

AM/FM Radio

The news director always in the middle

BY ELLEN ESHBACH

EVERYONE IN broadcasting has a treacherous job—one dependent to a large extent on the whims of the hands that feed and in no small amount on his own talent and dedication.

It has been said that broadcasting politics is vicious and cannot be ignored. Network stations are heavily influenced by New York office decisions and other stations often bow to special interest group pressures.

Others view broadcasting as an expanding field in which talent—sheer creativity and dedication—not politics, is the factor that determines who will rise to the top.

A radio news director has to include a sampling of both, implementing what he believes is necessary and right while walking a line between management and those under him.

"It's a, what's that phrase, human engineering job," Van Gordon Sauter, WBBM news director, described. "It's a groovy kind of job, but it has a certain amount of anguish. A news director has a wide range of talents working for him, people with diverse aspirations and abilities, and it is hard to keep them all happy and still please his own boss. You get the best results



JOHN WEBSTER

if you're honest with those both above and below you.

"Several people on the staff disagreed with general manager William C. O'Donnell's trial editorial last week but there is still a great deal of admiration on both sides. After all, he doesn't come out and lean over their typewriters."

"A news director is expected to be on top of news events not only in the city," WLS News Director Bob Benson explained, "but also within the company which could affect the operation of

your department. Electronic journalism is such a swiftly changing field. More and more complex rulings come from the Federal Communications commission—the fairness doctrine, personal attack rules, equal time provisions—and the Supreme Court rulings interpreting the first amendment.

"The news director has to be sure his department is working in compliance with the rules and attempt to keep broadcasting in the role of free access.

"He also has a myriad of administrative functions to tie him down," Benson continued. "You represent your news department to management in requests for per-

sonnel and physical equipment expansion. You direct specific assignment desks and critique news writing and delivery styles.

"The news director has a specialized function, spanning the gap between the journalists and management. He's right there in the middle."

"Some people worry about politics so much, keeping on the good side of the boss, doing what they're told, that they forget about the news," John Webster, WMAQ news director, said.

WMAQ IS owned and operated by NBC, something Webster finds an advantage. "When you are controlled by New York you can't be

controlled by news interests in this city, which is unusual but it did happen at WCFL."

[Webster was news director at WCFL until last April when he quit after reportedly being forced to fire a reporter who displeased City Hall.]

"WCFL is owned by a special interest group and the people who operate it just don't understand that you stand head and shoulders above everyone else if you can ignore pressure. They don't know what freedom of speech is all about.

"I believe in this industry and I love it and I know politics plays a part in it. But if I can someone, I can him because he's no good, not

because he didn't kiss everybody's rears. The trick is to remain talented."

"We air an awful lot of things that Mayor Daley and the Federation would not like," Bob Hagen, news director at WCFL, said. "Last Sunday we gave 30 minutes to Rennie Davis talking about the Viet Nam war and every day this week we've covered SDS, even tho they are not loved by the city.

"I won't be so naive as to say that there has never ever been a political reason for a decision, but I think by just fair looking around at what's on the air you can see the amount of political consideration in our news stories is practically nil."