

TV: Networks and the White House

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

In this week's coverage of major developments surrounding the possibility of Presidential impeachment, the most significant television moments stemmed not from content but, in two key instances, from behind-the-scenes network policy decisions. Tuesday evening, NBC did not—repeat, did not—give live coverage to the 7:30 news conference of James D. St. Clair, Presidential counsel. Wednesday evening, the CBS Evenings News With Walter Cronkite did not give live coverage to Mr. St. Clair's delivery of President Nixon's response to the tapes decision of the Supreme Court.

Neither network ignored the item in question. But both handled the material on their own terms, not the terms of the White House, and a num-

ber of broadcasting figures say that the importance of those decisions for TV journalism can hardly be exaggerated.

The problem has been summarized in the label "Presidential television," referring to the White House's ready access to broadcasting channels.

Many politicians and broadcasters agree that the Presidency demands and deserves effective instruments for shaping public opinion. They do not question that major Presidential addresses and legitimate news conferences should have a broadcasting forum. But their feeling does not necessarily carry over to what they see as the public relations aspects of a campaign by a President who is fighting for political survival.

When the President himself becomes part of a larger

story, they see no need for the networks to jump when the White House says that a "major statement" will be delivered at a certain time, usually prime time, and that "live coverage would be welcomed."

That happened this week with the appearances of Mr. St. Clair. NBC did not carry the Tuesday evening news conference for two reasons: the two other networks were carrying it so the conference was not being blacked out, and NBC intended to incorporate the highlights in a special half-hour scheduled for later that evening.

The situation for CBS News Wednesday evening was slightly more complicated. Mr. Nixon's response to the Supreme Court decision constituted important news. However, in the view of news editors it was not more important than the decision itself. The networks were told that the response would be available for live coverage at 7 P.M., timed so that it could lead off the three Eastern editions of network news and, at the same time, shift the primary focus from the decision to the response.

Getting no indication of how long the St. Clair statement might last, CBS News refused to grant automatic access. That decision was made by, among others, Richard Salant, president of CBS News, William Small, senior vice president, and Sanford Socolow, vice president, Washington operations. Reached in Washington Wednesday evening, Mr. Socolow explained: "We like to maintain control of our own product."

As a result, that edition of the CBS Evening News began with Mr. Cronkite reporting from the steps of the Supreme Court. The court decision, and wide public reaction to it, was reported in detail, followed by a taped version of Mr. St. Clair's statement. This put the major events of the day into a sequence that news editors at CBS believed made journalistic sense.

The form of that journalism was firmly in the hands of CBS News. It was not merely a response to a White House that has taken open pride in its "sophisticated" use of the media. The moves by NBC and CBS, according to a number of broadcasters, leave substantial dents in the institution of "Presidential television."