'HE NEW YORK TIMES,

TV Review

New Orleans Slayings in Live 'Bulletins'

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Several of yesterday's TV soap operas were interrupted for what appeared to be a typical action-suspense melodrama, complete with policemen, terrorists, rifles and gunfire. The action, however, was live, direct from the Howard Johnson Motel in downtown New Orleans.

TV's sporadic coverage of the breaking news story illustrated both the enormous technological potential and the real economic limitations of the medium.

All three networks had access in New York to live closed-circuit coverage of the story, transmitted by their affiliates in New Orleans from buildings near the motel. The "feeds" began late Sunday evening or early Monday morning. Executives at each of the network news departments had continuing access to the scene and the story. The problem was in deciding when to break in on regular programing with live bulletins.

●

The Columbia Broadcasting System used some material, provided by WWL-TV, on the C.B.S. morning news with John Hart. But it wasn't until about 2:45 in the afternoon that the network decided to come on the home screen with a lengthy half-hour "bulletin."

At that point, the police were on one of the roof levels of the motel and it was assumed that the remaining gunman or gunmen were about to be captured. Shots were fired. Three policemen were injured. After painstaking preparation, the police broke into a storage area. No one was there. C.B.S. had great pictures, an intensely dramatic situation and a disappearing act.

The National Broadcasting Company had some live material from WDSU-TV on the "Today" show and came on again, for 11 minutes, at about 3:20 P.M. N.B.C. had great pictures and the report on the disappearing act.

Both C.B.S. and N.B.C. returned briefly at about 4:30 with a report that the police had spotted a man in an air conditioning unit on another roof level. Several units were dismantled but, again, no one was there. The networks had another fascinating vignette and another false lead.

The American Broadcasting Company was receiving a feed from WVUE-TV but did not see fit to interrupt its regular schedule. One employe said during a phone call, "We've been watching C.B.S."

●

Following last summer's coverage via satellite of the tragedy at the Olympic Games in Munich, the New Orleans story provides still another example of TV's increasing capacity for live "event" coverage of breaking news.

Time allowing, cameras can be set up anywhere. If the story isn't neatly self-contained, however, if it sprawls in time or space, TV is still at a considerable disadvantage. The pictures may be clear, the content may be fascinating, but that doesn't pay the network bills. Regular programing does, and it will continue to get top priority.