

ART FOR OUR SAKES:  
AN ANALYSIS OF ARTS COVERAGE IN CITY AND  
REGIONAL MAGAZINES

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A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
At the University of Missouri

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements For the Degree  
Master of Arts

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By  
CHRISTINE JACKSON  
Prof. John Fennell, Thesis Supervisor  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined  
the thesis entitled

ART FOR OUR SAKES:  
AN ANALYSIS OF ARTS COVERAGE AT CITY AND  
REGIONAL MAGAZINES

Presented by Christine Jackson,

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor John Fennell

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Dr. Amanda Hinnant

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Dr. Andrea Heiss

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Dr. Nancy West

## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to the artists who work tirelessly to put something beautiful or meaningful or interesting back into their world, the spaces that welcome and celebrate them and the journalists who work just as tirelessly to tell their stories. The work is long, difficult and often thankless. But the things you do make your cities and life in them just a little bit better, and that is more than worth the effort. Thank you for everything you do.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to better understand how decisions about arts coverage are made at city and regional magazines and the value that these stories have to both the publications they appear in and the communities they are targeted toward. City and regional magazines, which cover specific areas and have more intimate relationships with their readers than, say, a national consumer magazine or arts periodical, were chosen because of the unique opportunity afforded to them by their position as a cross between the community-oriented city newspaper and the glossy, in-depth monthly magazine. In discussing the arts, their value, and the ways in which they are covered with arts and culture editors and top editors at magazines from around the country, this research found value in arts journalism for city magazines, both in the fulfillment of these publications' missions and the enrichment of their communities. This research approached the topic through the use of gatekeeping theory, which explains how media messages travel from their producers to their consumers.

## **CHAPTER I: Introduction**

In times of crisis, conflict and discontent, voices and opinions often manifest themselves in the performing and visual arts. While it falls to artists to create these messages, it is up to arts journalists and editors to determine the stories that are told and the narratives that emerge from the production of this art. The purpose of this study is to better understand how arts writers and editors choose to cover the arts and the value that these stories have to both the publications they appear in and the communities they are targeted toward. This study will focus specifically on city and regional magazines, which cover specific areas and have more intimate relationships with their readers than, say, a national consumer magazine or arts periodical. This research will approach the topic through the use of gatekeeping theory, which explains how media messages travel from their producers to their consumers. Fewer gatekeeping studies of magazines have been conducted than of newspapers, and few studies of arts journalism extend themselves beyond art criticism and newspaper arts sections. This study seeks to better understand the role arts journalism plays for city and regional magazines and whether or not the arts are a valuable part of these publications' overall content.

The arts work their way into most facets of a community. Art is in the design of the buildings that people live and work in. It's in the clothes they wear and the items they choose to fill their homes. It's a vehicle for protest and an agent of change. The arts link people to the past and help us envision the future. There is no way to ignore the arts while covering a community, but there are myriad ways to approach them. This study will expand the existing knowledge of arts journalism and the roles of city and regional magazines through the application of gatekeeping theory. This theory is most often applied to hard news and the products that deliver it to the public. In contrast, this research will explore its impacts on the understudied topics of arts journalism, defined as writing on the topics of performing arts, visual art, music (depending on the definition of the individual magazines, as some do not include popular/current music in their definition of the arts) and theater, and city and regional magazines, defined by the City and Regional Magazine Association website as consumer magazines published on a city or regional basis.

On a practical level, this research will widen the existing knowledge of the field of arts journalism as it relates to magazines, specifically magazines that focus on defined communities. This study will facilitate further understanding of how arts journalism is produced by city and regional magazines and the perceived and actual value of the content to those in charge of producing it.

## CHAPTER II: Review of the literature

Criticism no longer dictates success and failure in the art world. It hasn't for a long time, despite what academic discourse would imply. The art world continues to discuss the demise of art criticism, but media in its many forms has often had a more prominent effect on the success and failure of art and artists. In a recent discussion of how arts journalists navigate the complicated problem of artist performance and personae, Sarah Thornton, former contemporary art correspondent for *The Economist* and sociologist of culture, discussed the relationship between the media and the arts. "I think the media's role in the history of art is huge and relatively undocumented, while the role of criticism in art history is probably overstated," she said. "There are a lot of panels at art fairs talking about the demise of criticism, but with the rise of other forms of media I would say one could point to all sorts of instances in which media coverage of different kinds has been way more impactful than criticism itself." Her thoughts are not unfounded. With newspapers, the primary medium for that impact, shrinking and changing their arts sections, there is a role to be filled in the field of arts journalism.

Take the *Mona Lisa* example. While the Leonardo Da Vinci's enigmatic portrait is a good painting by almost all standards, it is not considered Leonardo's best work. However, it is the artist's most famous work. This is almost entirely due to the fact that it was the subject of an international news story in a time before regular global news. The painting was stolen, the theft was heavily covered by papers on both sides of the Atlantic and, just like that, the *Mona Lisa* became one of the most easily identifiable pieces of art in the world. Leonardo's handiwork didn't do that for the *Mona Lisa*, the press did. But now newspaper arts sections have experienced cuts across the board. The era of prominent arts coverage in newspapers has passed, and attention is being given to other aspects of culture. But the public's interest in the arts has not waned. In 2004, consumer spending on performing arts outranked both spending on spectator sports and spending on movies (Szanto, Levy and Andrew, 2004). So the audience for the content exists, but the question remains: Where is the right place for arts coverage? The press still has the power to affect the art world, it's just not using it in the same way it once did. Several reports have addressed both the crisis in art criticism and the paradigm shift affecting arts journalism. Many researchers have also sought to define the role of the city and regional magazines and establish their relationship to the communities they serve. There is little research that synthesizes the roles of arts journalism and city and regional magazines in one place. The two are interrelated and, yet, this relationship has been ignored by most of the existing discourse on both topics. The texts that gets closest to examining

this relationship are Palmer's *Making the Arts Relevant: Becoming Part of the Public Dialogue to Engage and Impact Communities*, which directly defines the effect of arts coverage on local communities, and *Reporting the arts II* (Szanto, Levy and Andrew, 2004), which examines the many roles of arts journalists. But, still, neither focuses on the role or potential of the city and regional magazine.

This research seeks to determine whether city and regional magazines could be the best option to take up the mantle of once-powerful newspapers in the fields of art and culture. Analysis of the roles of both arts journalism and city and regional magazines suggests that the two make an ideal pair. Both are characterized as crusaders for the topics they cover and the readers they serve. Both rely primarily upon an affluent and well-educated readership. To better understand how arts journalism makes it into the pages of a city and regional magazines and the effects this coverage has on arts communities and readers, the research started by this literature review will apply gatekeeping theory as defined by Shoemaker and Vos.

Current literature on the topics of both arts journalism and city and regional magazines is lacking. This fact requires a certain level of openness to other areas of study when researching the relationships between the two. Literature on the aforementioned topics appears in journals related to the arts, sociology, library sciences, arts management and public affairs in addition to media studies. From literature across these fields some key concepts that relate to and affect the topics of the planned study have emerged. These include the roles

of city magazines, the role of the arts in communities, crises in criticism, and the state of arts journalism.

### **Common goals: The arts, arts journalism and city and regional magazines**

Arts journalism was once a large part of newspaper content. Although the audience still exists for this coverage, it's not being produced in the same way it once was. This creates an opportunity for city and regional magazines to become the primary source of arts coverage in communities. The roles of city and regional magazines and arts journalists are closely aligned, and the arts are still of value to communities in the United States. While the crisis in arts criticism has shifted the way some arts journalism is produced, this "crisis" actually pushes arts content toward story formats that better suit a magazine than a newspaper. In order to establish the value of arts content to these publications, future research will employ gatekeeping theory to produce a cross-level analysis of arts journalism at city and regional magazines.

### **The role of the city magazine**

City magazines have a long and important history in the United States, and yet they are not often addressed in current research. By understanding their history and the roles these publications play in their communities, we can better see the overlaps in the goals of arts journalists and these city- and region-based publications.

The definition of a community is essential to the understanding of the role of city and regional magazines. Susan Currie Sivek stated in her 2014 article for Linfield College that, although geographical location is often studied as the basis for communities in regard to journalism, a shared interest or identity can also define a community (Sivek, 2014). This, she argued, is an important consideration for city magazine editors to consider when creating content for their publications. For example, in the case of city and regional magazines, cities and/or regions are the most obvious communities targeted by the publication. However, special interest communities can also be created through their coverage. Defined food scenes, art scenes, and neighborhoods with defined identities are all examples of how smaller communities can emerge from within a larger one.

The city magazine genre has more than one hundred years of history, much of it chronicled by Bartlett and Fallon's 1989 review of city magazines. Although this review of their history and roles stops 27 years short of today, it is a valuable resource to the understanding of how city magazines and their niche came to be. *Honolulu*, originally published under the name *Paradise of the Pacific*, has been around since 1888, and *Philadelphia* was first published in 1909 (Sivek, 2014). Both focused on a specific city as its community and have continued to carry that mission into the 21st century. However, the modern city magazine was not established until 1948, when publisher Edwin Self founded *San Diego* in San Diego, California. *San Diego* focused on local politics, arts, and other subjects, and was the first publication of its kind to do so. The magazine

was a success. In fact, it is still published to this day under the name *San Diego Magazine*. The idea, however, was slow to spread, and city magazines did not catch on until the 1960s and 1970s (Bartlett and Fallon, 1989). When they did spread, they boomed. According to Riley and Selnow's book, *Regional Interest Magazines of the United States*, which offers profiles and data about U.S. city and regional magazines, there were 920 city and regional magazines published between 1950 and 1988, with 470 still publishing in 1991 (Riley and Selnow, 1991). Such a complete study of the genre has not been conducted in the 25 years since Riley and Selnow's book was published, but city and regional magazines remain an important part of community journalism. The City and Regional Magazine Association alone has 74 member publications (<http://citymag.org/City-and-Regional-Magazine-Association/CRMA-Membership/Member-Directory/>).

In the nearly 70 years since Edwin Self began publishing *San Diego*, the local focus of these magazines' content has largely remained the same. The one marked change in nature of city and regional magazines is the change in target audiences throughout its history in order to appeal to advertisers with the money and desire to pay for print advertising. Greenberg described the idea of a "branded city identity" sold by magazines to readers in his "Branding cities: A social history of the urban lifestyle magazine." The magazines sell this idea to readers, and advertisers are interested in paying to be connected with that identity. While Greenberg's study was constructed by analyzing just three city and regional magazines (*Atlanta Magazine*, *Los Angeles Magazine*, and *New York Magazine*),

it can be readily applied to the industry as a whole (Greenberg, 2000). Even before Greenberg discussed the idea of branding a city through its local magazine, Hayes had introduced a similar but less loaded description of the role of city and regional magazines. He stated that the role of the city magazine is to keep residents of and stakeholders in certain cities and regions informed about news and culture that affects the defined city or region. These publications also act as “champions” for the cities they serve, providing readers with stories and images that foster their pride in their cities (Hayes, 1981). This early idea of the branded city suggests that the brand must always be positive. Whereas newspapers report on their cities, it could be said that city and regional magazines celebrate theirs. Joy Jenkins, also of the University of Missouri, has worked to better define this role and the roles of those who work at city and regional publications. Internally speaking, Jenkins has discussed the public and private interests of editors and the implications of these interests on the content of city magazines. Striking a balance between private-service content, which brings in both readers and advertising revenue, and public-service content, which falls more in line with the objective, journalistic role of the magazine, is essential creating a balanced and successful publication. (Jenkins, 2015). Jenkins has also discussed the role of city magazines in the context of their impact on communities. She argues that city magazines have the ability to disseminate a constructed reality of the location they seek to reflect based on the content they choose to include and the topics they choose to avoid. The general trend is to focus primarily on positive attributes of the

community and focus less on negative or problematic realities of a location. “This positive emphasis,” she writes, “contributes to the creation of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983), which provides citizens with a mass media-generated sense of place while also reflecting producers’ assumptions about geographic areas” (Jenkins, p. 320, 2016). The result is a slew of magazines that act as cheerleaders for their communities and that impart to readers a vision of their community that may only partially exist. This implies that city and regional magazines have a certain amount of power over the public image of their communities, at least to their readership. Jenkins, Hayes, and Greenberg all agree, in one way or another, that city and regional magazines have a tendency to project the image of their cities that they want people to see, and their research across three different decades suggests that this trend isn’t likely to go away anytime soon, even with publications in so many different communities across the country.

Jenkins analyzed issues of five city magazines in her study: *Los Angeles* magazine, *Cincinnati* magazine, *Portland Monthly*, *Memphis* magazine and *Indianapolis Monthly*. While those offer a wide range of communities and geographical locations, they are limited to city magazines for major metropolitan areas. In order to understand a wider array of publications this research will rely partially upon a series of reports published in *The Serials Librarian* which offer an array of city and regional magazines, their purposes, their content, their competition and their audiences. These reports, written primarily by Ladonne Delgado but sometimes with others, cover five regions of the United States: The

Rocky Mountain States, The Great Lakes States, The Great Plains States, The Middle Atlantic States, and The New England Area. In sum they cover 29 states and Washington, D.C. and act as a sort of field guide to American city and regional magazines. While they lack information on the South and the West Coast, the information they do include provides a solid base of knowledge about city and regional magazines on which to build through further research and later interviews. The collective information from these reports gives a fairly complete picture of the city and regional magazine landscape and the priorities of dozens of city and regional magazines across the country. The researcher will actively seek out notable publications from these regions to fill this gap in her own study and try to determine whether what was true for past researchers, who often focus on the publications of large, prominent cities such as Los Angeles and New York, is true in all cases.

As it stands, though, the current roles of city and regional magazines are two-fold. On one hand, they act as they have since the first city magazines emerged in Philadelphia, Hawaii and San Diego. They are publications that share news, stories and service of relevance to a particular community or communities. But beyond that, these publications also play an important role in defining their locations and populations. The image of a city and its people that a city or regional magazine projects is one that people will often believe, and that fact comes with a certain amount of responsibility for those creating the publications.

## **The state of arts journalism**

The state of arts journalism is influenced by several factors, including economics, self-identification among arts journalists and reader interest in the topics being covered. While the next section of this literature review focuses on issues regarding arts criticism, this section seeks to address the state of arts and culture journalism apart from criticism and establish its current state independent of the “critical crisis”.

This begins with the role of the arts journalist, which is different from that of the critic. Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen found in their survey of 20 arts journalists and editors that these writers and editors overwhelmingly view themselves differently than more general reporters for two reasons. First, they have a passion for their subjects that allows a certain amount of subjectivity in a profession that usually strives for objectivity. Second, they tend to see themselves in the role of crusader for the arts. They assert that these attitudes are directly linked to the goal of improving “public perception of the arts” (Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). This notion of the crusader for a specific community matches up with Hayes’ description of city and regional magazines as “champions” of their cities (Hayes, 1981). Arts journalists work to bolster the arts communities they cover, so a publication that seeks to do the same for the city it serves would

seem to be the ideal match for such a writer. Case closed. However, there are other ideas to consider.

*Reporting the arts* was the first ever comprehensive coverage of United States arts journalism. While it excluded magazines, it did analyze major newspapers, the primary medium for arts coverage at the time of its publishing. From this report several trends were discovered, and from them many future studies emerged. The key findings were these:

1. While a commitment to covering arts was seen in every publication, much of this coverage is simply listings of events.
2. Arts coverage was increasingly packaged into weekend supplements as opposed to daily/weekday coverage. The supplement packages tended toward listings, features, and reviews of the arts and shy away from news. Coverage of television, movies, music and books was most common. Coverage of visual arts, architecture, dance and radio received markedly less coverage.

The majority of this report focuses on community dailies and how they make decisions about their coverage. Though the newspapers obviously have different roles than city magazines, the community aspect of these publications makes the report's definition of the roles arts journalists valuable to this study. At the time of the report stories with staffer bylines were less common than event listings, newswire/syndicated stories and unbylined work. The inference here is that the role of the arts journalist at a community newspaper was shrinking. This inference

is confirmed by the *Reporting the arts II* findings, which not only showed a decrease in staffer bylines, but a decrease in arts stories as a whole (Szanto, Levy, and Tyndall, 1998 and 2004).

The role of the arts journalist was more recently examined by Jaakkola, who explores the role of the arts journalist in terms of two paradigms by which arts and culture content is produced: the generalist-informative (journalistic) paradigm and the specialist-evaluative (aesthetic) paradigm. When these two paradigms are reconciled, the result is newsworthy content that still stays true to the sensibilities of arts and culture writing (Jaakkola, 2012). Finding this balance and connecting with audiences that appreciate it is, perhaps, the key to the continuation of arts journalism and freedom from the “cultural crisis”, a concept that will be addressed later in this literature review. Allan M. Jallon, a long-time contributor to the *Los Angeles Times*, echoed the need for balance and new ways to connect with readers from an insider perspective in his discussion of the future of arts journalism with *Columbia Journalism Review*, stating that current arts journalism is struggling to reach audiences in its traditional format and admitting that traditional newspaper coverage of the arts may not be the only format in which it could succeed (Beckermann, 2005). Szanto, who also contributed to the *Reporting the arts* reports, and Janeway took this notion a step further and offered a solution to the issue in their article, “Arts, culture, and media in the United States”. The authors blamed the loss of the status arts journalism on business choices that put profit goals ahead of quality standards. These led to the “dumbing

down” of cultural coverage and opened the door for more “infotainment” pieces in major papers to appeal to a mass audience. The result of this is the opportunity for another media format to fill the gap in arts coverage left by the shift in newspapers’ content (Janeway and Szanto, 2003).

More than a decade after Janeway and Szanto’s study, weakness of content among newspapers is still an issue. While Janeway and Szanto suggested alt-weeklies as the solution to this problem, Cook and Darby suggested city magazines as the solution in their article, “County magazines: Pride, and a passion for print”. As newspaper resources shrink, city magazines have to opportunity to become more important sources of local information. They have the budgetary advantage over newspapers and the credibility advantage over user-generated content (Cook and Darby, 2013). Based on the sum of the literature that this researcher has analyzed, Cook and Darby’s solution makes the most sense in this researcher’s opinion. Not only do magazines have the advantage when it comes to budget, they also have readerships and values that align better with the culture of arts journalists than newspapers. This researcher’s future study seeks to further prove that arts coverage is of value to city and regional magazines and their readership not only because their values are similar, but also monetarily through partnerships with community organizations that share the goals of both the arts journalists and the publications. This idea is discussed by Suzanne Szucs in her report on a panel discussion of arts journalism. At this panel the question was posed, “Could we work with sponsors that shared our mission to grow the

audience for art?” (Szucs, 2015). The question was asked by a web producer, but could apply to city and regional magazines hoping to subsidize coverage of the arts in their own cities. Partnerships with arts collectives, museums, festivals, venue, etc., whether in advertising or some sort of special project could be valuable to editorial staffs and advertising staffs, as well as readers and the community being covered.

Arts journalism has a place and an audience in the United States, but it’s losing space and quality in newspapers. The implication of the texts discussed in this section is that arts journalism needs a new place to thrive. Magazines have an opportunity to take over the role once filled by newspapers when it comes to relaying arts coverage to the public, and the choice to fill that role could benefit everyone involved.

### **A critical crisis**

One of the most popular topics of study in regards to arts journalism over the past decade has been the so-called “cultural crisis” afflicting arts and culture journalism. What was once the crux of artistic success and failure no longer holds the power it once did. A shift away from actual critique and toward “descriptive” criticism that offers little value beyond context has upended the traditions paradigm of arts content. While the concept emerged more than 20 years ago, its discussion has increased over the past decade.

Whispers of a crisis in art criticism were appearing in the literature as early as the mid 1990s. Brenson wrote a piece for the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts in 1995 that addressed a crisis in journalistic criticism of art and outlined the problems facing critics of the time and noted the importance of their work to the wider context of the art world. He wrote:

“In short, journalistic criticism has an essential role to play in the artistic and cultural life of America. When it is as disengaged and self-absorbed as it is now, the entire artistic enterprise is weakened. Fewer artists, dealers, museums and alternative spaces are supported. Issues are not brought into the open, where a public conversation about them can take place, but allowed to fester,”  
(Brenson, 1995).

The problem then, was that these critics had an important role to play and either weren't performing or weren't being allowed to perform it. Most of the commentary on this issue seems to stem from information published in two places, both published after Brenson's piece: the original 1998 *Reporting the arts* report and the 2002 survey of art critics conducted by the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program. Both were affiliated with the Columbia program and concluded that evaluation, or actual judgement of art, had become the least important of a critic's jobs. Instead, critics were focusing on “accurate descriptions and contextualization” (Szanto, p. 9, 2002) and crafting pieces with literary qualities. The surveyed critics also tended toward positive reviews and

avoided negative criticism, hoping to champion their art communities and not detract from them. It appears from the survey that decrease in the importance of judgement also decreases the importance of a critic. Job security was a major worry among these writers, as well it should be. Major papers were operating without any critics at all, and arts sections were being cut significantly at the time.

From these original assessments of the state of art criticism many conversations on the topic have emerged. Most notable among these conversations is the discourse on the role of the contemporary art critic and whether there is still a place for the critic in arts journalism. Elkins and Newman note the popularity and the ineffectiveness of descriptive criticism and consider whether criticism should take on a larger role in academia as opposed to media (Elkins and Newman, 2007). This evaluation begins to explain the changing format of arts coverage throughout the second half of the 20th century. Jaakkola defines five major crises in the field of arts journalism and updates the state of the cultural crisis. From the discourse of other researchers, she determines that elitization, popularization, commercialization, journalistification and disengagement of and from arts coverage are the scourges affecting the state of the field. She also determines that further study of the practice of arts journalism is necessary in order to progress past the crises (Jaakkola, 2014).

One of the goals of this research is to address Jaakkola's assessment and understand how the field can progress into a role that is valuable to both producers of arts journalism and consumers of the content. The death of criticism

has opened the door to new, more generally accessible forms of arts journalism; the kinds of stories that could be embraced by city and regional magazines. By shifting away from critique and toward service and storytelling, these publications could re-engage their readership with the arts and better their communities in the process.

### **The role of the arts in communities**

The final concept that emerged from the literature relevant to this research is that of the roles the arts play in a community. While the arts are definitely of value, there is some disagreement about the power of the arts to create actual change and whose responsibility it is to take advantage of that value.

One of the major ideas introduced among this discourse is cultural democracy, which asserts that the collective determines culture. In his book, *Cultural Democracy*, James Bau Graves argues that the arts have positive effects on communities, but only if people choose to participate. And people only choose to participate in the arts if they received the messages and information that allows them to do so (Graves, 2004). By Graves' logic, the arts are an essential part of community improvement, and arts journalists essential members of the system through which communities better themselves. A more recent study by Brandice Palmer, aptly titled *Making the Arts Relevant*, sought to clarify this relationship. Palmer argues that the news media is responsible for sharing vital information with communities, but they are currently failing to communicate opportunities to

participate in and benefit from the arts to readers (Palmer, 2012). There is an opportunity here for city and regional magazines to succeed where news media has failed. The positive effects of community interaction with the arts as presented by Palmer could be a valuable public service for city and regional magazines to perform.

There is some disagreement about the value of the arts to communities, or at least about the nature of that value. Art itself does not do the work of facilitating social change or even just effects. That work must be done by people, though they can use discussion of the arts and its meanings in order to help this cause. Jensen wrote in *Is Art Good for Us?* that art has served many roles throughout American history, and has often been turned to to make social points (Jensen, 2002). But he, unlike many others, does not agree with those who raise the status of the arts to that of an elixir or cure-all. Art can't fix social problems; it can only help guide people toward addressing them. The contemporary notion of arts as an "elixir" to social ills is in many ways flawed, but in some ways it echoes Graves' thinking. While art cannot fix things on its own, interaction with the arts can be used as a way to bring people together and breach important social conversations. Jensen's book asks the question, "Is art good for us?" The answer is simple, if not entirely, helpful. Yes, but only if people want it to be.

The arts help people in one way or another. That much is true. They provide escape, they foster conversation, and they open people up to cultures apart from their own. Whether or not they can fix actual problems is up for

debate, but the fact that people benefit from participation in them is not. It is, then, the responsibility of local media to connect people with and inform them of those opportunities. If newspapers are going to continue to decrease the amount of space allocated for arts coverage and replace arts content with things like movie listings and concert dates, it falls to someone else to broaden the scope. City and regional magazines have the potential fill that need.

### **Gatekeeping theory and application to the study of arts journalism**

Although it is most often applied to newspapers, gatekeeping theory can be easily applied to the production of and processes related to city and regional magazines. It has already been used to better understand the arts, specifically music journalists, by researcher Kelsey Whipple. Whipple's process, though different, can help inform future methods of application of the theory to a more broad arts-related group.

Gatekeeping theory was first introduced via Kurt Lewin's exploration of channel theory in the 1940s, and was adapted for the study of news transmission by David Manning White in 1950. More recently, Shoemaker and Vos explained the concept of journalists as gatekeepers and listed five levels of analysis for consideration: the individual level, the communications routines level, the organizational level, the social institutions level, and the social systems level (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). This research plans to discuss multiple levels of the theory and how they relate to the choices made by city and regional magazines in

regard to arts coverage, specifically the communication routines, the organizational and the social system levels of analysis.

In studies which focus on communication routines, the units of analysis are the routines with which work is accomplished. These could be codes of ethics, processes by which stories are pitched, and regular ways in which information about the arts is gathered or shared with journalists. Moving outward, the organizational level of analysis, which is most often used in gatekeeping studies, focuses on specific media products as units of analysis and their characteristics as variables. In the context of this research these units would be the individual city magazines chosen for study and their attributes. The final level of analysis this research intends to focus on is the macro level of social systems. These systems can encompass any number of major systems, but the intent of this research is to consider cities targeted by selected city and regional magazines as the units of analysis (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009).

The ability of this theory to be applied to arts journalism is partially informed by the 2011 thesis written by Kelsey Whipple, also a University of Missouri graduate student. Whipple's study examined the ways in which music writers considered (and did not consider) their readers when covering music for national magazines and one prominent alternative weekly, *The Village Voice*. While her research considered music writers as the gatekeepers, this researcher's future study will consider both the people producing arts stories and the people

and processes through which the producers receive arts information as gatekeepers.

The goal of the application of this theory to arts coverage by city and regional magazines is to expand the knowledge gained from Whipple's study beyond music writers and national magazines and focus instead on arts journalists in general among city and regional magazines. This answers both Whipple's call for further research in the arts beyond music coverage and Shoemaker and Vos' call for cross-level analysis when applying gatekeeping theory to a subject.

### **Summary**

While little literature on the relationship between arts journalism and city and regional magazines exists, information on the topic can be gleaned from the discourse surrounding the previously outlined topics of analysis. The role of city and regional magazines, it seems, is to champion their communities in a way which satisfies both their editorial goals and the needs of advertisers looking to reach an affluent and well-educated audience. This role matches up nicely with the goals of arts journalists, who typically act as crusaders for the arts and avoid negatively impacting their specific arts communities. These journalists, however, have separate roles from art critics, despite the fact that they are often lumped together. Criticism is no longer a major element of arts journalism, as the importance of judgement in this criticism has waned in the contemporary era. Critics are more often creating content that contextualizes and describes art, and

these pieces are not given the same status as art criticism in previous era. Arts writers, critics, and city and regional magazines all impact the status of art in communities, and this status plays different roles across various cities. However, it is generally agreed upon that art can positively affect communities in one way or another, and journalism is a conduit for the information that allows communities to participate in the arts. With these roles and the current climate in arts journalism in mind, the future research will apply gatekeeping theory to produce a cross-level analysis of arts journalism at city and regional magazines to identify the value of this content to the medium.

**Research questions:**

From the previously outlined literature and the gaps apparent within it, three main research questions have emerged:

1. Why do city and regional magazines cover the arts in the ways that they do?
2. What value does arts coverage have for city and regional magazines and their readership?
3. How does perceived value of arts content affect the choices arts writers and editors make for their city and regional magazines?

### **CHAPTER III: Methodology**

The goal of this research was to answer the aforementioned research questions in order to better understand the choices made by writers and editors in regards to arts journalism at city and regional magazines. This study used gatekeeping theory, primarily on the communication routines, the organizational and the social system levels of analysis. In an attempt to understand the topic of this research on these multiple levels of analysis, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with top editors and editors of arts and culture content at city and regional magazines across the country. The structure of these interviews allowed participants to explore issues that they felt were relevant and important while still giving the researcher the opportunity to ask questions that she felt were important to the course of her study (Longhurst, 2016). The exception to this format was one interview conducted via email, which was less than ideal. However, this was done after many attempts to schedule a phone interview and after already conducting a significant interview with the other staff member from the

publication, which would have had to have been abandoned without its pair.

Kelsey Whipple (2011) conducted one of the few similar studies to this research for her master's thesis. Whipple's study focused specifically on music journalists who worked in some capacity with a magazine or alt-weekly and examined their relationships with audiences by applying gatekeeping theory at the communication routines and organizational levels of analysis. This analysis was facilitated by semi-structured, in-depth interviews gathered either by purposive or snowball sampling. These choices made opportunistic questioning and the freedom to add sources based on referral by previously selected sources possible (Whipple, 2011). This methodology provided a helpful model for this researcher's own methods, which, while tailored to a different topic, required similar contact methods and interviewing strategies. While Whipple's study sought to understand music journalists' relationships to their readership, this researcher's study attempted to understand arts journalists' relationships to their communities and publications. Whipple's discussion of further research based on her own work touched on the necessity of more study of the roles of arts journalists across the divides of the discipline (i.e. music, visual arts, performing arts, etc.) (Whipple, p. 85). The research that follows hoped to address those roles and thus help answer some of the questions left unanswered by Whipple's study.

In order to gain access to the sources for the series of interviews that informed this research, the researcher used both personal connections to city and regional magazine staff members and resources available to her through the Missouri School of Journalism. Sources were chosen from a variety of publications that represented the varied cultural climates of the United States. The researcher contacted *Seattle Met*, *5280* (Denver), *St. Louis Magazine*, *Baltimore*, *Atlanta* and *Memphis*. No representative of *Atlanta* ever responded. These publications were chosen based on existing connections between the staffs and the researcher, as well as for their diversity of location and the size and nature of their arts communities. Contact information for the relevant sources from each of these publications was available on the City and Regional Magazine Association website ([www.citymag.org](http://www.citymag.org)) and/or each magazine's website. Contacts made through previous publication visits and through this research's chair were also used. It is worth noting that New York city and regional publications, most notably *The New Yorker* and *New York Magazine*, are excluded from this list. This is because, while they are technically city magazines, their intended audience stretches far beyond their local readership. The sources were asked about several subjects relating to the overarching research questions of this study. These include:

- RQ1: Why do city and regional magazines cover the arts in the ways that they do?

- How do they define the arts?
- What are the processes by which they discover and produce arts content?
- What is the role of arts content in the publication?
- What is the role of an arts writer at the publication?
- RQ2: What perceived value does arts coverage have for city and regional magazines and their readership?
  - What do they feel their role is in the arts community?
  - How would they describe the quality of their arts content?
- RQ3: How does perceived value of arts content affect the choices arts writers and editors make for their city and regional magazines?
  - How important are the arts to their audiences and communities?
  - What value does arts content have to the publication?
  - How much arts content is being produced?

Both top editors and editors of arts content specifically were chosen in order to discern the goals of the publication as a whole in regards to the arts and the reality of producing these pieces. While the aforementioned topics are essential to interviews conducted for this study, further discussion of the topics and concepts relevant to this study will be determined by the course of the interviews. The specific sources with which the researcher conducted interviews are:

- James Ross Gardner, Editor-in-Chief and Darren Davis, Assistant Editor (Arts), *Seattle Met*

- Geoff Van Dyke, Editorial Director and Kasey Cordell, Front of Book Editor, *5280*
- Jarrett Medlin, Editor-in-Chief and Stefene Russell, Culture Editor, *St. Louis Magazine*
- Max Weiss, Managing Editor and Gabriella Souza, Arts and Culture Editor, *Baltimore* (left position in Nov. 2017)
- Kenneth Neill, Publisher/Editor and Chris Davis, Senior Editor (*Flyer*)/Staff Writer, *Memphis*

These sources were chosen as a purposeful, maximum variation sample of U.S. city and regional magazines. This sampling strategy was chosen based on its definition as the approach that allows a researcher to “identify important common patterns that cut across variation,” (Yin, 1994, p. 33). The variations in this study are geographical location, readership, staff size, editorial budget and the nature of each city’s arts communities.

The number of interviews necessary for this study was determined based on past studies of arts journalists. Whipple’s study was based on 10 interviews, while Harries’ and Wahl-Jorgensen’s study (2007) was based on 20 interviews. These studies have similar content to the research being proposed, but they also focused on much larger communities of arts journalists with a greater variance among them. Whipple focused on music journalists across all types of magazines, and Harries and Jorgensen focused on arts journalists in general. This study was originally proposed with plans to cover nine publications for a total of 18 interviews, but narrowed to five publications and 10 interviews on the advice of the

committee. Because the community of arts journalists based at city and regional magazines is smaller than either of the previously mentioned groups, this researcher believes that the 10 editors from five publications selected from city and regional magazines across the country was enough to gather sufficient data, especially considering the knowledge these editors have of the industry as a whole.

This methodology was directly influenced by the suggestions from Shoemaker and Vos' writing regarding 21st-century gatekeeping studies. The authors suggested that studies using news content as the dependent variable should be conducted moving forward, and this research followed that concept using arts content in a specific medium. The authors also noted the need for cross-level gatekeeping studies (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009), which this research accomplished by looking at the three previously mentioned levels of analysis. It is hoped that the results of this study helped to fill some of the gaps in gatekeeping theory as addressed by Shoemaker and Vos, and may facilitate further study in this area specifically regarding magazine journalism. Better understanding the ways magazines cover the arts and purposes of that coverage both establishes the perceived importance and relevance of the arts across communities and has the potential to help city and regional publications to improve and/or expand upon their coverage of the arts in their communities. One key feature of this research is the understanding of perception and value in

regard to the conclusions drawn from these interviews. While much of this research deals with the relationships between arts journalists, their readers, and the communities they serve, it is essential to remember that these are the editors' perceptions of their reality, and while they are informed by interaction and relationships with the other communities, those communities were not interviewed. The value they are discussing is also often intangible. While the idea of value is often tied to monetary concepts, the value discussed here was almost always detached from profit.

## CHAPTER IV: Results

### What are the arts?

It would be difficult to discuss the ways in which arts content at city and regional magazines is being created and the quality and effects of said content without first defining exactly what arts coverage is. During the course of their interviews, each subject of this study was asked how they define the arts. While some very directly listed the areas covered by the arts and culture or equivalent section of their publications, others went more abstract with the concept and expounded upon the idea of the arts themselves and their greater significance. Stefene Russell of *St. Louis Magazine*, for example, listed music, performing arts, visual arts, literature, fairs and festivals, and history under the umbrella of arts and culture. Chris Davis of *Memphis* defined the arts as “a way of seeing and organizing information and how it’s applied to various mediums. Film was included by some and not by others, and chess was mentioned as having a home among the arts by staff members from two different cities. The definition is, in a word, broad. From the commonalities among the staff members interviewed, this researcher has come up with something of a universal definition of the arts as they apply to a magazine dedicated to covering a specific city or region. The umbrella of the arts can be applied to any person, place, thing or action that enriches the cultural fabric of a

community to enable members of that community to express themselves through a creative medium. This definition extends as far as a writer or editor can defend it. Chris Davis of *Memphis* for example pointed out issues with institutional definitions of the arts when discussing what arts writing should entail. While donors and boards dictate where money goes in regard to arts in many communities, there are many facets of that community which are not organized or traditionally considered in the list one might give for what is included in arts and culture. Davis pointed to stand-up comedians, tattoo artists, sign painters, clowns and knitters as examples of those who probably deserve to be examined by arts and culture coverage but can be overlooked by their communities, and even by themselves. The duty to curate what is included in their sections based on this definition then lies with the editors of city and regional publications.

### **Arts stories and the people who write them**

While their opinions of what should be and what is included in the coverage of their cities' arts communities differs, the processes through which stories are discovered are largely the same from city to city. Writers and editors rely on events calendars maintained by venues, institutions and the city, as well as events postings that live on social media, to fill their own calendars. They, like the writers and editors on any beat, also regularly hear from public relations representatives, agents and communications teams, who send press releases or story pitches directly to them. But apart from these mostly passive vehicles for

story generation, arts writers and editors rely on the trust and understanding of the arts community in their city to stay abreast of the goings on in their area. City and regional publications often work months in advance and are at the mercy of the information available to them at the time of publication. This poses problems for coverage based around events, such as theater performances, concerts and gallery shows, details of which often aren't available or even decided upon at the time stories need to be pitched or written. It is for this reason that publications tend to focus on more permanent fixtures of their communities, and maintaining relationships among those is essential to the success of the publication's arts coverage and their role in the community. "I want somebody that is going to go out there and know the art world and not just the obvious, the big institutions, but also the small galleries and the small art spaces and the underground arts scene as well," says Max Weiss of *Baltimore*. "That just requires leg work, building trust, asking a lot of questions."

Editors' and writers' access to the arts community and the information and ideas they carry is directly dependent on relationships built between the two. Trust in and perception of the publication is essential to writers and editors trying to pluck stories from the vast territory covered by the arts. "The arts scene requires that you go out and experience quite a lot, and I think that's something that people don't realize," says Gabriella Souza of *Baltimore*. In discussing the processes by which she discovers stories in the city, she noted that the most important thing is on-on-one contact with her sources and constant participation

in the scene she's tasked to cover due to a "requirement of personal interest" in the community. If members of the arts community don't see her participating in what they're creating, then that can reflect poorly on the magazine and herself. But the flip side of that is being valued by those she covers to the point that some gallery owners will shoot her a text before each opening they're planning. Even if she can't make it to each one (and no one person could), she's got a personal connection to rely on for information.

Beyond finding the stories themselves, choosing writers who have the background knowledge to understand the arts community and the ability to tell stories in a way that takes the arts down from the pedestal upon which they are often placed and present them in an interesting and engaging way that can provide a service to reader is a task that some editors find difficult. As *St. Louis Magazine* arts editor Stefene Russell put it, the problem isn't so much finding arts stories as finding the experts who can report on, write about and intelligently discuss the arts in a way that makes sense. Editors have a responsibility to cover the arts and do it in a way that all of their readers can appreciate and learn something from. Balancing institutional minutiae and reader service in an interesting and coherent way is essential, and it's not always easy to find a voice that can find the right combination. "It's difficult to find somebody who's got a very approachable style, who can help people who don't have an insane background in [the arts] understand a certain exhibit," says Souza. "So that's what I'm looking for, is a good voice, a good style and also a good knowledge base that kind of brings it

in.”

The inability to balance expertise and approachable writing is part of a wider problem arts and culture sections face across the board. In some way or another, every editor interviewed for this research brought up the issue of a lack of resources, whether that be time, knowledge or manpower. When asked to evaluate the quality of the arts content being produced by their publications, these editors usually praised the quality of the writing and their ability to provide a service to their readers and their community. But despite their satisfaction with the quality of what is being produced, they almost all wish they could be doing more and creating content that goes more in depth. The time required to establish connections and trust within the prolific words covered by the arts and cover everything that it produces is impossible for a single person. Geoff Van Dyke of *5280* lamented the lack of writers who are truly “living in [the art] world” and able to bring back stories that only a real member of that community could get:

“I think the challenge for us is not having a writer or a reporter who just is really living in that world and knows all the players and can find stories that only he or she would be able to find living in that world. And we aren’t yet living in that world. We find great stories, and we pride ourselves on really making sure, especially in the front of the book with the shorter stories where it can be easier to find a press release and make some phone calls and then you have 250 word piece - we really, really try to avoid doing that. But I wish we could find stories that were a little unique and the type of stories that can only come from being immersed in that world. And because we have editors who are wearing a bunch of hats and juggling a bunch of different responsibilities they can’t be doing that, they necessarily can’t be living in that world. So that’s

our biggest challenge and that goes to the point of getting these folks that used to be at the *Post* [which recently let many of its critics and arts writers go], or used to be at other publications or have recently moved to Denver from elsewhere and covered the arts, to have them be able to come to us.”

Van Dyke attempts to solve this problem through a sort of informal beat system in which those with previous knowledge and interests in a topic took unofficial responsibility for that area – they become the point person for a specific genre or community, but that role is still a secondary part of their job. Others have developed relationships with designated freelancers with specific knowledge, as is the case at *St. Louis*. While Russell is the only designated person covering the arts in house, she’s established a network of freelancers who can cover film, music, history and art using background knowledge not easily accessible to the average writer or in-house intern.

A common problem among interviewees was having to make a sort of Sophie’s Choice between producing a larger amount of surface level arts stories or a creating a more limited number of stories that examine trends, go in-depth with people or groups or provide a wealth of service to readers unfamiliar with the community.

Darren Davis of *Seattle Met* has attempted to deal with this problem by making shifts in the format of the print products’ art pages. Prior to his taking over in July, the arts editor at *Seattle Met* was part time, and the print content being produced was primarily listings. After taking over, Davis swapped out one page of the arts listings for a 500-700 word story. “I think it looks great. I think

I'm pretty proud of it. I think that's the right direction if you want to be more of like a voice versus just like a calendar," Davis says. Even with this new vehicle to share more stories and fewer events listings, Davis still says there's room to improve the breadth of *Seattle Met's* coverage. His answer echoes the issue most of these editors face in trying to keep readers informed and entertained while still performing their duty to cover such a wide-ranging community within their cities.

"There's so much going on in the city there's only so much I can keep up with, so I might look to the alt-weekly here in Seattle and they have a visual art person. They have a theater person. They have a music person. They have a film person. And that allows them to kind of have a wide breadth and a deeper kind of content well than one editor. So I think that if there's a way that we can improve it's either me finding a way to have the bandwidth to cover more things or to bring other voices in who can speak more to certain things ... And that is something that is a challenge of resources, but it's something that I think we can improve upon."

The sheer number of writers a publication can afford to employ compared to the wide variety of happenings going on in the art scene ensures that some things are going to get missed. Kasey Cordell of *5280* wished she could have had someone in city meetings about an ongoing public art project. Souza was disappointed at the number of gallery openings missed due to time constraints. Russell wanted more balance between large events and grassroots artistic endeavors across the city. But there's no way to get it all. So how does one choose what gets skipped? The answer may lie outside of the city and regional publications themselves and in the roles of their fellow writers and editors across their cities.

### **Whose job is it to cover what?**

The question of the duties of a city's alt-weekly versus those of a city and regional magazine were not planned as part of this research, but popped up organically so often that it's worth mentioning how these other publications help craft the roles of those discussed. As newspapers' arts coverage has declined and city magazines have worked to balance their monthly timeline with their role as a source of information for the city, alt-weeklies have taken some of the pressure of day-to-day coverage off of city and regionals. Several editors brought up the advantages of having an alt-weekly in their market to handle breaking stories and week-by-week openings and closings, giving editors at monthly publications the ability to dive deeper into subjects and feel able to divert resources from smaller stories without the worry that they won't get told.

“I think a benefit of being a general interest magazine is - I had mentioned that alt-weekly in Seattle. People look to the alt weekly for a different thing than they look for in a Seattle Met. So, I think that we are given a little bit more leeway to have a more restricted coverage than something like an alt weekly.”

Gabriella Souza of *Baltimore* magazine echoed this point, as well as the roles of other city publications in shaping the coverage of the city magazine. Baltimore exists in a market with a daily newspaper, an arts-specific quarterly with a more timely web presence and, until its folding in November, an alt-weekly.

“One thing that I think I've really tried to think about and tried to emphasize in my coverage is that

our coverage is going to look very different from *The Sun's*, it's also going to look different from *City Paper*. And then there's *BMore Art*, which in some ways has been our saving grace, because people who were coming to us I think expecting this critical analysis now have a place to go ... [*BMore Art's*] website is actually the most impressive thing I would say. The website though, in terms of like fulfilling a need or servicing a community, her website is great and has helped us a lot. Because then we can scale back and we don't have to be the expert voice ... I think there were times [when] there was a competition feeling between *The Sun*, *City Paper* and us. And there's not a need for that, because we don't cover things the same way. Sure, we want to get the story first, that's not what I'm saying, but stylistically we don't have to beat them all the time."

In freeing themselves from the need to constantly break news or cover every event, arts editors are able to better focus their limited resources on the types of stories they need and want to be producing: the trend pieces, the in-depth explorations of people and venues and work, the time-intensive service packages that connect readers to their arts community.

### **A city's curators**

Most editors interviewed for this research described their role in covering arts and culture in their cities as curatorial. Like the museums, galleries and theatres that they cover, these editors have to pick and choose who and what receives coverage in their print and digital products. The second function most of these editors feel they fulfill is as a sort of translator for the general public. Finding significance in and connecting people to the arts in a way that the average reader can understand

requires specific knowledge and an understanding of what can sometimes be difficult personalities. While they use a comparison to a curator as opposed to a gatekeeper, the function of these editors remains the same. Information comes to them from the arts community, they choose what information is worthy of coverage and what can be done with the resources they have, the information reaches the community established by their readers, and the actions of the readers and the community as a whole affects the success of the arts community. The results of this series of interviews explored the value of arts content to three specific groups: the publication itself, the arts community of the city it covers and the community as a whole. The ways these different groups affect one another and interact shape city and regional publications and the communities that rely upon them for information and exposure.

Part of the value of arts content to city and regional publications themselves is that it fulfills part of their duty to the city. And we'll get to that. But one element of value this researcher had not anticipated was the inspiration the arts bring to the print product as a whole. Multiple editors brought up design and aesthetics when asked what value the arts bring to their magazines. *Baltimore* managing editor Max Weiss explained this in terms of the strengths of magazines in general when compared with other types of publications:

“Because we’re a magazine, and we are a much more visual medium than a newspaper, that gives us a wonderful opportunity to take wonderful photography. Whether it’s that we get a story about young dancers that get the Peabody and so we get an amazing photo of dancers, or we’re doing this

story about an artist and we can show you not just the artist, but also her work. Two things that magazines can do much better than newspapers, for example, are that we can dig a lot deeper. Beyond just ‘this is what’s happening.’ ‘Go see this event.’ We can do sort of a deep dive into that person and their art and what makes them tick. But we also can really accompany that with beautiful images to really drive that home. A part of it is just simply flipping through the magazine as well. You’re not just going to learn about the arts community of Baltimore and what’s happening in the arts world, but you’re going to see art. You’re going to be edified and see something beautiful ... I love to beautify the magazine. I think the magazine, as you know, is a tactile experience. So, if you’re flipping through a magazine and you’re seeing beautiful art, that enhances your appreciation of the magazine and also of your own city.

*St. Louis* editor Jarrett Medlin echoed this sentiment, saying that, “For the designers, writers, photographers, and editors who create the publication, the arts inspire the very fabric of the publication.” This value, like much of what will be discussed in the coming pages, is not monetary, but perceived. When it comes to the value of arts content in dollars and cents, it’s hard to say where it falls. The editors interviewed agreed that, as far as online clicks, arts stories are not the ones being clicked most often. That honor universally goes to food and dining content. After all, everybody eats – not everyone attends the symphony. But as far as interest and appreciation on the part of their readers, Russell makes an interesting point about the *St. Louis* community that would seem to extend to others. While she says arts stories are not the ones people tend to reach out about (This sentiment was echoed by several editors. They don’t hear complaints about their

arts coverage, but they don't hear praise either.) These readers may be more interested in the content than they realize or would put down on a reader survey. Russell referenced a study by the regional arts commission that examined how many people are going out and participating in the arts in St. Louis and how much money that generates. According to this study, the arts generated more money than sports, and this in a city that until recently had NHL, NFL and MLB teams, as well as multiple college teams and minor league soccer, baseball and rugby teams. "There are people that might not consider themselves art aficionados, but who go to the theater all the time, at least the Muny. St. Louis is sort of a family-oriented town," she says. People are constantly participating in the arts, but don't necessarily see themselves as members of or active participants in that community if their experience is outside of what they see as "high art" or the major institutions in their cities.

### **Weaving together the cultural fabric of a city**

The value of arts coverage to the communities defined by city and regional magazines is primarily theoretical, but decisions about arts coverage are being made based the way editors understand their audiences to be. Their theories are what matters in terms of their curatorial role in the city. Most editors interviewed see the value in two ways. On one hand, and as previously mentioned, they don't see the enthusiasm for the arts from their readers that they see in response to other subjects. But almost all of them see covering the arts as an endeavor that has

value to society as a whole, even if people do not realize it. “The arts enrich our entire community – no matter the ethnicity, income, gender, age, creed, or sexual orientation – in myriad ways,” say Medlin. “The arts shed new light on today’s most pressing issues, illuminate timeless lessons, build community, and enhance our day-to-day living in ways we often don’t fully appreciate.” The richness of life in a city is partially defined by the arts in that city, and showing the people of that community what their neighbors are doing and creating and offering them ways to participate in those things keeps them informed about the cultural fabric of their home. Perception of a city by the people who live there is essential to the identity of the place. In this way, people cannot fully understand their home without being acquainted with its artists, musicians, actors, writers, poets and designers. I really do think that arts coverage is really important to how a city views itself and how others perceive the city,” Weiss says. “I think it adds so much to the enrichment of life in a city and a county. And because so much of what we are doing here at the magazine is reflecting Baltimore’s best self back at itself, I think it’s absolutely critical.”

Being a vehicle for readers to acquaint themselves with the city in or around which they live was a common theme among the editors interviewed for this study. Nearly all of them brought up the ways in which they were responsible for reflecting the entire population of a city and celebrating it. The caveat there is avoiding taking a sort of chamber of commerce or department of tourism stance and avoiding criticism, but in general these editors see themselves as able to show

people what is good and interesting and exciting about their homes. “Our job is to connect with the people and serve [the part of] the population that really honestly believes that there is something special about where they live. That’s what we strive to do,” says Kenneth Neill, editor and publisher of *Memphis*.

Some editors take this role even further and see it as essential in the wider scheme of the community and the country. Russell views art coverage as a vehicle for people to expand their horizons and views, and in this way better participate in democracy:

“I just believe that the arts are part of the democracy. So, it’s like dreaming forward. We can see where we’re going as a society. I think it keeps us honest. I think it gives us morals. It keeps us ethical. And then having that creative, imaginative aspect of life is just so important. I think life sucks without it, really. And so, I feel like [the arts in a city] are very vital. And I know the arts are under attack on every side currently. Like I said, maybe I’m old fashioned, but they’re such a vital part of being a human being. And maybe that’s a lofty thing for a city magazine editor to say, but I think that in these cheesy little top five posts, if it gets somebody out and makes people think, it’s a quality of life thing for people.”

Those “cheesy little top five posts” of events where people can go during the week may not look like much, or feel like much to those writing them, but they provide and service to readers, artists and venues. They get people out exploring their cities and enriching their lives, and in turn help the success of the people and venues that the magazines choose to include. Weiss takes that one step further, saying that people do not even have to attend to get something out of the humble

event post. Just knowing what is going on makes people feel better about their city, and maybe even themselves. “A long time ago, someone said to me, even if the people don’t participate in the things that they see in the magazine, they like to know about it. They like to know about the things that are happening in their city. They like to feel informed and edified and maybe even a little cooler because they know about the cool things that are happening in their town.” So while magazines perform a literal service of informing their readers about cultural events and goings on that they can participate in throughout the city, they also act as a sort of confidence boost. In seeing all that is happening around their cities, people feel better about the place that they live and it becomes better due to that perception. The knowledge that you can, at any time, go out and do something or see something that enriches your life is of benefit to the city and all its inhabitants. James Ross Gardner of *Seattle Met* described being a source of information about the arts in Seattle as an essential part of the lifestyle brand the magazine has created. Being a member of the Seattle community, as he sees it, includes access to art, events and people that add to the cultural value of the city.

### **A portal into the city’s arts communities**

The relationship most emphasized by the editors interviewed for this study was far and away the one between the magazine and the arts community. They take their role as curators for the city very seriously, and are aware of how the choices they make affect the success of the cultural institutions and individual artists in

their cities. While service journalism is primarily meant to perform a service for readers – to show them things to do, inform them about a trend or generally get them out participating in something – it is also a service to those included. Promotion of participation in the arts drives readers to their communities’ artists, venues, etc. and enables that community to continue to grow and thrive. And enabling that success in turn benefits the community as a whole. Russell extended this point to her argument for the arts as a part of a healthy democracy:

“I just feel like having the ability to support local artists, you know, just enable them to keep doing what they’re doing and sometimes just a little bit of media coverage can really make the difference. Whether you’re a musician or a painter or a dancer. You know, that stuff goes into grant applications and it goes into media packets. It really can...it really is the difference between having an art scene and not having an arts scene. And I believe that having an arts scene is a part of having a healthy democracy.”

But acting as a “portal for the arts community,” as one editor put it, seems to be the primary function these publications feel they have in regard to their relationships with their arts communities. The same problem that requires editors to find writers who can bring arts personalities and concepts down from their ivory towers is a problem of public perception for the arts community. People normally put off by the unfamiliar nature of an exhibition, performance or personality can be introduced to it in a way that makes it more approachable for those who might not otherwise participate without some explanation or initiation. Souza gave the example of *Baltimore*’s October 2016 Fall Arts package, which

covered artist-run spaces. These niche, experimental and warehouse-esque venues are not where the average person would flock to if they wanted to see some art. They are small and off the beaten path, but they are where artists get their starts and where new trends and pieces emerge. They are a vital part of the city's arts scene, but they go unnoticed or unappreciated by the many community members who are either outside of the arts scene or intimidated by their nontraditional format. To tackle that barrier to the public, Souza created a package that tackles the subject from a few angles. It offers an introduction to the spaces in general, a map to guide people through a DIY art walk, introductions to the faces behind the venues and tips on how to approach a first visit to an artist-run or warehouse space. The result is a comprehensive, service-heavy guide that demystifies a subset of the city's arts community and makes it more accessible for the average reader.

“Art can be a little bit scary because it's taking you places you um might not want to go. And you just kind of have to handhold a little ... I actually did a sidebar that was like, 'This is how you do it. If you freak out, this is what you do. Bring your kids or your friend, go talk to the person taking the money or whatever. They'll help you! But I feel like that was almost necessary with a story like that. It's not easy.’”

Acting as a point of contact between the arts communities and their readers puts these magazines in a unique position to be essential to both parties. They lead readers to art spaces, and the people involved with these art spaces realize the value of this service and continue to provide the magazines with the information

they need to continue to help readers experience the arts in their communities. Call them translators, curators or gatekeepers, but these editors are helping to bridge the gap between a city's population and their arts community. "Our job is in some ways to become ... a point of access for readers who would otherwise maybe not give a gallery to a particular artist a second glance," Cordell says. "I think our job is to make the arts accessible to an audience that might have some type of trepidation about it for any reason."

### **Preservation of a part of the culture**

The fostering of the arts in a city is key to the cultural life of the city not only in the present, but going forward. Kenneth Neill of *Memphis* brought up a point of value in city and regional magazines' arts coverage that this researcher did not originally consider, which is in acting as a vehicle of a city's cultural preservation. Neill considers *Memphis* a "newspaper of record," excusing the fact that it is a magazine and not an actual paper. But Memphis' newspaper is no longer produced in the city. It is owned by Gannett and produced outside of the community itself. Neill feels that the paper's detachment from the community puts them in the position to be responsible for chronicling the cultural life of the city for future generations. "We're making sure that the arts are covered particularly, so that people can look back and say, 'Look at that guy, he was such-and-such artist,'" he says. We do a lot of things with a sense of responsibility that we feel we have ... We have to make sure they don't get forgotten when people

pass.” Chris Davis, also of *Memphis*, spoke to arts coverage ability to preserve the city’s arts community for the future as well, but in a much more literal sense. He offered the example of Overton Square, a theater and entertainment district of Memphis that first rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s on the backs of the era’s counterculture. As the area became more and more popular, the property was bought up by out-of-town groups with no regard for the cultural value of the place. Parts of it were left to wither without tenants who could afford rent increases. The exception to this decay were the arts institutions in the area, which thrived and grew thanks to efforts to secure local ownership and expand the district. Davis says people have seen the role that the arts can play in positively impact their communities, and thus take hold of an appreciate arts coverage from their local publications, especially following the demise of their local paper’s ability to cover their arts community due to layoffs and freelancer cuts.

“People believe their eyes when they see a new, enormous ballet in Memphis opening on the corner that used to house a derelict hotel. It’s difficult to deny the role that the arts have played in bringing a city that suffered from sprawl and decay and helping to knit back together a lot of that connective tissue ... There is this spine of people who get and understand and see that arts matter in ways that aren’t related to just seeing a pretty picture or a play that was funny ... This community understands that, and as a result they value arts coverage ... People are grabbing onto what’s left, and you can see that they feel it’s really important.”

In this way coverage of the arts becomes a facet of impact journalism. It helps to keep a part of the community that betters the city as a whole alive and able to put

more good back into the world around it. And from there city and regional magazines can continue to show the community all the good they are doing and reflect the city's best self back at it. It's a cycle, and one that benefits everyone involved. *Baltimore's* Max Weiss perhaps said it best. "It's one of these things where it's good for everybody," she says. "It's good for the city. It's good for the magazine. It's good for the reader. It's good for the artist. It's good for the art community. There's literally no downside to it."

## CHAPTER V: Discussion

So is there actual monetary value to covering the arts? Maybe a little.

There are arts institutions, businesses and individuals throughout these cities who may choose to advertise based on the magazine's coverage of the arts and importance to their target audience. And events coverage and arts service pieces will never do as well as food coverage online, but they get plenty of clicks and generate the fractions of cents that those earn the publication. A more concrete answer to the profitability of the arts will have to come from quantitative data and someone else's research. But as far as the perceived value of art coverage, it is clear from this sample of some of the country's city magazine editors and writers that there is an enthusiastic home for arts coverage at their publications. Nearly everyone hopes to do more, and can see that they have the space to do it. A lack of resources can impede their abilities, but several editors are taking active steps to expand their coverage anyway, looking to writers let go by other publications and experts in their communities for voices that can do justice to the community they look to serve.

The most significant thing gleaned from this research has been the understanding of how important a city's magazine and arts community are to one another. "Hopefully the arts community counts on us or knows they can count on us or they can depend on us," says Weiss. "We're vital to them and they're vital

to us.” Together they help each other succeed, inspire one another and weave together the cultural fabric of a city. One concern that arises here is that arts journalists in some way act as PR for the arts communities, or lack the necessary critical eye when approaching these communities. While it is understandable to ask the question given the generally positive arts content produced by these publications, this researcher does not find the relationship between the arts communities and arts journalists improper. City and regional magazines tend to skew more positive than their peers in the daily news game, as most include showcasing their city as part of their mission. Pointing out problems and tackling issues within the community is absolutely fair, and often done by these publications. However, a story showcasing a person, place, or piece of work that has merit is more likely to fit the editorial tone of the publication than tearing one down. In general, criticism has fallen out of fashion among arts journalists anyway. They are much more likely to contextualize or guide readers through work, trends, or venues than they are to critique them. This researcher concludes that it is not that arts journalists cannot or will not cover negative aspects of their arts communities, but that doing so is often the less effective way to serve their readers and their publications’ mission. On the whole this research has concluded that the editors believe value of arts journalism lies in six things:

1. The arts are part of the cultural fabric of a city, and a city magazine has a responsibility to reflect its community as a whole. Creating arts coverage helps a publication fulfill this responsibility.

2. Arts coverage lends support to arts communities, which in turn enrich the city. Support of cultural institutions helps them to reach their audiences, providing a service to both the art community and those exposed to it through the coverage.
3. Responsible arts coverage fosters good relationships with arts communities, which in turn provide the information and access that makes work produced by the magazine better. These require active participation in and interaction with the arts community.
4. Being informed about the cultural happenings of a city gives people who are a part of that overall community a positive perception of their home. 52 Whether they actively participate in the arts community or not, their knowledge of its contributions to the city improves their overall outlook about their home.
5. Arts coverage preserves culture both in the present and for the future. Artists are supported by arts coverage, and institutions are maintained through people's continued attention and patronage.
6. There is money to be made from advertisers and clicks from arts coverage, but this is by no means its main value, and a more quantitatively focused study would be required to further explore this point.

### **Implications for gatekeeping theory**

This study approached gatekeeping at three levels of analysis: communications routines, organizational and social systems. The results of this research revealed a cycle of information gathering and dissemination that occurs at each level and that are interrelated. At the lowest level, communications routines, we look at the ways in which stories are found and produced. The two major processes brought up by most editors were through the spread of information from the subjects being covered themselves (i.e. press releases, calendars, events, etc.) and through personal interactions with members of the community. Legs on the ground information gathering was far and away perceived as most important. While writers and editors act as gatekeepers for the information getting to the public, sources from and representatives of artists and venues act as gatekeepers between journalists and the arts community as a whole, forming a cycle of passing information between the two. The cycle flips once again at the organizational level, at which the information given to arts and culture journalists and disseminated through the city and regional magazines to the general public, who then use that information in a way which affects the arts communities. This is both through their participation in the arts and their overall perception of their city and community. While the information disseminated by the magazines about the arts can create action (i.e. attending a play, seeing a gallery show, purchasing work at a craft fair), it can also impact people's' perceptions of the place they live in a way that has a less direct, but not necessarily less valuable, way. The

publications and the arts communities are tied together by a need for one another and a common goal, to reach the community of which they are members and see action on the part of those they have reached. The final level of gatekeeping theory employed by this study was the social systems level, which in this case covers the cities these publications cover. The editors interviewed for this study are almost universally in agreement that the work they do has a positive impact on the city through a lifting up and enrichment of their community. Through the information they provide, these magazines help people to better understand and participate in their communities, and these people in turn help the arts communities they learn about to succeed. Without any prompting in regard to the theory this researcher was using, several of these editors described their role as curatorial, a comparison that blends well with both the idea of gatekeepers as described by Shoemaker and Vos' exploration of the theory (2009) and the perception of some arts journalists as tastemakers from Whipple's study of music writers (2010). But where it was found that the tastemaker idea was flawed, a curatorial stance seems more accurate. These editors cannot tell readers what to enjoy and what not to enjoy, but they can pluck a selection of information from a crowded field of artists, musicians, writers, etc. and present it for readers to examine and make decisions about for themselves.

### **Limitations**

Two factors that limit this research are the issue of geography and the size of the

sample being interviewed. Due to distance between the publications this research was done primarily over the phone, with two of the 10 conducted in person and one done via email due to time constraints on the part of the editor being interviewed. In-person interviews typically result in better quality discussions and have the added benefit of visual cues. They would have also offered the opportunity to go through issues and stories in person to offer better specific examples of some of the items mentioned in the course of our interviews. Detailed notes were taken on an identical form for each subject to try to maintain consistency among the interviews.

Distance and time are also factors in the researcher's choice of sample size. The originally proposed sample of 20 was narrowed to 10 editors on the advice of the committee for this thesis, and while the consistency of their thoughts and answers is encouraging as far as this being an accurate reflection of how arts and culture are covered at city and regional magazines across the country, more information can always be gathered.

The final limitation of this study is that information about the arts community and the wider readership of the magazines is limited to the views of the editors interviewed. While I trust the information given to me as thought to be true and accurate by the subjects that agreed to be interviewed, it may be different than what a reader survey or information gathered from members of each city's arts communities might reflect.

### **Directions for future research**

An option for future research brought up by Whipple in her study of music journalists is, in the researcher's opinion, still the best option for further study of the subject of arts journalism. Participant observation with a magazine arts and culture staff could help address questions left unanswered by both Whipple and the results of this research. It is also possible that participant observation could confirm or question the results of both studies. Either way, further study via a different methodology could add a new dimension to two understudied disciplines: arts journalism and city and regional magazines.

A second possibility for further research is to address the third limitation brought up in the previous section of this thesis. A survey among readers and members of cities' arts communities could glean information about the perception and value of arts coverage of city and regional magazines (and/or elsewhere). This information could either confirm the understanding of these groups by the people responsible for covering them or offer new insight into where perception and reality don't match up for these communities and the writers and editors creating arts coverage for and about these groups.

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## Appendix

**Topic: Why do city and regional magazines cover the arts in the ways that they do?**

- How do they define the arts?
- What are the processes by which they discover and produce arts content?
- What is the role of arts content in the publication?
- What is the role of an arts writer at the publication?

**Topic: What value does arts coverage have for city and regional magazines and their readership?**

- What do they feel their role is in the arts community?
- How would they describe the quality of their arts content?

**Topic: How does perceived value of arts content affect the choices arts writers and editors make for their city and regional magazines?**

- How important are the arts to their audiences and communities?
- What value does arts content have to the publication?
- How much arts content is being produced?