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September 29, 1993

The President
C-Span
400 N. Capitol, N.W.
Washington, D.C 20001

Sir:

The enclosed Op-Ed Piece from the
Litchfield County Times may be of some
interest.

Sincerely,
[REDACTED]

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THE LITCHFIELD COUNTY TIMES

FIVE

C-Span Delivers Good News To Seekers of Quality Air Time

By [REDACTED]

A television viewer, flipping through the channels looking for something besides violence, sex or inane sitcoms, is apt to be out of luck most of the time.

Even the news shows are not much help. As Neil Postman says in his book, "Hot to Watch TV News," "each day's TV news consists, for the most part, of fifteen or so examples of one or the other of the Seven Deadly Sins." Anything which has to do with significant events is purveyed in a brief sound bite which does little to inform and is too often couched in terms which reflect the bias of the newscaster or the restraints of the broadcasting company.

A fortunate channel flipper might come upon one of the good documentaries—say one done by Bill Moyers, or one like the PBS series on the Civil War or "Eyes on the Prize"—or he might settle for the "MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour" in spite of that program's narrow focus and implied pretension of complete objectivity.

But anyone looking for a way to see and hear what the movers and shakers themselves are saying need not despair. There are two channels on which one can view current events without the interposition of an "expert" to tell us what to think about them. That's the good news for those who like to think for themselves. The bad news is that these channels, called C-Span 1 and C-Span 2, are available only to those who subscribe to cable, and that excludes about 40 percent of what the television entrepreneurs call "the viewing public."

C-Span 1 airs the proceedings of the U.S. House of Representatives; C-Span 2 does the same for the Senate. Since these bodies are not in session at all times, the rest of the schedule is given over to legislative committee hearings, significant meetings such as those of the National Press Club, reviews of important books, interviews with legislators and Americans in the public eye, as well as panel discussions, important speeches and debates on current issues.

These programs occur live and they are also repeated several times throughout the 24-hour schedule. The interviewers and moderators are skilled in bringing out information without interjecting their own opinions or ideology.

That the content of the programs appeals to a

wide and varied audience is evident from the call-in parts of many of them. People from different economic backgrounds and educational levels call to ask timely and penetrating questions. The questions usually start with a statement such as: "I've been hooked on C-Span for a long time and..." or, "Thank you very much for C-Span. I'd like to ask..."

Since there are no analysts to interpret what is going on or what is being said, the viewer is able to assess the substance of what is being said and to form his own opinion. In such a format, it is not difficult to discriminate between those who are genuine and sincere and those who are poseurs, phonies or tendentious. Facts and objective opinions can be differentiated from bombast and rhetoric—especially helpful when watching the action in Congress—and mindless bias is easier to detect.

In sum, anyone looking to be informed about current events will find that the C-Span channels are by far the best source on television.

These two channels are a public service of the cable companies and are provided as part of the package of channels which these companies provide to subscribers. One can logically assume that they are offered as a bonus for those viewers who are interested in public affairs, as well as a come-on to attract those who would not ordinarily subscribe to the mostly mindless fare otherwise provided on cable TV.

If the medium of television is ever to live up to its educational and informational potential, C-Span 1 and 2 should be made available to every household that has a TV set. Radio and television broadcasters must get licenses to operate. Would it be too much to require that they pay for this free use of publicly owned air waves by supplying the C-Span channels gratis to anyone who would pay a one-time charge for installation, and to include these channels in every cable package, again without charge?

If every home with a television set had access to this kind of programming, it is reasonable to assume that more and more viewers would become "hooked," and in time, this could only result in a better informed and a less apathetic electorate.

[REDACTED] is a retired physician who lives in Southbury.