

New pressures on reporters

Examiner Services

WASHINGTON — The attempt by lawyers for Vice President Spiro T. Agnew to compel newsmen to disclose their sources of information has revived interest in legislation to prevent such action.

Bills that would give newsmen the right to refuse to disclose their sources have been lying idle for months in House and Senate committees, but efforts to move them can now be expected.

Eight reporters who wrote stories about the grand jury investigation of Agnew have been ordered by Agnew's lawyers to bring their notes and any other records that would disclose their sources to the federal courthouse in Baltimore Thursday. The newsmen are expected to resist the order.

The prospect of a major legal battle over the rights of a free press prompted Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.), yesterday to call for prompt action on legislation to protect newsmen's sources.

And Rep. Jerome R. Waldie (D-Antioch, Calif.), urged House action, saying the subpoenas served on the newsmen by Agnew's lawyers were designed to intimidate the press.

Proxmire is co-sponsor of a bill that has been before the Senate Constitutional Rights subcommittee since March 8, with no action having been taken on it.

"Any reporter worth his salt is going to refuse to reveal his sources and will probably face contempt proceedings," said Proxmire. "That in turn could force the issue in the U.S. Supreme Court, which in the past has been reluctant to uphold outright the fundamental journalistic ethic to protect news sources who want such protection."

It was a 5-4 decision of the Supreme Court in June, 1972, holding that newsmen had no constitutional right to refuse to disclose their sources, that led to the introduction of the bills now pending in the House and Senate.

The court invited Congress to provide protection for newsmen through legislation, if it felt such protection desirable, and there was an early surge or support for the bills by the news media.

It soon developed, however, that the absolute protection desired by much of the media had little chance of passage in Congress and enthusiasm for the legislation waned.

Last June a House Judiciary subcommittee headed by Rep. Robert W. Kastenmeier (D-Wis.), approved a bill that would grant absolute protection against disclosure of news sources to grand juries or other investigative bodies, but would permit disclosure at the trial stage under limited circumstances.

In recent weeks, private negotiations within the media have indicated growing support for Kastenmeier's bill, and he said last week he feels encouraged enough to present it to the full Judiciary Committee later this month.