

Whitehead: 'No Censorship'

By John Carmody

Dr. Clay T. Whitehead, director of the Office of Telecommunications Policy (OTP) and a frequent critic of network television news, has again sought to assure broadcasters that the White House seeks no censorship of the media.

In a Jan. 26 letter to a National Association of Broadcasters task force, released yesterday, Whitehead elaborated on a Dec. 18 speech in Indianapolis in which he spelled out legislative proposals to modify TV license renewal regulations.

Strong language used by Whitehead at the time to describe network news content caused controversy and some confusion over the proposals among the broadcasters.

In his letter to the NAB group, Whitehead said, "I grant you that the language I used in the Dec. 18 speech (in which he scored network news for "ideological plugola" and "elitist gossip") was strong.

"But," he went on, "those who have twisted an appeal for the voluntary exercise of private responsibility into a call for government censorship—that they can then denounce—have abandoned reasoned debate in favor of polemics."

He stated flatly that "neither OTP nor the White House has any power to effect the grant or denial of any broadcast license. And we have no intent or desire to influence in any way the grants or denials of licenses by the FCC."

The statement was addressed to NAB official Mark Evans, who is also a vice president of Metromedia, Inc. here.

Evans had asked Whitehead on Jan. 4 for "a clarification" of his Indianapolis speech. In that speech, Whitehead had said that "station managers and network officials who fail to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias from the networks—or who acquiesce by silence—can only be considered willing participants to

be held fully accountable by the broadcasters' community at license renewal time."

In his reply, Whitehead said the speech was "intended to remind licensees of their responsibilities to correct faults in the broadcasting system that are not (and should not be) reachable by the regulatory processes of government.

"For network affiliates, exercise of these responsibilities does not mean that the station manager has to monitor each network feed, and 'blip' out 'ideological plugola' or 'elitist gossip.' The station management must simply be aware of all the program content on the stations . . .

"Over the license term," Whitehead continued, "the broadcaster should make a conscientious effort to provide reasonable opportunity for discussion of conflicting views on issues and see that he has the opportunity to bring his concerns to the attention of his network."

"The broadcaster," he wrote Evans, "should take

the initiative in fostering a healthy give-and-take on important issues because that is the essence of editorial responsibility in informing the public. That does not mean constricting the range of information and views available on television. It does not mean allowing three companies (presumably ABC, CBS and NBC—though they are not named in the letter) to control the flow of national TV news to the public; accountable to no one but themselves."

He said the proposed bill "would add nothing to broadcasters, present obligations to be responsible for all the programming presented or carried by the station, regardless of the source."

An OTP spokesman disclosed yesterday that Whitehead had met with President Nixon for half an hour on Monday. "The President wanted to review the broad OTP programs for the year," the spokesman said.