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FALLOWS@LARGE | by James Fallows

ANOTHER WIN FOR CARL MALAMUD

Or: news you won't see in the May 2007 issue of the *Atlantic*

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About three weeks ago, I wrote the following short item while in Shanghai and sent it zooming across the ether to Washington DC, for inclusion as a tech-column sidebar in the May, 2007 issue of the *Atlantic*. You won't see it there, which is why I'm posting it here.

First, the item:

> Formal sessions of the U.S. Senate and House are mostly ritualistic and boring. The interesting public events at the Capitol, and often the important ones, take place in committee hearing rooms. On a busy day, up to 20 committees may hold hearings at the same time. C-Span can cover only a few and can't know in advance where the most valuable exchanges will occur. Thus a lot of significant public business is seen only by the people who happen to be in the room: lobbyists plus a smattering of tourists.
>
> An internet innovator named Carl Malamud is correcting this with a kind of web-based supplement to C-Span. Ten years ago Malamud tricked the Securities and Exchange Commission into making corporate financial data available free, on line. The corporate filings were already public in theory but in practice were hard to find. Malamud set up his own free web site with searchable access to the filings . After two years of operation, when the site had become widely popular, he said he would close it in 60 days and told people how to complain to the SEC if they wanted to keep getting the data. The resulting public demand forced the SEC to set up its own site.
>
> Malamud is now doing the same thing with hearings. The committees have their own webcasting services to record their meetings, but the recordings are not centrally catalogued or, in most cases, easy to download. Also, C-Span asserts copyright over its own recordings, so they cannot be distributed over the web. Malamud is amassing the committees' recordings, converting them to a standard format, and making them available, free. If you go to www.archive.org and enter the search term "hooptedoodle" (a literary allusion to John Steinbeck), you'll see his collection. He hopes people will eventually ask why Congress is not doing this job itself.

"Eventually" turned out to be a very short period of time. Two days ago Malamud sent us a note to report a very important victory for his cause. C-Span, which had previously resisted requests from Malamud and others to make its recordings widely available, changed its policy, as Malamud noted here. Good for C-Span and Brian Lamb! Good for Carl Malamud and the public's right to know! But too bad for us! We would come out a month later appearing to be the last to know about a development we had actually noticed quite early on. Fortunately we heard just in time to pull the item from the magazine and put something else in that space (wait and see).

Also see:

JamesFallows.com
James Fallows's Web site, with regularly updated dispatches, and information about his writings and appearances.

In Malamud's view, the C-Span decision, while significant, represents at best half of the overall answer. The main problem is that C-Span can cover so few of the numerous hearings happening every day. So Malamud is trying to get Congressional officials to commit to making high-quality video from **every** Congressional committee available for download on the Internet. Once they do, he will stop putting hearings on Archive.org himself. But already his

guerrilla/jiujitsu approach has made a difference — once again.

The URL for this page is http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200703u/c-span.

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