

Netlink sells separate satellite feed of WGN-TV to TVRO

United Video charges TCI will sell number-two superstation to itself

Netlink, the Tele-Communications Inc.-controlled satellite distributor, last week wheeled a transportable uplink into Chicago, put the signal of WGN-TV there on a satellite and began selling it to home dish owners.

The news hit Tulsa, Okla.-based United Video hard. The longtime satellite distributor of the Tribune independent, which now beams the signal to cable systems serving 24 million homes and tens of thousands of dish owners, sees the move as a competitive threat and as a way for Netlink and its TCI parent to increase its negotiating leverage with United Video. TCI is the nation's largest cable operator and a major customer of United Video.

"I see it as a move on Netlink's part to force us to let them sell WGN" to dish owners, said United Video Executive Vice

President Roy Bliss.

Netlink and United Video had been trying to work out a reciprocal agreement under which Netlink would sell United Video's WGN-TV signal to dish owners and United Video would sell a Netlink package of six Denver broadcast signals to dish owners. WGN-TV will replace KDVR(TV) Denver in the Netlink package.

Jack Riley, vice president, United Video, was more concerned about the impact on the company's core cable business. Netlink claims to have no plans to sell WGN-TV to cable systems, but Riley was skeptical. "They will sell to cable," he said. "It would be foolhardy of them not to. It's just not politically astute for them to say so now."

United's WGN-TV deal with TCI expires in 1991, Bliss said. A defection to Netlink of cable systems wholly or partly owned by TCI—altogether constituting "certainly less than 20%" of current WGN-TV distribution—would not break United, he said.

"It's not what TCI can take away. I just don't want them to take ATC [American Television & Communications], Newhouse or others with them."

Netlink President Brian McCauley gave little comfort to United Video. He repeated that Netlink has no plans to offer WGN-TV to cable systems, but added that "if the market changes, we would reconsider."

McCauley told BROADCASTING two weeks ago that Netlink would probably not replace KDVR with a broadcast signal. He said Netlink was trying to sell the satellite slot to a regional sports network (BROADCASTING, March 20). Riley also said that McCauley told him on March 17 that Netlink would not add WGN-TV—just five days before it did.

McCauley admitted last week that when he was downplaying the possibility of adding WGN-TV, there was, in fact, "a good indication" that it would be added, but "a final decision had not been made." □

One step closer to TV Marti

House committee OK's bill with funding for plan to begin television station aimed at Cuba

Backers of a plan to establish a television station that would operate under the umbrella of the U.S. Information Agency and broadcast news, information and entertainment to Cuba had reason to cheer last week. The House Foreign Affairs Committee, under the lash of its key members and the Bush administration, approved authorizing legislation containing \$16 million for each of the next two years for the operation of a TV Marti.

The committee acted Thursday (March 23), after the administration earlier in the week submitted its own draft TV Marti bill. The committee version—somewhat stricter than the administration's proposal—is contained in the bill authorizing appropriations totalling \$4.8 billion for the State Department, USIA, including the Voice of America, and the Board for International Broadcasting. The TV Marti element, relatively small in terms of dollars, stirred some of the strongest passions in the committee's markup of the bill.

Representative George W. Crockett (D-Mich.), chairman of the committee's subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, proposed an amendment to strip TV Marti from the bill. He expressed the view the project would exacerbate relations with the Cuban government and said it represented "a waste of \$16 million" better spent on domestic programs. And Representative Theodore S. Weiss (D-N.Y.) said that what was being proposed is a "propaganda" organ. Never mind that the bill says the new service is to operate "in accordance with all Voice of America standards to ensure the broadcast of programs which are objective, accurate, balanced and which present a va-

riety of views." The bill requires the USIA director to establish a Television Marti Service.

Crockett said he recognized the difficulty of opposing a measure supported by the chairman and ranking minority member of the committee—Representative Dante Fascell (D-Fla.) and William S. Broomfield (R-Mich.)—as well as the administration. And sure enough, his measure was swept aside, by a vote of 17 to 3.

The vote reflects the strength of the Cuban community in Florida that has been lobbying hard for the establishment of an affiliate of Radio Marti, which went on the air in May 1985.

Radio Marti has not been without its costs to American broadcasters. On Monday (March 20), when Radio Marti increased its programming from 17½ to 24 hours, Cuba extended the hours of its stations on 1160 khz and 830 khz to full time and began simulcasting with them a station on 1040 khz from 7 to 11 p.m. The National Association of Broadcasters considers the station on 830 khz a particular problem; the FCC estimates its power at 1,000 kw.

The approval of the TV Marti authorization does not constitute a blank check, even as far as the House is concerned. The measure takes into account doubts that have been expressed as to the feasibility of the proposal that envisages a transmitter beaming TV signals from a balloon tethered some 14,000 feet above the Florida Keys. The bill bars the expenditure of funds for a TV Marti unless the President determines that a test of the project—one is planned for later this year—has demonstrated its feasibility, and notifies Congress of that finding. The bill also requires the President, 30 days before he makes his determination, to submit a report of the test results to Congress.

USIA's concern with the TV Marti propos-

al is that Congress will dip into USIA funds for the project—as it did last year, when it appropriated \$7.5 million that had been designated for the Voice of America modernization program for startup funds for the television project. And the committee last week authorized only \$65 million for the modernization program in 1990, \$24 million less than the administration had requested. Although committee staffers said the cut was not intended to provide funds for TV Marti and the \$5 million indemnification fund, a number of committee members said the \$16 million was being offset by reductions in the administration request. However, the committee would increase the funds authorized for 1991 from what would have been \$102 million to \$126 million.

Overall, the committee authorized \$960 million for USIA, some \$11 million more than requested. The increase results from a boost the committee granted the National Endowment for Democracy.

If TV Marti caused USIA some concern, so did the committee's treatment of the agency's television service. The good news was that the bill repeals the ban on use of passive—that is, news and information—programs produced in-house for Worldnet, USIA's international television network. But the bad news is that the committee reduced the administration's request for the service from \$36.3 million (itself \$2.2 million less than the 1989 appropriation) to \$31 million. And it limits Worldnet expenditures to \$12 million.

Next stop for the bill is the House floor. Whatever its fate there, the provision for TV Marti, at least, is certain to get closer scrutiny in the Senate than it did in the House. The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) has made it clear he has his doubts about television service to Cuba. □