Women of the FCC: Activists or Tokens?

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In 1948 Harry S. Truman appointed Frieda Hennock to the Federal Communications Commission, making her the first woman to serve on the agency. When her term expired seven years later, Dwight Eisenhower selected Richard A. Mack to replace her. There would not be another woman on the FCC until Richard Nixon chose Charlotte Reid in 1971. In succeeding years, the FCC would not be without a woman commissioner as five other women followed the path of Hennock and Reid. With the continuing presence of women on the FCC, the question emerges whether gender influenced the policies regulating the broadcasting industry--more or less, did these women promote gender-linked issues? This paper examines the backgrounds and roles of these seven women on the FCC and the impact of gender on their agency activities.

When Truman appointed Hennock to the FCC, he selected an experienced lawyer and an active Democrat to be the first woman on an independent regulatory agency.[1] Born in Kobel, Poland, in 1904, Hennock was the youngest woman to be admitted to the New York State Bar in 1926 after receiving a degree from Brooklyn Law School. After practicing criminal law early in her career, she became the only Democrat and only woman partner in the prestigious New York law firm of Choate, Mitchell & Ely where she practiced civil law. She later served in the public sector as assistant counsel to the New York State Mortgage Commission and as a member of the executive committee of the National Health Assembly sponsored by the Federal Security Administration. She also campaigned actively for Franklin Roosevelt and William O'Dwyer, mayor of New York City. Pressured both by Republicans and Democrats to appoint a woman in an election year, Truman found an excellent candidate in Hennock [24; 38; 37; 20, p. 5; 34, p. 133].

As the first woman commissioner, expectations ran high that she would be the champion of women's issues in broadcasting, such as more programs tailored to women or more employment of women in the industry. *Time* magazine reported that "she hopes to represent the women who 'comprise radio's biggest audience'" [30]. In a follow-up article, *Time* quoted her about

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BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY, Second Series, Volume Twenty-one, 1992.

ISSN 0849-6825.

[1]Parts of the section on Hennock were presented in a paper on Frieda Hennock at the 1991 meeting of the Economic and Business Historical Society.

her FCC plans: "It seems fundamental that in this field--so peculiarly affecting women--the viewpoint of their sex should be presented" [33]. Anticipation continued in the months ahead. *American Magazine* opened its brief article on Hennock by declaring, "There are about 65,000,000 women in America, and a large percentage of them are radio and television fans with the distinctive likes and dislikes of their sex." The account proceeded to note that Hennock "expects to think and act like a woman and try to do something for her sex" [38]. Hopes of Hennock being a strong advocate for women's concerns in broadcasting dissipated, however, in the months and years ahead.

Hennock emerged instead as a proponent of educational television. In the months following her appointment to the FCC, she became aware of the potential use of television as an educational tool when she attended sessions of the Institute for Education by Radio (later to be renamed the Institute for Education by Radio and Television) at Ohio State University [1, p. 12; 21, p. 139]. In a *Saturday Review* article, Hennock noted that television could be used to provide instruction to eleven million adults whose formal education ended at an early age. For those still in school, Hennock argued that "television could supplement and perhaps make adequate the school training of millions of children in backward areas of this country who are underschooled as well as underclothed and underfed" [23, p. 23]. She also viewed television as a valuable medium to culturally enlighten the public with concerts and plays and to "show the various folkways of the national and ethnic groups to foster mutual understanding and tolerance" [23, p. 23]. Hennock clearly understood the importance of educational broadcasting to the public and fought to insure that educational television had the opportunity to develop. An FCC policy reserving specific channels for noncommercial, educational broadcasting was her goal.

Hennock worked aggressively over the next three years to insure that the FCC established reservations of channels for educational use. She dissented from the FCC's plan to allocate television stations in July 1949 when no reservations were made. She continued to agitate for reservations, forcing the FCC to call hearings on her proposal to begin in 1950 [3]. Her next step involved rallying reluctant educators. She argued that educational television could provide instruction in courses, such as science and art, where schools were too small to have teachers for these subjects. Countering arguments from cost-conscious educators, she also emphasized that "an educational-TV service is, without doubt, relatively inexpensive on a per-capita basis and its cost is modest in relation to its enormous value" [21, p. 143; 22, p. 448]. For those educators who understood the value of educational broadcasting, she strongly supported their formation of the Joint Committee on Educational Television to coordinate their case at the FCC hearings on reservations. Hennock directed her last appeal for reservations to the American people through means such as popular magazines. She reiterated her arguments that educational television was a valuable medium to the public--it was a source of continuing education, cultural enlightenment, and social understanding. Hennock's combined efforts to win support for reservations were successful. In April 1952, the FCC issued its "Sixth Order and Report" that reserved 242 channels for noncommercial, educational use [1, pp. 12-16; 23, pp. 22-23; 28].

Although Hennock did not become the activist for women's issues that many had anticipated, neither was she a token. Hennock's activities in support of educational television, often in opposition to some of her FCC colleagues, indicated that she was not just a woman parrotting her male counterparts. Her influential role as champion in the crusade for reservations brought her and her gender to the foreground of the broadcasting industry as well as the FCC.

Another woman did not occupy a seat on the FCC for the next sixteen years. In those intervening years, the political, social, and economic environment for women began to change. Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* raised the consciousness of women; the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII, prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex; and the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed to continue the fight for women's equality. In this climate the FCC began to develop an equal employment opportunity (EEO) policy that would promote equal access for women and minorities to the broadcasting industry.

This FCC policy evolved out of pressure in 1967 from the United Church of Christ's Office of Communications to develop an anti-discrimination policy. The UCC Office of Communications wanted the FCC to include in its licensing process evidence that a broadcast station was not following discriminatory practices based on race, color, religion or national origin. After hearing objections from broadcasters that compliance would duplicate duties of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and receiving assurance from the Justice Department that an affirmative action policy was legal, the FCC announced an EEO policy in 1968. The commission based its EEO policy on the "public interest" mandate of the Communications Act of 1934 and anticipated the new policy would not only increase minority employment in the broadcasting industry but also promote minority views in programming. Two years later the FCC established compliance procedures that required all broadcast stations with five or more full-time employees to file annual reports indicating the number of African-Americans, Asians, American Indians, and Hispanics that they employed in nine job categories. The compliance procedures also required renewal applications for licensees to include EEO programs designed to recruit and promote minorities [6, p. 166; 19; 14; 16]. In December 1971 the FCC further modified its EEO policy to include women in response to a 1970 petition by NOW [15]. Five months before the FCC amended its EEO policy, the Senate confirmed the appointment of Charlotte Reid, the second woman to serve on the commission.

Expectations that Charlotte Reid would be an advocate of women's issues in broadcasting did not arise as they had twenty-three years earlier with Hennock--and with good reason. Pressed to appoint a woman, Richard Nixon selected a conservative Republican Congresswoman from Illinois whom a *Chicago Daily News* article described as "slightly to the right of Marie Antoinette" because of her voting record in Congress [26]. Reid commenced her public career not as a politician but as a singer, when she became the "featured vocalist" on *Don McNeill's Breakfast Club* in 1936 at the age of twenty-three. Three years later she began devoting herself to being a mother

and wife and only entered politics in 1962 to replace her husband as the Republican congressional candidate after his death. The winner in 1962, she was re-elected four times for responding to wishes of her like-minded conservative constituents when she voted against Great Society measures, such as the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, funding for education, and housing for low-income families. Her proposal while in Congress to allow voluntary prayer in school and her support of the war in Vietnam solidified her image as a conservative [4, pp. 302-07; 10; 5].

Unlike Hennock's active record on the FCC, albeit not for women's issues, Reid's tenure on the commission showed a remarkable degree of passivity. An October 1974 *Wall Street Journal* article described Reid as "uninterested" in the work at the FCC, and Les Brown in a *New York Times* piece in August 1975 reported that Reid had been "absent for more than 15 per cent of the votes" [6, pp. 54-55; 2]. While Reid was on the FCC, the agency modified its EEO policy to require only stations with ten or more full-time employees to file annual EEO reports. This reduced the number of stations monitored by the FCC for EEO compliance from approximately sixty-six per cent to thirty-four per cent. It eliminated scrutinizing broadcast stations where minorities and women were more likely to enter the broadcasting industry and gain valuable experience for future hiring and promotion at larger stations. In the midst of this easing of policy, the Senate was holding its oversight hearings of the FCC. Benjamin Hook, the black member of the FCC, expressed strong reservations about this rule change. Reid who was also present did not [6, pp. 166-67; 31]. After remarrying in May 1976, Reid resigned from the FCC, leaving an unremarkable record.

The remaining five women of the FCC were Margita White, Anne P. Jones, Mimi Weyforth Dawson, Patricia Diaz Dennis, and Sherrie Marshall, and all were strikingly similar.[2] White was appointed by Gerald Ford in 1976 and served until 1979. Prior to her selection she was Ford's assistant press secretary and director of the Office of Communications at the White House. Jimmy Carter appointed Jones to the FCC in 1979 bringing her from the Federal Home Loan Bank Board where she was general counsel. She retired from the FCC in 1983. Dawson served on the commission from 1981 to 1987 after being selected by Ronald Reagan. Her previous job was administrative assistant and chief of staff for Senator Bob Packwood of Oregon. Reagan appointed Dennis in 1986, and she served until 1989. She was a member of the National Labor Relations Board for the previous three years. Coming directly from a position as attorney in the president-elect office, Marshall was appointed by George Bush in 1989. Her term expires in June 1992. All five of these women spent most of their professional lives prior to their FCC appointments in government positions. All but one have been lawyers, and Dawson, who did not have a law degree, held a bachelor's degree in government. Four were Republicans, but the one Democrat, Dennis, was only nominally so and considered a Reagan supporter. A major similarity between

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[2]The biographical information for these women has been gathered from sources such as *Who's Who in America* and the Senate nomination hearings of the appointees.

these women was their belief in a competitive, market-driven communications industry--in only slightly varying degrees they all supported deregulation. Implementing deregulatory measures occupied most of their time on the FCC. None of these women led a crusade like Hennock did. However, all appeared to oppose deregulation in the area of the FCC equal employment opportunity rulings [36, 7, 11, 13, 29, 12, 9].

This support of the FCC's EEO policy was in stark contrast to the disinterest of their predecessor, Charlotte Reid. In Dawson's response to questions asked by the Senate confirmation committee about the EEO policy, she expressed concern that the FCC had eased its rulings permitting the smaller broadcast stations to forego filing annual EEO reports [32]. Apparently, she felt close monitoring was needed to insure equal employment opportunities for women and minorities. She also addressed the concerns of some women when she opposed the sexploitation of women on television. She viewed the solution, however, beyond the scope of the FCC [35].

Like Dawson, Jones and Dennis supported the FCC's affirmative action rulings, but only after initially showing negligible interest in them. In fact, Jones went through a metamorphosis on the issue of affirmative action during her first three years on the commission. In an address to the Conference on the Future of Television in 1982, she explained this transformation by stating that "having concluded that the commission's EEO program is legitimate and effective, I also support it because it is still needed. Although the industry has made substantial progress, the goal of equal participation by women and minorities in broadcasting clearly has not been reached, either in overall employment, or, and perhaps more importantly, in significant job categories" [8]. Dennis also appeared to alter her position on affirmative action. In the first year of her tenure she spoke about representing all of the American people and not just being the spokesperson for minorities or women. From a conservative Democrat, these words implied that she might not derail the deregulatory engine before it eliminated the FCC's EEO policy. However, a year later she was staunchly backing the agency's affirmative action, and *Television/Radio Age* magazine quoted her as saying, "It's a special responsibility that I bear [being a woman and Hispanic]. After all, I've been there. I know what discrimination is. I've seen it. I've met it. I've had to deal with it myself. I'm very acutely aware of the effects of discrimination" [18]. Contrary to their conservative political philosophy, these recent women of the FCC stood firmly behind the commission's affirmative action policy--a key concern of women.

These recent female commissioners also supported preferential treatment for women in the licensing of broadcast stations to promote ownership diversification in the industry. Proponents of preferences have considered ownership and concurrent management by women and minorities an important avenue to increase minority and women's programming. Dawson advocated giving women odds in the lottery system of granting broadcasting licenses as had been done for minority groups and dissented in the 1986 FCC decision which ruled against such treatment. Two years later Dennis voted with the majority to give preferences in licensing to women and minorities. However, a recent federal appeals court decision, written by

Clarence Thomas, declared preferential treatment for women in broadcast licensing unconstitutional because the practice discriminates against men. With this path for increasing women's programming barred, future women commissioners will have to find new ways to achieve their goal [27, 17, 29, 25].

After examining the activities of these women of the FCC, it becomes apparent that most of the women were activists rather than tokens but that gender had only a minimal impact on policies regulating the broadcasting industry. Even though Hennock did not meet the expectations of many to become the advocate for women's concerns in broadcasting, her visibility in the crusade for educational broadcasting promoted the women's cause. Reid's presence on the commission a decade and a half later did not have a similar impact. It reflected mere tokenism. In contrast, the support of the five most recent women of the FCC for the commission's affirmative action and preferential licensing policies lends credence to their being considered activists, albeit mild ones. However, any efforts to promote other gender-linked issues, such as aggressively fighting stereotypes of women on television, would have called for content regulation, and that was anathema to conservative deregulators.

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