

TV News Carries Hefty Price Tag

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By John Carmody

Unprecedented television coverage of news events since Sept. 29—one of the more traumatic months in American history—has cost the three major networks some \$3 million in lost revenues and extra expense, an industry source said yesterday.

The period began when then-Vice President Spiro Agnew gave his fighting speech before a group of Republican women in Los Angeles. It extended through Agnew's resignation, the naming of Rep. Gerald Ford as a successor, the Mideast crisis, the resignation and firing of top administration legal officers and last Friday's tense presidential press conference.

Most events were handled by all three networks as ABC, CBS and NBC repeatedly preempted prime (evening) time, "fringe time" (afternoon and late evenings) and daytime tele-

casts for either specials, bulletins, or on-the-spot coverage of the breaking events.

Perhaps not since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November, 1963, have the networks been so comprehensive in their coverage.

Precise figures are unavailable, since network business offices are reluctant to release rates charged advertisers, but it is believed that the past month has cost CBS \$1 million alone. That figure includes revenues for a prime-time movie spectacular ("Dracula") that has yet to be rescheduled from the night Ford's nomination was telecast from the White House.

An NBC spokesman said yesterday "a million would seem a very high figure to me."

NBC, because of its coverage of the World Series, and ABC, due to its Saturday afternoon NCAA football pro-

grams, are believed to have spent just slightly less; but not much.

An ABC spokesman said yesterday that "we've been spending buck-for-buck with the other two and in the last couple of weeks we've done 45 minutes or an hour more than they have in preemptions." He declined to give an estimate of overall costs.

Broadcasting Magazine said yesterday that between Oct. 19 and 26 only, for instance, NBC provided "four hours 37 minutes in bulletins, inserts, interviews and specials outside regular newscasts; CBS provided four hours 11 minutes; and ABC two hours 37 minutes."

Costs include both the expense of special programming (including such items as the hiring of "stringers" for foreign telecasts in some cases) and much larger loss of advertising revenues, unrecoverable at least in the short term, according to the industry source.

During the summer, when the Watergate Senate hearings reportedly cost each network \$200,000 a day to cover (one network may have lost \$3 million during that period), daytime advertisers shied away from "sponsoring" such controversial fare.

However, with summer ad schedules not completely filled, those daytime advertisers were often able to reschedule commercials, giving the networks a chance to recover some of those revenues.

Starting in the fall, the entire prime-time advertising schedule was "locked-up", however, and such revenues were not recoverable, for the most part. "There's simply no slack time left," this industry source said.

On the other side of the coin, this source added, such thorough public affairs programming promotes each network's "image" as nothing else can.

Besides, he added, this is one of those years when big advertisers have been lining up on the New York sidewalks to get their commercials on the air. Each network expects to recover its losses before the 1973-74 season is out.