



Michael Slackman of the New York Times speaks at Medill

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Michael Slackman, deputy foreign editor of The New York Times and foreign correspondent, spoke to an audience including Northwestern students and faculty on "Making the Foreign Familiar" in Fisk Hall on Monday.

About 30 people attended the event, which was sponsored by the NU Center for the Writing Arts, Medill School of Journalism, Communications Residential College and The Alumnae of NU.

After graduating from Northeastern University, Slackman started working at a small newspaper in the New York City suburbs. He later became Newsday's Moscow bureau chief and the Los Angeles Times's Cairo bureau chief before joining The New York Times and becoming an expert in Middle East affairs, said Medill Prof. David Abrahamson, who introduced Slackman.

In his presentation, Slackman emphasized four key lessons he has learned as a foreign correspondent.

"Nothing can be taken for granted when you're abroad," Slackman said. "Everything has to be seen in context. What you see is not always what you get."



Ina Yang/The Daily Northwestern
Michael Slackman talks about being foreign correspondent for the New York Times on Monday.

In order to illustrate his point, Slackman recalled seeing an elderly woman with gold teeth during his first years as a reporter in Moscow. He said without knowing gold was the only available material for oral procedures during the time of the Soviet Union, reporters can easily misinterpret and make assumptions about what they see on assignment.

With his second point, Slackman stressed the importance of highlighting the experiences and values that countries share in order to help readers connect to stories.

"It's about connecting it to things you understand," he said. "When the values are fundamentally different, at least try to relate them to the values we have."

Slackman also said it is important to remember that people have different definitions for the same words, citing President Obama's misuse of the word "terrorist" when referring to the Hamas movement. He said while some may view the movement as a terrorist organization, others see it as a liberation group. Varying viewpoints on the same terms must be considered when working as a foreign correspondent.

"Words really matter," Slackman said. "In order to have a dialogue you have to agree on the words first."

To conclude his lecture, Slackman cautioned journalists against advocating for a particular side or group when reporting.

"It's not about me," he said. "I'm an advocate for the truth. Your allegiance should always be to the story."

After the presentation, Slackman answered questions asked by the audience. Abrahamson said the lecture helped provide an alternative perspective on foreign correspondence for students.

"This offers (the students) an unusual and valuable view of foreign correspondence and world affairs on a strategic level," Abrahamson said.

Medill junior Jorona Johnson was one of the two student tour guides for Slackman and is a student in Abrahamson's Literary Journalism class. She said Slackman's

lectures helped her understand how to foster better relationships with interview subjects.

"You learn a lot about how to make connections with people you don't know," Johnson said.

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