

Only the artists can save the arts critics

As the Independent on Sunday cuts its critics, **Ismene Brown** defends the reviewer's role and asks arts world to do the same

Ismene Brown

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Will the last person to leave the building, please turn out the lights? The arts world needs its critics, says Ismene Brown. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

How do you put a price on thought? How do you price an opinion? How do you even price the creative thought that the opinion was formed on? How do you do this in a culture - I think that's the right word - where people are used not only to getting opinion for nothing, but expect good information for nothing as well?

This is the vast battle now swirling around arts professionals: that is, those who create and organise art and those who make a profession of judging it, the arts critics. The picking off of critics, who national newspapers no longer employ on full-time contracts but phone up for £60 a pop, has been going on for years. Even in this context, [the Independent's dismissal of its entire complement of Sunday arts critics](#) is a first.

I don't suppose it will be the last. Many major American newspapers are now artless, even when their town still houses arts organisations. Astonishingly,

New York - one of the two capitals of world dance (London is the other) - has only one fully employed newspaper dance critic. And London is not lagging far behind.

The balance between professional critics and web amateurs is switching so fast that performing companies now routinely email and tweet press releases into the digital space without contacting arts specialists about an in-depth story. Professional journalists who cost money to employ are being smothered by amateurs who are already employed gainfully elsewhere and will chat about what they saw for nothing.

Welcome to the world. At [The Arts Desk](#), we swim at the forefront of this storm. We are Britain's first professional critics website (all web, zero print), launched in 2009 to kick away from the print ills that were emerging way back.

We've done what we set out to, which is to reverse one culture: the belief that the web was only for dilettantes and nutters. We aim to put greater critical depth and - I'd argue - bolder, faster reviews out to the public than any of the print megaliths manage, rising 7,000 articles by some 100 arts journalists of proven repute.

This was one culture that needed addressing. What we and every other arts desk also battle is the insidiously viral consumer culture that has come out of the web. The entire media world's brains have not yet solved how generally to persuade the digital user to pay for expert reportage and judgment, even when the costs and logistics of obtaining knowledge are obvious.

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In parallel, the entire arts world's brains have not yet managed to persuade Maria Miller's generation of politicians and media leaders that culture can't be priced up by value of jobs generated or taxi rides taken. They sign petitions in dozens, they throw desperate hooks to grab the tabloids' eye, but the arts argument that reaches the public remains a mostly disapproving one of inexplicable spending, London elitism and star temperament. It was left to peers [in the House of Lords](#) last week to have the most serious conversation about the contribution arts make to the quality of British life.

What the arts world has also neglected is the vital role played over the past 80 years of Britain's surging arts health by critics. The specialists who seized a niche interest with all their passionate intelligence and, like orators in the Roman marketplace, persuaded the public to come and share it.

This wasn't just the eyecatching blossoms of the early days; the Kenneth Tynans and Richard Buckles. It was a critical mass of public opinion that desired an entire garden of quirky delights as part of journalism's offering to national culture. At the Observer of the late 1980s, where I worked, 80% of readers put arts coverage in the top three factors in their choosing that paper. Arts overall inspired by far the highest-quality writing of any section, save the occasional foreign correspondent or football writer.

If newspapers don't know that, they're being myopic. Writing is what they're selling. But arts organisations are contributing to the demolition. Facing grant cuts, many of them are diving in panic into social media, feverishly filtering their feeds for "Wow, amazing!!!!" times 30, rather than looking for two or three discriminating reviews that actually study the work on offer, its impact on the soul, its place among human achievements.

Appreciation means to increase the value of something. Critics do that by explaining whether an event was worth the public's time and that each of us has the right to expect much of an artist from our own point of view.

Arts organisations are not the defenders needed here; they are too self-interested. I know from interviewing creative artists that they prize a detailed review by someone they trust to know their stuff, even if they disagree with it. If honestly and intelligently provided, it's food for growth. If the professional critics have any value in this current world, that is where it lies. Let the artists defend the critics. If they don't, let the critic die.

Ismene Brown is dance editor and co-founder of [The Arts Desk](#) - follow it on Twitter [@theartsdesk](#) and Ismene [@ismeneb](#)

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