



BROADCASTING'S MR. CLEAN

Howard H. Bell is called other things, too; as head of NAB's Code Authority, his decisions invariably displease some, but he's not running a popularity contest.

HOWARD HUGHES BELL is a pleasant looking man, soft of speech, and mild but firm of manner. Admirable as these attributes are, they do precious little to ease his almost constant exercise in brinkmanship. Often as not, his vantage point is from the middle of a frying pan.

Howard Bell lives dangerously as director of the Code Authority, the self-regulation arm of the National Association of Broadcasters. This is the industry's organized effort to set reasonable standards of taste and restraint in broadcasting. As an arbiter on what is acceptable for the air, Mr. Bell's decisions can, and sometimes do, upset advertisers, agencies, and his own employers—the networks and stations that subscribe to the Code. Whichever way his decision goes, somebody gets mad.

"I'm not the most popular individual," he smiles. "The better I do my job, I suppose the more disliked I become. But this is no popularity contest. We operate in the long range interest."

In a situation where an adverse ruling may mean the loss of millions of dollars in revenue, it is small wonder that Howard Bell is the target of many a stinging dart. "Broadcasting's Mr. Clean" is one of the mildest epithets hurled his way. Another gentle taunt is "Broadcasting's Answer to Batman." One disgruntled agency executive is said to have expressed his feelings more bluntly:

"Howard Bell should be taken out and shot."

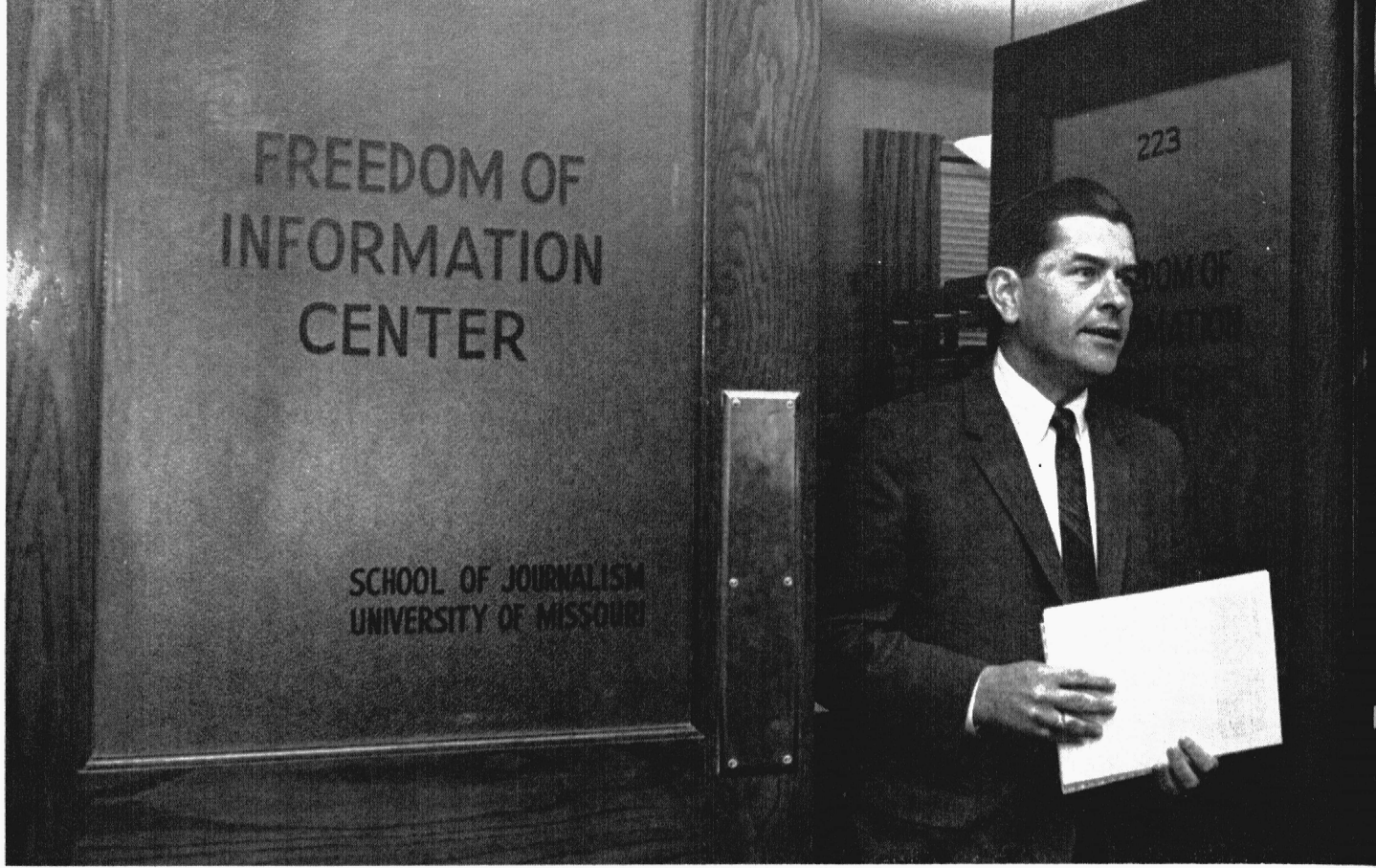
It is a safe bet that this nice guy, the kind you'd like to have as a next-door neighbor, never dreamed he would advance to such a precarious position back

in the 40's when he attended the School of Journalism and worked for KFRU. He probably sensed no impending peril when he joined the Evening Star Broadcasting Company in Washington after graduation in 1948, remaining for three years and becoming promotion manager for WMAL-TV. Still unsuspecting that his rapid rise was bringing him closer to the target range, he joined the NAB in 1951 as assistant to the vice-president. Fearlessly, he accepted a series of promotions, from vice-president for planning and development to vice-president for industry affairs and then to acting administrator of the Code in December, 1963. Two months after that he exposed himself to the full brunt of assaults from all sides when he became director of the Code Authority, in which position he has shown a commendable resiliency.

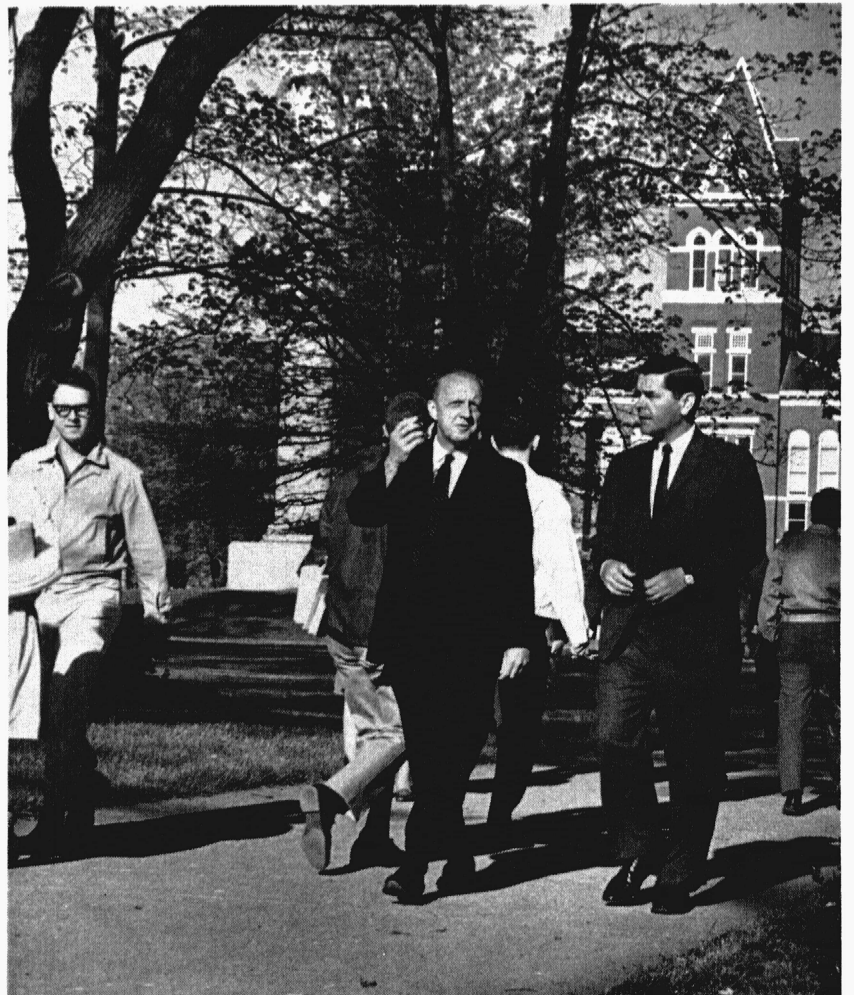
THE CODE AUTHORITY is the overall umbrella covering radio and TV codes. It has offices in Washington (Bell's headquarters), New York and Hollywood. Forty-four per cent of the radio stations are subscribers to the Code; in television, it is 70 per cent.

As director, Bell is an adjudicator who decides whether a commercial is in good taste, whether it makes claims that can't be substantiated, or downgrades competition unfairly. But he strongly disclaims that he is a czar, in the sense that baseball and the movies have had czars; he points to the appeals process through which those ruled against may seek redress. The board that hears such appeals is made up of eleven representatives from radio and nine from television. The Code Authority also relies on advisory panels. In medicine, outside experts are called upon to assess the reasonableness of claims for myriad patent nostrums.

As a one-time resident of Defoe Hall, Howard H. Bell returns to the scene of his student days on tour of campus during Journalism Week.



Howard Bell picks up some material at the Freedom of Information Center on his visit. A founding member of the Center's advisory committee, he wrote the first statement of Center objectives. Below, he strolls about the campus with the Center's director, Professor Paul L. Fisher.



Photos by Kenneth Seals



The Code Authority director, from a point on the Mall, looks out over old Rollins Field and toward the Medical Center, recalling the trailer camp days of the post-war era at the University...

'The most effective sanction the Codes have is the public.'

The Code Authority spot checks commercials. In a typical year, monitoring of TV covered 52,000 hours and of radio 67,000 hours. This was tape monitoring done by professional organizations, although the Code staffs evaluate the results.

The Code offices could never screen or clear all fare before it hits the air. The networks continue to do most of the industry's commercial clearance work.

In addition to its regular monitoring, the Code gets involved in commercial reviewing in a variety of ways—at the request of a subscriber, an advertiser or agency voluntarily seeking counsel, a listener or viewer who complains, or even governmental inquiry. At times an agency or advertiser may present a commercial in script or storyboard stage.

Some objectionable commercials are around for quite a while before they get tossed off the air. The reader may recall a headache tablet that was referred to as "just like a doctor's prescription," a phrase that finally was eliminated; and the epidemic of television actors posing as doctors who always wore white coats, which have since been shed.

The methods employed by the Code Authority to bring about compliance with its rulings are simple but effective. If a commercial is disapproved, the sub-

scribers are notified. It is the subscriber, not the advertiser, over whom the Code has jurisdiction. If it meets with opposition, the Code Authority in effect takes its case to the public. It issues a public statement that the commercial is unacceptable and is in violation of the Code. Though it means loss of revenue, the subscribers generally comply; those that do not are expelled and their call letters are published.

"I am convinced that the most effective sanction the Codes have is the public," Bell said.

"The Codes state what cannot be done, as opposed to prescribing what should be done. We make no pretense that our self-regulation efforts in broadcasting have achieved perfection. We continually explore ways of meeting our responsibilities."

What product category do you suppose involves the Code Authority more than any other? Cigaretts? Health remedies? No. Toys. In cooperation with the Toy Manufacturers of the U.S.A., Inc., the Code serves as a virtual clearing house in the toy area. In the 1965 holiday season, Code offices approved 283 toy commercials of 41 manufacturers. As samples are required, the New York office takes on the look of a toy factory; the toys are returned after demonstration.

What is guarded against in toy commercials is over-



"You can't help but look back on college days as the best period in life; it's just too bad we never realize it at the time."

glamorization and consequent child disappointment. If a toy rocket is advertised, the child actor should not be dressed as an astronaut; the film should not dissolve to a shot of a Cape Kennedy launching. Child actors handling a toy gun should not be shown in cowboy attire or against a western backdrop. The child viewer must not be disappointed by being misled into thinking he gets all the trappings with the toy rocket or gun.

BELL GETS BACK to the campus whenever he can, and has been here on several occasions in connection with the Freedom of Information Center. His most recent visit was in May when he took part in the Journalism Week program. He said then that every time he returns to Columbia he is "impressed all over again with the great progress the University has made. The growth in facilities is quite dramatic."

A native of New York City, where he graduated from DeWitt Clinton High School, Bell came to the University in the V-12 program with the Navy in 1945. It was a time when the campus was crowded with serious-minded veterans who were more interested in the academic life than in social activities.

"The golf course had been transformed into a trailer camp to accommodate the married veterans," Bell recalled. "There were as many students concerned about baby sitters as about dates."

When he was mustered out of the Navy after two years, Bell decided to stay on here to get his degree in journalism, a field he had always been interested in. But, he readily admits, there was another reason for wanting to stay in Missouri. He became intrigued with a red-haired cheerleader, Corinne Chandler—so much so that in his final year they were married "and she worked at the University Hospital to get me through school." Bell received his B.J. in 1948, the year after his bride had earned her A.B.; later he acquired a law degree from Catholic University of America after attending George Washington one year. They now live in Maryland with their three children.

On weekends Howard and Corinne would go to her home town, Hannibal, Missouri. On one occasion the city boy from the sidewalks of New York, trying to impress his wife's father with his knowledge of farming, noted the amount of poison ivy growing in the fields. It turned out that the "poison ivy" was a very good crop of soy beans. At that time his knowledge of the earth and its products was confined to what he had seen growing in Central Park. Today, in his role of promoting taste and restraint in broadcasting, it can be said that Howard Bell still is on the lookout for poison ivy, and trying to eradicate it wherever he can. J.C.T. □