

## Message for the Media

The White House message to American broadcasters—commercial, public and educational—is coming through louder and clearer every day. That message is blunt: Stay away from controversial subjects. If you behave yourself, we will renew your license for a longer term. If you get Government funding, we will determine the kind of programs you will air.

Over the past two decades, occasional efforts have been made by White House spokesmen and Federal Communications Commissioners to interfere with the content of television programs, usually when they considered specific shows too critical of some aspect of Government policy. Now, for the first time, an Administration is trying to change the independent structure of broadcasting itself by attempting to drive a wedge between commercial and public networks and their affiliated local stations.

The White House broadcasting czar, Clay T. Whitehead, youthful head of the Office of Telecommunications Policy, has proposed changes in licensing practices that circumvent the legislative authority of the F.C.C. The transparent goal of the changes is to hold out a honeypot to the local broadcasters—renewal of licenses for five years instead of three, plus vastly increased immunity against upset by outsiders eager to take over their Government-granted channel—provided they walk a tightrope of accountability to Washington for any network programs they put on the air.

What this means is that the major news, documentary and entertainment programs produced by N.B.C., C.B.S. and A.B.C. would be carefully scrutinized and possibly blacked out if deemed to contain what Mr. Whitehead, in his menacing phrase, calls "ideological plugola." One correspondent who is generally in strong sympathy and stronger favor with the Administration, Howard K. Smith of A.B.C. News, summed it up: "It begins to look like a general assault on reporters" that could lead to a time when "we will live solely by Government handout."

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A similar threat is unfolding for public broadcasting stations. Henry Loomis, the new president of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, has served notice on these stations that their funds will be in jeopardy unless he and his Presidentially-appointed board approve their major programs. These are interconnected by the Public Broadcasting Service, a creative subsidiary made up of representatives of the public and educational stations.

Early next month the C.P.B. and P.B.S. boards will meet to attempt to define programing responsibilities. Since substantially all of P.B.S.'s operating funds come from grants made by Mr. Loomis's agency, he is expected to call the tune. He has already declared that programs of a controversial nature in news and public affairs are not welcome. Unless the many loyal viewers of public broadcasting recognize and protest this Government interference in the programing process, the stations are in danger of being reduced to approved blandness.

In both commercial and public broadcasting, locally originated programs are of great value to communities. But it is impossible for local stations to produce the major national and international news programs vital for an informed public and electorate. These require large, skilled staffs and major investments of time and money. By striking at the networks, the Office of Telecommunications Policy and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting are striking at the heart of news and public affairs programs.

This is the message for the media. Even if Congress does not undercut the F.C.C.'s authority or approve licensing changes, the Administration will have succeeded in warning the networks and stations to avoid programs that do not follow the Government line. The voices of Congress and the public will have to be heard if broadcasting is not to be turned into a counterpart of the domestic United States Information Agency.