

Star 8/6/68

ON THE AIR

TV Links Shocked Nation

By BERNIE HARRISON
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All three TV network stations were on early yesterday morning when the tragic news came, although CBS had concluded its coverage of the California primaries about 2:15 a.m. and its affiliate, WTOP-9, was running "The Late Show," a film called "Gideon of Scotland Yard," starring Jack Hawkins.

CBS News alerted WTOP that it was resuming with news of the shooting and the station, of course, promptly broke into the film and never returned to it.

WMAL-7's program director, Herb Victor, at home, got a call around 2:30 a.m., asking him whether the station should stay with the network coverage or sign off. While the projections had already declared Sen. Kennedy the winner, Victor was aware of the slowness of the tabulation of votes from the Los Angeles area and cautiously decided to stay on.

WRC, channel 4, had no such decision to make, since it is owned by NBC and was on the air with the network, although affiliates elsewhere may have elected to cut away or return to a late movie feature.

The other Washington stations were off the air. Channel 5 went off at 12:38 a.m. and the staff long dispersed when the news broke.

Last night, WTTG-5, a member of the Metromedia chain, was planning a cross-country hookup with its sister station, KTTV, in Los Angeles, and Channel 14, with no network service, was planning a follow-up program, one with author Mark Lane. Earlier Tuesday night, Lane, on John Hightower's "Checkpoint 14," while discussing the assassinations of President Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, reportedly said, "There are guns between Robert Kennedy and the White House." The size of the TV audience at

that early hour was probably very small, even if there was still room for doubt about the outcome, and the majority of Washingtonians undoubtedly first heard the news yesterday morning via their radios, at home or in the auto.

Remarkable Job

Once again, though television did a remarkable job in bringing the salient facts of the tragic shooting to the nation, with reports covering every conceivable aspect of the story. Some reporters, like NBC's Sander Vanocur, were visibly shaken, but the treatment — from what I could see, skipping from channel to channel — was restrained and sobering. Commentary on the event and its meaning came from many sources, including such network commentators as Eric Sevareid, for CBS, who referred to the "maximum view" that this is a "sick nation," but who said that no nation could be so described, except Germany under Hitler. Sevareid decried the literature of violence, the cult of the anti-hero.

There is a point of sad irony in the Kennedy shooting and the assassination of his brother, the President.

The Federal Communications Commission seemed at last to be moving in some direction for the control of various television excesses in the fall of '68 and hearings were ordered on the controversial proposition that the FCC adopt the standards of the industry itself, as expressed in the code of the National Association of Broadcasters, in dealing with commercials.

Between the order for the hearings and their date, the complexion of the Commission itself changed, but more importantly, the hearings were convened when the nation was still

reeling from the shock of President Kennedy's death. Television's performance had been superb. A Congressman rushed a bill into the hopper which took away the Commission's right to deal with commercials and while it vanished in the Senate, the FCC got the hint. It retreated.

Changes Asked

It now happens, coincidentally, that there is considerable sentiment for change, not only in programming but in the way the radio-TV industry is regulated. Robert Lowe, a counsel for the Senate Commerce Committee, came up with a study that could restructure the entire industry. He suggested that broadcasters be taxed on gross revenues to induce public service programming and, among other things, argued that stations should be classified by the amount and quality of public-interest broadcasting, with those carrying little or no such programs paying high taxes. Two Federal Communications Commissioners, Nicholas Johnson and Kenneth Cox, have approached this same issue from another direction. The two commissioners disagreed with the FCC majority in the renewal of licenses in the state of Oklahoma, writing that local programming is the whole reason for our system of station distribution and such programs are almost non-existent in Oklahoma. Meanwhile, Washington regulators and congressmen were asserting the need to arrest or break up multimedia groups. And another FCC Commissioner, veteran Robert Bar-

tley, pointing out that the Commission was so bogged down with legal procedures that it was unable to keep up with the "state of communications art," proposed a plan dividing the present functions of the FCC between two independent agencies and a new authority for frequency allocations.

Something needs to be done. There is no question that television can — when the opportunity presents itself — cover a news event splendidly, earning our gratitude. Will that gratitude once again postpone remedial action?

(Listen to Bernie Harrison, weekdays, 4:40 p.m., WQMR.)