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Keynote: Douglas Brinkley
Media Resiliency in a Post-Cronkite America

Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history at Rice University, bestselling author, Grammy-award winning producer and presidential historian for CNN, opened his talk by explaining that his goal was to take a look at the media environment as a historian. To do that, he would start with Cronkite.

“Cronkite was born in Missouri in 1916. At that time journalists had a 70 percent approval rating, today journalists have a 15 percent approval rating. What’s happened?” Brinkley asks.

Here’s a snip of history as described by Brinkley.

Dropping out of college Cronkite got a job in print journalism. Radio was really big and enticing so he entered broadcast news as a radio announcer. WWII broke out and Cronkite served as a United Press (UP) reporter, in uniform he embedded himself with the soldiers and told the war as he saw it. Everyone loved reporters back then because they kept saying the Yanks are getting the job done.

In 1952 Cronkite got the coveted assignment to cover the presidential convention. Cronkite was becoming the leading expert on how to do broadcast news. In fact Kennedy hired Cronkite to teach him how to look and be seen favorably on TV. In 1960 the nightly news was still 15 minutes of headline news. The revolution came when the news expanded to 30 minutes. The report now included in depth reporting on a subject with a storytelling line for an additional 15 minutes. Cronkite continued to establish his name in broadcasting and became well known for his thoughtful and factual coverage and especially his dignified announcement of Presidents Kennedy’s assassination.

Then Cronkite ran the devastating story of U.S. soldiers burning huts in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson was upset that journalists had turned against America. And then journalists brought Nixon down. Nixon had lied to the American people. Why was Cronkite so trusted? He came across as centrist, he played well. In part, Cronkite was also trusted at this time in history because the American people were realizing that Nixon and so many others had lied to us.

In 1980 24-hour cable news was born and CNN started broadcasting. Fast forward to the Internet. Cronkite was worried. He led a campaign that kids should be taught how to use the Internet. He wanted children to be taught how to learn what the facts are.

In contrast to this Brinkley sees what is happening today. “Fox, MSNBC and CNN and cable news is creating questions just to confuse people,” he says. “We are in a mass of dysfunction.” Brinkley says newspapers and cable are not pulling for the American people they are at war. National magazines are also really having it tough. “It’s true, Washington is broken and the nation’s media culture is going thru a hurricane,” says Brinkley. “The corporatization of America – this McDonaldization – it’s just not interesting,” he says. “And American is not just McDonalds.”

In contrast Brinkley says local is interesting. “City and regional magazines offer us national reconciliation thru local pride,” says Brinkley. “These magazines are creating a new civility movement.” His advice is to keep on keeping on. “Keep talking about why your area is special,” he says. “Regional magazines are the healthier part of the magazine world.”

According to Brinkley the good news is that regional magazines are not broken. “City and regional magazines are the front line soldiers,” he says. They are reporting on real people. “In a time when the media culture is adding to the dehumanizing atmosphere and environment, regional magazines are holding the line for public decency. Regional magazines are friendlier.” Regional magazines are one of the last media outlets that people trust because they don’t have a political axe to grind. “Your readership is pulling for you,” he says. “You are celebrating them and their area.”

When asked from the audience about the importance for city and regional magazines to also run hard hitting news Brinkley agreed that was also important. “You have the public trust because of your civility so when you go hard on something you take your reader with you,” he explained. Remember the trust that Cronkite had? “Your readers believe you have not been bought,” he says. By bringing your readers along you can teach people not just ‘bust’ people. City and regional magazine are educational. Brinkley says, “In a time when America is getting polarized. The gospel of regional wins!”

Douglas Brinkley is a professor of history at Rice University, bestselling author, Grammy-award winning producer and presidential historian for CNN. Brinkley’s most recent book, JFK: A Vision for America, was the basis for New-York Historical Society’s exhibition honoring the 100th anniversary of President Kennedy’s birth. Brinkley also serves as a contributing editor for Vanity Fair, Audubon, and American Heritage. He is a frequent contributor to The New York Times, Foreign Affairs, The New Yorker, and The Atlantic Monthly.