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Chafee, Jr: GOVERNMENT AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS

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GOVERNMENT AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS. Report from the Commission on Freedom of the Press. 2 vols. *Zechariah Chafee, Jr.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1947. Pp. xvii, 830. \$7.50.

One writer¹ has accused the Commission of offering nothing but "mousy platitudes" in its general report, *A Free and Responsible Press*. The present book should answer such objections. It consists, first, of an examination of past and present relations between government and the press, radio, and motion pictures: from the standpoint of the individual (libel laws), public decency (obscenity regulations) and other public policies sometimes conflicting with absolute freedom of the press (labor laws; anti-trust laws). But this summary is used only as a background for an exhaustive discussion of proposals to make mass communications media more responsive to public needs. For example: should the correction of errors be left to the cumbersome methods of the law of libel, or should a statute guarantee the "right of reply"? Should "group libel" legislation be enacted to protect minority groups against villification? Should there be a more vigorous Sherman Act policy toward press bigness? And, most important, is freedom of the press only freedom *from* restraint—or should it be freedom *for* something, too? For if there is skepticism over the power of the true thought to "get itself accepted in the competition of the market," should government help the process with a bureau to see that all sides of public issues are presented to the "consumer"? The commission urges certain specific reforms, but its answers are largely negative. The government should give only informal encouragement; an active sense of responsibility within the profession must be the main bulwark against "meaninglessness and vulgarity." It is easy to call this conclusion a platitude; but what makes this book valuable and important is not only the carefully considered conclusions, but Professor Chafee's lucid discussion of arguments and possibilities. The length of the treatise is regrettable, for its audience is thereby reduced; but the author has a great deal to say, and he says it with his characteristic readability.

¹ Kenneth N. Stewart, SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE.