

AN URGENT LEGACY: TELEVISION, LIVENESS, AND THE JANUARY 6 HEARINGS

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A number of highly anticipated series debuted on US television in summer 2022, including *Irma Vep* (HBO), *Ms. Marvel* (Disney+), and *The Rehearsal* (HBO). But the runaway hit of the season—the one dominating headlines, captivating pundits, and generating enthusiastic morning-after recaps—belonged to an unexpected source: the US House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol. Between June 9 and July 21, 2022, nothing captured the feeling of “appointment television” like watching nine congresspeople question witnesses and share never-before-seen footage of the riot that ensued on January 6, 2021, when Congress met to count Electoral College votes and formally designate Joseph Biden Jr. the US president elect. Over the course of the series’ eight episodes, the Select Committee outlined how former President Donald Trump’s “seven-part plan” to stay in office intentionally and inexorably led his supporters to violently storm the Capitol, an attempted coup that left five people dead.¹

These hearings were some of the best television I’ve ever watched—assuming they were in fact television. Although the hearings were broadcast live on ABC, CBS, NBC, C-SPAN, CNN, and other networks, I personally watched them—mostly live, but sometimes later the same day—on YouTube.² Regardless of platform, the hearings were eminently televisual in their aesthetics, structure, and sociopolitical stakes. Like television news broadcasts—and notably unlike most Internet live streams—they featured scripted speeches and testimony delivered in real time, excerpts from prerecorded interviews, and expertly crafted video montages of footage from January 6. That blend uncannily reflects television’s “ideology of liveness” as Jane Feuer described its unfolding on *Good Morning, America* (ABC, 1975–) almost forty years ago.³ It enabled the hearings to

return a pressing sense of urgency to television viewing, an urgency I have not felt since, well, January 6, 2021. Live coverage of the riot invited viewers to witness a national catastrophe unfolding, reminding us that synchronous catastrophe coverage remains one of television’s defining modes.⁴ The Select Committee hearings affirmed television’s cultural significance, albeit in a different register: they upheld television as the medium for national conversations and, through their invocation of historic television formulas and ideologies of liveness, marked television as a legacy medium whose very datedness bestows a certain gravitas on its contents. In so doing, the hearings reasserted both the Select Committee’s power and the power of television.

Political hearings have long contributed to television’s cultural capital and its appeal as a platform for events of national significance. Congress first began telecasting live hearings in 1947 although, as Thomas Doherty has noted, “the primal ‘hearingcasts’ of the late 1940s were treated more as novel experiments than media landmarks.”⁵ The sense of presence invoked by live transmissions of political hearings quickly proved riveting, however. As a contemporaneous critic observed, “The telephoto lens, bringing each human element close to the eye, makes it an experience probably more intense and disturbing than actual presence in the committee room.”⁶

This intensity begat “Kefauver Fever” in March 1951 when local stations began simulcasting the New York hearings of the Senate Committee to Investigate Crime and Interstate Commerce, chaired by Senator Estes Kefauver. As Doherty notes: “The thrill of soaking in the full force of the medium for the first time, of fronting the essential facts of life with television, was an artistic experience of a new aesthetic order.”⁷ Some of that thrill was no doubt related to the colorful Mafia personalities testifying in close-up on-screen, but much of it came from the marriage of statecraft and spectacle that televised hearings represented. And clearly the thrill remains, seventy-one years later, when television has ostensibly been outmoded by online media yet continues to guide the mediation of congressional procedure.

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In suggesting that the January 6 hearings were acutely televisual, I do not mean to tie their televisuality to simultaneous transmission or to suggest that the hearings felt like television because they unfolded live on-screen. Rather, the way they produced liveness as ideology drew on television history, particularly the methods and practices of television news and its formulations of liveness. Every hearing began with introductions from two cohosts—Chair Bennie Thompson and Vice Chair Liz Cheney—whose presence anchored investigative reports by other committee members and guest appearances from key witnesses. The committee members also introduced prerecorded video clips as evidence (both legal and rhetorical) for the claims they and their witnesses made. This structure was highly reminiscent of television news broadcasts, although most of the video footage was excerpted from posttelevisual platforms, particularly social-media live streams and Zoom interviews. New media was thus harnessed to serve the televisual, to affirm the importance of its rhetorical traditions. In this manner, the hearings confirmed the hegemony of television. Bolstering its supremacy were the very production values with which the Zoom clips and participant videos were integrated into the hearings and assembled into long evidentiary montages whose stylistic force stunned viewers.

Thompson introduced the first such montage approximately halfway through the first hearing on June 9. An eleven-minute compilation of security-camera feeds, police documentation, and rioter footage, the montage purportedly depicted “exactly what took place” during the attack.⁸ Most of its contents, Thompson noted, had never been seen before. The montage begins with a band of masked men marching toward the camera as the Washington Monument rises behind them and they yell, “Grab your bullet.” A bottom-third title announces, “10:00 am / Proud Boys gather on the National Mall” as a male voice intones, “Be advised there’s probably about three hundred Proud Boys ... marching eastbound ... towards the United States Capitol.” An on-screen title attributes that voice to “MPD [Washington, DC, Metropolitan Police Department] Radio Transmission.”

Blending material from multiple, even opposing sources, the montage continues to portray events leading up to and including the invasion of the Capitol; at one point it offers a powerful shot-reverse-shot rendition of a face-off between insurrectionists and law enforcement on the Capitol’s Lower West Terrace. Composed of both rioters’ and US Capitol Police footage, the sequence depicts violent hand-to-hand combat as Donald Trump intones, “They were peaceful people. These were great people.”⁹ The montage consistently relies on such powerful and well-established

editing techniques to shock the spectator; indeed, the Select Committee hired former ABC News president James Goldston to produce the hearings and provide a sense of visual storytelling missing from the two Trump impeachment hearings.¹⁰ Under Goldston’s supervision, tight editing, narrative cues, and first-person interviews make the attack on the Capitol legible as a plot: a violent attempted coup engineered by the president of the United States.

Goldston’s skills imbued the hearings with the production values of network news, but some of their televisuality also emanated from less prestigious generic referents. The hearings obeyed a narrative logic of delayed revelation that resembled nothing so much as celebrity reality television, particularly *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2007–21). Of the 20 million viewers who tuned in for the Select Committee’s first hearing, few would have been entirely unfamiliar with the events of January 6 or the characters involved: the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, Donald Trump and Rudy Giuliani, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner. Even former US attorney general William Barr and former White House counsel Pat Cipollone became political celebrities in the waning days of the Trump administration. And surprise guest stars—like unannounced witness Cassidy Hutchinson—proved even more riveting in their willingness to divulge unscrupulous plots and unseemly behavior.

Thus the televising of the January 6 hearings allowed viewers to peek behind the headlines and see how these famous players understood the scandal at hand. Journalists had written previously about white-supremacist groups’ preparatory alliance for January 6 and about Barr’s disgust with Trump’s schemes to hold on to power, but now behind-the-scenes footage illustrated the events and machinations in question, just as the final season of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* revealed new details about Kim Kardashian’s devastating separation from Kanye West (which gossip columnists had announced months before). One of television’s most enduring cultural functions has been purporting to show average viewers the reality behind celebrity facades. The January 6 hearings drew on this tradition while unmasking the treasonous intrigues of a famous former reality TV star.¹¹

The January 6 hearings didn’t just tap into television’s historic formulas and epistemological systems, however; they also affirmed television’s historical functions. Each in their own way, Chair Bennie Thompson and Vice Chair Liz Cheney used the ideological power of live television to contextualize the committee’s investigations within US history—and indeed to write US history. Thompson opened the hearings on June 9 by remarking, “I was born, raised, and still live in Bolton, Mississippi ... a part of the country where people justify the actions of slavery, the Ku Klux



Former Attorney General William Barr testified via Zoom for the Select Committee.

Klan, and lynching.” With gravelly solemnity and restrained cadence, Thompson went on to recall Abraham Lincoln’s pledge that he would accept the outcome of the 1864 presidential election “come what may.” Lincoln allegedly feared that his opponent, General George McClellan, would dissolve the Union if he won. And yet, Thompson intoned, Lincoln vowed “to uphold the rule of law, to do what every president who came before him did, and what every president who followed him would do, until Donald Trump.” Thompson’s oratorical delivery underscored the gravity of the January 6 riot by locating it in the long history of American travesties—specifically, racist travesties—and juxtaposing Trump’s bid for power with the selfless patriotism of another Republican president.

Cheney’s remarks framed the events of January 6 not with the past but for the future, anticipating how the riot—and indeed Cheney herself—would be remembered by generations to come. During the Select Committee’s first hearing, Cheney addressed “you,” the citizen-viewer at home, far more than any other speaker. She also habitually framed her remarks in the future tense: *You will hear...* *You will see...* In this manner, Cheney sought to shape how the Select Committee’s evidence would be interpreted by its intended audience. By the committee’s final hearing on July 21, Cheney referred to such interpretations as settled consensus: *You know ... You already know ...* Moreover,

whereas Thompson somberly affirmed the hearings’ place in history, Cheney roused viewers by performing the committee’s legal and moral righteousness.

This performance was both relational and sartorial. During her closing remarks on July 21, Cheney looked down (on the camera and her assembled audience) from the Select Committee’s dais as she declared, “We cannot abandon truth and remain a free nation.” She further exhibited the Select Committee’s principles by prominently displaying her congressional pin on a suffragist-white blazer.¹² Cheney’s jacket—and her repeated references to the bravery of female witnesses at the hearings—symbolically linked her to feminist progressivism and disassociated her (at least in the moment) from her reactionary record in office. This superficial liberalism subtly and strategically intimated that the Select Committee’s mission transcended partisanship. Cheney’s attire, demeanor, and words combined to convey that democracy must be actively performed and protected by all citizens and elected officials.

Implicit in that affirmation was an affirmation of Cheney herself, who sacrificed her standing in the Republican Party to join the Select Committee. Cheney’s crusading ethos across the hearings made them something of a sizzle reel, an advance advertisement for her postelectoral professional ambitions, whatever they might be. (Cheney lost her primary race for reelection in August

2022.) Despite using the hearings to craft her own legacy, Cheney nevertheless assisted Thompson in framing the hearings as a matter of national legacy, not party politics. In so doing, the two politicians from different parties upheld television as the legacy medium through which such narratives are engendered.

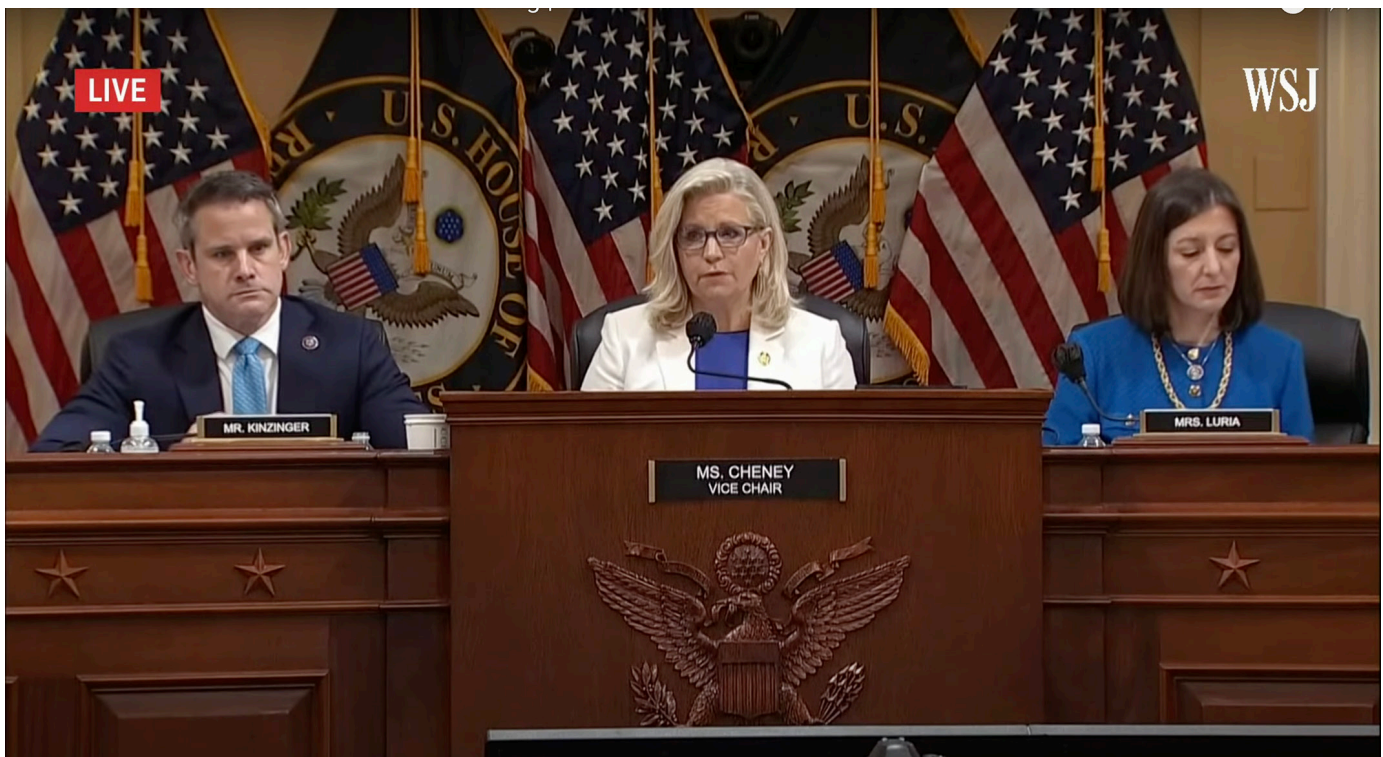
The January 6 hearings embellished and drew upon television's cultural capital to ask viewers to see themselves as Americans engaged in the collective work of historiography. Such work, the hearings asserted, was a necessarily synchronous process, unfolding through live, dialectic exchange among witnesses, committee members, and viewers. The hearings' compositional form and ideological structures thus dramatized the differences between televisual liveness and live streaming (i.e., videos created, distributed, and received concurrently online).

Both Karin van Es and Mary Anne Doane have written on this distinction, albeit not in the context of explaining why one must understand a national event, transmitted simultaneously over network and cable television and multiple websites, as televisual in order to appreciate the timeliness and timelessness of its historical project. As van Es observes, liveness is "a socio-technical construction," one that is "very much oriented around *newness* and constructing the idea of providing unique access to something of social relevance." One "can't just turn on a webcam and

call it live," she argues, although that seems to be the very premise of many live-stream feeds: show what's happening as it happens, and one will have achieved liveness and its larger sense of social relevance.¹³ The live streams of a Ring camera or a Zoom meeting differ from televisual liveness, then, because even though they provide simulcasts, they lack the social significance associated with live television.

Contra televisual ideologies of liveness, moreover, live streams typically emphasize the excitement of instantaneity over earnest public or historical concern. Hence Doane argues that "the role of televisual 'liveness' has been made more critical by the emergency and rapid dissemination of digital media that lay claim to an even more desirable temporality—'real time.'"¹⁴ Doane explains that television deploys liveness as a "crisis of temporality which signifies *urgency*." It thereby assists in "a certain slippage between the notion that television covers important events in order to validate itself as a medium and the idea that because an event is covered by television—because it is, in effect, deemed televisual—it is important."¹⁵

In sum, the real time of live streaming and the liveness of television make very different demands on their spectators: the former tend (not exclusively) to exploit the entertainment value of synchronous transmission while the latter tend (not exclusively) to invoke simultaneity for a sense of momentousness. This is why, as Doane suggests,



Rep. Liz Cheney wore suffragist white to issue the Select Committee's closing statement.

television actually benefits from digital live streaming, as it helps repurpose TV's obsolescence as cultural capital.

In summer 2022, the Select Committee needed television just as much as television needed the Select Committee. No other "socio-technical construction" of liveness would grant their hearings the gravitas and urgency the committee required to affirm their historiographic mission; no other mission could so strongly confirm television's continued significance.¹⁶ Moreover, the recordings of live-streamed video within the hearings contributed an important counterdiscourse that affirmed the hearings' televisuality. Their sheer abundance helped the Select Committee convey the hard work that they and their assistants performed in sifting through and selecting from the panoply of materials. Sifting, selecting, and framing registered as television's legacy functions, in contrast to the swamps of mis- and disinformation festering unchecked online. The hearings marked television worth watching again, just as the televisual aesthetics made the hearings worth watching too.

"We have much work yet to do." With those words, Cheney ended the Select Committee's July 21 hearing. It's not yet clear what that work will entail. Will the Select Committee find evidence that Trump deserves to be prosecuted for seditious conspiracy? Can they convince viewers that the 2020 election was not rigged or stolen? This first round of hearings ended on a bit of a cliffhanger: neither Trump nor any of his coconspirators have yet been charged with a crime, and the former president still plans to run again 2024. Thus viewers must bide their time and wait for season 2—perhaps the truest indication that the January 6 hearings were indeed must-see TV.

Notes

1. See Dana Bash, Jake Tapper, and Jeremy Herb, "January 6 Vice Chair Cheney Said Trump Had a 'Seven-Part Plan' to Overturn the Election: Here's What She Meant," *CNN*, June 10, 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/06/09/politics/jan-6-hearing-cheney-trump-overturn-election-plan/index.html.
2. The Select Committee also live streamed (and subsequently archived) the hearings on their website. See Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, "Watch Live," <https://january6th.house.gov/news/watch-live>.
3. Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology and Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Lanham, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 16–21.

4. See Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2005), 251–64.
5. Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 106.
6. Doherty, 106.
7. Doherty, 115. Importantly, Doherty notes that the hearings failed to make much of an impact when recorded, either when broadcast via kinescope on the West Coast or compiled for newsreel by the Fox Movietone News.
8. "Watch: Full Jan. 6 Committee Hearing – Day 1," YouTube video, 1:53:11, posted by MSNBC, July 1, 2022, <https://youtu.be/DQDfAQo20k8>.
9. The video notes that Trump's voice-over was excerpted from an interview recorded later, in July 2022. "Select Committee NEW Footage," "06/09/2022 SELECT COMMITTEE HEARING," Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol video, 11:18, June 9, 2022, <https://january6th.house.gov/legislation/hearings/06092022-select-committee-hearing>.
10. Sarah Ellison, Jacqueline Alemany, and Josh Dawsey, "The Subtle Stagecraft Behind the Jan. 6 Hearings," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/media/2022/06/23/jan6-hearings-story-narrative-stagecraft-james-goldston/.
11. Donald Trump starred in *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004–17) from 2004 to 2015.
12. Myriad other female politicians, including Hillary Rodham Clinton and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, have worn white suits and jackets to honor suffragist history. For more on Cheney's "suffragist white," see "Rep. Cheney Pays Tribute to the Women's Suffrage Movement in Closing Jan. 6 Remarks," *NPR*, July 22, 2022, www.npr.org/2022/07/22/1112992409/rep-cheney-jan-6-suffrage-hearing.
13. Philip Auslander, Karin van Es, and Maren Hartmann, "A Dialogue about Liveness," in *Mediated Time: Perspectives on Time in a Digital Age*, ed. Maren Hartmann, Elizabeth Prommer, Karin Deckner, and Stephan O. Görland (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 284, 279, 291.
14. Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," 262.
15. Doane, 253, 251.
16. To be sure, television still traffics in thousands of live banalities every month, from sporting events to shopping channels to the twenty-four-hour news cycle. See Mimi White, "Television Liveness: History, Banality, Attractions," *Spectator* 21, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1999/2000): 39–56.