

WITH THE IMPEACHMENT inquiry gaining speed, Congress should no longer put off serious debate about what role television and radio should play in informing the country about the House Judiciary Committee's public sessions, the House floor debates and, if it comes to that, the Senate trial of the President. Unless congressional rules are changed, live and taped broadcasting of all those sessions will be barred. Thus one arm of the media will be grossly restricted in its reporting of deliberations which will be open to the writing press and to as many citizens as the galleries can hold. The question is whether the nation's interests will be advanced if the rules are amended to enable radio and television to perform their unique service of providing complete, direct, nationwide coverage of these somber and momentous events.

Opponents of full coverage advance, in essence, two overlapping arguments, one by analogy and one from fear. The first, summarized by Jerome Barron in an article elsewhere on this page, is that because impeachment is a quasi-judicial proceeding, the cameras have no more place in the Senate chamber than they would have in any common court. The second assertion is that television is some kind of pernicious force which is likely to poison the proceedings by turning the most responsible legislator into a posturing demagogue and converting sober deliberations into a raucous spectacle. This adds up to the suggestion that full television coverage will somehow fundamentally change the nature of the impeachment process, and that something or other—the Congress, the system, the country—could not stand the added strain.

This is a little hard to swallow. For one thing, it involves a massive mistrust of the people's elected representatives, suggesting that they are so immature, undisciplined or publicity-hungry that they would trifle with the most important responsibility which they may ever bear. That possibility does of course exist, but the very restrained, careful performance of the House Judiciary Committee and most other legislators so far is welcome evidence that they recognize the danger and are resisting it. Moreover, to the extent that mistrust might be justified, it seems a bit misplaced. One can argue with equal facility that members would be much less likely to manufacture sensation, strike poses or otherwise

misbehave under the watchful eye of television than they would when they have only a passing reference in a newspaper or 30 seconds on the nightly news to worry about—or to play to.

The more basic consideration is the nature of the process at stake. For all the obvious similarities, a Senate trial of a President is not an ordinary criminal trial writ large. The Judiciary Committee's inquiry is even less a grand version of a grand jury probe. Impeachment, however judicious it ought to be in its findings and its processes, is not strictly speaking, judicial. It is a political process in the most fundamental, constitutional sense, the means by which the people's representatives deal with alleged gross abuses of the public trust. Its purpose is not to punish—in the sense of fines or imprisonment, removal from office is the only penalty. Moreover, while Congress will be judging the conduct of the President, the public will be evaluating the conduct of both, and will be arriving at the ultimate and essentially political verdict both on the judgment and on the manner in which it is attained.

From this perspective, it is hard to see how the national interest will be served if the deliberations on Capitol Hill are not transmitted fully and directly to the people, but instead arrive only through the necessarily selective, compressed and confined form of news summaries and the printed press. The difference is roughly the difference between listening to an entire tape and reading an edited transcript. Last summer's Watergate hearings should have made this point, for those weeks of complete coverage enabled millions of Americans not only to hear and weigh significant testimony about startling events, but also to observe and assess the character and conduct of every participant. Whether those evaluations were favorable or not is beside the point. The point is that there is no substitute for full information as the raw material for judgment.

The issue, as George Reedy writes, is the restoration of public trust in the integrity, capacity and accountability of government. Whatever the outcome of the impeachment inquiry, that cause will be advanced if the Congress permits—and the broadcasting industry fulfills its obligation to provide—full coverage of the proceedings which have now begun.