Chapter 5: Using C-SPAN to Examine the Political Discourse of HIV/AIDS, 1985–1987

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In the 1980s, the AIDS crisis challenged the resilience of gay and lesbian activists. Friends, family members, and loved ones died from an unknown syndrome as activists fought to secure funds for research, services, and education. In 1981, the first media reports of unusually lethal cancers and pneumonias sensationalized the patients’ drug use and homosexuality. By the summer of 1982, scientists had identified possible transfusion-associated immune problems in the heterosexual population. In 1983, AIDS became a cover story that was difficult to ignore as conflicting reports on the safety of the blood supply and the potential for casual communicability circulated. The public reacted with fear and uncertainty. Some responded with blame and anger toward gay men. Others demonstrated compassion toward people with AIDS. The media hype of 1983 dissipated in 1984 but surged again in 1985 with increased attention on the spread of AIDS in the heterosexual population. Medical discoveries gave hope of a vaccine or treatment but also revealed that people who tested positive could remain symptom-free and transmit the virus unknowingly. Some called for mandatory testing for all in high-risk groups and quarantine for any who tested positive. Parents
organized to keep children with the AIDS virus out of their children’s schools. Meanwhile, 12,529 people had succumbed to the opportunistic infections associated with AIDS (Thirty Years, n.d.).

While struggling to meet the immediate needs of people with AIDS, activists continued to fight for protection of their rights. The newly formed Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF), the first national political action committee dedicated to lesbian and gay issues, promoted a national civil rights bill. They sought to bring their message of gay and lesbian rights as human rights into the “mainstream.” As the AIDS crisis grew, HRCF attempted to use its nascent political connections to influence federal AIDS policies and funding. They also educated activists at their annual leadership conference (see Figure 5.1). Community-based AIDS service groups formed the Federation of AIDS Related Organizations (FARO) at the Second National AIDS Forum in Denver (1983). Under the name AIDS Action Council, FARO became the only national lobbyist group dedicated solely to AIDS issues. The council attempted to broaden the public’s compassion for all people with AIDS. The messaging of HRCF and the AIDS Action Council intersected and placed human rights and health care in the same framework. My investigation considers the organizations’ strategies and reach during the period 1985–1987 when fear and uncertainty were high. My research question considers whether the activists’ messaging entered public and political conversations and how the messages were received during this period of high anxiety.

The C-SPAN Archives’ online Video Library affords a unique glimpse into both the public and the political realm. Programming includes legislative hearings, call-in programs featuring legislators, political figures, activists and journalists, and political event coverage such as national meetings, organizational panels, and speeches. The variety of program formats provides examples of political positions as well as the voices of the public and activists. As a primary source, the C-SPAN Video Library offers an unmediated glimpse of multiple points of view. For this chapter, I examined the available videos that mentioned gay and lesbian rights or AIDS from July 1985 through October 1987 for evidence that the activists’ messages circulated in the public and on Capitol Hill. Although an analysis of C-SPAN videos does not denote the full reach or impact of HRCF and AIDS Action Council messaging, the broad swath of coverage types does provide an indication of the depth to which their objectives circulated.
THE HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN AND POLITICAL POWER

The first section of this chapter considers the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF) and perceptions of gay and lesbian political power. The HRCF board promoted their goal of a national civil rights bill “by supporting and educating candidates for federal elective offices” (By-laws, 1982). Early on, they established working relationships with key figures in Washington including Representatives Henry Waxman (D-CA) and Ted Weiss (D-NY) and Senators Alan Cranston (D-CA) and Lowell Weicker (R-CT), leaders who sponsored the national civil rights bill and later chaired congressional committees on AIDS testing, drug development, and funding. These political relationships included campaign contributions.

In his memoirs, organization founder Steve Endean described the early funding distribution strategy HRCF applied throughout the 1980s. “We decided we would make only small contributions, rather than major ones, to safe incumbents … [that] would leave us with resources for the really big races” (Endean & Eaklor, 2006, p. 112). By 1982, HRCF had raised enough money to distribute $140,000 to 118 congressional candidates (25 Years, n.d.). Also in 1982, they convinced former vice president Fritz Mondale to speak
at a major HRCF fund-raiser. The audience applauded Mondale’s remarks about the Democratic Party’s commitment to “eliminate all laws, rules and regulations which discriminate against individuals on the basis of sexual orientation” (Smothers, 1982). The dinner raised $400,000. Referring to the 1982 election, Endean asserted, “[It] helped us start to turn the corner — bringing the gay and lesbian rights movement into the mainstream” (Endean & Eaklor, 2006, pp. 106, 116).

The political impact of the HRCF campaign contribution strategy is difficult to assess. Sources claim the HRCF won 81% of the 1982 races and 69% of the 1984 races it contributed to (Endean & Eaklor, 2006, p. 116; HRCF, 1984). A 1984 HRCF newsletter broadly interpreted the success of the election: “The victory goes far beyond the election of men and women who will continue to speak out in the Congress for human and civil rights. A more important underlying result is that support for the issue of human rights is spreading.” The report balanced the celebratory remarks with an acknowledgement that incumbency played a critical role in many of the races — both won and lost. Despite a few points of discouragement, the election summary concluded, “But taken as a whole, the 1984 election was a solid victory for gay rights” (HRCF, 1984). The small donation strategy allowed the HRCF to claim sponsorship of many campaigns and thereby associate more candidates with gay and lesbian civil rights; however, the policy of providing small sums to “safe” candidates diminishes the significance of the success rate.

The AIDS crisis complicates the evaluation of HRCF’s victory claims. Videos in the C-SPAN Video Library suggest the perceived political clout of those who supported gay and lesbian civil rights. Callers, activists, reporters, political groups, and legislators mentioned the gay community’s power; however, fear and uncertainty over the communicability of AIDS shaped the perceptions of power. Some blamed the spread of AIDS on government inaction due to the political influence of gay activists. Often, those in strongest opposition to gay rights credited activists with the greatest political influence. Three 1985 call-in programs bared the intensity of the response.

In the summer of 1985, *Life* magazine published a dramatic cover story on AIDS titled “Now No One Is Safe From AIDS”; beloved movie star Rock Hudson announced he had AIDS and died shortly after; and children with AIDS were entering schools. The newly developed blood test for the HTLV-III virus amplified concern as the public began to understand that people could
transmit the virus prior to having any symptoms of AIDS. In September, *Newsweek* correspondent Mary Hager spoke to C-SPAN host Brian Lamb about her experiences covering the AIDS story. In general, callers wanted to discuss medical and social issues rather than media coverage. Several expressed hostility toward the gay population’s perceived political power. A male caller from Reno, Nevada, argued that extreme precautions including quarantines used for hepatitis and measles should apply to AIDS. He forcefully concluded, “I don’t see why we are suddenly being urged not to worry about it—everything’s just fine—because it happens to attack a politically powerful segment of the society.” A few minutes later, a caller from Yonkers, New York, complained about the defense of “the homos” and the leniency of the liberal press. Hager responded by describing two extreme views she had heard as a reporter. The first claimed, “One reason AIDS has gotten so much attention is because it is in the homosexual community and this was a very well-organized lobbying group.” The other asserted a solution would have been found by now if the afflicted were from the Chamber of Commerce. Hager placed her opinion in the middle of the two (C-SPAN, 1985a). These AIDS conversations reveal a divide between the gay community and a segment of the population that was angry and fearful about the spread of AIDS. Whether or not the gay lobby had succeeded in influencing government policies on AIDS, some concluded they had the power to do so.

A few weeks later, Representative William Dannemeyer (D-CA), a strong critic of same-sex relationships, discussed his legislative goals to protect Americans from AIDS on a C-SPAN call-in program. Dannemeyer spoke directly of his resistance to elevating the “status of male homosexuality to a civil right.” Several times, he complained that public health officials’ concern for “homosexual sensitivities” had resulted in poor public health decisions. Referring to San Francisco, he claimed, “The political authorities of that city are so beholden or fearful of the political backlash of the male homosexual community that they’re just standing around doing nothing.” He continued, “Because they don’t want to complicate or impair their ability to get political contributions from a very powerful, small special interest group.” The next caller, from Richmond, California, complained that the media did not show both sides of the issue due to the “extremely powerful” homosexual community (C-SPAN, 1985c). Dannemeyer heightened the intensity of his moral complaints and his comments about medical uncertainty with fearmongering.
about the ability of the gay community to influence public officials to make poor decisions that would endanger the public’s health.

The C-SPAN Video Library also included videos featuring leaders from gay activist organizations. In November, C-SPAN offered a call-in program with Nancy Roth, the executive director of the Gay Rights National Lobby (GRNL). Roth fielded questions from often antagonistic callers. Roth maintained an even demeanor as she asserted, “The rest of society has chosen to make the gay and lesbian lifestyle a political issue by making it perfectly legal to discriminate against us because we are gay men and lesbians. If it were not legal to discriminate against us, it would no longer be a political issue.” C-SPAN host Brian Gruber asked Roth about conservative Democrats who felt the Democratic Party lost votes in the 1984 election because of the platform support for “groups such as yours.” In reply, Roth discussed GRNL efforts to educate both parties. “And they’re beginning to understand that there’s tremendous voting power and tremendous disposable income within the gay and lesbian community. We were named the seventh largest voting bloc in the United States last year at the height of the 1984 election hype. So that begins to tell you what kind of political hype we can have.” In additional answers, Roth advanced GRNL strategies and goals, and asserted political strength (C-SPAN, 1985d). C-SPAN covered other activists sharing messages about gay rights including Jeffrey Levi, executive director of the National Gay Task Force (NGTF); Paul Popham, a founder of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and of AIDS Action Council; and Marguerite Donoghue, spokesperson for AIDS Action Council. In a sense, C-SPAN assisted activists’ efforts to share their message with the public.

The three 1985 call-in programs demonstrate that HRCF’s assumption of political victory was acknowledged by others; however, the reaction to the perceived political strength created a backlash when applied to the AIDS crisis. Fear drove some of the responses. While activists had decried the federal government’s limited response to the AIDS crisis for several years at this point, some people now blamed the activists’ political power for interfering with the government’s response to the crisis.

The C-SPAN coverage of the chief justice confirmation hearings of Associate Justice William Rehnquist affords a glimpse of attitudes about gay and lesbian rights outside of the AIDS discourse (1986b, 1986c). Activist Jeffrey Levi firmly opposed Rehnquist’s promotion to chief justice because
of his previous rulings restricting freedom of speech and freedom of association. He placed his rebuke of Rehnquist’s record on civil liberties for gay and lesbians in the broader context of rights for every American. Levi cautioned, “These positions are threats to all Americans, not just homosexuals, because once we start making exceptions to fundamental constitutional rights for one group, it becomes increasingly easy to allow the government to intrude on the freedom of others” (C-SPAN, 1986b). Levi’s ability to testify demonstrates that the message of gay and lesbian rights as commensurate with civil and human rights had crossed a threshold of political viability.

Activists succeeded in getting their message heard but still faced significant opposition. Watching the video clip adds nuance to the available written testimony. A brief exchange between Levi and Hearing Chair Strom Thurmond (R-SC) reveals Thurmond’s disregard for the gay community. Thurmond asks if gays and lesbians can receive treatment to “change them and make them normal like other people?” He follows up with another question about whether “they could be converted to be like other people?” (C-SPAN, 1986b). While the written words could be interpreted as uninformed questions, on the video, the countenance and vocal inflection of both men indicate a pointed verbal sparring match. Thurmond did not engage in Levi’s testimony on civil and human rights; rather, he pressed Levi to acknowledge that gays and lesbians were not “normal.”

As the confirmation process continued the next day, Representative Ted Weiss (D-NY) also spoke in opposition to Rehnquist’s confirmation. Weiss delivered his erudite comments with force and conviction. He argued, “[Rehnquist] will further divide this country between the privileged and the poor, between black and Hispanic and white, between men and women, between homosexual and heterosexual, between the majority and the minorities.” By placing potential division between homosexual and heterosexual people in the same framework as economic, racial, gender, and political division, Weiss indicates gay and lesbian men and women were one of several minorities that could be at risk rather than an exceptional minority at risk. Later during questioning, he again placed “sexual orientation” in the same category as minority and women’s rights. Weiss’s overall testimony condemned Rehnquist’s failure to protect the civil rights of all citizens (C-SPAN, 1986c). By embedding “homosexual” rights within the civil rights movement, he located gays and lesbians in the larger struggle for a cohesive America. His
inclusion demonstrated his open support of the gay and lesbian struggle for civil rights extended beyond sponsorship of the national rights bill.

C-SPAN’s coverage of the hearing testimony gave the public an opportunity to evaluate Associate Justice William Rehnquist’s nomination to chief justice far beyond that available in newspaper articles or the evening news broadcasts. Although only a small fraction of the total testimony, Levi’s and Weiss’s statements asserted the significance of gay and lesbian civil rights as a determining factor in the promotion of a Supreme Court justice and demonstrated the political resonance of the gay and lesbian rights movement without specifically discussing its power.

Republicans had lost the Senate majority in the 1986 midterm election. In August 1987, C-SPAN offered a behind-the-scenes view of the Republican campaign process as the party anxiously planned for the 1988 presidential election. The program exposed conservative dismay over the power of the gay lobby and displayed the antigay climate that motivated HRCF’s continued efforts. Similar to the content of the 1985 call-in programs, the AIDS discourse negatively intersected with the conversation on gay and lesbian rights.

The group Young Americans for Freedom sponsored a panel on AIDS that featured Representative Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and Joseph Sobran, senior editor of the conservative National Review. Gingrich labeled Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and Representative Waxman as “princes of power” who led a community of the “radical values” Left in which Gingrich declared the homosexual rights advocates were a significant faction. Gingrich called Waxman (a politician supported by the HRCF) a “chief prince” and warned the audience that “The princes of power in order to keep their power will do what their radical allies insist because that’s how their community works.” Sobran’s remarks condemned liberal sexual values he referred to as the “sex and drug networks” and the “fluids exchange networks.” He denounced President Reagan’s appointment of an “avowed homosexual and gay activist” to the President’s Commission on the HIV Epidemic and expressed surprise at the power of the “homosexual lobby” as the “most embarrassing and ludicrous example of a special interest lobby in American politics.” Both Gingrich and Sobran implied that political expediency caused liberals to make irresponsible and expensive decisions regarding AIDS (C-SPAN, 1987a). Although not mentioned by name, the panel members characterized efforts by groups such as the HRCF as immoral and dangerous.
Returning to the Human Rights Campaign Fund’s hope that the 1984 election portended gay and lesbian acceptance into the “mainstream,” one can use the C-SPAN Video Library to sample some of the messages circulating in the public discourse in the following years. Lists of campaign contributions and candidate success rates do not clearly demonstrate the political power of activist organizations; however, claims of gay political power originating from both the opposition to and support for gay rights add weight to assumptions of gay activist power. The HRCF did not achieve its goal of a national gay and lesbian civil rights bill; nevertheless, the message of protecting gay and lesbian civil rights had entered the wider political discourse. The ability of activists such as Roth and Levi to address the national audience of C-SPAN suggests the HRCF message did reach the mainstream; however, videos also demonstrate that acceptance of the message, particularly in reaction to the AIDS crisis, was limited.

AIDS ACTION COUNCIL AND THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Gary MacDonald, the first executive director of AIDS Action Council, saw his role as an ambassador for AIDS. Although many of the board members represented gay rights organizations, MacDonald asserted, “The council had deliberately decided not to position itself as a gay organization” (Andriote, 2011, p. 202). AIDS service organizations and gay and lesbian rights groups including the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, the National Gay Task Force, and AIDS Project Los Angeles funded AIDS Action Council’s lobby project (FARO update, 1983, p. 3). The NGTF and the GRNL worked through the AIDS Action Council to coordinate congressional lobbying (AIDS Action Update, 1984b, p. 15).

The AIDS Action Council communicated the organization’s goals and strategies in a series of newsletters. Efforts to increase AIDS funding dominated the issues. The newsletters also encouraged members to build coalitions in their local community and shared information about how to organize grassroots letter-writing campaigns to support the council’s efforts. The articles confined discussion of civil rights to matters related to AIDS. Topics of concern such as the soon to be released HTLV-III antibody blood test and member success stories rounded out the issues. In this chapter, I will confine
my investigation of AIDS Action Council’s message to one goal—shifting
the public’s view of AIDS to recognize it as a global public health crisis rather
than a gay problem.

The council adopted several strategies to reframe AIDS including co-
alition building and messaging that linked AIDS to the larger public. The
first newsletter noted, “A little creative discussion of actual interests and the
wide-ranging impact of AIDS on virtually every sphere of American life
goes a long way toward convincing people of the urgency of this crisis.” The
council offered members talking points to promote public support of AIDS
research and education. The points highlighted the applicability of AIDS re-
search to cancer, infectious diseases, and immune disorders research. They
concluded, “Solving the AIDS mystery through intensive research will thus
definitely benefit the overall health of the nation.” Funding for public ed-
ucation would also have social benefits for all. During 1984 and 1985, the
public was uncertain about AIDS transmission vectors. The council argued
that education would reduce the hysteria of those not at risk and potentially
“demystify homosexuality” by providing opportunities for heterosexuals to
meet gay people (AIDS Action Update, 1984a, pp. 5–7).

In a later newsletter, MacDonald argued that the council needed to
convince people that AIDS is “a disease to which everyone is potentially vul-
nerable” and that “AIDS… is in fact a very dangerous general public health
emergency” (AIDS Action Update, 1985, p. 7). In reflection 10 years later, Jean
McGuire, AIDS Action Council executive director (1988–1990), commented,
“De-gaying’ the epidemic, and playing upon the fears of heterosexuals that
they were also at high risk became the main strategy of gay AIDS advocates,
including the AIDS Action Council” (Andriote, 2011, p. 205). During the news
lull and perceived complacency of 1984 and early 1985, the council’s strategy
of calling attention to public vulnerability seemed reasonable to its members.

C-SPAN videos reveal that the message of AIDS as a public health crisis
gained political traction but also generated resistance. In legislative hearings
on AIDS funding, research, and testing, committee chairs expressed undiffer-
entiated support for people with AIDS; however, some committee members
and panel speakers still viewed the crisis in terms of innocent victims versus
gay men and IV drug users. In 1987, C-SPAN programs on media coverage
of AIDS provided opportunities for public response. Similar to the interac-
tions observed in the 1985 call-in programs discussed earlier, callers often
strayed from the intended topic of discussion. Their comments reveal how some negatively applied the message of AIDS as a public health emergency.

Senator Lowell Weicker sat as chair on a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee regarding funding for AIDS. In a 1985 session, he concluded his opening remarks with a strong statement of expectation. “Today we do not have the cure for AIDS. But neither do we have the ignorance of our ancestors who cast lepers in the sea and the mentally ill in the dungeons. As our society presses the attack on AIDS with vigor and resoluteness, those among us who suffer this disease deserve understanding and help. We in the United States are one people. And by fact or law there will be no pariahs among us” (C-SPAN, 1985b). Representative Ted Weiss, chair of the House Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations and Resources, opened a 1986 hearing on the status of AIDS drug development with remarks that did not identify the sexuality of people with AIDS. He frankly stated, “Twelve thousand men, women, and children have died from the disease and over 100,000 are believed to exhibit ARC—AIDS Related Complex” (C-SPAN, 1986a). The people were not homosexuals or heterosexuals, high-risk groups or innocent victims; they were Americans who had died. A year later, Representative Henry Waxman, chair of the subcommittee on Health and the Environment, supported legislation to protect the confidentiality of people with AIDS and to diminish discrimination. At a hearing on AIDS testing, he presented his position as apolitical and scientific: “This is not liberal or conservative, it is not a Democratic or Republican position, it is the position of the experts in medicine and public health … and every professional group that has looked at AIDS” (C-SPAN, 1987b). All three chairs presented AIDS as a national public health concern in line with AIDS Action Council strategy.

Representative William Dannemeyer sat on the 1987 committee on AIDS testing chaired by Waxman. The video clearly revealed the tension between those who supported voluntary testing with confidentiality protection measures and Dannemeyer, who had introduced legislation requiring mandatory testing for marriage licenses, all hospital patients, and prostitutes. The intensity of the disagreement comes to fore with the first witness, June Osborn, dean of the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan. Osborn warned that mandatory measures could shake society’s “pluralistic foundations.” Waxman followed up with a series of questions. He asked why the government could not mandate people to get testing and whether mandatory
testing for marriage and driver's licenses would reach more people. Without the cues that tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language provided by the video, one might assume Waxman’s rhetorical questions supported mandatory testing; however, he spoke with a pleasant inflection and Osborn smiled and nodded as they interacted (C-SPAN, 1987b).

Osborn’s comportment changed as she answered Dannemeyer’s questions. Although he began his questioning with a smile, Dannemeyer quickly became frustrated with Osborn’s responses. She was critical of his questions and deflected them with a lecturing tone on medical technicalities. At times, he interrupted and talked over her answers. Dannemeyer concluded with strong words that accused Osborn of defying logic and supporting unsound policy, and then mocked her expertise. The uncomfortable exchange ended as Waxman called the next speaker (C-SPAN, 1987b). Although the conversation centered on the medical, financial, and social issues regarding AIDS testing, the underlying dispute placed those who recognized the health needs and civil rights protection of all people living with AIDS in conflict with those who felt the general public needed protection from people living with AIDS and others deemed to be engaged in unacceptable activities. In the two years since the 1985 call-in program, Dannemeyer had certainly learned more about the limited communicability of AIDS and heard messages about AIDS as a public health crisis. He continued to view AIDS as a gay health crisis that could be kept out of the public with restrictive measures.

In 1987, C-SPAN offered a few programs that evaluated media coverage of AIDS. Panel members at a Radio-Television News Directors Association meeting offered poignant reflections of the frustrations they encountered. Journalist Jim Merriam, who had written many of the early AIDS stories for United Press International, related how people often assumed there had already been enough AIDS media coverage. He discussed the continued hysteria and fear and urged journalists to write “story after story” to get the message across. Merriam echoed AIDS Action Council strategies to bring AIDS closer to the public. He concluded, “Unfortunately, the other thing that will help bring people around is that as there are more and more people with AIDS, more and more people will get to know somebody who has AIDS or know somebody who knows somebody who has AIDS and that’s going to help change attitudes, I think” (C-SPAN, 1987d).
Robert Bazell, science and medical correspondent for NBC, followed Merriam on the panel. Bazell discussed how difficult it had been to convince producers and editors to include AIDS stories in 1982 and 1983. He described their standard response: “Why would we want to put on a story about a disease that is affecting gays and drug addicts … there’s not that many of them, it’s not that big of a deal, there’re not many cases.” He tied his next anecdote to Merriam’s remarks: “Then Rock Hudson died and suddenly America knew somebody who died of AIDS. Well, here was a communal experience, we all knew Rock Hudson. … So that kinda shocked people and suddenly there was an endless appetite of stories for AIDS” (C-SPAN, 1987d). Merriam and Bazell mirrored the council’s talking point on “demystifying homosexuals” and AIDS through familiarity.

The conflicting messaging about compassion for people with AIDS and the “very dangerous general public health emergency” generated mixed results. Panelist Laurie Garrett from National Public Radio expressed a different opinion. She urged the audience of reporters to avoid sensationalizing AIDS stories with emotional community responses that validated fears. At one point, she specifically disagreed with Merriam’s idea that more cases would help change attitudes.

I think when there are more cases around, hysteria will get worse. People will start feeling it closing in on them. They start feeling “ooh”—it’s in our town in Ohio. My god, it’s in Oklahoma. It’s come to Memphis. It’s here in North Dakota. When that’s starts happening, there will be a greater and greater temptation to resort to authoritarian means to solve the problem, to resort to vigilante means to solve the problem. (C-SPAN, 1987d)

Garrett concluded her remarks by urging reporters to educate their audiences (C-SPAN, 1987d).

Polls conducted in 1987 reveal the continued need for education. A Gallup Poll found 30% of those surveyed believed insects could transmit AIDS with another 15% uncertain. At least a quarter of those surveyed responded that people could catch AIDS from donating blood, food handling, drinking glasses, and coughs (Gallup, 1987). A separate qualitative analysis concluded, “Underlying respondents’ attitudes and behaviors regarding AIDS was a
strong current of perceived personal vulnerability and confusion which should not be underestimated” (Kaplan, 1987). C-SPAN call-in programs vividly reflect the anxiousness and anger this uncertainty created. For example, in a program meant to discuss the challenges journalists faced as they wrote about the AIDS crisis, Robert Engelman, correspondent for Scripps Howard News Service, and Philip Boffey, deputy editor of the New York Times, spoke to more than 20 callers from 12 states. Callers wanted to discuss insect transmission; AIDS as a right-wing plot to get rid of undesirables; AIDS as an international biologic weapon; media conspiracies; Haiti and cheap gay sex; why the media ignored the Christian interpretation of AIDS—referring to the punishment of God; why media reports conflicted; LaRouche’s claims; sexual acts and transmission; mandatory testing and quarantine. Some demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the state of AIDS medical research and a distrust of official sources (C-SPAN, 1987c). Similar to Mary Hager’s responses to callers in 1985, Engelman and Boffey’s answers educated the public on medical and policy issues and debunked speculative claims.

Additionally, the journalists challenged viewers who condemned the gay community or suggested mandatory testing or quarantine. Boffey asserted that the issue of testing should be treated as a civil rights issue. In response to a caller who argued that if the government could ban smoking, they should stop homosexuals, he gave a lengthy reply. After explaining how the presence of the AIDS virus in the gay community was a historic accident, he informed viewers, “I think the public should always look upon it as from the point of view—even if I am from a heterosexual family—this could be my son, my daughter, and it could be spreading like herpes did” (C-SPAN, 1987c). Boffey effectively articulated the message AIDS Action Council had proposed in 1984; however, the call-in program demonstrated the message was not accepted by all.

In the 1985 call-in programs discussed earlier, some voiced anger over the political power of the “homosexual” lobby. They did not trust experts’ assurances on the limited communicability of AIDS and demanded the government provide better protection from accidental exposure. In 1987, callers expressed resentment about the government’s civil rights protection of people with AIDS in regard to mandatory testing and quarantine. By this time, the public understood that a person could transmit the HIV virus prior to exhibiting any symptoms of AIDS. Although the language of the complaint had
shifted from political power to civil rights, the impetus and intent remained the same. Some callers feared people who had AIDS and felt the government should identify, regulate and possibly remove them.

During 1984, when it seemed the public did not care about AIDS, the AIDS Action Council conceived a message similar to the HRCF message of “gay rights are human rights.” They advocated for recognition of AIDS as a universal health crisis rather than just a gay crisis. The council’s strategy broadened the appeal for support of AIDS funding by promoting AIDS research as applicable to broader medical research. It amplified the urgency by elevating AIDS to a global health emergency. On one hand, the broadened scope increased compassion as more people became aware of the human suffering. C-SPAN videos indicate the political reach of the message. Archives footage of hearings show that key legislators recognized AIDS as a national problem. Additionally, programs allowed reporters to educate the public and correct myths. On the other hand, fear of AIDS led to blame and a backlash. Videos demonstrated that some callers and members of Congress supported harsh measures of mandatory testing and quarantine to stop the “homosexuals” from spreading the disease.

As the participants in the 1987 March for Gay and Lesbian Rights gathered in Washington, activist Jeffrey Levi spoke to the National Press Club. In his presentation, Levi brought together many of Human Rights Campaign Fund and AIDS Action Council’s messages. The March organizers had built coalitions with other civil rights groups. Additionally, Levi recognized the diversity within the community: “There are gay Republicans, gay conservatives, gay liberals, gay Democrats.” In the body of his speech and in the question session following, Levi explained how AIDS had increased familiarity and understanding. Although he concluded the chances of a federal gay and lesbian civil rights bill in the near future was “slim to none,” Levi described the “quiet revolution” in city councils and state legislatures and predicted members would advance to Washington positions “ready and willing to move these issues to the national level.” He noted, “Doors to member of the Senate and the House have been open because of the AIDS crisis—people we would not have otherwise talked to but for their role on health policy.” He continued, “As they come to understand our community, as they come to see us as real people rather than some stereotype they may have read or seen in the media, I think their support will increase” (C-SPAN, 1987e). Levi’s speech
echoed the message of inclusion found in the HRCF campaign strategy and early AIDS Action Council newsletters. Despite the political backlash and staggering death rate of 1985–1987, Levi looked forward to the march on Washington with hope.

As I conclude, I would like to consider the similarities between the Human Rights Campaign Fund and the AIDS Action Council’s messages and strategies. Both organizations promoted a message of inclusion. The messages sought to pull gay and lesbian concerns out of the periphery and into the center or mainstream of public discourse. The similarity in messaging intertwined the objectives of expanding human rights and of expanding access to health care. My analysis of C-SPAN videos strongly suggests that the organizations succeeded in disseminating their messages in the public and political spheres. The HRCF adopted a strategy of funding candidates who supported gay and lesbian rights. They interpreted their candidates’ success as progress toward a more inclusive society that recognized gay civil rights as human rights. Although it is difficult to weigh the impact of the financial contributions, my analysis shows their efforts contributed to a perception of political power; however, those opposed to gay and lesbian civil rights used affirmations of their political power as fearmongering. The AIDS Action Council adopted a strategy of broadening the appeal of AIDS in order to increase compassion and secure federal funding for AIDS education, services, and research. They framed AIDS as an inclusive national and global health crisis. My investigation found examples of compassion and recognition of the global nature of AIDS; however, focus on the state of emergency contributed to heightened anxiety. The videos in the C-SPAN Video Library establish a range of responses to both strategies, from acceptance and support to rejection and resistance.

HISTORIANS AND C-SPAN

In a recent chapter, historian David Greenberg asked, “Do Historians Watch Enough TV?” He comments that historians of the postwar period often avoid television as a source and notes that those who do examine television often prefer reading the transcript over the time-consuming process of watching TV (Greenberg, 2012). Most of the videos in the C-SPAN Video Library do
have transcription available. Reading transcripts certainly takes less initial time than watching the video version of a broadcast. I had intended to rely on the transcripts for this chapter; however, I found the transcripts of material from C-SPAN’s early years were incomplete. My brief investigation of the AIDS crisis demonstrates what is lost when relying solely on transcripts. Most obviously, video includes interpretive aids such as vocal inflection, facial expression, and body language absent from print sources. If I had confined my research to transcripts, I would have missed the composure Nancy Roth and Jeffrey Levi exhibited when asked provocative questions that condemned their “lifestyle” and the assertiveness of Philip Boffey as he countered calls for quarantine. Historians can find additional congressional hearing transcripts that also include the submitted written material at Hathi Trust Digital Library; however, the transcript versions do not include the visual and aural clues that indicate humor, rhetorical questions, or sarcasm. These interpretive aids are particularly informative when analyzing committee members as they questioned witnesses and interacted with each other. Similarly, the language of parliamentary procedure can mask goodwill, annoyance, and anger. One does not need to watch a video to understand that Representatives Waxman and Dannemeyer held different positions on mandatory AIDS testing; however, a video of their interaction exposes the intensity of their disagreement. Overall, I feel that the opportunities to hear and view the individuals and events I investigated enhanced my evaluation of attitudes and relationships.

Historians can use C-SPAN call-in broadcasts to add context to quantitative study and survey results. For instance, the 1987 Gallup poll results indicated a significant portion of Americans were unclear about what the “transmission of bodily fluids” entailed. Twenty-five percent thought a person could catch AIDS from a cough or sneeze; another 10% did not know. The survey summary noted, “Many Americans still cling to mistaken ideas about its [AIDS] transmission.” Callers’ responses suggest why people continued to hold views that “[had] been entirely discounted by health officials” (Gallup, 1987). Callers mention the confusion caused by contradicting reports. Several reference newspaper or magazine articles that supported fears of insect transmission or casual contact. The doubt contributed to fear. During the 1987 broadcast, Boffey responded to a caller who suggested all travelers should take an AIDS test before they enter the United States. In his rebuttal, he remarked, “So many of the callers—seem to me that there is an undertone
that they are at risk.” Call-in conversations about mandatory testing and quarantine exposed hostility toward gay men and disregard for the civil rights of people with AIDS but also expressed mistrust of the medical information received. For instance, a caller from New Jersey in favor of quarantine regardless of the cost or consequence argued, “If AIDS is so hard to get, why do so many people have it?” (C-SPAN, 1987c). The callers’ responses suggest these mistaken ideas identified in the survey could have been the result of the circulation of contradictory information and may have contributed to the support of extreme measures such as mandatory testing and quarantine.

In evaluating call-in programs, historians should consider the demographic limits of the caller sample. C-SPAN solicited a variety of callers by providing separate numbers for different geographic regions and adopting a rule that limited caller participation to once in 30 days. The host typically identified callers by city and state. In the videos I sampled, more callers came from California and New York but just as many callers from other states in the Midwest, South, and West joined the conversations. Callers seldom mentioned their age but at times their comments included clues. Similarly, gender is often left unspoken but remarks provided clues. The videos I viewed included calls from men, women, activists, people with AIDS, people with medical backgrounds, people who identified as gay or lesbian, and people with various religious and political opinions. Anonymity may have encouraged more truthful and/or more extreme statements. Although not a random representative sample and likely to express the views of those motivated by public engagement, the callers’ statements shed insight on the public’s concerns and responses to policy issues.

Programs in the C-SPAN Video Library also provide an unmediated view of political discourse. Almost every video I viewed included interaction between guest and host; guest and callers or audience members; political figures and callers or audience members; legislators and witnesses; or legislators with each other. The participants discussed various issues and expressed multiple points of view. C-SPAN viewers also heard unedited testimony on the discrimination and medical challenges faced by people with AIDS. For those investigating congressional floor proceedings, the videos show the unedited dialogue prior to any revisions added to or subtracted from the account published in the Congressional Record. Historians relying on printed sources or commercial television for accounts of debates and events must
first unpack the authors’ or producers’ selection of evidence and argument with a critical eye toward reliability and bias. While C-SPAN provides uncensored content, discourse alone does not provide a full view of the AIDS crisis. Journalists and reporters entered homes and hospitals with cameras and video equipment to more poignantly show the daily lived experiences of people with AIDS. Still, the Video Library affords the historian a selection of unabridged social and political dialogues.

For my research, one of the benefits of using the C-SPAN Video Library was the variety of programming available, especially considering that the time period I investigated occurred before C-SPAN routinely preserved their tapes. In addition to call-in programs, hearings, and political events, I evaluated campaign interviews, a U.S. Conference of Mayors panel on AIDS, presentations related to the President’s Commission on HIV, two events featuring Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, an Association of American Medical Colleges conference panel, and a program on the psychology of AIDS prevention. The scope of programming offered samples of the expected political positions as well as opinions of activists and viewers. I watched Newt Gingrich use fear of AIDS to rally supporters and Robert Kunst use the slogan “Cure AIDS Now” to define his campaign. I viewed mayors sharing their communities’ concerns about AIDS and U.S. representatives and senators discussing what the government should do about AIDS. I observed numerous witnesses condense their expertise into concise presentations in hopes of influencing public policy decisions. Activists spoke with intensity as did callers. In the process of evaluating the videos, I became better acquainted with many of the political figures, experts, and activists I had previously read about.

C-SPAN strives to provide “a balanced presentation of points of view” and “a direct conduit to the audience without filtering or otherwise distorting their [elected and appointed officials and others who would influence public policy] points of view” (C-SPAN, n.d.). Historians should still assess the program selection for unintended bias, particularly in consideration of the category of “others who would influence public policy.” In my research, I did not assume the videos contained every point of view or individual integral to AIDS public policy decisions. By mission and resource, the wealth of material did not delve into local and state government. Based on the videos, I could not measure the extent to which HRCF and AIDS Action Council’s
messages reached their intended audiences or the specific effect of their messages. I do argue that their messages were present and considered in public policy debate. The backlash evident in some callers’ comments suggests the messages also circulated in the public sphere. Much of what I discovered will find a place in the larger research project that includes this chapter.

As part of “The Research Possibilities of the C-SPAN Archives” conference, participants toured the Archives facility at Purdue Research Park. The behind-the-scenes tour included a meeting with C-SPAN website developers. Since I began my research in the library, the website interface has added features. The developers shared plans for continued enhancements. I appreciate the option to search for congressional videos based on committee, members, votes, bills, or elections. Users can also search by Series, Executive Branch, and Supreme Court as well as employ advanced search features for people or topics. The video clip feature allows users to create, save, comment, and share video segments, an especially useful tool when analyzing longer videos such as congressional hearings. It could also be a useful classroom tool. The bulk of available material suits historians of the 1980s and forward; however, C-SPAN’s American History TV series includes videos on American artifacts, lectures, topical programs, oral histories, early 20th-century clips, and historians talking about their work, which could be of interest. I encourage researchers of American history to investigate the C-SPAN Video Library for content related to their research needs and to consider the benefits of incorporating video as a primary source.

NOTE

1. The Centers for Disease Control adopted the name Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the summer of 1982. French scientists identified a virus they named LAV in 1983 and American scientists identified a virus they named HTLV-III in 1984 as the cause of AIDS. In 1986, an international committee decided both names should be replaced with the name Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). During the period under discussion in this chapter, the term AIDS was often used to refer to the virus, the syndrome, and the cause of death. For simplicity, my use of “AIDS” reflects the use of the time.
REFERENCES


