



On the Air: You

A very quiet but crucial debate is under way before the Federal Communications Commission, the government's "watchdog" over the broadcasting industry. You might call the argument "The People versus Big-Time Broadcasting," for it concerns the right of every citizen to participate more fully in television and radio programming. What does this mean? We asked Nicholas Johnson, an advocate of broadcasting reform, and one of the 7 FCC commissioners, to explain.

Most people just accept the fact that television and radio reduce you to a passive condition: Commercials shoot slogans at you; Hucksters berate you about the whiteness of your wash or suggest that a new automobile will cure you of your basic fears and raise your self-esteem. Should you disagree and want to challenge these messages, you're out of luck. Most stations won't broadcast your letters, nor your calls, nor will they allow you to present your views directly on the air. And that's one of the basic issues that concern the FCC now. The commission is currently examining an old rule called the Fairness Doctrine; the outcome of this examination could have a broad effect on people's rights in broadcasting.

The Fairness Doctrine, established in its present form in 1949, has usually been applied to programming, and not to commercials. As of now, it requires two things of a broadcaster: that a station deal with the "controversial issues of public importance" in its locality, and that it present all points of view on those issues. So, if a station runs a program on the women's-lib movement, for example, it must air all sides of the issue. Should you feel the broadcaster has not done this, the recourse would be to write to the FCC, file a "fairness" complaint, and hope that the commission agrees with your complaint.

In recent years, however, citizens' groups have scoffed at this "traditional" interpretation. They have asked the FCC to extend the Fairness Doctrine to controversial commercials and demanded time on the air to respond to advertisements that concern public issues. While the broadcasters screamed at such sacrilege, these citizens won a major battle in 1967. The FCC applied the Fairness Doctrine to cigarette commercials, and soon the anti-smoking slogans became almost as familiar as the pro-cigarette jingles.

Emboldened, environmental groups pushed further, and last year they won in court the right to re-

ply to high-test gasoline and automobile ads. The judge ruled that these ads, like the cigarette messages, imply the products will provide something beneficial for consumers, when indeed the products contribute to the poisoning of our air.

The FCC is currently considering a number of citizens' proposals. The National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, for example, wants the FCC to order stations to provide equal time, right after a commercial, for organized rebuttals; to run a printed notice under a commercial whenever the Federal Trade Commission disputes its claims; and to drop advertisements that take a self-serving stance on an issue of public importance.

Should the Fairness Doctrine be expanded, a spokeswoman for an opposing viewpoint could reply to a commercial or to other programming. But you, the viewer, would still be sitting at home. However, an emerging theory of public-access would require stations to set aside a certain amount

of broadcast time for any citizen or local group. If you and your neighbors oppose a new highway, you could appear on television, at an allotted time, without charge or for a moderate fee.

Not surprisingly, these proposed reforms have drawn fire from broadcasters. They claim they will be reduced to bankruptcy and the broadcast system will be entirely destroyed. With their enormous economic and political power, the broadcasters will probably be able to block most of these proposals. Unless, of course, many more people ask for changes.

Anyone can start a campaign; write a note yourself or with neighbors to the FCC, Washington, D.C. 20554. Or contact the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, 1145 19th Street NW, Suite 506, Washington, D.C. 20036.

I believe that, unless they abolish the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, it's still a do-it-yourself country. Will you help? —Nicholas Johnson