

PBS, Televisе the Impeachment Hearings for All to See

For the sake of the nation, public TV must air the Trump impeachment hearings in prime time.

What may have been public television’s shining hour – some 247 hours, in fact – came in 1973 when PBS carried gavel-to-gavel coverage of hearings convened by the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities.

Also known as the Watergate committee.

Over the course of 51 days and nights, millions of viewers watched as the story of the Watergate break-in, the cover-up, payoffs, and dirty tricks unfolded before their eyes. The evidence was undeniable: Richard Nixon, the President of the United States, had abused the power of his office, corrupted the rule of law, lied persistently, and obstructed justice.

Other networks carried the hearings, too, but what set public broadcasting apart was the decision to air them twice a day: live, in real time as they happened, and then via videotape in prime time every evening, when people who had spent all day working could come home, watch the drama play out without intrusive commentary, and become a part of the process of judgement. One viewer wrote: “I arrive red-eyed and sleepy to work and I don’t care.”

The hearings showed Americans that democracy can work because they saw it at work. The coverage catapulted a fledgling PBS into the national consciousness.

We know because we were there. Both of us started working in public television nearly fifty years ago and were on the scene as PBS made its mark.

It almost didn’t happen. PBS was already under attack from Nixon and his henchmen. The president’s efforts to quell “Eastern liberal” dissent he claimed was biased against him included eliminating public broadcasting altogether. (Nixon’s special assistant Patrick Buchanan had said, “We’ve got to zero it out, and that’s that.”)

A nervous PBS polled member stations on the decision to carry the hearings. Barely half of them gave the go-ahead.

Initially, there was only enough money for 15 nights of programs, but when the broadcasts proved so popular, cash donations flowed in, as did thanks from across the country. PBS had a hit.

This ironic symmetry was lost on no one: Public television had assured its place in the nation’s esteem by covering fairly the man who had tried to strangle it in the cradle. And the rookie network that had been accused of avoiding controversy for fear of government and partisan retribution showed the independence and courage to help Americans come to grips with a clear and present danger.

Now, during yet another great Constitutional crisis, it’s time for PBS to stand up again – to air the Trump impeachment hearings live during the day and repeat them in the evening primetime hours.

Yes, the regular PBS evening schedule will have to be preempted, as it was back in 1973. But disrupting its programming for a few weeks is a small price to pay for helping preserve the republic. As President Lyndon Johnson noted when he signed into law the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, public broadcasting might yet become “a replica of the old Greek marketplace, where public affairs took place in view of all the citizens.” Dirty linen included.

C-SPAN, cable and satellite channels and the Internet now offer some version of the service once unique to public TV, but according to the PBS.org website, the difference is clear: Over the course of a year 83% of all television households — over 215 million people — watch PBS via traditional television. PBS reaches 83% of non-internet homes, 82% of lower-income homes and 78% of rural homes.

So airing the impeachment hearings as streaming video on a website isn’t enough. Plenty of Americans still rely on good old broadcast TV to get the word. Harken, PBS: Pull out the stops once again, and for the sake of the nation, throw away the schedule and air the Trump impeachment hearings in prime time.

Who wins? Democracy – and viewers like you.

Bill Moyers
The Schumann Media Center

Michael Winship
Senior Writing Fellow, CommonDreams.org