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Radio and Television

Undue Alarm At FCC Ruling

By Lawrence Laurent

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BROADCASTERS are in a great state of agitation over a recent FCC decision that the 18-year-old Fairness Doctrine applies to cigarette commercials.

This means, said the FCC, that radio and TV station owners would have to provide time for opposing points of view. It suggested this could be done with the public service films made by the American Cancer Society and HEW. It also recommended news programs and panel discussions.

Broadcaster, who regard the crook of an FCC little finger as a potential judo chop, see dire circumstances ahead. One pointed out that radio and TV might lose cigarette advertising, which currently amounts to \$20 million a year.

Another said that the FCC could apply the Fairness Doctrine to the advertising of beer and wine.

"And," worried another station operation, "what about automobiles?"

THE INDUSTRY'S chief trade publication, Broadcasting magazine, thundered that last week's decision is a "real threat to the broadcaster's basic modes and policies of operation."

Vincent T. Wasilewski, president of the National Association of Broadcasters, asked the FCC to reconsider the "broad threat to all advertising which the Commission's action could portend."

Before the wailing gets to its greatest pitch one might look carefully at the decision itself. In the first place, WCBS-TV won its case. The FCC said the station is already complying with the Fairness Doctrine in its regular programming.

Nearly every station has unsold time into which anti-cigarette announcements can be dropped. Thus, the decision involves additional bookkeeping but not the loss of \$20 million in revenue. (By the way, broadcasting's income is at an annual level of \$3 billion.)

Also, it might be well to re-

member that a station rarely loses a license on a single, narrow issue. The seven FCC Commissioner look at three years of station operation and decide whether it is in "the public interest, convenience and necessity" to renew the license.

THE LOOK is casual, as Commissioner Nicholas Johnson dissenting opinion. He was noting renewal of a license for a station that had carried 33 commercial minutes per broadcast hour.

Wrote Johnson: "Can the public be offered nothing save the realization that, at this rate, it will be 1994 before the radio hour is totally consumed with commercials?"

Before worrying about possible, future loss of revenue from beer, wine or automobiles, one might look carefully at the unique problem of cigarette makers. Each carton and each pack I buy must carry—by act of Congress—the warning: "Cigarette Smoking May Be Hazardous to Your Health." Congress thus decided that our smoking habit is a controversial subject. The unanimous ruling by the FCC merely followed that decision.

This doesn't mean that cigarette commercials will disappear from broadcasting. It does mean that a little more time will be devoted to those who don't rejoice over the benefits of the habit.