

Media

TV Proposal: Reactions

By John Carmody

There was a mixed reaction yesterday among broadcasters and on Capitol Hill to the Nixon administration's latest criticism of TV network news content and a legislative proposal to make local stations responsible for the objectivity of network shows.

Most spokesmen for the broadcasters said they were withholding comment until they could see the legislative package revealed in part on Monday by Dr. Clay T. Whitehead, director of the Office of Telecommunications Policy, in a speech in Indianapolis.

Whitehead is scheduled to appear this morning on the CBS Morning News at 7 o'clock (Channel 9). He is to be interviewed by CBS correspondents John Hart and Nelson Benton, a network spokesman said.

In his address Monday, Whitehead warned that "station managers and network officials who fail to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias in the network—or who acquiesce by silence—can only be considered willing participants, to be held fully accountable... at license renewal time."

He said the administra-

tion was preparing a bill to amend the Communications Act of 1934. It would change some criteria for broadcasters who go before the Federal Communications Commission for license renewal, a process stations must go through every three years at present.

Some broadcasters say they see an implied threat in having to answer for news content to a federal agency with the power to take away the legal authority to broadcast.

Whitehead's speech drew a sharp retort yesterday from Ancil H. Payne, president of the King Broadcasting Co., licensee for three TV stations in the Pacific Northwest.

"FCC rules now require that controversial issues be treated fairly," he said. "Employing Congress to pass legislation in support of these rules seems adventuresome and unnecessary."

He called Whitehead's Monday charge that some journalists dispense "elitist gossip in the guise of news analysis" on the networks a "frightening accusation."

Lawrence Rogers, presi-

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dent of the seven-station Taft Broadcasting Co. chain, said on the other hand that "most of what I've heard about the speech so far I've liked."

He said there was "too much frothing at the mouth, too much yelling at each other" by people in the broadcast industry these days, "who don't check out the facts."

Rogers said he called Whitehead's office here yesterday and "what I heard about the draft legislation sounded like a reasonable attempt to trim back FCC power."

"For the last 40 years, generally speaking," Rogers said, "a licensee has had to be responsible. I didn't find anything different, in what I know about the speech."

In New York, CBS officials again refused comment on the Whitehead speech, though a spokesman said "it would be a fair assumption that it's getting read around here."

NBC and ABC, stuck by the brief statement they issued Monday attacking what they called the administration's attempt to "drive a wedge" between the networks and their affiliates around the country.

Sen. John O. Pastore (D-R.I.), a ranking member of the Senate Commerce Committee, declined comment on the speech yesterday. The committee would hold hearings on any broadcast legislation submitted by the administration.

"The senator told me he wouldn't and couldn't discuss the matter until he saw the legislation," a top aide said. At present Pastore is in Rhode Island and has reportedly seen only news accounts of the speech.

Meanwhile, Sen. Vance Hartke (D-Ind.), said yesterday he had written to Pastore, chairman of the Communications Subcommittee, asking that hearings be held on "government censorship of the press, including broadcast media."

Hartke, a committee member, said the "White House aide's declaration (had) all the earmarks of a new administration move toward censorship."

Top executives of WRC, WMAL and WTOP, the three local network outlets here, also declined to discuss the speech since they had not seen a copy of the proposed legislation.

In an interview last weekend, Whitehead told The As-

sociated Press that the speech was not a provocative assault on the networks.

The speech was challenged yesterday by Sig Mickelson, a former CBS News executive and now a Northwestern University journalism professor. He said the draft bill

was dangerous in that it appeared to use affiliate stations as a club to hold over the heads of the networks. "Secondly, of course, it would be making the first step toward direct control of the news," Mickelson said.