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Advances in Research Using the C-SPAN Archives

Browning, Robert

Published by Purdue University Press

Browning, Robert.

Advances in Research Using the C-SPAN Archives.

Purdue University Press, 2016.

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CHAPTER 3

CONSIDERING CONSTRUCTION OF CONSERVATIVE/LIBERAL MEANING: WHAT AN EXTRATERRESTRIAL MIGHT DISCOVER ABOUT BRANDING STRATEGY IN THE C-SPAN VIDEO LIBRARY

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In this study of what constructed meaning in media discourse reveals about recent changes in political semantics, the power of political branding strategy is demonstrated through a remarkable lesson in not missing the forest for the trees. That's not to suggest the trees in this case don't also provide some useful lessons, however, as we shall see.

Quite arguably, the terms *conservative* and *liberal* have come to form the cornerstones for the dominant themes that have played out in American political discourse over the past three or four decades. Mainstream media accounts now, almost rotely, dichotomize the manner in which they construct virtually all discourse involving almost any sort of political activity. The respective positions, players, interests, etc., are ubiquitously and almost offhandedly labeled as either *conservative* or *liberal*—as if the terms had finite and

universally understood meanings, within which all life can be categorized as one or the other. Rarely do such accounts provide definitional guidance as to specifically what they mean by this categorization. The terms tend to be used more as ordinary qualifiers, as if they were as objective in their meaning as terms more clearly dichotomous—such as *tall/short* or *black/white*—regardless of the historical, geographical, or cultural context.

And yet *conservative* and *liberal* have in reality been almost anything but terms with constant meaning regardless of time or place. Just a few generations ago, for example, Americans held very different understandings of both. As historian Laura Jane Gifford's 2009 work notes, referencing someone as a liberal in the 19th and early 20th centuries "generally indicated an individual who adhered to the principles of classical liberalism—laissez-faire capitalism. Even mid-century figures such as Herbert Hoover and Ohio Senator Robert Taft insisted on being called liberals, despite being two of the more right-wing figures of their day" (Gifford, 2009, p. 10). The term *conservative* in particular has undergone a dramatic evolution in usage, particularly in recent decades. Historically, Jerry Muller has noted in his 1997 anthology on conservatism, "The institutions which conservatives have sought to conserve have varied, the major targets of conservative criticism have changed over time, and conservatism differs from one national context to another" (Muller, 1997, p. xiii). For historians, even writing about conservatism over much historical time creates organizational and semantic challenges because until relatively recently, "it was unusual for Americans to refer to themselves politically as *conservatives* [emphasis in original], though many used the term as an adjective," observed Patrick Allitt in his 2009 study of the history of conservatism. Even with figures in earlier American history who can be understood as conservatives, "this was not a noun most of them used about themselves," and indeed, "before the 1950s there was no such thing as a conservative *movement* [emphasis in original] in the United States" (Allitt, 2009, p. 2).

And yet, a few decades later, in mainstream media the terms *conservative* and *liberal* are used as commonly and regularly in accounts involving political activity as are references to rain and sunshine in the weather reports. In both cases, the clear assumption is that the terminology references phenomena so much a part of the long-fixed everyday landscape for audiences that understanding of their meaning will automatically be received and processed

in the same way by all. But as political historians attest, such meanings more typically shift from one generation to another and from one geographical or cultural locale to another.

The reasons behind the changes in political culture over this period in American history can be considered from a number of perspectives. This study approaches the subject in the context of the argument that one powerful dynamic in the changes has been the establishment of conservatism as one of the most successfully entrenched brands of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. “The brand strategy is the tool that Conservatives have used to build their movement from 1964 until the present,” declared political scientist Kenneth Cosgrove in his 2007 study of how “conservatives have employed brands to sell their candidates in much the same way that many businesses use brands to sell products to consumers. Both use brands because they are powerful tools with which a marketer can cut through the noise of a crowded marketplace” (Cosgrove, 2007, pp. 1–2). In Cosgrove’s analysis, the timing for such a strategy was perfect: “The brand strategy has become a key part of the Conservative movement’s success because the movement was developing at exactly the same time that consumer marketing techniques were improving and as an ethos of consumerism was taking hold across the country. For a new movement to present its candidates, using the same techniques to that being used to sell other kind of products, was an entirely logical occurrence” (Cosgrove, 2007, p. 8).

And that assertion is hardly limited to scholarly analysis. Longtime political activist Richard Viguerie, who is widely credited with pioneering direct-marketing techniques that proved highly influential in the success of conservative political causes in the latter 20th century, has spoken very clearly of how central the branding strategy was. He detailed in 2004 how his early efforts, decades before, at promoting conservatism failed until he grasped the power of branding. “There’s nothing more important than being the first to lock in a brand identification,” he wrote. “I had not understood branding, and the importance of the image that your potential customers or donors have of you. But I never again made that mistake” (Viguerie & Franke, 2004, pp. 94–96, 223). At the same time, in Cosgrove’s analysis, liberalism has failed to advance a successful branding strategy “in the same long-term way that Conservatives have,” while conservatives “have not only branded themselves, but their opponents as well” (Cosgrove, 2007, pp. 2, 11).

Although branding cannot be argued as the sole factor, the rise of conservatism in relation to liberalism as a dominant political force in American democracy, especially since the late 1970s, is undeniable. Although many developments played a role in that, the rise of Ronald Reagan over the course of the seventies to the White House in 1980 is most widely accepted as marking the beginning of that dominance (Edwards, 1999, p. 224; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2004, p. 91; Shirley, 2005, p. 340). “From the late 1970s to the early twenty-first century, American conservatism was constantly in the news. Conservative intellectuals challenged nearly all the liberal verities of the 1950s and 1960s,” Allitt summarized the period. “Powerful conservative think tanks served up a steady stream of policy proposals, and politicians from both major parties took notice. New media outlets . . . began to approach the news from an openly conservative vantage point, and by the 1990s some politicians were disavowing liberalism because even use of the ‘L word’ appeared to cost them popular support.” In time, “government began to dismantle decades-long welfare and busing programs. A succession of appointments under President Reagan and the two Bush presidents changed the character of the Supreme Court. In foreign-policy, conservatives theorized exhaustion of the Soviet Union, then celebrated the end of the Cold War, before looking ahead to new geopolitical challenges” (Allitt, 2009, p. 1). In its rise, conservatism focused squarely on displacing the influence of liberalism. First, “in their struggle against the dominant liberal state, conservatives gained control of the Republican Party by defeating its liberal eastern wing,” as historian Donald Critchlow (2007) has documented the process. “Modern liberalism proved to be a formidable opponent, politically and institutionally. The administrative state established in the New Deal and later expanded in the 1960s by Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society institutionalized a liberal regime that was not easily overturned by conservative opponents” (Critchlow, 2007, pp. 1–2).

However, liberalism faced its own challenges as it struggled to respond to an economy shifting from an industrial manufacturing base to a postindustrial era with a workforce more white collar and less unionized. Traditional family structure also began to be transformed dramatically, with far more women developing careers, family size decreasing, and the divorce rate increasing. “In this changing cultural environment, social issues such as gender equality, abortion, and gay rights took on new urgency and political salience,”

Critchlow (2007) wrote. The major political parties “responded to constituents’ anxieties and interest in their own ways. Whereas Democrats held fast to their New Deal liberal and internationalist vision, Republicans represented the fears of white middle-class and religious voters through a political platform of low taxes, national defense, preservation of family values, regulation of social morality, and opposition to policies that affirmed racial, gender, or sexual preferences in the public sphere.” Over the span of the tumultuous, late-20th-century decades, the latter strategy boosted the political fortunes of conservatives. “Although the course of the conservative movement was neither preordained nor inevitable, it did ultimately triumph over its foes,” Critchlow concluded. “Republicans battled Republicans for control of their party, and conservatives battled liberals for control of government. But ultimately, the Right did ascend to political power against all odds” in a period when the “tensions and contradictions of modern American conservatism” can be seen to “have a parallel in the limitations of liberalism in the postwar period” (Critchlow, 2007, pp. 3–5).

Those trends have established conservative political influence as solidly locked in, if not quite fully in control of the national government. “Although the Republican Party has dominated American politics over the past 40 years, it has not achieved a political realignment. Instead, the GOP has developed the capacity to eke out victory by slim margins in a majority of closely contested elections, losing intermittently but winning more than half the time,” declared political journalist Thomas Edsall in 2006. “It is likely to continue this pattern for the foreseeable future. Conservatives have, furthermore, created a political arena in which winning Democrats are likely to find themselves forced to move to the right” (Edsall, 2006, p. x). Such indications of conservatism’s power to rein in liberal impulses beyond its own ranks further suggest the success of the conservative branding process asserted by Cosgrove and others. It has also likely played a factor in increasing polarization of the major political parties. “The traditional American party was almost defined by its peculiarly nonideological character,” wrote political scientist Nicole Rae (1989), observing that as early as 1989, the parties had entered a “new world of American politics” in which, “the Democratic Party has become a more consistently liberal party, and the Republican Party more consistently conservative, than has been the case in any previous period of American history” (Rae, 1989, p. 3).

In order to more clearly articulate the impact of that dramatic evolution of the conservative/liberal relationship in political influence and power on media discourse, the study discussed in this chapter sought to examine the nature of meaning constructed in related media representations in the C-SPAN Video Library. The times have relatively rapidly gone from an era when *conservative* was scarcely used as a noun in reference to an individual's political orientation to one in which "the label 'conservative' is promiscuously applied to fundamentalists, populists, libertarians, fascists, and the advocates of one or another orthodoxy," as Muller characterized it (Muller, 1997, p. xiii). Common labeling of liberals is similarly amorphous in the varied range of positionings to which it is casually and loosely applied.

This study utilized the search function of the vast database of the C-SPAN Video Library to spawn an algorithmically generated data pattern for guiding a qualitative framing analysis focused on identifying media frames and the dominant understandings they reflect, or what Gitlin characterized as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). The C-SPAN Video Library database offered an ideal means to systematically identify and assess bodies of relevant representations of the objects of this study that are extremely rich in revelatory discourse. For the C-SPAN Video Library not only represents a vast database of the sort of media-discourse artifacts from recent political events, it offers a research interface that allows scholars to search its archives systematically and objectively.

In short, framing is a well-established method of content analysis, deeply grounded in theoretical concepts discussed more fully below in the section Methodological and Theoretical Context. Utilizing framing methodologically provided the means of analysis for identifying the degree of effectiveness of the branding effort discussed above—branding being a marketing strategy to develop stronger relationships between products and audiences. The search engine of the C-SPAN Video Library was utilized in this study to algorithmically retrieve information stored in the video database—retrieve it in a systematic manner determined by the search-algorithm function of the C-SPAN Video Library search engine, rather than the subjective selection process of a human retrieval effort. (While a search algorithm can potentially reflect biases of its programmer, in the context of this study, the scholar is utilizing a research tool independent of the scholar's own biases—any scholar entering the same search terms will obtain the same results.)

Perhaps a more narratively illustrative way to consider the conceptual basis for this study and the significance of its findings could be to consider it in terms of a sort of thought experiment. If we imagine, let us say, the effort of an extraterrestrial who had recently arrived here to develop a greater understanding of early 21st-century American culture, and if such a being were to begin tuning into random discourse, quite possibly among the terms that would soon begin to suggest salience by the frequency of their usage would be the terms *conservative* and *liberal*. It plausibly could suggest to our extraterrestrial the need for a more systematic examination of the terms and what greater meaning they held in the culture of this unfamiliar landscape. And then let us imagine that the extraterrestrial were to come upon the C-SPAN Video Library and recognize the potential it offered to quickly advance the effort to learn more about the nature of meaning constructed through a sampling of its massive body of media discourse, with its emphasis on political culture. What might that process suggest to a fresh consciousness unmarked by the longer-term mediated conditioning that has influenced the understanding of American audiences over the course of recent decades?

To provide a short summary of the findings discussed in more detail below in the sections Searching for Conservatism and Searching for Liberalism, our extraterrestrial would find significant evidence to support the argument that in terms of branding strategy, conservatism is indeed now a brand quite compellingly established—and that liberalism conversely seems to have scarcely any branding presence of its own provenance. For he would discover that searching the database with a simple focus on the term *conservatism* would produce, almost exclusively, video recordings of individuals who represent themselves as conservatives discussing conservatism. And he would discover that searching the database with the term *liberalism* would produce, almost exclusively, video recordings of individuals who represent themselves as conservatives discussing liberalism. In both cases, conducting such searches via the purest and most direct of search strategies indicates first of all that it is conservatives who are engaging in far more public discourse on both conservatism and liberalism. Thus it is also conservatives who are dominant in the overall construction of meaning for the audiences of this programming. Those findings will be elaborated upon following the discussion of the methodological and theoretical grounding of this analysis, in the sections Searching for Conservatism and Searching for Liberalism.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The concept of framing can be particularly useful in studies of the ways that media producers construct representations of reality. Framing theory holds that the ways in which ideas and issues are framed become powerful factors in media discourse. The construction of symbolic meaning that contributes to promotion of themes vital to communicators is a particularly important element of the framing process. The degree of effectiveness with which framing is employed offers insights into why the content of discourse may hold meaning for audiences. Carey proposed that analysis of such themes or narratives can reflect efforts to utilize cultural ideals of an era to create “systems of meaning, and standards of reality shared by writer and audience” (Carey, 1974, p. 5). Societies negotiate the greater meaning of events in many ways, and the media and legal discourse focused upon in this study offers intriguing evidence for considering the manner in which audiences may develop understandings of the terms *conservative* and *liberal*.

Framing theory asserts that successful framing can be the most powerful feature of discourse and in fact as powerful as language itself. Framing was originally discussed in the early 1970s as a psychological concept that described the ways that individuals include, exclude, and organize experience. Bateson compared the influence of a psychological frame to the way that a “picture frame tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper” (Bateson, 1972, pp. 172–193). Goffman described the psychology of framing as a process by which humans define a situation according to the organizing principles of social events and our subjective involvement in those events. Thus, human beings frame reality in order to order, negotiate, and manage it (Goffman, 1974, pp. 10–11).

From that conceptual perspective, framing analysis was utilized as a means of structuring this qualitative study. Such analysis can be particularly useful in studies of the ways that media producers construct representations of reality. Gamson conceptualized the media frame as “a central organizing idea used for making sense of relevant events,” which can provide a basis for exploring how readers may “understand and remember a problem” (Gamson, 1989, p. 157). In this study of understandings of the terms *conservative* and *liberal* advanced in bodies of political discourse from the C-SPAN Video Library,

framing analysis provided methodological discipline for guiding the critical evaluation of representations of those terms. Those representations were evaluated in terms of the way they utilized narrative elements in a manner that contributed to recurring themes and dominant frames. Such analysis seeks to identify “the specific properties of the . . . narrative that encourage those perceiving and thinking about events to develop particular understandings of them . . . and [that] convey thematically consonant meanings across media and time,” as Entman has discussed it (Entman, 1991, p. 7). This approach to analysis does not eliminate all inconsistent or incongruent information from texts, but on balance serves to “render one basic interpretation more readily discernible, comprehensible, and memorable than others” (Entman, 1991, p. 7). That occurs through a process Entman has detailed in which “framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, pp. 52–53).

Specifically, this study utilized Altheide’s “document analysis” process to connect the media representations that are the focus of the study to broader ideas in discourse and ideology (Altheide, 1996, pp. 23–44). Altheide’s approach defines the conceptual relationship of discourse, themes, and frames in this manner: “The actual words and direct messages of documents carry the discourse that reflects certain themes, which in turn are held together and given meaning by a broad frame. . . . Frames are a kind of ‘super theme’” (Altheide, 1996, p. 31). This method relies less on counting than on qualitative identification of prominent themes through a multistep process (Altheide, 1996, pp. 23–44).¹

This methodological approach is not without bias, but it does provide a systematic framework to guide the critical evaluation of relevant media discourse. As Gamson and Modigliani have discussed, “Media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 2). Considering framing in this context suggests that texts potentially represent symbolic meaning relevant to both communicators and receivers, both of which influence and are influenced by the times and culture in which they live. Therefore, the analysis in this research focuses most directly on the texts involved, embracing Entman’s assertion that “whatever its specific use,

the concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, pp. 52–53). While it cannot ultimately tell us definitively how audiences understood the media representations of political ideas or terminology such as are the subject of this study, it offers insight into symbolic meaning through prominent ideas recently disseminated in the media universe in which those audiences live.

The study drew upon these basic research questions to guide the analysis:

- What understandings are most evident in representations of prominent political discourse centered substantially upon the term *conservative* in relevant media content from the C-SPAN Video Library?
- What understandings are most evident in representations of prominent political discourse centered substantially upon the term *liberal* in relevant media content from the C-SPAN Video Library?
- Are there significant commonalities and/or contrasts among understandings identified in the respective bodies of prominent political discourse from the C-SPAN Video Library?
- What does this analysis suggest regarding how examination of understandings identified in this study of relevant bodies of prominent political discourse from the C-SPAN Video Library can help place in historical and social context recent media representations related to the terms *conservative* and *liberal*?

SEARCHING FOR CONSERVATISM

When searching the C-SPAN Video Library database with a focus on the term *conservatism*, the first consistent understanding that is most evident is the fact that, as could probably be expected, one’s results produce, almost exclusively, video recordings of individuals who represent themselves as conservatives discussing conservatism. In that body of discourse, one does find the framing reflected in those conservatives’ representations of conservatism to some extent advanced through the contrasts asserted regarding liberalism.²

Liberals are commonly represented, for example, as removed from mainstream life: “Most liberals live in pretty cloistered communities” (Brooks, 2015). And liberalism has “an impulse toward centralization and technocratic expertise that . . . is problematic” (Wehner, 2014). However, that sort of framing even more frequently involves representations of conservatism that advance understandings that contrast conservatives with one identified liberal in particular: Barack Obama. Not only is he said to make “no . . . effort to stand on the side of freedom” and to be “quick to deal with the oppressors but slow to deal with the oppressed,” he uses “shameful, derogatory rhetoric” that “should have no place in our democracy” (Rubio, 2015). Thus that sort of framing advances understandings of conservatism as antithetical to such behavior.

That is represented as why “with President Obama, you are looking at a failed presidency,” because conservative “ideas are still more with the grain of the American character” (Lowry, 2015). President Obama does not know that “people built the farms, the ranches, the schools, the churches, the not-for-profit associations,” rather than government (Sasse, 2015). Instead, he is a president who “loves the word ‘collective’” and uses it more often than can be counted (Kengor, 2014).

So one of the clearest understandings framed as vital definitionally to conservatism in this body of discourse is one that represents it as distinct from actions taken or thoughts held by Barack Obama. Indeed the assertion is made that a problem with the candidates seeking the Republican nomination midway through 2015 is that “they are not talking about . . . the way the Obama Presidency has gone” (Graham, 2015). Thus, they are not clearly enough advancing a message of true conservatism.

Beyond that, however, this body of political discourse reflects a considerable range of understandings that are sought to be advanced as essential meanings of conservatism:

- Conservatism places “a very high premium on what sociologists call mediating institutions—family, churches, schools, civic associations and so forth” because “between the state and the individual there is a large area of human life that needs to be respected and supported” (Wehner, 2014).
- Conservatism “opposes an echo of the same old politics, the same old policy” (Martin, 2015).

- Conservatism “features an inherent distrust of government, an adherence to the rule of law, not of men, a constitutional system that gives an outside place for deliberative assemblies, a belief in certain unchanging truths about human nature and our God-given rights, and finally a concrete expression of what was once called a free-labor ideology, which rests on a belief in the dignity of all labor and a right to the proceeds of our own labor” (Lowry, 2015).
- Conservatism “empowers me to be whatever kind of woman I want to be” (Wright, 2014).
- Conservatism has “often had an agenda that focuses on an effort to bring down the top marginal tax rate” (Ponnuru, 2014).
- Conservatism has “the best ideas for lifting people out of poverty, . . . not saying how can we get a better capital-gains tax for billionaires. It doesn’t come up. We think about what can we do to create greater opportunity for people who have been left behind” (Brooks, 2015).
- “The seed idea of” conservatism “is the idea upon which this nation was founded. Divine ownership, natural rights, that men are born free and independent, as such they own their bodies, they own their minds, they own their labor and the fruits thereof” (Phillips, 2014).
- Conservatism is the “ideal . . . that allows people to live the lives they want to live, that we choose to live, that best suit us as individuals. We are all going to make different kinds of choices, and it is only the conservative ideal that allows that” (Wright, 2014).

That highlighting of the variety of understandings as to the meaning of conservatism is useful not because it brings together a coherent whole but precisely because it suggests how misleading it is for mainstream media to so often routinely label broad collections of positions, players, interests, and so forth. That is what this sampling generated via the C-SPAN Video Library search function helps illuminate—that mainstream media could contribute more meaningful representations by avoiding rigidly dichotomized labeling

and utilizing more nuanced characterizations. While there is some commonality in the understandings advanced by individuals representing themselves as conservatives, there is on balance far more contrast.

SEARCHING FOR LIBERALISM

When searching this database with the term *liberalism* and going back the previous 2 years, this is where one realizes it is time in the analysis to step back from the trees and considerable what a remarkable pattern of “forest” this algorithmically generated data pattern indicates. And that is, quite simply, that conservatives appear to be engaging in much more discourse at the sort of events where C-SPAN cameras are present than liberals are—so much so that the systematically objective search function of the C-SPAN video library identifies far more videos from events at which conservatives are talking about the meaning of liberalism than at which liberals are talking about liberalism. And that suggests that the conservative branding effort is markedly more robust than any similar effort by liberals—because that conservative branding effort, in effect, serves to brand liberalism in such a manner as to contribute even more to its own objectives.

This body of political discourse does not exactly advance understandings of liberalism that have clear commonality, except that by and large those understandings frame liberalism as a negative societal influence and inferior to conservatism:

- Liberalism has “no set, fixed values. . . . They are constantly looking up, finding new sins, new laws, new ways to offend. . . . You disagree with one, you aren’t just wrong, you’re not just unenlightened, you’re immoral. You’re sinful. And you’re deserving of punishment in the here and now, not in the afterlife” (Cashill, 2015).
- Liberalism treats Jean-Jacques Rousseau (and his *The Social Contract*) “as some great guru in the conventional history lesson, and yet, if you read what he actually said, it’s appalling. . . . Well, what he says basically is that government can just do anything it wants to and that the social contract . . . is that we allocate all of our rights to the general will, to

the community with no reservation of freedom whatsoever. . . . That's the premise of all the totalitarian movements of the modern era, and it's totally destructive of freedom" (Evans, 2015).

- Liberalism "lost faith with the American project" in the 1960s and 1970s, and "when middle America feels that its values are being attacked by liberal elites, meaning educated, higher-income liberals who took over the Democratic Party in the late Sixties, there is some truth to it. So middle American voters, who had heretofore been the rank and file of the Democratic Party, turn against their own party and leave their own party because their party took on a different tone towards their country and towards them" (Bloodworth, 2013).
- Liberalism "like communism, Fabianism, and fascism, . . . was a vanguard movement born of a new class of politically self-conscious intellectuals. . . . Critical of mass democracy and middle-class capitalism, liberals despise the individual businessman's pursuit of profit as well as individuals' self-interested pursuit of success. . . . A sense of alienation from American life, a sense that America was the worst of all places was essential to liberalism in its inception" (Siegel, 2014).
- Liberalism's "political dream is a dream of justice without virtue. Its moral dream is a dream of virtue without discipline or censure. And spiritually, it's a dream of self-realization as salvation" (Reno, 2014).
- Liberalism "sees liberty and individualism as somehow an impediment to radical egalitarianism" (Hanson, 2013).
- Liberalism is "wrong on just about every issue," and if given a choice between Saddam Hussein and the United States, "will not only side with Saddam Hussein, . . . will viciously slander good and decent Americans in order to do so. . . . Vulgarizing society is part of the modern liberal agenda" (Sayet, 2014).
- Liberalism "is in fact a religion, or at least functions like a religion, . . . [and] Christians and other opponents of the agenda of liberalism . . .

can turn the tables on liberal secularism by actively bringing cases to dis-establish it as a state-imposed worldview in education, in federal agencies, and even in the courts” (Wiker, 2013).

One must search back farther than the 2-year period of this study to begin to find even a small number of videos of events at which individuals identifying themselves as liberals discuss substantially the meaning of liberalism. Even then, there are still more videos from the sorts of events highlighted in this section, in which individuals identifying themselves as conservatives discuss the meaning of liberalism.

CONCLUSION

This approach to considering what constructed meaning in media discourse reveals about how effective the asserted branding of conservatism has been in recent decades suggests it has been quite effective—and that liberalism cannot be seen to have established any significant branding presence of its own provenance. Certainly, the question can be considered via other approaches than the one utilized here. But utilizing the C-SPAN Video Library in this manner does provide a systematically neutral mechanism for sampling a considerable body of recent political discourse—and the results were unambiguous: Searching the database for *conservatism* produced, almost exclusively, videos of individuals who represent themselves as conservatives discussing conservatism, while conversely searching the database for *liberalism* produced, almost exclusively, video recordings of individuals who represent themselves as conservatives discussing liberalism.

Although the search strategy involved in the overall research design of this study was not a particularly complex one, the results that strategy yielded suggest quite significant, almost startling, implications. By locating and operating video cameras at an incomparably broad range of public-affairs events, including far more types of events than just congressional proceedings and hearings, the three C-SPAN networks transmit a staggering quantity and diversity of unedited or minimally edited political discourse. With all of that being recorded and indexed in the C-SPAN Video Library, a collection totaling more than 223,000 hours of programming since 1987 has

been amassed and made available online—“one of the most comprehensive video archives of governmental and political content,” as the Video Library site characterizes it.

So it could hardly be expected that utilizing broad, neutral search strategies of that vast archive of media discourse for the term *conservatism* would produce, almost exclusively, videos of individuals who represent themselves as conservatives discussing conservatism, while searching the database for *liberalism* would also produce, almost exclusively, video recordings of individuals who represent themselves as conservatives—not liberals—discussing liberalism. This study does not attempt to explain all that that finding represents. But it strongly suggests that conservatives are engaging in far more public discourse on not only conservatism, but also on liberalism. And that suggests conservatives are dominant in contributing to the overall construction of related meaning for audiences of a broad and massive body of television programming.

With conservatives apparently engaging in far more public discourse on both conservatism and liberalism, it can only enhance conservative branding efforts to maintain such domination of the overall construction of meaning for audiences of such a considerable quantity of video programming. Whatever the dominant societal understandings may be of conservatism and liberalism today, the findings of this study of media content suggest they are both being determined more by avowed proponents of the former than of the latter.

NOTES

1. Altheide’s method utilizes a 12-step process that involves devising research questions, developing context for the sources of documents to be analyzed, examining a small number of the documents to begin developing categories to guide data collection, testing the categories on more documents, revising the categories, implementing “progressive theoretical sampling” (which refers to “the selection of materials based on emerging understanding of the topic under investigation”), collecting data, performing data analysis (which “consists of extensive reading, sorting, and searching through” the documents), comparing and contrasting extremes and key differences, summarizing findings, and integrating findings with interpretation.

2. The discourse highlighted was drawn from videos of events over the 2 years preceding the summer 2015 research period, all of which were identified through the search strategies discussed. In order to minimize researcher search biases, none of the search filters offered for the “Search the Video Library” search box of the C-SPAN Video Library were employed. All searches were conducted by entering the terms noted with the default “All” option selected (rather than, for example, filtering the search with any of the offered filters, which include “Videos,” “Clips,” “People,” “Mentions,” and “Bills”). The priority was on utilizing the basic C-SPAN Video Library search function with as little intentional or unintentional researcher bias as possible, so as to obtain whatever selections of video events that search function determined to be most relevant—and then to apply to those selections the framing analysis discussed.

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