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Style reporter visits NU to discuss pop culture, journalism

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She's been slandered by Sarah Lawrence College students as a "Botox bitch" who sold out to the man. For three months she scoured the country fact-checking the deaths of 10,000 AIDS victims for The New Yorker. And 17 years ago, a failed typing test prevented her from nabbing a position at Rolling Stone.

No wonder New York Times Style section reporter Alex Kuczynski considers herself "a public figure with a thick skin."

The 39-year-old journalist and author spoke about her career to an audience of about 40 students and faculty at Fisk Hall on Monday afternoon. The event, "Style and Substance: Reporting on Popular Culture," was co-sponsored by the Medill School of Journalism, The Center for the Writing Arts, Communications Residential College and Northwestern alumni as part of the "Literature of Fact" series.

Kuczynski shared anecdotes about her reporting experiences at an array of prestigious New York-based publications, including The New York Times.

Kuczynski currently writes "Obsessions," a column that runs 15 times per year in T: Style Magazine, The Times' newest supplemental magazine. Her first book, "Beauty Junkies: Inside Our $15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery," came out in October 2006.

She described her career as "extremely lucky" and "a combination of preparation and opportunity."

At 22, Kuczynski took her first stab at the industry by applying to work at Rolling Stone, but was rejected due to a flunked typing test.

"In retrospect, Rolling Stone wouldn't be the right place for me, but at the time it seemed perfect; it was my Bible," she said.

Her journalistic career began a few years later with a three-month fact checking position at The New Yorker. Kuczynski simultaneously pitched stories to one of her favorite publications, The New York Observer, a weekly society newspaper.

Kuczynski said she wrote "a lot of weird stories" at the Observer, including an investigation of flesh-eating bacteria on everyday objects such as pay phones. Kuczynski joked that she is "partially responsible for the rising popularity of Purell hand sanitizing wipes."

While working for The Observer, Kuczynski was asked to write for The New York Times' Home section. Unsure of her competence as a journalist, she turned down the offer and told the newspaper to call her in a year.

"Just like with suitors, The Times was banging down my door a year later," she said.

Nine years ago she began reporting for the newspaper's Style section.

"People often say that writing about style is just a way to report on the really wealthy, but I try to write about the populace, not just the elite," Kuczynski said. "For a tiny crust of about 0.1 percent of the population, (the Style section) is service journalism. … For the rest, it's voyeurism."

Kuczynski also defended herself against backlash she has received from blogs and others who criticize her as a superficial journalist.

"People really do like the fluff with their meat and potatoes," Kuczynski said. "You need a little frosting."

Medill graduate student Liz Logan came to Monday's event because she said she also wants to work in pop culture journalism. Although she found Kuczynski to be "hilarious," Logan said she didn't expect her to be "such a socialite who knows everyone in the (media) world of New York." She said, "It makes me wonder if you get everywhere simply from your (industry) connections."

Taylor Norris, a Medill freshman, reported on the lecture for a class assignment.

"Alex Kuczynski seems like such a colorful and down-to-earth person," Norris said. "It's lucky I picked this event because it ended up being really interesting."

Kuczynski encouraged students to be tenacious in their career pursuits.

"People who are unafraid of rejection are the ones who will succeed," she said. "The more rejection letters you get, the more you learn."

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