

USING C-SPAN IN THE CLASSROOM TO ENHANCE STUDENT ANALYSIS OF
ROSS PEROT'S SENSITIVITY WITH AMERICAN DIVERSITY DURING THE
1992 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Document Date - July 17, 2007

Jim Schnell, Ph.D.

Professor

Dept. of Communication Studies

Ohio Dominican University

Columbus, Ohio 43219

schnellj@ohiodominican.edu

614-251-4581

USING C-SPAN IN THE CLASSROOM TO ENHANCE STUDENT ANALYSIS OF
ROSS PEROT'S SENSITIVITY WITH AMERICAN DIVERSITY DURING THE
1992 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

A primary objective in the development of my classroom assignments is to construct activities that convey theoretical understanding and illustrate correlation between theory and real world application. Theory and the application of theory should be woven into the fabric of knowledge. The use of C-SPAN videotapes, available from the Public Affairs Video Archives at Purdue University, provides a unique opportunity to meet this teaching objective. Communication scholars have acknowledged the use of C-SPAN as a teaching tool in resources such as C-SPAN in the Communication Classroom: Theory and Application (Muir, 1992).

The C-SPAN application to be described in this article is useful in the Cross-Cultural Communication and Mass Media courses. This application focuses on how we define what connotes sensitivity & insensitivity with diversity issues and how journalistic interpretation can affect our perception via mass media.

Businessman Ross Perot rose from relative obscurity in the spring, 1992 and within seven months received 19% of the popular vote in the 1992 presidential election. His climb in public awareness was affected by positive and negative

interpretations of Perot. One of the negative interpretations dealt with the belief Perot lacks sensitivity with diversity issues. This interpretation is relevant in my Cross-Cultural Communication and Mass Media courses. I recognized this as an opportunity to use C-SPAN as a teaching resource and to teach students how researchers study such issues.

C-SPAN tapes analyzed in this project were obtained from the Public Affairs Video Archives (located at Purdue University). The Archives provided me with an index listing all of Perot's presentations delivered during the presidential campaign period (January-November, 1992) that were covered by C-SPAN. A total of 55 presentations are available on videotape. Fourteen of these videotapes, that are representative of Perot's presentations (in content, context, & formats), were selected for analysis.

The hypothesis was that Perot's presentations would contain statements conveying insensitivity with diversity issues. This hypothesis was based primarily on newspaper reports of Perot's June 11, 1992 speech to the NAACP convention. The Washington Post reported "Perot drew a cool reception when he referred to blacks as 'you people'" (Washington Post, July 12, 1992). The Chicago Tribune referred to Perot's use of "you people" and "your people" as

"a gaffe in his speech that offended some in the audience as racially insensitive" (Chicago Tribune, July 12, 1992).

There is no widely accepted paradigm for analyzing a speaker's sensitivity with diversity issues. What connotes sensitivity? What connotes insensitivity? Playing the tapes in class, allowing students to draw their own conclusions regarding Perot's sensitivity, can promote lively discussion and enlighten students on the role of mass media in creating public perceptions.

Surprisingly the data (videotapes) disproved the hypothesis that Perot's presentations would contain statements conveying insensitivity with diversity issues. The following is a collection of representative statements made by Perot (regarding diversity in America). Dates of the statements are in parentheses. These statements convey sensitivity with diversity.

"Our diversity is our strength, we've turned it into a weakness If you hate people I don't want your vote" (10/11/92). "If you don't mind living in a society where one out of eight women are raped I don't want your vote" (5/5/92). "We're not gonna turn the clock back. Segregating would hurt the economy" (3/18/92). "Our country will not be great until we are all united and equal I cannot be free until we are all free" (7/11/92).

Use of C-SPAN tapes to study this subject is particularly relevant in that the C-SPAN index helps define the sample to be studied and the tapes provide literal verbal meanings, indirect nonverbal meanings, and context for speeches. Transcripts provide literal statements but the videotapes frame the literal statements. This type of inquiry rests on what is said and equally important on how it is said.

The classroom format described in this report can be applied with other speakers and with a variety of issues. C-SPAN videotapes allow the viewer to interpret public figures in their own words, without mass media interpretation. Public presentations can be studied in their entirety (rather than selected excerpts). Thus, C-SPAN videotapes are an innovative teaching tool that enhance student understanding.

References

Chicago Tribune. July 12, 1992, p. 6.

Muir, Jannette K. C-SPAN in the Communication Classroom: Theory and Application. Annandale, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, 1992.

Washington Post. July 12, 1992, p. 1 & p. A-10.