FROM: Phyllis Schlafly

68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 / (618) 462-5415

RELEASE: AUGUST 10, 1982

THE FAIRNESS DOCTRINE

The Fairness Doctrine, which governs television and radio stations, is under attack. Even the Federal Communications Commission has voted to ask Congress to amend the Federal Communications Act to eliminate the Fairness Doctrine, but it would be a grievous disservice to the American people to relieve TV and radio stations of their obligation to be fair about important public issues.

The Fairness Doctrine is a reasonable obligation imposed on local television and radio stations to serve the public interest by airing opposing views on controversial issues of public importance. Since the Fairness Doctrine does not require equal time, in practice, it is more a function of the broadcasters' social conscience than of governmental directive.

The TV and radio broadcasters who want to get rid of the Fairness Doctrine argue that the public interest can be adequately served by private-enterprise competition among the electronic media outlets. That argument is out of touch with reality.

For more than a century, the American ethic has rejected absolute laissez-faireism. Ever since the Republican Sherman Anti-Trust Act, our national concept of private-enterprise competition has included the restraining hand of government to prevent monopoly control of any industry.

Any observer of the media would have blinders on his eyes if he did not recognize the effective monopoly control exercised by the television networks. They determine the national news agenda; they set the low moral level of entertainment programming; and they produce products as ideologically uniform as three peas in a pod.

Judge for yourself any evening by comparing (a) the news selection and bias of the network TV news programs, and (b) the immoral-sex and violence of primetime entertainment programs. The network monopoly has censored out of national television the political ideas and moral values of the Middle Americans who elected Ronald Reagan and the conservative Senate.

The second argument made by the broadcasters who want to get out from under their fairness obligation is that, since newspapers have no such requirement, neither should television or radio. But the extraordinary and preeminent power of the visual TV images make television a unique force in our society; and the greater the power, the greater should be the responsibility to serve all the people rather than just some of them.

National television presents a limited spectrum of ideas and values as compared to the great variety of opinions in the print media. The New York Times and the Washington Post cannot begin to dominate and control the thinking and content of local newspapers the way that CBS, NBC and ABC dominate the local TV stations.

If you live in a city dominated by an ultra-liberal newspaper, it is certainly impractical to start your own newspaper to present opposing views. But you can print handbills, newsletters or tabloids; and you can usually buy a large ad in the liberal newspaper on which you have the editorial freedom to present your message. It is a rare occurrence when a newspaper refuses to accept a paid ad with an opposing viewpoint.

Presenting your views on the airwaves is a problem of an entirely different type. You cannot air your views at all unless a network or station gives or sells you the time. Few people realize how ruthlessly and successfully broadcasters refuse to give or sell any time at all.

The third argument made by broadcasters who want to get rid of their fairness obligation is to wrap themselves in the mantle of the First Amendment. However, the media don't own the First Amendment; the American people are entitled to receive its benefits, too.

First Amendment benefits should extend to all individuals, groups, issue advocates, and candidates who wish to air their opinions. Yet the Fairness Doctrine is now so limited in its effect that the power to make the decisions as to whether to give or sell them time, or to censor them off the airwaves, is totally in the hands of the broadcasters, subject only to a general obligation to exhibit some "fairness" if they decide to allow a subject to be discussed at all.

A third group, the general public, should also enjoy the benefits of the First Amendment. The American people have a First Amendment right to hear the arguments on all sides of controversial issues of public importance.

The Fairness Doctrine, which applies to local TV and radio stations only, provides some First Amendment rights to the American public to hear opposing views on controversial issues. The networks, which are not subject to the Fairness Doctrine, have shown that they have no compunction about freezing out views that don't accord with their biases. Examples are the CBS program called "People Like Us" which was a savage attack on Reaganomics without even a token word on the other side, and the five-hour CBS documentary on the U.S.-U.S.S.R. military balance which censored out the view that U.S. military superiority is the key to peace.

The elimination of the Fairness Doctrine would vest absolute power to set the issues-agenda and the moral standards of America in the electronic media elite. In a free, democratic society, no group should have so much power. The Fairness Doctrine should be extended to the networks in order to assure First Amendment rights to the Middle Americans whose ideas and values are censored out today.