



Laurence Stern

Sneers at Agnew Won't Dispel Issue of Media Performance

WHEN Vice President Agnew unloaded last week on the alleged biases of the "tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men" in the television news business, cries of foul were heard throughout the land.

That often happens when public figures attack the media, probably because there is a theory in the industry that people shouldn't bite back at their dogs.

In Agnew's case it has been charged that he seeks to erode "freedom of the press," that he is trying to muzzle the administration's critics, that he is subliminally blackmailing a \$3 billion industry with a reminder that TV licenses are given and taken away by a Federal Communications Commission whose members are appointed by the President. There is even talk about a new era of McCarthyism.

"My feeling," an overwrought CBS commentator told *Newsweek*, "is that the White House is out to get all of us, all the liberals in all the media . . . We're in for some dangerous times."

Perhaps. But the issue of media performance is not going to evaporate in this country simply because publishers and network presidents wrap themselves in the First Amendment and sneer at Spiro Agnew. For the facts are that the media are as blemished as any other institution in this society and that there is growing public concern over their performance.

This is reflected in the spectacular proliferation of underground newspapers whose constituents are young radicals and dropouts turned off by the Establish-

ment press. It is reflected in the creation (with private and public funds) of a vast network of "educational" television stations offering an alternative to whatever it is that the commercial networks happen to be selling.

IN CHICAGO, reporters and editors think so little of their daily product that they produce each month a Journalism Review cataloguing the sins and omissions of the newspapers that employ them. The Columbia Journalism Review attempts the same thing on a broader scale.

Politicians from Dwight Eisenhower to George Wallace to Eugene McCarthy have raged at the Eastern Liberal Press. Newton Minow, a former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, and Nicholas Johnson, a present member of the Commission, made their reputations assailing the TV "wasteland" to the cheers of many of the same editorial writers and critics who are now shocked at Agnew's gall.

Indeed, Commissioner Johnson has been one of the principal advocates of community pressure groups that are trying, in Agnew's phrase, to make television stations more "responsive" to public desires in programming.

If successful, these efforts will lead to the transfer of television licenses in various cities—Jackson, Miss., New York and Washington, for example—from "conservative" to "liberal" owners and managers.

One of the reasons for all this agitation is that people have come to recognize that the selection and presentation of information and

"news" is a very unscientific enterprise. Except for a few platitudes about "objectivity," "responsibility," and "news that's fit to print," there are no accepted or enforceable standards in this business.

"NEWS" IS WHAT the media say it is and the definition varies from day to day and place to place. It was "news" in The Washington Post and The New York Times last week when three doves in the Senate announced support for the antiwar demonstrations on Nov. 15. It was not "news" at all in The Times the following day when 359 congressional hawks and dawks endorsed the President's negotiating posture on the war.

In some parts of the country last week, people were told that Washington was braced for war against the howling mobs in the city. Elsewhere they read about love and singing and picnics on the public lawns.

There is no conspiracy in any of this, despite Spiro Agnew's dark suspicions. But there is much room for criticism, debate and discussion. And that debate and discussion need not be limited—should not be limited—to the dreary convention halls of the broadcasters and editors.

In a free society, the public—including public officeholders—has the biggest stake in "news" and information and its views need to be heard.

There is always going to be heat in the kitchen and if networks and newspapers can't take it they're in worse shape than they seem.