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8502A Guest Column

C-SPAN78? A call for life unplugged

"Is C-SPAN OK?" asked the woman, flipping on a tiny, black-and-white television as we entered her apartment. We met only hours before, and she already was sharing her deepest viewing habits.

"It's all I watch, really," she said while rifling through a stack of mail from extremist political organizations. "I'll just leave it on all day if I'm here."

On the screen, only three people lingered in the House of Representatives. A digital ticker relayed the action: 20 minutes left to vote, 30 votes in. Vivaldi played over this mad, mad scene.

She stopped sorting her mail and looked at me. "You hate C-SPAN, don't you? Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know if I get anything else, though."

"No," I said. "I'm like you. I can't get enough. I'm a C-SPAN freak."

I had never told anyone this before. I had never found anyone who would believe me, who would not laugh.

Hyperactive cable TV may be on its way, with 5,678 channels in as many languages, but all I need is C-SPAN and C-SPAN2 (or as we fanatics like to call it: The Deuce).

For the uninitiated, the C-SPAN concept is simple: stick a TV camera in Congress so everybody can see what's going on. No fancy graphics or anchorpersons or advertising. It's like the news, unplugged.

It doesn't go far enough, I think. We need C-SPAN3 and 4. We need C-SPAN78. We need cameras in Capital Hill restaurants and bars.

...restaurants and bars.

And we need a C-SPAN for younger viewers, for those of us with almost no attention span, who dig the pace of "The Real World" and "Sonic the Hedgehog."

So put 112 cameras in the Senate. Stick them at different angles and strap one to Newt Gingrich's chest. Hell, strap one to everybody's chest. And then cut from camera to camera every 1.8 seconds.

Television could be improved overall with mass C-SPANning, with more channels of unplugged life.

Put cameras on the streets in high-crime areas and eliminate the need for local TV news. Put a camera in the mall. Put one in the concert hall. Feed the images from convenience-store security cameras right into viewers' homes — somebody would watch it.

Some networks, like The Learning Channel, have caught on. Their "Operation" show has twice the drama of "E.R." Have you ever seen open-heart surgery in progress? How about a vasectomy? You don't miss a snip or a squish!

And who doesn't love riding shotgun with the nation's finest on "COPS"? It's C-SPAN with guns. But we need a whole channel of it. We also need the CORONERS channel. And the WAITRESSES network...

There would be, of course, dangers to this. People like me would never leave the house. Even with just C-SPAN and The Deuce, I feel like a prisoner of information. I used to work nights and spend every daylight hour watching C-SPAN. Never in my life had I felt more informed, yet more ... demented.

Except the time I stayed up all night watching a filibuster. I can't remember what the bill was, or even which senator read till dawn in solitary defiance of legislative injustice.

I just know I watched it.

At 3 a.m. I turned to my drunken viewing partner, a woman I no longer speak to because of a certain argument about the Supreme Court, and said: "Who's got bigger problems? This Senator talking to an empty room ... or us?"

She handed me a bag of Doritos, turned off the TV and fell asleep on the floor, drooling. I had my answer.

Gaslin writes feature stories for the Daily Press. Tony Gabriele's column will return Nov. 22.