

How can we build a better arts press?

Academic conferences disseminate research; they don't engender innovation. At the Annenberg Innovation Lab, that's not our style. We invite media executives, academic leaders, and students to explore provocative questions and create communities of innovators. We call these high-speed ideation sessions Think & Do Workshops.

On October 25, at the Annenberg Beach House, you'll participate in one. You'll join a room full of arts journalists, artists, entrepreneurs, and media researchers and work together to answer the question: How can we build a better arts press?

What follows are a few things to think about before Friday.

Arts journalism, professionally, is in bad shape.

“Over 50 percent of the art journalist positions in American media have been eliminated in the last two years.” - Dennis Scholl, Knight Foundation

“Only two of America’s top 100 magazines have a writer or an editor assigned to art.” - Tyler Green, Modern Art Notes

“There are now only two full-time staff dance critics in all of America.” - Suzanne Carbonneau, Director, NEA Institute of Dance Journalism

“What the United States produces now is culture and ideas. Trouble is, making a living doing this has never been harder.” - Scott Timberg, Salon

At the same time, from some angles, the greater arts ecosystem, where arts journalism lives, looks pretty healthy.

There's been an explosion of new media devoted to the arts, a richness of voices and discussions the likes of which we've never seen. According to Technorati, there are more than 300,000 arts blogs. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Tumblr have fueled expansive conversation about the arts.

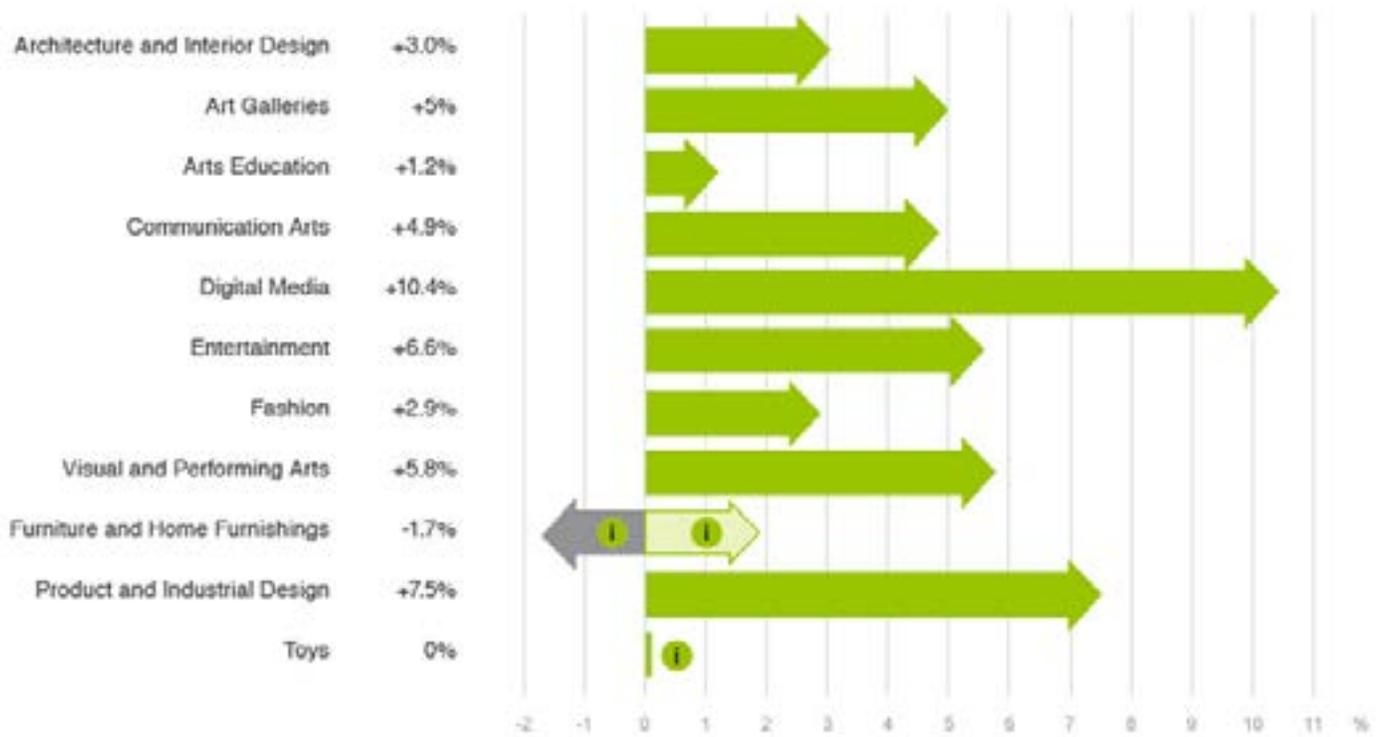
Arts organizations are now media organizations. "The average arts organization is active on three social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) and uploads 66 new pieces of content each month." - Theatre Bay Area

Nationally, there's money in the arts.

“In terms of donations, arts and culture was Americans’ fastest-growing charitable cause in 2012, rising an estimated 7.8% to \$14.44 billion... Donations to arts and culture sank 8.2% during the two-year recession of 2008 and 2009. The \$14.44 billion given in 2012 vaulted the sector back above the pre-recession peak of \$13.7 billion in 2007.” - LA Times, citing stats from Giving USA

“Corporate giving is up for the first time in nine years. From 2009 to 2012, arts giving from corporations is up 18 percent. Before we all get too excited at what sounds like a huge number, remember arts giving is up 18 percent over three years, an average of a more modest 6 percent per year.” - ArtsUSA, citing stats from Americans for the Arts

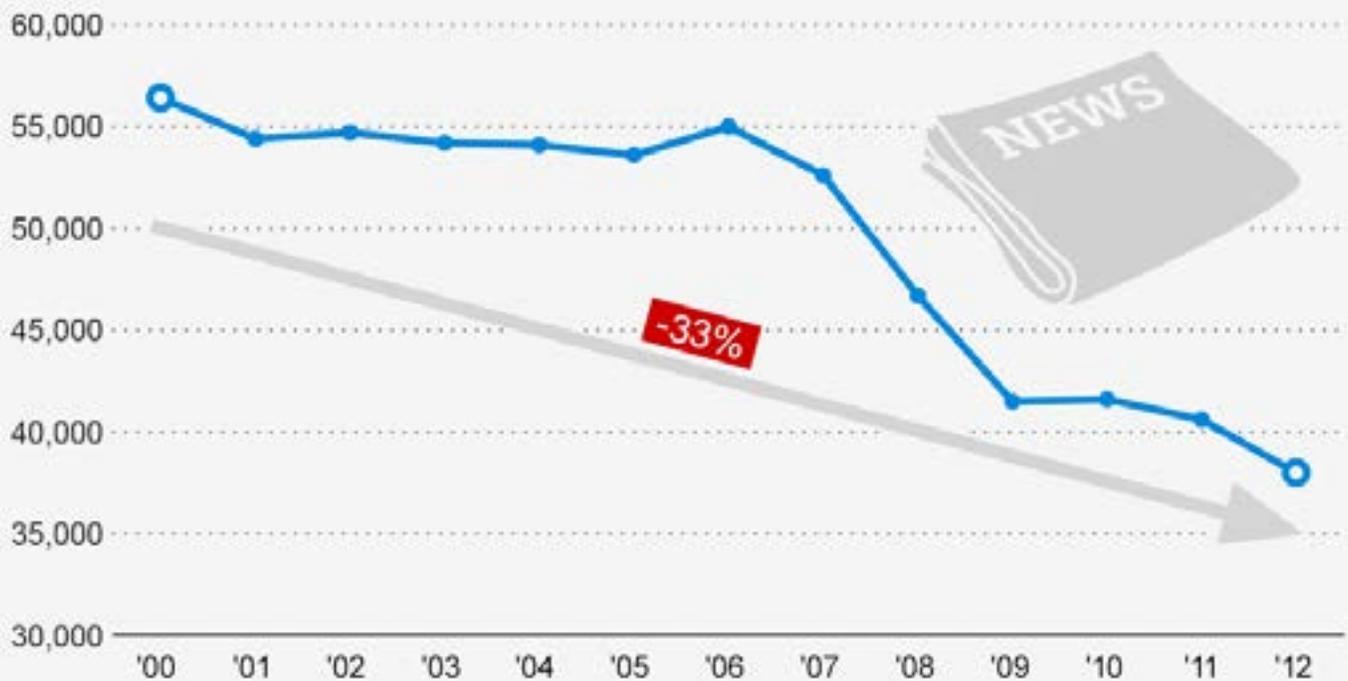
And, here in Southern California, the creative economy is big, important, and growing. Here's an Employment Forecast 2010-2015, from Otis College's most recent Report on the Creative Economy of the Los Angeles Region:



The institutions that employ most arts journalists, however, are still having a hard time.

U.S. Newsroom Employment Down to 30-Year Low

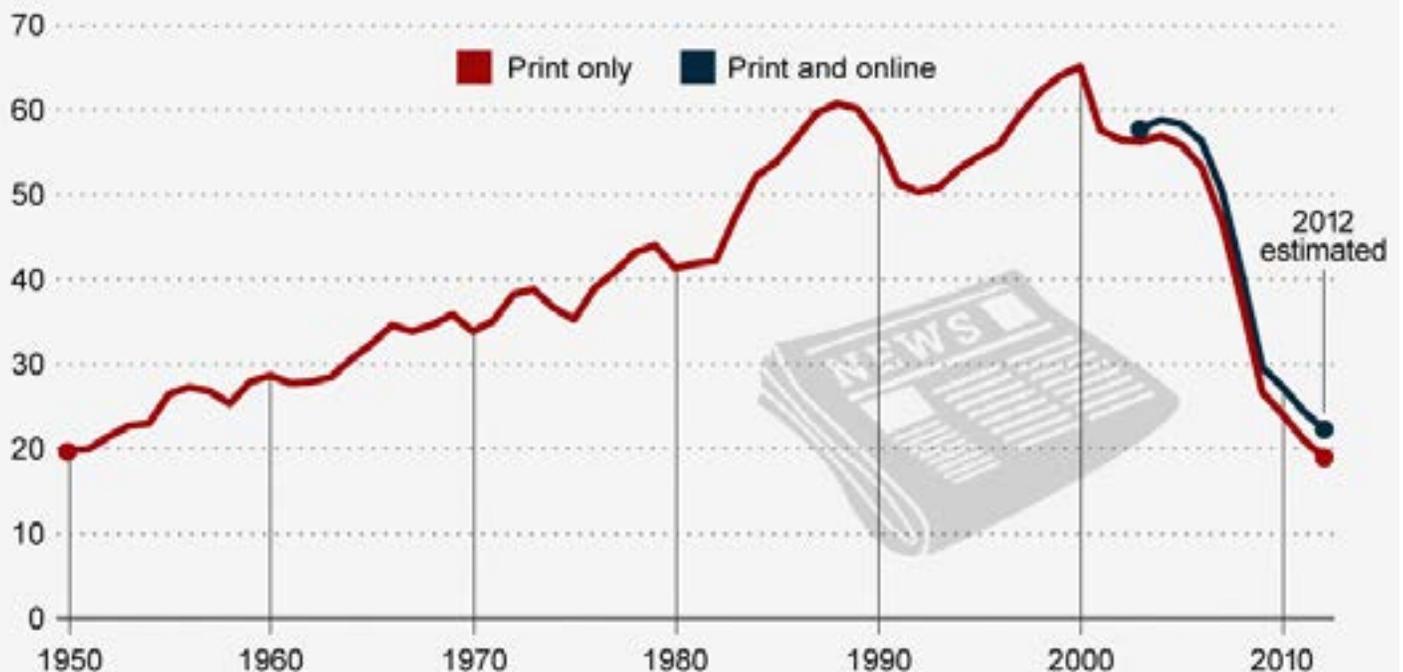
Number of full-time professional editorial jobs at U.S. newspapers



As Clay Shirky pointed out in 2009, “That the relationship between advertisers, publishers, and journalists has been ratified by a century of cultural practice doesn’t make it any less accidental.”

50 Years of Growth Wiped Out in a Decade

Newspaper advertising revenue in the United States (in billion U.S. dollars; adjusted for inflation)



Shirky reminded us back then that this “is what real revolutions are like. The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place. The importance of any given experiment isn’t apparent at the moment it appears; big changes stall, small changes spread. Even the revolutionaries can’t predict what will happen. Agreements on all sides that core institutions must be protected are rendered meaningless by the very people doing the agreeing.”

Douglas McLennan, one of people who has brought you here today, sees a way forward for arts journalism:

Art doesn't get its power until audiences decide to do something with it. One could say the same about ideas. The more people who use them, the more they evolve and become codified. In professional communities this process is known as a Community of Practice. Out of articulation and re-articulation, experimentation and debate, experience and documentation, a framework begins to emerge, a vocabulary that gives the community ways of articulating a movement or field. Without building such a framework, ideas can't find fertile ground to grow and get traction.

The Civil Rights movement didn't become a real force until there was a way to organize and animate the ideas in ways that more people could join. Gender studies didn't become a field until the feminist movement of the 60s and 70s established a vocabulary around the ideas. Each branch of medicine has a field of practice that defines professional behavior that is constantly challenged and evolving as new ideas and practitioners come along. Without a healthy framework, innovating efficiently is almost impossible; there has to be conventional wisdom to push against in order to test innovative ideas.

Arts journalism used to have a strong community of practice. Thirty years ago, it was pretty clear what the roles of a critic were, what the ethical standards were, what was accomplished by good arts journalism and what being a good critic was (and what was not). Artists and arts organizations and journalists could debate the standards, the value, the worth of good journalism.

We're in the midst of a communications revolution. It isn't just that we can communicate more easily with more people; our new abilities to communicate change who we are and how we act. Our relationships in the arts ecosystem are changing because of this. As they have, the functions and roles of arts journalism and arts journalists have become disaggregated. It's not so easy anymore to define what journalism about the arts is or who is an arts journalist. Standards? There's no agreement on how to even talk about them. Ethics? Shifting sands on which we can no longer agree on where the solid ground is. Value? We can't really tell. There are pockets of value but no definitive agreement.

The once-strong community of practice that defined arts journalism has been lost. While there's an amazing richness of experimentation and the flourishing of new voices is breathtaking, it's almost impossible to get traction for anything because there isn't a community of practice that provides a framework with which to evaluate it. This is largely the reason that there has been so little effective innovation in the ways we communicate about the arts.

The new community of practice around communicating culture has to be bigger than traditional journalism. Virtually every arts organization and many artists are becoming media organizations in their own right. It is changing them – how they act, what they choose to do, even who they are. Cultural consumers are becoming the equivalent of their own media organizations, many with audiences through social media that exceed those of the arts organizations and artists in whom they're interested. Arts professionals have also become media organizations, often articulating and driving the most interesting ideas in the arts.

The point is that “arts journalism” is no longer contained within a traditional job description. Traditional arts journalists – as much as they’d love to – can no longer define the community of practice on their own because they’re now a subset of a larger community.

This is an enormous opportunity. We are in a time of great instability in how we interact. Out of that chaos there are big opportunities. But in order to recognize them, understand them, build on them, we need to establish a new community of practice in which ideas, standards, behavior, ethics, values, qualities and innovation get investigated, defined and tested so they get codified in ways that more in the arts ecosystem can use and build on them.

Right now there’s no way to even have these conversations because we can’t even agree what we’re talking about. So how do we build a new community of practice?

The Second National Arts Journalism Summit

Four years ago we held a National Summit on Arts Journalism at USC Annenberg. The summit came out of an observation that there had been an explosion of new arts journalism projects and we wanted to survey and profile the best. We asked for submissions and received 107. Of these we presented ten.

When we started thinking about a second National Summit for this year, we realized that the landscape had changed and that simply surveying projects wasn't enough. Thus our attempt here to reach outside the arts journalism field and talk with members of the larger arts ecosystem about how we communicate about creativity and the arts.

We've assembled a diverse group of people to talk about the needs of the larger arts community. This day is being recorded and documented, and over the next week we'll be building a website to show what happens today and present some of the ideas. This will serve as a Second National Summit on Arts Journalism and we'll be publicizing the site and asking for feedback. You'll be able to find the site at www.ajsummit.org.