

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

NY Times writer stresses compassion in reporting

Lauren Pond

Posted: 2/22/05

New York Times investigative reporter Deborah Sontag stressed the importance of maintaining a human angle in stories Monday in a speech at the McCormick Tribune Center.

Sontag has been an investigative reporter and staff writer for the Times' metropolitan desk, as well as Jerusalem bureau chief.

Her lecture was part of the Literature of Fact series sponsored by the Medill School of Journalism, The Center for Writing Arts, Communications Residential College and NU alumni.

While covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October 2000, Sontag said she watched helplessly as Israeli reserve soldiers mistakenly drove into the Palestinian city of Ramallah and were stabbed and stomped to death by an angry mob. She was horrified, but when she called her editor, he was primarily concerned with the length of the story, she told an audience of 40.

"To the editor, it was just another day, another dollar, another story," she said.

Reporters must respect their sources, she said. Sontag once profiled former Lt. Col. Alan West, who was discharged for abusing an Iraqi prisoner. Sontag said she wrote the story knowing it could expose him to a new wave of criticism.

"It was his life," she said.

Sometimes reporters must also respect sources by not exploiting their unfamiliarity with the press, Sontag said during a question-and-answer session after her speech.

"I understand when they tell me something that they don't want to tell 1.8 million people," Sontag said.

The human perspective can also add flavor to stories, Sontag said. Journalists should avoid writing formulaic articles in the race to break news quickly, she said.

At the same time, Sontag cautioned against excessive compassion in journalism. While reporting on housing issues in New York City, she encountered many people living in squalor, including one child with a nest of cockroach eggs in his ear, she said. She included these details in her story, even though these details could have been construed as gratuitous or exploitative, Sontag said.

Sontag's lecture provided a different perspective on journalism, Medill freshman Steve Silver said.

"It's refreshing to know that there are people out there who write with their own voices," Silver said.

Reach Lauren Pond at l-pond@northwestern.edu.

© Copyright 2007 The Daily Northwestern