

Michael Wolff: Media Business as a Game

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EVANSTON, IL (MAY 17) -- Michael Wolff, a media columnist for *Vanity Fair* and a former contributor to *New York* magazine, spoke to an audience of about 50 people regarding his experiences as a media reporter -- though only off the record.

In a lecture entitled, "The Self-Referential Press: Reporting on the Media," Wolff used a conversational tone to delve into everything from his failed attempt to buy *New York* magazine to his thoughts on the value of publicity. His often-witty anecdotes revealed insight into his entire career as a journalist.

"A friend once said, 'Publicity is the currency of our time,'" Wolf said. Using it, he has become a media player.

The discussion, held in Fisk Hall, was part of Medill's Literature of Fact series organized by Professor David Abrahamson and cosponsored by the NU Center for the Writing Arts, the Alumni Association of Northwestern and the Communications Residential College.

Wolff, who has been published in numerous magazines including *Rolling Stone* and others, spoke about his former weekly column in *New York* entitled "This Media Life." That column twice earned him the National Magazine Award for Columns and Commentary from the American Society of Magazine Editors.

After a shift in ownership of *New York* a few months ago and his attempt to buy the magazine, Wolff moved his column to its current home, *Vanity Fair*.

"If you go into the magazine business, at some point your magazine will be sold," Wolff said.

Wolff said he initially never had any real hope to buy the magazine, which would have cost about \$50-100 million, though he "felt like it was my magazine."

Wolff also told of his role in creating publicity around his bid to buy the magazine with the backing of several potential millionaire and billionaire buyers. The role was one he described as being "the billionaires' mascot."

As a critic of the media, Wolff wrote of his experiences in his columns. He said he benefited from the publicity of being a potential buyer, an experience that he called "incredibly amusing."

"I lost the deal, and I lost my magazine," Wolff said. "But I certainly got my publicity."

Some audience members said they were taken aback by Wolff's request to speak off the record, though they enjoyed the interesting subject matter.

"His wit and humor certainly added to his speech," said Kelsey Salmen, 20, a Weinberg sophomore. "It's a bit discouraging but true that you have to have a big ego if you want to be a media player."

Wolff, who said his columns are about how to "play the media game," acknowledged that success requires "ego, ego, ego."

"I have no pearls of wisdom," Wolff said when asked by an audience member about advice for novice journalists.

"The things I know are all things one should know," Wolff said. "The real talent here, highly valued, is one for self-promotion, which is discouraging -- unless you're good."