

News Media Going All-Out

By Jules Witcover

Washington Post Staff Writer

Like an army that has already been stretched to the limits of troop endurance and materiel, the news media that has been covering all ramifications of Watergate for more than two years now is shooting the works on the impeachment story.

The combat analogy is particularly apropos, because the nation's television news and press organizations are moving onto a battleground that really has never been explored before. Never in the mass communications era has a President been impeached; TV news and the press alike are feeling their way, knowing only that they will be dealing with an incredible real-life drama.

"Surely this is the biggest story ever out of Washington," says Don Meany, vice president of NBC News for public affairs, "and one of the biggest stories anywhere, ever," though its exact dimensions and demands are not yet known.

The national television networks estimate it is costing each of them at least a half-million dollars in lost advertising revenue each day one of them provides the morning-to-late-night live coverage of the House Judiciary Committee's debate. NBC, CBS and ABC are pooling the coverage—each taking a day in turn—to cut the cost, but each reserving the option to air the debate on the network's two "off" days.

That cost is not expected to diminish materially if a vote for impeachment moves the debate to the House floor and after that to the Senate, for a trial that could stretch through most of the fall—or beyond.

Though neither the House nor the Senate has said it will admit TV cameras, that is the expectation.

The Public Broadcasting Service—public television—again as in the Senate Watergate committee hearings is taping each full day's debates and running them at night. Thus, in many of the 252 outlets of public television around the country, the impeachment story will be aired at least until 3 a.m. this weekend.

For PBS, which does no commercial advertising and hence suffers no revenue loss by preempting shows, the story figures to be a massive boon. Production costs, according to Gerald Slater, vice president for broadcasting, are only \$15,000 to \$20,000 a day. Also, based on the great popularity of its Senate Watergate re-runs last year, PBS expects the impeachment story to give its stations an inordinate share of the normal night-time TV viewing audience.

Newspapers, too—contrary to the often-heard impression that they profit from big stories—are losing money when they enlarge their editions to print more stories or textual material.

Over the last 15 days, for instance, The Washington Post has printed 656 additional columns, or 82 pages, over its normal size to handle aspects of the impeachment story, with no notable increase in its circulation.

According to Mark Meagher, vice president for business affairs for The Post, 285 tons more of newsprint has been fed at a cost of about \$65,000, plus additional production costs totaling \$30,000 and \$1,000 more for ink, for a daily circulation of about 535,000. All this averages out to a daily additional cost of \$6,400.

Also, Meagher reported, there has been a daily payroll increase of about \$700 for pressroom overtime on the increased runs.

The New York Times, according to Al Katz, its director of printing and delivery, is spending an additional \$12,000 daily—\$9,900 for an average of eight more pages on a circulation run of about 900,000, and about \$2,100 for 30 additional men in the press room.

Local television stations, here and around the country, also are likely to lose revenue in carrying the impeachment proceedings live, because the House Judiciary Committee in authorizing television specified there were to be no breaks for commercials. The impeachment debate, for all the public interest, may also cost the networks viewers, depending on what the other channels offer, and depending how long the proceedings last. On opening night, about 20 million viewers around the country watched some part of the debate on ABC, according to the Nielsen ratings.

ABC led the other two networks when the Judiciary hearings started at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, but eventually lost out to CBS as its line-up, "Tony Orlando and Dawn," "Cannon" and "Kojak" came on.

Nevertheless, ABC according to a Nielsen sample in the New York TV market had a 27 per cent share of the audience for the three hours, considered a very good rating for a public affairs telecast. CBS had 34 per cent of the market, NBC with a movie had 15 per cent, and the rest went to independents.

The impeachment story has also heightened the workload and pressures on most of the 1,200 news-

paper, 500 radio-TV and 529 magazine reporters accredited to the House and Senate press galleries.

As always when there are major stories in a town that does not yet have the facilities to cope with the demand, most have been shut out of the House Judiciary Committee, which has only 140 seats for the media. Accordingly, most reporting of it is being done off television sets in news bureaus around the city.

The prospect for covering the actual impeachment proceeding in the House is not much brighter for the press and TV. There are only 94 seats in the press gallery and room for another 50 or 60 standees. Special credentials are to be issued, with a rotating system for the standees, according to the House press gallery staff.

But costs, audiences and lack of seats are not what make the impeachment story the media's big moment. It is the judgment on presidential culpability that is to be rendered in the next historic weeks, and probably months—in public.