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Major TV Networks Accused Of Censoring News Coverage

By ROBERT WINDELER

A Senator and a Federal Communications commissioner on Sunday accused the news divisions of the country's three major television networks of competitiveness at the expense of the public interest and charged that they failed to cover events affecting the economic interests of television and its advertisers.

But both men agreed that neither Congress, nor the F.C.C., nor any other regulatory agency would ever do anything about this because the networks were so powerful and First Amendment freedoms so solid.

Senator John O. Pastore, chairman of the Senate Communications Subcommittee, and Commissioner Nicholas Johnson appeared on "The Whole World Is Watching," a two-hour television program prepared by the Public Broadcast Laboratory. The program, an examination of television news reporting, was seen on the country's non-commercial educational network of 146 stations. It was televised here from 8 to 10 P.M. over Channel 13.

Senator Pastore, Democrat of Rhode Island, said "the one fault" he had found with network news was "this keen competitiveness" based on "money, money, advertising, selling the program, ratings, money—money is the source of all, evil, and there's a lot of money in broadcasting."

Mr. Johnson said, "not charging specific instances of abuse."

that there were big-business conflicts of interest.

The Radio Corporation of America, which owns the National Broadcasting Company, he said, gets from 18 to 20 per cent of its income from defense contracts.

"Many of the top defense contractors are multiple station owners," he said. "Here is a conflict of interest with a corporation that is profiting from war reporting about the war to a nation that is going to determine its future course with regard to that war based upon the attitudes of the people that are derived from what they've seen on television."

He also cited the cigarette and automobile industries as responsible for TV's practicing "a form of self-imposed censorship." He said:

"The cigarette industry, which provides roughly one-tenth of the advertising revenue of the broadcasters, has produced the result that tens of thousands of Americans have died of heart disease and cancer and other diseases that are exacerbated by cigarette smoking. And we're never told by the media that cigarette smoking was associated with anything other than football and fun and good times.

"Automobile manufacturers are big advertisers. When do we ever hear about the unsafe automobile?"

Newsmen on Program

Other guests on the wide-ranging program—in separately filmed appearance— included the newsmen David Brinkley, Walter Cronkite, Frank Reynolds and Sander Vanocur, and the presidents of the three network news departments: Elmer Lower (American Broadcasting Company), Richard S. Salant (Columbia Broadcasting System) and Reuven Frank (N.B.C.). Some of them attempted to answer the Senator's and the commissioner's charges. Others raised new issues.

Mr. Salant said, "I do think that perhaps competition led to an overemphasis during one phase of our reporting in Vietnam on the small actions which made good pictures at the expense of what the meaning of it all was."

Mr. Frank said: "I don't remember being asked or told to lay off a story by R.C.A. or getting requests like that coming from R.C.A. through any of my superiors. News coverage generally happens too fast for anything like that to take place."

Mr. Lower said: "I've been here five years at A.B.C. and I can't honestly say that I felt advertiser pressure. That does not mean the advertisers agree with everything we do. They certainly don't."

'Scorecard' Kept

Mike Wallace, the C.B.S. newsman, said that when he was in Vietnam other network correspondents kept "a kind of scorecard as to which pieces were and were not used, and why, and it did seem as though an inordinate number of combat pieces were used compared with some first-rate pieces in the political area or the pacification area or nonbloody stories."

Mr. Reynolds, Mr. Johnson and others said television depended too much on the wire services and tended to be led by "the disproportionate influence" of The New York Times. Mr. Vanocur said TV news had been trying for a long time to get away from a feeling that "whatever The New York Times says is fit to print is necessarily what's news."