

STATEMENT BY SENATOR HUBERT H. HUMPHREY

CONGRESS AND THE NEWS MEDIA

Before the Joint Committee on Congressional Operations
Hearing on "Congress and Mass Communications"

February 20, 1974

- Structural Organization
"modern Congress" Act

- Question Period - yes
Joint Committee
Scheduling committees

Mr. Chairman, I commend the Joint Committee for its wise and timely decision in calling this hearing. If anything, we are overdue in considering the subject of the relationship between Congress and the news media. Congress & the Public!

The Congress suffers doubly for its inattention to this subject in the past. On one hand, we cast a blurred and confusing image for the man on the street; on the other, we are regularly made victim to end-runs and upstaging by the President. We have failed to make ourselves known and understood as an institution, with a recognizable and positive identity in the public mind. And we have been sluggish in meeting the challenge of the Executive's inherent advantage in competing with us for the public eye and ear.

Ask the average citizen what the President did or said today, and then inquire what the Congress did, and you will quickly see how great the imbalance is.

Such an "identity gap" is in some degree inevitable, It stems in part from the differences between the Congress and the President, between the legislative and executive branches. He is one; we are many. He can speak for himself. It is rare if ever that a single voice can express the unanimous view of 535 members of the House and Senate.

When I served as Mayor of the City of Minneapolis before coming to the Senate, I usually found I had the advantage over the City Council in reaching the public. I am sure the chief executive of any governmental unit, from small towns and villages to the states, has also found this true.

└ But this does not mean there is not ample opportunity for the Congress to improve its performance in this regard. We can make improvements in two basic ways -- first, by simply making the Congress and its activities more accessible to the representatives of the news media; and second, by more actively seeking out the media to offer our point of view as an institution.

└ First, let me offer some thoughts on ways of making Congress more accessible to news coverage. Probably the simplest and most direct means is one I have advocated for 20 years -- by opening up the floors of the Senate and House of Representatives to coverage by radio and television. This is also the basic proposal of a recent, excellent study entitled, "Congress and Mass Communications," prepared by Mr. John G. Stewart for the Committee, through contract with the Library of Congress. The report points out that only once, in 1947, for the opening session of the 80th Congress, were television cameras permitted in the House Chamber, while there has never been such coverage

allowed during a regular business session of the Senate, But the report alertly observes the irony in the fact that the House Chamber is opened up to television coverage for the delivery of the State of the Union Message -- by the President.

└ This example alone vividly illustrates the need for Congress to update policies and practices regarding the news media. The matter becomes more imperative when considered against the current background of concern that the Executive Branch has severely eroded and undermined the powers of the legislative branch, while the Congress itself has simply failed to exercise the powers and authority it has under the Constitution.

└ To quote from the report by Mr. Stewart:

"A decision by Congress to permit some form of television and radio coverage of floor proceedings would produce broader and more informative news coverage of the institution. It is hoped that citizens would begin to acquire a new sense of Congress' institutional role by witnessing the legislative process in operation and by seeing their elected representatives openly conduct the public's business."

└ In short, it would make us shape up.

I'd like to paraphrase another writer, Mr. Ben H. Bagdikian, national correspondent of the Columbia Journalism Review, who, in the current issue of that fine publication, voices some strong criticisms of both the news media and Congress, in an article entitled, "Congress and the Media: Partners in Propaganda." I recommend the article for all members of Congress and members of the journalistic profession, as food for serious thought. The portion that should provoke a great deal of concern by this Committee as it continues its deliberations, deals with the numbers of members whose activities in Congress are virtually unseen by most or all of their constituents back home in the state or district they represent. This is due to the lack of personnel in Washington reporting back to the newspapers and radio and television stations in the areas those members serve. Surely many of the smaller newspapers and radio and television stations are unable to hire even a "stringer" to dispatch news to them from Washington. But if Congress opened itself up to national coverage, it would follow that each individual member would thus be exposed to at least some greater degree of news coverage.

I believe this disadvantage at which smaller news outlets are placed in covering the activities of Senators and Congressmen long-distance, from back home, is a serious

problem which we should address. I suggest that it is possible for those news outlets to improve their coverage of Congress if the opportunity were made available. The first thing they need is understanding of Congress as an institution, and of the work of individual Senators and Representatives. The second thing they need is access, so they can keep track of those Senators and Representatives.

I have long been a strong supporter of a privately-financed program that provides the first half of that equation, understanding, for news media professionals -- and in this case, for political scientists and federal agency personnel as well.

Many of my colleagues in the Senate and in the House are familiar with the Congressional Fellowship Program sponsored by the American Political Science Association. Many of you have had APSA Congressional Fellows work in your offices as part of their studies of Congress. At present, I have two Fellows, both newspapermen, working in my office.

What I would propose is a program on a smaller scale, specifically for editors and reporters from the smaller newspapers, the weeklies and dailies of up to perhaps 50,000 circulation, and the local television and radio stations. Rather

than extending for a period of nine months, as does the APSA program I would suggest a short-course format. Two or three weeks would be sufficient. [This would make it possible for an organization with a small staff to function with one member absent while he or she attended the short-course, and would hold down the costs.

[On the subject of financing the program, I am ~~absolutely~~ not advocating any involvement of federal funds for its support or operation. [Only an attempt to mix church and state would set off a howl as great as would be heard if we offered federal money for a program involving government and the Fourth Estate.

financial [But Congress can and should invite and encourage such a *Privately* program and then go all-out to cooperate with it.

[I would propose that we establish an ad hoc, bi-partisan committee of a few members of both Houses of Congress, to go out and talk up this idea with representatives of groups that might logically be interested in sponsoring and helping finance it. [I know that we have among our ranks several Senators and Representatives who have had experience in the news media before being elected to their present offices. I don't know how many there are or who all of them are, but a

diligent search should identify them quickly, and we could perhaps name them as the committee. They could contact organizations of professional journalists, including both the so-called "working press" groups and those representing the management side, the publishers and station managers and owners.

The cost to the sponsors would depend on the number of journalists who would participate in each short-course, and the extent to which they would be supported by their own employers.

Those are all details that should be worked out once willing sponsors are found, and should be left up to them. But I think we should make an energetic attempt to encourage thinking about establishing such a program.

The object of the program would be to educate reporters and editors about the operations of Congress, so they could go back home and write and select their stories and broadcast reports more intelligently.

But in order to do that, they also need better access to the Senators and Representatives from their states and areas of circulation or audience. To provide that, we already have at least partial facilities available to many of us, in the form of the Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) with which we maintain contact with our states and districts.

It is now possible for a reporter to walk into our home office and place a call on our WATS line to talk with us or our staff members about pending legislative business. It is also possible for a reporter to send a message through our home offices to us in Washington so we can call the reporter back via our outgoing WATS line from Washington.

I would suggest an investigation of the possibility of expanding this service to increase the usefulness of the WATS line as a link between us and the news media back home. I can envision, for example, telephone news conferences linking the office of a Senator or Representative and two or more news outlets in different parts of the State or district.

While the handicaps of the hometown news media are important, I note that the title of this hearing is, "Congress and Mass Communications." This implies a primary concern with the large, national news media, and I assume, electronic media chiefly represented by television ^{and radio}. This, too, is vitally important if Congress is to maintain its status as a co-equal branch with the Executive, and stop accepting second-billing behind the President on prime TV time.

I have recently introduced the Modern Congress Act, in which I propose improvements designed to reform the operations

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of Congress in a variety of ways. I call your attention to three of those proposals which I believe would achieve the ends being sought by this Committee.

One is the establishment, by legislative mandate, of a new tradition in Congress -- the annual delivery by the leadership of both Houses and both parties, of a "State of the Congress" message. While we have seen informal efforts to achieve such a step in recent years, I believe making it a formally declared custom of Congress would enhance its prestige, as a message of importance on the same plane as the President's state of the Union Message. A legislative mandate also would insure that the practice would continue.

Another is the establishment of an Office of Congressional Communications. While a major part of this OCC's job would be to operate a modernized internal information and communications system within Congress for the benefit of members in performing their work, it also would provide facilities, equipment and expert technical advice to help members communicate with the public, through the news media.

Third, the Modern Congress Act proposes following recent changes in Congressional rules and procedures to their logical conclusion, by fully opening up the activities of the committees and subcommittees to news media coverage. If any

of us cringe at being more closely scrutinized in our activities -- and I hope none of us would feel we have anything to fear from such scrutiny -- let me point out that if we are doing our jobs, we can only gain, since through this reform our constituents will be better able to see us at work. And I need not point out to my colleagues in either House of Congress that the committee room is the real workshop of Congress -- the place where the major portion of our time is spent on pending legislation.

└ I offer a final point as is the one we must keep in mind as we consider the subject before this Committee. We have been experiencing a period of growing suspicion and disapproval by citizens, toward government in general and elected officials in particular. While there are many reasons for this, including some for which Congress is free of blame, we have a duty as an institution to reverse this trend.

└ Any nation is in trouble when its citizenry feels alienated from its government and suspicious of it; but this is by far a worse disease when it afflicts a democracy. There are some justifications for this lack of esteem for public officials by the citizen. Hopefully, most of those reasons are being answered by other committees of Congress and by the judicial branch. But one of the reasons is popular ignorance of what

government is and how it functions. That condition as a basis of the public's judgment of us is not acceptable, and its results are not justified. We must act to overcome it, to the extent we are able. I believe that the measures I have proposed would go far toward fulfilling our duty. I believe that an open Congress would be a Congress understood and respected.

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