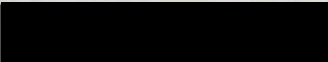


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Leesburg Virginia 22075

December 23, 1992

Dear Folks at C-Span,

This is a fan letter, a letter of appreciation, which, of course, is not as satisfying to write as is a complaint letter, my usual forte. Briefly, (and unfortunately I probably won't be brief) C-Span is the best thing to happen to TV journalism in the history of the medium.

I've been watching TV news on the medium since the stone age 50s and I remember sitting in front of Huntley and Brinkley or Uncle Walter and later Grim Dan or Significant Ted and wondering why the news had to be filtered through these talking heads. Where are the pictures? Isn't this a visual medium? Oh, after a while there would be pictures in a given broadcast but they would have to share time and space with a talking body - the reporter. OK, cameras used to be bulky, they didn't work too well in dim light (which of course turned TV into theatre [as opposed to reality] because everything had to be bathed in a kleig glare), but still that was a feeble pretext for TV star journalism...

McNeil/Lehrer at least put some discussion, some pretense of analysis into the equation but still the pictures aren't very riveting and you still see a lot of head and shoulders. Ted Turner gives us 24 hours of news and that is useful at times but CNN is just as formulaic: the same talking heads (with different names) the same pontificators (with different names). And then C-Span, its arrival coincident with another important development: the phenomenon of amateur video news.

Pictures, by God, pictures! To go along with the pictures, occasional voices with an occasional body attached to them, just enough so you have a sense of who is mediating, mediating, not interpreting, not pontificating. What a relief.

A recent example which brought all these thoughts into focus: you presented ex-President Reagan's speech to the Oxford Debating Society, early this month or last month. We heard a brief announcement, off-camera, of what we were about to see. Pictures of the space abuzz with anticipation which allowed us to look at the place, to see what an Oxford student looks like (surprisingly like high school students I thought but then I'm an old fogey). I was allowed to anticipate at my own mental pace without being directed by a talking head.

At the networks (and CNN) all of this preliminary stuff would've been edited out and probably replaced by one or more pundits sitting around a studio trying to predict (as press releases are being fed into their ears) what Ron is going to say and what it might mean.

But to return to C-Span. Ron arrives, shakes hands, nods, mumbles, bows, smiles. All standard politico tail-wagging but interesting in the new context of the ODS. Again, all of this would have been deemed irrelevant by the network snippers. Ron is introduced by someone who couldn't be a student at Oxford as he only seems 12 years old. But he does have that Oxfordian cockiness we colonial students of English literature have been fearing for several centuries. Just the type to reduce an old Ronald Reagan to tatters. And for a telling moment it seems Ron might be fresh bait. His hand goes into his pocket and for a moment he can't extricate his notes. But finally he tugs them out of his pocket. That one visual moment told you how old our former president is. The networks would've missed it, either because someone would've been talking over it, or they would have edited it out. Once the notes were on the podium, Ronald Reagan never gave them a second glance. There followed an apparently extemporaneous speech, astonishing in both in content and delivery. (although vintage Reagan in many ways, it was also remarkable prescient; reminiscent of Eisenhower's farewell speech warning us about the military economic juggernaut). There was not an um or an er for the next hour; complicated thoughts on the state of the world were delivered smoothly, confidently, without hesitation.

For the first time since he appeared on the political scene I began to have an inkling of why this man had been on top of the heap for eight years or more. OK, he's an actor and maybe he had an off-camera prompter. Nevertheless, years of network coverage had never given me any kind of insight into the man. It was a bravura performance both on Reagan's part and on C-Span's part: you turned the cameras on and you had the courage to let the event define itself.

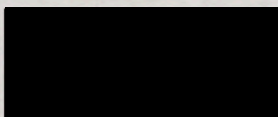
What you do so well is to allow the camera to see; to exist in real time, unedited, the way we exist in real time. You leave in all the little incidental details that makes up reality and that in turn allows us to decide what's important and what isn't. Because of this freedom from the tyranny of the voice, the pontificator, the ruthless editor, We're able to think, to meditate.

Your coverage of the election was sublime. You simply turned the cameras on the beginning of an event and turned them off in the end and the resulting wealth of visual details made me feel as if I had been physically present - and seen and understood a lot more than I would have had I been present - and most likely wedged deep inside a crowd somewhere. Your interviews, usually without the visual presence of a talking body (i.e. a reporter) were exceptionally well done also.

Well, my wife says, what about their call-in shows? Aren't they really radio? I was ready to admit this at first but without the camera we wouldn't see what your guests (often people we read about but rarely see on the tube) look like or how they physically react to various questions - that reaction often speaks more eloquently than words. Although many of your questioners are slightly nutty I think we learn more from their questions (and the subjects' responses, not to mention the deft guidance of Mr. Lamb et. al) than we would from a group of pundits arguing around the table.

Well, I guess I've made my point. I argue for a C-Span 3 which would focus on the one or two important news events of the day and present them unedited - but I think you're doing that already, at least domestically. Well, I for one would pay a subscription if you expanded your news service to international locations. I'm tired to trying to see Somalia over Grim Dan's shoulder.

Sincerely,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the letter.