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September 2005

# TALKERS<sup>®</sup> magazine

## NAB RADIO SHOW ISSUE

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PROGRAM



## C-SPAN marks 25 years of viewer call-in programs

Network CEO/founder Brian Lamb is pictured kneeling by the sign reminding call-in show hosts that their audio is also carried on C-SPAN's Washington, DC radio station. Story and photos inside.

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The Bible of Talk Radio and the New Talk Media

Issue 161

PROGRAMMING • MANAGEMENT • MARKETING • TECHNICAL • LEGAL

Sept. 2005

## C-SPAN celebrates 25 years of viewer call-in programming

*Unique public service network has had positive influence on talk radio as well as commercial cable news/talk channels*

By Alan Linder

TALKERS MAGAZINE  
Assistant to the Publisher

**W**ASHINGTON — On Friday October 7, 2005, C-SPAN will mark the 25th anniversary of viewer call-ins with a special 25-hour call-in program starting at 8:00 pm ET from the National Press Club in the nation's capital.

Viewer call-ins have been a staple of C-SPAN programming since October 7, 1980, when the 19-month-old network televised its first live viewer call-in from the National Press Club in Washington, DC. Following a speech by then FCC chair Charles Ferris, three television industry trade reporters — Pat Gushman, Tack Nail, and Don West, along with George Mason professor Mike Kelley — were the first call-in guests. C-SPAN founder and chair/CEO Brian Lamb served as host. The first-ever C-SPAN caller hailed from Yankton, South Dakota. (See photo)

With that launch, C-SPAN inaugurated what many industry observers credit as television's first regularly scheduled national viewer call-in program, building on a format used by Phil Donahue on WLWD-TV in Dayton, Ohio in 1967.

Since its first program, C-SPAN has continually incorporated viewer call-ins into its programming schedule, both in regularly scheduled call-ins and spontaneous open-line programs that allow people to react to breaking news events. (Recent examples include the retirement of Supreme Court Justice Sandra

Day O' Connor, or the days of continuous viewer calls following 9/11.) Over 25 years, the network has produced some 46,000 call-in segments with more than 12,000 individual guests, and has aired more than a half-million calls!

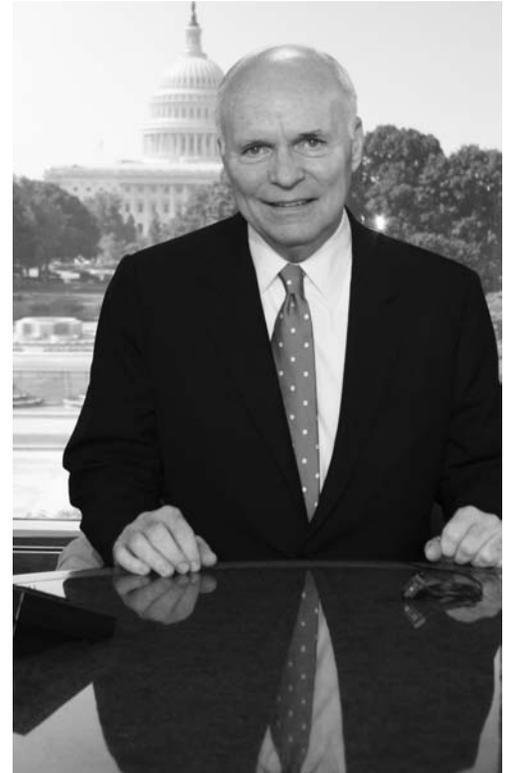
### Friend of talk radio

In addition to pioneering the call-in aspect of modern day cable news/talk television, C-SPAN has actively simulcast radio talk programs starting with Larry King's old nighttime show on Mutual Radio in 1983. These call-in simulcasts have allowed C-SPAN to merge the views of the national C-SPAN audience with talk radio listeners — which, according to *TALKERS* magazine research, overlap to a significant degree. To date, C-SPAN has televised approximately 100 local and national radio talk shows (as well as many of *TALKERS* magazine's talk radio host forums). This has not only created interesting and informative programming, it has also contributed greatly to talk radio gaining enhanced credibility during the course of the modern era as a legitimate and important news media entity.

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*“Over 25 years, the network has produced some 46,000 call-in segments with more than 12,000 individual guests, and has aired more than a half-million calls!”*

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**C-SPAN founder Brian Lamb is pictured at the talk program round table in the network's main studio in Washington, DC. By the way, that's the *real* Capitol Building seen through the window behind him... not a set backdrop.**

### The emergence of Washington Journal

In January 1995, the three-hour Washington Journal, which broadcasts 7:00 am to 10:00 am ET, replaced the network's earlier call-in incarnations as C-SPAN's flagship viewer call-in program. Throughout the quarter-century, one theme has remained constant: C-SPAN encourages citizen interactivity by enabling viewers to talk directly to elected officials, policymakers, and journalists covering the day's news.

### C-SPAN's mission

This philosophy — spearheaded to a large degree by 2000 Freedom of Speech Award recipient Brian Lamb's even-handed dedica-

tion to objective information broadcasting — is consistent with C-SPAN's broader mission:

- To provide audiences with access to forums where public policy is discussed, debated and decided — all without editing, commentary or analysis and with a balanced presentation of points of view;
- To provide elected and appointed officials and others who would influence public policy a direct conduit to the audience without filtering or otherwise distorting their points of view;
- To provide the audience, through viewer call-in programs, direct access to elected officials, other decision-makers and journalists on a frequent and open basis;
- To employ production values that accurately convey the business of government rather than distract from it; and
- To conduct all other aspects of the C-SPAN Networks operations consistent with these principles.

In addition to Lamb (who also hosts an outstanding author series, Book TV, on the network), Washington Journal features a rotating cast of six regular hosts drawn from staffers who perform other jobs at C-SPAN (in alphabetical order): Connie Doebele, senior executive producer, Book TV; Robb Harleston, congressional assignment desk editor; Paul Orgel, coordinating producer; Steve Scully, senior executive producer and political editor; Peter Slen, executive producer, Washington Journal; and Susan Swain, chief operating officer.



C-SPAN's state-of-the-art master control room during live broadcast of three-hour daily morning call-in program, Washington Journal.

#### Labor of love

When asked about the criteria that determines the selection of C-SPAN call-in program hosts Lamb tells *TALKERS* magazine, "Each host has his or her own day job. First requirement is you have to not be motivated by money. The hosts must realize their views are never heard — hosts are not allowed to have a view. This is a labor of love — each host does one show a week so it is not that big of a time commitment. The style of hosting here isn't found in journalism schools. It just kind of happens by itself."

#### Callers as competitive edge

When asked how Washington Journal positions itself to compete against the growing ranks of news/talk television shows, Lamb again points to the importance of the callers. "Journalists are everywhere on the dial, you have people talking about issues and legislation. This is the only show that focuses on the callers. Each show starts off with a half-hour conversation then turns to the callers. The shows have more focus on callers with a quota of 60 callers minimum for a three-hour program, and 20 callers for an hour-long program. No other shows out there really take calls. Larry King advertised that he was taking calls and he may have done it once, one caller the entire show. All the shows start off saying that they will take calls. The big network morning shows are talk shows — entertainment, however, and not competing for the same audience. A lot of people, politicians especially, won't go on shows that take calls."

#### Screening

Because C-SPAN is not anywhere near as bottom-line oriented as commercial radio and television (it is well-funded by the cable industry itself as a public service), it doesn't have to be as selective about screening the callers for the sake of ratings or entertainment value. However, according to Lamb, the producers of Washington Journal have a loosely enforced policy for "regular" callers limiting them to one call per 30 days. Lamb says, "There are a lot of repeat callers but we don't



**ANCIENT HISTORY.** The above photo was taken at the first C-SPAN viewer call-in show which took place on October 7, 1980 at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. It was in response to a speech given by then FCC chair Charles Ferris. Shown (l-r) George Mason University professor Mike Kelley, along with TV trade reporters Pat Gushman, Don West and Tack Nail. C-SPAN CEO Brian Lamb (far right) served as host and moderator.

keep a tally of how many. We hope callers would honor the 30 day rule but there are those who won't honor the system and drive people here crazy. Since there's no one regular host, callers can drive the seven hosts crazy. Unless the people at the switch board recognize their voices, which they do after a while, there's no way to screen. The process of callers calling in is pretty much like throwing ink on wall to get a general sense of what America thinks. You have the racists, the anti-Semites, the conspiracy theorists, etc. You hear views you normally wouldn't hear, whether you agree with them or not." Regardless of the extremes, Lamb points out that most of the

callers are reasonable, intelligent and very informed.

Although viewers do not get to hear Lamb and his colleagues' personal political views, he tells *TALKERS* magazine that he appreciates hearing other people's strong views and thinks the contentious nature of political talk media in general is a healthy thing. "People ought to be able to state their opinions. There are too many media outlets to go back to the old days of the Fairness Doctrine. The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine was a good thing. Now, with satellite radio, podcasts, the Internet — it's all a good thing. People are thinking, 'I have a brain, I can think for

myself.' So they pick and choose what they watch and listen to."

A look at viewer call-ins on C-SPAN reveals that average citizens, notable names, and policymakers alike watch the call-in segments. While recognized names from Cher to Ted Kennedy, to Ronald Reagan have phoned in, the 25th anniversary of call-ins is as Brian Lamb tells *TALKERS* magazine, "an opportunity to celebrate the average viewer."

*Alan Linder is TALKERS magazine's assistant to the publisher. He can be phoned at 413-739-8255.*