I still remember when I was department chair and Robert Browning called and asked me to join him and Brian Lamb in a meeting to discuss the concept of the C-SPAN Archives. I have heard a lot of great ideas in my time, but few surpass what Brian wanted us to do and what Robert thought could be done. Now it is up to all of us who conduct research in public policy, issue analysis, communication theory, and the countless other disciplines that use the Archives for their research to use that research to better inform the public.

From the beginning I thought that C-SPAN would be a great success and that it would increase our understanding of American democracy. This is brought home to me every time I watch a debate, committee hearing, call-in session, or one of the many interviews. C-SPAN informs, provides relevant information, and most importantly educates.

Let me provide an example. I was teaching a course titled Congressional Elections 2014. Part of our work included watching the Senate candidate
debates in the various campaigns. We watched portions of debates in Colorado, New Hampshire, and North Carolina, and at one point a student interested in politics as a career noted that each Republican candidate cited the same business organization to point out that each Democratic incumbent had a very poor record on votes to help small businesses. The student did some quick research and realized that the organization had been put together in late summer and had carefully selected its votes so as to cast the incumbents, all Democrats, as opposed to small businesses. This was a “eureka” moment for my student when she realized that there was such a thing as a national playbook and that it could be very partisan. This is just one of many teaching moments C-SPAN has provided me over the years.

C-SPAN is an elixir that energizes the spirit and recharges the mind. In short, American democracy and its leaders and citizens are better and more resolute because C-SPAN is there recording these leaders’ decisions and the decision-making processes. Perhaps another anecdote will prove my point.

I always enjoy telling the story about being in a Washington taxicab and the driver, intently listening to coverage on the C-SPAN radio network, asking me three or four times what address I wanted. When he finally listened to me and not the radio and I gave him the C-SPAN address, he almost stopped the cab as he asked me whether I was going to C-SPAN then told me that, if so, I needed to tell them what a great job they were doing. So on behalf of the taxicab driver and the numerous others who have shared their opinions with me, thank you, C-SPAN.

CHALLENGES C-SPAN FACES

While C-SPAN and the Archives have worked tirelessly to provide outstanding service and to develop a unique brand, their greatest challenges are ahead. In fact, if these challenges are not met, C-SPAN and the Archives eventually may not be the beacons they are today. I want to discuss several of these challenges.

First, C-SPAN, and indeed the entire telecommunication industry, faces new and interesting challenges. One such challenge is determining the best way to deliver the product—for example, through Internet streaming, as video
on demand, or in the more traditional cable and satellite format. Another is identifying potential challengers (e.g., social media) that could offer the same service in a different format and thus threaten C-SPAN. The same is true for the Archives. To anticipate and meet these possible challenges, C-SPAN and the Archives must continue to adapt to change, as well as continue to be true to their core mission.

In his comments included in the 2014 book about the first C-SPAN Archives research conference, *The C-SPAN Archives: An Interdisciplinary Resource for Discovery, Learning, and Engagement*, Brian Lamb recognizes this problem with his comment that “we [C-SPAN] can’t have our heads in the sand about the future” (Lamb, 2014, p. 26).

Second, C-SPAN needs to continue to be innovative while at the same time being the video diary of Congress as well as expanding its coverage. Brian Lamb (2014) summarizes how much effort has been directed toward getting the Supreme Court to permit C-SPAN to record the approximately 75 hours of oral arguments the Court hears per term. He reports no progress here, and I hope at some point the justices realize that the American public is entitled to an unfiltered view of how that Court functions. This is an example of where C-SPAN must continue to press for change.

The third area of concern has to do with the various models of presenting information. We all know of the decrease in viewership of the nightly news of the major broadcast and cable news networks. Today’s anchors do not have the impact of their predecessors, and the news is often quite different. I often scratch my head in wonder when any of the national broadcast news programs opens its evening news with a story about the polar vortex or some other weather event that has limited impact on the general public—in essence a weather forecast! Is this the hard news we need in order to understand what is happening in an increasingly complex and interconnected world?

One of the major implications in the loss of viewership is that network news departments have lost revenue, which means fewer reporters and foreign offices and limits on the ability to get network reporters into the field. C-SPAN has to ensure that it has the resources it needs to provide the coverage it does and that this coverage can be expanded when new opportunities arise.

Fourth, C-SPAN has to adapt, but it also needs to do so in a cautious way. What may seem as a game-changing innovation may not turn out to be and
C-SPAN would be well served to be slightly behind the curve than attempting to always being on the cutting edge. Perhaps a little perspective from my experience with a reputed cutting edge innovation would be helpful here.

**THE EXPECTATIONS OF MOOCS**

For the past three years I have been doing research attempting to better understand a new pedagogical model that many have claimed will make brick and mortar colleges and universities nearly obsolete. Let me explain.

Between 2006 and 2012, MOOCs (Friedman, 2013) burst onto the higher education scene. The Massive Open Online Course, according to its advocates (Kolowich, 2013a) and some early supporters in the mass media, would do these things:

1. provide quality instruction by the intellectual and academic leaders in a particular field (initially, engineering and science);
2. deliver this instruction to large numbers of students via the Internet;
3. accomplish both 1 and 2 with low unit costs; and
4. in doing so, would broaden the base of higher education and improve educational levels globally.

During this period, a few MOOCs (mainly covering artificial intelligence and other engineering topics) began with enrollments of 20,000 plus. Many argued that degrees would cost tens of thousands of dollars less because MOOCs would lower instructional costs. It was often argued that only the elite undergraduate residential colleges and universities would be able to survive as knowledge became readily available and at a much lower cost or even no cost (Meisenhelder, 2013). Colleges and universities were told to adapt or perish. Boards and presidents were excited because MOOCs presented the best of two worlds: lower unit costs and a possible geometrical expansion of knowledge.

When I reviewed the 200-plus scholarly and large summary articles on MOOCs, I found that most talk about their promise and their far-reaching implications, and few talk about whether MOOCs will actually work or what their potential shortcomings might be. Even MIT and Harvard and the newly formed companies (Coursera is a good example) that are developing MOOCs
have stressed only the potential, and with little empirical evidence to support their claims (Caputo, 2014).

THE REALITY OF MOOCs

By 2012 the reality of what MOOCs could and could not accomplish had begun to cloud their future (Caputo, 2014). These were the actual and perceived major shortcomings:

1. It was discovered that for many of the MOOCs in the sciences and engineering, the audience was largely those with a degree who were interested in learning more and updating their knowledge base.

2. Many MOOCs had completion rates of less than 2 percent, and more than half of the students often dropped out of the MOOC by the second or third lecture.

3. Even the successful MOOCs, often defined as having a greater than 3 to 4 percent completion rate, could not show the value added for the student. Learning outcome measurements were seldom used during this period and so it was difficult to know if the MOOC was achieving the same result as the more traditional pedagogical approaches.

4. Well-executed MOOCs also generated significant costs to the institutions, which were not being offset by revenue in the form of tuition or fees. Thus instructional unit costs increased and MOOCs lost some or all of their competitive financial advantage.

5. Not surprisingly, faculty began to oppose the development of MOOCs, seeing them as a threat to the traditional classroom and the values (e.g., interaction, face-to-face conversation, debate) that the traditional classroom is said to impart (Kolowich, 2013b). Heated discussions concerning MOOCs took place at Harvard, San Jose State, and other higher education institutions as faculty questioned if resources should be allocated to MOOCs.

6. Education accrediting agencies had a difficult time evaluating the MOOCs, and in some cases MOOC providers decided to go with certificates or other programs as a way to avoid the delays and often negative decisions reached by accrediting agencies. This remains a
major impediment to the growth of MOOCs and if resolved could help to foster a renaissance for MOOCs.

I won’t bore you with all that has happened as MOOCs went from the revolutionizing idea that was going to change higher education forever to an idea where there is now little media attention and claims have yet to be proven (Marks, 2012). Even the for-profit companies, such as Coursera, have lowered their expectations, and other MOOC providers such as edX continue their work but in a more research-driven way and with a financing model that charges for some courses and does not charge for others.

**MY EXPERIENCE WITH MOOCS**

For the past two semesters I have developed and taught a MOOC on the 2014 congressional elections, and I am in the process of developing a MOOC for the 2016 presidential elections (Caputo, 2014). The original research was funded by the Verizon Foundation through a grant to Pace University’s Thinkfinity project.¹

My experience with developing and teaching a MOOC leads me to conclude the following:

1. MOOCs are difficult to plan and deliver for a variety of reasons. One is that you are dependent on others for the actual production of the MOOC, and this can cause a variety of problems.
2. There are many hidden costs associated with MOOCs.
3. Developing learning outcomes and then testing to see if the outcomes are reached involves considerable effort and care.
4. Devising how you are going to grant credit and deciding what to charge, if anything, for the MOOC are often complicated, and we know educational institutions often have difficulty with complexity.

I was able to use C-SPAN material in my MOOC in a variety of ways, from interviews with Brian Lamb and Robert Browning to the coverage of the Florida 13th Congressional District race in the spring of 2014, which was in many ways a harbinger of the fall election to the various candidate debates
held around the country. The ability to use the C-SPAN video material enhanced the MOOC.

THE FUTURE OF MOOCS

Based on my research and experience to date, I think MOOCs will have an increasing role to play in the delivery of knowledge, but they will not be the “killer application” that changes higher education as we know it. Perhaps the following quote best summarizes this killer application thinking:

MOOCs started in 2008; and, as often happens with disruptive technologies they have so far failed to live up to their promise… MOOCs will disrupt universities in different ways. … Were the market for higher education to perform in [the] future as that for newspapers has done over the past decade or two, universities’ revenues would fall by more than half, employment in the industry would drop by nearly 30 percent and more than 700 institutions would shut their doors. The rest would need to reinvent themselves to survive. (A Cost Crisis, 2014)

After attempting to convince you that MOOCs are not going to dominate higher education, I now want to convince you that there is a potentially major role for a different type of MOOC. This is the advocacy MOOC. I will be spending the next year to 18 months developing one in the energy area and then turning my presidential elections course into an advocacy MOOC.

An advocacy MOOC provides basic information on a specific issue or issues and then attempts to motivate students and other citizens to get involved in influencing the decisions by various political and social agencies. Advocacy MOOCs can be used by many different organizations and I think offer a potential way to increase participation in democracies.

This is done by educating and then mobilizing and acting for a desired outcome. An advocacy MOOC does not define the desired outcome—it instead provides an overview and a strategy for the individual interested in influencing public policy and public policymakers. In this regard it should be informative and instructive, but the instructor should be nonpartisan.
Advocacy MOOCs also need to provide specific information on candidate and party issue positions. Here the Archives and ongoing C-SPAN coverage will often provide the needed material. A student can follow candidates or parties as they develop their positions on various issues and know when key variations were developed or a position actually changes.

What the MOOC revolution has taught us is that new technology does not always immediately overwhelm other technology, especially in areas such as higher education where tradition and routine often make change difficult or slow to happen.

I think the lessons of the MOOC experience for C-SPAN and the Archives are clear: explore, keep abreast of developments, but remember your core business and adapt to protect and strengthen that core. To use a business analogy, be sure you have a wide and deep moat between what you do and what others do.

**REFLECTING ON C-SPAN AND DEMOCRACY**

I want to close this chapter by going back to an earlier point. C-SPAN and the Archives play an important role in our understanding of policy and policy decision making. In his insightful keynote address at the first Archives research conference, Professor Roderick Hart (2014) indicated that he was concerned about the impact of the Internet on democracy because the Internet may be causing younger Americans to abandon their activism. He argued that democracy requires face-to-face interaction and that without it accountability is lessened and incivility is likely to increase.


Professor Hart’s arguments, since they address the impact of the Internet after such rapid change in the past 15 years since Putnam’s analysis, are important to our understanding of democracy in an increasingly technological era. While I am sympathetic to Professor Hart’s arguments, I do not share his pessimism for two reasons.
First, it is very unlikely that the new technology will be eliminated or ignored, so the task of teachers is to convince students of the liberating aspect of the Internet and how it can be used to educate and broaden horizons regardless of personal views.

In political science courses, this means building in exercises that require students to sample a variety of websites—from conservative to liberal, from radical to reactionary—and to evaluate how the sponsors of these sites view issues and what they recommend as an appropriate response. As students learn from and experience the great wealth of information and diversity of opinion on the Internet, they will hopefully be more apt to understand valid arguments and reasonable proposals while at the same time realizing the importance of their own individual participation.

C-SPAN and the Archives are critical as a source of information without a partisan bias. We know that partisanship, whether on the floor of our legislative bodies or in the mass media, has increased and that for many what is reported with partisan bias often becomes the objective truth. C-SPAN can help mute this increasing partisanship by permitting the average citizen to obtain more objective information.

Second, while there are those who will use the Internet only to reinforce their views, there are others who have found and will find Internet-based knowledge that challenges their perspective and views. The task of teachers is to sponsor that debate and provide ways for students and all citizens to participate and to have a sense of civic community in the digital age and beyond.

In a democracy, individual citizens are responsible not only for understanding the issues but for voting for the candidates they believe will most likely advance their position. Accurate and timely information is the key to a robust and vibrant democratic system. The Internet may be a powerful resource in providing that information.

This is why I titled this chapter as I did: “C-SPAN, MOOCs and the Post-Digital Age.” Clearly C-SPAN and the Archives have a continuing and crucial role to play in our knowledge-based economy and in our political process. Even if the information is imperfect at times, the viewer will ultimately be able to discern its reliability and its truthfulness.

As the post-digital age evolves, it will be interesting to see the impact on American democracy. Unlike many, I think there is the possibility that C-SPAN, the Archives, and the other institutions committed to providing
basic information will help individuals reach responsible decisions, reinforcing democratic norms not in all but in most cases.

What more can we ask for going forward? As has been true throughout American history and in other democracies, we are dependent on individuals making the appropriate decisions that reinforce democracy and provide a path forward. These decisions will often be imperfect, but even imperfect decisions based on unbiased information will help us progress. I am confident that, with the help of C-SPAN and the Archives, that will continue to be the case and that the promise of American democracy will continue to be realized.

NOTES

These comments are based on work I began in 2011 and the paper I presented at the American Political Science Association’s Teaching and Learning Conference in 2014 (Caputo, 2014) and the American Political Science Association’s national meeting in 2014. I would like to acknowledge Enxhi Brahja’s research assistance during her Pace University undergraduate research fellowship, as well as during the research phase of the Verizon Thinkfinity research grant. She provided outstanding bibliographical research assistance and was helpful in reviewing the various papers that resulted from this work. I will be continuing this work while on sabbatical in the fall of 2015. My work during this time will be to develop an advocacy-based MOOC which can be used for both the 2016 presidential nominating process and the 2016 presidential general election process. Access to the material on C-SPAN and the material available through the C-SPAN Archives’ online Video Library will be a central part of the MOOC.

1. Here is an interesting side story: My student assistants and I were working on the 2014 course when we wondered if the domain name Presidentialelection2016.com was available. It was so I purchased it and also the Congressionalelections2018.com domain name. Look for websites using these in 2015 and 2017, respectively.

2. See especially Putnam’s discussion of social capital and its importance in a democracy on pp. 148–180 and 402–413.

REFERENCES


