

C-SPAN has changed my life. You see, I am a legislative addict. I have spent more hours than I care to recall sitting in congressional galleries observing with fascination the peaks and—more often—the valleys of debate. (My disease, I confess, is not a symptom of Potomac fever: As a high school student, I engaged in similar mindless activity when the city council met in my small New England hometown.)

Now, through the magic of the coaxial cable, I may never again need enter the galleries to watch the House or Senate. In the comfort of my suburban living room, I can watch government in action at any hour of the day. And I can view this business on two stations, no less. A simple flip of the wrist, rather than a trot down a long corridor, can take me from one gallery to the other.

Some of you, like the burghers of Washington, D.C., don't have this service, but your domicile presumably is your choice. Nationwide, roughly 26 million homes—of the 40 million wired for cable—have access to the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network; 7 million homes also have the newer C-SPAN II.

All House and Senate floor proceedings are broadcast live on C-SPAN and C-SPAN II, respectively, and they are the network's top priority. Contrary to what some think, the C-SPAN folks have no control over those broadcasts. They merely transmit a feed produced and sent to them by each chamber. The House began its service in March 1979, and C-SPAN II launched operations last June, when the Senate began telecasts after interminable delay by opponents and dire warnings that the upper body's way of life was under threat.

But that is only part of what C-SPAN airs. The fare also includes congressional hearings, press conferences, association meetings, academic seminars and speeches by presidential candidates—many of them live. Its three one-hour call-in shows each weekday in 1986 featured a total of 1,058 Members of Congress, lobbyists, reporters and officials. And the network does not limit itself to the legislative branch. "We are a full-service public affairs network," said Brian Lamb, C-SPAN founder and chairman. The organization's \$11-million budget supports a youthful staff of 130, with 17 cameras and five crews recording events outside the studio. In choosing what to cover, the managers emphasize timeliness, interesting subjects and recognizable names. C-SPAN's money comes mostly from fees paid by subscribing cable systems.

A taped political campaign management lecture at midnight on Saturday may not be everybody's idea of excitement, but you might be interested in forthcoming events such as a week of programming on the FBI's operations or the American Society of Newspaper Editors convention. Lamb thinks there is a good chance that with the support of Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist, the Supreme Court may permit cameras within the next year, in which case C-SPAN would open the world to what is probably Washington's most cloistered and least understood environs.

I watch C-SPAN because, arguably, it's my job. But who else

watches? Judging from the minimal changes C-SPAN has brought about in House and Senate operations, few Members of Congress appear to be playing to their new electronic galleries. But it's not that simple. Asked in a recent interview how he will sell the public on his new conservative agenda, media-savvy Rep. Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., responded simply: "C-SPAN." Lamb said that top Reagan Administration officials frequently ask to be guests.

A Gallup Organization Inc. poll, done last year for the Times Mirror Co., found that 8 per cent of respondents considered themselves "regular" C-SPAN viewers. And aides to a growing number of House Members notify producers at their local television stations of prospective appearances by their bosses, coverage of which most stations can lift from the C-SPAN feed.

Lamb is reluctant to boast of a big impact for C-SPAN, partly because he and his staff do not want their personalities or the network itself to overshadow its content. But he listed several accomplishments: "For those people who watch, there is a terrific amount of education and information about how the system works. Members of Congress, when they go back home, get reaction from the public watching how they work. And the members of

the political infrastructure watch how each other works. . . ."

Lamb added that C-SPAN does not attempt to duplicate the news coverage of the three commercial networks or the Cable News Network. For example, its staff aired without interruption gavel-to-gavel proceedings of the 1984 national party conventions, and it already has begun regular coverage of 1988 campaign activity across the country. In December, when the networks presented live hearings of the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Iran inquiry, C-SPAN switched to a live meeting of Republican governors and rebroadcast the Iran sessions during prime time.

The studied nonpartisanship of C-SPAN may turn off viewers who prefer the hype—personalities and promotional gimmicks—that increasingly accompanies televised public affairs programming and makes it a form of entertainment. But the intended effect is to allow a close-up view of the debate as though audience members were Washington full-timers.

Sometimes, the events can be dreadfully boring—both on-site and through the camera—but that, too, is worth knowing. Like the decisions on zoning permits made by my hometown council, action on regulatory laws or pork-barrel spending affects many people, and the galleries should be open to as many witnesses as possible. Inside the Capital Beltway, for example, a pay raise for Members of Congress and other top federal officials may seem justified but, as C-SPAN listeners have learned in recent weeks, it generates angry telephone calls from the public.

I have only one beef with C-SPAN. My few personal appearances on camera have shown the limits of my future in television. But compared with the status or riches available to media heavies, being a "C-SPAN junkie" offers loftier rewards to those of us needing a regular political fix. □

C-SPAN Junkie

