ABC keeps narrow lead in TV ratings

NEW YORK (UPI) — ABC edged out CBS in the weekly Nielsen ratings race, possibly in part thanks to President Carter — by not carrying the President's March 14 news conference live.

The ABC difference was 0.3 of a ratings point, and with only five weeks to go until the end of the ratings season, ABC's planned broadcasts of its season-date ratings averages by 0.2 of a point.

ABC said it refused to carry the question-and-answer session live — as did CBS and NBC — because it believed the campaign advantage a presidential news conference would give Carter only four days before the Illinois primary.

The network said it had warned the White House about this after the President scheduled a prime time news conference in Illinois just four days before the New Hampshire primary.

In the ratings race, CBS had to push back its highly successful "Dukes of Hazzard" in favor of its top-rated series "The A Team," which ABC, "Where the Ladies Go," also began its run against a news conference instead of a top series.

"Where the Ladies Go," ranked 51st on a list of 96 programs even with this break. Ratings for President Carter were not immediately available because Nielsen only offers fast figures on sponsored programming.

ABC probably has done the ABC viewer a service by allowing the new "The A Team" to face a light on presidential pre-emption. During the Nixon administration, there was considerable controversy about the ABC president using his power to pre-empt as a political tool. The networks may find it tough to turn down a president, but public reaction can keep the ratings high.

Meanwhile, back at the ratings war, NBC has reason to be cautiously optimistic, still in third place, but narrowing the gap between the top two. CBS had two shows in the top 10 — "Real People" and "Diff'rent Strokes." Among new shows, ABC had an entry in the top 25, "Three's Company." The show is gaining in its second week, but it earned disappointing numbers on several shows including "Tenspeed and Brown Shoe," "Galactica 1980," "The Whistle Blows" and "Stone."

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"Alfred Hitchcock Presents" slipped into season-to-date last place, with 1.2 in the Nielsen ratings, while NBC and ABC were tied in third place with 1.8, and CBS maintained its lead with 2.2.