The Fairness Doctrine: Background History I

Description

In order to establish the foundation for any discussion that may follow, and to frame future posts on this currently debated issue, Iâ€™m going to try and put the history of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) here. I began this discussion here, to address what will most likely become a major topic of discussion from now until the â€™08 elections.

The Fairness Doctrine was put into place, not as law, but as â€œdoctrineâ€• to cover radio and TV broadcasting coverage. By my reading, (initial source document) it appears a driving force was the concern over the limited amount of â€œbandwidthâ€• (using terms we use today about Internet use) that was available and therefore, with the granting of broadcast licenses, the possibility of an imbalance of coverage of issues of importance to the public.

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The â€œfallout,â€• or if you prefer a less glowing term, that brings us to the debate in our time was the implementation, which, the FCC deemed was an obligation by the broadcasting entity â€œâ€¦to actively seek out issues of importance to their community and air programming that addressed those issues.â€• [1]â€• This was to be done by granting â€œequal timeâ€• to opposing viewpoints to meet this standard.

The â€œtimes:â€• President: Harry Truman â€“ Democrat. FCC Commissioner: Frieda Barkin Hennock .

Who was Ms. Hennock? To begin, she was the first woman appointed to the position as Commissioner of the FCC. Her professional background prior to the taking this position was that of lawyer, and she had been involved in fund raising for political campaigns of Democrats, most notably, Franklin Roosevelt. Noted as her major accomplishment was the â€œset asideâ€• of â€œnon-commercialâ€• station licenses and hence the genesis of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS).

At the time, there were 16 TV channel allocations in the designated radio frequency spectrum, and there was interference causing problems. Technically, this was an issue to be addressed, to keep from having stations within the same locale â€œwalk onâ€• each other. Consider this part of the Media Museumâ€™s history of Ms. Hennock:

> In addition to the technical issues she faced as a commissioner, Hennock became convinced that television had the power to serve as an important educational tool. As the proposed table of television channel assignments was developed during the freeze, however, there were no reservations for educational stations. Hennock was determined that the opportunity to use television for educating the audience not be lost. She wrote a strong dissenting opinion and became an outspoken advocate for channel set-asides.

Comment: Educating the audience: Good thing. Hiding political indoctrination under a cloak and calling it â€œeducation:â€• Very bad thing and done by dictatorships for a long time now. *[Editorial note:*

Itâ€™s about who defines â€œeducationâ€•]. Consider this: The concept behind this doctrine was about â€¦â€•issues of importance to their communityâ€¦â€• per the Media Museumâ€™s write up. Therefore, the power to â€œeducateâ€• is not about a course on how to re-shingle your roof or how tectonic plates work, but â€œissues.â€• The baseline was to ensure the fairness of â€œeducationâ€• in the arena of political issues.

I gather from reading that Ms. Hennockâ€™s major push was to set aside many licenses for education, and did a TV and radio campaign to garner public support. The commercial side of the industry held they did provide educational material, and therefore the set asides were not necessary. Another historical case of governmental control, versus the use of resources for the purpose of free and open competition, Iâ€™m sure. Not surprisingly, educators formed the Joint Committee on Education Television, which studied commercial broadcasts and, again, not surprisingly, found commercial media fell short of being educational.

Comment: The educational system of this era was the one that sent astronauts to the moon using slide rules made of bamboo. I donâ€™t think we really needed a set aside for â€œeducation,â€• but â€œissues.â€• Certainly commercial owners would object to having the ethereal RF spectrum being used to replicate the school houses, while there was business to be done and money to be made (read: a new method in which to grow an economy).

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In doing some reading in a short biographical post, I found this statement:

> She advocated FCC preferential treatment for the weaker transmitters of UHF stations, opposed editorializing by broadcasters, and, convinced that television was â€œjust too important a medium,â€• denounced multiple ownership of broadcast facilities.

Comment: Will those people who are demanding a return to the Fairness Doctrine, and who might make a push to codify it in Federal law be true to Ms. Hennockâ€™s vision, or will they just use it as a rationale to break up corporations? Note that that FCC commissioner was against broadcasters editorializing. Soâ€¦darn that precedent thing getting in the wayâ€¦while you may â€œcut offâ€• the conservative talk show hosts who seems so scary, then ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN broadcaster â€œjournalistsâ€• (and I use the term lightly) will be similarly constrained. So much for reporting on â€œillegalâ€• wars and â€œTHE CULTURE OF CORRUPTION!â€•â€¦

Wrapping up the genesis of the person who initiated the Fairness Doctrine is this quote:

> Hennock was not surprised when her term as FCC commissioner was not renewed. Many of the positions she had taken were unpopular with powerful broadcasters. She was an outspoken critic of the practices of commercial networks. She criticized violence in television programming and warned about the growth of monopolies in the broadcast industry. She wrote many dissenting opinions questioning FCC actions. But as her assistant Stanley Neustadt told oral historian Jim Robertson, when she took a position on an issue â€œshe was ultimatelyâ€“sometimes long after she left the Commissionâ€“ultimately shown to be right.â€• At the end of her term as FCC commissioner, Frieda B. Hennock returned to private life and private law practice.

Comment: Ms. Hennock seemed like and intelligent person, passionate about her ideas, yet the history says there was much discussion on her plan to limit the availability of commercial interests to use the airways, in the context of limiting licenses, a direct impact on money making. Iâ€™m not sure Iâ€™d have been surprised at that outcome. May not have liked it, but not surprised.

Summary: The Fairness Doctrine was a response to a limited amount of mass communications â€œchannels.â€• Not a bad idea at the core, and considering the technical limitations of the electronic media at the time. As far as the concern about â€œthe message,â€• it wasnâ€™t about how the Government would manage to be fair using Government controlled broadcast outlets, it was about telling commercial business how to do business. The â€œfearâ€• of evil messages only that Representative Hinchey (D-NY) was discussing on Laura Ingrahamâ€™s radio show is unfounded when he implies the radio media is like that of the fascist control of the German government in the ramp up to WWII, because our media is not a government entity. His comparison is truly apples to railroad tracks and is merely done to invoke more fear of something that isnâ€™t the case. Certainly weâ€™ve advanced technologically and there are, in fact, many, many educational channels that provide material for distance learning and the busy, two or single professional families who are burning the candle at both ends.

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When you come back (more logically, when I post more): More history of the FCCâ€™s Fairness Doctrine of 1949 and â€œEqual Time.â€•

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