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Public service, private media: The political economy of the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN)

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Abstract

The Satellite-Cable Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN) is the only television outlet in the U.S.

providing Congressional coverage. Scholars have studied the network's public affairs content and unedited "gavel-to-gavel" style of production that distinguish it from other television channels. However, the network's ownership structure and funding, which are also unique, have not been systematically analyzed. This study fills a gap in C-SPAN scholarship by providing a structural analysis of the network. C-SPAN was founded and is sponsored by the U.S. cable industry. The industry insists its support for the network is based on public service. However, this study reveals that C-SPAN affords the cable industry a number of substantial political economic benefits: a political lever in Washington and with local franchise authorities, a risk-free testing ground for new products and services, and assistance in selling subscriptions for other fee-based services. This study argues that these material benefits are the motivation for the cable industry's support, not public service. It also is argued that C-SPAN can only be comprehensively understood through its relationship to the capitalist political economy of the U.S. To contextualize this relationship, the study provides a history of Congressional television, the cable industry, and satellite technology. These circumstances reveal that the network was less an act of individual cable executives' selfless altruism than a product of political pressures, economic realities, and technological breakthroughs. The study also discusses the implications of a private public affairs network. C-SPAN is a perfect case study of what has been labeled "neoliberalism," or the form of global capitalism based on privatizing social services and regulating industry using rules favorable to the needs of capital, not civil, society. At a social level, the network enables the accumulation of wealth for a select few, enabling these private interests to gain social power. The study concludes that C-SPAN may serve the public, but it is not a public service.

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