

A Possible Club Over Networks

By LES BROWN

A few days before Patrick V. Buchanan, a White House aide, went on television to amplify President Nixon's charges of news distortion by the electronic media, the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy released a report showing how at least 67 new major stations could be

News Analysis

added to the television spectrum in the 100 largest urban centers. While the incidents probably were not conspiratorially coordinated, the coincidence was too close for comfort for many in the television industry. Coming together as they did, they illustrated how the policy-making power of the executive branch may—even unintentionally—keep the federally licensed media in line.

For even as Mr. Buchanan was speaking of the need for more networks in his interview on the "C.B.S. Morning News" last Monday, the White House office headed by Clay T. Whitehead was demonstrating how another network could be created.

Three Years in Making

Anyone who might want to connect the two might draw the inference that the Administration would be prepared to make a fourth commercial network possible if the existing three networks didn't shape up their allegedly biased coverage of President Nixon.

The study, an titled "Technical Analysis of VHF Television Broadcasting Frequency Assignment Criteria," which was three years in preparation, maintains that, with the application of certain technical measures, new stations can be inserted—or "dropped into"—many of the top 100 television markets without affecting the operation of those already in existence. These would be on the VHF (very high frequency) band, ranging from Channels 2 to 13, which is where most of the prominent stations are.

With advances that have been made in technology since the Federal Communications Commission's standards for VHF allocations were formulated two decades ago, and with the recommendation that the F.C.C. adopt more modern and rigorous engineering criteria, the office of Telecommunications Policy in its report shows that 67 more stations can be added in the top 100 television markets alone.

In the analysis, three additional VHF stations could be inserted in the Miami and Johnstown-Altoona, Pa., markets, and two additional in such markets as Dallas-Fort Worth;

White House Report Shows 67 Stations Could Be Added

Kansas City, Mo.; Birmingham, Ala.; Charleston-Huntington, W. Va.; Salt Lake City; Little Rock; Binghamton, N. Y.; South Bend, Ind.; Mobile-Pensacola; and Champaign-Decatur-Springfield, Ill.; among others.

A single new station is possible in San Francisco-Oakland, Cleveland, Seattle-Tacoma, Atlanta, Houston, Milwaukee, Dayton, Portland (Ore.), Nashville, Louisville and Albany-Schenectady-Troy, to list a few of the larger urban centers.

No "drop-ins" are envisioned for the six top markets, however—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston or Detroit.

Independent Services

Given that the existing networks each encompasses 180 to 220 markets, the 67 proposed new stations are not quite enough for a fully competitive fourth network, especially since the new insertions would affect only 43 different urban areas. But combined with the existing "independent" stations—those not affiliated with a network, such as WOR-TV, WPIX-TV or WNEW-TV in New York—and with the UHF (ultra high frequency) stations scattered over the country, the drop-ins could make possible at least one and possibly even two minor networks operating on a more limited basis than the American Broadcasting Company, the Columbia Broadcasting System and the National Broadcasting Company.

Moreover, where news is concerned—which has been the sensitive issue with Mr. Buchanan, dating to his authorship of Spiro T. Agnew's attack on the media in Des Moines in November, 1969—the new stations could link up through the two independent electronic news services that lately have become available. Those are Television News, Inc., whose benefactor is the Adolph Coors Brewing Company of Colorado, and U.P.I.T.N., the partnership of United Press International, Independent Television News of Britain and Paramount Pictures.

Both companies syndicate 30

minutes worth of national and international news daily (often by satellite) to subscribing individual stations and cable systems. The news is transmitted as objective straight matter, without the cohesion of personalities, and it is left to the stations or cable systems to assimilate them in their own newscasts, using their own anchor-men, so that the bias—if any—is theirs and not a network's.

The basic purpose is to provide local stations lacking network service with same-day reports and news film delivered by national hook-up. At present, both T.V.N. and U.P.I.T.N. have fewer than a dozen subscribers, which means that neither is making a profit. But if a majority of the possible new stations were to become subscribers, there would be five—rather than three—major news services in television.

If the networks themselves are not chilled by the possibility of new competitors—and they might not be, since the one or two minor networks that could grow out of the Office of Telecommunications policy drop-ins would be frail indeed—there has already been a pained reaction to the White House study by the operators of television stations, especially from those markets where the new competition might occur.

The television stations that are now affiliated with the three networks—numbering about 600 altogether—have a certain influence upon them when they make their fears and wishes known.

Some See a Club

All this leads up to the worry in television circles that the study may be a purposeful threat to the industry, a club held over broadcaster's heads to enlist their support in another matter.

There is strong belief by some in the industry that the affiliated stations will apply pressure on the networks to present news of the Nixon Administration more sympathetically than they have been doing. The stations, they feel, would do this in hopes that it would make the Office of Telecommunications Policy forget about adding new competitors to the spectrum. And, needing the loyalty of their stations to be successful, will the networks be inclined to respond?

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