

Medill - Northwestern University: A Lesson in Op-Ed: Gail Collins of the New York Times Visits Medill

Story by Belinda Lichty Clarke, MSJ94

In a time where many would argue the proliferation of “news-inspired” content on the Web is helping to blur the line between fact and opinion, the *New York Times* remains steadfast in its definitive separation between the two, said Gail Collins, editor of the editorial page and, since 1995, a member of the paper’s editorial board.

Collins spoke to students, local residents and faculty on November 8 as part of Northwestern’s Literature of Fact lecture series, sponsored by the NU Center for the Writing Arts, the Medill School of Journalism, the Alumnae Association of NU and Northwestern’s Communication Residential College.

Not only are the news and editorial departments at the paper physically distant (by several floors) but neither Collins nor any of her staff ever participate in newsroom discussions. So much so, says Collins, that up until the day the *New York Times* published its endorsement of candidate John Kerry, no one in the news department knew definitively who the editorial board had chosen.



Gail Collins, editor of the New York Times editorial page, spoke to students and faculty on November 8.

“Of course, pretty much everyone at the *Times* knew which way we were going to go,” said Collins. “But there is virtually no contact between the news and editorial, and they [the news department] know better than to ever lobby the editorial staff members.”

That was historically always the case, explained Collins, who spent several minutes discussing America’s very biased newspaper history. Until the 20th Century, she said, there was no objective reporting as we know it today because the press at that time was not funded by readers or advertisers but supported instead by various governmental factions. It wasn’t until there was enough money in publishing that the news ceased to be politically driven.

“Also, with the advent of television there was pressure to make coverage of events more interesting and provide more in-depth analysis and background for the news to supplement what we saw on TV,” Collins said.

But to non-journalists, the analysis surrounding actual events often is misconstrued as opinion, said Collins. “The difference between analysis and what we read in the Op-Ed section is that classically, the experts doing the analysis don’t have a dog in the fight,” she said. An analyst’s job, explained Collins, is to assess the repercussions of a particular event or piece of news, not try and get you to form an opinion about that piece of news.

“I have a dog in every fight,” Collins said. “Everything we do is geared toward convincing you that the issues the *New York Times* editorial board supports is what we want you to support. When we write about drilling in the arctic wilderness we are trying to get you to feel the same way we do about it.”

Though the issues may change, everything the editorial board does is part of an overall mission – to carry out the core values of the paper’s editorial page, Collins said. Some of these values include upholding civil liberties, protecting the environment, support of a woman’s right to choose, free trade and campaign reform. Collins added that the core values themselves have changed only slightly over the years with the exception of one, equal rights for women, which coincided with the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

“The New York Times editorial board was steadfastly against women’s suffrage until the moment the

amendment was passed," she said. Which is why, said Collins, she takes pleasure coming to work every day, sometimes arriving early to take a minute to view the portraits of the board's founders, Henry Raymond and Charles Miller. "I look up at them and say, 'Hi guys. I got your job.'"

"Gail Collins is a great role model for students and faculty," said Michele Weldon, assistant professor at Medill who attended the lecture. "She is a trailblazer for women in all levels of the profession because she is extremely knowledgeable about history and current issues in the media, performs superbly in a difficult job and so obviously enjoys her work." Weldon added, "It was a genuine treat to hear her speak at Medill and to have her work closely in classes with students."

On the future of journalism, Collins agreed that the Web has helped to proliferate opinion and that in some cases; this proliferation has proven useful to fuel constructive debate. "What bothers me is the overly harsh tone that the authors often take," she said. To students, she provided the following piece of advice: "It's hard to find a job in journalism, but you can do your best to ensure success by going into it planning to write about the stuff you love."

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