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**F.B.I.'s 'Open' Policy on Press
Called Only Partly Successful**

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 30 — Traditionally, except when G-men were shooting down notorious bank bandits in the 1930's and wanted to build an image, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has viewed the press with the same friendliness it reserved for domestic Communists and the less exotic felons.

But when Clarence M. Kelley took over last July as the bureau's new director, he said that the tight-lipped "no comment" would disappear, to be replaced with an "open stance" on press policy.

So far, according to news reporters whose job it is to report F.B.I. activities, the new policy has, at best, been only partly successful. Most of the reporters say that they believe Mr. Kelley is sincere, but that it might be impossible to change the bureau's long-standing habits.

"As far as I can see, the Kelley policy has been more cosmetic than fact," said Tom Stewart, who has been reporting F.B.I. activities for Reuters, the British News agency, for nearly five years.

Margaret Gentry of the Associated Press, the largest news gathering agency in the United States, says, "It's still wait and see as far as I can see. I still don't find much that the F.B.I. will talk about."

Some Changes Noted

Still, there is little question that there have indeed been some changes in the bureau's relationship with the news media since Mr. Kelley became its director.

Robert Russ Franck, who heads the bureau's external affairs division, which includes press relations, says, "There is a responsibility on the part of reporters to learn that we are more accessible now than ever before in our history. Many reporters have not bothered to find that out."

Reporters might find many of the changes slight, but often the best news articles are built on the piecing together of slivers of information. Thus, Miss Gentry found it significant when the F.B.I. admitted in public that it was, in fact, investigating the 18-minute erasure on a Watergate tape.

"Under Mr. Hoover they might not, they probably would not, have made such an admission," she said, referring to the late J. Edgar Hoover, whose tight reign over the bureau was legendary in a city where every Government bureau leaks information like a sieve.

And Mr. Kelley has worked mightily to open the bureau to the press.

Promises to Respond

In a speech before the National Newspaper Association meeting in October, in Hot Springs, Va., Mr. Kelley said: "Now I am aware that in the past the F.B.I. has had something less than a wide-open press policy. But times change. And I wish to assure you that as a matter of policy henceforth, the F.B.I. will respond only to news media inquiries insofar as we are permitted by mandates of law and ethics."

One of his first acts was to set up the 32-man external affairs division headed by Mr. Franck, an assistant director of the bureau with 22 years' ex-

perience as an F.B.I. agent and executive. The division's job is to handle press inquiries and queries from the public and Congress.

The bureau receives, for instance, 90,000 letters from the public a year and the division's job is to answer each one. The division is also charged with supplying speakers for the 14,000 requests the bureau gets each year from civic groups, high schools, colleges and the like.

Late in October, the new director started a series of executive management seminars. Eight of these were held throughout the country; each lasted for five days and each brought together F.B.I. agents and executives to meet with private industry management experts and local news media people.

Gave News Conferences

Mr. Kelley appeared at all eight, and at each gave a news conference—such a conference, according to Mr. Franck, being one of the director's devices to encourage local agents to deal more directly with the press. Such conferences were unheard of in the days of Mr. Hoover.

In the bureau's largest office, in New York City, where there are more than 1,000 agents Mr. Franck has installed two agents whose sole business is dealing with the press.

But thus far, the Kelley-Franck effort has not been too successful, most reporters feel.

"They now explain to us why they can't give us information instead of merely saying "no comment," said one Washington-based reporter who covers the bureau.

Ralph Blumenthal, a reporter for The New York Times who works in New York, said that he recently called the F.B.I. in New York for information and was given the old, "no comment."

"They didn't even say, 'Look, we can't talk, but why don't you call Washington?' It was just 'no comment,'" he said.

The Wrong Person

Mr. Franck, however, attributes that sort of answer to the reporter reaching the wrong person in the local office. Under bureau regulations only the agent in charge of the office or his No. 1 aide may answer questions; agents may not.

Another problem he sees is the fact that few reporters have read the bureau's guidelines for giving out information to the press—guidelines drawn up not by the bureau but by the Attorney General.

Reporters, on the other hand, say that even if the bureau is sincere, there is little indication that F.B.I. men in the field are confident enough to deal with the press after so many years of a rather closed press policy.

For the F.B.I. however, the question of being open with the press is not a simple one, for the bureau, as a law enforcement agency, must be circumspect in the information it does release.

That is, there is a point where the release of information about an episode may so prejudice that case that it would be impossible for a judge to do anything but dismiss the charges against the defendants.