

# '60 Minutes' Ticks

By Sander Vanocur

A bit of television history will be made tonight when "60 Minutes" moves into its new time slot on CBS at 7 p.m. Never before has a network put a continuing weekly news program in prime time.

The program, which has added Dan Rather to its reporting team of Mike Wallace and Morley Safer, has run for eight years. Despite its previously truncated schedule—it went off the air when pro football came on in the fall—it has retained its faithful audience. During the past summer, when it was shown during prime time, it demonstrated that it could attract a high rating. That is why it is now being moved into prime time to replace "Three for the Road." It will probably do as well if not better than any enter-

tainment replacement that CBS could have found.

Is "60 Minutes" news or is it entertainment? There is no question what it is. It is news presented in an entertaining manner. That is what makes it and the new and successful NBC monthly program "Weekend" work. They entertain as they inform.

Entertaining is defined as "the act of receiving a guest." That is what has made "60 Minutes" apparently so welcome in so many homes. It does not come at viewers with gloom and doom and an exaggerated sense of its own importance. It does not feel that important stories need a whole hour to tell. It does three or four in an hour. In its case, less is more. Like a good guest, it does not overstay its welcome.

See PRIME TIME, G11, Col. 1

## PRIME TIME, From G1

Don Hewitt, its executive producer, thinks the program has been successful because it has filled the void left by the demise of Life and Look. He understands the limitations and the opportunities of television as a predominately, but not exclusively, visual medium. "It is," he maintains, "not so important what you tell people, as how much they remember."

"60 Minutes" and "Weekend" may be showing us a new form of documentary. All the networks do documentaries. They do them for a variety of reasons, a major one being the prestige they bring to the network. When Robert E. Kintner ran NBC in the late '50s and the early '60s, he emphasized, in addition to regular news programs, "instant" specials and documentaries. CBS was ahead in entertainment and not likely to be overtaken. NBC looked to its prestige in news and documentaries.

More recently, ABC ran into trouble with its affiliates when it announced plans to cut back the number of highly acclaimed "Close-Up" documentaries

in 1976. It will restore the series to its regular schedule of 12 in 1977.

But there remains a problem. Documentaries do not generally attract high ratings. There are exceptions. NBC won a very high share of the viewing audience last year with its UFO special. CBS appears to have done well in the ratings with its recent two-part special on the John F. Kennedy assassination.

Documentaries, to attract a large audience, generally need three elements: quality, controversy and a great deal of promotion. "The Incredible Machine," a National Geographic Society documentary about the human body, received the highest ratings in the history of PBS. But it was not a news documentary.

That is the catch. What once might have seemed controversial on a news documentary, a subject like abortion, may not attract the audience that it once did, now that we have seen the issue defined in different terms on "Maude." The issue of death, which once might have been the subject of a news documentary, was treated

brilliantly and tastefully in comedic terms recently on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

That is a special problem for the people who make news documentaries. They must deal with a climate in which entertainment programs now deal regularly with issues that were formerly taboo. Issues that once were assigned to news departments for explanation and amplification.

This is not to say that the traditional "hard news" documentary is dead. Sweeping generalizations about the past, present and future of anything in television are about as useful as similar statements about politics. But the success of "60 Minutes" on a weekly basis and "Weekend" on a monthly basis suggests that people are receptive to information presented to them in something other than straight-forward news documentary form.

It seems to be more than just a passing fad. It suggests that people in television news, and perhaps in newspapers and magazines as well, may have to revise their judgments about what is news and what is entertainment. Perhaps they are the same.