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The Vice President on TV

In his far-reaching attack on the national television networks, Vice President Agnew has exacerbated the division among the people of this country over the Administration's Vietnam policies and at the same time has undermined the basic principle of freedom of speech on the airwaves.

While acknowledging that "every American has a right to disagree with the President of the United States and to express publicly his disagreement," it is precisely because a number of network commentators did in fact disagree with President Nixon that Mr. Agnew has now questioned the integrity of television news broadcasters and broadcasting as a whole. It is perfectly obvious from the whole tenor of his address that if their comment had been favorable, Mr. Agnew's—and the Administration's—reaction would have been quite different.

One does not have to argue that news as offered the American public on the television screen—or for that matter on the newspaper page—is always free of partisanship or sensationalism to find Mr. Agnew's conspiratorial theory of news presentation to be not only unwarranted but positively dangerous to the very concept of freedom that he pretends to endorse.

It is one thing to criticize the TV networks (or the newspapers) for failing on occasion to give an even-handed presentation of news dealing with highly controversial subjects. It is quite another thing to do what Mr. Agnew has now done, which is to imply that a "tiny", enclosed fraternity of privileged men" determine public opinion by manipulating television news and commentary. What this major spokesman for the Nixon Administration is now saying amounts to little less than a demand that TV news be tailored to "serve the national search for internal peace and stability," and that TV commentators take a generally friendly political position to the Administration that happens to be in power.

Mr. Agnew's remarks are particularly offensive because, as the second-highest elective officer of the United States Government, he is in effect putting extreme pressure on communications media that are under direct control (through Federal regulation of the airwaves) of the United States Government. This is a transparent form of intimidation foreshadowed by the extraordinary action of Dean Burch, newly appointed chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, in personally phoning the presidents of the three national networks to ask for transcripts of their commentators' remarks following Mr. Nixon's speech.

But quite apart from his attack on the principles of the First Amendment, Mr. Agnew's clumsy defense of President Nixon's ambiguous speech of Nov. 3 does nothing to add to the credibility of the Administration's position in Vietnam. The vulgar personal attack on Avrell Harriman, President Johnson's chief negotiator in Paris, serves only to enlarge the doubts about President Nixon's position, not to narrow them. When he charges Governor Harriman with bargaining away "some of the greatest military concessions in the history of warfare" for virtually nothing, does Mr. Agnew mean he wishes to resume the bombing of North Vietnam? In practically accusing Mr. Harriman of *lèse-majesté*, does he really mean that the President is not to be criticized? By his irresponsible comments, the Vice President has but widened and sharpened the division among Americans over the wisdom and effectiveness of President Nixon's Vietnam policy.

This is not the way to achieve the national unity the President is seeking. Nor can Mr. Nixon, taking the relatively high road while Mr. Agnew takes the absolutely low, continue for much longer to escape responsibility for the divisive, intemperate utterances of a man he says he is "proud" to have as Vice President of the United States.