

TV: Verdict on Impeachment Coverage? Justified

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

After four full days of coverage, the verdict is clear. The decision to televise the House Judiciary Committee debates on Presidential impeachment is fully justified. While the presence of TV cameras has undoubtedly had some effect on the participants, that effect has often been positive, keeping blatant or excessive posturing to a bearable minimum. Meantime, the public is afforded invaluable access to, and understanding of, a historical event.

The House debates are by no means as "sexy," in TV trade jargon, as the Senate Watergate hearings, where new and frequently sensational information was being divulged on screen in living color almost daily. The material of the debates is now familiar to most Americans, and the constant rehashing of details can be downright boring. Many viewers, at least according to the ratings numbers, have stayed for awhile and then switched to other channels.

The more persistent have had two key rewards: a firsthand view of the complicated processes of government, and the emergence of a mosaic of 38 distinct personalities from the rather colorless

mass of the committee itself. The importance of the proceedings is almost matched by television's awesome ability to transform local figures into national personalities.

Though there can be little doubt that the House panel hearings should be televised, legitimate concern remains on the question of how. Some observers, citing the historic importance, would argue that the proceedings be carried simultaneously on all three commercial networks instead of being rotated daily on a single network. You are, in other words, going to watch it whether you like it or not. This argument smacks of smug paternalism at best.

Much attention has also been given to the inclusion of commercials. The networks, however, have shown reasonable restraint in this area. Commercials have been inserted, but only in the natural recess breaks, and in some cases have almost provided welcome relief from the labored musings of the TV commentators.

The biggest problem for television is the material placed in and around the committee proceedings. The commercial networks have been using their chief anchor-men—Walter Cronkite, John Chancellor, Harry Reasoner

and Howard K. Smith—as central and generally sound commentators, explaining what is about to happen and summarizing what has happened.

Proceedings, however, require very little explaining. The content is remarkably clear. That leaves the commentators with a minimum of immediate commentary, and during breaks the tendency is to switch to TV reporters at the scene who conduct interviews.

The interviews are sometimes either worthless or misleading. On NBC, Friday morning, several committee members went on record with the completely erroneous impression that the proceedings would wind up that day. The interviews also, and quite naturally, can stimulate aggressiveness on the part of the reporter searching for news. The effect on the TV screen is merely jarring and, at this point, counterproductive.

For at this stage of the impeachment process, the primary role of television, especially if it is to have a role in the entire proceedings, should be that of a conduit. The less extraneous interference, the better. Hard reporting should be restricted to regular newscasts and special reports. "Grandstanding" before the TV cameras is a

seduction for TV newsmen no less than for members of the Congress.

On the commercial networks, several of those special reports have been excellent, particularly those carried on CBS and NBC on Wednesday evening for a review of the Supreme Court decision and the opening of the committee debates. As for the Judiciary Committee debates, the most effective coverage, perhaps coming closest to the concept of a conduit, has been provided by public TV's NPACT center in Washington.

NPACT has been feeding the coverage live to certain stations, including Channel 13 in New York. Following the live feed, the stations are free to pick up a taped version of the entire day. At Channel 13 that has resulted in day-long coverage extending into the early hours of the following morning, what one station spokesman calls "wall-to-wall impeachment."

As anchormen, Paul Duke and Jim Lehrer have relied mostly on studio conversations with assorted guests, generally law school professors. The format is thoughtful and relatively unobtrusive. For the rest of the proceedings, that is precisely the format the medium must cultivate.