Chapter 13: C-SPAN in Changing Spaces of Political Communications

Published by

Browning, Robert X.
The Year in C-SPAN Archives Research: Volume 4.
Purdue University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/62531.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/62531
When many people think of C-SPAN, they often think about television coverage of congressional hearings. As the previous chapters demonstrate, the C-SPAN Archives offers so much more. In addition to congressional floor action, the C-SPAN Archives’ online Video Library includes White House press briefings, news conferences, State of the Union speeches, coverage of conference panels, presidential debates, videos of public policy seminars, speeches from notable experts, interviews with scholars, and event coverage. Despite this wealth of information, the C-SPAN Archives is underutilized by scholars, pundits, and teachers. In this book, the assembled authors have begun to address this oversight by using C-SPAN videos to examine presidential communications, audience response to presidential debates, and historical changes in professional journalism. In addition, one author demonstrates how best to use C-SPAN videos as an instructional tool. Below, I provide a summary of each chapter, focusing on critical takeaways. Building on these main points, I offer future directions for research utilizing the C-SPAN Archives.
In Chapter 9, Delaney Harness and Joshua Scacco examine President Trump’s first 30 days of presidential communication. The authors make clear that “presidential communication” is no longer an official speech in the Rose Garden or a White House press conference. Instead, President Trump skips the traditional press and turns to Twitter. To examine how President Trump expanded his communication outreach, the authors systematically compared Trump’s tweets to his speeches and press conferences during his first month in office. The textual analyses reveal several notable findings. Consistent with prior literature (e.g., Gainous & Wagner, 2013; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Towner, 2016), the Twitter platform allows President Trump to display more pseudo-interactivity on Twitter, such as invitations to participate, engage, and share, than in traditional communication. Trump employs Twitter, rather than filtered speeches, to speak directly to his supporters, further solidifying American identity and nationalism while eschewing international bodies. Overall, Harness and Scacco provide early evidence that Twitter is a unique extension to presidential communication, allowing the president to sidestep the mainstream media.

**SHIFTS IN JOURNALISM**

In Chapter 10, Michael Buozis, Shannon Rooney, and Brian Creech call for a historical examination of journalism as an institution. To understand journalism today, we must trace back to early changes in journalism. Between the 1960s and today, newspapers declined, cable television climbed, and online news boomed. The latter is what we know based on readily available subscription, viewer, and user data. Instead, shifts in journalism might be better understood by examining C-SPAN’s archival video from four prominent journalism organizations, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Society of Professional Journalists, the National Press Club, and the Freedom Forum. The authors argue that historical footage of panels, speeches, and events—some dating back to the early 1980s—are an overlooked and untapped data source for mapping the changing discourses and practices that
encompass journalism as a profession. The authors leave us wondering if we fully understand today’s institution of journalism.

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE RESPONSES

In Chapter 11, Austin Eubanks, Patrick Stewart, and Reagan Dye focus on audience responses to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump’s three general election debates. For decades, audience reactions have been used to measure the impact of presidential debates on candidate evaluations, political knowledge, and vote choice. Traditionally, audience reactions to debates are measured with dial-testing, traditional polling, focus group responses, and, more recently, smartphone applications and social media comments (e.g., Boydstun, Glazier, Pietryka, & Resnik, 2014; Gainous & Wagner, 2013). Eubanks, Stewart, and Dye offer new measurements for spectator reactions: applause, laughter, and booing. Unlike traditional measures, these audible measures require less cognitive control and perhaps are less susceptible to social pressures. For example, instead of thinking about turning a dial to 70 or 80, cheers, jeers, claps, boos, heckling, and hollering are more automatic and natural behavioral responses. These authors examine C-SPAN debate videos; their content analysis of the duration and type of audible audience responses show variation in some spectator responses to Clinton and Trump speaking. Interestingly, Trump and Clinton garnered the same amount of applause, but different amounts of laughter. As these authors report, Trump received more laughter than Clinton, and that laughter occurred for a longer duration. Hence, Trump was seen as funnier than Clinton. Did Trump laugh his way into the White House?

TEACHING WITH C-SPAN

In Chapter 12, Pavla Hlozkova puts “active learning” in the college classroom under the microscope, providing insights on how to incorporate C-SPAN videos into creative collaborative learning (CCL) classrooms. In a CCL environment, students are expected to be highly engaged in group
tasks, discussing and debating issues, and making collaborative decisions. It is the instructor’s role to provide interesting readings, stimulating hands-on activities, meaningful question-and-answer sessions, incredible multimedia demonstrations, and experiential learning events. To aid instructors, Hlozkova notes the advantages of using C-SPAN videos, particularly since digital video allows real professionals and experts to be inserted directly into the classroom at a low cost. In addition, instructors and students can pause and discuss, stop and rewind, and watch the entire video again for deeper understanding. An important disadvantage is that not all video segments—often long and unedited—are best for learning in a CCL classroom. To overcome this challenge, instructors should evaluate videos based on (1) understanding of the issue discussed, (2) language and professional skills, (3) “in the moment” expression, and (4) thinking enhancement. Most importantly, the author provides several “classroom-tested” examples, illustrating that some C-SPAN videos meet the criteria whereas other videos do not.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The question then becomes: Where does research and teaching with C-SPAN videos go from here, and, more importantly, what kind of research questions will be central to employing C-SPAN videos as a data resource? Considering the previous chapters, many interesting questions remain. Harness and Scacco nod to the Twitter presidency, indicating that digital tools are an integral part of presidential communication in the digital era. Previous presidents used Rose Garden speeches or Oval Office addresses to communicate with citizens about critical policies or in moments of crisis. Barack Obama, considered the “social media president,” spoke to the nation on the state of American security while standing in the Oval Office—not on his Twitter feed. In contrast, President Trump tweets about every major moment. After almost a year in office, Trump has tweeted about health care, immigration, tax reform, North Korea, Russian meddling in the 2016 election, and the National Anthem controversy. How do Trump’s tweets compare to his traditional communicative actions? According to the C-SPAN Video Library, President Trump has delivered an inauguration speech, an address to a joint session of Congress, a speech on the Iran nuclear agreement, a statement on
the Las Vegas mass shootings, weekly presidential addresses, and more. How does presidential discourse differ in the Twittersphere versus the traditional media? How does this dialogue impact the public? Do Trump’s tweets stick more in citizens’ minds than Trump’s speeches?

It is well known that the media landscape is ever-changing—just as Buozis, Rooney, and Creech suggest in Chapter 10. Today’s journalism consists of user-generated news, real-time reporting, and self-selected information from Yahoo! News. But how did we get here? The authors have neatly laid the groundwork for examining the changing discourse among professional news organizations using the C-SPAN Video Library. They note research opportunities and offer several research questions. Drawing on an analysis of C-SPAN videos of professional news organizations’ panels, speeches, and talks, they ask: How have journalist norms and boundaries changed? How has news media transitioned to the digital era? How has the definition of a professional journalist been altered? Has the definition of “soft news” shifted from “talk show” to “blog” among professional news organizations? Other possibilities include examining how these news organizations in C-SPAN footage framed the rise of the Internet, blogs, and social media platforms. Did news organizations in the 1990s frame their discourse as an “opportunity” or a “risk”? These frames, if used, may help explain the professional guidelines used today in the journalism industry (see Lee, 2016).

Humor has been highly studied in politics, indicating that laughing matters (e.g., Baumgartner & Morris, 2007; Stewart, 2012). Eubanks, Stewart, and Dye’s conclusion that Trump was funnier than Clinton in the 2016 presidential debates ties nicely into prior research on political humor and comedy. The C-SPAN Archives offers presidential and vice-presidential debate footage from 1960 to 2016, which would allow a historical analysis of audible audience responses. Did previous presidential candidates elicit similar amounts of boos, applause, and laughing during debates? Does the funnier candidate have an advantage on the road to the White House? Obama was funny. George W. Bush was more humorous than Al Gore. Reagan entertained millions with amusing tales and anecdotes. A systematic look at audible audience responses during presidential debates as well as State of the Union addresses and official presidential speeches (available in the C-SPAN Video Library) may reveal interesting patterns. It would also be worthwhile to examine how audience response, measured by traditional polls or Twitter sentiment, is
correlated with the audible response on television. Do public opinion polls reflect the audience’s boos, applause, and laughter? Does the Twittersphere react to debates that trend with televised audible responses? Or consider linking reactions to a smartphone application, such as HillaryDonald,¹ which gives users the ability to shake their cell phone to register remote applause or boos. Is dial-testing dead?

Previous studies employing C-SPAN videos in the college classroom have examined how videos can help explain communication theories and American government concepts as well as create interactive learning beyond the lecture hall (see Browning, 2014). Hlozkova makes clear that video selection is critical. Her criteria are useful to any instructor employing C-SPAN videos in a learning environment. Once the best video is selected and then viewed in class, however, it remains unknown how watching and discussing C-SPAN videos contributes to measurable learning (i.e., grades). As Hlozkova discusses, students can digest video content at their own pace and explore content more deeply. Do students better recall information in video format? Does video facilitate thinking and problem-solving? Pedagogical research suggests that video can inspire and engage students when linked to assignments (Willmot, Bramhall, & Radley, 2012). An experiment could compare student grades in a class utilizing C-SPAN videos as a learning tool to student grades in a class without C-SPAN videos, controlling for content, instructor, and academic assessments. Would academic achievement be higher in the C-SPAN classroom?

NOTE


REFERENCES


