

PRESS & TELEVISION***The Senate and TV:
What's News?***

"Television Network News Coverage of Senate Committees" by Denis S. Rutkus, in "Appendix to the Second Report, Temporary Select Committee to Study the Senate Committee System" (1977), Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

During televised Senate committee hearings on Vietnam in early 1966, CBS refused to pre-empt regular programming (and sacrifice major revenue) to carry "live" the testimony of Ambassador George F. Kennan. The decision prompted the resignation of CBS News President Fred Friendly. The network, Friendly claimed, had made a "mockery" of past CBS "crusades" to gain access to congressional debates. According to Rutkus, a Library of Congress analyst, the 1966 case illuminates the rigid journalistic and financial pressures that determine what will and will not be aired on television. And he concludes that, as a result, ABC, CBS, and NBC are not (really) anxious to expand coverage of Senate proceedings.

Business considerations, says Rutkus, argue strongly against increased "live" coverage; and time limits (i.e., the 22-minute news show) argue, in turn, against more Senate coverage on the regular evening news. Because pre-empting scheduled entertainment programming means a loss of advertising, and because congressional debates may "bore or alienate" viewers, commercial networks limit such coverage to events of "overriding importance"—customarily, dramatic clashes between congressional committees and the executive branch (see table). One exception is the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), which does not rely on advertising. Since its creation in 1970, PBS has broadcast more hours of congressional activity than any of the commercial networks.

ANNUAL "LIVE" TV COVERAGE OF CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

		ABC	CBS	NBC	PBS	TOTAL
		<i>In hours and minutes</i>				
(Valachi, Bobby Baker)	1963	4:30	9:23	7:50		21:03
	1964	2:06	3:19	10:47		16:12
	1965	0:00	0:00	0:00		0:00
(Vietnam)	1966	22:36	27:33	69:09	1:30	120:48
	1967	0:00	0:00	0:00	10:00	10:00
	1968	1:00	1:34	10:20	2:30	15:24
	1969	0:00	0:00	5:35	6:30	12:05
	1970	1:51	0:00	1:53	0:00	3:44
	1971	0:00	0:00	0:00	5:00	5:00
	1972	1:30	0:30	0:30	3:00	5:30
(Watergate)	1973	115:05	116:38	123:03	274:00	628:46
(Impeachment debate)	1974	17:13	27:09	25:42	116:30	186:34
(Intelligence Committee)	1975	0:00	0:00	0:00	7:00	7:00
(Cabinet confirmations)	1976	0:00	0:00	0:00	3:47	3:47