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FCC chairman Burch: Charge of plot against networks is "a bunch of hooley."

FCC Chief Disclaims Idea Of Muzzling Commentators

By Stan Benjamin

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The new chairman of the Federal Communications Commission says his interest in reviewing television news commentaries is natural for a man in his job "without necessarily suggesting that I propose to do anything about it."

Furthermore, says Dean Burch, any notion that he and Vice President Agnew are out to destroy the television networks is "a bunch of hooley."

Burch, 42-year-old former Republican chairman and Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign manager, took office Oct. 31.

One of his first acts was to telephone TV network heads for transcripts of the commentaries on President Nixon's Nov. 3 Vietnam speech. On Nov. 14, Agnew assailed what he called "instant analysis and querulous criticism" by the commentators.

While Burch disclaims any idea of trying to muzzle commentators, there are a few things, he said in an interview, he would like to do something about:

One is streamlining the FCC itself.

Another is to study and to head off—probably through voluntary industry cooperation—a growing problem of obscenity on radio and television.

And he conceded that minorities are under-represented in broadcasting.

The FCC might well consider favoring blacks, he hinted, in competition for available broadcast licenses, particularly where the black community is not adequately served.

After Agnew's criticism, ABC defended its fairness; NBC called Agnew's speech "an appeal to prejudice"; and CBS termed it an "unprecedented attempt . . . to intimidate a news medium."

FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson accused Agnew of trying to manage the news and said the appointment of Burch implied a threat to broadcasters' federal licenses.

Several congressmen

warned Burch, through Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin (D-Calif.), "that we might be found climbing up your back if there are more incidents such as this."

Burch said he would continue to seek transcripts, but through more normal—and slower—channels than personal calls to network presidents.

Here are a few excerpts from his interview comments:

Q—What is your purpose in reading transcripts of commentary?

A—It's really a matter of information more than anything else. I have a lot of interest in things that go out on the television without necessarily suggesting that I propose to do anything about it.

Q—Do you propose to do anything about commentary?

A—I have not proposed to do anything about it, no . . . I've said a hundred times that there are some agile minds at work, in your business and others, who like to speculate from two known facts that some terrible cabal is being created to destroy the networks. And I think that this is a bunch of hooley.

Q—Do you feel there is any slanting of news reporting in radio or TV that would present a problem to the FCC?

A—I don't think there is an area for the FCC in this. The "fairness doctrine" is pretty explicit; that nobody is obliged to be "fair"; what they are obliged to do is present all sides of an issue, and I think that's really about as far as the FCC should go into this.

Q—You've raised the question of keeping obscene movies off television, but you've said this is not yet a problem.

A—I think that's a fair statement.

Q—Have you seen indications that it is becoming a problem?

A—Yes, though not so much on movies.

We have some people who contend that blipping out profanity from a movie is destroying the artistic integrity.

We have a problem of phon-

ograph records which . . . if you understand them, they have very rough lyrics.

We have a very difficult problem dealing with live coverage of news . . . What's a broadcaster to do? I don't know.

We're going to have to think about it and come up with some solutions to it.

Q—Do you have an actual staff study going on?

A—Not in the formal sense, no. I've asked for materials on this . . . there are several ways of approaching this:

One is through rules and regulations; second, on a case-by-case basis; third, in a public inquiry; or, fourth, you can try to deal with it, with the industry through discussion of the subject.

And at the moment, I'm probably tending toward the latter. I haven't done it as yet, but I think I probably will.

Q—You mena something voluntary?

A—Yes, a voluntary approach.

Q—Are Negroes and other minorities under-represented in electronic media both as owners and communicators?

A—I think that's probably an accurate representation as far as certain parts of the industry are concerned . . .

One of the other charges, which does have a great deal of factual basis, is that very few blacks own any broadcasting facilities . . . Very few blacks own baseball teams, too, and other things . . . I think it's an unfortunate situation and I hope it will resolve itself is that black people will buy stations because there are no more television licenses to distribute other than UHF; there are no more AM stations.

Q—Should the FCC perhaps favor black ownership, on the basis that the black community is represented—in other words, all other things being equal, should a black broadcast-license applicant be granted a preference because he's black?

A—Assuming we had a whole reservoir of available licenses, I don't know whether that premise is valid or not, but it does not offend me . . .

I don't propose a policy for the FCC at this time, but I think it would be relevant in a comparative hearing to know that "group A" consists of black people who propose to serve the black community and that it is not being served.