

Administration Moves to Tie TV Licenses to News Shows

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By John Carmody

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In a speech sharply critical of the television networks, a Nixon administration spokesman announced yesterday that legislation has been prepared that would make local stations responsible for the objectivity of network news shows.

Dr. Clay T. Whitehead, director of the Office of Telecommunications Policy, said the proposed legislation would

amend the TV station license renewal provisions of the Communications Act of 1934.

His comments and some of the legislative proposal were contained in a speech before the Indianapolis, Ind. chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, a professional journalism society.

Whitehead said the legislation would establish two criteria for renewal, which each TV station would have to meet before the Federal Communi-

cations Commission would grant a new license.

• "The broadcaster must demonstrate he has been substantially attuned to the needs and interests of the communities he serves . . . irrespective of where the programs were obtained . . . and

• "The broadcaster must show that he has afforded reasonable, realistic, and practi-

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cal opportunities for the presentation and discussion of conflicting views on controversial issues.

(In Washington, an OTP source said the bill now being discussed at the Office of Management and Budget would also increase the license renewal period from every three to every five years. He also said another provision, not discussed by Whitehead, would "put the burden" on community groups to prove their complaints against local broadcasters before the FCC would hold a hearing. In the past, lengthy adjudication has sometimes arisen from renewal complaints.

All these points, the source said, were "actually pro-broadcasting" and arose from a meeting between some 30 broadcasters and President Nixon here last June).

But it was the suggestion made by Whitehead yesterday that local broadcasters be responsible for network news content that caused network concern.

"When there are only a few sources of national news on television, as we now have," Whitehead said, "editorial responsibility must be exercised more effectively by local broadcasters and by network management."

"Station managers and network officials who fail to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias in the networks—or who acquiesce by silence—can only be considered willing participants, to be held fully accountable... at license renewal time."

Whitehead did not spell out how local stations might assess the content of network coverage in advance or on what basis the FCC might judge stations in violation.

In Washington, the OTP source said the proposed bill was still in the planning stage and that "Whitehead was really starting the debate with today's speech."

Continuing his attack on network news, Whitehead said that "station owners and managers cannot abdicate responsibility for news judgments."

"When a reporter or disc jockey slips in or passes over information in order to line his pocket, that's 'plugola' and management would take quick corrective action."

"But men also stress or suppress information in accordance with their beliefs. Will station licensees or network executives also take action against this ideological 'plugola'?"

Station licensees have final responsibility for news balance—whether the information comes from their own newsroom or from a distant network. The old refrain that "we had nothing to do with that report" is an evasion of responsibility and unacceptable as a defense.

The OTP chief stressed several times that 61 per cent of the average affiliate's schedule is network programming.

Whitehead also said that local broadcasters "can no longer accept network standards of taste, violence, and decency in programming. If the programs or commercials glorify the use of drugs, if the programs are violent or

sadistic, if the commercials are false or misleading, or simply intrusive and obnoxious, the stations must jump on the networks rather than wince as the Congress and the FCC are forced to do so."

The OTP chief stressed that if a station "can't demonstrate meaningful service to all elements of its community, the license should be taken away by the FCC."

"The standard," Whitehead said, "should be applied with particular force to the large TV stations in our major cities, including the 15 stations owned by the TV networks and the stations that are owned by other large broadcast groups."

"These broadcasters, especially," he said, "have the resources to devote to community development, community service and programs that reflect a commitment to excellence." (Each of the three networks has five owned-and-operated affiliates around the nation.)

A spokesman for NBC yesterday said, "The administration's plan as described by Mr. Whitehead seems to be another attempt to drive a wedge between television stations and the networks."

"This is regrettable because the ability of our broadcasting system to expand its service to the public depends on continuity of a close and cooperative association of networks and stations, particularly in the area of news and information, without government interference." Spokesmen for ABC and CBS were unavailable.

White House press secretary

Ronald L. Ziegler later yesterday declined to comment when asked if Whitehead's hard-hitting speech had been written by presidential speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, who has often been critical of the way radio and TV cover Mr. Nixon.

Ziegler also declined to comment on whether Whitehead's speech was intended as a threat of license revocation.

Whitehead also addressed himself to the current worries in the journalism profession over the First Amendment.

"The First Amendment's guarantee of a free press was not supposed to create a privileged class of men called journalists, who are immune from criticism by government or restraint by publishers and editors," he said.

"To the contrary, the working journalist, if he follows a professional code of ethics, gives up the right to present his personal point of view when he is on the job."

"Who else, but management," Whitehead asked, "can or should correct so-called professionals who confuse sensationalism with sense and who dispense elitist gossip in the guise of news analysis?"

Whitehead has taken the lead in administration attacks on broadcasting over the past 14 months. In recent weeks broadcasting industry sources have hinted he may leave for a job in the private sector soon: An MIT graduate and Rand Corp. employee before joining the administration, he is considered an expert in systems engineering and other technical fields.