

TV Action And Reaction

Post 10/22/73
By Judith Martin

The man who called WMAL (Channel 7) five or six times on Saturday night was furious enough to promise that he would bring his case against the station to the Federal Communications Commission.

The complaint was that he had been watching "The Six Million Dollar Man," a movie about black market dealings in nuclear weapons, when the program was interrupted for the announcement of the sudden departure from government service of Attorney General Elliot Richardson, Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus and Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.

"I'm from Virginia," he explained tersely to the newsroom writer who picked up the telephone. "So this doesn't affect me. What you people do up there (in Washington) doesn't affect me."

But there were an awful lot of excited people on both sides of the television screen that night who didn't agree with him. One popular program after another gave up slices to news bulletins or went off the air completely for the television specials which were hastily put together to cover the breaking story.

On the 6:30 CBS news from New York, Dan Rather had speculated about Richardson's resigning and Cox's being fired. Rather then sprinted to catch the 8 p.m. shuttle to Washington, on which he found, as usual, his NBC competition, Tom Brokaw. Brokaw said that the NBC bureau had decided that they weren't sure enough to go ahead with it.

Also on the plane was CBS' Eric Sevareid, who was returning from giving a speech in Kansas City. "People kept asking him what was happening, and he kept shaking his head and saying he didn't know, that he'd been off making a speech," said Rather.

"Of course, nobody believed him. They were all convinced that he knew, but he wasn't telling."

to "Channel 5 radio sources."

The official announcement from the White House on this ended at 8:27—after which NBC's Carl Stern and CBS' Nelson Benton raced to their camera crews on the White House lawn to get it on the air.

Benton ended up having a small, technical conversation with his crew on the air, before he realized—all the while keeping an eye on Stern and his crew nearby—that his microphone was live.

"I may have been a little out of breath," he said afterwards. "It's 30 yards from the pressroom to the lawn. But I guess the adrenalin was still going."

The NBC and CBS bulletins, cutting in on "Emergency" and "M*A*S*H" respectively, were the first full announcements, with Channels 5 and 7 coming in slightly later.

NBC claims the record, getting in at 8:29 p.m. plus 20 seconds.

Channel 9, the CBS affiliate, had started its full coverage locally at 7 p.m., throwing out "Treasure Hunt" so that "Agronsky & Co." could run a full hour instead of its usual half hour.

By 7:20, the telephones there were ringing. Columnist George Will had been defending President Nixon, and the calls attacking Will were coming in so thick that the switchboard operator's husband spent 3½ hours trying unsuccessfully to get his wife's ear.

The station's vice president Jim Snyder estimated that about 300 calls got through, "overwhelmingly opposed to the President's position. A lot of them were people who had tried to call the White House and hadn't been able to get through, so they called us instead."

There were also news bulletins at 9:30, 10 and 10:40, but the callers were not complaining about the interruptions in the Bob Newhart and Carol Burnett shows. "That shows how strongly people felt," said Snyder. "When you interrupt Carol Burnett, you're really taking

In Washington, Metromedia's Maury Povich went on the air at 7:14 with the speculation about Cox and Richardson, which he attributed

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a chance of alienating people."

At Channel 7, which had two one-minute bulletins, some 20 or 30 callers (not counting the man from Virginia) called to express disillusionment with President Nixon.

"Five or six that I got were crying," said one newsroom employee. "They kept saying they'd backed him through everything but this was the last straw."

Meanwhile, NBC was going in on "The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid" with a 10 p.m. bulletin, and Metro-media had its regular 10 p.m. nightly newscast with

six minutes and 45 seconds out of the half hour devoted to the Justice Department developments. This included an interview on the subject with columnist Jack Anderson.

At 11 p.m., all three network stations carried the news on their regular news broadcasts. Channel 9 had George Will back, making the callers mad, along with Carl Rowan, Elizabeth Drew and Pete Lisagor who disagreed with him. About 70 per cent of the regular newscast was devoted to discussion of the firing and resignations.

At 11:30, CBS ran a half-hour network special with Dan Rather, Benton and

Fred Graham discussing the developments.

Also at 11:30, NBC began a 90-minute special, with John Chancellor in New York and David Brinkley, Douglas Kiker, Stern, Robert McCormick and Clare Crawford in Washington.

Mrs. Crawford, the only nonnetwork reporter among them, had been watching "All in the Family" at home when she heard the news, and had dressed and dashed out, first to the Richardsons' house and then the Ruckelshaus'.

She caught Mrs. Richardson in her dressing gown, and carried Sen. Charles McC. Mathias (R-Md.) and

his family who were coming up the driveway to pay a social call in support of the former Attorney General.

After Mathias had promised her to appear on the 11:30 special, Mrs. Crawford moved on to the Ruckelshaus', where the former Deputy Attorney General left his kitchen supper to do an interview that was used on the special.

The special also included a telephone interview between Chancellor and Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), and recaps of earlier film such as Richardson's initial description of how free Cox would be of White House influence.