


Washington, D.C. 20037

August 26, 1993

Mr. Brian Lamb
Chairman
CSPAN
400 N. Capitol Ave.
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Brian:

I have been involved in Broadcasting for 30 years, half of that time with two of the largest media companies, so I have empathy for the pressures on News and Public Affairs Broadcasts. I rarely bother to write (and never call-in) but feel compelled to comment on the Buchanan/Hitchens fiasco last week.

Let me put my remarks in a context. I completely concur with the widespread wisdom that you have no peer as an interviewer. As far as I am concerned, you are the fairest, most objective, most incisive interviewer on this side of the Atlantic. I particularly look forward to BOOKNOTES and your Monday and Friday morning correspondents call-in shows. They are the most informative and balanced news and public affairs broadcasts around, rivaled only by MACNEIL LEHRER.

Beyond those broadcasts, Brian, I also admire your leadership at CSPAN and your ability to imbue others on your staff with a culture that honors the need for impartiality and ability to respect even the most inane telephone caller (although given current trends toward caller orchestration, that respect must be very difficult).

Brian, with that background, allow me to move to the point. I watched the Pat Buchanan and Christopher Hitchens broadcast with amusement, though it was clear that you were far from amused. As I thought more about your role in that discussion, though, the amusement evolved into concern because, in retrospect, that morning you appeared to be forced into a slavish attempt to define 'balance' as "Do you, or do you not like President Clinton". And in meeting that

dubious criterion, that broadcast missed a marvelous opportunity to engage two very articulate, two very different people in a roaring good confrontation.

CSPAN's best discussions have been with opposites like Forbes and Cockburn, Sullivan and Page, or Buchanan and Hitchens. The quality of their arguments does not pivot on whether or not they agree with the President. (In fact, one would anticipate that neither representative of the left or the right would agree with a centrist President.) CSPAN demeans its audience when it so narrowly focuses on tracking and evening the call-in headcount.

The American political system is now sadly defined by personalities, slick one-liners and simple minded polls. Suffice it to say, CSPAN must not fall into the trap of pandering to such surfacy issues. That's why they invented USA TODAY.

The solution? You know the CSPAN organization and objectives far better than I. My thoughts: Stick to illuminating. Don't overreact to the calls (which, unfortunately, are clearly stacked.)

I have a concrete suggestion. Review the Mission of CSPAN. Rewrite it, if necessary, and make it clear and unambiguous. Publish it. Use it frequently on bumpers. If your Mission is what I hope it is, such a promotion will make it crystal clear to viewers that (1) CSPAN will continue to find and air the wide and complete range of political ideas and philosophies and (2) airing the complete range cannot occur on each and every program. Offend the audience a little. Delight the audience a lot. Most important, educate us regarding alternatives.

Brian, our Nation is in the beginning stages of profound changes ... new political structures, widening international relations, dramatic new communications systems, lower growth economy, military downsizing, redefined social contracts. CSPAN can and must continue to contribute positively to the public dialogue on all of these matters. Don't let demagogues and entrenched interests and reactive responses diminish your service and stifle the opportunity to educate.

Sincerely,

