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A Newspaper Editor Attacks TV Licensing Bill

By DAVID K. SHIPLER

The Nixon Administration's proposal that local television stations be held accountable for the content of network news they broadcast drew sharp criticism yesterday from Robert G. Fichtenberg, chairman of the freedom of information committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

"This is one of the most ominous attacks yet on the people's right to a free flow of information and views," Mr. Fichtenberg declared in a written statement.

"It is consistent with a pattern in which the executive branch of the Federal Government appears committed to an assault on the First Amendment, specifically the people's right to be informed without Government interference."

Mr. Fichtenberg was referring to a bill drafted by Clay T. Whitehead, director of the White House Office of Telecom-

munications Policy, and made public by Mr. Whitehead in a speech in Indianapolis several weeks ago.

Without citing any examples, Mr. Whitehead's speech condemned "ideological plugola," "consistent bias" and "elite gossip in the guide of news analysis," and stressed that local stations must be held responsible for such programming, even if it come from networks.

The bill he is proposing, however makes no specific reference to such accountability. It extends from three to five years the period between license renewals, and it provides two broad obligations to be met by the station that seeks renewal: that it "has been substantially attuned to the needs and interests of the public in its service area," and that it has opened its facilities to "the discussion of conflicting views on issues of public importance."

Mr. Whitehead has contended that the change would ac-

tually decrease the Government's regulatory role but that, in return, broadcasters must scrutinize network programming.

But Mr. Fichtenberg, who is executive editor of The Knickerbocker News-Union-Star in Albany, said he saw in the proposal "the prospect of Government control of TV news programming through the threat of withdrawing licenses from those stations that do not monitor network news programs to the administration's satisfaction."

"Thus the White House plans to substitute its judgment on what is news and fair comment for the judgment of the public and the TV broadcaster," Mr. Fichtenberg continued. "There is only one appropriate word for this type of system: censorship."

In reply, Brian Lamb, Mr. Whitehead's assistant, said: "It is very disturbing to see a committee going by that name and supposedly upholding the highest professional standards of accuracy making statements so clearly erroneous and so clearly misinformed."