



A parliament channel –
MUST SEE TV?

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Would a dedicated television channel for parliament help improve the public's view of politics? Dr Julianne Schultz argues that it would.

'Sunlight is the best disinfectant'. This old saying, much loved by journalists and editors, may be of relevance to the current discussion about the means of raising parliamentary standards, and addressing the institutional disappointment many Australians feel about the conduct of public life in this country.

The sunlight in this case would come from making it easier for all Australians to be able to see on television, unedited, what goes on within Parliament House—in the chambers, in the committee rooms and in the other public places where speeches, news conferences and public addresses are conducted.

This has already begun in a quiet fashion—there are seven channels of parliamentary activities webcast on the internet for those who have high speed broadband connections, and subscribers to TransACT in Canberra are able to watch the sittings of the House of Representatives and Senate.

Over the next few years, as the technology becomes more affordable and available, parliament should make it a priority to ensure that more Australians have easy access to the parliamentary debates which determine policy in this country, by datacasting, pay television or broadband internet. Televising parliament may do as much as anything to help increase public understanding of complex issues, and if the American experience is any guide, help raise both the standing and responsiveness of members of parliament.

In a speech I recently gave at Parliament House, I outlined some of the ways in which the management of public debate in this country has failed the broader public interest. I argued that the combination of sophisticated media management and time

and space pressures on the media made it hard for the full complexity of issues to be explored.

Not surprisingly much political reporting focuses on the theatre, the spectacle, the gaffes and nuances. Single words and phrases bounce around the airwaves framing the public discussion. Emotion has beaten logic as the principal tool of debate. A simple clear exposition of facts and rationale rarely cuts through the one-liners, the rhetoric, the spin, the code words and the masked ideology. It is no wonder that so many retreat into their preconceptions as policy is reduced to one-liners.

Many people feel a sense of institutional disappointment as a result. The media searchlight shines brightly for a few minutes before moving to the next event, that is its job. The limits of this style have been shockingly obvious so far this year.

At the same time technology makes it possible for us to access more detail than ever before—to read the court judgements, to consider the full reports, to examine the data on a thousand and one web sites—making the quick retreat to one-liners and snappy phrases somewhat paradoxical.

Yet the language of politics has been reduced to the five second grab that pushes the buttons and draws a response. This is what the pollsters—and ultimately the ballot box—can measure. But at a time when the people of this country are better educated than ever before, when they are dealing with increasing complexity in every other aspect of their lives, why is our political discussion reduced to such a thin broth? Emotion and snappy one-liners are no substitute for logic or complexity in policy making and public debate.

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Committee hearings could be broadcast on a parliament channel, says Dr Julianne Schultz.

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It is time to look again and more ambitiously at televising parliament, to draw out its democratic potential. This is not a new idea, but it seems to me that it may be one whose time has come. Televising parliament and related public affairs events could help raise the baseline for informed public policy discussion.

The technology has changed and spectrum that was once scarce is now available. The methods of televising the proceedings are now well established. The expectation that cameras can relay events anywhere anytime is well established throughout society. We live in a visual virtual reality and television remains the best way of reaching a mass audience. At the same time, the need for citizens and audiences to get access to more than the five second grab becomes greater as the space available for 'hard' news has shrunk.

I have no doubt that television can supplement what Hansard already does. The webcasting and TransACT services show that televising parliament is no longer something to be scared of.

Public debate in Australia is robust, at times even bullying. Genuine alternatives, complexity and subtlety rarely get an airing. The opportunities to watch extended verbatim coverage would demonstrate the limits of this style and provide an easy means to access the insights from the parliamentary debate.

The televising of parliament is well established elsewhere. The technology of digital broadcasting, cable and satellite television, broadband internet removes scarcity of spectrum as a bottle neck, and promises exciting new opportunities for interactivity. It would not be expensive television, need not be boring and could provide interesting opportunities for feedback.

The C-SPAN—cable and satellite public affairs network—in the USA is a useful

model. It was set up in 1979, a year after the Australian parliament first considered televising its sittings. The vision was of a television network that had the time to show the debate, the speech, the news conference in full—gavel to gavel. It was not flashy, but by making the full debate, the full news conference, and the full speech available it provided a base line for access to information about public affairs.

Journalism, on the other hand, must reduce and distil, draw out the most salient points and hopefully arrive at a snapshot that captures the essence of the debate. Sometimes the context is lost; without the underpinning arguments the conclusions may make less sense. Televising parliament wouldn't prevent this, but members, senators and speechwriters would at least be able to take comfort from the knowledge that some people saw the whole speech and had a chance to comprehend the complexity. The opportunity to watch the full version would supplement and complement media reports.

C-SPAN now operates two television networks covering the Congress and the Senate, committees, media conferences, speeches and conferences. It is reached by 77 million of the 98 million American TV households, up from 3.5 million in 1979. While 60 per cent never or rarely watch the network, 30 per cent watch occasionally and 10 per cent watch regularly several times a week—a committed audience of more than 23 million. This is not just a minority interest, the C-SPAN audience is mixed: a third of them are under 35, a third also only went to high school and about a third earn less than \$30,000 a year. They are not just members of the wealthy political elite.

The experience with webcasting here is similar. The number of people accessing the channels in February 2002 increased 80 per

cent over the previous year, a measure of both the spread of broadband access and public interest in parliamentary debate. There were more than 75,000 webcast requests in the first two sitting weeks of the 40th Parliament and 14,000 each day for the recent Senate committee hearings.

Concerns have been expressed in the past that the robustness of the debate may be diminished by the cameras and audience. Some have pointed to changes in the tone and nature of the debates after radio broadcasts began in 1946, and suggested that the deliberative nature of the Australian parliament could be impeded by such openness. Similar arguments were used to restrict press coverage in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It may be that the knowledge that an audience of electors is watching might change the tone and nature of the debates for the better.



The C-SPAN figures suggest this: 86 per cent of US politicians reported significant increases in correspondence after they appear on the network, 91 per cent considered this to be a good thing, 63 per cent believed it had enhanced the reputation of Congress and only 6 per cent felt it had been harmed.

The proposal to broadcast parliament and related public affairs events is about using the technology to extend parliament and enrich public debate, not just creating another TV channel.

Dr Julianne Schultz is a director of IT and media consultancy Strategies and Solutions, and the author of Reviving the Fourth Estate (Cambridge Uni Press). The text of her address, 'Two Cultures: Parliament and the Media' is available from the Senate Occasional Lecture Series web site at: www.aph.gov.au/Senate/pubs/transcript/transcript.htm ■

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