 (9)	401 (1)
Undermain Theatre		
1991	0	545 (2)
2005	0	123 (1)
Theatre Three		
1991	394.8 (4)	721.1 (8)
2005	0	642 (1)
Theater Community		
	1787 (2)	1097.4 (5)
	417.5 (2)	795.7 (3)

Table 9: Analysis of Reviews in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, by Theater

	1991	2005
Circle Theatre		
Percentage of Reviews that discussed:	N= 5	N= 4
Set:	60%	0
Sound/Light:	20%	0
Costume	40%	0
Interpretive Criticism:	20%	20%
Percentage with a rating:	0	60%
Stage West		
Percentage of Reviews that discussed:	N= 8	N= 6
Set:	50%	33.3%
Sound/Light:	25%	0
Costume	50%	16.7%
Interpretive Criticism:	62.5%	50%
Percentage with a rating:	0	83.3%
Theatre Arlington		
Percentage of Reviews that discussed:	N= 6	N= 4
Set:	16.7%	75%
Sound/Light:	16.7%	0
Costume	16.7%	25%
Interpretive Criticism:	66.7%	50%
Percentage with a rating:	0	75%
Theatre Three		
Percentage of Reviews that discussed:	N= 3	N= 3
Set:	0	0
Sound/Light:	0	0
Costume	0	0
Interpretive Criticism:	0	0
Percentage with a rating:	0	100%

Table 10: Analysis of Reviews in *The Dallas Morning News*, by Theater

	1991	2005
<hr/>		
Stage West		
Percentage of Reviews that discussed:	N= 5	N= 6
Set:	100%	16.7%
Sound/Light:	40%	16.7%
Costume	40%	0
Interpretive Criticism:	40%	83.3%
Percentage with a rating:	0	0
<hr/>		
Undermain Theatre		
Percentage of Reviews that discussed:	N= 5	N= 4
Set:	60%	25%
Sound/Light:	60%	25%
Costume	40%	25%
Interpretive Criticism:	80%	75%
Percentage with a rating:	0	0
<hr/>		
Theatre Three		
Percentage of Reviews that discussed:	N= 6	N= 15
Set:	16.7%	46.7%
Sound/Light:	0	20%
Costume	16.7%	26.7%
Interpretive Criticism:		
Percentage with a rating:	50%	40%
	0	0
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VITA

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Kathryn interned at two local theaters in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex from 2003 to 2006, which sparked her interest in arts journalism. In September 2004, she enrolled for graduate study at Texas Christian University. While working on her master's in journalism, she held a graduate assistantship in the journalism department. Kathryn currently works as the Membership Coordinator for the Fort Worth Chapter of the Texas Society of CPAs and resides in Fort Worth. She is a member of the Public Relations Society of America.

She is engaged to be married to James Paul Goldsmith of Palestine, Texas on September 22, 2007.

ABSTRACT

Among the Dallas/Fort Worth theater community, there is a feeling that local press coverage no longer adequately represents the thriving theater scene. This study takes a local look at this pertinent issue through a quantitative examination of press coverage of five major live theaters in Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas. It is hypothesized that theater coverage has declined in the last fourteen years and that listings have increased as in-depth articles and reviews have decreased. The qualitative aspect of this study attempts to explore the effects of suggested cuts to the arts pages on the local theater community and to potential theater-goers. The implications of the content analysis, focus group, and interviews conducted for this study can contribute to the bodies of knowledge regarding arts journalism and the practice of public relations and marketing for arts practitioners.