

Medill - Northwestern University: *New Yorker* Magazine's Michael Specter Talks Science and Society

Story by Belinda Lichty Clarke, MSJ94

The future is bright for students who want to pursue a career in science journalism but with new opportunities comes an added responsibility to the public, according to Michael Specter, a staff writer at the *New Yorker* who writes about science and technology.

Specter visited Medill on February 26 to talk to students about his career and how science writing impacts society. Specter has worked at the Washington Post and the New York Times where he was co-chief of the New York Times Moscow bureau and covered the war in Chechnya and the declining state of health care in Russia. Since 1998 he has worked for the *New Yorker* as a science writer.

"We need for people to believe what we say, especially when the issues are so important," Specter said. However, he said that "there needs to be more careful checking by journalists of the facts."

New Yorker staff writer Michael Specter spoke about science writing and society at Medill on February 26.
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One of the most difficult aspects of science writing is that often, you don't know what the data say because the data is very complicated, he said. One way to help substantiate research studies and findings is by making sure that the findings have been peer reviewed and supported by other respected scientists in the field. Google is definitely not a reliable source, he emphasized, but it is a good way to get started and track down sources.

According to Specter, hype is not just limited to the celebrity tabloids. Scientific articles, too, are regularly subject to hyperbole, he said, because "it makes a good story." In fact, he said, there are "lots of definitive things written that are rarely supported by definitive fact."

"We are all guilty of the 'curing every disease' syndrome, and as journalists we need to ratchet back a little bit," Specter said.

One example he used was global warming. Specter said that while the quality of stories written about global warming ranges from "great to appalling," it's especially important with this issue that journalists pay close attention to the information they put out and, more importantly, the predictions they make. While he says that there is definitely a climate crisis, there is really no way of really knowing exactly what the impact will be in decades to come.

"The downside is, if you tell people things are going to happen and then they don't happen the way you said they would then you run the risk that people will just give up," Specter said. He added, "You don't need to exaggerate it, because things are bad enough."

Specter also said one of the reasons he thinks science writing is important is because he believes that every person should have at least a basic understanding about various aspects of science and technology.

"Do you know how cell phones work? How you can send a photo to your parents using your phone?" he

asked the students. "Few of us actually know how this stuff works, and yet it is technology that we use every day and rely on."

He concluded by telling students he believes there is great opportunity for journalists who are interested in writing about science, because there are so many areas to explore such as medicine, the environment, even economics and politics.

"It's astounding how much information is based on things you need to know about science and scientific ideas," he said.

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