

Nicholas Johnson on TV

His Master's Voice

Those who are interested in seeing television educate, enlighten and inspire had great hopes when, in 1967, President Johnson sent Congress the Carnegie Commission's bold proposal for the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The CPB's framers were ambitious: they sought a system of national programming and local stations which would be free from the commercial pressures that relegate programming to culture's lowest common denominator, free from poverty, free from government domination.

The sun has yet to rise on this potentially bright future for the CPB. The administration has substituted governmental influence for commercial domination.

In a speech to the National Association of Educational Broadcasters on October 20, 1971, Tom Whitehead, director of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy (OTP) accused the CPB of ignoring the local stations and concentrating on building a national network. Mr. Whitehead also remarked, in the same speech, that permanent financing would not be forthcoming for the CPB until it fulfilled the "promise envisioned for it." John P. Witherspoon, CPB director of television activities, interpreted Whitehead's remarks as meaning that "until public broadcasting shows signs of becoming what this Administration wants it to be, this Administration will oppose permanent financing." What Nixon's spokesman overlooked was that a part of the "promise envisioned" for public television was just such a national service, one similar to that offered by every other public broadcasting system in the world. (As the Carnegie Commission said, "major national production centers . . . [will] insure that localism . . . will not become parochialism.")

When "The Great American Dream Machine," one of the most popular nationally produced public television shows, did a short film segment on FBI informers, J. Edgar Hoover complained

that the story was "inaccurate," though most of it had already appeared in the papers. After hurried consultations at CPB, the segment was killed. When it was later run (as a response to public criticism at the censorship), it was accompanied by a long discussion among journalists of the merits of the segment. In case you are thinking that the late Mr. Hoover lost this round, you ought to keep in mind that "The Great American Dream Machine" has been cancelled.

When the National Public Affairs Center for Television (NPACT) hired Sander Vanocur as a first-class professional reporter for "A Public Affair" (the only prime time show devoted to an analysis of the Presidential campaign) the administration criticized both Vanocur's alleged "liberal" bias and his high salary. Mr. Whitehead even suggested that public funds should not be used to "express controversial points of view which are going to be opposite those of many citizens"—surely a preposterous standard for a society that values the free exchange of ideas.

Nevertheless, the CPB continued to attract attention. (*Broadcasting* magazine reported in 1971 that an estimated 39 million viewers watch public TV at least once a week.) For an administration which thrives on an uninformed electorate, the growth of public broadcasting could only have been viewed with alarm.

So, when the bill to appropriate \$155 million to the CPB over a period of two years sailed through the Congress (82 to one in the Senate and 256 to 69 in the House), the President vetoed it. The CPB was then left with the administration's alternative bill—\$45 million for only one year—thus insuring that the CPB will have to fight annually for its economic life.

In his veto message, the President displayed a remarkable dearth of candor when he echoed Mr. Whitehead's refrain that the CPB had ignored the will of Congress by failing to emphasize local programming. Given the fact that the vetoed bill had provided for more local funding than ever before, and the fact that numerous local stations have been forced to cut back on next year's program plans because of his veto, Mr. Nixon's alleged concern for localism seems bizarre.

Mr. Nixon has since seized control of the CPB's board of directors. He has appointed or reappointed 10 of the 15 members including the chairman. As a result, John Macy—one of the ablest

men who could be selected for CPB president—was hounded out of his job. A Mr. Henry Loomis is to take his place.

Who's he? Mr. Loomis' interest in the CPB is illustrated by his first response upon hearing of public broadcasting: "What the hell is it?" His qualifications are revealed by a further elaboration, his statement that he had "never seen a public television show." That Mr. Loomis shares the administration's concerns about criticism of government is exemplified by his remark that, under his leadership, there will be a sharp drop in public affairs programs. And what about local enterprise? Mr. Loomis says the CPB will henceforth take a strong role in determining daily program content over the nationwide public broadcasting network—a direct antithesis of the policies once urged by Tom Whitehead.

So much for localism. So much for the freedom which the CPB's framers so desperately wanted. So much for Mr. Vanocur, who once said that his job was "to keep the government honest."

Like the Latin American revolutionary whose first task is to seize control of the radio stations, the President has, through his efforts at managing both the commercial networks and now public broadcasting, largely succeeded in stifling the free exchange of ideas and blotting out aggressive criticism of government. Mr. Nixon and Co. have now largely completed the four-year process of transforming the CPB from a burgeoning creative alternative to commercial television into what may well become a propaganda machine.

From its beginning, many have expressed the concern that propaganda might prove to be CPB's undoing—that it might become, in an oft-repeated phrase, "a domestic Voice of America." It is an ever-present threat to public broadcasting systems around the world. De Gaulle succeeded in controlling French television. Straus, in West Germany's Bavaria, bounced the distinguished Herj Wallenreiter from the head of Bavarian broadcasting almost the same day that Nixon drove Macy from CPB.

Perhaps we should expect no more from a man who nominates a Carswell to the Supreme Court or appoints a lifetime broadcaster to an FCC already more than adequately dominated by the industry. But it's Nixon's gall that rankles most. For "a domestic Voice of America" is no longer an ugly joke. Mr. Loomis' former position? Director, Voice of America.