

Fred W. Friendly

'An Obligation To Communicate Directly'

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Permit me to begin with quotations from two distinguished colleagues, one who practiced my profession, the other yours.

"When a man is really important the worst adviser he can have is a flatterer." That's the scripture from Gerald Johnson, the Baltimore editor and historian, and I hope it applies to our dialogue here today.

The second quote, in 1808, is from a lame duck President, Thomas Jefferson, who, in an attempt to recruit barrister William Wirth of Virginia into running for office, wrote: "The object of this letter is to propose to you to come into Congress. That is the great commanding theatre of this nation..."

My unflattering question is—have you let Mr. Jefferson down, have you permitted technology and the natural inclination and central motivation of Presidents to move "the great commanding theatre of this nation" to the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue?

And whose fault is that—not Marconi's, or Murrow's, or Cronkite's or Chancellor's, not even Coolidge's, or Kennedy's or Nixon's. They merely invented or exploited new forms of communications which the Senate and the House chose to ignore or to regard as a howling sideshow instead of an electronic extension of the spectators galleries of 426 seats in the Senate and 732 seats in the House. You closed your eyes and ears to a miracle permitting your gallery to be filled by three or four sightseers and lobbyists from each of your constituencies while the Executive Branch transformed its "Bully Pulpit" into an electronic throne. Presidents have used broadcasting as a magic political carpet, transporting the citizenry to the oval Office, to the ancient wall of China, ironically even to the floor of your joint sessions while you, with few exceptions, have relegated these miracles to the status of a kind of over-the-transom, Peeping Tom, too theatrical or "too dangerous" to be allowed in...

I wonder if you and your colleagues are aware of what's going on in our republics? Let's take West Germany. Later this month the Bundestag will be conducting a historic debate on proposed reforms of the abortion laws. It is an inflamed issue, but there is no controversy over the reality that Germans from the North Sea to Bavaria will be watching every minute of it on television. Indeed, nations which were not even born when television was a political fact of life in the United States, now permit and provide live coverage of their legislative process. Because the Security Council of the United Nations provides live coverage of its debates, many Americans understand more about the voting and deliberative process of that body than they do of their own nation's...

The hidden agenda item in all your deliberations, of course, is the growing concern over the possibilities of impeachment and a Senate trial involving the President. One of America's most respected newspapermen, James Reston, has pronounced that such events of government should be closed to television because it might turn the trial into a nightmare; Senator Buckley and others fear a three-ring circus. My conviction, Mr. Chairman, is that the public's presence via the television camera will preserve decorum and dignity but certainly if this trial occurs, the American people will require a first-person, unabridged view of so historic an event without having it strained and filtered through the eyes and ears of even the most responsible newspapers. Much of the confusion over the impeachment and subsequent trial of Andrew Johnson exist today

because print journalists alone, no matter how skilled cannot preserve the essence and dynamics of such complex procedures. None of us here today can know whether such a trial will take place, but I can assure you that neither history nor the American public will accept surrogate witnesses to so momentous an event...

What you need is a plan of action, not just a removal of restrictions. Of all the more than 30 resolutions over the past 30 years from Senator Pepper to Representative Pepper, the most stimulating and potentially productive plan is S.R. 136, proposed by Senator Byrd of West Virginia. Simply stated, it suggests "a full and complete study and investigation with respect to the broadcasting and telecasting (including closed-circuit telecasting) of the proceedings of the Senate." I trust that the Senator will consider it a friendly if unofficial amendment if I add the phrase—and House of Representatives.

The wired Congress, if I may use that as shorthand for putting cameras and microphones in both chambers, and all hearing rooms, and connecting them by coaxial cable to every office, dining room, lobby and a videotape center will be expensive but will cost far less than building a modern destroyer or celebrating the bicentennial. Operating it will be less expensive than running a destroyer or an atomic submarine per year. Senator Byrd's resolution needs to be costed out and studied—now. Such a survey could be accomplished with an economy of time and funds...

Now, Mr. Chairman, you will ask, "But how does wiring the Congress ultimately reach the nation? Live or delayed coverage will still be subject to the gatekeeper function of the commercial networks and even of public broadcasting." That is true although the performance of public television and radio during the Watergate hearings was a major breakthrough in prime time coverage.

My proposal is not only to make the wired Congress available to all networks, but to leap over all those gatekeepers with their varied values and priorities and deliver the signal direct to 200 American communities. If telephone company long line and microwave distribution is too expensive, synchronous satellites made possible by this nation's maximum, costly effort in the space program will this year and in the next three years make it possible to spray television signals into every time zone simultaneously...

One may ask: Why will these local broadcasters relay them to regional audiences if the networks won't? My response is—for the same series of reasons that cause some 500 different newspapers to send correspondents to Washington. These editors know that political reporting from the nation's Capitol is like regional accents and customs—different for various communities.

Debates on farm subsidies will find their audiences in Kansas, Iowa and Louisiana, while New York and Massachusetts would be more attentive to the hearings on mass transportation and urban blight...

To sum up, take Senator Byrd's proposal of June 1973 seriously, combining it with Senator Pastore's proposal to commemorate our 200th birthday by opening Congress to the nation. A study on costs and feasibility would take less than six months, a decision to go could be possible in time for 1976.