

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

WEDNESDAY, JULY 7, 1971

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The Responsibility of Broadcasters

Although the authors of the Constitution could hardly have foreseen television as a technique of news dissemination, their concern when they wrote the First Amendment was in keeping the flow of news to the people untrammelled; and since more people, it is said, get their news today from television than from the printed page, it follows by every consideration of logic and common sense that the content of TV programs must, like the content of newspapers, be free from governmental supervision.

But Representative Harley Staggers, the chairman of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, takes the view that it is the business of his committee to see to it that fairness prevails on the air waves. He did not like a recent Columbia Broadcasting System program called "The Selling of the Pentagon"; and so he has ordered CBS to furnish his committee with all the scripts and filmed material (called "outtakes") that went into the preparation of the program but were not actually a part of the finished product. It is as though he were to demand from this newspaper the rough drafts of this editorial including paragraphs edited out of the final version. The president of CBS, Dr. Frank Stanton, courteously but firmly declined to do so, asserting that the demand, "though aimed at CBS, is effect taking dead aim against the First Amendment."

Mr. Staggers says that all that is involved in this controversy "is simply whether we are going to

tolerate calculated deception on television." And he added gratuitously — and altogether inaccurately — that "CBS says it is none of the public's business." In the first place, he has no warrant whatever for the charge of "calculated deception." Whether or not the program, like many another presentation of news in print or on the air, was flawed, there is no evidence at all that it was intentionally distorted. And in the second place CBS has never said, or even intimated, that the program is "none of the public's business." It has merely said that it is none of the House Commerce Committee's business, a very different thing indeed.

A majority of the committee voted last Thursday to recommend that the House of Representatives cite CBS and Dr. Stanton for contempt of Congress. The issue is expected to come to the House floor week after next. Members of the House will be strongly tempted no doubt to demonstrate their loyalty to Mr. Staggers and to the Commerce Committee by sustaining its authority. But they owe their real loyalty to the principle of press freedom which CBS is defending. That principle, so recently vindicated in the courts so far as newspapers are concerned, ought not to be so grossly challenged again. The responsibility of television, like the responsibility of the rest of the press, is not to the government but to the people in whose name the government exercises certain limited, specified powers. And that responsibility can be discharged only through independence of the government.