

CHICAGO WATCHDOG GROUP SEEKS FCC RULING PROHIBITING PTV HOME SHOPPING

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FCC declaratory ruling banning home shopping programming on public TV-radio is being sought by Chicago-based watchdog group. Coalition for Democracy in Public TV (CDPTV) filed complaint with Commission last week contending that home shopping trials conducted last fall by WTTW (Ch. 11) Chicago (PBR Oct 22 p1) exceeded PTV's noncommercial programming strictures. It asked FCC to impose unspecified monetary fine and to consider alleged violation at time of WTTW's license renewal. But spokeswoman for station, which conducted experiment over 2 weeks last Oct., defended it as attempt at alternative fund-raising, and said it had no current plans to pursue it in future.

In 17-page complaint to FCC, Coalition accused WTTW of preempting 45 hours of regularly scheduled programming "solely to hawk and sell" merchandise: "The goods, usually referred to as 'merchandise,' were not offered as 'premiums' for donations -- none of the amounts paid were described as being tax deductible. Nor, so far as {Coalition} is aware, was any of the merchandise donated to WTTW, as is often the case with auctions that occur on public broadcasting stations as fund-raising programs."

Group says it's composed of more than 170 organizations and coalitions, including D.C.-based public interest law firm Media Access Project. It charged that home shopping programming "is repugnant to the very notion of noncommercial broadcast service," and attacked WTTW for not seeking advance waiver from FCC on generally prohibited 2nd party fund raising: "Although it is certain that WTTW could not possibly qualify for a waiver, its action is even more egregious given the licensee's failure even to ask for one." WTTW collaborated on fund raiser with Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Field Museum, Lincoln Park Zoological Society. Those 5 organizations shared revenues resulting from on-air merchandise sales.

WTTW Corporate Communications Vp Tanya Neimark defended station's decision to experiment with home shopping as alternative type of fund raising. She said that major complaint of members was boring and repetitive nature of pledge drives and that station was "trying to find a different way of doing it" and "tried to make it a good thing" by offering program-related merchandise in home shopping format. She said that complaint was first ever filed with FCC against station, and that in past WTTW had always had good rapport with Commission. She also said station had received no "significant" viewer complaints, except from members of CDPTV, during pilot broadcast.

Neimark also denied contention that station intended to replicate home shopping format "not just on the... Chicago station, but throughout the country." She emphasized that trial, called "Chicago Holiday Gift Exchange," was only experiment and that station had "no plans" to pursue similar format in future. Coalition said in filing that "even if WTTW does not syndicate its home shopping format... other public television and radio stations may nevertheless follow WTTW-TV's lead" and develop own home shopping programming. No other public TV-radio entities are known to be considering home shopping as potential revenue sources. WNET N.Y.-Newark considered leasing portion of its broadcast schedule for home shopping several years ago (PBR April 3/87 p4) but ultimately decided against it.