
C-SPAN in The Classroom

Richard F. Welch, Ph. D., Associate Professor of Communication/Interim Director of CETL

Surfing through the cable stations at home, I've paused momentarily (and sometimes longer) on C-SPAN1 or C-SPAN2, the public affairs channels carried by most cable systems in the Atlanta area.

Maybe it was a House roll-call vote that caught my eye. . . or a live call-in program with a journalist. . . or a rebroadcast of a talk by a National Press Club speaker. Whatever it was, I've often thought, in mid-watch, how some of that stuff would be ideal material for one of my classes.

I'm not alone. A recent conference in Washington, D.C., brought together faculty from around the country who use or want to use C-SPAN as instructional support. Their consensus was that these channels were an often untapped gold mine of quality material.

C-SPAN1 and 2 are unique among the myriad program offerings on cable because they are copyright free. Thus, educators may use all the material broadcast on C-SPAN without fear of infringing on anyone's copyright protection or having to seek advance approval. (However, rebroadcasts of programs aired by other channels—NBC, CBS, TBS—may have some protections that must be reviewed. In this case, a call to Bruce Collins, C-SPAN's general counsel, can determine that.)

Public Affairs Programming

C-SPAN began in 1979 with live, gavel-to-gavel coverage of the U.S. House of Representatives. C-SPAN2 was added in 1986 to cablecast sessions of the Senate. Today, however, such coverage accounts for only 13 percent of total air time; the rest is devoted to a wide assortment of regular and special programs.

In addition, there is "Event of the Day," (weeknights at 8 p.m.)

Regular Programs

Among the regular features are:

Booknotes (Sunday, 8 & 11 p.m.) has guest authors of recently published historical, policy or political books.

C-SPAN Sunday Journal (Sunday, 10 a.m.) surveys top policy issues and events of the week.

National Press Club (Saturday, 6 p.m.) is a rebroadcast of all Press Club speakers—everyone from Bob Dole to Boris Yeltsin to Coretta Scott King.

Communication Today (Saturday, 11 a.m.) focuses on issues affecting the cable and broadcast industries.

British House of Commons (Sunday, 9 p.m. and 12 a.m.) is a taped broadcast of the Commons sessions of the week.

which highlights the key public policy story of the day, as well as numerous national and regional conferences, such as the recent UCLA conference on the Information Superhighway.

Locating the Treasures

The biggest complaint about C-SPAN has been the difficulty in predicting (and recording) what events are to be aired. Since the channels function much like a daily newspaper, often selecting what to cover the day it's aired, there is little lead time for what events will be covered.

However, C-SPAN has attempted to assist faculty in snaring those hidden treasures. There is a programming hotline, (202)628-2205, that has the schedule for that day, the next day and future events. This same information is available on America On-Line, a commercial computer network, and on Internet (Gopher c-span.org).

Although finding what's happening on C-SPAN now may be a problem, finding gems from the past is not. Since October 1987, Purdue University has been archiving every minute of C-SPAN broadcasts. Through an Internet subscribers network (minimum membership is \$100 to get a pass-

word), faculty members can search the archive's database (extremely user-friendly) to locate specific speakers or events. Tapes of these broadcasts can be ordered at a relatively low cost (approximately \$50 per hour of broadcast, although custom tapes of many short clips will cost more).

Based on past requests, Purdue has also compiled a number of tapes that pull together clusters of like material. For instance, it offers a tape of 1992 television commercials from the Bush, Clinton and Perot campaigns. These are also for sale through a catalogue distributed by Purdue.

C-SPAN is so eager for faculty to use its material that it has formed C-SPAN in the Classroom, a free membership service for educators. It publishes a semi-annual professor's guide with helpful hints for using the channels. (For complete information, call (800)523-7586.)

If you are interested in reviewing C-SPAN in the Classroom material, please contact CETL. If you have C-SPAN tapes—either personally recorded or purchased from Purdue—and are willing to share, let us know so we can spread the word. And happy channel surfing!