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## F.C.C.'s Temporary Chief Proves More Than a Fill-In

By EDMUND L. ANDREWS

WASHINGTON, Oct. 3 — Many others might have felt resentful or even insulted. But at the age of 79, James H. Quello had few illusions about the terms on which he took over the Federal Communications Commission in February.

He would be a caretaker, running the agency only until President Clinton nominated a permanent chairman. Even though Mr. Quello is a Democrat and had served as a commissioner for 19 years, it was clear that the White House wanted someone younger.

Yet as he prepares to hand over control to Reed E. Hundt, a Washington attorney who is expected to be confirmed by the Senate this week, he has racked up a remarkable list of changes. Far from simply marking time, the F.C.C. under Mr. Quello has issued decisions that will affect mass media and advanced telecommunications for years.

The record is more striking be-

cause Mr. Quello is hardly a technological visionary. He is a former broadcaster from Detroit who likes plain talk, wears polyester suits and loves getting awards, making speeches and repeating his one-liners four or five times as he moves from crowd to crowd. "I've never been busier in my life," he said last week. "I still have 75 percent of my marbles, which is pretty good if you're in Washington."

By combining humor with common sense, he has coaxed bold decisions from an often fractious commission.

In April, for example, the F.C.C. put into effect a new cable television law, imposing more than 500 pages of detailed rate regulations and scores of tough rules to promote the quality of service. And though there are signs that the cable companies have found loopholes in the commission's plan to trim prices by a total of \$1 billion a year, the industry still predicts that the rules will cost it hundreds of

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# F.C.C. Chief Is More Than a Fill-In

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millions of dollars in 1993.

Also in April, Mr. Quello persuaded his fellow commissioners to abandon restrictions that barred television networks from entering the \$5 billion market for reruns and syndicated programming. The move, a blow to Hollywood studios, came after years of fruitless bickering on the commission.

In July, the F.C.C. brushed off a lobbying blitz by local phone companies and imposed new rules that forced them to accept more competition from new rivals.

On Sept. 23, it issued a landmark decision that opens the airwaves to a vast expansion of services involving wireless telephones, computers, pagers and faxes. It also outlined a plan to sell new radio licenses to the highest bidder, a radical change ordered by Congress that is expected to generate billions of dollars.

To be sure, the F.C.C.'s agenda has largely been driven by outside forces. Congress set strict deadlines for applying the cable law, and a Federal appeals court forced the agency to re-examine the rules barring networks from owning rerun rights or financial interests in prime-time shows.

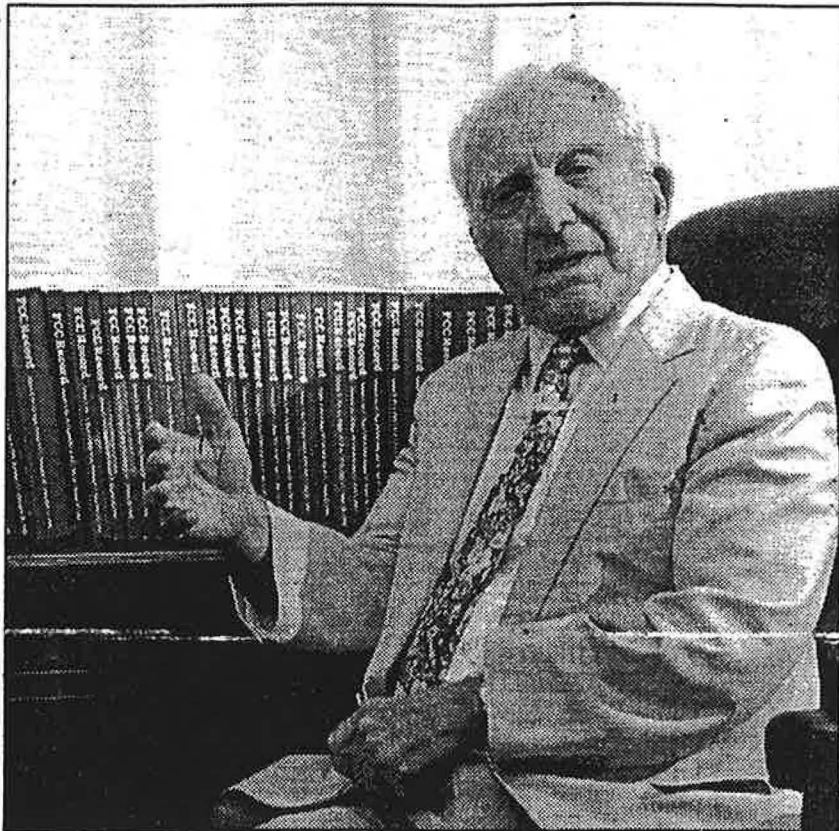
Even so, the commission could have been far more timid. The cable rate regulations stunned both the industry and Wall Street. Likewise, studios and producers were enraged by the move to lift the restrictions on the TV networks. And until a few months ago, cellular phone companies had been assuming that the commission would put off action on new wireless services until a permanent chairman was in place.

## 'New Spirit of Openness'

Ervin S. Duggan, a commissioner who frequently bristled at the former chairman, Alfred C. Sikes, attributes much of the F.C.C.'s pace to the ease of working with Mr. Quello. Members of Congress echoed that. "He has joined his efforts with a new spirit of openness and collegiality," said Representative Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts and chairman of the House Commerce subcommittee on telecommunications.

Mr. Quello was not always in such favor. Before joining the commission in 1974, his nomination by President Richard M. Nixon was opposed by consumer advocates like Ralph Nader, who accused Mr. Quello of being a pawn for broadcasters. Mr. Nixon, then mired in the Watergate scandal, would have let the nomination languish had it not been for an appeal from Gerald R. Ford, then House minority leader and soon to be Vice President, who was a friend from Michigan.

Once confirmed as a commissioner, Mr. Quello staked out positions. He



Michael Geissinger for The New York Times

In seven months as acting chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, James H. Quello has led change, including a new cable television law and a decision that opens the airwaves to a vast expansion of services including wireless phones, computers, pagers and faxes.

has often supported over-the-air broadcasters and has been a champion of preserving free universal television in an era of cable. He was a strong supporter of cable regulation and of the provisions of the new law that allow local stations to seek compensation from cable systems that retransmit their signals.

Likewise, when some children's-programming advocates wanted to restrict shows based on toys like G.I. Joe because they appeared to be program-length commercials, Mr. Quello was emphatically opposed.

But he has not been an industry pawn. In the early 1980's, he opposed the F.C.C.'s move, led by the chairman then, Mark Fowler, to let owners of television stations sell their licenses after owning them only one year. Previously, the ownership requirement was three years.

The decision undermined the Reagan-era commission's policy of awarding new licenses based on the comparative strengths of each applicant because it meant that a candidate who seemed community-minded could buy a station and almost immediately sell it to someone else.

"I do deregulation," Mr. Quello told

Mr. Fowler at the time. "I don't do anarchy."

More recently, Mr. Quello has called for legislation that would allow the F.C.C. to keep closer watch on the level of violence on television.

These days, Mr. Quello is enthusiastic about breaking down the legal barriers that prevent the telephone and cable television industries from competing head-to-head. "There are going to be at least two competing super-electronic highways," he said last week. "I look forward to telephones competing with cable, cable competing with telephones and perhaps even wireless competing with both. There will be a mind-boggling array of advanced services, with very little need for Government regulation."

Mr. Quello will remain a commissioner when Mr. Hundt takes over, and he betrays no sorrow about giving up the job of acting chairman. "If I were 45," he said, "I would really want to do it. But I'm 79, and I'd rather help out somebody else and let them run it."

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