

Obama's 'Big Brother' Threat to Monitor Newsrooms Still Alive

The Federal Communications Commission has abandoned a plan to place government monitors in newsrooms and ask probing questions of news gatherers—at least for now.

Under the plan, the FCC would have asked questions about why journalists cover what they do and ignore topics some in government might consider crucial.

Some First Amendment defenders, though, are worried this threat to freedom of the press may not be completely dead.

“It’s important to stay vigilant,” Matthew Clark, an attorney with the American Center for Law and Justice, said.

Clark viewed the FCC plan as both intimidating and a threat to the protections offered by the First Amendment.

“It protects the American people from having a federal government that would promote its own agenda through the press, forcing the press to cover the stories that it wants it to cover, that it believes that the American people need to know about,” he said.

FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai, one of two Republicans among the five FCC commissioners, was so worried about the study and monitors, he blew the whistle on his own agency in a *Wall Street Journal* column.

He discussed the kind of grilling journalists would be subjected to by these monitors.

“‘How do you decide to cover certain stories? What’s your news philosophy? Does your station have a perceived bias?’ Those

are questions I don't think belong in any newsroom, and certainly not when posed by government," Pai told CBN News.

Supposedly, cooperating with these monitors would be voluntary, but when a big agency like the FCC has the power to revoke broadcast licenses, critics say that can be perceived as a lot of pressure to play along with whatever the government asks or wants.

"I certainly found it threatening to our First Amendment values," Pai said.

One thing these monitors would be investigating is if news outlets were covering eight specific areas government has deemed "critical," which Pai said would be mighty intimidating.

"That was part of the concern, too," he explained, "that ultimately news coverage could be slanted towards those eight categories for fear of offending some sort of government monitor."

Pai and Clark both cheered when the FCC backed down in the face of a huge public outcry: more than 80,000 people signed an ACLJ petition protesting the scheme.

"When the American people stand up with one voice and say 'No. No FCC monitors in the newsrooms of the American people,' that really makes a huge difference," Clark said.

"It was a victory for the American people, for the First Amendment, and also a vindication of the notion that there are certain things that all Americans, regardless of their political stripe, believe in," Pai added.

"And I think virtually every American, even though they disagree on where they want to get their news and what news they want to consume, they don't think the government has a place in the newsroom. That was heartening to see," he said.

The FCC commissioner rejoiced at one particular promise made by FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler.

“That neither this study nor any future study would involve government or researchers hired by the government posing questions to media owners, to news directors or to news reporters about any of these kinds of questions,” Pai paraphrased.

Although the study and plan to place monitors in newsrooms has been suspended for now, that doesn’t mean it’s gone for good.

“I make the analogy to a baseball game,” Pai said. “When a baseball game is suspended, that doesn’t mean it’s cancelled. It just means that play is going to resume at some later time.”

Clark said he was particularly worried that one admitted focus of the monitors would be news and talk radio.

“What that really means is Christian radio stations and conservative talk radio stations, which are the vast majority in that category, would be the ones targeted by this,” Clark explained.

Clark and some of the other critics of the monitoring plan see it as no coincidence the plan was being pushed by the same administration whose IRS has been holding up tax-exempt status for Tea Party and other conservative groups and grilling them about their motives.

“It’s just an over-arching philosophy of trying to silence the opposition, and to control both the media and what is being able to be broadcast or being able to be talked about amongst the American public,” Clark said.