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Topchik

A former New York Times editor spoke to a journalism class at Hood College last week about his concerns and advice for young journalists.

Jack Topchik, former editor with the New York Times in the News Services division, told the students that he fears “the love of language has begun to be lost” with the advent of new technology. He said young people have “butchered the English language” with texting and email.

Topchik said that the quality of writing in newspapers has diminished since he began working at the New York Times.

Topchik said he had teachers in high school that helped to establish his love of the English language. When he speaks with young journalists, Topchik said he tells them that “to write, you need to want to be challenged by the language.”

“The vocabulary you need to develop your writing has to come from reading,” he said. “If you will not read, you cannot learn.”

“Every story you will ever write is about people,” Topchik said. “You have to be interested in people... You have an obligation to find out what is in their minds.”

Topchik was influenced by the AP coverage of the integration of Little Rock High School. A reporter wrote a story from the perspective of the mob outside of the school and tried to explain why they were acting the way they were. Topchik said the reporter ended the story with a “tiny glimmer of hope” which “makes great journalism.”

“So much about getting a job is walking in the door on the right day,” Topchik said. He was hired by The New York Times after he graduated from the University of Tennessee when he “walked in the door” and applied for a job. He does not think young journalists could get a job this way today.

“My advice for most young journalists is that you prepare to live almost anywhere,” he said.

Topchik said that one of his biggest regrets was not working at a small newspaper where “you have to do everything.”

Topchik said there have been many changes in journalism since he began in 1967. The internet has made research easier but communication has declined. He said journalists are losing their status in society, “in our culture” and this has had an effect on morale in the newsroom. Topchik said that “objectivity used to be presumed in journalism.”

“The average reader brings far more bias to his or her reading than the reporter to his or her writing,” he said.

Topchik said he knew he wanted to be a journalist when he was 10-years-old. When he finished his paper route he would “sit down with a Coke and read the paper.”

Topchik graduated from the University of Tennessee, where he studied journalism, in June of 1967. He was an editor with the NY Times from 1967-2007. Topchik, 66, has been married for 44 years and has two sons and five granddaughters. He retired to Frederick, M.D. in 2007.

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