

# Concern by Networks

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## N.B.C. Sees Effort to Cast Discredit, But U.S. Aide Stresses Responsibility

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

In his Indianapolis speech and in a recent interview with editors and reporters of The New York Times, Clay T. Whitehead, director of the White House's Office of Telecommunications Policy, has limited himself to broad generalities on over-all broadcasting policy. Both his insistent avoidance of specifics and his coupling of the proposed communications bill with an attack on some aspects of television content have triggered, apparently with calculation, intense debates on the motives of the Nixon Administration.

In contrast to the cool official language of the bill, some of the rhetoric of the speech was especially provocative, particularly on the subject of network news. It was this element that went further than most past criticism from the White House on the content of television.

In a message to National Broadcasting Company affiliates this week, Julian Goodman, president of N.B.C., supplied what he called "an indication" of his network's views: While "we are all for that basic goal" of the proposed bill—extending the term of a station's license to five years from three and increased insulation against challenges to license renewals, "Mr. Whitehead's speech is an entirely different matter—the speech and the bill must be considered separately even though they were presented as a package."

### 'Divisive Issues'

The speech, Mr. Goodman said, continued a calculated attack against network news. "That campaign," he charged, "seeks to discredit an independent national news medium and to reduce public trust in it. It tries to manufacture divisive issues between stations and networks. Its goal is to influence the content of broadcast news programs, both local and network, so that broadcasters will avoid reporting news the Government does not like."

Mr. Whitehead stressed in his interview at The Times that the decision to combine disclosure of the proposed bill with the speech was "quite intentional." The message of the combination is that the Administration is going to support broadcasters, but that the local broadcasters will have to demonstrate "responsibility" in relation to national network programing, especially news. The debates, and confusion, in and out of the industry, center on the nature and

evaluation of that responsibility.

The speech referred to several areas of responsibility: minority-group needs; violence in content; children's programing; reruns and commercials. But it was Mr. Whitehead's reference to "objectivity in news and public affairs programing," complete with charges of "ideological plugola" and "elitist gossip," that stirred the most controversy.

For his part, Mr. Whitehead insisted in his interview at The Times that he was interested primarily in less Government regulation of what is essentially a business, and in the creation of opportunities for a greater diversity of viewpoints. If those viewpoints are not provided by the networks, which are generally characterized as being more liberal than the stations as a group, they must be provided by the stations, either through preemption of "biased" or offensive network content or through counterprograming at the local level.

While the Federal Communications Commission would remain the final arbiter in the renewal of station licenses, Mr. Whitehead conceded that the proposed bill would take away "a lot of power" from the agency.

Prepared by Mr. Whitehead's office, the draft of a proposed letter to the Speaker of the House explains that the proposed legislation "would establish the local community as the point of reference for evaluating a broadcaster's performance."

"In effect, the letter says, "it would place the responsibility and incentive for superior performance in the hands of the local licensee and the public he undertakes to serve."

### Use of Percentages

It is at this point that Mr. Whitehead's proposed legislation becomes vague. The bill would bar certain guidelines, that the F.C.C. has been considering for the past year. These guidelines would set specific percentages for several program categories such as religion, national news and local news. These guidelines are being considered, industry watchdogs say, because many stations would be quite content to schedule nothing but old reruns.

What evaluative criteria, then would the commission use at license-renewal time? Mr. Whitehead says, "I would hope that it would be a fairly general test. We've made it very clear that the burden of proof is on the person who would challenge the license."

What would the proposed bill do to make stations and the networks behave differently from the way they do now? Mr. Whitehead answers: "Absolutely nothing. This law provides no vehicle for the White House to use, the Congress to use, or anyone else to use, to force stations to do anything. It takes away."

It is this element that prompts some media professionals to charge that the Whitehead speech may have been a smokescreen for the bill that will give the broadcasting industry several long-sought goals.

Others contend that the bill would presume, without justification of the record, exemplary conduct on the part of the stations, and that no real requirement is included for the discussion of public issues.

And, most prominently, there is the accusation by media observers that the speech's preoccupation with "bias" in network news is simply another round in the Nixon Administration's battle with the press, both print and electronic.

There is, however, another possible scenario. During informal comments after his interview at this paper, Mr. Whitehead said he personally would like to see more ballet and country bluegrass music on television.

But he conceded that complete diversity of programing would be almost impossible in the current, limited structure of commercial television. There does happen to be one solution looming in the future: cable television.

Mr. Whitehead's office has been working on, and is about ready to release, recommendations for the future growth of the cable industry. But that growth, Mr. Whitehead said, will "be over the dead body of the networks," which see the channel abundance of cable as an economic threat.

For all of the network nervousness about the Whitehead speech, it should be noted that each network would benefit greatly from the bill as the owners of five major stations in the top markets.