

COLOR TELEVISION

A Confused Issue Shows No Signs of Clearing

By JACK GOULD

LAST week's rapidly moving developments in the controversy over color television permit of only one conclusion: the confusion and uncertainty over the whole immediate future of TV is going to continue in the minds of both the public and the industry for some time to come.

The action of the Federal Court in Chicago in temporarily delaying the introduction of commercial broadcasting of color, which originally had been scheduled for tomorrow, reflected the complexity of the issues involved.

In deciding that there could be no immediate harm to the public interest in postponing the go-ahead for the Columbia Broadcasting System's color, one member of the court, Judge J. Earl Major, remarked:

"It is unthinkable that we can decide this issue in a day, a week or a month. We must have time to consider the arguments of all parties, and we are going to take that time."

Long Wait

Considering that the court must study voluminous briefs, affidavits and oral arguments, much of it based on highly technical testimony before the Federal Communications Commission, the position of Judge Major is not hard to understand.

Even when a decision is reached in Chicago, however, the court proceedings will not be ended by any means. The issues are scheduled to go on appeal directly to the United States Supreme Court, which may need many weeks or months to hand down a final determination.

The Chicago court's action is a significant if only preliminary victory for the Radio Corporation of America, which initiated the legal proceedings to upset the F. C. C.'s approval of the C. B. S. system.

The basis of the R. C. A. suit was that government approval of the C. B. S. system was contrary to public interest because that system is not compatible with present black-and-white TV. Under the C. B. S. system an existing set requires modification if it is to pick up a color signal either in monochrome or in natural tints. R. C. A. is working on a system which would not require modification for an existing set to continue to receive black and white. The R. C. A. method, however, would require a converter for an existing set to pick up color.

Race

For the Columbia Broadcasting System, the Chicago decision was a bitter disappointment. It came practically only a matter of hours after the network had basked in virtually unanimous praise for the fidelity and stability of its color images. Certainly, whatever went on behind the cabinet, the C. B. S. color that was seen on the screen was highly impressive and infinitely superior to black-and-white.

Actually, however, the real behind-the-scenes battle over color television is a dramatic race against time itself.

While its lawyers battle in the courts, the engineers and technicians of R. C. A. are working unrelentingly in their laboratories at Princeton, N. J., to bring to a maximum state of perfection the corporation's all-electronic system of color transmission. In approving the C. B. S. color system, the F. C. C. expressed doubts that the R. C. A. method ever would be free of technical "bugs." R. C. A. declares it will spare no effort to prove the F. C. C. wrong.

R. C. A. plans to demonstrate its system in only a little over three weeks. If its method can win the same critical plaudits that greeted the C. B. S. system last week—and do it without jeopardizing the usefulness of present sets—the whole color situation could change rapidly, particularly in the matter of clarifying public opinion. Last week's court decision gives R. C. A. an added period of grace.

High Stakes

C. B. S., not to mention the F. C. C., is well aware of the crucial days that lie ahead. Economically, the stakes are high enough to suit any gambler—potentially, millions of dollars will accrue to the system that wins. But the color fight also has become a matter of pride for all concerned. Nobody is going to give up easily.

Regardless of how the controversy is ultimately resolved, last week's events already have had one noticeable effect, which in the last analysis may do more than anything else to hasten a solution. That is the greatly increased awareness of color TV as such.

The arguments in court and the C. B. S. demonstrations have made the public conscious of tinted images to a degree that the industry cannot afford to ignore.

Most striking to the viewer is the greatly increased visual information which color provides. In the C. B. S. demonstration, for instance, there was a showing of evening dresses—a dusty pink taffeta with a black chantilly lace, a sky-blue tulle with a silver laced bodice and red tulle with sequin embroidery. To see the natural flesh tones of the models set off against the arresting hues of their gowns could not help but make black-and-white seem lifeless by comparison.

One way or another, color is going to be the next television treat in the living room.