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The First Telecasts of Congress

by Susan M. Swain, Vice President, Corporate Communications, C-SPAN

When C-SPAN began satellite-transmitted telecasts of the U.S. House of Representatives in March 1979, three million cable homes were wired to receive its service. Weekdays, between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. live Congressional debates could be piped into the livingrooms of interested cable subscribers. Four C-SPAN employees labored on the project and when the House was dark, they typed up the text for video billboards that announced their next Congressional telecast.

Over the next eight years, C-SPAN grew dramatically. Today, 135 employees work for C-SPAN in fields as diverse as programming, marketing, accounting, and newsletter publication. C-SPAN is on the air 24 hours a day with two channels of public affairs programming. The core of C-SPAN's fare is still the U.S. House debates; C-SPAN II, created in 1986, offers live coverage of Senate debates. Once a network that owned no cameras or tape decks, today C-SPAN has six field units that cover a myriad of Washington events. Now, instead of going dark at the close of Congressional sessions, the two channels are rife with telecasts of Congressional hearings, press conferences, policy debates, National Press Club speeches, election coverage, special events, and a variety of other programs from Washington and across the nation.

Throughout the years, however, C-SPAN has remained committed to one central programming philosophy: events are televised uncut and without analysis or commentary. The goal is to offer viewers an unfettered view of the public policy process, a sort of behind-the-scenes coverage of news stories. Noted *New York Times* television writer John Corry called C-SPAN "a masterly civics lesson. It shows us what keeps government intact, as much as what divides it." Whenever possible —

and at least three times each week-day — C-SPAN opens its phone lines to allow viewers a direct connection with policy makers and policy analysts.

In its early days, C-SPAN was thought of by many local cable operators as an inoffensive, but perhaps unexciting, public service offering for their customers. Today, C-SPAN is recognized as garnering a continually growing and loyal following among opinion leaders, political activists, and "news junkies" in communities all across the United States. The President, many governors, members of Congress, local legislators, state political party workers, newspaper editors, and political scientists are among those who count themselves as regular C-SPAN viewers.

C-SPAN's organizational structure is as unique as its programming. A non-profit cooperative effort of the cable television industry, C-SPAN is supported by cable subscriber fees and overseen by a 40-member panel of top cable television executives. C-SPAN is truly a product of the cable industry; without the industry's initial endorsement and continuing support, C-SPAN could not have grown.

In 1986, with the urging of its board, C-SPAN began an effort to reach educators with its story. Regular viewers have long recognized its educational potential — "C-SPAN is more than 'America's Network,'" a Massachusetts viewer wrote, "it's a university...for all of us to attend to learn and form our own opinions to help keep alive the free exchange of ideas." Therefore, C-SPAN officials decided it made sense to begin an outreach to the nation's classrooms, informing those who teach political science, journalism, speech, and other courses of a liberal taping policy that permits unlimited classroom use of C-SPAN telecasts. C-SPAN hopes that educators will find its programming an invaluable teaching aid that can put real faces and emotions to political theories.

Political Scientists and Journalists Watch Congress

by Norman J. Ornstein,
American Enterprise Institute

When the House of Representatives began to allow television cameras in to cover its floor proceedings in early 1979, it was not widely noticed in the country or the academic community. As C-SPAN's Susan Swain notes, the initial cable coverage was from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays, with only three-and-one-half million homes wired to receive the service. It was rare in the first year or two of television coverage for other television outlets, especially the commercial networks, to use any of the floor footage extensively either.

But within a couple of years, the television coverage of the House began to penetrate the media and the country more widely. C-SPAN, under Brian Lamb's astute tutelage expanded dramatically; network evening and weekend news shows, growing comfortable at monitoring the floor debate, began to use both ten-second "sound bites" and more extended excerpts on their shows; public television, through the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* and *The Lawmakers*, made the televised floor proceedings staples of their news coverage. By the time the Senate followed suit and began to televise its floor proceedings in 1986, an astonishingly large number of American television viewers — more than 20 million monthly on C-SPAN, according to one systematic survey — were tuning in to Congress with some frequency, many whetting their appetites on the network news and then becoming "C-SPAN junkies."

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