

C-SPAN

December 10, 1994

400 North Capitol Street, NW #650

Washington, D. C. 20001

Attn: Brian Lamb

*Opinion
programming*

Dear Brian,

Since I have been unable to reach C-Span by phone, I am writing to give some comments and suggestions on your programming and other subjects. I look forward to hearing your responses.

1. I feel strongly that you and your guests devote far too much time and attention to discussion and analysis of the public perception of important issues, and far too little to the merits of these issues. Likewise, many of your guests are persons, such as journalists, whose primary interest seems to be pontificating on how well or poorly issues and ideas are being sold to the public, rather than experts of various sorts who are knowledgeable about the merits and details of various proposals. I think you have an extreme lack of balance in the wrong direction. Are experts hard to obtain for your programs?

To give just one example, during the recent health care reform debate, the opponents of the Clinton plan repeatedly made the false assertion that the administration had paid no attention to the costs of its plan. Actually, the administration had made very careful cost estimates with the help of the government health care actuaries and economists, and then had engaged a very reputable consulting firm to make an independent set of cost estimates. Later Robert Reichschauer and the Congressional Budget Office made still a third set of cost estimates. It would have been helpful and informative if C-Span had invited those three sets of experts to discuss their cost estimates and the significance of any differences.

2. On a more trivial level, you and the rest of the news media are misrepresenting poll results in one respect; you are giving a false understanding of "margins of error". You report them in a way that implies the poll result must of necessity lie within the margin of error of the true result. Worse than that, for election poll results, where a poll shows one candidate leading by less than the margin of error, you report the poll result as "a statistical dead heat". Both of these assertions are false. Any margin of error

calculation is based on an assumed confidence level, usually 95%, and the correct statement should be that there is a 95% probability that the true result does not differ from the poll result by more than the margin of error. The second type of assertion is a grosser error. Consider the case of a candidate leading his opponent by 52% to 48% with a poll margin of error of 4%. To call that a statistical dead heat implies that a 48% true result for the leading candidate is just as likely as the poll result of 52%. Actually, the poll result is probably more than 100 times more likely to be the true result than the result at the edge of the margin of error. I would suggest that you get a statistical expert to help you present poll results more properly.

3. From time to time, callers accuse you of bias in selecting your guests. I think your selection does show a conservative bias, but I accept your claim to be trying your best to be unbiased, and respect your right and power to choose guests as you see fit. Rather, I would like to suggest that you broaden your choices to include sources you seem to be neglecting, in particular representatives of the minority press, such as Ebony, Black Enterprise, and the Pittsburgh Courier.

4. To my mind, you and most of your guests seem to be overly timid in correcting callers who make clearly incorrect comments or who base their questions on clearly false premises. Instead, you seem to bend over backwards trying to find some glimmer of reason in unreasonable questions. I think it would be more useful to both the particular caller whose question is based on an obvious misunderstanding and to the rest of your audience if you clearly pointed out such errors. As it is, you leave the impression that an obvious falsehood is truth. To give one example, a recent caller made the statement that including Social Security income in the general budget made it possible to use Social Security funds for other than Social Security, an obviously false statement. No one on your panel corrected the statement.

Sincerely

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