

003093 JUL 191

June 26, 1991

Mr. Brian Lamb
C-SPAN Networks
400 N. Capitol st., Suite 650
Washington, DC 20001

cc: S. Trahern ✓

Dear Brian:

I probably could have gone a while longer before coming up with a subject for another letter, but seeing my letter first up on your "Inside C-SPAN" program today got me thinking again. That's a dangerous thing for you to be doing, Brian. When you get me thinking, you never know what I might come up with.

In accordance with the saying, "When the only tool you have is a hammer, all problems look like nails," I tend to solve problems with computers since I am a computer professional. It occurs to me that the problem I've been writing about, and which at least one other caller today mentioned, concerning factual accuracy of commentary on your programs, a computer system could be helpful in solving.

Other call-in programs, especially on radio as we saw in your coverage of the radio stations recently, usually seem to have TV monitors showing the call-in cities, topics, perhaps caller name and even age. You may or may not have something like this, and even if you do it may not be adaptable to this purpose. But anyway, my idea is to set up a computer information system which would be visible to the host of a program so that as a topic came up, information on that topic could be displayed on the screen so that any factual problems could be dealt with.

I suspect that the easiest system to deal with would be a Macintosh system with Hypercard/Hypertext software (which comes with a Macintosh at no extra charge). A Macintosh II system with two monitors (one for an off-camera operator, the other for the program host), or a Macintosh SE/30 with its one internal monitor and an additional external monitor (built-in for the operator, external for the host) would be perfect, I think. It might be possible to set up the host's monitor so it was visible in the camera line like a TelePrompter-type system, but I can't give you any details on that.

Then, what you'd have is an off-camera computer operator who would be looking through the computer database as topics came up, and displaying available information on the host's screen. This could be especially helpful for people talking about specific bills, either by number or by title. But it would also be useful when you get into less specific topics.

Of course, all of this depends on the volume of information available on the computer system. Given all the activity in the Congress and everywhere else you get involved with, it could take a full-time research person to keep the records reasonably up to date. (To make it easier, additional cheap Macintosh computers could be connected to the main system for data entry and updating, which could be done even while the look-up system was in use. And additional host terminals could be set up too, so more than one program could be getting done at once.) But research people seem to be about 2¢/dozen in Washington so getting one or more in your office shouldn't be too tough or expensive, and you could probably get help too from the various think-tanks and other groups in the area. The only definite, full-time extra staff needed would be one person to serve as operator during programs. You'd want someone bright enough to be able to figure out what to look for in the database,

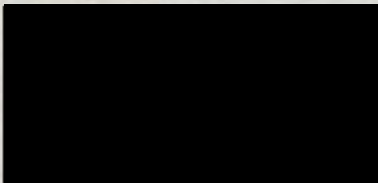
but that doesn't require a Ph.D in Political Science; and you'd want someone with good manual dexterity to work the system quickly, but that doesn't require a concert pianist. Any good journalism intern who knows how to type could fill both of these criteria just fine, and after a little practice I think it would go just fine.

There are many reasons why this could do a really good job after a little work and thought gets put into it, but some things are not going to be obvious right off so allow me to point out a few little things. For example, the reasons for picking a Macintosh system. First, the easy dual-monitor situation is very important in this application. IBM PC-style systems aren't very good at this. Second, you get the Hypercard/Hypertext software without extra cost, and unless you wanted to spend a lot of time and money on custom software I don't think you can find anything that would work better for this application. Third, it's cheap and easy to hook up more data entry and/or program host systems in the Macintosh environment. All you need is the add-on computer and a cable. PC-style systems get into interface cards in all the computers, much more expensive cabling, and special software that may or may not work well with the database software. Fourth, the Macintosh system allows for displaying large type on the host's monitor as a standard feature, so hosts wouldn't have to be squinting at the information being displayed or otherwise get distracted from the guest(s), caller(s), and topic(s). Fifth, the Macintosh and Hypercard/Hypertext allows for graphics, and in color if you get appropriate monitors (although the internal monitor of the SE/30, used by the operator, doesn't do color, but it really wouldn't need to either).

You mentioned on a program recently that C-SPAN is pretty flush budget-wise, and this whole system wouldn't cost any more than another camera or a commercial VCR. And, as you cover more and more issues and information, and as the viewers get (as you said today) more and more ahead of the people at C-SPAN in terms of total knowledge of issues, people, and information, it seems to me that this kind of a system is going to become increasingly important. It seems to me that starting now would be a good idea, so you can start building the information database and start using the system on a limited basis. I think you'd find that the very first time you were able to answer a caller's question on the status of a bill, or correct a caller (or a guest, shiver me timbers!) on even the most trivial point, you'd start getting praise that would make your current worshippers seem like Trappist monks.

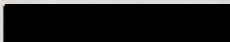
Thank you for your time, and if you'd like any more suggestions on putting this system together, just let me know. There must be good computer people in Washington, but I wouldn't mind helping anyway. And it may be that the computer education school that I'm working on could be a good information source for you, too.

Sincerely,

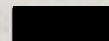


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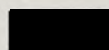
Phone:



P.P.S. For the size of database you're looking at, you'll want to start off with the largest internal hard-disk possible, and then add at least one optical disk system for true bulk data storage. (A read and write optical disk system, that is.)



P.S. Among your first information in the database should be a dictionary, perhaps an encyclopedia/atlas, and of course a complete directory of all the branches of government. You could even include computer-graphics photos of people!



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