

Watergate Tied to News-Viewing Gains

By LES BROWN

The Watergate revelations are thought by audience research experts to have been the significant factor in the sudden upturn in television network news ratings during 1973, after several years of steady decline in the viewing levels.

If the public appetite for news was whittled by Watergate, it was further stimulated by the crisis of the Presidency that has grown out of the scandals, the fall of former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, the outbreak of war in the Middle East, and the energy crisis. This is reflected in the record-viewing averages for the three network newscasts during the last half of the year, according to television researchers.

Average viewing for the early evening newscasts increased approximately 5 per cent above 1972 levels for the year overall, and the sharp reversal of the downtrend that had begun in 1969 occurred during the April-June quarter, when the Watergate scandal was raging and the Senate Select Committee hearings got under way.

July Figures Climbed

But starting in July, news viewing on the networks began to climb to all-time levels. By year end, the three programs together were reaching an estimated total of 43 million people an evening, compared to about 39.5 million for the same October-December period a year ago.

On the basis of a full week, the newscasts aggregately averaged approximately 80 million different viewers in 1973 compared to 75 million the year before.

Audience gains accrued to all three networks, but the National Broadcasting System — usually 10 to 14 per cent behind

in audience — the Chancellor news program suddenly caught up with its C.B.S. competition during the last three months of the year.

The two are now in a virtual tie, with the latest rating report showing the C.B.S. half-hour a shade ahead of N.B.C.'s.

News Growth Significant

The growth in news audience exceeded the general increases in viewing for network programs before and after the newscasts last fall.

Sheldon Jacobs, a research executive for N.B.C., has observed that the fluctuations in news ratings are undoubtedly influenced by events. The last year in which network newscasts achieved peak viewing levels, he pointed out, was 1968, when major events included the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., President Lyndon B. Johnson's surprise announcement that he would not seek re-election, and the turbulent Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Mr. Jacobs added, however, that the upswing in the ratings might be indicative of "a more permanent interest in actuality programs" on the part of the general television audience, which grows in sophistication year by year.

Attacks in Capital

An official of one of the networks said that there might be a connection between the Nixon Administration's efforts to discredit network news and the trends in viewing.

He said that the decline in the news audience occurred while members of the Administration were attacking network journalism but that the reversal of that trend occurred when the Administration's own credi-

bility came under attack.

Somewhat harder for audience analysts to explain is why the Chancellor news on N.B.C. won a sufficiently larger share of the additional audience and suddenly achieved parity with the Cronkite news on C.B.S.

One explanation put forth is that the week in which Mr. Chancellor marked the first quantum gain was the week of Oct. 15 when N.B.C. was carrying the World Series games. The theory is that the baseball viewing spilled into the newscast and made some new fans.

Chancellor Approved

Donald Meaney, vice president of television news programming for N.B.C., said he believed the improvement in the "Nightly News" ratings was probably an effect of both the greater exposure given Mr. Chancellor in the coverage of live special events during the summer and the alterations that were made in the format of the newscast itself last fall.

"We abandoned the rundown of top items in the beginning of the newscast because we felt we ought to get right to the main story of the day," Mr. Meaney said. "That gets Chancellor off and running, while the other networks are still going down the list of stories they plan to present."

Whatever the reason for Mr. Chancellor's increased audience it was accomplished largely without the help of the New York market. Audience research shows that the gains made by the N.B.C. newscast came from other parts of the country. The belief at N.B.C. is that the local news on Channel 4, which has been running poorly in the ratings, has penalized the network news that follows at 7 P.M. by providing a weak lead-in.