

Times and J-School host "36 Days" Forum

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Last night some of the nation's top journalists met with Columbia students and faculty to discuss their industry's coverage of the longest election night in the nation's history.

The forum, "36 Days: The 2000 Presidential Election Crisis," featured New York Times reporters Linda Greenhouse, Frank Bruni, and deputy national editor Jim Roberts, who discussed their roles in reporting on the controversial 36-day period following the November election.

Tom Goldstein, the dean of the Journalism School, moderated the school-sponsored event and opened the forum by first remarking on the limbo of the 36 days following the presidential election vote.

"That November-December period was so crowded with confusion and saturation reporting," he said.

After briefing the audience with the respective biographies of Roberts, Greenhouse, and Bruni, Goldstein turned the spotlight over to his featured guests.

"For many of us this election was a test of endurance, a marathon... Many of us felt that maybe, in a few days, all of this would be wrapped up, and we could move on with our lives," said Jim Roberts, who was the Times' and national political editor during the election.

At the time Roberts was in charge of delegating the reporting responsibilities for the unfolding election saga and found that his biggest difficulty lay in securing rested journalists for the Florida job.

"We wanted to get some fresh blood ... fresh people involved in this who hadn't been before," said Roberts.

By Wednesday of that week, he acquired at least half a dozen reporters and sent them to cover the ballot counting in Florida. He also sent investigative journalists

down in order to ascertain whether Republicans were tampering with the absentee ballots.

The difficulty of discovering innovative methods with which to report on the election for an enduring period of time made covering the 36 days "like covering a plane crash every single day," according to Roberts.

Linda Greenhouse, the Supreme Court correspondent for the Times, spent the first half of the 36 days congratulating herself on her lucky detachment from the heated election coverage.

"I kept saying, 'If the Supreme Court ever gets involved in this, we'll know we're in a crisis,'" said Greenhouse.

Soon afterwards, Greenhouse not only got involved but also became the most important reporter on the job, as she was ultimately responsible for explaining the disputed election verdict to the world.

"It was nearly impossible to piece together a coherent narrative, because the same events just appeared differently to different people," said Greenhouse. "The more I think about what happened, the more bizarre it seems to me that the court was even willing to get involved."

After enduring a stifling 13-hour stint in the Supreme Court press room, Greenhouse received the verdict from the justices and rushed back to the Times' Washington office as her editors back in New York watched the hastily arranged television coverage reporting that the election remained in limbo. Greenhouse, after reading the opinion in a taxi on the way to the Times office, set her editors straight: the election was over. Roberts had no reason to hear any more and handed down his own mandate: a 20-minute deadline.

Frank Bruni had a somewhat more relaxed 36 days covering George W. Bush's presidential campaign and said the infamous uncertain period was actually quite comfortable for him.

"If I spoke about my 36 days, I would talk about spending my days in the Four Seasons covering a candidate who wouldn't come out of the woods or leave his dog Spot," said Bruni.

According to Bruni, Bush's campaign revolved around his strategy of doing and saying whatever he pleased so long as he maintained an image of being proud of his decisions.

"His advisers told him that even if the position he advocated wasn't approved by the majority of people, he would get points on the character scale," said Bruni.

"He would gain more public respect if he did what he wanted and didn't worry about getting a mandate."

Roberts, Greenhouse, and Bruni all conceded that the Times coverage of the election limbo could have been better. Since the election had no precedent and was unlikely to repeat itself due to election reform in the coming years, though, November's media coverage was anomalous to past elections.

After the three finished speaking, audience members raised questions ranging from Bill Clinton's role in the elections to the role of the press in the everyday life of Americans.

Julia Lyon, a student at the Journalism School, asked about the prevalence of coverage of the candidates' personalities during the elections. She felt that their response to her question was fair, albeit subjective.

"I think any reporter is biased by the story they have already written," said Lyon. Another student raised the issue of the impact of the Supreme Court decision on the country at large.

"I agree with Ms. Greenhouse seeing that the best thing they could have done would have been not taking the case," said Jeff Stacey, a graduate student of political science.

Ben Bolger, a student in the School of Architecture, was concerned with Bill Clinton's role in the election coverage and enjoyed the opportunity to address it in the forum.

"I thought it was a generally excellent[ly] organized event, but I could have used more analysis on my question," said Bolger. "But I really have only positive things to say about it."