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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(September 9, 1985)

Contact: Susan Swain
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SHOULD THE U.S. SENATE BE TELEVISED?

(On September 17, a Senate Committee Revisits the Idea)

by: Brian P. Lamb
Chairman & CEO
C-SPAN/America's Network

The six-year presence of television in the House of Representatives has forced U.S. Senators to take a closer look at the prospect of doing their business on TV. This week, in fact, the Senate Rules Committee begins two days of hearings which examine proposals to bring the electronic eye into the Senate chamber.

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Admittedly, the issue of Senate TV is not one to arouse the interest of outside pressure groups, and so it will be decided only when the Senate is ready. In any case, Senators' six-year terms seem to insulate them from procedural changes more than House members' two-year stints.

Interestingly, the question does not seem subject to the pull of party loyalty. In 1984, former Majority Leader Howard Baker (R-TN), was the chief promoter of Senate TV, having introduced a resolution on its behalf; this year, the issue is being pushed by the Minority Leader, Robert C. Byrd (D-WV). And, according to the C-SPAN TV poll, 28 of the Senate's 53 Republicans indicated "yes", while 17 of the 47 Democrats said they favored Senate TV.

In spite of Senate TV's seeming recent upswing, doubts remain about how the institution some call "the most exclusive in the world" would be covered. Finding an agreement on the shape that coverage would take is the most difficult step on the way to bringing the Senate to America via television. The resolution offered by West Virginia Senator Byrd calls for TV coverage only of selected Senate debates, to be decided by the majority and minority leaders. Another TV resolution introduced by Sen. William Armstrong (R-CO), opens the Senate to full "gavel-to-gavel" coverage except during a closed door session. The benefits and disadvantages of both measures will be considered by the Senate Rules Committee in hearings on September 17 and 18.

At the core of most Senators' apprehensions about Senate TV lies concern that television will disrupt -- and distort -- the Senate's conduct of everyday business.

Some Senators' objections include:

- ° Television could change the deliberative nature of the Senate.

The Senate's rules of conduct have earned it the name of "a continuous body." Unlike House members, whose speaking privileges are restricted by rigid time limits, Senators can speak on any subject virtually as long as they please. According to Sen. Mack Mattingly (R-GA), "gavel-to-gavel coverage of the U.S. Senate will end

the tradition of unlimited debate...There would have to be a time agreement on every major bill or we would be forever getting to a vote." Many Senators might resist any such attempt to curtail open-ended debate, an old and highly valued Senate tradition.

° Senators may take advantage of unlimited debate time to play to the cameras.

If debate rules remained unchanged, how would TV affect the Senate? Sen. Russell Long (D-LA) voices the fears of some Senators: "The Senate is not able to get its work done now. It would be even worse if the Senate were on television." Some feel that the presence of cameras on the floor, along with members' prerogative to orate, would egg Senators on to make endless speeches. Sen. Don Nickles (R-OK) warns, "Half the Senate floor is running for president. I'd hate to think they could sit on the floor of the Senate and make a speech and not have to work at it."

It should be noted that those who criticized the idea of House telecasts also foresaw a torrent of frivolous orations that would take up long stretches of Congress' time. But a look at House statistics shows that its hours of operation have actually dropped since the introduction of television cameras. In 1979, the figure dropped to 974 hours, dropping still further to 901 hours in 1980. Even with the added time taken up by the renewed popularity of "special orders," speeches made at the end of the House business day, the 1984 tally came to only 853 hours.

On the other hand, Senators who favor gavel-to-gavel Senate TV maintain that the influence of television may actually tighten up an unwieldy floor process. According to Sen. Armstrong, TV "would most likely encourage Senators to be more concise when speaking on the floor, if aware that the entire proceeding was being broadcast so the public could follow the debate."

° Television might increase the power of the Senate Majority Leader.

Another reservation some Senators have about television takes into account the great power of the Majority Leader to determine the Senate's legislative agenda. The

Senate leader has more direct authority than his House counterpart -- the Speaker -- to decide what bills reach the floor and at what time. (House legislation comes to the floor through its Rules Committee; in the Senate, the majority leader calls bills up directly from the Senate Calendar.) With TV in the Senate, says Sen. Lawton Chiles (D-FL) "Control of the floor and of legislative scheduling will take on a whole new importance."

Such objections lie in the crux of the Byrd bill, which Mr. Byrd describes as designed to "protect the interests of the minority; and electronic coverage of the Senate must be consistent with that need."

Individual Senators express a wide range of views on the issue. Conservative Sen. James McClure (R-ID) says: "Television cameras are the eyes and ears of the American people...and the time for opening the Senate's doors to the public is long overdue." Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT), known as a liberal, opposes it: "The rules of the Senate, I feel, would probably have to be changed to accommodate television."

And a whole spectrum of "ifs" lies between the two sides. Sen. Alan Simpson (R-WY) swung from a positive to a negative position to Senate TV based on his belief that "effectiveness in committee would be totally destroyed," but says he might support it if "a suitable compromise" is reached on how to cover the legislative body. Sen. Alan Cranston (D-CA) supports television in the Senate, but only on the condition that "the coverage be fair" from the viewpoint of the minority.

When will the Senate decide on whether to let itself be televised? Clearly, only when it is completely prepared and not before. While we have little doubt that the Senate will eventually allow cameras to roll in its chambers, it will grant permission only after it has fully examined and defined what form the coverage will take. At the moment, the question of Senate TV seems not "if," but "how." But who can really predict? After all, the idea is as old as the small screen itself: former Florida Senator Claude Pepper first proposed TV for the Senate in 1948.

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Admittedly, the issue of Senate TV is not one to incite the passions of outside pressure groups. Nonetheless, Senators' resistance to televising their floor debates seems to be ebbing. A poll that we at C-SPAN recently conducted -- we're the public affairs cable network that televises the House of Representatives -- demonstrated a high level of support for Senate TV.

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Despite this upward trend, the question will only be decided when the Senate is ready; Senators' six-year terms seem to insulate them from procedural changes more than House members' two-year stints.

Interestingly, the question does not seem subject to the pull of party loyalty. In 1984, former Majority Leader Howard Baker (R-TN), was the chief promoter of Senate TV, having introduced a resolution on its behalf; this year, the issue is being pushed by the Minority Leader, Robert C. Byrd (D-WV). And, according to C-SPAN's TV poll, 28 of the Senate's 53 Republicans indicated "yes", while 17 of the 47 Democrats said they favored Senate TV.

What troubles some Senators is how the institution some call "the most exclusive in the world" would be covered. Coming to an agreement on the shape any coverage would take is the most difficult step on the path to bringing the Senate to America via television. The resolution offered by West Virginia Senator Byrd calls for TV coverage only of selected Senate debates, to be decided by the majority and minority leaders. Another TV resolution introduced by Sen. William Armstrong (R-CO), opens the Senate to full "gavel-to-gavel" coverage except during a closed door session. The Senate Rules Committee will ponder both proposals in the Sept. 17 and 18 hearings.

Past debate points out that at the core of most Senators' apprehensions about Senate TV lies concern that television will disrupt -- and distort -- the Senate's conduct of everyday business.

Some Senators' objections include:

- ° Television could change the deliberative nature of the Senate.

The Senate's rules of conduct have earned it the name of "a continuous body." Unlike House members, whose speaking privileges are restricted by rigid time limits, Senators can speak on any subject virtually as long as they please. According to Sen. Mack Mattingly (R-GA), "gavel-to-gavel coverage of the U.S. Senate will end

the tradition of unlimited debate...There would have to be a time agreement on every major bill or we would be forever getting to a vote." Many Senators might resist any such attempt to curtail open-ended debate, an old and highly valued Senate tradition.

° Senators may take advantage of unlimited debate to play to the cameras.

If debate rules remained unchanged, how would TV affect the Senate? Sen. Russell Long (D-LA) voices the fears of some Senators: "The Senate is not able to get its work done now. It would be even worse if the Senate were on television." Some feel that the presence of cameras on the floor, along with members' prerogative to orate, would egg Senators on to make endless speeches. Sen. Don Nickles (R-OK) warns, "Half the Senate floor is running for president. I'd hate to think they could sit on the floor of the Senate and make a speech and not have to work at it."

It should be noted that those who criticized the idea of House telecasts also foresaw a torrent of frivolous orations that would take up long stretches of Congress' time. But a look at House statistics shows that its hours of operation have actually dropped since the introduction of television cameras. In pre-TV 1978, the House met 1,015 hours. By 1979, the figure fell to 974 hours, and by 1980 it had dropped further still to 901. Even with the renewed popularity of "Special Orders" speeches made at the end of the House business day, the 1984 tally came to only 853 hours.

On the other hand, Senators who favor gavel-to-gavel Senate TV maintain that the influence of television may actually tighten up an unwieldy floor process. According to Sen. Armstrong, TV "would most likely encourage Senators to be more concise when speaking on the floor, if aware that the entire proceeding was being broadcast so the public could follow the debate."

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Another reservation some Senators have about television takes into account the great power of the Majority Leader to determine the Senate's legislative agenda. The

Senate leader has more direct authority than his House counterpart -- the Speaker -- to decide what bills reach the floor and at what time. (House legislation comes to the floor through its Rules Committee; in the Senate, the majority leader calls bills up directly from the Senate Calendar.) With TV in the Senate, says Sen. Lawton Chiles (D-FL), "Control of the floor and of legislative scheduling will take on a whole new importance."

Such objections lie in the crux of the Byrd bill, which Mr. Byrd describes as designed to "protect the interests of the minority; any electronic coverage of the Senate must be consistent with that need."

Individual Senators express a wide range of views on the issue. Conservative Sen. James McClure (R-ID) says: "Television cameras are the eyes and ears of the American people...and the time for opening the Senate's doors to the public is long overdue." Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT), known as a liberal, opposes it: "The rules of the Senate, I feel, would probably have to be changed to accommodate television."

And a whole spectrum of "ifs" lies between the two sides. Sen. Alan Simpson (R-WY) swung from a positive to a negative position on Senate TV based on his belief that "effectiveness in committee would be totally destroyed," but says he might support it if "a suitable compromise" is reached on how to cover the legislative body. Sen. Alan Cranston (D-CA) supports television in the Senate, but only on the condition that "the coverage be fair" from the viewpoint of the minority.

Is this the year the Senate will finally agree to letting the cameras in? Clearly, the Senate will only decide when it is completely prepared and not before. We have little doubt that the Senate will eventually allow cameras to roll inside its chambers. But that permission will be granted only after the Senate has fully examined and defined what form the coverage will take. Finally, after nearly five years of consideration, the question of Senate TV seems not "if," but "how." But who can really predict? After all, the idea is as old as the small screen itself: former Florida Senator Claude Pepper first proposed TV for the Senate in 1948

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author: Brian Lamb
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Six and one-half years ago, the U.S. House of Representatives opened up its chamber to television cameras, thus providing the American public with greater access to its government.

In the two hundred year history of our political system, six years is hardly sufficient time to measure the development of political trends. However, as the U.S. Senate continues its debate on whether to join the House in the television age, it seems instructive to reflect on how this unfiltered view of politics may effect our governmental process.

Since the Congress is delivered into American homes via television, many observers stand ready to judge the worth of this coverage only by conventional television standards -- ratings points, audience shares, and advertising dollars. To do so sells the concept short. Its real impact lies not in large audience numbers, but in stories of personal involvement in the political system.

Right now, over 60 million people have access to live Congressional telecasts. Inarguably, many of those able to watch the Congress never will. But more people are tuning in all the time; a recent survey indicated that 20 million viewers watch over the course of a single month. And, as one political aide recently told a reporter, "Even

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THE CABLE SATELLITE PUBLIC AFFAIRS NETWORK

if only a hundred thousand people tune in to a particular debate -- infinitesimal by television standards -- what politician would pass up the chance to speak to that many people at one time?"

Many of those who have become regular "Congress watchers" found the programming on their own accord. For although it is offered as a public service by the cable television industry, there are no large dollars in the project to spend on heavy promotional efforts.

Not surprisingly, those who watch these legislative proceedings tend to be politically active: ninety-three per cent of them reported to vote in the 1984 elections. However, you'll hear a continual "chicken and egg" debate among political analysts who can't be certain whether watching the Congress inspires people to participate in politics, or simply attracts those who are already politically aware. In truth, it is a little of both. We know of one case where a regular viewer who became so engrossed that he turned off the tv and ran for Congress himself. Today, he is midway through his first term, representing a district in Texas.

Most of the stories are not likely to be so dramatic. More often, they involve the farmer in Nebraska who watches and telephones a Congressman with thoughts on farm legislation; a journalist in California who augments reports from her Washington bureau by watching the Congress for herself; a housewife in Louisiana who challenges her husband to dinner table debates on the Federal Reserve System after taking in testimony from Fed Chairman Paul Volker; or a teacher in New Jersey who makes political science lectures come alive by tuning in Congress for his classroom.

One national television writer observed that what we are witnessing is the emergence of a "wired democracy." And with the 49th state capital about to receive these Congressional telecasts, an instantaneous technological link is being forged between all levels of government. Already, many governors, mayors, state legislators and their aides say they watch to keep up with developments in the complicated interplay of federal/state relations.

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For five years, the Senate has debated the merits of joining this quiet technological revolution. They are struggling over how to downplay the disruptive tendencies of cameras and lights -- questions the House Members discussed for six years before finally agreeing to the presence of the electronic eye. On this issue, outside pressure will not likely hasten the Senate's decision: debate will continue until many of these concerns are answered.

Until the Senate allows the American public access to its debates via television, coverage of the legislative process remains frustratingly incomplete for those who are interested. Without broadcast technology, the stirring debates of the world's greatest deliberative body continue to be seen only by a handful of journalists and the small groups of people who are privileged enough to sit in the Senate galleries.

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