

I Want My C-SPAN

Bruce W. Sanford*

A few years ago, Brian Lamb, the founder and public face of C-SPAN, was asked during an interview about Newton Minow's famous indictment of American television. If anyone in the communications industry today has the credentials to brush aside the question, it is Lamb, who reinvented public affairs programming over the last two decades. C-SPAN now reaches approximately eighty million U.S. households—one in twenty Americans watches it regularly.¹ The producers of *The Bachelor* would envy its demographics. C-SPAN is "reality TV" that even Minow would have loved.

But despite his successes, Lamb did not scoff at the question. "I think [Minow] was right about an enormous amount of television," Lamb replied in the 1999 interview. "[B]ut I think you could say that about an enormous amount of things American. One person's wasteland is another person's great pleasure."²

The journalist who kicks off the political day with *Washington Journal* and has provided a forum for hundreds of authors on *Booknotes*, expanded on his answer:

One of the hardest things for us to understand is that everybody is not going to listen to opera, they're not all going to listen to symphony orchestras, they're not all going to read *The New York Times*. I don't

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1. Carlyn Bowman, *Majority Back Bush Plan for Homeland Security Department*, ROLL CALL, June 13, 2002.

2. Michael H. Ebner, *Bringing Democracy to Television*, ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIAN'S NEWSLETTER (Organization of American Historians, Bloomington, IN), Aug. 1999, available at <http://www.oah.org> [hereinafter *Lamb Interview*].

care if it was immediately available to everybody, it just wouldn't appeal to everybody. And it's really hard in the end what people choose, especially if you have a kind of lofty view of what's good and bad.³

Lamb has grown a business devoted to public affairs programming at a time when the government, thanks to some key court decisions and eventual Federal Communications Commission deregulation, has been pushed out of the business of telling broadcasters how much and what kind of news coverage is required of them. Since launching C-SPAN in the 1970s, he has pointed the cameras at our national political life and made it both informative and profitable at the same time. C-SPAN now runs three cable channels, a radio station, and an Internet site. The ghost of Minow is not haunting Lamb, that is for sure.

I recently served as a moderator for a conference at the National Press Club relating to media coverage of the global war on terrorism. The room could only accommodate 100 people but C-SPAN's cameras gave us a national audience. As one major wire service editor wrote me afterwards, "I heard good things about the conference from friends around the country. Never underestimate the reach of C-SPAN."⁴

C-SPAN may not make "cloture" a household word, but its growth refutes Minow's worst fears about market failure in the area of public interest programming. In fact, according to one study, the view from 2003 does not look all that bad. The number of weekly hours of news programming on network television has grown by approximately 50% since Minow's 1961 proclamation.⁵

Contrary to popular misimpressions, C-SPAN receives no public funding. Its budget comes from license fees paid by cable companies. Just a few cents per cable subscriber pays for its congressional coverage as well as its original programming. C-SPAN is as much an indispensable part of the basic basket of channels on any cable system as is the for-profit CNN and ESPN. No government law requires cable operators to place it on your dial. C-SPAN became must-see without must-carry.

"When viewers have a choice . . . [t]hey go all over the dial," Lamb said. "They go to us, the Weather Channel, Arts and Entertainment. Or they find really well-done documentaries on a lot of different channels including Bravo and Ovation."⁶ To Lamb's list we might add other high-quality cable

3. *Id.*

4. E-mail from Peter Copeland to Bruce Sanford (Jan. 17, 2003, 1:09 P.M.) (on file with Journal).

5. See CHRISTOPHER H. STERLING & JOHN MICHAEL KITROSS, *STAY TUNED: A HISTORY OF AMERICAN BROADCASTING* 852-53 (3rd ed. 2002).

6. *Lamb Interview*, *supra* note 2.

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outlets, such as Home & Garden Television (“HGTV”) and (yum!) the Food Network (the “vast waistline”).

On the question about Minow and his legacy, Lamb had it right. Let us grade television today not on taste—who of us is qualified for *that* job?—but on choice. By that measure, the marketplace looks a lot more robust than it was in 1961. I can get my C-SPAN (or my Bravo or my HGTV) around-the-country and around-the-clock even without TiVo.

