



Sharon McConnell, of Bettles and Fairbanks, broadcasts Native news to Fairbanks listeners four times daily from KIAK Radio and KFAR Radio. Her shows are an example of how the broadcast media can respond to community information needs. Access to the media by minority and public interest groups has flared across the state recently, see story on page 3.

# Alaskans for Better Media--Who are they?

By NANCY HARVEY

Who are the Alaskans for Better Media?

Growing controversy over ABM developed last December when the organization became actively involved in "efforts to help insure that radio and television broadcasters meet their obligation to serve the public interest."

Due to poor and critical press coverage of ABM, many people have misunderstood ABM objectives. Broadcasters interpreted proposals of ABM as demands imposed upon the stations with the threat of challenging license renewal applications should they fail to comply. Cries of extortion were rampant in the Alaska media community.

But let's start from the beginning.

Radio and television airways are a scarce public commodity. By Federal law the airways are temporarily entrusted to station owners through licenses issued by the Federal Communications Commission. The FCC in turn encourages local citizens and community groups to play an active role in assessing the performance of stations and in suggesting improvements in their future operation.

Every three years a station's license comes before the FCC for renewal. And, because of the myriad of stations under their jurisdiction, the FCC must rely on public input regarding the performance of individual stations. It is a general consensus that with so many stations under their control, it is unlikely that FCC will take action against an individual station unless the public calls attention to specific deficiencies.

As part of the renewal process, stations must make specific promises to the FCC as to how they will attempt to meet local broadcasting needs in the coming three years. The stations must also report on their performance during the license period just completed, thereby showing they have lived up to promises made to serve the public interest.

License renewals for all Alaska radio and television stations are due in 1978.

ABM is composed of consumer, environmental, women's and one Alaska Native group. Minimal funds for operational purposes have come from small donations of local residents and ABM has no paid staff or offices. The group is represented in Washington, D.C. by Media Access Project, a public interest law firm.

The ABM effort began late last fall during the time local stations were preparing their license renewal applications. As part of the process, stations must make their files available for public inspection and must solicit comments from the affected community.

According to ABM, an in-

depth study of local station records revealed a number of problems, some in the recent past and some on-going, which demanded public attention.

For example, ABM found "real problems" with the ascertainment process, whereby stations must interview community leaders to identify local issues for public affairs programming. The study revealed that one Anchorage television station contacted only two minority individuals in soliciting comments on public affairs programs out of 118 interviews. According to ABM, the study further revealed that in several instances a station tampered with responses to the survey in an effort to justify public affairs programming that has been broadcast.

ABM says in some cases stations were falling short in their compliance with the FCC's equal employment opportunity requirements. Yet, other stations reportedly did not live up to their original promises made to the FCC regarding public affairs broadcasting.

Working within the legal framework established by the FCC and based on their study of local stations, ABM drafted several proposals to begin discussing with broadcasters. The proposals included suggested promises the stations should consider and work with to better meet Alaskan broadcasting needs and to fulfill their obligation to the public. The suggestions centered around the areas of local public affairs programming, public service announcements, equal employment opportunity, local news and on-going community input into the Alaska broadcast media.

After examining nearly every radio and television station in Anchorage, including interviews with former employees, ABM sent proposals to five Anchorage stations: KENI-TV; KENI-AM; KIMO-TV and radio stations KGOT/KYAK.

According to ABM: "We chose those stations not only because their problems evoked cause for concern, but because they seemed to hold the greatest potential for improvement. Our affiliates in Juneau, Sitka, Ketchikan and Fairbanks are dealing with individual stations in those cities."

In preparing the suggested promises for the stations to review and hopefully consider for submission to the FCC, ABM drafted proposals in an FCC acceptable format. For example, the ABM proposal states, "the station will do such and such..." The proposals met with immediate opposition from the stations who felt they were being forced into either meeting ABM demands or facing an expensive challenge to their license renewal applications.

ABM responded to the stations' concern: "If the stations do not acknowledge the importance of our concerns, or do not accept their responsibility to improve their performance in areas such as their commitment to responsive public affairs programming, ABM may have no other alternative than to consider the possibility of filing objections to license renewals. We think that presenting our proposals for discussion is much more constructive and fair to the stations than the other alternative: going directly to the FCC with a petition to deny their license."

Discussions with the Midnight

Sun Broadcasting Co. consisted of one meeting. ABM insists that although attempts were made to continue discussions, "we never heard from them again." In January ABM filed an objection to the license renewal application of Midnight Sun, which owns seven stations banks, Ketchikan and Kenai.

In the 593 page objection ABM cited a number of deficiencies in the areas of equal employment opportunity, public affairs programming, public service announcements, and the ascertainment process. It is now up to the FCC to investigate, and should they find the charges

serious enough, hold local hearings to further document the findings.

In addition ABM has filed an informal objection to the proposed sale of Midnight Sun saying: "Our reasons for filing the much-publicized objection to the sale of Midnight Sun Broadcasting Co. also relates to a point of serious public concern in broadcasting: in a situation of clearly concentrated ownership, how can anyone ensure that no group or aspect of an issue is denied access to the airways? We find it highly legitimate to ask whether such an ownership arrangement is in

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# ● ABM

**CONTINUED OFF OF PAGE THREE** the public interest, or whether more diversity of ownership is preferable. We are merely trying to achieve a situation in which a balance always exists in broadcasting—where access for any viable interest can be assured.

At the end of January ABM filed a second objection to a license renewal application. In a 700 page document filed on deadline, ABM has challenged the license renewal of KIMO-TV in Anchorage.

Although the deadline for filing objections to license renewals has passed it should not mean an end to meaningful discussions which have taken place. And, while ABM will readily admit they started late in the game and have made some significant tactical errors, their undertaking has called attention to deficiencies in local broadcasting that need remedy.

In no instance does ABM seek to have any station taken off the air.

By filing an objection to the license renewal application, ABM is calling the FCC's attention to deficiencies they have identified and been unsuccessful in resolving either through discussions or lack of discussions with the station.

The FCC in turn has the power to investigate and seek remedies to the problems which may in the long run result in bettering a station's ability to serve the public interest.

Pioneer Alaskan broadcasters

have brought radio and television a long way since the early days. ABM is looking beyond what the media is today to what it can be tomorrow.

One might say the bottom line of the ABM message is to help the public become more aware of their rights to access to the broadcast media.