



IN THE PRESS

Televising the Legislature Gavel-to-Gavel— A North Carolina Version of C-SPAN?

By Adam Hochberg

Legislators are considering a plan to provide gavel-to-gavel television coverage of the General Assembly, comparable to the C-SPAN network's telecasts of the United States Congress. The state Senate, concerned about the \$3.2-million price-tag, balked at the proposal during its 1992 session. But many legislators support the concept, and some expect approval once the state's tight budget situation eases. In this article, Insight looks at arguments for and against gavel-to-gavel coverage, as well as the experiences of C-SPAN, televised "town hall" meetings, and other TV programs linking citizens with government. The article also examines existing legislative coverage provided by the UNC Center for Public Television and the Agency for Public Telecommunications.

Since 1979, most cable television subscribers in North Carolina have been able to watch live, gavel-to-gavel coverage of the U.S. Congress on C-SPAN. In many communities, cable viewers also can watch their local city council or board of county commissioners. Now, a proposal is being discussed in Raleigh to televise the General Assembly's sessions from beginning to end.

A legislative study commission is recommending that the state spend \$3.2 million for the gavel-to-gavel telecasts.¹ "The public is demanding to know more about their government," says Rep. George Miller (D-Durham), a member of the commission. "Currently, the public has to rely only upon what is reported through the press, many times sporadically, most of the time after the fact." Miller says the live and tape-delayed coverage of the General Assembly would give North Carolin-

ians an unprecedented opportunity to see their government in action.²

Other legislators, however, are less convinced that the state should spend money on the project. "I have not heard any hue and cry from anybody wanting to see us on television," Sen. Beverly Perdue (D-Craven) said during a July 1992 meeting of the Senate Appropriations Committee. The committee voted to delete funding for the project from the state budget, and decided to direct the money into a fund that pays for repairs and renovations to state buildings.³ Rep. Miller says he plans to re-submit the funding request in 1993.

Under the commission's proposal, television cameras would be installed in the House and Senate chambers, as well as in the rooms where the appropriations and finance committees meet. The Legislative Services Commission — a panel of legislators chaired by the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate — would establish policies on how the cameras would be used. For instance, the commission might be asked to decide whether the camera operators may pan across the chamber or if the cameras must remain fixed on the legislator who is speaking. The coverage would be produced and distributed by the Agency for Public Telecommunications (APT), a branch of the Department of Administration.⁴

Wade Hargrove, a Raleigh attorney and chair of the APT, says the gavel-to-gavel proposal is aimed at making state government more accessible and accountable to the public.⁵ "The legisla-

Adam Hochberg is a broadcast journalist who covers state government for public radio stations in North Carolina.

tive television coverage is simply one dimension of a broader effort that began over 10 years ago to provide the people of the state more access to state government,” says Hargrove, who represents the N.C. Association of Broadcasters and the N.C. Cable Television Association. “A lot of people feel it’s important for the people of the state to have more access. The question is: Can the taxpayers of the state afford it at this time? In 1992, the General Assembly said, ‘No, we can’t afford it, in view of the times and the circumstances.’ It will be appropriate, however, for the General Assembly to reconsider the question in the future.”

Legislative leaders in both parties agree that cost is the key factor in whether the legislature decides to televise its sessions.⁶ “I personally feel that it would be wonderful to try to show it,” says Sen. Marc Basnight (D-Dare), who chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee during the 1991-92 session. “How to pay for it is another matter. We have to compete against the other many requests we get from across the state. What is needed more — textbooks for the children, or TV pictures of legislators talking? We need to weigh these sorts of things.” Basnight’s views are ech-

oed by Sen. Paul S. Smith (R-Rowan), who says the future of the proposal hinges on whether the state succeeds in winning a federal grant to help pay for the coverage — without a lot of strings attached. “I don’t want anyone coming in and telling us what to do,” says Smith, the Senate Minority Whip from 1989 to 1992.

Others question whether enough people would watch the gavel-to-gavel coverage to justify spending \$3.2 million in start-up costs and \$500,000 in projected annual operating expenses. “It really is more of a ‘field of dreams’ prospect — if you build it, they will come,” says Allyson Duncan, a member of the state Utilities Commission and former member of the APT Commission. “While I don’t have a problem with that with respect to private funds, I find it troubling with respect to public ones. Further, I don’t believe that people will come (or view it). And, if they do, it will only be periodically and in insufficient numbers to justify the expenditure. Finally, if you are going to spend this kind of money, I think it makes more sense to upgrade the public television system that you have now *before* creating something with the potential to compete with it.”

**Cameramen with WUNC-TV cover a 1956 news conference in Raleigh.
Note the “Channel 4” banner on table.**





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REP. GEORGE MILLER (D-DURHAM)

State Already Provides Limited Television Coverage

Currently, the Agency for Public Telecommunication produces four hours of television programming per week, which is carried by some 50 cable systems in the state. (See Table 1, p. 53.) The agency's Open Public Events Network show, called OPEN/net, regularly features unedited videotaped portions of legislative committee meetings, as well as meetings of boards and commissions in the executive branch.⁷ The videotaped meetings are followed by call-in sessions, in which viewers are encouraged to ask questions of government leaders in APT's Raleigh studio. For instance, a recent OPEN/net program televised a meeting of a state Senate committee studying prison construction bonds, then invited callers to ask questions of two committee members and an official of the state Department of Correction.

APT's executive director, Lee Wing, says OPEN/net programming has been well received by North Carolinians. Although there are no ratings data on the telecasts, Wing says OPEN/net has handled more than 13,000 phone calls over the past seven years and is now averaging about 19 calls per show. "Our lines can be busy the whole time, and we might get in only 10 calls, if people are long-winded," Wing says. The program also has received national attention. In 1987, the Ford Foundation recognized OPEN/net by bestowing on it an award for "Innovations in State and Local Government."

The proposed gavel-to-gavel legislative coverage, Wing says, would improve upon the sporadic committee meeting coverage that OPEN/net already provides. "It gives people a complete picture of what happens on the floor of the House and Senate," Wing says. "People who know more

about their government will vote more intelligently, and government will improve as a result of it."

Wing says gavel-to-gavel telecasts also would benefit elected officials because it would allow constituents to hear them speak, unfiltered by the news media. Wing says OPEN/net hosts do not conduct interviews, but only introduce the programs, guests, and callers. "We are not journalists," she says. "Many of our hosts over the years have been reporters with local television stations. We retrain them for the job of being an OPEN/net host. They're not investigative reporters when they're on OPEN/net. Their job is not to go after government officials." Wing told the legislative study commission that gavel-to-gavel television coverage may increase the public's approval of the legislature.

Because the House and the Senate usually meet simultaneously, the Agency for Public Telecommunications plans to alternate live coverage of the two bodies each day. For instance, on Tuesdays, the Senate session might be covered live, while the House would be tape-delayed. On Wednesdays, the House would be covered live, while the Senate would be shown on tape. Evening hours would be filled with call-in programs and tapes of meetings of the legislature and executive boards and commissions.

Some Legislators Skeptical of Gavel-to-Gavel Concept

Before APT's plan could be put into effect, legislators need to be convinced that gavel-to-gavel coverage is a good idea. In the Senate Appropriations Committee, senators from both political parties spoke against it. "It's a frivolous expenditure," Sen. Perdue said. "I'd much prefer to see that money go to buy a few school buses for our children. They need that more than they need to see us."

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"I HAVE NOT HEARD ANY HUE AND CRY FROM ANYBODY WANTING TO SEE US ON TELEVISION."

SEN. BEVERLY PERDUE
(D-CRAVEN)

**Table 1. Existing Public Television Coverage of
North Carolina State Government**

Program	Producer	Duration / Frequency	Availability	Description
"Legislative Report"	UNC Center for Public Television	30 minutes, 3 days a week during legislative sessions	Statewide on public television channels	Taped interviews with news clips and discussion.
"North Carolina This Week"	UNC Center for Public Television	30 minutes, weekly	Statewide on public television channels	Journalist roundtable, often focusing on legislative issues.
"OPEN/net"	Agency for Public Telecommunications	2 hours, weekly	Statewide on about 50 cable TV systems	Unedited coverage of legislative and executive branch meetings, followed by live call-in show.
"Inside North Carolina"	Agency for Public Telecommunications	1 hour, weekly	Statewide on about 50 cable TV systems	Live call-in show on public issues of statewide interest.
"State to State"	Agency for Public Telecommunications	1 hour, weekly	Statewide on about 50 cable TV systems	Live call-in show on public issues of state and national interest.
(title varies)	UNC Center for Public Television and N.C. Center for Public Policy Research	1/2-hour to 1 hour, broadcast once or twice yearly	Statewide on public television channels	Documentaries on various public issues such as solid waste, rewarding good teaching, poverty, health care.
"Town Hall Television"	Town Hall Television Inc.	1 hour, monthly (planned)	Statewide on public television channels	Varied format show on public issues of state-wide interest.

Rep. Miller, a supporter of gavel-to-gavel coverage, sympathizes with Perdue's financial concerns. But he says that legislators shouldn't feel forced to choose between funding for television or funding for schools. "I view [gavel-to-gavel coverage] as seeing that the public is informed," Miller says. "An informed public then would be better informed as to the need for additional appropriations for public education."

Other legislators worry that gavel-to-gavel television would disrupt the General Assembly. Sen. Jerry Blackmon (R-Mecklenburg) predicts that the presence of television cameras on the Senate floor would lead to more political posturing. "I was on a county commission for six years, and we were exposed to this kind of thing,"

Blackmon told the appropriations committee. "It increases the time of the meetings and causes people to say things that you would never expect them to say." Sen. Basnight has similar concerns. "Once you bring the cameras in, there's a lot of politicking that goes on," Basnight says. "If you could hide the cameras, where nobody would see them, I think it would be great."

Wing, the APT official, insists viewers would be smart enough to know when a legislator was posturing or wasting time. "They're not dumb," Wing says of viewers. "They can figure out if somebody's giving them a bunch of baloney. Furthermore, I think the legislature will police itself. It's not going to tolerate that kind of baloney." Hargrove, the APT chair, says the continual pres-



The Agency for Public Telecommunications telecasts some of its productions from this satellite dish on the roof of the state Administration Building in Raleigh.

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LEE WING, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
AGENCY FOR PUBLIC TELECOMMUNICATIONS



ence of TV cameras might *discourage* legislators from wasting time on political posturing. "Knowing that there is an audience outside the chambers that is watching them may have the effect of refining the discussions," Hargrove says.

If legislators can be persuaded to fund gavel-to-gavel coverage, the next challenge would be to win cooperation from the cable television industry. Many operators of local cable systems are reluctant to set aside a channel for legislative coverage when they could be using that channel for a commercial network that can attract more viewers and advertisers. "Channel capacity is always a problem, especially for smaller systems," explains Adrian Cox, president of the North Carolina Cable Television Association and executive vice president of Summit Cable Services in Winston-Salem. Hargrove adds: "The cable industry has indicated it will try in good faith to be as supportive of the proposal as it can be. A number of cable systems have said they will make channel space available for this public service effort. But viewer preferences ultimately might determine which programs cable systems will carry."

A wild card in the question over channel availability is the new federal law, passed by Congress over President Bush's veto in October 1992, that re-regulates the cable TV industry. "Some cable systems may have fewer channels available with which to provide this kind of programming," Hargrove says. "But I think it's too early to make a judgment about that."

State officials hope advances in video compression and digital technology will increase the channel capacity of local cable television systems within the next decade, making it more likely that there will be space for the new service. In the meantime, APT is pursuing another way for people to watch gavel-to-gavel coverage, even if they

can't receive it on cable TV. The agency is asking the legislature to match \$314,175 in federal funds to install satellite receiving dishes at 100 public libraries statewide.⁸ Wing envisions that North Carolinians could go to their local library to watch the legislature on television, as well as the APT's other programs.⁹ She says the satellite dishes at the libraries also could be used to receive live telecasts of meetings, public hearings, and training classes in Raleigh for public school teachers and other state employees. Viewers at libraries might be able to participate in a public hearing by phoning in their comments as they watch the event on television. "I'm very excited about the usefulness of satellite technology — to reach people and to allow them to reach back," Wing says.

Five States Telecast Live Coverage of Their Legislatures

The states of California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Rhode Island now have some form of gavel-to-gavel television coverage of their legislatures. (See Table 2, pp. 58–59.) In addition, Oregon and New York previously had such telecasts but discontinued them. The Oregon telecast was a three-month experiment that failed to gain enough support to earn public funding. The New York telecast ran for eight years before succumbing in March 1992 to tough, budget-cutting measures in a state faced with an \$875 million shortfall in its 1991–92 budget.

Most of the state legislative telecasts cost about \$500,000 a year to operate, excluding initial capital costs for wiring, cameras, and other equipment. Nebraska has the least expensive program, costing about \$100,000 a year. Its expenses are lower because some costs are charged to another pro-



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SEN. JERRY BLACKMON
(R-MECKLENBURG)

The UNC Center for Public Television: 36 Years of Legislative Coverage in North Carolina

The first time North Carolina experimented with gavel-to-gavel television coverage of the General Assembly, the cameras were black-and-white. So were the issues that legislators discussed.

In July 1956, WUNC-TV — the state's new public television station — showed live coverage of a special legislative session on school desegregation.¹ In light of the U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, lawmakers in North Carolina enacted the "Pearsall Plan to Save Our Schools." The plan provided parents with ways to avoid sending their children to integrated public schools, and gave them state grants if they wished to enroll their children in private schools.² Huge cameras televised the proceedings in the old House chamber in the state Capitol, as the General Assembly set down into law that "no child will be forced to attend a school with children of another race in order to get an education."³ It was one of the earliest live remote broadcasts in North Carolina television history, seen both on WUNC-TV and on Durham's new commercial television station, WTVD.⁴

Over the next few decades, public television continued to televise House and Senate sessions from time to time when the legislature was debating such issues as the Speaker Ban Law, legalized abortion, and liquor by the drink.⁵ "We did extensive gavel-to-gavel type coverage," recalls Richard Hatch, public affairs director at the UNC Center for Public Television. "We would put cameras in the balcony and do it live. Several times, we broadcast all afternoon."

In recent years, public television has backed away from live legislative broadcasts, instead putting more emphasis on its daily program, *Stateline: Legislative Report*. Hatch says it's harder to do gavel-to-gavel coverage today than it was 30 years ago because viewers have increased their expectations. "It's gotten so complicated and expensive," he says. "Today, nobody would accept the quality that we used to do." Public television's most recent gavel-to-gavel legislative telecast was in January 1991, when Rep. Dan Blue (D-Wake) became the first African-American to be elected Speaker of the House in North Carolina.

— Adam Hochberg

gram that Nebraska Public Television broadcasts nightly, according to Bill Ganzel, a senior producer for the network. Also, the Nebraska legislature is a unicameral body — requiring half as much equipment and personnel as it would to telecast a bicameral legislature.

Several of the existing state programs are not as extensive as the North Carolina proposal. For instance, gavel-to-gavel coverage in Massachusetts is available only for the House of Representatives, and it is broadcast over a local station in

Boston. In Minnesota, only the Senate is televised, and it is distributed over cable systems only in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.¹⁰ Program administrators in both states cite budgetary constraints as a key reason for not providing more complete coverage.

The most advanced state in legislative TV coverage is California. The California Channel televises live action from the House and Senate floors, as well as legislative committee meetings, state Supreme Court proceedings, and press con-



The News & Observer, c/o N.C. State Archives

A television camera (upper right) records the 1956 session of the General Assembly, one of the first events televised live in North Carolina.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The University of North Carolina put WUNC on the air Jan. 8, 1955, with funds raised by private donors. Initially, WUNC was the only station, and its programs were supplied by studios on the campuses of UNC-Chapel Hill, N.C. State, and Women's College (now UNC-Greensboro). The network later grew to its current 10 transmitters, covering virtually the entire state by the mid-1980s. Although the General Assembly has appropriated money for public television since the mid-1950s, it did not codify statutes for the network until 1979, when it adopted G.S. 116-37.1, which authorized the UNC Board of Governors to establish the UNC Center for Public Television.

² *The Pearsall Plan to Save Our Schools*, Governor's Advisory Committee on Education, April 5, 1956.

³ Chapter 3 of the 1956 Extra Session Laws.

⁴ Richard W. Hatch, "News Coverage of the General Assembly, Past and Present," *Popular Government*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Spring 1984), Institute of Government: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, pp. 32-36.

⁵ The General Assembly enacted the Speaker Ban Law in 1963, forbidding Communists from speaking at all state-supported schools, but the state Supreme Court later ruled the law unconstitutional. North Carolina was one of the first states to legalize abortion, which the legislature approved in 1967. The liquor-by-the-drink legislation, enacted in 1978, allowed cities and counties to hold elections on whether to allow sales of mixed drinks.

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ALLYSON DUNCAN,
MEMBER, N.C. UTILITIES COMMISSION

ferences by the governor.¹¹ Unlike the North Carolina proposal, which calls for the state to fund and operate the television system, the California Channel is a private, non-profit venture, funded mainly by the cable television industry.¹² The program is also the most expensive to produce, at \$900,000 a year, nearly double the operating costs of most state telecasts.

Paul Koplin, the president of the California Channel, says the public has been very supportive of the channel during its two years of operation. "We're the only means for them to understand what's happening in the state," Koplin says. "We get calls from constituents all the time saying, 'Are you going to air this committee hearing on education cuts or this committee hearing on health care cuts?'"

Still, only about half of California's cable subscribers have access to the channel because many cable operators are hesitant to add it to their systems. Koplin tries to convince cable television executives that adding the California Channel will improve the cable industry's image with the public. "As they face an increasing regulatory environment, it's important for them to maintain these positive relations," he says.

At the national level, C-SPAN officials report increasing public interest in the channel's telecasts of Congressional sessions and other government proceedings. C-SPAN surveys show growing viewership of the channel, particularly during periods when Congress has grappled with serious national issues such as the Gulf War, the federal budget crisis, and the breakdown of the savings and loan industry. Currently, the channel is available in 57.9 million households nationwide, up from about 35 million in 1990.

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Table 2

State ¹	Producer	Duration
California	The California Channel and the California state legislature	1991-present
Massachusetts	WGBH Public Television	1984-present
Minnesota	Senate Media Services	1988-present
Nebraska	Nebraska Public Television	1982-present
New York	New York Cable Television Commission	1984-92 (discontinued)
Oregon	Legislative Media Services	1989 (discontinued)
Rhode Island	Capitol Television	1986-present

Gavel-to-Gavel Television Coverage in Other States

Annual Budget	Funding Source	Distribution	Coverage
\$900,000	Private	Viewers in 60 percent of cable TV systems in state	State legislature, governor's press conferences, state supreme court, selected state boards
\$425,000	Public	Cable TV systems in Boston and eastern half of state	State House only
\$650,000 ²	Public	Cable TV systems in Minneapolis/ St. Paul metro area	State Senate only
\$100,000	Public	Cable TV systems in Lincoln and Omaha metro areas	State legislature (unicameral body)
\$500,000	Public	Cable TV systems in Albany metro area	State legislature, court of appeals, some board meetings
NA ³	Public/ Private	Cable TV systems in Portland metro area	State legislature, some board meetings and press conferences
\$500,000	Public	Cable TV systems and commercial radio and TV stations statewide	State legislature, some board meetings, press conferences, and special programs

¹ California, Massachusetts, and New York have full-time legislatures; the remainder are part-time bodies.

² Minnesota budget includes funding for a half-hour, edited news program.

³ Oregon coverage was done on a trial basis for three months in a cooperative effort involving the state legislature, Oregon Public Broadcasting, a private telephone company, and three cable TV systems. No special appropriations or grants were involved.

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PAUL KOPLIN,
PRESIDENT OF THE CALIFORNIA CHANNEL

"More people are tuning in to C-SPAN to see how Washington is responding," says Brian Lamb, the network's chairman and chief executive officer. "The cable industry should be proud — these are the times when the public service value of C-SPAN is really driven home." C-SPAN has televised the U.S. House of Representatives since 1979 and the U.S. Senate since 1986.

The network's news coverage has been "so successful that we've extended it to the White House and are working with the courts to see if we can get cameras in the courts," says Virginia Diez, a C-SPAN media specialist who applauded the

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THE AGENCY FOR PUBLIC TELECOMMUNICATIONS: *Can It Coexist with Public Television in North Carolina?*

Although the UNC Center for Public Television has produced a regular legislative news program since 1974, the proposal to televise gavel-to-gavel coverage has come from another source — the Agency for Public Telecommunications.

Both state agencies are in the telecommunications business. But the Center for Public Television is part of the University of North Carolina system, while the Agency for Public Telecommunications (APT) is part of the Department of Administration.¹ Both televise public affairs programming — the UNC Center on a 10-station broadcast network and APT on cable television systems across the state.²

Some lawmakers worry that agencies' activities sometimes overlap. The co-chairs of the House Appropriations Committee — Rep. David Diamont (D-Surry) and Rep. Martin Nesbitt (D-Buncombe) — inserted language into the state's 1992-93 capital budget mandating a study of all the state's video networks, as well as its audio and data networks.³ "We want to know how to get the biggest bang for the buck to get the programs out to the people," Diamont says. "Are we duplicating the UNC network, and is there any overlap?" The study, released in December

1992, found some overlaps between the UNC Center and the APT, but concluded that it would be difficult for the two agencies to share their basic resources.

Some legislators from southeastern North Carolina say the money proposed to start APT's gavel-to-gavel cable television coverage could be better spent on new transmitters for the UNC Center for Public Television. The southeastern region — including much of Robeson, Scotland, Hoke, and Bladen counties — is the only major portion of the state that doesn't receive public television. In the Senate Appropriations Committee this July, Sen. David Parnell (D-Robeson) voted against the gavel-to-gavel proposal. "Before we start spending state dollars to cover the work of the legislature, we ought to spend the dollars so that our people would be able to receive the service that's going out of the stations now," Parnell said in an interview.

The UNC Center's associate director, Chancy Kapp, says her agency can coexist with APT, but legislators need to complete the state public television system — even as they explore new technologies like cable TV. "Obviously, you shouldn't say, 'Let's finish with the buggy whips



The Agency for Public Telecommunications produces three cable-TV shows, including OPEN/net, which features taped excerpts from meetings followed by live call-in discussions with state officials. In this show, left to right: former Rep. Art Pope, Rep. Martin Nesbitt, host Leila Tvedt, Sen. Marc Basnight.

before we buy the rockets,” she says. “But broadcast television isn’t buggy whips. It’s a service that’s going to be out there for a long time.”

Lee Wing, the APT’s executive director, says her agency fills a niche that complements rather than competes with the state’s public television system. A key distinction between the two agencies, she says, is that APT’s programming is largely interactive — that is, viewers can call in questions to participants on OPEN/net and other shows. “There is no other way to give so many people in their homes direct access to state services,” Wing says.⁴

— Adam Hochberg

FOOTNOTES

¹ The University of North Carolina established WUNC as the state’s first public television channel in 1955. In 1979, the General Assembly passed G.S. 116-37.1, which created the UNC Center for Public Television and reorgan-

ized the public TV network. Also in 1979, the legislature created the Agency for Public Telecommunications under G.S. 143B-426.8.

² The UNC Center for Public Television’s network includes 10 stations: WUNC in Chapel Hill, WUNF in Asheville, WUND in Columbia, WUNG in Concord/Charlotte, WUNK in Greenville, WUNE in Linville, WUNM in Jacksonville, WUNJ in Wilmington, WUNL in Winston-Salem, and WUNP in Roanoke Rapids. The network’s programming reaches 90 percent of North Carolina’s TV households, including 257 of the state’s 260 cable systems. The Agency for Public Telecommunications’ programs are telecast on about 50 cable systems statewide.

³ The amendment to S.B. 1205 directed the Government Performance Audit Committee to study the audio, video, and data communication systems provided by the Agency for Public Telecommunications, UNC Center for Public Television, Microelectronics Center of North Carolina, Office of State Controller, UNC Computing Service, Department of Public Instruction, and Department of Community Colleges.

⁴ As quoted by Ben Kittner in “OPEN/net: North Carolina’s Weekly Electronic Town Meeting,” *C-SPAN Quarterly*, Fall 1992, pp. 16-18.



The technology has changed as well as the faces in the 36 years that WUNC-TV has covered state government. This photo shows cameramen taping a Raleigh news conference in 1956.

proposal to televise legislative sessions in North Carolina. "Certainly, we would encourage you to go forward with it."

Commercial TV Stations Cutting Back Their Legislative Coverage

Koplin says the California Channel has become an especially important news source because all of the commercial television stations in California have closed their state capital bureaus during the past few years. In North Carolina, many commercial television stations also have de-emphasized legislative news. WBTV in Charlotte and WNCT in Greenville have closed their Raleigh bureaus in the past two years, and WRAL in Raleigh has eliminated—at least temporarily—its position of state government reporter.

The University of North Carolina Center for Public Television provides the only regular TV coverage of the General Assembly, with its "*Stateline: Legislative Report*" program. (See Table 1, p. 53.) *Stateline* typically covers key legislative issues three days a week during ses-

sions, providing analyses by reporters, interviews with legislators and lobbyists, and taped footage of meetings and debates. Among commercial television stations, only WTVD in Durham and WECT in Wilmington regularly assign reporters to cover legislative news.¹³

"There appears to be less public coverage of the General Assembly," says Rep. Miller, a 12-term legislative veteran. "I can recall when the newspapers would publish the calendar of the bills that were on for debate. Now the news media don't feel that the legislature warrants front-page news."

Indeed, some supporters of gavel-to-gavel television hope it will result in more news about the General Assembly in the media. All television and radio stations in North Carolina would be able to tape the gavel-to-gavel coverage and broadcast excerpts in their news shows at no charge. For instance, if the House or Senate were debating a controversial subject, a commercial TV station could videotape the debate directly from cable TV. The station's reporters then could edit this tape and assemble a story about the debate for their



UNC Center for Public Television

Camera crew taping WUNC-TV's annual fund-raising drive in 1992.

evening news, all without ever leaving their hometown newsroom. "The heaviest pitch [for the gavel-to-gavel coverage] was that the media people wanted it," said Rep. Judy Hunt (D-Watauga), a co-chair of the study commission. "If they had access to a tape, they'd do more legislative coverage."

The president of one of the state's largest broadcasting companies agrees. Jim Goodman, whose Capitol Broadcasting Company owns WRAL-TV in Raleigh, says it's difficult for a mobile TV news camera to shoot good video in the House and Senate chambers because of poor lighting and peculiar camera angles.¹⁴ As part of the proposal to begin gavel-to-gavel coverage, the lighting in the chambers would be upgraded, and several cameras would be permanently installed to result in more attractive video. "As a business now, we're really tied to video," Goodman says. "If we have a picture of it, we'll cover it."

The UNC Center for Public Television would continue its legislative coverage even if the gavel-to-gavel telecasts become a reality, Associate Director Chancy Kapp says. But the availability of a

gavel-to-gavel video feed from the House and Senate floors could free up public TV reporters to do more interviews and in-depth analyses of the legislature, she says.

"The legislative television coverage is simply one dimension of a broader effort that began over 10 years ago to provide the people of the state more access to state government."

WADE HARGROVE,
N.C. ASSOCIATION OF BROADCASTERS AND
THE N.C. CABLE TELEVISION ASSOCIATION

Even some newspaper editors say gavel-to-gavel television could improve their coverage of the legislature. Richard Oppel, editor of *The Charlotte Observer*, was among the news executives who testified before the legislative study commission in favor of the proposal. Oppel said in an interview that the *Observer* has no plans to scale back its staff of three Raleigh-based writers who cover the legislature. But he says Charlotte-based writers also could cover the General Assembly if they could watch it on TV. For instance, he says if legislators were debating a bill concerning public schools, the newspaper's education writer might watch. "You always have legislation that affects a specialized area," Oppel explains. "As the legislature takes up bills like this in committee or elsewhere, I would see the gavel-to-gavel providing the opportunity for a reporter to tune in from back in Charlotte. He or she may not necessarily have to get in a car and drive to Raleigh."

Still, the advent of gavel-to-gavel coverage would not guarantee that legislators receive more attention from their hometown media. Ron Miller, the news director at WBTV in Charlotte, says access to video from the House and Senate floors would only "occasionally" result in his station broadcasting a legislative story. "It's not very exciting video," Miller says. "The value of legislative coverage is that you have a reporter and camera person there to tailor the coverage, put it into a package, and really make it meaningful to the local viewer." Since WBTV closed its Raleigh news bureau, it now relies mainly on WRAL to provide it with legislative news, although Miller says WBTV occasionally sends a crew from Charlotte for major legislative stories.

Media Observers Stress Need for Objectivity in Gavel-to-Gavel Coverage

Several North Carolina media executives also question whether the gavel-to-gavel television coverage would be objective. Richard Hatch, the public affairs director at the UNC Center for Public Television, is concerned about how the Legis-

lative Services Commission might use its control of the cameras. "The North Carolina proposal would have the TV coverage under the control of the legislature and distributed by another state agency," he says. "Thus, the origination and distribution of coverage and the production would all be under the control of the legislature or a state agency dependent directly on the legislature for its funds. . . . As someone who has covered the legislature since the 1950s, I am delighted at the growing interest in the subject. My own view is the more coverage the better, but I would prefer to see some distance from legislative control built into the project."

Hatch points out that the U.S. House and Senate produce the video coverage that C-SPAN telecasts. In other words, Congress controls the coverage; C-SPAN merely distributes it. For example, Congress requires the video cameras to be aimed at whomever is speaking on the floor during regular proceedings, and it bars reaction shots or close-ups of Senators and Representatives.¹⁵ "They have very strict rules to make sure that nobody looks

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— RICHARD HATCH,
PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIRECTOR,
UNC CENTER FOR PUBLIC TELEVISION

bad," Hatch says. "Any organization that sets out to cover itself is going to have a conflict of interest in how they do it."

Another problem with the gavel-to-gavel proposal, Hatch says, is that simply televising legislative proceedings — without interviews, background information, or analysis by reporters — might confuse or fail to inform most viewers. "Coverage of floor debate is a one-dimensional picture of a highly complex process which includes committees, lobbyists, special interests, and other government agencies," he says. "This is why we decided 20 years ago to concentrate on journalistic coverage."¹⁶

Oppel, *The Charlotte Observer* editor, agrees there's potential for government leaders to manipulate the schedule of the television service to portray the legislature in a positive light or to limit coverage of sensitive issues. He urges legislators to fund the APT proposal, "then stay out of the judgments about how specifically to assign coverage."

—continues on page 66

Electronic Town Halls: Another Way to Televisify Government

Gavel-to-gavel telecasts are not the only way that television can be used to supplement the conventional legislative coverage provided by journalist round tables and edited newscasts on commercial and public television channels. A fourth way that television can more thoroughly cover the legislature is through "electronic town halls" — that is, with televised meetings in which participants and viewers can actively discuss particular issues.

The UNC Center for Public Television has periodically produced such call-in shows on specific topics for many years. More recently, the Agency for Public Telecommunications has begun regular production of three cable television shows that follow the "town hall" format: "OPEN/net," "Inside North Carolina," and "State to State." (See Table 1, p. 53.) OPEN/net features a one-hour telecast of a legislative or executive branch meeting, followed by a one-hour, live call-in show in which viewers can pose questions to administrative and elected officials. Both "Inside North Carolina" and "State to State" are one-hour, live call-in shows in which viewers can discuss issues with experts, administrators and elected officials. "We make connections," says Lee Wing, executive director of the Agency for Public Telecommunications. "The expense of the call-back is no more than the cost of a telephone call."

On the national level, the electronic town hall concept was embraced heartily by then-Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton and Ross Perot in their 1992 campaigns for president. In his book, *United We Stand*, Perot promotes interactive electronic town halls as a way for Americans to "lay out the issues, review the choices, argue over the merits and demerits, and reach a consensus."¹ Like former President Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous "Fireside Chats," Perot

says, such meetings could help unite the country and set national policies.

"The only difference between the Fireside Chat and the Electronic Town Hall is that the first was one-way, the only radio technology available at the time, and the second is two-way, which we can do today," Perot writes. "Instead of passively listening to the radio or watching members of the political elite debate on television, our citizens will be able to engage their representatives and appointed officials in a direct conversation."

A variation on the theme is provided by a new *privately funded* program in North Carolina called "Town Hall Television." The non-profit program plans to tackle topics of statewide importance — including key legislative issues — in a series of taped, hour-long shows to be broadcast by the UNC Center for Public Television. The program focused on public education in its first show, aired in September and October 1992. Eventually, the show plans

—continues

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ROSS PEROT, *UNITED WE STAND*

to address topics such as economic development, health care, the environment, discrimination, the state budget, family and rural issues, the criminal justice system, the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches of state government, and the declining participation of citizens in public affairs.

"Our ultimate goal is to have about one new program each month on major issues facing the state," says Gerry Hancock, a Raleigh attorney and chair of the board of directors for Town Hall Television Inc. "We might in the future have sessions that deal with legislative themes — much as Ted Koppel does with legislative issues on [the ABC Television show] 'Nightline.'"

Under Perot's plan, the televised town halls would let citizens shape public policy through "interactive" communication — that is, viewers could call toll-free telephone numbers to register their opinions on issues. Hancock says "Town Hall Television," unlike Perot's concept, does *not* intend to gauge public opinion on issues. Rather, the North Carolina show plans to use a variety of provocative formats to explore issues in depth, inform citizens, and stimu-

late discussion. For instance, in the first "Town Hall" show, participants role-played as public officials, educators, and parents in exploring education issues such as public schools of choice, local flexibility in school administration, and family participation. Eventually, Hancock says, the program plans to use interactive communication as a way to engage viewers in discussions — much like Phil Donahue and other television talk-show hosts use audience participation and telephone calls from viewers to stimulate debate.

"Our goal is education, purely and simply," Hancock says. "We're not a function of government, and we're not trying to gauge opinion. If our project continues, then I think there will be a much expanded discussion in the state of the issues most important to the public — and those tend to be the issues most important in the General Assembly."

— Tom Mather,
Associate Editor, North Carolina Insight

FOOTNOTE

¹ See Ross Perot, *United We Stand*, Hyperion: New York, 1992, pp. 32-33.

Common Cause — a group that lobbies for accountability in government — says even greater steps should be taken to assure the gavel-to-gavel coverage is fair and objective. Jeff Parsons, a Raleigh attorney and chairman of the governing board for Common Cause/North Carolina, says independent charitable foundations should become involved in the funding and management of the television project. He says that would help shield the television programs from editorial interference by the government and would provide a secondary source of funding if the state cuts the project's budget.¹⁷

Such a joint venture would not be without precedent. Private donations already pay for a substantial portion of the state's existing television and radio coverage of the legislature, state government, and public issues. For example, the UNC Center for Public Television's \$14.5-million

"I would like to see a private-public partnership running it. I have a concern that if it's 100-percent government funded, then you're only going to see what the government wants you to see, and perhaps not necessarily see everything we need to see."

JEFF PARSONS,
COMMON CAUSE/NORTH CAROLINA

budget for the 1992-93 fiscal year included 53 percent state funds, 32 percent private contributions, and 9 percent federal grants and contracts. The Agency for Public Telecommunications depended on private and federal grants for about 10 percent of its \$1 million budget for the 1992-93 fiscal year. Similarly, private cable systems and viewers underwrite C-SPAN's telecasts through licensing fees and subscription costs; the U.S. Congress pays for the cameras and other equipment used to televise its sessions.

"I would like to see a private-public partnership running it," Parsons says of the state proposal. "I have a concern that if it's 100-percent government funded, then you're only going to see what the government wants you to see, and perhaps not necessarily see everything we need to see." ☐

FOOTNOTES

¹ The funding proposal, H.B. 1427, was introduced in May 1992. It called for a total appropriation of \$3,222,669 for the 1992-93 fiscal year. That included \$2,403,700 for the purchase of television equipment at the Legislative Building, \$314,175 to match a federal grant to install satellite receiver dishes at public libraries statewide, and \$504,794 in operating funds for the telecasts. The bill was based on recommendations of the Open Government Through Public Telecommunications Study Commission, which submitted its report to the legislature on May 1, 1992.

² For more on television and cable coverage of the legislature and government, see Henry Wefing, "A Blow to Public Access," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Spring 1979), p. 9; *Cable Television in North Carolina*, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research (Nov. 1978); Jack Betts, "The Capital Press Corps: When Being There Isn't Enough," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Sept. 1986), pp. 48-51; Katherine White, "Cameras in the Courtroom: The Experiment Continues," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Sept. 1986), pp. 41-43.

³ The Senate appropriations committee defeated the funding proposal for gavel-to-gavel coverage on a voice vote, July 8, 1992. The House did not debate the proposal.

⁴ The General Assembly established the Agency for Public Telecommunications in 1979 under G.S. 143B-426.9.

⁵ For more on public access to state government, see Bertha Holt, "Conflicting Interests for Citizen Legislators," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Fall 1980), pp. 30-34; Fred Harwell, "Government Secrecy vs. Public Access," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Summer 1978), pp. 4-7; *The Right To Be Able To Know*, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, 1978.

⁶ Such financial concerns were reflected in December 1992 by the Government Performance Audit Committee, a panel created by the legislature to identify waste and inefficiencies in state government. The panel, in its report to the 1993 General Assembly, recommended delaying funding for gavel-to-gavel

TV coverage until the state could "validate both the need and the expected value of the program."

⁷ The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research's executive director, Ran Coble, participated in one such telecast aired on APT's OPEN/net program on Aug. 29, 1986. For a summary of Coble's presentation, see "Campaign Finance Research Featured Before N.C. State Board of Elections and on Cable TV," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (March 1987), pp. 100-105.

⁸ The APT was seeking the grant from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration in the U.S. Department of Commerce. Although the Senate committee's denial of funds killed the grant proposal for the current year, APT officials are optimistic that the federal agency will continue offering grants for such projects in the future.

⁹ In addition to OPEN/net, the APT produces two other regular, one-hour shows, "Inside North Carolina" and "State to State." The APT also provides educational programs to schools and community colleges through its State Services Network.

¹⁰ See Mary Renstrom, "Legislative Television Programming in the States," *State Legislative Report*, Vol. 17, No. 13 (July 1992), National Conference of State Legislatures, Denver, Colo., pp. 1-17.

¹¹ The California Channel's CAL-SPAN program covers the legislature using robotic cameras, with procedural rules established by the state Assembly and Senate. CAL-SPAN uses people-operated cameras to cover press conferences, court proceedings, and other events.

¹² The California Channel receives most of its funding from cable television system operators who pay fees based on the number of subscribers to their systems. The network also receives private contributions.

¹³ For more on cutbacks in television coverage of the legislature, see Jack Betts, "The Capital Press Corps: When Being There Isn't Enough," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Sept. 1986), pp. 48-51. Also see Betts, "Radio Journalism in North Carolina: Listening for Less News," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (June 1987), pp. 44-46; Paul O'Connor, "The Legislature of the 21st Century," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Sept. 1992), pp. 58-68; and Tom Mather, "Slowly But Surely, Legislature Opening its Doors," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Sept. 1992), pp. 69-71.

¹⁴ The legislature requires that camera operators set up their equipment in one spot, thereby limiting them to one view or angle of floor sessions. The sheer size of legislative chambers also limits televising; it would take two or more cameras to effectively televise sessions.

¹⁵ Rules are different for videotaping special orders of business, such as when members of Congress speak to largely empty chambers after regular sessions. Cameras periodically scan the chambers at such times.

¹⁶ The state plan proposes covering appropriations and finance committee hearings as well as floor sessions. Hatch applauds that plan, but notes that money issues make up only a fraction of total committee debates.

¹⁷ In times of budget crisis, the legislature has targeted public broadcasting in the past. In 1991, as part of efforts to trim a \$1.2-billion shortfall in the budget, the General Assembly reduced the UNC Center for Public Television's budget and eliminated funding for five of the seven state-owned public radio stations. The legislature dropped funding for all radio stations operated by the UNC system, including WFAE in Charlotte, WFSS in Fayetteville, WNAA in Greensboro, WRVS in Elizabeth City, and WUNC in Chapel Hill. The legislature continues to fund stations operated by the N.C. Department of Community Colleges, including WNCW in Spindale and WTEB in New Bern.

Recommendations

Increasing the public's access to the workings of government ultimately leads to better government. That belief has been one of the beacons guiding the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research since its inception in 1977. Toward that end, the Center has consistently pushed for more open public meetings and records as well as the publication of complete tallies and descriptions of legislative votes.

Televising legislative sessions is another vital step in the effort to open state government's doors to the public. Such coverage would foster greater public awareness and make elected officials more accountable — at a time when commercial television news programs increasingly are abandoning the legislature. Only two commercial TV stations, WTVD in Durham and WECT in Wilmington, now regularly assign reporters to cover legislative news in North Carolina. Therefore, the Center makes the following recommendations:

1 The 1993 General Assembly should enact the the Open Government Through Public Telecommunications Study Commission's proposal to provide gavel-to-gavel television coverage of the legislature. The commission specifically recommended that the Assembly appropriate:

- \$2,403,700 to the Agency for Public Telecommunications for the purchase of necessary television coverage and transmission equipment;
- \$314,175 in capital funds, to be matched by a federal grant, for the purchase and installation of satellite dishes and other equipment needed to receive legislative telecasts at public libraries in all 100 counties of the state; and
- \$504,794 to provide additional support and technical staff in the Agency for Public Telecommunication, purchase additional supplies, and cover distribution costs.

Despite the costs, providing gavel-to-gavel coverage would be an investment in good government. The telecasts should provide benefits statewide because local television stations, radio stations, and newspapers could "cover" the legislature by watching it on TV, even if they could not afford to send reporters to Raleigh. Citizens without cable TV also could view the legislative coverage under the plan to beam the telecasts by satellite to local libraries across the state. Plus, the constant presence of TV cameras could force legislators to be more accountable by exposing their deliberations to viewers. Some proponents also make the case that gavel-to-gavel coverage would give citizens the opportunity to observe government, unfiltered by the news media. That coverage would be particularly helpful if the APT included bill numbers and titles on the screen during its telecasts of legislative deliberations.

2 The legislature should appropriate funds to the UNC Center for Public Television to: a) allow its broadcasts to be picked up in all of North Carolina, particularly the southeastern region; and b) boost its signals in the mountains and other areas where reception is poor. Telecasting gavel-to-gavel coverage must not come at the expense of public television's existing legislative news coverage and other programs. Legislators must remember that the state already has a sizable investment in its existing public television network. Yet, the legislature has cut funding for public television by 8.3 percent over the past two fiscal years,¹ while failing to allocate the money needed to broadcast its programming to the entire state. Public television broadcasts still do not reach much of southeastern North Carolina — more than 35 years after WUNC-TV first went on the air. Plus, reception is poor in many parts of the mountains as well as the outer fringes of the network's broadcast signals — even in highly populated areas such as Raleigh.

The UNC Center for Public Television estimates that it would cost \$12 million to install the towers, antennae, and other equipment needed to extend its broadcasting to the southeastern part of the state, with new transmitters near Lumberton and Rockingham. In addition, at least two of the public television network's 10 broadcast stations need substantial equipment upgrades to improve reception. The UNC Center estimates that it would cost about \$10 million to upgrade stations WUNC in Chapel Hill and WUNL in Winston-Salem.

— *Ran Coble,*
Executive Director,
N.C. Center for Public Policy Research

FOOTNOTES

¹ The legislature appropriated \$7,362,087 to the UNC Center for 1990-91, a 2.3-percent cut from the previous fiscal year. The 1991-92 appropriation was \$6,913,172, a 6.1-percent cut, according to unaudited figures.

Televising legislative sessions is another vital step in the effort to open state government's doors to the public. Such coverage would foster greater public awareness and make elected officials more accountable — at a time when commercial television news programs increasingly are abandoning the legislature.
