Arts coverage need not be elitist, panel says:

Coverage from the Associated Press Managing Editors Conference

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Facts, figures and a bit of indignation highlighted Friday's "Covering Arts and Culture" session, where media and university representatives discussed what some see as the short shrift given to arts coverage.

"A lot of newspaper culture sections have very cute names, and a lot of them are hidden," said Doug McLennan, editor of the online arts news service ArtsJournal.com. "Culture is related to the core of everything else we cover in journalism."

Carole Carmichael, assistant managing editor for features at the Seattle Times, said in introducing the panel that more integration is needed between what most consider cultural reporting and other kinds of traditional reporting.

"Arts, culture and entertainment coverage has very much been one of the traditions of journalism," she said. "Culture stories come from every angle of our reporting. They emerged from the war in Iraq about museum looting. They can be anywhere."

Andras Szanto, deputy director of Columbia University's National Arts Journalism Program, agreed.

"My job, and the job of those I work with, is to remind the industry that the arts are hard news," he said. "Often they're thought of as what your wife and children do on the weekend."

He added that "the new Miami Herald arts section is called Tropical Life," producing chuckles.

McLennan said that "a lot of art now is escaping the bounds of traditional tags - video art, online art - and that's something publications haven't figured out yet very well."

But traditional forms aren't receiving their fair share of attention either, he said.

"Dance coverage in most newspapers is very, very small, yet the number of participants nationwide is increasing," he said. "There are 250,000 choruses in the U.S.," he said, but you wouldn't know it by reading most American newspapers. And, in 2001, "more than 1 billion people visited a U.S. museum, twice as many as attended a sporting event," said Steven Tepper, deputy director of Princeton University's Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies.

"But museum shops are also a lot bigger now, which speaks to museums and the arts becoming more social events."

There were a few surprises for the crowd of more than 150 managers and editors.

"Someone who likes classical music is more than twice as likely to also like rap as somebody who doesn't," Tepper said, filling the room with chatter.

McLennan suggested the arts should be covered like sporting events.

"With sports reporting, there's the story about the game last night, but people are also interested in the columnists, the personalities, the strategies," he said. "There should be a living sense of what creating art really is."
There was general agreement that arts coverage need not be elitist.

"There are two models of arts coverage," Szanto said. "There's 'top-down,' where editors and critics can pick a few events they consider important and show readers how to consider a few select works of art, or, alternatively, writers can help readers use their precious little free time by providing an overview."

But readers don't like to be patronized either, he said.

"In sports, the term sacrifice bunt is familiar to everyone who knows baseball, and it's OK to use these terms in arts coverage," he said. "It's patronizing not to, because in some way arts coverage has a self-selecting readership."

Perhaps, he said, a new model of arts coverage needs to be developed.

"The legitimacy of reviewing 10 books in a week when 1,000 or 500 come out is questionable," he added. "This old model, which really goes back hundreds of years, may not be adequate any longer."

The presentation ended with four dances by a Cuban dance troupe, including a rumba, a traditional "summoning" dance to an Afro-Cuban god, and a finishing conga line that led everyone out the doors to the lunch ballroom.