

The Watergate Channels

Senator Ervin's Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities has decided to allow hearings "open to the public and the news media," which can serve as an educational forum for the American people. In past hearings on war, crime and corruption, television has been a source of visual information on the function of Congress as a co-equal branch of the Federal Government. The hearings scheduled for May 15, under judicial guidelines established by Senator Ervin's committee, could help clear the air—without circumvention or circuses—on the Watergate investigation.

But for the hearings to be broadcast, the channels must be open in the public interest. The Public Broadcasting Service, interconnecting arm of the country's 233 non-commercial television stations, plans to carry the hearings live during the day, with the chance of taped rebroadcasts in the evening. The Washington National Public Affairs Center has allocated funds to broadcast the Ervin hearings.

The White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, in the meantime, has been putting heat on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to disassemble its Public Broadcasting Service and lower the voices of the local stations. If successful, the result of this effort will be to minimize subjects of a controversial news nature that might be deemed embarrassing to the Government.

The development of this policy raises two questions in respect to public broadcasting stations: Will the Office of Telecommunications Policy actually try to prevent the Watergate hearings from being aired? If it does, will the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Public Broadcasting Service and the local stations stand up against such pressure? The answers will tell much about the credibility and future of public broadcasting in this country.