

# News to Fill Empty Networks

By PETER J. BOYER

The television networks, faced with a possible shortage of fresh entertainment shows because of a writers' strike, are looking to their news divisions to help fill the programming void. And one network, CBS, is even considering expanding its "Evening News" program into an hourlong prime-time broadcast.

The circumstance gives an unusual twist to the rôle of the news divisions. The news departments have had to fight for air time for their news programs, which usually do not attract large audiences; but with the prospect of a delayed fall television season because of the strike by the Writers Guild of America, network news executives are scrambling to develop ideas for programs as replacement shows.

Roone Arledge, the president of ABC News, has asked for new program ideas from the executive producers of his regularly scheduled news programs. "What we're talking about is doing hour specials, other series, and there's always the possibility of repeating things, although I'd rather not do that," Mr. Arledge said yesterday. "The strike looks like it will go a long time, and this is a great opportunity for a news division."

## Projects Are in the Works

Several such projects are in the works at ABC, and at least four hour-long news specials, in addition to those already planned, are likely to be broadcast this fall, ABC executives said.

Brandon Tartikoff, NBC's entertainment president, said two weeks ago that he would welcome ideas from NBC News to help fill the fall schedule, and yesterday he met with

The void left by the writers' strike could be an opportunity.

news executives to solicit specific program proposals.

Last week, CBS announced that it planned to broadcast two hourlong programs featuring highlights from its popular prime-time news program, "60 Minutes."

CBS is also developing a prime-time broadcast featuring the stars of its morning news-and-information program, "CBS This Morning," Kathleen Sullivan and Harry Smith.

## Death of President Kennedy

In addition, CBS News is planning a prime-time special on the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The network had earlier declined to buy rights to a prime time Kennedy special created by outside producers, for which the host was to have been Walter Cronkite, the former CBS anchor.

But the most unusual proposal, and perhaps the least likely to be carried out, comes from the staff of the "CBS Evening News." Tom Bettag, the executive producer of that broadcast, has proposed that the newscast, anchored by Dan Rather, be expanded to an hour and moved into prime time.

Such a move would not only provide fresh programming for CBS five nights a week during a strike-postponed season, but also would satisfy the long-harbored ambition at CBS News to expand its nightly half-hour newscast to an hour.

"There's no question that we'd be up for it, no question at all," Mr. Bettag said yesterday, "we'd love to do it." He noted that prime-time hour-long newscasts have proved successful on the local level, and added, "You can look at that, and say that prime-time news works very well."

## Ways to Fill an Hour

Among the ideas discussed for an hourlong "Evening News" was the in-

clusion of live interviews, in the manner employed by the ABC News program "Nightline," and allowing correspondents' reports to run longer than the minute-and-a-half standard now employed.

In the past, all three network news divisions have vigorously lobbied for an expanded nightly newscast, but their hopes have always been dashed by their affiliated stations, who were loath to donate the extra time. But an expanded nightly newscast playing in prime time, as opposed to the period just before prime time where network news now plays, would take no time from the affiliates, thus perhaps eliminating that source of opposition.

Indeed, two CBS affiliates yesterday endorsed the idea of an expanded "CBS Evening News" in prime time.

"That would be interesting to see," said the assistant manager of WWL-TV in New Orleans, Phil Johnson. "I imagine they'd use it to put their foot in the door with an hour news. They've been trying to do it for years, but the affiliates have said no, because it would take time from us."

Jim Babb, of WBTV in Charlotte, N.C., said: "I think they're right to give it consideration, and if they do it in a proper fashion, I think it will have some potential. I think they ought to give it a try."

## No Word From Jankowski

In 1981, when CBS made its most serious proposal to expand the "Evening News" to an hour, Mr. Babb led the affiliates' opposition that eventually killed the idea.

Gene F. Jankowski, the president of the CBS Broadcast Group, would have to approve such a plan, and was unavailable for comment yesterday.

However, other executives at CBS News did not think the expanded nightly newscast was likely. For one thing, an expanded "Evening News" would strain the already stretched resources of CBS News, which has undergone severe budget cut in recent years.

Beyond that, the news division plans to provide original episodes of its weekly news series, "48 Hours," which requires the services of its regular news staff.

Also, there is the matter of ratings. "The argument against it is, will it deliver good enough ratings for the network?" Mr. Bettag said.