

I watch C-SPAN because it gives voice to a nation. A voice from Florida responds to a voice from Iowa; a voice from Oregon comments on the exchange. I hear the voices raw, in dialect or regional accent. I descry the opinions of Americans in their fulness--the prejudice, the tolerance, the concrete perspectives of a farmer, a secretary, a construction worker, a nun. No sociologist or commentator or reporter classifies or evaluates or sifts these voices first. C-SPAN broadcasts them whole--voices whose roots still find nourishment in the centuries-old first amendment.

I watch C-SPAN because it allows me to make an occasional visit to the democracy. C-SPAN takes me along to a caucus in the living room of an Iowa farm couple. I listen to their deliberations, watch their expressions and manners, measure their arguments, and come to a deeper and more humane understanding of American political life. I am helped to better understand how, against all forces to the contrary, the American democracy lives on.

I watch C-SPAN because it takes me beyond the tidied Congressional Record, past the deletions of the daily press, behind the strangely attractive reporting of the network news, straight to the House and Senate floors, even into the subcommittees, where our elected representatives stand directly before us in all their eloquence and inarticulateness, their wisdom and foolishness, their openness and evasiveness, their glory and disarray. And I not only hear the detailed arguments, but I watch the way of American government. The actual procedures of American liberty, elaborated and sharpened over centuries, are seldom glimpsed outside of C-SPAN's coverage of Congress in session.

I watch C-SPAN to better understand the press. I watch a hearing in the House one night, and read a report in the newspaper in the morning. I see what has been neglected and what was believed worthy of print. I see which representative was chosen as spokesperson for a position and which representative's remarks went unreported altogether. I watch C-SPAN to measure the differences between what has happened and what is said to have happened. If the differences are sharp ones, I can be sure that the following evening some caller from some state I seldom think of will have been troubled by exactly what troubled me.

I watch C-SPAN because of its great implicit and active faith in free speech and open deliberation. At a time when more and more decisions are reserved for experts, and when the very information for making reasonable decisions is available only to relatively small numbers of people, C-SPAN opens the discussion to an entire nation, and draws the eyes and ears of a people to the deliberations at hand. In place of paternalism rises respect. And in place of voicelessness come ringing hundreds of different voices, rooted in constitutional liberties which have become concrete^{so} of all places, on television.