

25 Years in the Sausage Factory

If you want to enjoy sausage or respect the law,” Otto von Bismarck reputedly said, “you should never watch either of them being made.” For a quarter century, American political junkies have had the opportunity to test the truth of Bismarck’s quip, by looking over the shoulders of the sausage makers on C-SPAN—the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network.

Through its “gavel to gavel” coverage of Congress, the network has made the ins and outs of the legislative process accessible to over 85 million households, and an estimated 28 million viewers each week now watch their representatives at work.

We didn’t always know our legislators so intimately. The Continental Congress met in secret, as did the Constitutional Convention in 1787. The Senate met behind closed doors for its first five years, and continued to hold a substantial number of secret sessions until 1929. That same year—on March 4, 1929, seventy-five years ago—the first live radio broadcast from inside Congress was heard by the outside world, as a new Vice President took the oath of office in the Senate chamber. In the years that followed, radio was joined by television, and extraordinary congressional events became spectacles for a national audience: presidential addresses, the Army-McCarthy hearings, various Vietnam investigations, the Nixon impeachment proceedings, and others. The putative purpose of these broadcasts was public edification, though they also often gave logorrheic legislators a platform for self-promotion.

The broadcasting of Congress went full-time twenty-five years ago, when C-SPAN, with a staff of four people, launched its coverage of the House of Representatives on March 19, 1979. (Coverage of the Senate began in 1986.) The cable network has gone far to promote political openness and transparency, and to shorten the distance between the American people and their representatives, by broadcasting uncut the activities of Congress. It has been an incomparable resource, not just for those who make up what Jeff Greenfield has called the “Army of the Over-Informed,” but for millions of ordinary citizens hoping to understand our government.

The technology of television has, of course, changed American government. Many members of Congress have used C-SPAN to their advantage; some, like former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, rose in prominence thanks largely to their deft use of the medium. Cameras in congressional committees seem to invite grandstanding, while the presence of cameras in the main chambers has resulted in more scripted, less spontaneous debate.

The presidency has recently been the subject of successful movies and TV shows, often glorifying the excitement and drama of the job. And the judiciary is dramatized constantly on daytime courtroom shows dispensing pop-justice and evening “lawyer shows” glorifying the clever argument. But there haven’t been many recent movies or shows about Congress. Nor is there likely to be, as long as C-SPAN lets us see that the hard work of legislating is too dull for drama, and that no actor could better lampoon members of Congress than they do themselves.