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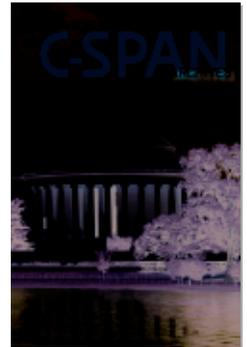Published by Purdue University Press

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CHAPTER **8**

C-SPAN UNSCRIPTED: THE ARCHIVES AS REPOSITORY FOR UNCERTAINTY IN POLITICAL LIFE

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Most political communications that individuals encounter on a regular basis could be easily classified as neat, orderly, planned, sterile, or sanitized. Presidents speak from manuscripts electrified by teleprompter. Members of Congress post press releases documenting their activities. Journalists prepare questions to interview political officials. In one extreme example of planned politics, 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's tweets had to be approved by 22 staffers before being posted online (Kreiss, 2014). Few political surprises abound amid an endless stream of talking points.

What then are scholars to do if they want to study the "natural" parts of American politics? The first step is finding the proper setting or context where political officials, journalists, citizens, or other political actors are forced from manuscripts and talking points. These settings arguably would create greater

uncertainty for political and citizen actors, meaning that the audio, verbal, nonverbal, and visual material may capture this uncertainty as well. The C-SPAN Video Library is an appropriate place to begin this search. Because of the unedited way C-SPAN covers public affairs content, the material captured in some contexts represents those unscripted, natural moments in United States politics.

The previous three chapters focus on two unscripted venues captured in the C-SPAN political debates and investigations. In each of the chapters, the authors document the convergence of planned politics and uncertainty. These chapters offer insights on what these unscripted moments tell us about expectations for candidate behavior, gender norms, and institutional power.

POLITICAL DEBATES

Political debates are critical moments in the course of election campaigns in the United States. For prospective voters, the format allows for learning and direct comparisons (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Pfau, 2002), as well as the opportunity to correct misperceptions (Popkin, 1994) and rally around the "home team" candidate (Scheufele, Kim, & Brossard, 2007). For candidates, political debates are risky affairs where scripted talking points meet the uncertainty of press questions and oppositional attacks. The previous chapters by Patrick Stewart and Spencer Hall as well as Martha Kropf and Emily Grassett provide a window into one of the most unscripted moments in campaign communication.

The chapter by Martha Kropf and Emily Grassett unpacks the language patterns of male and female candidates in debates for seats in the United States Senate. Statements heard one at a time may reveal little in terms of patterns. In their computerized textual analysis of 942 candidate statements in 16 debates, Kropf and Grassett observe few differences in the communication styles of Senate candidates based on gender. Indeed, the analysis illustrates how debate communication style may contradict past research finding gendered differences in speaking styles. The authors creatively posit that female candidates for the U.S. Senate may change "their language to present themselves to the debate audience in a more masculine manner than the natural language used

by women." Even in a relatively uncertain environment, the authors claim that women candidates engage in a high level of language monitoring. Kropf and Grassett's work should encourage scholars to delve into the repository of debate material in the Archives to extend their work.

Patrick Stewart and Spencer Hall focus on another potentially natural part of political debates—candidate facial displays. In their microanalysis of candidate nonverbal communication in presidential debates, the authors illustrate how the small facial expressions of individuals reveal particular emotional responses. These responses, in turn, are judged by individuals to be either appropriate or not (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999). Their work is a nice illustration of how the visual material in the Archives can be used to assess emotional, physiological, and potentially psychological components of American politics. Stewart and Hall write, "In an increasingly Internet-connected world, memes and tweets drawing upon such moments where candidates act seemingly inappropriately have the potential to reach and influence a large audience." Indeed, scholars who research in this area have a wealth of material to explore in the C-SPAN Archives.

POLITICAL INVESTIGATIONS

The third chapter addresses a similarly unscripted format in one area where law and politics collide: political investigations. Seared in the political consciousness are moments where wrongdoings were brought into sunlight—the abuse of power with Watergate or the personal exploits of the Monica Lewinsky affair. It is the latter which continues to occupy the attention of scholars of the contemporary presidency. Research has focused on media coverage of the Lewinsky scandal that engulfed Bill Clinton's presidency (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000), the communicative responses President Clinton gave as a result (Kramer & Olson, 2002), and the progression and influence of public opinion (Lawrence & Bennett, 2001).

Angela Garcia's chapter enriches these perspectives by examining the detailed question-answering and evasion strategies in Clinton's 1998 grand jury testimony. Using conversation analysis, she extends prior research looking at question/answer strategies in interviews to a heated legal investigation of the president. Despite the uncertainty created by interrogatory questioning,

President Clinton controlled the agenda at key moments during his testimony, employing a practical ethnomethodology, "he persuasively used common-sense understandings of what is ordinarily done and how ordinary people do things," Garcia writes. The chapter presents an interesting portrait of how the small linguistic ways in which the president answered questions protected and insulated the institutional presidency.

RESEARCH PATHS FORWARD

The previous three chapters illustrate that the material in the C-SPAN Archives serves as a rich communicative collection of unscripted moments. These unscripted moments can tell researchers quite a bit about the health of democratic institutions as gauged by both political elites and citizens. I wish to touch on two additional communicative venues included in the Archives that both illustrate unscripted political moments and offer insights on the pulse of democratic governance: press conferences and call-in programming. These venues offer clear paths forward for continued archival research that seeks relatively unscripted political material.

Press Conferences

The C-SPAN Archives are an important repository for moments where press officials attempt to question and probe political elites on matters of import. A search of the C-SPAN Archives for "news conference" or "news briefing" contains approximately 18,000 videos, a wealth of material for scholars to assess unscripted moments where political officials meet the press. These texts include remarks by the president, secretary of state, the White House press secretary, and congressional leaders, among many other political actors.

   Why should scholars consider press conferences as a site for analysis? First, the actors that participate in press conferences strongly dislike them (see Hart & Scacco, 2014). Press conferences combine both antiseptic transactions (which the press dislikes) with the inherent uncertainty embedded in the format (which political officials dislike). This recipe makes press conferences radioactive for journalists and political elites, but promising for researchers. The opportunity to assess the planned language of opening statements and

press questions against the unscripted nature of responses and follow-up questions in one venue is replicated in few other political communication formats. Second, the press conference often represents a public clash of institutions, between the press (Cook, 2006) and another political actor. This venue can provide keen insights on how news norms and practices are publicly performed and have evolved over time, how political actors negotiate uncertain circumstances, and how two or more disparate institutions comingle.

Although scholars have assessed a number of facets of press conferences, there is still much to investigate. For instance, researchers have assessed the type and tone of questions posed by journalists at press conferences (Clayman, 2004; Clayman, Elliot, Heritage, & McDonald, 2006). This trajectory of research could be extended with the Archives by pairing the type and tone of questions with the visual responses of political officials. In this manner, scholars can assess not only unscripted verbal responses, but also nonverbal responses as well. The chapter by Patrick Stewart and Spencer Hall in this volume on microanalysis of debates could be instructive in this manner. Other research has looked at other aspects of the dialogic dance between political and press officials. Recent work that Roderick P. Hart and I (2014) completed on rhetorical negotiations in the presidential press conference assesses the language patterns of presidents and journalists across 12 presidencies. Using DICTION, a computer-assisted textual analysis program, we document how presidents have increasingly gotten the better of the press over 6 decades. Yet, the Archives present the opportunity to compare the language of presidents and their corresponding press secretaries, as well as other cabinet members. These comparisons could shed light on how organizational pressures within the executive branch lead to similar and different rhetorical patterns when managing press relationships.

Call-In Programming

The C-SPAN Archives also are home to a repository of call-in programming from the *Washington Journal*. Over the course of three and a half decades, C-SPAN has featured relatively unscripted calls from individuals who wish to comment on contemporary topics. The incorporation of call-in programming on C-SPAN in 1980 presaged other participatory mass-media developments that would occur in the late 1980s and 1990s, including talk-radio formats in

shows like those of Rush Limbaugh and Larry King (Davis & Owen, 1998; Owen, 2013). The archived material would allow researchers the ability to track citizens' sentiment, as represented by their communication, over an extended period of time.

Citizen communications can reflect deep-seated concerns, as well as hopes and opportunities, within the body politic. Although call-in programming does not constitute a representative sample of public concerns, the material in the Archives can allow for comparisons over time and the estimation of rough trajectories. Similar approaches have been applied to other news media venues, including letters to the editor. In his research examining letters, Roderick Hart (2000) observes that a picture of the citizenry can be constructed in a number of manners, including with public opinion polling or letters to the editor. Hart's research uncovers that citizen communication in letters to the editor operates as a tonal intermediary between journalists and politicians. Indeed, his work points to the importance of considering citizen sentiment outside public polling formats. In an age with numerous newer media venues, I add call-in programming to this list of promising venues to gauge citizen sentiment.

Scholarship in the area of citizen talk could benefit from a careful examination of the call-in programming in the C-SPAN Archives. Because of the often-provocative nature of the programming, talk radio formats have received quite a bit of scholarly attention (for reviews, see Barker, 2002; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Richard Davis and Diana Owen (1998) were among the first scholars to tout C-SPAN's call-in programming as part of a new generation of media formats designed to engage individuals. Public affairs–focused formats, like *Washington Journal*, encourage callers to mention pertinent political information that may not be on the show's or the public's policy agenda, as found in a content analysis conducted by David Kurpius and Andrew Mendelson (2002). Although citizen call-ins create uncertainty for the hosts (a possibility that also could warrant research attention), the unscripted nature of caller responses could shed light on the emotional and information richness inherent in citizen political communications.

The C-SPAN Archives represent a wealth of public affairs material for scholars to explore the more unplanned moments in American politics. The previous three chapters offer a clear starting point for understanding the often unscripted nature of political debates and investigations. Although we

acknowledge how so much of our politics is neatly planned, these chapters illustrate that there is still much to know where planned politics meet uncertain contexts.

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