

# THE C-SPAN ARCHIVES AS THE POLICYMAKING RECORD OF AMERICAN REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY: A FOREWORD

Almost two centuries ago, the idea of research libraries, and the possibility of building them at scale, began to be realized. Although we can find these libraries at every major college and university in the world today, and at many noneducational research institutions, this outcome was by no means obvious at the time. And the benefits we all now enjoy from their existence were then at best merely vague speculations.

How many would have supported the formation of these institutions at the time, without knowing the benefits that have since become obvious? After all, the arguments against this massive ongoing expenditure are impressive. The proposal was to construct large buildings, hire staff, purchase all manner of books and other publications and catalogue and shelve them, provide access to visitors, and continually reorder all the books that the visitors disorder. And the libraries would keep the books, and fund the whole operation, *in perpetuity*. Publications would be collected without anyone deciding which were of

high quality and thus deserving of preservation—leading critics to argue that all this effort would result in expensive buildings packed mostly with junk.

To make matters even more confusing, the critics turned out to be right: Most research libraries today are predominantly filled with publications that interest no one. To take one example, more than half the books in the libraries at my own university have not been checked out even once. Yet, the central benefit of these hugely important institutions has turned out to come from collecting the exhaustive record of human thought and activities in some area or areas, making it possible for future scholars to make discoveries from this material that could not have been foreseen at the time. And the progress since has been spectacular.

Such must have been the case three decades ago when Robert X. Browning and his colleagues were trying to set up the C-SPAN Archives. You can almost hear the arguments: C-SPAN is not exactly the most popular TV network, even when it runs live debates of current interest, and now Browning is planning to preserve in perpetuity the 17th hour of a Senate filibuster being taped at 2 a.m., with three senators in the chamber watching?

It is a good thing for society and American democracy that Browning won those arguments. We now have more than 214,000 hours of videos constituting the primary, and in most cases the only, visual and audio record of the policymaking process in the world's leading representative democracy. With the vision we now all have with hindsight, we can see that it is a true shame that the visual record of prior policy and politics in America is now lost forever. Fortunately, this is no longer the case, and perhaps will never be the case from here on out.

The C-SPAN Archives has produced obvious benefits for the public in understanding governmental debates and policies through the many hundreds of thousands of these videos watched and studied every year. But, just like research libraries, the most important benefits of the C-SPAN Archives are those which were unknown when the Archives was formed. And that is the point of this important volume—to record, explain, and build on the fast progress being made in the fields of research that have grown up around, as a result of, or coincident with the Archives.

I am especially interested in the progress in research turning text, audio, and video into actionable research data. Few could have imagined in the 1980s that the VHS tapes being filed on shelves and in boxes in West Lafayette,

Indiana, would eventually be digitized. Fewer still could have understood that developments in methodology, statistics, machine learning, and data science would turn this digitized treasure trove into informative research data capable of producing insights and measures crucial to social science inquiry. These include automated measures of emotion, nonverbal behavior, crowd counts, interactions, and numerous other crucial indicators valuable for a wide range of social and political research.

The C-SPAN Archives not only has a bright future, but it has helped create one for us all as we shed light on how democracy works in America. The research benefiting from the Archives, and well represented in this impressive book, is teaching us a great deal. In this sense, the original vision of the founders of the C-SPAN Archives is having a bigger impact now than it ever has. We should all be glad that this book is being printed and copied, and is due to be stored in the world's libraries in perpetuity.

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