

Threat of Censorship in Agnew Speech

In a telegram sent last month to Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, ACLU Executive Director John de J. Pemberton, Jr., said:

"Your charges against network commentators raise serious implications for freedom of the press, a central American liberty. Freedom from government restraint is especially important for broadcast journalism because of its major role in news dissemination.

Fairness Doctrine

"The First Amendment protects equally your right to rebut TV commentators and their right to criticize your Administration. If it is your contention that an imbalance exists, recourse is available to you, as to any citizen, through the Fairness Doctrine promulgated by the FCC and sustained by the U.S. Supreme Court.

"Your concern about the structure of an information industry which concentrates vast power in the hands of a few men properly focuses attention on the dangers to diversity in such control. But by joining your reaction to the commentators' criticisms with a demand that the networks be made more responsive to the views of the nation you have made a clear and chilling threat of government measures to penalize those criticisms. That threat is inherently a threat of censorship.

"Network commentators are not 'self-appointed analysts.' They are selected by Program Directors as newspaper columnists, are selected by Editors, and both must earn their audiences. The broadcast industry may be distinguished from the print media by its structure, but it must not be differentiated by a variable right to select commentators and their right to express their views.

"We implore you to cease criticism of journalists certain to be taken as pressure and intimidation upon an independent right of the free press."
