

Network Debate

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By John Carmody

The president of the CBS broadcast group said yesterday that Nixon administration proposals to modify TV license renewal rules "appear to be very much in the public interest."

At the same time, John A. Schneider said he "deplored" the "unwarranted allegations and some of the implications" contained in the speech delivered by Clay T. Whitehead, when the latter announced the legislative changes last month in Indianapolis.

Whitehead, director of the Office of Telecommunications Policy, had attacked what he called "the ideological plugola" and "elitist gossip in the guise of news analysis" in network news and news analysis. The Dec. 18 charges brought a sharp reaction from a number of broadcasters.

The ensuing controversy overlooked the fact that Whitehead's proposed changes in the Communications Act of 1934 did not include legislation supporting his attack on network news and the failure of affiliates to balance alleged bias.

The industry had inferred

that legislation would be included after Whitehead warned in the Indianapolis speech that "station managers and network officials who failed to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias in the networks can only be considered willing participants, to be held fully accountable . . . at license renewal time."

Last week, NBC president Julian Goodman pointed out that difference between the speech and the actual legislation when he notified his network affiliates that "we regard the principle of the (administration) bill as desirable." He noted that a "clear distinction must be made between the proposed bill and the speech announcing it."

As detailed Thursday in New York by the OTP director, the administration proposal would:

- Extend broadcast license renewal periods from the present three to five years.

- Eliminate comparative hearings by the FCC whenever a competing application is filed for the same

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broadcast service at renewal time.

- Ban the FCC from "restructuring the broadcasting industry" through its license renewal process.

- Halt use of "predetermined performance criteria" by the FCC in evaluating renewal applications.

Schneider also urged yesterday that authority be granted to the FCC on an experimental basis to "permit suspension of Fairness Doctrine obligations in cities having 25 or more radio broadcast licensees."

Schneider pointed out that Whitehead previously had mentioned this plan.

The CBS executive said such an experiment could help determine "whether the goal of an informed citizenry might be better served by giving radio stations the same freedom from governmental surveillance that print media have had since the founding of the republic."

Schneider's proposals were contained in a teletype message to the network's 194 television and 254 radio affiliates.

He said network attorneys

had advised that the administration proposal "does not alter existing law with regard to license responsibility for what is broadcast" and added parenthetically that "individual broadcast licensees have been and should be responsible for what they broadcast."

He added, however, that "we would be concerned if the context of the Whitehead speech announcing the bill . . . could be interpreted as meaning an alteration of existing law to impose novel and undefined Fairness Doctrine obligations upon licensees or networks."