

Happy birthday, C-SPAN

The network that brought Congress
to the people turns 30 today.

Once upon a time, finding out what happened in Washington was difficult. A few journalists lurked in the Capitol, but they could not report everything. Bills passed unnoticed, floor speeches went unheard, and the folks back home decided if their representatives did a good job based on incomplete, second-hand accounts.

That changed 30 years ago today. On March 19, 1979, C-SPAN started broadcasting from the floor of the House of Representatives with a speech by Rep. Al Gore Jr. Since then, the network has become a triumph of open government and has fundamentally altered the relationship between the people and their representatives.

Americans have watched campaigns unfold, the impeachment of a president, uncounted confirmation hearings, floor debates and lonely speeches in the quiet hours of the night before an empty chamber, all from the comfort of their living rooms. And let's be honest, who hasn't also spent a half-hour enjoying the British prime minister's weekly question time before the House of Commons?

Contrary to popular belief, the network receives no taxpayer money. The cable and satellite companies that carry the stations



fund the broadcasts.

Today, C-SPAN includes three television broadcasts, one focused on the House, one on the Senate and a third offering other public affairs and historic programming. It also operates a radio station in Washington. And it streams all its content online. Its Web site is a vast archive of American government in action.

If federal officials are still scrambling for presents, they might consider fulfilling a couple of birthday wishes that would make the people's business even more accessible.

Congress maintains control of the cameras in the capitol, and C-SPAN cannot give a full view of the House and Senate. Allow the public to see congressmen nodding off, horse-trading or raptly paying attention.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court erects even greater barriers to broadcast, banning cameras from its sessions. Americans have as much interest in how their laws are adjudicated as in how they are written.