

[REDACTED]  
Arlington, VA 22202  
14 September 1996

Mr. Brian Lamb  
C-SPAN  
400 N. Capitol St., NW  
Suite 650  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Mr. Lamb,

As a frequent viewer and devotee of C-SPAN, I am writing to bring to your personal attention a C-SPAN program which in my view departed widely from your typically high standards of programming. More importantly, the issue it represents cries out to be addressed as a policy matter within C-SPAN, if it has not already been. Though this summer has been busy beyond belief, I want to get this letter off to you before any more time passes.

First I would like to express my deep appreciation for C-SPAN. It fills a wide chasm in the increasingly desolate landscape of today's television. Nowhere else can the viewer receive unfiltered the opinions, discussions, and events you broadcast. You should take it as a compliment that Fox Morning News seems to be moving toward a similar format (with commercials, of course).

The program I would like to bring to your attention was Washington Journal on Sunday morning, 28 July 1996. Your moderator was Paul Orgel and the guests were Robert Shrum and Aram Bakshian, described as Democratic and Republican strategists and consultants. That program exemplified vividly what a growing number of other programs such as "Crossfire" have become and what C-SPAN has not been: platforms for rude, abusive, exchanges in which sound bites and decibel level count more than substantive content.

Specifically, one of your guests, Mr. Shrum, repeatedly cut off both the other guest and your callers, talking at a high pitch verging on shouting, with sound bites and the usual tricks of the political consultant trade that do much to deprecate and little to inform. No one who began a sentence with a point Mr. Shrum did not agree with was allowed to complete it, and he was not only rude, but demeaning of others' ideas and motivations. In short, he used the medium of C-SPAN to act the classic bully.

It was extremely disruptive and upsetting to watch, making me grateful I had the Olympics to turn to as an alternative that Sunday morning. But I did turn back to C-SPAN frequently to see if this incredible display of poor taste could possibly still be taking place on C-SPAN, and it was, every time. It was all summed up perfectly by the final caller, a woman from New Mexico, whose comments you might want to make a point of hearing on tape.

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Except for a brief retort near the end, Mr. Bakshian did not respond in kind, but instead, when permitted by Mr. Shrum to speak at all, addressed the matter at hand in calm and rational fashion--as do the large majority of C-SPAN guests, I am glad to say. Perhaps most disturbing of all, your moderator, Mr. Orgel, sat by passively while all this was going on, looking unperturbed and in fact pleased.

As nice a fellow as Mr. Orgel appears, he was completely ineffectual as a moderator. While one can understand the difficulty of being moderator in such a situation, frankly I don't know what a moderator is paid for unless it is, in large part, to exercise some control over what is going on. He or she should maintain sufficient control, at least, to support your mission of bringing intelligent discussion and information to your audience.

I am not singling out Mr. Shrum as the only or necessarily the worst offender ever to come along, as I'm sure there are others like him at all points on the political and ideological spectrum. In this case he was clearly the offender--a particularly egregious one. Your callers, your viewers, Mr. Bakshian, and above all your high standards as a forum for intelligent and informative programming were the victims.

I'll leave it to you and your excellent C-SPAN staff as to how to deal with unacceptable behavior on the part of guests. Among the options that come to mind are simple rules your guests agree to respect; having the moderator counsel them off-line, perhaps by passing a note when things are getting seriously off track; or, as the ultimate sanction, simply not inviting these people back.

This situation highlights the very real challenge you face in maintaining C-SPAN's standards as an island of intelligent discourse and civility. Your effort to maintain high standards will become both more important and more difficult, as I'm sure you well realize, given that you are bucking a rising tide of declining standards, diminishing levels of civility and public discourse, and lack of personal respect in the society at large. Many people--and I am one--believe that this decline is eating away the foundations of our democracy.

Scenarios like what took place on the July 28 Washington Journal could quickly become a generic problem if they are not nipped in the bud. You have the full support of your viewers, you can be sure, in whatever efforts you find necessary to maintain C-SPAN's high standards. Our deep appreciation for your vital work and the outstanding public service you are rendering.

Sincerely,

