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An Audience of Vigilantes?

THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION has launched a phony attack on the television networks, and the networks have responded with a bogus defense. Uninstructed people, as a result, have the impression that freedom and liberty are under serious fire in this country.

In fact, the issue is what kind of society we want to shape through television. It is a question of whether we want a self-indulgent society with anarchic tendencies, or a society of tighter common bonds including a touch of elitist culture.

The starting point for all this is that the administration feels that the networks, and especially CBS, are hostile to Mr. Nixon. Presidential advisers have been trying to put the networks on the defensive for years.

THE LATEST effort comes from Clay Whitehead, the Director of the

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White House Office of Telecommunications Policy. In a speech on December 18, Mr. Whitehead called on local station owners to monitor the networks for "ideological plugola" and "elitist gossip" in the evening news shows. The networks shot back with the usual charge that the White House was threatening the First Amendment guarantees of a free press.

A moment's reflection disposes of both the attack and the defense. The bias of the networks, if it exists, had as its most important recent political outcome that Mr. Nixon received 60 per cent of the vote and carried all but one state in the last election. Freedom of expression, far from being in jeopardy, is remarkable for the far-out examples that keep cropping up in the press, television, films, dress and everyday behavior.

But just because the fight isn't about what the protagonists say it's about doesn't mean that the fight isn't serious. In fact, the fight is important in the way that television is important.

TELEVISION is a negligible influence in determining opinion on particular issues or candidates. It is important as a social force, shaping life in the almost unconscious way that the automobile has shaped life over the

CYNICISM about authority is strongly promoted. Important world figures, traditionally magnified by remoteness, appear on the screen in the living room and are casually discussed as familiars. Mere children, exposed to rampant selling techniques, develop a precocious sophistication about being taken in.

Commitment, and indeed attention, are eroded by television. Viewers are spared the task of buying a book or going to see a concert. They can switch from channel to channel. It says a great deal that the current expression for alienation is a TV metaphor—"turned off."

Another social consequence of television is the widening of protest beyond politics and economics to a cultural dimension. Since TV markets a prevailing ethos, those who would promote change feel first obliged to fight the ethos. Thus black leaders feel required to come on as militants, not the polite, smiling Negroes who normally appear on TV dramas. Woman's libbers affect the Cult of Ugliness to offset the chic, smiling ladies of the TV screens.

In these conditions, the decentralization of TV power advocated by the White House seems to me the very opposite of wisdom. Giving more weight to the local community is establishing over television a kind of vigilante authority by regional and ethnic groups, full of their own self-importance and with little respect for national values.

The networks have national sensitivities at least dimly in mind. Their



Clay Whitehead

evening news shows bespeak a high professional quality. Thus the case for Walter Cronkite and John Chancellor and Harry Reasoner is not the First Amendment. It is that, in a divisive time, they express values that make it easier for us to live with ourselves.

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past half-century. Much as the automobile yielded on unforeseen pattern of life now known as suburbia as its end product, so television will probably produce patterns of life not yet visible. But already some of the social impact of television is evident.

The self-indulgent instinct, for one thing, is powerfully advanced by TV. The best and fanciest of the world's goods are projected into every home. Those who don't have are stimulated in the strongest way to go out and get theirs by acts of self-assertion.