PS1 for 4/16/87#IN DEFENSE OF THE FAIRNESS DOCTRINE

For the last five years, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has been trying to get rid of the Fairness Doctrine. Unable to do this directly, the FCC has simply let the broadcast industry know that it will not be enforced. That, in a nutshell, is why the networks feel they can be so blatantly adversarial against President Reagan.

Simply stated, the Fairness Doctrine is an obligation on local television and radio stations to serve the public interest by airing opposing views on controversial issues of public importance in the course of their overall programming. The only standard imposed on TV and radio stations is one of ""reasonableness'' and good faith.

Because so much heat has been generated about this issue, let's review what the Fairness Doctrine does NOT require. The biggest defect of the Fairness Doctrine is that it does NOT apply to the networks; it applies only to the local stations (most of which carry network programs).

The Fairness Doctrine does NOT require ""equal time,'' nor does it require that opposing views be presented on the same program. It does NOT limit stations from expressing their own editorial opinions and commentaries at any time.

FCC bureaucrats do NOT monitor stations to ensure compliance. The ultimate right to decide WHO will gain access to a station's airtime, and WHEN, rests completely with the broadcaster, not with the government.

The Fairness Doctrine was designed to preserve and extend First Amendment principles in our electronic age. It carefully balances the First Amendment rights of everyone: the broadcasters, the individuals who wish to get their message on the air, and the general public who have a right to be informed about current issues and candidates.

Those who argue against the Fairness Doctrine seem to think that those who own a television or radio station are the only ones entitled to exercise First Amendment rights. That should not be true. The public has just as much right

to enjoy the First Amendment as broadcasters.

Television and radio broadcasters like to compare themselves to newspapers and say that, since newspapers have no fairness obligations, the electronic media shouldn't have any either. That's a non sequitur. There are two fundamental reasons why the Fairness Doctrine should apply to television and radio but not to newspapers.

First, if newspapers do not print news and commentary on your side of a controversial issue of public importance, you have several options. You can (a) write a letter to the editor, (b) run a paid advertisement, or (c) print newsletters, fliers, reprints, etc., and distribute them yourself. You have other print-media alternatives.

You do not have any such options when it comes to the electronic media. If your local television or radio stations will not give or sell you time to air your views, you have no recourse.

No one can speak on television or radio stations unless the manager permits you. His power is absolute. You have no right to speak; the station manager may indulge you, and then again he may not. He can give or withhold his favors like royalty.

Second, as a practical matter, we suffer from monopoly control of news and information by the Big Three Networks, a concentration of power so total that Americans have never seen the likes of it before. In a democracy, it is not good for any one institution to exercise such tremendous power.

The Big Three TV networks wholly dominate the national news on local stations. Just think about it: when you turn on your local channel to get the national news, you get Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, or Peter Jennings. But when you read your local newspaper, you very seldom read news or editorial items from the New York Times or the Washington Post.

The bias of the news media elite (politically liberal and morally permissive) has been well-documented. What is more important is the power of the national media elite to (BF)select(end BF) the news.

This little group has decreed that the big issues which we must hear redundantly every day, week in and week out, are the Iran-Contra affair and condoms, and they have censored out other issues that are arguably of greater public importance. It's bad enough that the liberal media elite try to tell us what to think; it's intolerable that they should have such vast power to tell us what to think about.

What's wrong with an obligation to be fair? Nobody expects the Fairness Doctrine to force the media to give ""equal time'' to conservatives. But the Fairness Doctrine should require television and radio to air some opposing views on all controversial issues of public importance.

It's hard to see how any station could oppose an obligation to be fair unless it were planning on being unfair.