

## ABSTRACT

### A Quantitative Analysis of Theater Criticism in Four American Newspapers

Amber Werley Orand, M.A.

Mentor: Robert F. Darden III, M.J.

The researcher systematically sampled 144 issues of four major American newspapers from reference points over the last three decades and conducted a quantitative analysis of theater reviews to determine whether the amount of theater criticism has changed as the newspaper industry has declined. Instead of an across-the-board change over time, however, the trends were observed to vary by newspaper, while the overall quantity of theater criticism in the observed newspapers has actually increased. Yet, other aspects of the results, such as a decline in staff critics and an increase in reliance upon freelancers, indicate that theater criticism is becoming less valued in American newspaper journalism. More research is needed to suss out further quantitative and qualitative trends in journalistic theater criticism. Meanwhile, the Internet and

Web logs offer viable avenues for theater criticism if it loses ground in journalism.

A Quantitative Analysis of Theater Criticism in Four American Newspapers

by

Amber Werley Orand, B.F.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Journalism

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Clark Baker, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee

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Robert F. Darden III, M.J., Chairperson

---

Amanda F. C. Sturgill, Ph.D.

---

DeAnna M. Toten Beard, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
May 2008

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to my thesis committee, Prof. Robert Darden (chair), Dr. Amanda Sturgill, and Dr. DeAnna Toten Beard for generously sharing their time and knowledge, and for working with me to complete this project under my rigorous time constraints.

Many thanks to Dr. Jack Tubbs and, especially, Linda Njoh in the Baylor University Department of Statistical Science for their advice in formulating my methodology and their invaluable assistance in tabulating and displaying results.

Thanks also to theater critics Peter Marks, Chris Jones, and Lawson Taitte for sharing insights into their work.



To Nick

Criticism should not be written to influence opinions,  
but to stimulate others into *having* opinions.

—John Ardoin, *The Dallas Morning News*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The newspaper industry is rapidly changing. Over the past several decades, advances in technology, decreases in readership, and changes in the public's tastes have wrought major shifts in the way news is written, delivered, and read. In many cases, this has led to newspapers reducing staff, cutting coverage of certain topics, or replacing original material with wire copy. When school budgets are slashed, the fine arts are usually cut first. When something simply has to be cut back, our society has a strong tendency to view "creative" pursuits as less crucial than "factual" pursuits. Have changes in newspaper coverage taken the same path? Are newspaper sections devoted to topics like books and the arts significantly skimpier now than, say, thirty years ago?

This research pertains to the serious theater<sup>1</sup> review in newspapers. The study examines the quantity of theater criticism in four American newspapers at three fifteen-year intervals. It is expected that the research will uncover a decline in coverage from each interval to the next.

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<sup>1</sup> The spelling of the word *theater/theatre* has been standardized to *theater* throughout in deference to the primary spelling in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. Spellings of items in the reference list have not been changed.

### *Justifications for This Study*

This study explores a little-researched area, journalistic theater criticism. This research may prove useful to scholars in the fields of journalism and theater arts who have an interest in theater criticism. It may also provide a jumping-off point for those interested in a deeper exploration of some area of theater criticism. Additionally, this study may prove useful to arts critics or editors looking for data to support trends they have noticed anecdotally; it may also prove useful to newspaper professionals who are interested in knowing more about how well the industry is serving its public in this particular area of arts coverage.

### *Operational Definitions*

#### *Theater*

As theater can be an intensely personal creative pursuit, there could theoretically be as many theatrical forms as there are theater artists. The word *theater* can refer equally legitimately to a slick, big-budget Disney musical and a politically radical one-woman performance piece staged in a run-down storefront. But for the purposes of this study, it is necessary to delineate and apply a standard definition. Therefore, for this study, *theater* is defined as a fictional or non-fictional narrative performance conducted live before an

audience, in which the performer(s) represent fictional or non-fictional character(s) through speech, music, movement, or visual or technical elements, or any combination thereof.

For this study, no distinction will be made between professional, university, and amateur or community theater. This is simply because there is no black-and-white rule about what constitutes a *professional* or *amateur* theater, actor, or artist; and the shades of gray among those categories are numerous. Many who would say their vocations lie in theater actually derive their primary income from other professions; they may or may not be paid for their theater work. Additionally, it is not uncommon for some participants in a production to be paid while other members of the cast and crew are unpaid. And most theater companies that would be widely considered *professional* are heavily subsidized by public and private grants. To avoid delving into this murky territory, and because the focus on the study is on the quantity of criticism, rather than any perceived quality of it, the author decided to include in the study all theater reviews published in the selected newspaper issues.

### *Review/Criticism*

Although in common parlance the words *review* and *criticism* are often used interchangeably, some theorists have drawn a distinction between the two concepts. Palmer's definition of the difference is typical:

A review focuses on a specific performance and carries time value, being written for publication or broadcast as soon as possible after the performance. Criticism may refer to specific performances, but takes a broader, more theoretical view and commonly deals with a number of productions, an “ideal” performance, or the script apart from its manner of presentation. Criticism appears under less stringent time pressures, usually in a more analytic or scholarly form, often written for journals or books published long after the closing of productions analyzed. (Palmer 1988, 1)

English further clarifies the difference:

Reviewers write white-hot reactions to cultural events, relying heavily on descriptive reporting of the scoops of the events as well as some of its details. If interpretation is required, the reviewer tends to generalize and summarize. Evaluation tends to be specific—this particular work is worth attending or it isn’t. Reviewers often deal with the contents of the arts, rather than their formal aspects, because the content is the most accessible outer layer. A reviewer works under the pressure of deadlines, and for those on morning papers, that often means only one hour or less to write a complete review. The critic, however, takes a wider perspective of cultural fare and emphasizes the value of a particular event in larger context. (English 1979, 17-18)

Stanley Kauffmann’s definitions of a *theater critic* and a *drama critic*

exemplify another widely-accepted distinction: “The [theater critic] deals with performance, including text-in-performance; the [drama critic] deals with texts and pertinent history” (Kauffmann 1973, 9). To take these definitions a step further, a theater critic would write reviews and/or criticism, while a drama critic would deal only in criticism.

To minimize confusion, this study will use the terms *review* and *criticism* interchangeably. The operational definition of a review or an item of criticism

used in this study is “an article of any length that describes and evaluates a single performance” (Herrig 1985, 19). For the purposes of this study, the researcher will not take into consideration features about people, events, or other aspects of the drama, or *notices*, which, in modern American parlance, “may describe a performance or the circumstances surrounding a performance, but make . . . no attempt to offer critical judgments” (19).

### *Limitations of This Study*

Little research has been done in the area of journalistic theater criticism. Therefore, this study has been conducted with the aim of establishing how much criticism exists in newspapers today and whether the amount of coverage has changed significantly in correspondence with the general downward trends of the newspaper industry in the past three decades. The study samples newspapers from three reference points over said time frame: one point prior to the beginning of the newspaper decline; one point in the middle of the time frame, after the watershed introduction of *USA Today*—which brought about many changes to the newspaper industry—but before the widespread use of the Internet; and one recent point, after the use of the Internet had become widespread and at which time the decline in newspaper circulation had had a significant impact on all areas of the newspaper. There are certainly many questions left unanswered by this study, but the intent of this research is to focus

on a fundamental aspect of journalistic theater criticism in order to provide a baseline for further study.

### *Research Questions and Hypotheses*

It is expected that the data will show a decline in the quantity of theater criticism from each reference point to the next. If so, this trend might indicate a lessening of the perceived relative importance of original theater criticism in the face of budget cuts and other changes to the newspaper industry. Other questions to consider involve changes in the inclusion of photographs with reviews, the job positions indicated in the bylines and whether these aspects have any relationship to each other or to the mean word counts of the reviews.

### *Research Questions*

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Has the quantity of theater criticism in American newspapers changed over the last thirty years? If there is a change in the quantity of theater criticism in these four newspapers over these three reference points, what are the trends, and how do they vary by newspaper?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Have there been changes over the last thirty years in the way authors of theater criticism are credited in their bylines? If the bylines have changed, what are the trends, and how do they vary by newspaper and over time?



RQ<sub>3</sub>: Have there been changes over the last thirty years in the quantity of photographs run with items of criticism? If so, what are the trends, and how do they vary by newspaper and over time?

*Hypotheses*

H<sub>1</sub>: The quantity of theater criticism in the representative issues from 1991 has declined as compared with the representative issues from 1976.

H<sub>2</sub>: The quantity of theater criticism in the representative issues from 2006 has declined as compared with the representative issues from 1991.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of Literature

#### *Theater Criticism*

There is a general dearth of academic research about journalistic theater criticism, and the preponderance of what exists tends to be biographical. A small amount of research has been conducted into critical influence (not necessarily of *theater critics*), but very little research into other aspects of criticism (Fosdick 2002, 116) has been conducted. This study is important because it will add much-needed information to the canon of academic research that examines theater criticism and its place in the world of journalism. While the scope of this research is admittedly rather narrow, it could provide a platform upon which further research can be built.

#### *History of Theater Criticism*

*Aristotle through the neoclassicists.* Theater scholars trace the history of theater criticism to Aristotle, particularly his treatment of tragedy in *The Poetics* (Loudon 1981, 70). (In fact, known theatrical theory goes back a bit further, as Aristotle's writings built upon Plato's analyses of mimetic art (Gray 1987, 467).) In *The Poetics*, Aristotle laid out the basic types of drama—tragedy and comedy—

and explained the ways in which they differ from one another. For instance, comedy focuses on men of “a lower type,” while tragedy dwells on men of a higher; and “comedy aims at representing men as worse, tragedy as better than in actual life” (2004, 2). Aristotle also delved into the causes of man’s desire for poetry, which he identified as man’s pleasure in imitation and his instinct for harmony and rhythm. *The Poetics* also provides historical information about some of the earliest developments in theater practice: “Aeschylus first introduced a second actor; he diminished the importance of the Chorus and assigned the leading part to the dialogue. Sophocles raised the number of actors to three and added scene-painting” (2004, 4).

Crucially, Aristotle created the first known critical standards by which to judge a work of drama:

Every tragedy . . . must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. . . . But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action. . . . Without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. The tragedies of most of our modern poets fail in the rendering of character. . . . If you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents. (Aristotle 2004, 6)

Theater criticism changed little from Aristotle’s day through the medieval period (Russell 1949, 14). Dante explored the etymological basis for the words

*comedy* and *tragedy* and tied their root meanings to their characteristics. He pointed out that *comedy* was derived from a Greek phrase meaning “village song,” while *tragedy* was born in the phrase “goat-song.” Tragedy, he said, “begins admirably and tranquilly, whereas its end or exit is foul and terrible,” he explained, likening this foulness to a goat’s “fetidness.” Comedy “introduces some harsh complication, but brings its matter to a prosperous end” (Alighieri 1969, 349).

Aristotelian authority remained unchallenged until the sixteenth century, when Lodovico Castelvetro, in his treatise *The Poetics of Aristotle*, both explained *The Poetics* and made new assertions of his own, some of which contradicted Aristotle (108-116). Castelvetro was the progenitor of the strict neoclassical rules that would obsess theater critics for the next three centuries. These ideals stress the importance of verisimilitude, or the appearance of truth, a concept that was usually closely associated with the concept of decorum, or appropriateness. The neoclassical ideals were primarily exemplified by the unities of time, place, and action or plot.

Castelvetro held that, in order to abide by the unity of time, a play must not “represent more things than those which come about in the space of time that the comedies and the tragedies themselves require” (110). He also agreed with Aristotle that the action “cannot endure more than one course of the sun over the

earth" (116). (Castelvetro did not allow for telescoping of incidents, but believed plays should adhere literally to what is now called "real time." He allowed for a twelve-hour limit in running time because "there must always be regard to the ease of the people, for after some hours the people have to leave the theater because [of] the human necessities for eating, drinking, sleeping, and other things" (110).) To maintain unity of plot, the play must have only one central action, relating to one person only. "And, if there are more actions than one, that one should depend on the other" (111). The unity of place compelled playwrights to maintain one setting throughout the play, so as not to confuse the "ignorant multitude" (Carlson 1984, 48).

Castelvetro also introduced another rule that most Renaissance critics could agree on: To maintain the dignity of the play and its audience, the playwright should make sure that bloodshed and violence were not shown onstage, but only referenced (Russell 1949, 18).

Theater critics and practitioners throughout Europe went on to passionately debate the particulars of *vraisemblance* (verisimilitude) and the three unities for centuries. The most notable critical debate during this period was the infamous *Le Cid* controversy. Pierre Corneille's 1637 play raised the ire of several fellow dramatists—most notably Georges de Scudéry—who published pamphlets, some anonymous, attacking the play on the grounds that it "defie[d]

the major rules of a Dramatick Poem" (Carlson 1984, 94) and was immoral. Corneille counter-attacked in pamphlets of his own, disagreeing with the necessity for strict adherence to neoclassical rules, and instead preferring to stretch the rules to remain truthful to history when one was writing about factual events. Corneille's arguments were not particularly radical; he agreed with the necessity of the three unities, merely wanting to allow for some flexibility when necessary. Nevertheless, the controversy grew, and for months there was a flurry of critical pamphleteering. Eventually, the Académie Française was called in to judge, with Cardinal Richelieu himself getting involved in an effort to ease tensions between the dramatists. After nine months of boiling controversy, the Académie ruled that, while his detractors' analyses were not entirely correct, Corneille had "offended verisimilitude" (Carlson 1984, 96). They also condemned his play on the grounds of decorum, brooking no argument that the events to which they objected were historically accurate.

In 1698, another battle of tracts began, this time in England, with the publication of Rev. Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*. Although he was a fiery writer whose political persuasions put him at odds with the sovereigns, William and Mary, Collier was no crackpot; he was extremely well versed in theatrical theory and backed his arguments with extensive quotations of great thinkers like Aristotle and Saint Augustine (Collier

1996). Dryden was so affected by Collier's message that he proclaimed himself ashamed of some of his earlier works (Carlson 1984, 124). Queen Anne gave orders "not permitting anything to be acted contrary to religion and good manners" (Wardle 1992, 20).

During the eighteenth century, journalistic coverage of London theater was born (Wardle 1992, 13). Unsurprisingly, its tone was moralistic and "schoolmasterly" (18). Critic and historian Irving Wardle says, "When journalistic criticism began, its chief model was the schismatic pamphlet, a form with no literary grace, expressly designed to wound the object and bludgeon the reader into agreement" (17). He adds, "This is an inheritance we still have not shaken off."

*Theater criticism in American journalism.* Journalistic theater criticism in America is almost as old as it is in England, reaching as far back as the 1730s, when *The South Carolina Gazette* began reviewing popular plays like George Farquhar's *Recruiting Officer* (English 1979, 11). But by the nineteenth century, "play reviewing was held in low esteem, even by critics themselves" (Miller 1976, 165). Part of the reason was that many critics behaved like journalistic prostitutes, reviewing only productions that bought advertising in their newspapers (Miller 1976, 165). Additionally, the stage was generally considered immoral and déclassé by the upper and middle classes, who "would attend the

first-class theaters only when a star—usually European—was performing in a well-known classical piece” (Miller 1976, 166).

But by the time of the Civil War, a new crop of serious theater critics, including William Winter for the New York *Tribune*, John Ranken Towse for the New York *Evening Post*, and Henry Austin Clapp for the *Boston Advertiser* imbued their writings with evidence of their classical educations and strict Victorian morals. “Aristotelian in critical philosophy, these men evaluated the theater by objective standards—ethical as well as aesthetic—in the formal style of the period. . . . They were right for their time, helping to elevate the tone and style of criticism while winning respect for their profession” (Miller 1976, 166).

This new brand of critics disagreed over whether American or British plays were preferable, but they agreed on one thing: their strong dislike for the new kind of drama typified by the works of Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. “Towse believed the theater should educate its audiences by producing ‘an elevation of the public mind and morals.’ As such, the theater should uphold what was good and wholesome” (Loudon 1981, 40-41). Winter even excoriated artists like Sarah Bernhardt for their shocking personal lives, believing they “foul[ed] the theater’s sanctuary” (39-40).

The increasing sensationalism of the press and the desire of Americans to escape into colorful, clever writing after the misery of the Civil War led to a new



type of criticism typified by Andrew C. Wheeler, who wrote under the *nom de plume* “Nym Crinkle” for the *New York World*. Wheeler’s aggressively witty style was widely imitated. “Most [imitators] however, were merely clever, without his knowledge or appreciation of the theater” (Miller 1976, 168).

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the great “yellow journalism” rivalries of the penny press spawned “instant criticism.” Criticism was a popular feature that sold newspapers; critics were expected to be journalists first and foremost, and to avoid being scooped by the competition. “Critics for morning newspapers were expected to rush back to their offices after an evening performance and pour out their reviews in time for the deadline of the next edition” (English 1979, 11-12). Aside from Sunday “think pieces” — and a few critics, like Stanley Kauffmann, who experimented with reviewing previews to have more time to write their reviews — this “instant criticism” is still widely practiced.

The early twentieth century emphases on deadlines and color detracted from attention to informed criticism. Throughout the twentieth century, American journalistic theater criticism was plagued with the assumption held by many editors that theater criticism requires no special qualifications. “Reporters were summarily shifted from obituaries or the police blotter to the ‘drama beat’ as needed” (Kalb 2003, 46).

*The present and future of theater criticism in American journalism.* As the technological innovations of the second half of the twentieth century led to a decrease in newspaper circulation, they also led to a decrease in the number of people attending the theater (Bay-Cheng 2007; 1). As a result, “editors today regard theater as a specialized interest, and . . . theater coverage has become for the most part brief, rare, and tuned to predetermined editorial keys, a standing reminder of how little the editors know or care about the art” (Kalb 2003, 49). The recent rapid declines in circulation have had an even more profound effect. “Whenever times get tough at an American newspaper, fine-arts coverage gets thrown off the back of the sled first” (Teachout 2007).

Theater criticism is not the only area where the pinch is being felt. Book criticism in American newspapers is declining rapidly (Wasserman 2007). In fact, the rate of decline has been so alarming that the National Book Critics Circle has launched a “Campaign to Save the Book Review” (Teachout 2007). When about one-fifth of the newsroom staff (111 individuals) of *The Dallas Morning News* accepted buyout offers in 2006, the book critic and both television critics were among them. They were not replaced; copy from wire services and freelance writers filled the gaps. When one of its two theater critics left criticism to manage a theater company in 2005, the *News* chose not to replace him, either.

The *News* is just one example of an apparently widespread trend of death-by-attrition of original criticism. The theater criticism that remains in American newspapers has had an increasingly “consumer reports” bent (Kalb 2003, 49) (Fosdick 2004)—perhaps not surprising when one considers that two tickets to the theater, even outside New York, can cost more than a hundred dollars.

A 1999 study conducted by the National Arts Journalism Program noted,

The anecdotal story, especially from the point of view of many arts journalists in the trenches, is about pressures to squeeze down, dumb down, leave staff positions unfilled, do interviews and profiles, and lap up blockbuster entertainment hype and celebrity frenzy. It’s about a sense among critics that their roles as interpreters, evaluators, and public educators have been marginalized. It’s about “thumbs up, thumbs down” and other sound-bite ways of trivializing the essence of criticism. (National Arts Journalism Program 1999, 11).

The program repeated the study in 2003 and found that, even as the number of Americans participating in the arts is increasing, arts coverage in American journalism is remaining steady or shrinking (National Arts Journalism Program 2003).

### *Personal Nature of Criticism*

Theater critics—particularly those who are journalists first and critics second—sometimes struggle with reconciling the concepts of critical judgment and journalistic objectivity. To put it bluntly, the two ideas are thoroughly at odds with each other. *The Times* of London critic Irving Wardle says,

'Objective criticism' is a dead duck. The eighteenth-century Aristotelians tried it out, as did the regiments of [Andrei] Zhdanov's socialist realists: both proving that the effect of taking shelter behind rules is to produce unreadable copy and to do greater injustice to the artist than the wildest individual aberration. (1992, 38).

Criticism is personal by definition: There is no criticism without judgment. That judgment certainly should be informed by knowledge and standards, but without judgment, criticism is just an exercise in "beating the opposition to it with the announcement that Mrs. Othello was murdered last night" (Wardle 1992, 4).

Interestingly, the high-minded desire for objectivity in American journalism and academia in the twentieth century may be contributing to the decline of theater criticism. In an age of increasing cultural and moral relativism, journalists and students are continually impelled not to form value judgments, which are the cornerstone of arts criticism (Kalb 2003, 50). Bridging the distance between the two contrary ideas, in a personal letter dated January 27, 1949, *New York Times* theater critic Brooks Atkinson wrote, "The only thing of value I can contribute is an objective record of enjoyment or pain" (Russell 1949, 118).

### *Critical Standards*

So, other than the visceral reaction of like or dislike, what methods do theater critics use to shape their opinions? While, of course, each critic uses a different method, many do have a set of standards they try to apply to all

productions. Lorenzo (1990, 10 - 14) highlighted some aspects of the production that the critic should consider in his or her analysis:

1. Theme (the playwright's motivation for telling the story; the driving thought all aspects of the production should reinforce). What is the theme? Is it substantial enough to sustain the production? Is it relevant to contemporary audiences?
2. Plot (the actions and, sometimes, motivations of the characters). Are the characters' motivations clear? Are their actions plausible? Is the storyline interesting?
3. Characters (the human element that embodies the themes and emotions). Are the characters compelling and believably developed? Does the dialogue sound authentic? Is the dialogue inventive and intelligible?
4. Pacing (rate, intensity, rhythm, and pitch with which the performance is executed). Is the timing of lines and actions correct? Is the overall tempo of the production appropriate? Is the style and speed of the actors' delivery appropriate?
5. *Mise en Scène* (all visual aspects of the production). Do the costumes, scenery, makeup, and other visual elements clearly evoke a setting and mood? Does the production fully utilize a theater's staging resources? Are the visual aspects of the production interesting? Does the lighting reinforce the play's overall mood and style?

But those are guidelines; not a standard. While Lorenzo's points are useful—especially to the beginning critic—signposts to keep in mind, they do not remove any of criticism's subjectivity; one critic's idea of an appropriate overall tempo could vary significantly from another's. While a critic may have his or her own standard, it is a personal one; and probably no critic could put into words just what it is. The best tools a critic can have are a thorough knowledge of

theater history, literature, and tradition and a strong understanding of dramatic theory through the ages (Roberts 1971, 383).

### *Functions of Theater Criticism*

*The critic as a preserver of the ephemeral.* “Theater critics are not often liked by theater people,” said Stanley Kauffmann, perhaps putting it mildly (1973, 10). But “theater people” recognize that critics serve several useful purposes. Theater, by its nature, is fleeting. Some people believe this is part of its charm: When attending a play the audience is experiencing something that will never happen again—not in exactly the same way, at least. And anyone who has ever watched a filmed play can attest that it is simply not the same. Without the intimacy and energy of a live performance—or the technical freedom that bring a feeling of reality to a traditional film—a filmed play is a chimera that cannot compare to either of its parents. Therefore, perhaps the best way to get a feel for a performance one has not personally experienced is to read a well-written review.

In the past, of course, reviews were the only way to record performances. Without the critics of the past, we would have no way to experience the great performances of history. George Henry Lewes described Edmund Kean’s acting thusly:

In watching Kean's quivering muscles and altered tones, you felt the subsidence of passion. The voice might be calm, but there was a tremor in it; the face might be quiet, but there were vanishing traces of the recent agitation. One of his means of effect—sometimes one of his tricks—was to make long pauses between certain phrases. For instance, on quitting the scene [in George Colman's *The Iron Chest*], Sir Edward Mortimer has to say warningly, "Wilford, remember!" Kean used to pause after "Wilford," and during the pause his face underwent a rapid succession of expressions fluently melting into each other, and all tending to one climax of threat; and then the deep tones of "remember!" came like muttered thunder. Those spectators who were unable to catch these expressions considered the pause a mere trick; and sometimes the pauses were only tricks, but often they were subtle truths. (Lewes 1968, 19).

*The critic as educator.* Even the most ardent theatergoer cannot possibly see every play produced in his own city, let alone elsewhere. So the critic's column is often the only exposure one has to a work. With (one hopes) a thorough grounding in theater theory and history, a critic can offer both vivid description to enable readers who were not there to recreate the event in their minds, and insights to serve as the "uncommon observer" even for those who did attend. "As uncommon observers, critics are also charged with the responsibility of analyzing, interpreting, and illuminating the arts. This intellectual activity requires puzzling out the artist's message" (English 1979, 206-207).

The critic must also "break the circle of self-hypnosis between the stage and the auditorium" (Wardle 1992, 7). The actors and other artists must believe in their work, as they have much invested in it emotionally, physically, and often financially. The audience also has an interest in approving the performance, "if

only because they have risked their time and money.” The critic, it can be argued, is the closest thing to a disinterested observer there is in theater.

Good criticism adds to the cultural health of a community. It stimulates thought and debate, and raises the profile of the arts. In a personal letter, Brooks Atkinson wrote, “I think intelligent criticism is as much a part of an alert newspaper as intelligent editorials. It seems to me that I can get a very sound notion as to the cultural qualities of a city from reading the movie, theater, and musical criticisms published in the newspapers, as well as the editorials” (Russell 1949, 121).

*The critic as establisher of the canon.* In addition, the work of the critics—especially the combined work of multiple critics—has the effect of establishing the theatrical canon (Luckhurst 2005, 375). A work that is soundly rejected by every critic who sees it will not stand the test of time. Meanwhile, a work that may not be initially successful can sometimes find an audience when vigorously supported by critics.

[The theater critic] has the primary and important task of winnowing wheat from chaff. . . . This means that the theater critic spends most of his time with junk. . . . It is objectively a ridiculous mode of life. There seem to me only two real reasons to pursue it: first, the possession of a critical talent “which is death to hide,” as true of critical talent as any other . . . second, hope: hope for the arrival of good work, hope that one may help it to arrive and may help to connect it with its audience. This hope is, in sum, an exponent of commitment. (Kauffmann 1973, 16)



## *Criticizing Critics*

*Good criticism vs. bad criticism.* Theater criticism is not an easy task. The critic is expected to have a vast storehouse of theory and history at his fingertips, as well as a working knowledge of all the aspects of production. He must be able to describe the sometimes virtually indescribable and distill his emotions and reactions—often within an hour or two—into clear, evocative prose, without resorting to capriciousness or cavalierism, or talking down to the reader. While some theorists maintain that criticism cannot be evaluated because of the subjectivity of critical writing (Myung 1988, 72), other critics have offered suggestions for recognizing good criticism when one sees it. John W. English (1979, 206-215) put forth a checklist of questions to help readers learn to evaluate critics:

1. Does the critic offer adequate description, interpretation and evaluation to satisfy readers?
2. Does the critic's review seem full of fresh reporting and observations?
3. Does the critic draw from his/her personal experience and storehouse of information and relate previous examples to the present?
4. Does the critic express his viewpoint with confidence and passion as well as with clarity?
5. Is the critic's writing style communicative?
6. Does the critic frequently use reference points outside the field?
7. Does the critic's vocabulary reflect his standards of evaluating art?
8. Is the critic open and straightforward about his point of view or ideological commitments?
9. Do critics have any known or covert conflicts of interest that may compromise their writing about a particular subject?
10. Whom does the critic serve—himself or his readers?

11. Does the critic appear to take his writing and himself seriously?
12. Can readers detect lazy and worn-out critics by looking at their work?

Irving Wardle (1992, 41-44) went so far as to create a “black glossary” of clichéd or meaningless critical buzz-words that should be avoided. His glossary includes:

1. Pretentious
2. Definitive
3. Beguiling
4. Controversial
5. Stylized
6. Derivative
7. Eclectic
8. Mannered

*The critic as artist.* Is the critic an artist himself? It seems no one—and especially not critics—can agree. Wardle scoffs at the idea:

Edwardians . . . used to sound off on the “art of criticism,” a phrase which subsequently died of shame. If the reviewer saw himself as an artist, his dependent condition and the instant oblivion that overtakes his work would drive him to despair. He can only sustain his professional self-respect by accepting his inferior status to the art he serves. (1992, 59)

But other critics have proudly accepted the mantle of *artist*. George Jean Nathan (writing, it must be admitted, not long after the Edwardian period ended) boldly proclaimed “criticism is itself an art. It might, indeed, be well defined as an art within an art, since every work of art is the result of a struggle between the heart that is the artist himself and his mind that is the critic” (1922, 4-5). Harold Clurman, a theater practitioner, theorist, and critic, not only

thought the critic is, at best, an artist, but that the critic could make the *reader* “something of an artist as well” (1974, 2).

Jonathan Kalb relieves the debate of some of its irksomeness by removing the word *artist*:

Criticism is a talent—just like acting, directing, designing, and playwriting. It may sound unfashionable in this era of exploded universal assumptions, but some people are actually more perceptive watchers of plays than others. They see more in theater works than others do, and *their creative fulfillment* is in communicating their insights persuasively to others. [emphasis added] (2003, 51)

### *Reference Points*

#### *USA Today's Impact on American Journalism*

In 1982, *USA Today* came along and shook up the newspaper industry with its use of color and information graphics, its boiled-down stories, and its national focus. But soon, the publication that had initially been regarded as “a journalistic joke” (McCartney 1997, 19) and mocked as “McPaper,” gained traction. Less than four years after its inception, *USA Today* had become the most widely read newspaper in the United States (Pritchard 1987, 363), and the flashy design that had been laughed at years before was being copied in other, more “serious” newspapers. *USA Today's* massive growth was perhaps all the more remarkable because it came at a time when virtually all other American newspapers were in a sharp circulation decline (McCartney 1997, 19).

Within just one year of *USA Today's* launch, a report prepared for the Associated Press Managing Editors conference found that more than 100 newspapers "reported a variety of changes in news editing, reporting, and production as a result of *USA Today* competition" (Logan 1986, 74). In a 1993 study, George A. Gladney, calling the paper a "catalyst of near-revolution in the newspaper business," noted that "more and more papers [were adopting] its emphasis on color, illustrations and graphics, entertainment (sports and celebrity coverage), and abbreviated, digest-style writing" (Gladney 1993, 17).

Surprisingly, the paper's founder, Al Neuharth, acknowledged that *USA Today's* impact on other newspapers was not always for the better:

"It has had a tremendous impact on newspapers for better or for worse, and in some cases it has been for worse," he says. "There are some things some papers have been foolish to adopt." For example, Neuharth points out, it makes sense for *USA Today* to run a national weather map because the paper has a national audience. "But why would you run a national weather map in Fort Myers, Florida? What they want is a local weather map." (McCartney 1997, 25)

Writing for *American Journalism Review*, James McCartney pointed out that many newspapers have copied *USA Today's* less-admirable qualities, "cheapening their product with gimmicks and frills," while "McPaper" itself was sharpening its news value and improving its product. The copycats, meanwhile, lost circulation, while *USA Today* grew in both market share and respectability (McCartney 1997, 21).

Considering the homogenizing impact *USA Today* has apparently had on American newspapers, it is to be expected that newspapers would begin to devalue theater criticism, which is, by its nature, a basically local enterprise. *USA Today's* influence may also lead to shorter, more general, less in-depth coverage, which is antithetical to serious criticism.

### *The Internet's Impact on American Journalism*

During the 1990s, the Internet moved out of the realm of science fiction and esoteric computer wizardry and into ordinary American households. Not to be left behind, the newspaper industry began putting content online, usually for free. The resulting threat to the traditional printed newspaper has been discussed extensively ever since. The past decade has seen numerous other Internet-related changes and challenges, including the popularity of Web logs and the rise in citizen journalism. While these trends have been seen as threats to the traditional newspaper, they have also been co-opted by many, if not most, traditional newspapers.

This blending is frequently described with the buzzword *convergence*. Convergence can be defined as "the strategic, operational, product, and cultural union of print, audio, video, and interactive digital informational services and organizations" (Kraeplin et al 2005, 48). Examples of convergence in journalism are many and diverse: a columnist's Web log; a slideshow of user-submitted

photos of neighborhood Christmas lights; or a service whereby a news organization sends subscribers text messages about breaking stories and weather updates. Some have blamed convergence, at least in part, for the recent circulation freefall. After all, why should a consumer pay for a hard copy of a newspaper when he can get so much for free online? And the advertising aspect is still a cipher; since it is currently unknown just how well, if at all, online advertising works, it is too early to establish definitively whether or not online advertising will ever be trusted enough by advertisers to make Web journalism profitable.

Nevertheless, it seems there is no turning back from the growing interactivity trend. Some media outlets have turned to a facet of citizen journalism known as “crowdsourcing,” a type of user-generated content in which tasks once performed by professionals, such as newsgathering and photography, are done cheaply or for free, by members of the general public. There have been user-generated reviews for almost as long as there has been an Internet.<sup>1</sup> But now, mainstream news organizations are using the technique, as well. In 2006, the Gannett Company (incidentally, the parent company of *USA*

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<sup>1</sup> The mainstream Web site rottentomatoes.com, through which any user who completes a simple registration process can be a film critic, is one example. The site kango.com, now in beta testing, allows users to review tourist attractions and hotels. And, while their reviews are written by professionals, Web sites talkinbroadway.com and broadwayworld.com have extensive message boards on which anyone can post his or her opinion about anything related to New York theater.

*Today*) made crowdsourcing a major part of its operations, restructuring its newsrooms—now called *information centers*—into twenty-four-hour data banks. Implicit in this move is a shift in focus away from the printed product and toward the online product (Howe 2006). And even *The New York Times* has a “Reader Reviews” area adjacent to each of its online theater reviews.

But credibility is always an issue when the traditional gatekeepers open the gates. Some are asking whether all this high-tech journalism really is journalism. The lightning-speed availability of news via the Internet and the twenty-four-hour cable news channels may have caused irreparable harm to the quality of news disseminated and to people’s perception of the news’s credibility:

Professional standards have often suffered because often the first news reports . . . may be fragmentary, lacking details, and occasionally may be distorted or incorrect. Then, instead of waiting for fuller and more-rounded reporting, both broadcast and print reporters immediately start interpreting the meaning of it all and offering opinions on the event’s future impact. (Hachten 2005, 90)

Citizen journalism and the convergence trends have contributed to what media lawyer and scholar Scott E. Gant calls the “blurring” of the lines distinguishing professional journalists from other disseminators of information. Gant says, “It is harder than ever to tell who is a journalist” (2007, 3). This loss of distinction is raising questions about free speech, privacy, protections, and the

law. Some are pushing for a legal clarification of journalism, a move that Gant warns could impinge on First Amendment rights and take the life out of journalism. Gant recommends “do[ing] away with the journalistic caste system . . . which elevates the employees of established news organizations above other citizens engaged in the practice of journalism,” and “reclaim[ing] the conception of press liberty as a right and a privilege that belongs to all of us, not just mainstream news organizations” (2007, 204). Journalist and scholar William A. Hachten has written that the media, the courts, and the public have a vested interest in ensuring that news and opinions come from as diverse a selection of sources as possible. “When diversity disappears, in its place come orthodoxy and conformity” (Hachten 2005, 174).

However it ends up, the face of journalism may never again look as it did just a decade and a half ago. We have come to a point from which there is no return to the clearly delineated journalist/non-journalist dichotomy of the past, as evidenced by *Time* magazine—which is mainstream if anything is—declaring “You” the person of the year for 2007, and saying “You control the information age. Welcome to your world” (*Time* 2006). Additionally, many university journalism programs are embracing the change, creating online projects to encourage citizen journalism (Gant 2007, 28). And as Hachten points out,

Interactive journalism is already developing a new generation of young journalists who are attracted to online jobs for the money, opportunity,



excitement, and a way to avoid unpaid internships and small-town newspaper jobs. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, has a staff of twenty who work exclusively for the Internet edition—writing stories, taking pictures, using video cameras, and even creating digital pages. The young people entering the uncertain world of digital journalism now are the ones who will bring about important changes later. (Hachten 2005, 153)

Indeed, the future of journalism looks exciting. Editors of news Web sites (stand-alone sites and those owned by traditional media outlets) “have become a social force already with agenda-setting capabilities” (Robinson 2006, 844). And some theorists have even suggested that “journalists will become monitors of the information portal that is the Web, providing enough news to serve only as a launching pad from which people can jump with new information” (Robinson 2006, 848). It is unclear what journalism will look like in the future, but thanks to technological advances like the Internet, it already looks vastly different than it looked thirty, or even fifteen, years ago.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

This study was designed to describe the content of four major American newspapers at three distinct points in time, with the goal of determining whether the quantity of theater criticism has significantly changed over the years. The research took into consideration only quantity of coverage, not quality. The newspapers selected to be analyzed were the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Dallas Morning News*. These publications were selected for their wide geographical spread and because each is the largest serious newspaper of a major American city with a thriving live theater community.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, the researcher had selected the years 1977, 1992, and 2007 as reference points. These years were chosen because (in addition to being at 15-year intervals) they are representative of three distinct stages in American newspaper journalism, which are described briefly below and in detail in

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<sup>1</sup> The absence of *The New York Times* from the list may seem striking. That publication was intentionally left off the list because, in the author's opinion, the New York theater scene's vastness and renown put it in a class by itself. The purpose of this study is to examine newspapers more representative of theater coverage nationwide and not affected by the vast tourism machine that is Broadway theater.

Chapter Two. However, the researcher encountered difficulty in obtaining some of the issues from late 2007, as they were too recent to be on microfilm but too old to obtain back issues. Therefore, it was decided to move each of the selected reference points back one year. This should not have a significant impact on the outcome of the study, as the years now in question—1976, 1991, and 2006—are still well within the three journalistic epochs identified by the researcher:

1. 1976. By 1976, the long midcentury newspaper heyday was ending. Newspaper circulation had already been declining for about a decade—this was largely blamed on the growth of television news—but the newspaper was still considered the gold standard of American news, a reputation enhanced by *The Washington Post's* seminal coverage of the Watergate story four years earlier.
2. 1991. *USA Today* had been introduced nine years earlier, impacting the design and content of American newspapers as described in Chapter Two. By 1991, the impact of *USA Today* had been felt. As circulation continued to decrease, many newspapers copied innovations introduced by *USA Today*, hoping to capture some of the success of that newspaper. In 1991, the Internet had not yet gone worldwide.
3. 2006. Use of the Internet had been widespread for about a decade, and its impact had been felt in the world of journalism, as described in Chapter Two. The newspaper industry was changing more rapidly than ever, and also struggling more than ever. Mergers, buyouts, and layoffs in the newspaper industries were common during this period.

It was decided that issues of all four newspapers, from three systematically sampled representative weeks from each of the years in question, would be examined. Personal e-mails from three currently active theater critics (Lawson Taitte of *The Dallas Morning News*, Peter Marks of *The Washington Post*,

and Chris Jones of the *Chicago Tribune*), all dated January 22, 2008, indicated that, in the critics' experience, the least-busy times for theater criticism at their papers are late summer and the Christmas season, with more productions taking place in January–early summer and September–early December. Therefore, it was decided to select one week each from February, May, and November of each of the years in question.

Marks wrote:

Reviews tend to run on weekdays, and most often, Monday through Thursday. There's more intense competition for space in the *Post's* Style section on Fridays, when movie reviews run, and the weekends tend to be sparser. Reviews never run in the Sunday arts section, which is reserved for features and other kinds of arts pieces.

This was consistent with the input received from the other critics, so the decision was made to study Mondays through Thursdays of the representative weeks.

For the sake of consistency, it was decided to use the first week with a Monday of each of the chosen months. Therefore, the dates selected to be examined were as shown in the Appendix.

For each of the selected thirty-six dates, the researcher examined issues of all four selected newspapers: the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Dallas Morning News*. This brought the total number of issues examined to 144. The study employed empirical methods to quantify the coverage dedicated to theater reviews in each issue. Specifically, the researcher

conducted a word count of each review. While it is customary to determine the length of a newspaper article by a simple linear measure of column inches, that method was not possible in this case due to the inconsistencies of visual display of the newspaper editions caused by variances in microfilms, microfilm readers, and printers.

The author examined microfilm copies of each newspaper issue for articles meeting the definitions of a theater review enumerated in Chapter One. (All sections of the papers were examined, as reviews are occasionally run in sections other than the arts or lifestyles sections where they would be expected to appear. For example, in a single issue, a paper might contain one review in section D, the Style section, and another on the Overnight page of section A.) All the articles that met the definitions were printed and labeled as to publication and date. Later, the author manually performed a word count on each of the 101 reviews that were found. In addition to noting the number of words in each review, the researcher made note of the byline, how many individual reviews ran in each issue, and how many, if any, photographs appeared with the review.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### *Quantity of Criticism (H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>)*

Even as the author was collecting the data, it began to be apparent that the data would probably not support the hypotheses, namely, that (1) the quantity of theater criticism in the representative issues from 1991 has declined as compared with the representative issues from 1976, and (2) the quantity of theater criticism in the representative issues from 2006 has declined as compared with the representative issues from 1991. For example, *The Dallas Morning News* ran only one review in the four sampled issues from February of 1976, while it ran four reviews during the same period in 2006. And, indeed, analyses of variance show that (1) (a) there is not a significant difference between the quantity of theater criticism (number of reviews) in 1991 as compared with 1976 (see Table 4.1); (b) there is not a significant difference between the amount of theater criticism (word count) in 1991 as compared with 1976 (see Table 4.2); (2) (a) there is not a significant difference between the amount of theater criticism (number of reviews) in 2006 as compared with 1991 (see Table 4.3); and (b) there is not a

significant difference between the amount of criticism (word count) in 2006 as compared with 1991 (see Table 4.4). Therefore, both H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> were rejected.

Table 4.1. One-way analysis of variance, number of reviews by year (1976, 1991)

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
year	1	0.093750	0.093750	0.1480	0.7014
Error	94	59.562500	0.633644		
C. Total	95	59.656250			

Table 4.2. One-way analysis of variance, total word count by year (1976, 1991)

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
year	1	27034.6	27034.6	0.3452	0.5583
Error	94	7361940.4	78318.5		
C. Total	95	7388975.0			

Table 4.3. One-way analysis of variance, number of reviews by year (1991, 2006)

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
year	1	0.260417	0.260417	0.4514	0.5033
Error	94	54.229167	0.576906		
C. Total	95	54.489583			

Table 4.4. One-way analysis of variance, total word count by year (1991, 2006)

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
year	1	148916.3	148916	1.6964	0.1959
Error	94	8251491.7	87782		
C. Total	95	8400408.0			

In short, the data do not show a general decline in the amount of theater criticism in the four newspapers over the three reference points, as anticipated by the literature review (see Figure 4.1). While this is good news for the professions of journalism and theater, it is also unexpected news, given that the (admittedly limited) available literature pointed toward a steep decline. Therefore, it warrants a close examination of the data to see whether there are any trends, and if so, just where they lie.

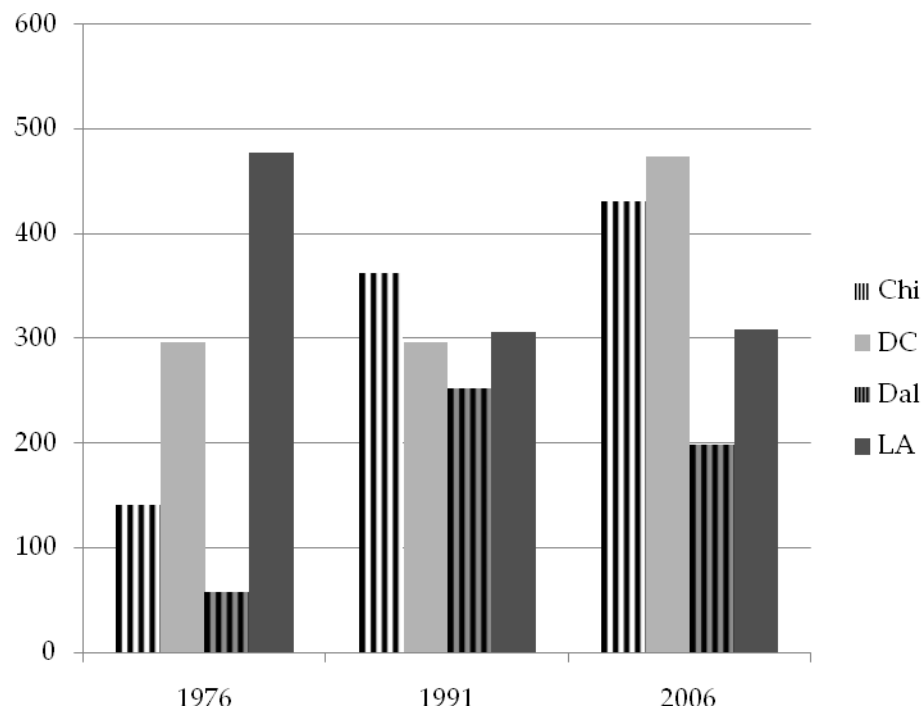


Figure 4.1. Mean word counts of all four newspapers, across reference points

A one-way analysis of variance shows a significant difference in the total number of words in the reviews by newspaper (see Table 4.5). There is also a



significant difference in the number of reviews by newspaper (see Table 4.6). In other words, while there are not significant differences in the overall amount of criticism over time, there are differences in the amount of criticism between newspapers. Therefore, it will be useful to inspect each newspaper individually for trends over time.

Table 4.5. One-way analysis of variance, total word count by newspaper

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
paper	3	897299	299100	3.8807	0.0106
Error	140	10790201	77073		
C. Total	143	11687499			

Table 4.6. One-way analysis of variance, number of reviews by newspaper

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
paper	3	6.631944	2.21065	4.0977	0.0080
Error	140	75.527778	0.53948		
C. Total	143	82.159722			

### *Chicago Tribune*

The *Chicago Tribune* showed an overall increase in the amount of theater criticism from each reference point to the next (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3).

Considering the overall word counts and the number of reviews, there was a significant difference in the quantity of criticism in the *Tribune* between 1976 and 1991 (Tables 4.7 and 4.8). Again, however, this difference was an increase, as

opposed to the decrease that was expected. There was not a significant difference in the quantity of criticism between 1991 and 2006. The length of each review generally increased; there was an increase in word count at each reference point (see Figure 4.4).

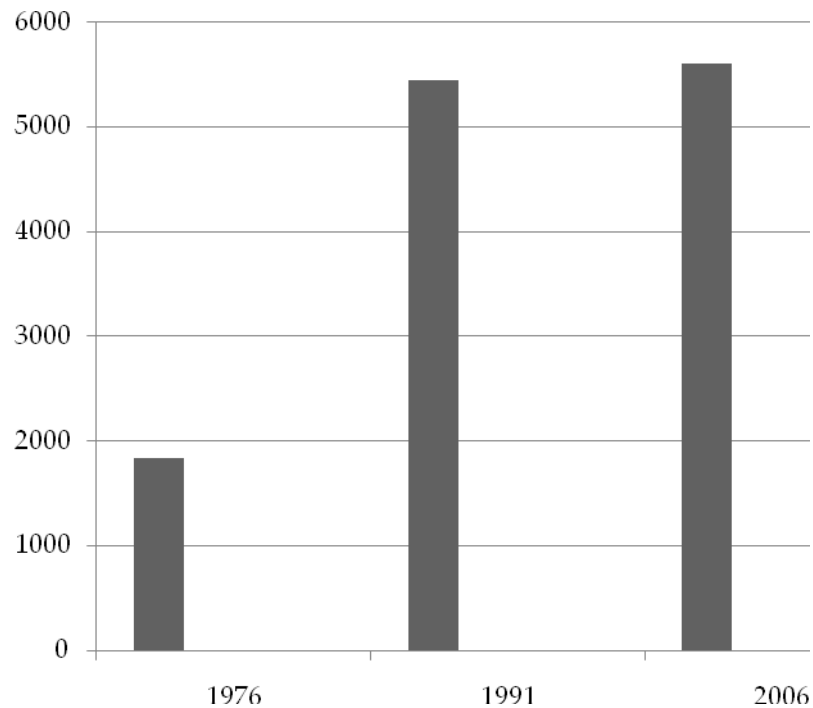


Figure 4.2. *Chicago Tribune* summed word counts by year

#### *The Dallas Morning News*

In the sampled issues of *The Dallas Morning News*, both the overall word counts of items of theater criticism and the mean length of the reviews increased from 1976 to 1991, and then decreased again from 1991 to 2006 (see Figures 4.5

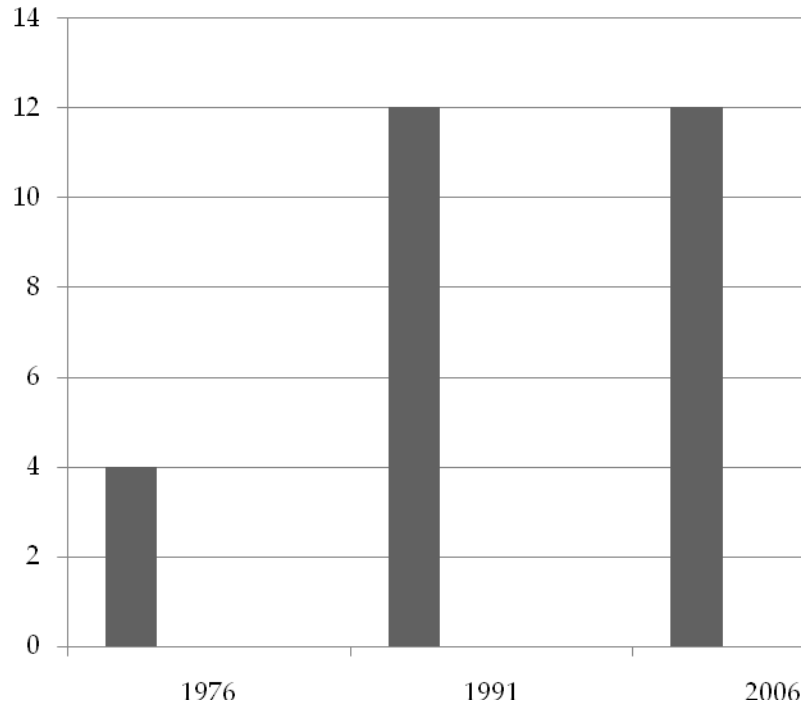


Figure 4.3 *Chicago Tribune* number of reviews by year

Table 4.7. One-way analysis of variance, number of reviews by year (*Tribune*)

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
year	1	2.666667	2.66667	5.5000	0.0284
Error	22	10.666667	0.48485		
C. Total	23	13.333333			

Table 4.8. One-way analysis of variance, total word count by year (*Tribune*)

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
year	1	262295.0	262295	4.4847	0.0457
Error	22	1286692.9	58486		
C. Total	23	1548988.0			

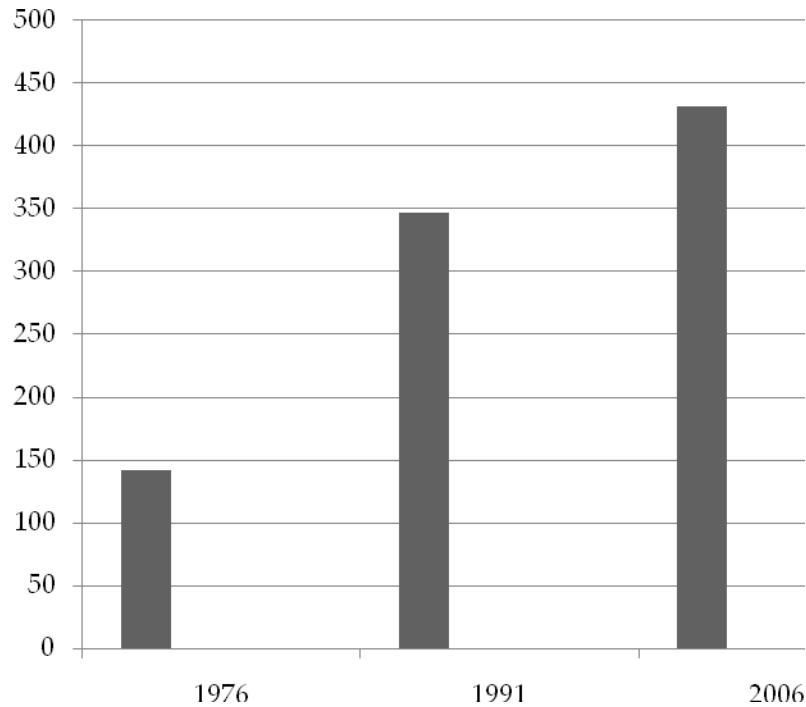


Figure 4.4. *Chicago Tribune* mean word count by year.

and 4.6). However, the differences were not statistically significant at either point. The number of reviews run in the representative issues steadily increased over each of the reference points, but the difference was not statistically significant (see Figure 4.7).

#### *Los Angeles Times*

The *Los Angeles Times* was the only newspaper in the study that displayed the downward trend that was expected given the literature. The total quantity of theater criticism in the observed issues of the *Times*, by word count and number of reviews, decreased from 1976 to 1991 and from 1991 to 2006 (see Figures 4.11

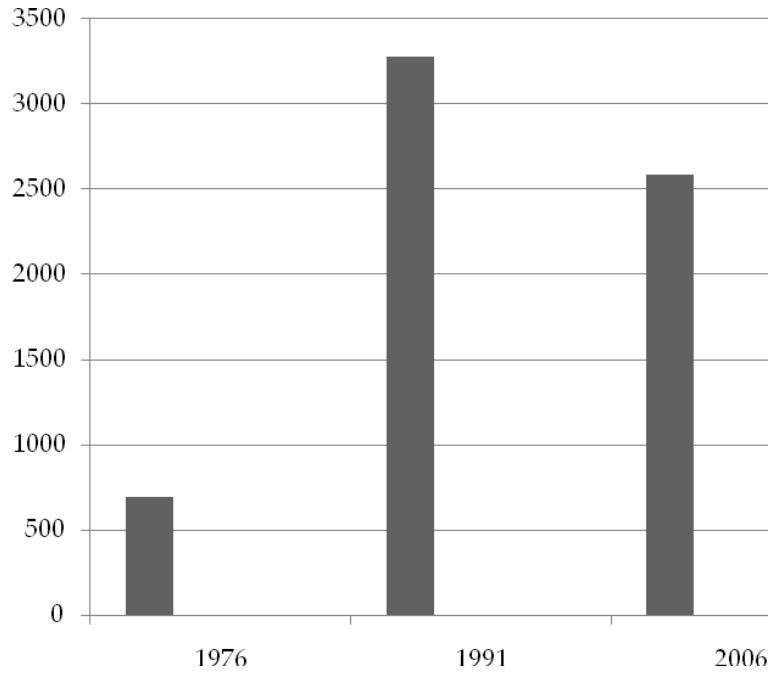


Figure 4.5. *The Dallas Morning News* summed word counts by year

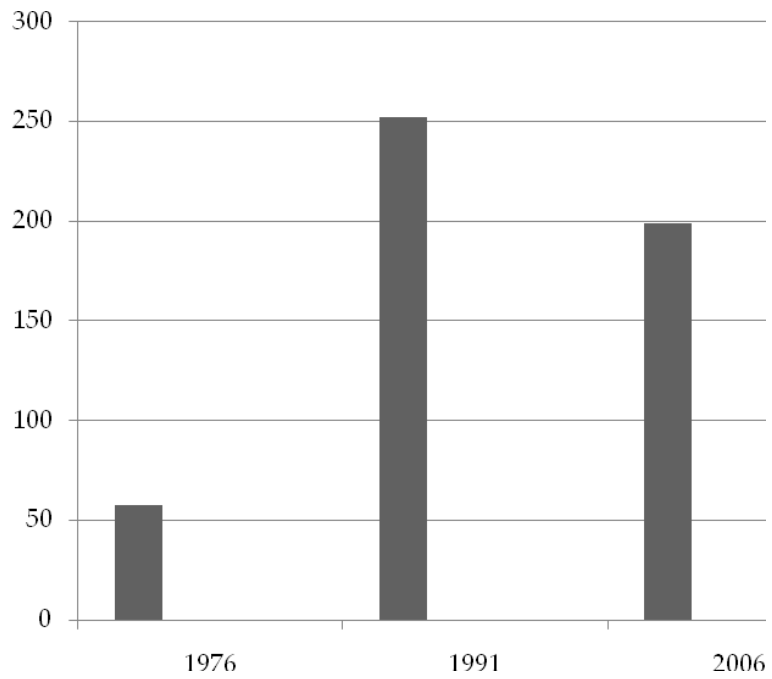


Figure 4.6. *The Dallas Morning News* mean word count by year

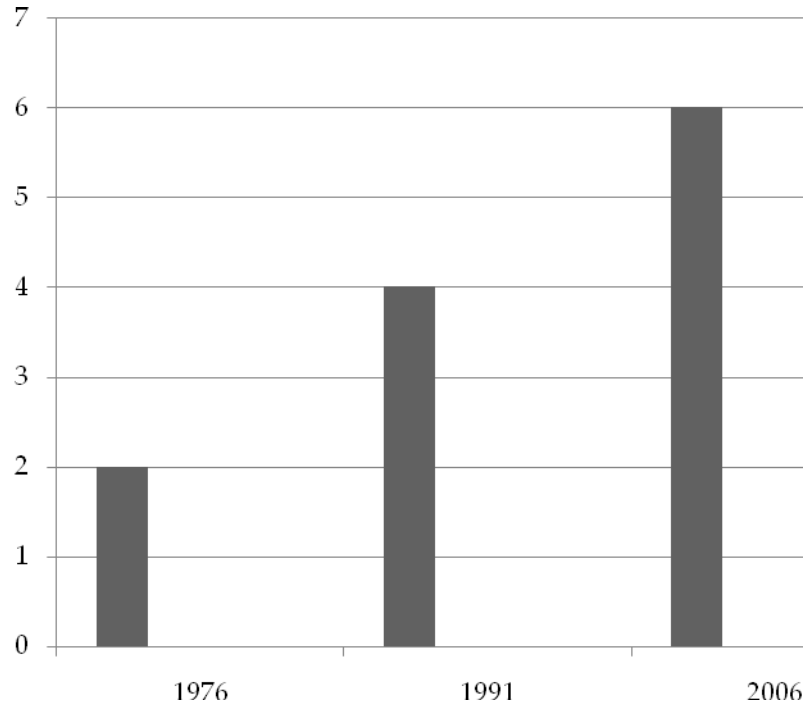


Figure 4.7. *The Dallas Morning News* number of reviews by year

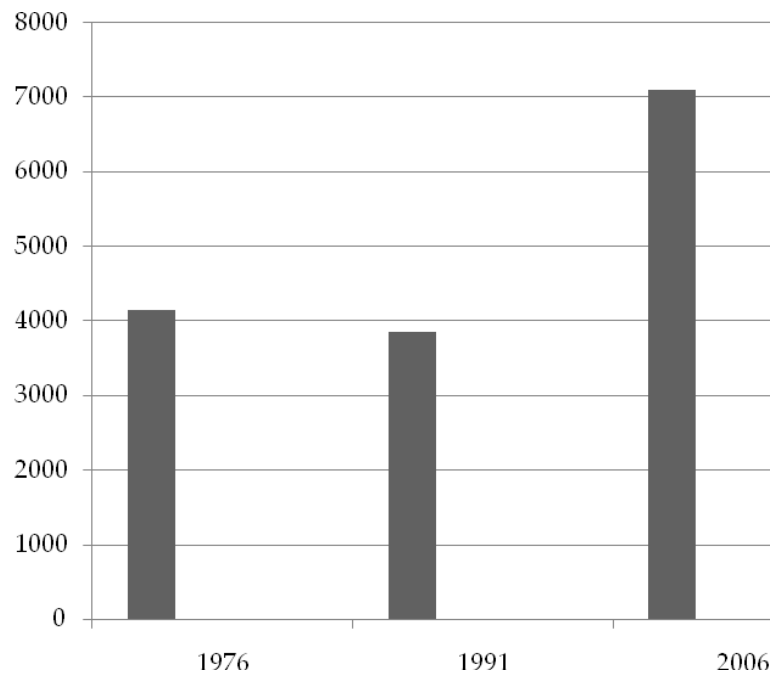


Figure 4.8. *The Washington Post* summed word count by year

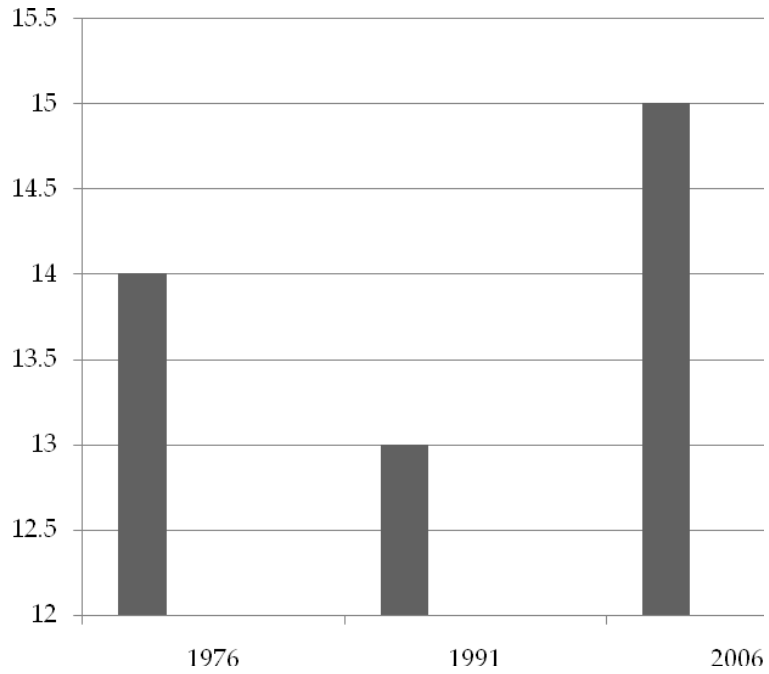


Figure 4.9. *The Washington Post* number of reviews by year

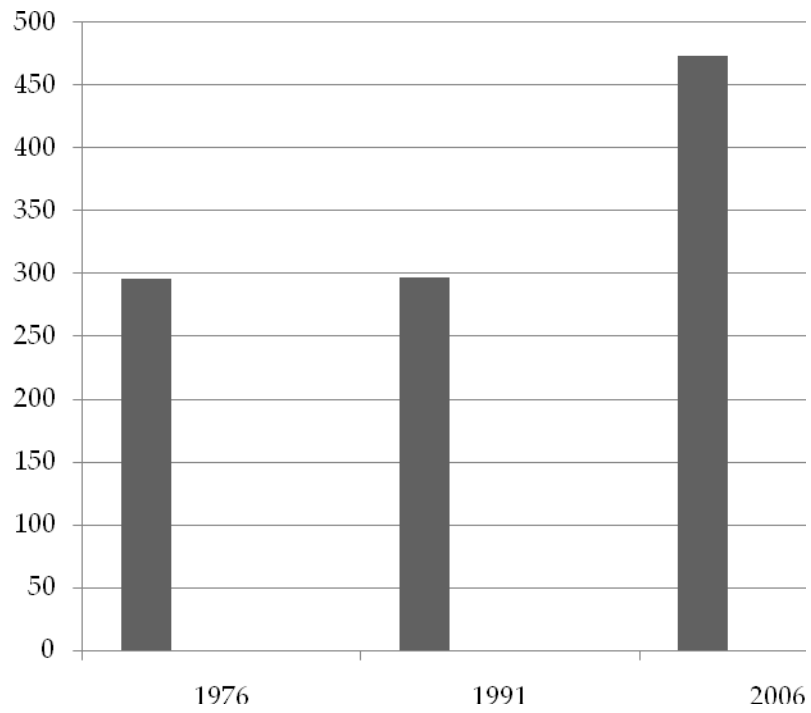


Figure 4.10. *The Washington Post* mean word count by year

and 4.12). The mean word count of each review also decreased from 1976 to 1991, then remained steady into 2006 (see Figure 4.13). However, once again, these differences were not statistically significant.

### *Bylines (RQ<sub>2</sub>)*

While collecting the data, the researcher noted the byline of each review, particularly the staff position of each writer, if indicated. These were then coded so that they could be compared. When no title was given—only the writer’s name was printed—or the byline simply indicated *staff writer*, the piece was coded *staff no.* The appellation *critic* was used when the byline gave the author a title such as *theater critic, entertainment editor, entertainment writer, staff critic, arts critic*, or some other similar designation that indicated a specialty. The third category was *special*, which was used for items that were bylined *special to* whichever newspaper they appeared in, a designation that typically indicates that the piece was written by a freelance or guest writer.

There was statistical evidence of an association between newspapers and bylines (see Table 4.9). However, because the count in some of the cells was small, it was impossible to statistically determine where the association lies. But, as can be seen in Figure 4.14, the *Chicago Tribune* is far likelier than the other newspapers to use the designation *critic*, while *The Washington Post* is the least



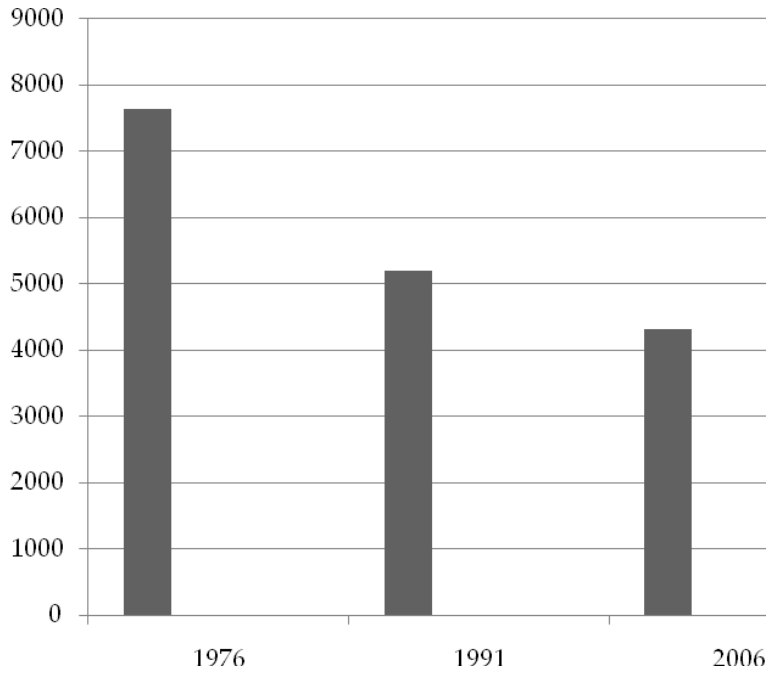


Figure 4.11. *Los Angeles Times* summed word count by year

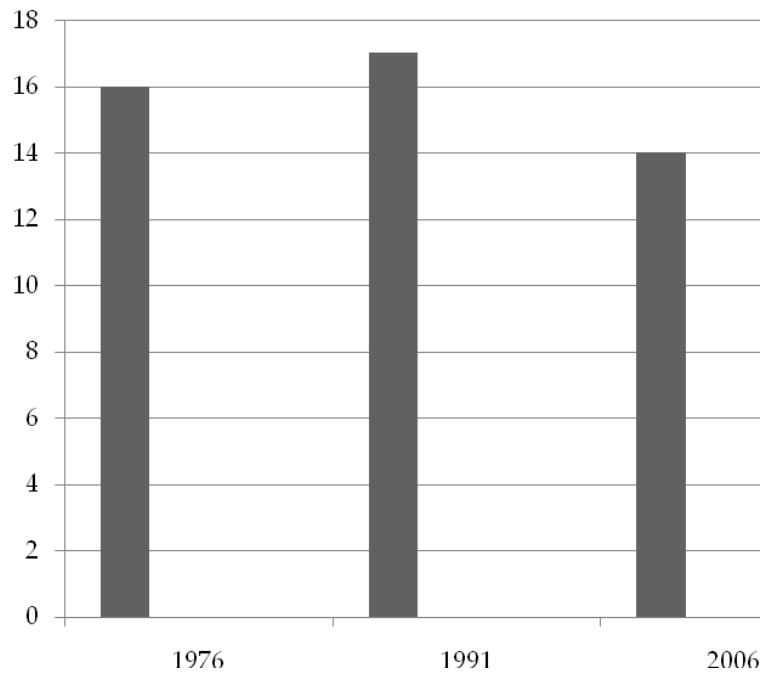


Figure 4.12. *Los Angeles Times* number of reviews by year

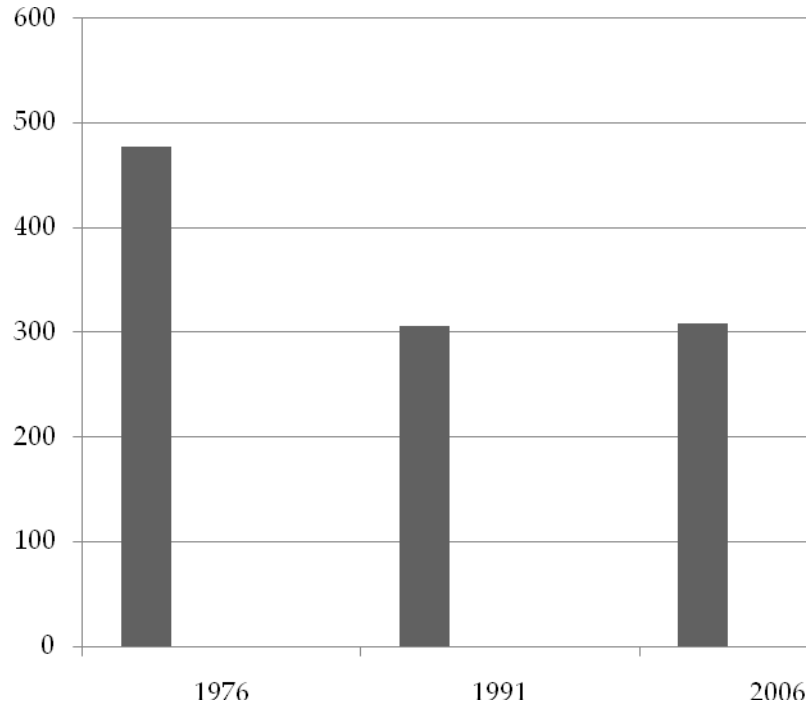


Figure 4.13. *Los Angeles Times* mean word count by year

likely, not having used it at all in the sampled issues. The *Post* is, however, apparently more likely to use freelance writers than the other newspapers. And the *Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* were far more likely to have their reviewers designated *staff writers* or not have any staff position listed for them. The possible implications of this information will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Table 4.9. Association between newspapers and bylines

Test	ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
Likelihood Ratio	65.880	<.0001
Pearson	53.920	<.0001

There is also statistical evidence of a relationship between the byline and the year (see Table 4.10). Additionally, there is statistical evidence of a general association between newspapers by byline controlling for date (see Table 4.11). But once again, as some of the cells have a count of less than five, there is not enough information to statistically determine where the differences lie.

Table 4.10. Association between bylines and year

Test	ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
Likelihood Ratio	20.983	0.0003
Pearson	16.719	0.0022

Statistical analysis did not turn up evidence of an association between the mean word count of the reviews and the staff position of the writers and indicated by byline. A graphical representation of that data is shown in Figure 4.15.

*Presence of Picture(s) (RQ<sub>3</sub>)*

Statistical analysis did uncover evidence of a relationship between the mean word count and the presence of one or more pictures (see Table 4.12). As evidenced by the chart in Figure 4.16, the reviews that ran with photographs tended to be longer than those without pictures.

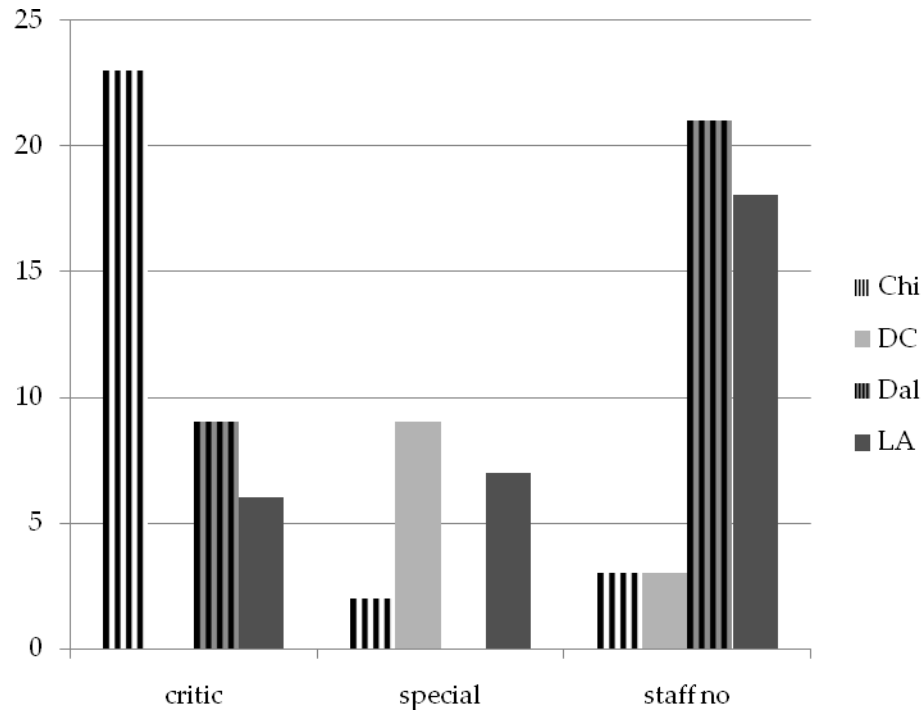


Figure 4.14. Association between newspapers and bylines

Table 4.11. Association between newspapers and bylines controlling for date

Alternative Hypothesis	DF	Value	Prob
Nonzero Correlation	1	10.4025	0.0013
Row Mean Scores Differ	3	42.0672	<.0001
General Association	6	52.5684	<.0001

However, there was no statistical evidence of a relationship between the byline and the presence of one or more pictures. An examination of the data (see Figure 4.17) shows that reviews written by writers credited as *special* to were somewhat less likely to include a photograph, but the difference was not statistically significant (see Table 4.13).

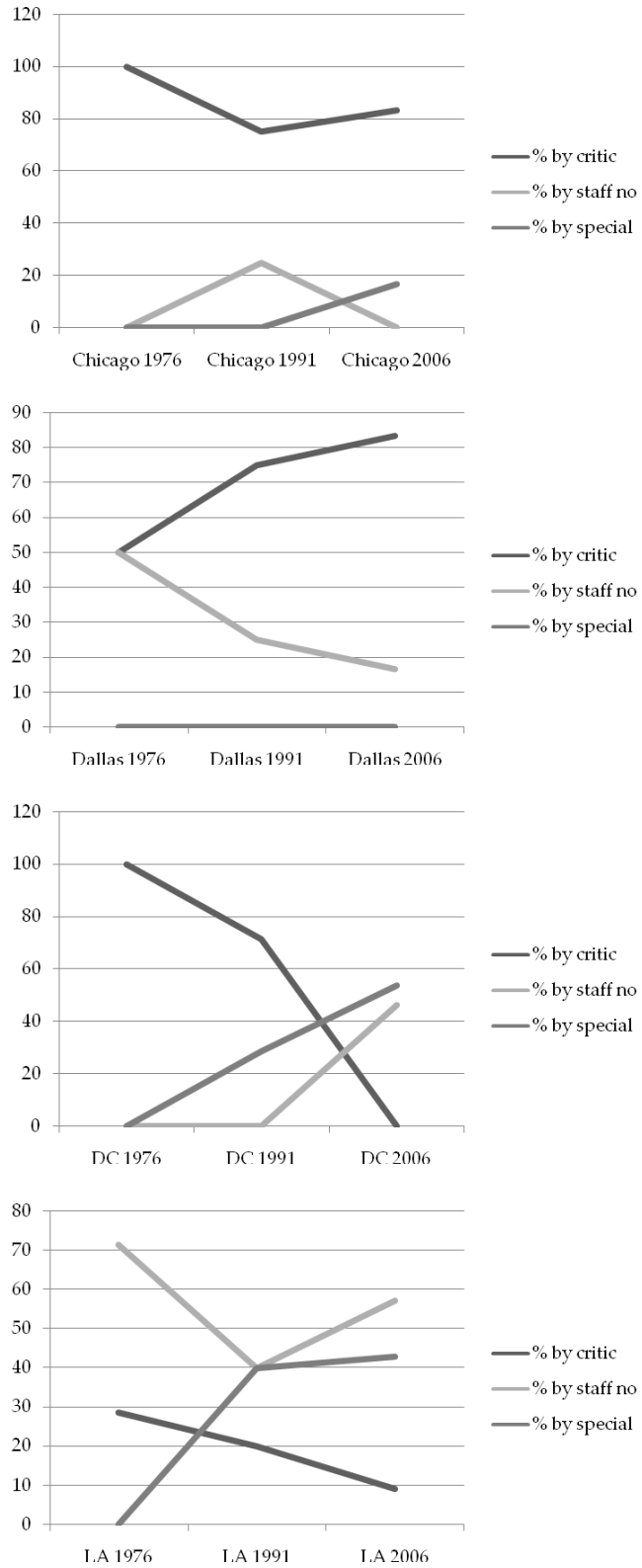


Figure 4.15. Association between byline, newspaper, and date

Table 4.12. Analysis of variance of presence of picture and mean word count

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
pictures	1	333567.8	333568	13.4276	0.0004
Error	99	2459353.1	24842		
C. Total	100	2792920.9			

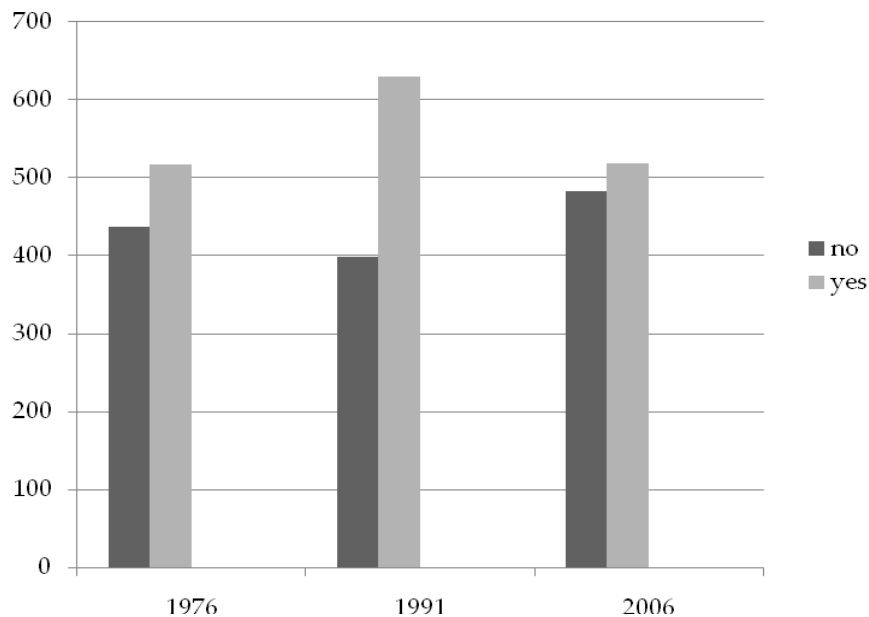


Figure 4.16. Relationship between mean word count and presence of picture(s)

There is evidence of an association between the presence of one or more photographs and the reference point, or year (see Table 4.14). A visual representation of the data shows an increase in the use of photographs at each reference point (see Figure 4.18).

There is also statistical evidence of a relationship between newspapers and the use of pictures (see Table 4.15). As Figure 4.19 demonstrates, *The Dallas*

*Morning News* is far less likely than the other three observed newspapers to run one or more photographs with a review.

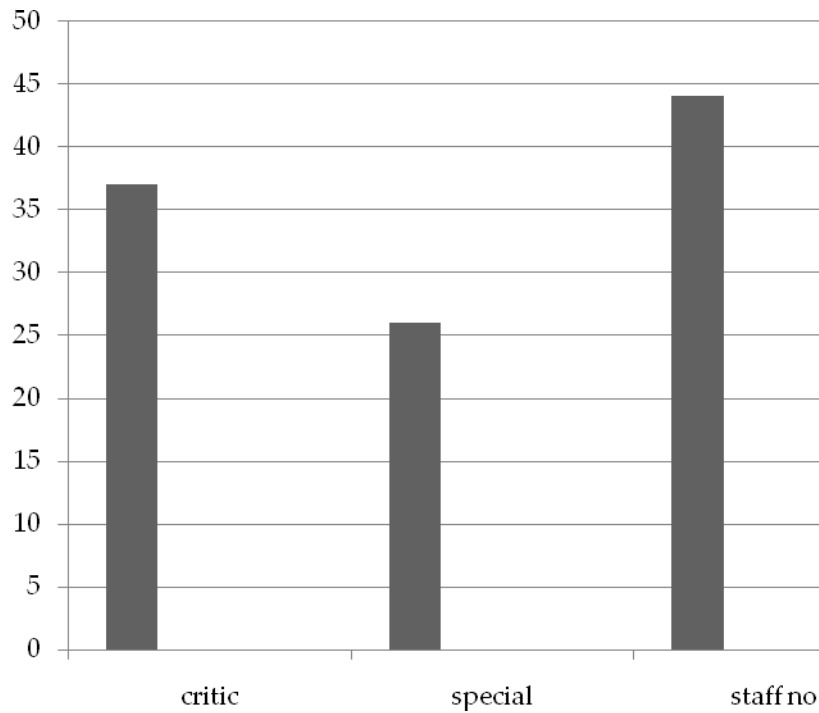


Figure 4.17. Analysis of byline credit and picture(s)

Table 4.13. Analysis of relationship between byline and picture(s)

Test	ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
Likelihood Ratio	3.965	0.1377
Pearson	3.839	0.1467

Table 4.14. Analysis of relationship between picture(s) and year

Test	ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
Likelihood Ratio	17.727	0.0001
Pearson	15.716	0.0004

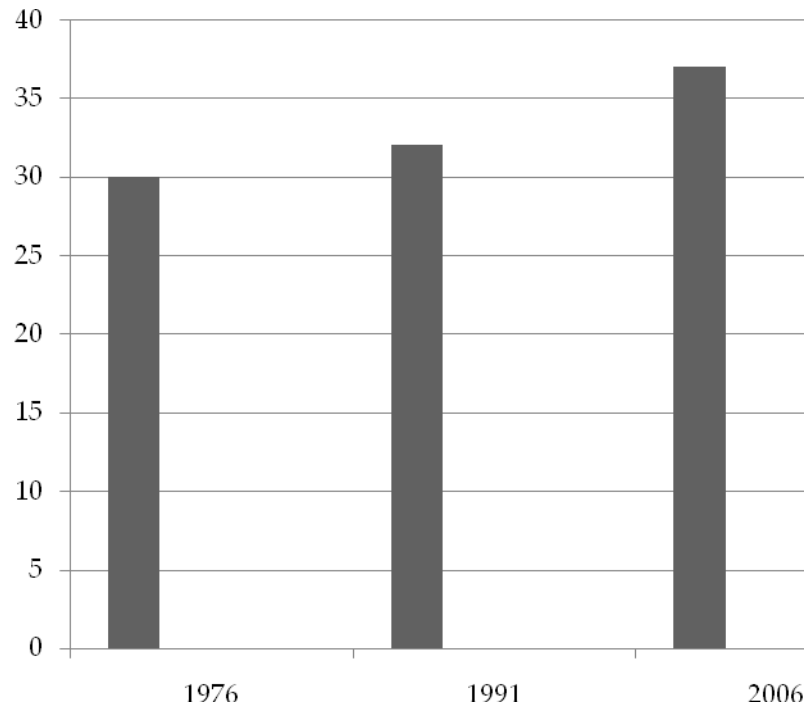


Figure 4.18. Analysis of relationship between picture(s) and year

Table 4.15. Analysis of relationship between picture(s) and newspaper

Test	ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
Likelihood Ratio	8.467	0.0373
Pearson	7.815	0.0500

And, finally, there is also statistical evidence of a relationship between newspaper and the use of photographs when controlling for time. Again, however, since some of the cells have a count of less than five, it is statistically uncertain exactly where the differences exist. However, an inspection of Figure 4.20 shows a general increase over time in the use of pictures by the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Dallas Morning News*, while the *Los Angeles*



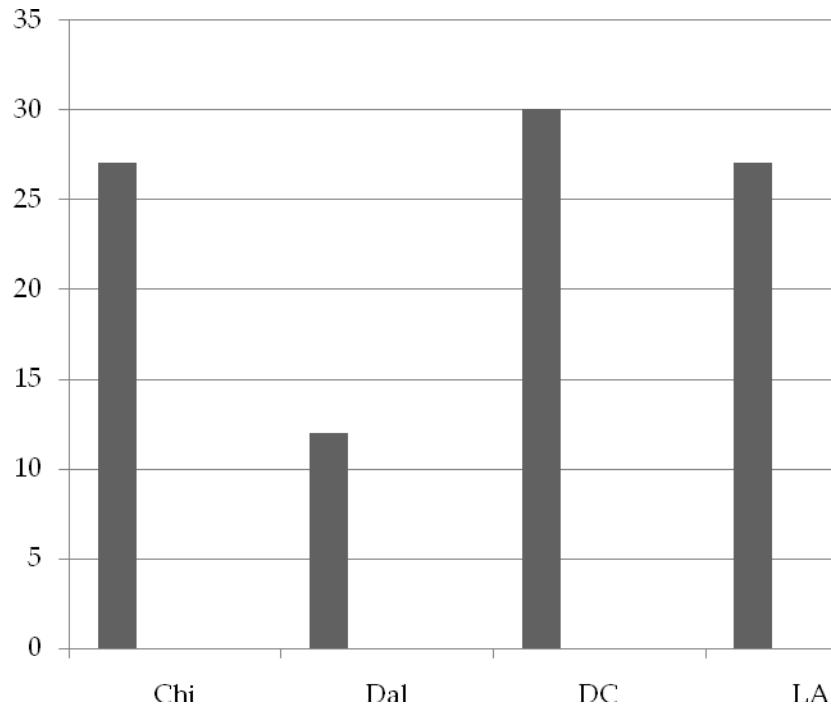


Figure 4.19. Analysis of relationship between picture(s) and newspaper

*Times'* use of photographs with their theater criticism has decreased. (It is important to note that the decrease in the use of pictures with theater reviews in the *Times* is not *caused* by the general decrease in theater criticism in that newspaper. Since the question at hand was regarding photographs that ran with reviews, only issues in which reviews ran were analyzed for the presence of photographs. In other words, there can be no photograph with a review if there is no review to begin with. Therefore, the decrease in the use of photographs with reviews in the *Los Angeles Times* is separate from and in addition to the overall decline in theater criticism in that newspaper.)

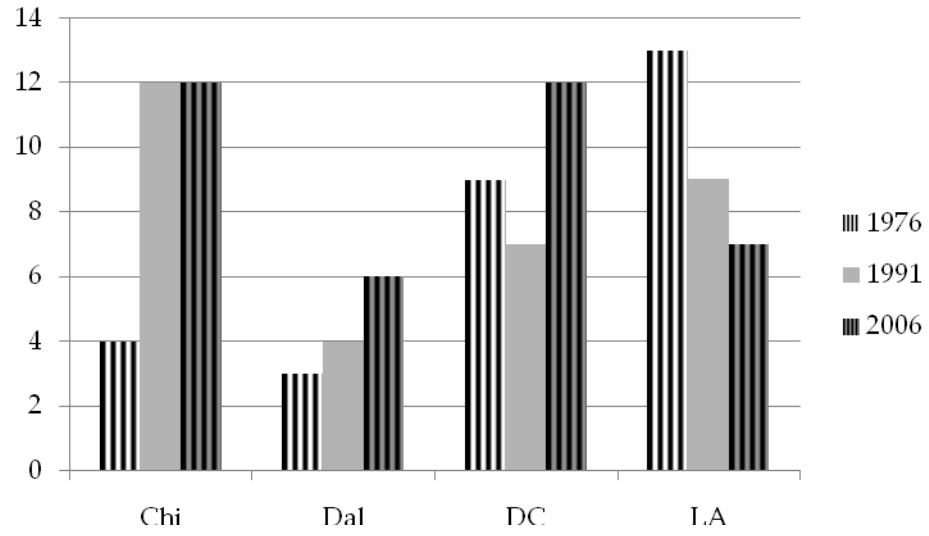


Figure 4.20. Analysis of the relationship between picture(s) and newspaper over time

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusions and Discussion

After conducting a literature review that seemed to foretell the death of journalistic theater criticism (see pages 15-17), the author of this study expected to see a decline in the quantity of reviews. That decline did not materialize in the data; however, a careful analysis indicates that the results are not entirely at odds with the literature review. After all, the picture painted by the existing literature is one in which editors “know or care [little] about the art” of theater (Kalb 2003, 49), critics are replaced by freelance writers or wire copy, and arts journalists are pressured to “squeeze down, dumb down, leave staff positions unfilled, do interviews and profiles, and lap up blockbuster entertainment hype and celebrity frenzy . . . trivializing the essence of criticism” (National Arts Journalism Program 1999, 11). Despite an increase in the overall amount of theater criticism in the selected newspapers, the picture that emerged is not inconsistent with that painted by the literature review.

## *Possible Implications*

### *Where Has the Staff Critic Gone?*

Journalistic theater reviews seem, given this study, to be thriving; but the staff theater critic may be going the way of the dinosaur. Looking at the raw data or at Figure 4.15, it is easy to see that, at each reference point, the percentage of reviews written by newspaper staffers—be they designated *critic* or not—is decreasing, while the percentage written by freelancers is increasing. As far back as 1999, the National Arts Journalism Program noted this trend, which the group’s report called one of the ironies of the field of arts journalism: “Many newspapers, holding down costs by understaffing, recognize increased arts activity with increased use of freelancers, who may or may not have training or depth” (National Arts Journalism Program 1999, 11). While there is no reason to believe that the freelance critics whose work appeared in the issues sampled in this study lack training or depth—in fact, a quick Internet search of the most frequently occurring names on the list showed writers who were eminently qualified—the fact that newspapers are turning to them to save money at the cost of employing full-time staff critics does indicate a devaluing of the professional theater critic in American newspaper journalism, or at least of theater criticism as a full-time profession. This trend shows decreased emphasis on the theater critic

as a cultural presence in a community, a force who can, over time, help shape the vision of theater within his or her sphere.

*The “Dumbing-Down” of Arts Coverage*

The newspaper industry is foundering, and to stay afloat, newspaper publishers must make what they think is the best use of their financial resources and produce what they think readers want. And, unfortunately, it seems that many readers want popular culture, entertainment news, and “fluff.” When Bill Marx, a twenty-year veteran of theater criticism and other arts journalism in Boston, was forced out of Boston NPR affiliate WBUR, the station’s managing director, Sam Fleming, was quoted as saying, “We recognize the arts are really important. We’ll have some criticism and a lot of stuff as related to arts in the news.” Fleming also said that “the shift is a result of wanting ‘to do more journalism about the arts’” (MacLaughlin 2006). Sadly, what passes for “journalism about the arts” is increasingly gossip about celebrities like Britney Spears—whose relationship to the arts is tenuous at best. So, in general, while the quantity of arts coverage may be increasing, its quality may be decreasing. It was not the purpose of this study to examine any quality of theater criticism; but the findings of this study raise questions that may be best pursued through a more qualitative approach. (Topics for further research are discussed later in this chapter.)

The increasing use of photographs with reviews, as indicated by this study, is also telling; with the exception of the *Los Angeles Times*—incidentally the only newspaper in the study in which the overall quantity of theater criticism is declining—newspapers are increasingly using photography along with their reviews. Since this is not accompanied by a reduction in mean word count, it can only be helpful to readers and artists. Photographs can enrich reviews by adding a visual dimension to verbal description and can enliven the material and capture the attention of potential readers. Still, when combined with the aforementioned indicators and the increasing use of a star or letter ratings system, this trend hints at an increasing emphasis on the slick, quick, and visually appealing over the in-depth and intellectual. Perhaps future studies could attempt to discover whether the increase in pictures corresponds to a simplification of criticism.

### *Hope in the Blogosphere*

In 2007, veteran (U.K.) *Guardian* theater critic Lyn Gardner pronounced—on a *Guardian*-hosted blog—that blogging has saved theater critics from extinction. Her fellow *Guardian* critic Michael Billington had, the day before, written a post hailing the democratization of opinions that blogging allows, while expressing hesitation about the medium's pace, informality, and tendency

toward “pre-emptive guesswork” (Billington 2007). The time and space limitations of printed review, he pointed out, “force one to focus on essentials.”

While agreeing with Billington’s surmises, Gardner added that

the blogosphere is opening up criticism and giving us newspaper critics a necessary kick up the bum. . . . I can think of increasing numbers of bloggers who are writing thoughtfully and inspiring a genuine dialogue about the issues that matter in the theatre. (Gardner 2007)

It is increasingly evident that the Internet is now the home of some of today’s most interesting criticism, much of which has been unable to find a home in traditional journalism. Drama and music critic Terry Teachout has written, “I now spend more time reading art-related blog postings than print-media reviews. Increasingly, they’re sharper, livelier, and timelier than their old-media competition” (2007). One example of such a site is critic Jonathan Kalb’s *Hunter On-Line Theater Review* (HotReview.org). Featuring a simple design with a grass-roots feel, *HotReview* features reviews of everything from an experimental feminist play in Hamburg to a hit Broadway musical. Even long-time establishment critics like Stanley Kauffmann and Marvin Carlson have contributed, as have award-winning playwrights Tina Howe and Tony Kushner. Whatever the future holds for theater criticism in newspapers, there is as yet no need to despair about the death of criticism.

### *Limitations and Difficulties of this Research*

When choosing the reference points, the researcher used consistent fifteen-year intervals in three distinct epochs of American the newspaper industry. The researcher then referred to the responses of the three professional theater critics in selecting three sample weeks of the year which could be applied consistently to each of the reference points. The author intentionally refrained from consulting history to avoid sample weeks falling at the same time as a major news event. This was deemed appropriate for two reasons: First, this method would help to create a sample that was as average and representative as possible, given the systematic method of sampling. Second, as there is virtually always some story in the news that would be deemed major by someone, it would prevent the necessity of getting into the complicated business of deciding what news stories met the criteria of rejection.

In retrospect, however, perhaps it would have been preferable to sample a week in November other than the first, as the first week in November is election week; in particular, in 1976, the first week in November was a presidential election week. It is possible that the domination of election coverage in the news in the first week of each November led to a decrease in theater criticism that may have rendered that particular week non-representative, skewing the results.



## *Topics for Further Study*

### *Further Exploration of the Quantity of Theater Criticism*

Due to logistical and time constraints, this study left many interesting topics unexplored. For instance, the past century has seen the number of American newspapers dwindle to a fraction of what it once was. Whereas in 1900, Chicago had “a dozen newspapers, each with a theater critic, by the end of the century there were just two downtown dailies, and . . . only one of them had significant influence over the arts” (Fosdick 2004, 92). Therefore, there may still be an overall decline in the quantity of theater criticism that was not visible in a study that looked only at these individual newspapers. Another interesting avenue would be to study how theater criticism fares as a percentage of theater coverage in newspapers and other media.

### *Qualities of Theater Criticism*

If further study supports the conclusions of this research that the quantity of journalistic theater criticism may not be where the perceived problem lies, the next step will be to examine the quality. Possible topics for future research include (1) studying what plays are being reviewed and whether reviews of “serious” plays are giving way to reviews of mass-market corporate musicals, for example; (2) studying the reading level at which criticism has been written to

determine whether the writing has become more simplistic; (3) researching whether the increase in the use of photography corresponds to a simplification of criticism; and (4) conducting a content analysis of theater reviews to determine whether reviews are becoming more “consumer reports”-oriented.

### *Effects of Theater Criticism*

Some of the most fascinating questions one can raise about theater criticism pertain to its effects. Future studies might examine (1) how theater criticism affects audiences and the reading public; (2) how theater criticism affects theater practitioners; (3) who reads reviews; (4) what impact reviews have on ticket sales; and (5) how the public views the credibility of theater critics as compared to other journalists. Addressing these questions could go a long way toward understanding the role of criticism in American journalism.

## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX

Table A.1. Raw data collected in observations of 144 newspaper issues.

Date	Paper	Number reviews	Byline	Word count	Photograph(s)
Mon. Feb. 2, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Mon. Feb. 2, 1976	LA	1	staff no	551	no
Mon. Feb. 2, 1976	DC	0	0	0	0
Mon. Feb. 2, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Tues. Feb. 3, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Tues. Feb. 3, 1976	LA	3	critic	765	yes
Tues. Feb. 3, 1976	LA		staff no	459	no
Tues. Feb. 3, 1976	LA		critic	723	yes
Tues. Feb. 3, 1976	DC	1	staff no	495	yes
Tues. Feb. 3, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Wed. Feb. 4, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Wed. Feb. 4, 1976	LA	0	0	0	0
Wed. Feb. 4, 1976	DC	2	staff no	382	no
Wed. Feb. 4, 1976	DC		staff no	295	yes
Wed. Feb. 4, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Feb. 5, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Feb. 5, 1976	LA	2	staff no	523	no
Thurs. Feb. 5, 1976	LA		critic	630	no
Thurs. Feb. 5, 1976	DC	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Feb. 5, 1976	Dal	1	critic	370	yes
Mon. May 3, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Mon. May 3, 1976	LA	1	staff no	308	no
Mon. May 3, 1976	DC	1	staff no	442	yes
Mon. May 3, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Tues. May 4, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Tues. May 4, 1976	LA	1	staff no	602	yes
Tues. May 4, 1976	DC	2	staff no	501	yes
Tues. May 4, 1976	DC		staff no	395	no
Tues. May 4, 1976	Dal	1	staff no	318	yes

Table Table A.1 continued.

Date	Paper	Number reviews	Byline	Word count	Photograph(s)
Wed. May 5, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Wed. May 5, 1976	LA	2	staff no	400	no
Wed. May 5, 1976	LA		staff no	600	yes
Wed. May 5, 1976	DC	0	0	0	0
Wed. May 5, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Thurs. May 6, 1976	Chi	1	critic	649	no
Thurs. May 6, 1976	LA	1	staff no	520	yes
Thurs. May 6, 1976	DC	1	staff no	489	yes yes
Thurs. May 6, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Mon. Nov. 1, 1976	Chi	1	critic	637	yes
Mon. Nov. 1, 1976	LA	1	staff no	670	no
Mon. Nov. 1, 1976	DC	0	0	0	0
Mon. Nov. 1, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Tues. Nov. 2, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Tues. Nov. 2, 1976	LA	1	critic	434	yes
Tues. Nov. 2, 1976	DC	1	staff no	248	no
Tues. Nov. 2, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Wed. Nov. 3, 1976	Chi	0	0	0	0
Wed. Nov. 3, 1976	LA	1	staff no	437	no
Wed. Nov. 3, 1976	DC	1	staff no	553	yes
Wed. Nov. 3, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Nov. 4, 1976	Chi	2	critic	373	no
Thurs. Nov. 4, 1976	Chi		critic	177	no
Thurs. Nov. 4, 1976	LA	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Nov. 4, 1976	DC	1	staff no	336	no
Thurs. Nov. 4, 1976	Dal	0	0	0	0
Mon. Feb. 4, 1991	Chi	0	0	0	0
Mon. Feb. 4, 1991	LA	2	critic	730	yes
Mon. Feb. 4, 1991	LA		staff no	718	yes
Mon. Feb. 4, 1991	DC	1	staff no	555	yes
Mon. Feb. 4, 1991	Dal	0	0	0	0
Tues. Feb. 5, 1991	Chi	1	critic	523	yes
Tues. Feb. 5, 1991	LA	0	0	0	0
Tues. Feb. 5, 1991	DC	0	0	0	0
Tues. Feb. 5, 1991	Dal	0	0	0	0

Table A.1 continued.

Date	Paper	Number reviews	Byline	Word count	Photograph(s)
Wed. Feb. 6, 1991	Chi	2	critic	387	no
Wed. Feb. 6, 1991	Chi		staff no	470	no
Wed. Feb. 6, 1991	LA	0	0	0	0
Wed. Feb. 6, 1991	DC	0	0	0	0
Wed. Feb. 6, 1991	Dal	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Feb. 7, 1991	Chi	1	critic	410	no
Thurs. Feb. 7, 1991	LA	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Feb. 7, 1991	DC	1	staff no	593	yes yes
Thurs. Feb. 7, 1991	Dal	0	0	0	0
Mon. May 6, 1991	Chi	1	critic	342	no
Mon. May 6, 1991	LA	3	staff no	695	yes
Mon. May 6, 1991	LA		staff no	604	no
Mon. May 6, 1991	LA		special	190	no
Mon. May 6, 1991	DC	2	staff no	556	no
Mon. May 6, 1991	DC		staff no	380	no
Mon. May 6, 1991	Dal	2	critic	794	yes
Mon. May 6, 1991	Dal		critic	837	yes-2
Tues. May 7, 1991	Chi	2	critic	648	yes
Tues. May 7, 1991	Chi		critic	374	yes
Tues. May 7, 1991	LA	0	0	0	0
Tues. May 7, 1991	DC	1	staff no	482	yes
Tues. May 7, 1991	Dal	0	0	0	0
Wed. May 8, 1991	Chi	1	critic	452	no
Wed. May 8, 1991	LA	0	0	0	0
Wed. May 8, 1991	DC	0	0	0	0
Wed. May 8, 1991	Dal	0	0	0	0
Thurs. May 9, 1991	Chi	2	critic	496	yes
Thurs. May 9, 1991	Chi		staff no	426	no
Thurs. May 9, 1991	LA	1	special	254	no
Thurs. May 9, 1991	DC	1	special	645	yes
Thurs. May 9, 1991	Dal	1	staff no	854	yes
Mon. Nov. 4, 1991	Chi	0	0	0	0
Mon. Nov. 4, 1991	LA	2	critic	660	yes
Mon. Nov. 4, 1991	LA		special	700	yes yes
Mon. Nov. 4, 1991	DC	0	0	0	0

Table A.1 continued.

Date	Paper	Number reviews	Byline	Word count	Photograph(s)
Tues. Nov. 5, 1991	Chi	0	0	0	0
Tues. Nov. 5, 1991	LA	0	0	0	0
Tues. Nov. 5, 1991	DC	0	0	0	0
Tues. Nov. 5, 1991	Dal	0	0	0	0
Wed. Nov. 6, 1991	Chi	1	critic	505	no
Wed. Nov. 6, 1991	LA	2	staff no	202	no
Wed. Nov. 6, 1991	LA		special	436	yes
Wed. Nov. 6, 1991	DC	0	0	0	0
Wed. Nov. 6, 1991	Dal	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Nov. 7, 1991	Chi	1	staff no	405	yes
Thurs. Nov. 7, 1991	LA	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Nov. 7, 1991	DC	1	special	636	yes yes
Thurs. Nov. 7, 1991	Dal	1	critic	790	yes
Mon. Feb. 6, 2006	Chi	1	critic	501	yes
Mon. Feb. 6, 2006	LA	0	0	0	0
Mon. Feb. 6, 2006	DC	1	staff no	486	yes
Mon. Feb. 6, 2006	Dal	2	critic	375	yes
Mon. Feb. 6, 2006	Dal		critic	453	yes
Tues. Feb. 7, 2006	Chi	1	critic	553	yes
Tues. Feb. 7, 2006	LA	0	0	0	0
Tues. Feb. 7, 2006	DC	2	staff no	883	yes
Tues. Feb. 7, 2006	DC		special	483	yes
Tues. Feb. 7, 2006	Dal	0	0	0	0
Wed. Feb. 8, 2006	Chi	1	critic	535	yes
Wed. Feb. 8, 2006	LA	1	special	423	no
Wed. Feb. 8, 2006	DC	1	staff no	670	yes
Wed. Feb. 8, 2006	Dal	1	critic	436	yes
Thurs. Feb. 9, 2006	Chi	1	special	443	yes
Thurs. Feb. 9, 2006	LA	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Feb. 9, 2006	DC	1	special	539	yes
Thurs. Feb. 9, 2006	Dal	1	staff no	412	yes
Mon. May 1, 2006	Chi	1	critic	353	yes
Mon. May 1, 2006	LA	1	staff no	877	yes
Mon. May 1, 2006	DC	1	special	523	yes
Mon. May 1, 2006	Dal	0	0	0	0

Table A.1 continued.

Date	Paper	Number reviews	Byline	Word count	Photograph(s)
Tues. May 2, 2006	DC	2	staff no	660	yes
Tues. May 2, 2006	DC		special	608	yes
Tues. May 2, 2006	Dal	0	0	0	0
Wed. May 3, 2006	Chi	2	critic	435	yes
Wed. May 3, 2006	Chi		critic	520	yes
Wed. May 3, 2006	LA	2	special	482	yes
Wed. May 3, 2006	LA		staff no	577	0
Wed. May 3, 2006	DC	1	special	478	yes
Wed. May 3, 2006	Dal	0	0	0	0
Thurs. May 4, 2006	Chi	1	critic	409	yes
Thurs. May 4, 2006	LA	0	0	0	0
Thurs. May 4, 2006	DC	1	special	531	yes yes
Thurs. May 4, 2006	Dal	1	critic	447	no
Mon. Nov. 6, 2006	Chi	1	critic	518	yes yes
Mon. Nov. 6, 2006	LA	2	staff no	1188	yes yes
Mon. Nov. 6, 2006	LA		staff no	431	yes
Mon. Nov. 6, 2006	DC	0	0	0	0
Mon. Nov. 6, 2006	Dal	1	critic	457	yes
Tues. Nov. 7, 2006	Chi	1	special	400	yes
Tues. Nov. 7, 2006	LA	1	special	329	yes
Tues. Nov. 7, 2006	DC	2	staff no	631	yes
Tues. Nov. 7, 2006	DC		staff no	110	yes
Tues. Nov. 7, 2006	Dal	0	0	0	0
Wed. Nov. 8, 2006	Chi	1	critic	500	yes
Wed. Nov. 8, 2006	LA	0	0	0	0
Wed. Nov. 8, 2006	DC	1	special	486	yes
Wed. Nov. 8, 2006	Dal	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Nov. 9, 2006	Chi	1	critic	435	yes
Thurs. Nov. 9, 2006	LA	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Nov. 9, 2006	DC	0	0	0	0
Thurs. Nov. 9, 2006	Dal	0	0	0	0



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