

Huge Audience For Nixon TV Interview

New York

Early ratings from four cities for David Frost's televised interview with former President Richard Nixon indicate that the Wednesday night telecast was the most watched news interview in the history of television and one of the highest-rated news broadcasts ever.

The 90-minute telecast, which was carried on 155 stations, drew 47 per cent of the viewing audience in the New York metropolitan area, according to the Nielsen overnight ratings.

Moreover, the ratings show
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that the viewing did not drop off as the program progressed. The audience reached its peak at 8 p.m. PDT, and most viewers remained with the program to its end at 9 o'clock.

In Los Angeles, the interview attracted 50 per cent of the audience and in Chicago 36 per cent.

A rating service that competes with Nielsen, Arbitron, reported a 42 per cent share of audience for the program in both New York and Los Angeles.

In a special overnight rating ordered by WCKT in Miami, an NBC affiliate that carried the broadcast, the Nixon-Frost interview gained a 50 per cent share.

(Neither Bay Area Channel, KPIX, which carried the Nixon interview, nor KTVU, which carried the Warriors-Lakers basketball game, made ratings checks.)

In every situation, the ratings far exceeded the most optimistic expectations of the promoters, and the program devastated all competing entertainment programming, including the John Wayne movie "Big Jake" and a Peter Fonda film, "Race With the Devil."

Top officials of all three network news divisions conceded that "The Nixon Interviews" was a blockbuster, and all praised the program almost without reservation.

"It told you everything about Nixon," said Richard Salant, president of CBS News, who called the effort "one of the most interesting interview broadcasts I've ever seen."

Richard Wald, president of NBC News, rated the program "excellent" and praised Frost for doing "a very good job of interviewing."

"I would not claim that one of our people would have done it better — differently, I think, and maybe just about as well, but I wouldn't want to say better," Wald commented.

Another NBC executive observed that the program had probably benefited from the fact that Frost, a British television personality, "could bear down on Nixon harder than a traditional American reporter could have." A journalist has to maintain a greater sense of objectivity and impartiality, he said.

The news chiefs all said that they regretted not having the program on their own networks but added that the circumstances, chiefly Nixon's requirement of a large fee, had made it impossible.

"The tremendous interest in this event doesn't change the principle that is at issue," said William Sheehan, president of ABC News. "We would still have to consider it wrong to pay a public figure for granting a news interview. Our policy against practicing 'Checkbook Journalism' is firm and not governed by the ratings potential."

Alone among the networks, NBC News had been willing to pay a fee to Nixon, reportedly \$400,000. "But it was never held open to bidding," Wald said. "One day we learned that Frost had won the rights, and we were never told why."

Frost is understood to have offered the former President \$600,000 and ten per cent of the profits for the four 90-minute interviews.

The British Broadcasting Corporation carried the Nixon-Frost interview Wednesday night, as did nine other foreign broadcast systems.

New York Times