

# TELEVISIONING LEGISLATIVE PROCEEDINGS IN THE UNITED STATES

*Lawrence J. Janezich*

**T**he history of broadcast coverage of Senate committees in the United States can be divided into two periods. The first began in 1947 when a Senate committee was covered by television and lasted until the early 1970s with the advent of electronic video cameras.

During this early period, broadcast coverage of Senate committees was minimal. There were almost never more than three film cameras in a committee hearing. There was no immediacy: film had to be developed before it could be put on television.

Senate rules permitted committees to allow broadcast coverage of their hearings if they wished, under such rules as the committee might adopt. Many of the most important committee meetings, such as committee mark-up sessions (where the final form of a bill is agreed upon) and conference committees (held to work out differences between House-passed and Senate-passed versions of a bill), were closed to the public and press.

The second period has been marked by three major occurrences, each of which has had an enormous impact on broadcast coverage of Senate committees.

In the early 1970s electronic video cameras brought portability and immediacy to the television news business. Still, initial development was slow as the industry phased out film cameras and replaced them with electronic ones. Senate committee coverage was not that much different from what it had been in the earlier period. This changed in the second half of the 1970s due to several developments.

The first of these was the Watergate scandal, which had two direct results. First, television coverage of the Senate Watergate Committee hearings made its chairman, Senator Sam Ervin, a celebrity — a media star — and gave national recognition to Senator Howard Baker and other members of the committee. Second, Watergate resulted in government reforms which began an over-all trend within the institution of Congress toward open government.

In 1975, as part of the open movement, the Senate voted unanimously to pass a Senate rule providing that all committee

hearings, mark-up sessions, and conference committees would routinely be open to the press and public unless a majority of the committee voted to close them. The rules further provided that when these hearings or meetings were open to the public, they might be broadcast by radio or television or both, under such rules as the committee or sub-committee might adopt.

The passage of this rule reflected widespread feeling among members of the press and some members of Congress that the public had a right to know and be informed of decisions being made by Congress which would affect them. This feeling was especially strong among the Senators and Congressmen elected in the first post-Watergate election.

The idea that the public has a right to know contradicted the maxim under which Congress had been operating — that government functions best at the lowest level of visibility.

The matter was complicated by another development, rooted in yet another Congressional maxim: a member's first duty is to get re-elected. What happened in the early 1970s is that members began to recognize the value of television as a campaign tool. Being an incumbent gave one a forum from which to speak. It became important to know how to relate to the media and to take advantage of opportunities to utilize the media.

A third major development was the technical development of satellite technology, which enabled a correspondent and camera crew in Washington to broadcast live to a station anywhere in the country at a reasonable cost. This technology resulted in a proliferation of news bureaus in Washington, as smaller broadcast companies sent correspondents and camera crews to cover the government from the local angle. In five years, membership in the Radio-Television Galleries doubled — from 900 to 1800. This increase was reflected in television coverage of Senate committees, which went from a maximum of four cameras in 1970 to twenty or more in 1981.

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## Problems Arising from Television Coverage of Senate Committees

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Problems fall into two related categories. The first is a physical one of space: how to accommodate the numbers of electronic journalists who want to cover Senate hearings. Committee hearing rooms were not designed to permit television coverage. There are only two rooms in the Senate complex large enough comforta-

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bly to accommodate ten cameras — and these rooms are usually used for purposes other than committee hearings.

We found that the large numbers of cameras in committee hearings interfere with committee operations and occupy space intended to be utilized by committee staff and Senators' aides. There is a series of secondary problems related to the question of space and the faulty design of committee hearing rooms. We have problems providing parking for equipment vans for organizations who want to cover committee hearings. We have problems trying to accommodate the parking of microwave vans for organizations which want to broadcast committee hearings live.

We have problems overseeing the installation of equipment to provide the temporary capability to broadcast committee hearings live. This often involves wires strung long distances down halls and microwave transmission equipment placed in hallways, in Senators' offices, or on ledges around the office buildings. (There are on-going plans to permit the installation of permanent microwave transmitters on top of one of the Senate Office Buildings, to which the news organizations would have access as needed. Installation of transmission cables in committee rooms is also being contemplated as a way to link hearing rooms with microwave transmission equipment located on Senate Office Buildings).

Senators also complain about the television lights being too bright and the room being too warm as a result of those lights.

In response to space problems, committees have been limiting the number of cameras permitted to set up in a hearing room, or insisting, if more than a certain number of cameras want to cover a hearing, that television coverage be pooled. Pool coverage means that one network will set up a camera in the hearing room and provide an electronic feed to anyone who wants it by means of a piece of equipment called a distribution amplifier set up in an adjoining room or hallway.

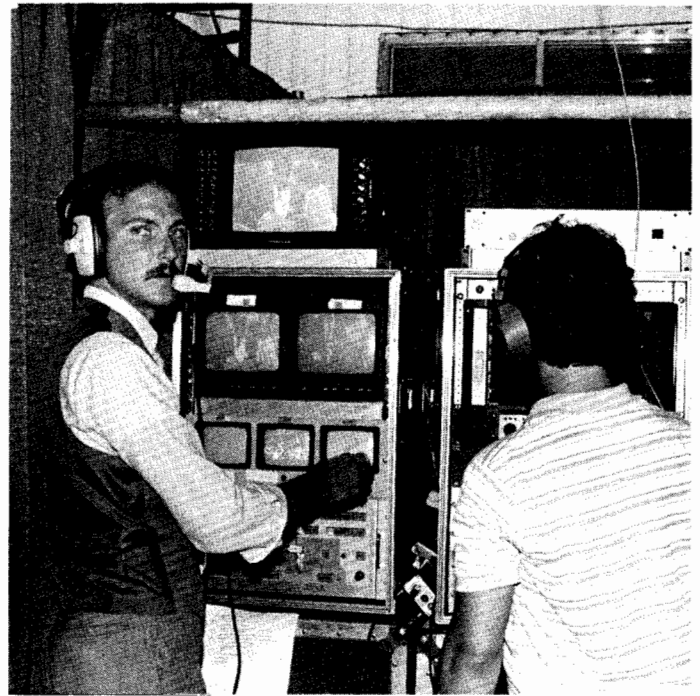
Pools can effectively be required under current circumstances, only when at least two of the three major networks decide to cover a hearing. With one exception (C-SPAN), independents generally do not have the equipment to provide a pool.

The three networks co-ordinate coverage of Congressional events among themselves to avoid duplication of technical lighting and audio coverage efforts. When pools are required, the networks assign one of their number to provide the necessary equipment and personnel. The networks resist pools and protest them as a matter of policy, believing it is in the interests of the news industry for each organization to have its own camera. They also resent providing a free ride to independent organizations. If the committee insists, however, the networks will comply.

Networks want all those who participate in a pool to share the costs of providing the pool. Efforts to institute a fee have not been successful, primarily due to lack of agreement on a fee and how to collect it.

An alternative discussed with Congress from time to time is an institutional pool, with television coverage provided by Congressional personnel and equipment to anyone who wishes it, much as is currently the case with the coverage of the House of Representatives.

There are three purposes served by having television in Senate committees. First, to inform the public; second, to focus attention on some issue; and third, to promote the images of individuals or party. The last purpose, however, has the potential to interfere with informing the public and indeed with the functioning of the institution.



**Most Americans learn about politics from television.**

Let me cite two minor examples of how partisanship has interfered with television's purpose of informing the public, and interfered with functioning of the institution — or at least changed the institution in subtle ways.

First, partisan Senate re-election organizations within the respective parties utilize open coverage to videotape Senators in action at committees for "videotape press releases" distributed free of charge by satellite to television stations in the Senator's home state. It is possible that a Senator might alter his behavior under such circumstances. Further, the video-tape releases compete with regular news organizations which cover Washington for stations in the Senator's home state.

Secondly, in most Senate committees, the majority party arranges committee member seating so that members of the majority are facing the cameras, while members of the minority have their backs to the cameras. In major hearings, networks overcome this by setting up a two-camera pool.

Assuming that the primary reason for admitting television coverage to Senate committee hearings is to inform the public, the question is, does having cameras in committee hearings really further public understanding? In many cases, it does not, due to time limitations of television news programs, and the tendency of commercial American news programs to focus on dramatic exchanges.

In other cases — where organizations devote a greater amount of broadcast time to committee hearings, it can increase public understanding of issues.

It is impossible in the short run to reverse the trend toward open government. Institutional pressures, as members become creatures of television, become too great. But it is important to remember that the institution has a higher interest than short-term political gain, and that it does not help to let the press or public interfere with committees' operation. When the press or public is admitted under conditions which make the situation unmanageable for the committee, or so uncomfortable that no one can follow the proceedings, then open government defeats the purpose of open government. ■