

UNLEASHING TELEVISION

One of the first bills to face the new Congress will be modestly called a revision of the 1934 Communications Act. But its impact on all of us could be devastating.

As presently drafted, the bill would de-regulate radio and television. No longer would radio and TV stations have to renew their licenses every three years. No longer would they have to demonstrate that they operate for "public interest, convenience and necessity." No longer would they have to make their channels available to unremunerative public affairs programs, religious programs, free speech messages, public service announcements. No longer would they be bound by a "fairness doctrine."

In short, they would be folded into the free market, like your neighborhood shoe store. And "hurray!" say some, including the chief author of the bill, Lionel Van Deerlin, Congressman from San Diego. After all, newspapers are not bound by such regulations or by the oversight of a Federal Communications Commission.

There was once a marked difference between newspapers and TV stations. If you didn't like the way a newspaper was handling things, you could start one of your own. But there was a limited number of channels on the air waves. Someone had to see that those channels weren't monopolized by irresponsibles. However, with UHF, satellites and other technology, the channels are no longer so limited. Would it not now be healthier to let competition be the only regulator for TV and radio, as it is for the print media?

Maybe so. But newspapers are not TV; their use and effect are quite different. With newspapers, the reader is the aggressor. The reader has to seek out what he wants to read. With TV, the station is the aggressor. The watcher has to avoid what he does not want to watch.

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One of the many results: one learns more *in depth* from a newspaper about subjects in which one happens to be interested; but the public learns much more from TV about the world in general. The average American still only spends about a minute a day reading about foreign affairs in the newspapers, but spends at least twenty times that hearing about foreign affairs on the TV. Now, that may be good or bad, depending on the quality of what TV presents on foreign affairs.

Our free political life depends on an objectively informed public. There is reason to believe that our system for informing the public depends on more than government regulations. There is no longer wild competition among newspapers; there are fewer and fewer of them. Of course, anyone can distribute mimeographed sheets on the streets; and it is important that we can do that. But it takes a little more than that to keep the newspapers "honest." What it takes finally is "editorial responsibility." That is the tradition which says: "We will use our space to print that which is important, and to print the truth as we see it." Insofar as enough major newspapers follow that tradition, we are safe.

However, there is some reason to believe that the TV industry does not start with the same ingrained tradition. It is an industry that makes much more money, is subject to more commercial pressure, and is subject to more "mob" and "lowest-common-denominator" pressure. The TV industry, by its nature, is essentially an entertainment industry, unlike the newspaper industry -- and more subject to the values and traditions of the entertainment world.

Incidentally, there is the converse responsibility of the public not to exert "mob" pressures, which will throw the delicate factors out of balance. The public has to have the instinct to distinguish between what it doesn't like and what it finds a breach of editorial responsibility. The two are not necessarily the same.

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But the point is this: if TV has not yet demonstrated that it has a basic tradition of editorial responsibility, if it is still more entertainment than journalism, then perhaps the TV industry may still have to be formally reminded of its editorial responsibility. You may wish to suggest to your Congressman that American should not plunge too quickly into de-regulation, as currently proposed by the Van Deerlin bill.

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