

Broadcast legend Hugh Downs discusses changes in media at downtown luncheon | Downtown Devil

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Hugh Downs recalled his experiences on 20/20 and commented on the changing media landscape at the 2011 Arizona Town Hall Fall Luncheon Thursday. (Cydney McFarland/DD)

Hugh Downs, a long-time broadcaster with a career in television spanning 60 years, spoke about changes in media Thursday at the 2011 Arizona Town Hall Fall Luncheon at the Wyndham Phoenix Downtown Hotel.

Downs discussed the changes in media technology and consumption he has witnessed during his lifetime and career to a room of about 200 Arizonans, remarking that broadcasters and politicians alike are too loud and shout at each other instead of finding solutions. Downs also called the current Congress “too paralyzed” to change anything and the worst to ever be elected in the history of the United States.

In response to these problems, Downs offered up higher education as a place where minds are collaborating to solve these issues.

“Universities are beacons of light in a dark place,” he said.

After the applause from the crowd ended from these pointed statements, Downs specifically praised ASU President Michael Crow for his leadership in forging a New American University.

In a biographical segment of the speech that followed, Downs, 90, recalled some of his most memorable interviews during his time on 20/20, from his most humorous to most embarrassing.

In his most “illuminating” interview, Downs quoted King Hassan II of Morocco as saying that there is no strife between Jews and Muslims in his country. He said that although he did not believe the king at the time of the interview, he visited Morocco some years later and saw a complex where half of the facilities were a Jewish synagogue, and the other half a Muslim temple.

Downs said he was also surprised to learn that when half of the building was undergoing repairs, worshipers from the Muslim side allowed Jewish people to practice on their side.

“I was wondering why the Muslim and Jewish world(s) were not using this building as a model for how to deal with each other,” he said.

In a question-and-answer session to follow, Downs ensured the audience that newspapers would survive the Internet, just as they survived radio and television before it.

“Any time there is a new technology, people think the new technology will smash the old technology,” he said.

In answering another question concerning the validity of comedians providing news coverage, Downs praised the talent of Jon Stewart from the Daily Show on Comedy Central.

“He can just quote someone and stare at the lens, and you realize the ridiculousness you just heard,” Downs said.

“Most extroverts I know are introverts who armor themselves and are actually sensitive people,” he said.

Downs admitted that he had stage fright when he first started his career as a disc jockey in 1939 in Ohio. He stresses that anyone can overcome anything and it is important not to label oneself as unable to do something.

Downs retired from his co-anchor position on 20/20 in 1999 and now resides with his wife in Paradise Valley.

The town hall was part of “A Day of Civic Action” sponsored by a number of Arizona organizations that took place Thursday, held in conjunction with the 66th National Conference on Citizenship, a two-day event continuing on the Tempe campus Friday.

The discussion on media civility and responsibility continued at the conference later on Thursday with a keynote panel moderated by journalism professor Aaron Brown.

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