

N.Y. Trial Lawyers Offer To Defend Newsmen Free

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New York

An association of 3500 New York trial lawyers pledged yesterday to defend freedom of the press against what it called a major attack by the Nixon administration, mounted by "people who can't stand criticism."

"This is not the media's fight alone, it is the people's fight," declared Melvin Block, president of the New York State Trial Lawyers Association.

"We are in the throes of attempted massive suppression of news media and the attempted decimation of

viable and aggressive journalism," Block told a news conference. "Not in a long time has the First Amendment come under such a major attack."

Block said the association is prepared to offer free legal aid alone or in conjunction with media lawyers to any network, station, editor or reporter "who because of protecting the First Amendment rights of the people finds itself, himself, or its license in jeopardy."

Moreover, Block said, the association plans to fight in the courts to nullify administration measures it deems

"to be in violation of the Constitution."

While the offer applies primarily to the news media in New York State, Block said: "If we get an offer from out of state, we will not refuse it."

He cited a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that newsmen may be forced to reveal sources and surrender tapes and notebooks to a grand jury if the information has bearing on a crime.

Former Los Angeles Herald-Examiner reporter William T. Farr, now with the Los Angeles Times, is in jail

in the California city after refusing to reveal the source of material for a story he wrote about the Charles Manson murder trial.

Earlier this week, John F. Lawrence, chief of the Los Angeles Times Washington bureau, was jailed briefly when he refused to turn over complete tapes of an interview with a prime witness in the Watergate case.

"Against the background of the recent jailings of reporters and editors," Block said, "it behooves the bar to make ready for a concerted defense against the growing assault upon independent thought and communication in America."

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