A Descriptive Analysis of the Current Status of Paid Religious Broadcasting on National Television

Wayne R. Bills

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A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATUS OF PAID RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING ON NATIONAL TELEVISION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of Communications
Brigham Young University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Wayne R. Bills
April 1984
This thesis, by Wayne R. Bills, is accepted in its present form by the Department of Communications of Brigham Young University as satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Owen S. Rich, Committee Chairman

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Date: Feb 23, 1984

Owen S. Rich, Graduate Coordinator

Typed by: Donna M. Smith
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The Electronic Church</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophies and Objectives</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience and Accomplishments</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The &quot;Mormon&quot; Way</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends and Philosophies</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience and Accomplishments</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Findings</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrasts</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figures</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>Sample Prayer Request</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>Total Syndicated Programs and Audience</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Audience Data on Ten Syndicated Television Ministries</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>Percent of Audiences by Region</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>U.S. Audience Size for LDS Paid-Time Television</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOREWORD

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.

Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The use of the broadcast media as an evangelical tool is a subject that has received relatively little attention in the world of higher education, and yet broadcast religion is as old as broadcasting itself. The first wireless voice broadcast was transmitted to the public in 1906 - it was a Christian program of songs and scripture reading. The first religious program on television was broadcast on Easter Sunday, 1940.¹

During the last few years broadcast religion has received more attention than in years past. More and more it is becoming a subject of interest, study and concern.

Many observers of the American religious scene from the left and the right care passionately about what is currently happening in religious broadcasting. It is a social phenomenon so widespread and important that it has acquired a name - The Electronic Church.²

In the future the subject of religious broadcasting will continue to attract more and more attention in institutions of higher learning. As a church-owned school, it would be well for Brigham Young University to be among the leaders in the study of, and

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application of the principles involved in teaching gospel concepts through television.

As John Kinnear, Director of Media Planning for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has said, "We must use media effectively and efficiently to get the message of the church out." In order to do that one must first understand more fully what is happening in the world of broadcast religion today.

Through this thesis it is hoped that other researchers will be prompted to investigate the field of broadcast religion even further. In doing so they will add to an ever-increasing body of knowledge that can be made available to those who plan and carry out the policies concerning use of the broadcast media as a teaching, proselyting and public relations tool.

Statement of the Problem

This study will present the results of extensive research concerning the current status of what has been called the "Electronic Church," and will discuss some of the contrasts between the trends and philosophies of the major evangelical broadcast organizations and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in their use of paid time on national television.

Since the numbers of organizations and people involved in religious broadcasting have grown so rapidly, no attempt will be made to include the entire "cast of characters" in this effort. This study will focus its attention on a few of the "key players," and will include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints among them.

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3 Interview with John G. Kinnear, Salt Lake City, Utah, 17 October 1983.
The study will explore, in some aspects, the differences between the approach taken by the LDS Church and the philosophies and attitudes of the evangelical broadcasters toward religious broadcasting. It will not focus on the "main line" religions (Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, etc.), but rather, it will look at the evangelical movements that use national television as their primary means of "spreading the word." In brief, the problem was to conduct a study identifying some of the major contrasts between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the "Electronic Church's" use of the Broadcast media.

Justification

Although much has been written on the subject of religious broadcasting in general, and there seems to be renewed interest in the activities of several of the nationally-known television evangelists, very little has been written about the involvement of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in broadcasting. A thorough search of the literature reveals a dearth of written material uniting under one cover information about the major televangelists with the LDS church's efforts in national television broadcasts.

The study of this evangelical phenomenon known as the "Electronic Church" is important. Its ability to reach out and influence hundreds of thousands of Americans is a force not to be taken lightly. Its influence can reach far beyond the relative peace of the nation's spiritual life. Indeed, many analysts point to the powerful influence of "televangelists" such as Jerry Falwell in the politics of the 1980 presidential campaign. 4

4 Hadden and Swann, op. cit., p. 4.
This thesis will focus on a few of the major organizations involved in nationally televised religion today, and discuss the different methods used to convey their message. It will bring together the opinions of many professional observers of the electronic church, and present facts and figures as given by various media agencies.

As a parallel to this, it will present a current look at the Mormon involvement in national television, and discuss some of the most recent projects, as well as the general philosophy guiding the LDS Church in its decisions concerning the media.

In some ways this study will compare the approach of the "Electronic Church" with that of the Mormon Church. It will discuss some of the major differences, and put forth possible explanations for these contrasting elements.

It is extremely important that religiously-oriented scholars gain a better understanding of what is taking place in broadcast religion today if they are to be prepared to make significant steps forward in the future. As Hollywood script writer, James Fleck has said, "If religious-minded people don't learn how to use the media correctly, then anti-religious or areligious factions will form the value systems of the world."5

Methods

This thesis has been developed using a combination of the "descriptive" and "historical" methods and represents a consolidation of information gathered in a search of more than a hundred magazine and newspaper articles and several books. Approximately 30 articles, six

books and four unpublished theses were selected and studied more closely for specific use in compiling the information.

In addition to this literature search, personal interviews were conducted with Heber Wolsey, Managing Director of Public Communications for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1978 to 1983, John Kinnear, Director of Media Planning, and Lorry Rytting, Director of Communication Analysis, in order to get an accurate account of what the LDS Church is doing on national television today. Through these interviews we are also able to see more clearly the basic LDS philosophy concerning the use of the broadcast media.

**Delimitations**

This study is not intended to be an exhaustive historical treatise, nor will it focus on what may be in store for the distant future of religious broadcasting. It is simply a compilation of facts and opinions concerning religious broadcasting as it is being conducted on television today by some of the nationally known religious groups including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The programs included in this study are broadcast to a nation-wide audience. This work will not attempt to include organizations with programs that are produced and broadcast within the boundaries of a single city or region.

As Jeffrey Hadden and Charles Swann set out on an investigation of the electronic church, they soon found that there were many more elements involved than simply the production of a weekly broadcast.

Before we got very far into the research, it became obvious that we could not properly understand the electronic church if we restricted ourselves to the radio and television broadcasts themselves. The computers that spit out direct mail at lightening speed, the telephone banks that serve to
receive pledges as well as offer counsel and prayer to
listeners, the cassettes, records, newsletters, and magazines
that are available to faithful viewers - these are all
integral components of the electronic churches.

In collecting information for this thesis, the author has had a
similar experience. There are simply more facets of religious
broadcasting than can be covered thoroughly in one thesis. Many of the
things mentioned by Hadden and Swann will not be included in this work,
but could be the focus of future research. In this way, this study has
a high degree of heuristic value because of the potential for future
research and investigation.

There are many subjects suggested by this thesis that will not be
discussed in-depth in this work, but that could be the subject of future
writings. These include questions such as: What format is most
effective for communicating a religious message on television? What is
the typical religious attitude of those who regularly "attend" the
"Electronic Church"? Should the LDS Church put more emphasis on the use
of T.V. to spread the gospel message? Should the LDS Church compete
with other religious broadcasts through a weekly program of a similar
format? Since radio and television stations are no longer required to
provide free "public service" time to religious groups, how long can the
LDS Church hope to continue airing "Music and the Spoken Word" in its
current "public service" status, and what is the future of public
service spot announcements such as the Mormon's "Homefront" series?

It is hoped that this study will provide not only an additional
source of valuable information, but an incentive for others to pursue
further studies in this field.

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6 Hadden and Swann, op. cit, p. ix.
The teaching of religious principles, one human being to another, has been practiced since the days of Adam and Eve. Indeed, one of the longest best-selling books in the world today is a compilation of the writings and teachings of Christian principles known as the Bible.

As the world population has grown in number, our capability to communicate with people has also increased. With the development of radio and television, it is now possible for one man, standing in one place, to send a message that may be heard and/or seen by literally millions of people in many countries all at practically the same instant in time.

As a natural result of man's interest in religion and his well-advanced technology in the field of mass communication, more people in the world today have had an opportunity to hear the gospel of Christianity than at any other time in our history.

It has been estimated that Jesus Christ preached to no more than 20 to 30 thousand persons during his lifetime. Even if this total is underestimated, the number is trifling in contrast to the audiences reached today by his disciples who utilize the airwaves. Many ministers, perhaps scores, speak to significantly more people every time they preach than did Christ in his lifetime.

Considered in historical context, the vast numbers tuning in every week—and in a few instances, every day—to the so-called electronic preachers with national audiences constitute truly a phenomenal development. Moreover, the technology is now in place so that, theoretically at least, a billion persons could be reached simultaneously with the gospel message.
For many evangelicals this is indeed good news. But if those Christians are elated with the potential for electronics to beam the gospel across the globe, some are uncertain whether the airwaves constitute the best—or even a proper—way to spread the Good News. Still others see the phenomenon we call the "electronic church" as a threat to developing and sustaining local Christian communities.¹

**Historical Background**

In order to understand the status of religious broadcasting in the 1980's it is important to understand some of the historical background behind this movement. Television was, of course, preceded by radio. It was in 1906 that the first wireless voice broadcast was transmitted to the public. The broadcast was a religious program of Christian songs and scripture readings.²

Religious programming continued to be an essential element of a radio station's format, and with the advent of television clergymen who had been actively involved in spreading the gospel message by radio saw another valuable tool to help them in their ministry.

These early builders of the electric church shared a common passion to carry the message of the gospel to as many people as possible by the most effective means available. They recognized radio as an instrument of God. . . . While each program speaker had his own way of expressing the message, all stressed the basic doctrines of the traditional Christian faith and stood fast against modern aberrations. . . . Most were ordained clergymen, and without exception, all were active members of a local church.³

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² Ibid., p. 81.
Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was among those clerics actively involved in religious broadcasting on radio. He is also given credit for the first religious program on television; a one-time Easter special broadcast in 1940. Later, in 1952, Sheen developed his own television program called "Life is Worth Living," and with this became the first effective religious television personality.4

An experienced radio speaker, Bishop Sheen was not aiming to become a television star but to introduce modern men and women to the basic principles of historic Catholicism. In contrast to other television programs of the period, Bishop Sheen's program ignored the Hollywood flourishes of music, scenic backgrounds, changing camera angles, and a large cast. . . . Essentially, it was the same presentation as his long-running radio program, but now there was the extra dimension of visual contact. . . . Viewers of all denominations, and viewers who had no church identification, avidly followed Bishop Sheen's program on NBC. During his years on television, viewers sent him as many as six thousand letters a day.5

The potential audience for the early television ministries grew rapidly during the 1950's. In 1950 less than 10% of American households had television sets. By 1955 that number had climbed to 65%, and by 1960, 90% of the nation's homes were furnished with at least one television.6 Today it is claimed that more people watch religious programs on television each week than attend the nation's churches.7

As the major broadcast networks took their place in providing much of the programming available to individual radio and television


5 Ben Armstrong, op. cit., p. 82.

6 Hadden and Swann, op. cit., p. 9.

7 Ben Armstrong, op. cit., p. 7.
stations, religious organizations were designed to represent the interests of the churches.

Even before the days of television, the NBC radio network asked the Federal Council of Churches (predecessor of the National Council of Churches) to take responsibility for establishing the policies for Protestant, Catholic and Jewish programs.

By 1940 battles had begun between the Federal Council of Churches who had established the policies and the independent evangelists who wanted to buy time for their religious programs.

While liberal elements progressively developed more influence through the Federal Council of Churches during the 1930's, there was no comparable organization to represent the many denominations and congregations that maintained the classic biblical truths. Since conservative churches were growing and benefiting from radio ministries, it was natural that a threat to religious broadcasting would draw them together.8

This conflict led to the formation of the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) in 1944. This organization continues to be very powerful today, and is made up of many of the big-name evangelists.

Because of the early strength and domination of the so-called "main-line" religions, most religious television broadcasters of the 1950's and early 1960's were clergymen of the Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic faiths.

According to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations, "all stations had to allocate a certain amount of public-service time for religious programming."9 This public-service time was provided the various religious organizations at no charge. Because of policies

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8 Ben Armstrong, op. cit., p. 49.

imposed by the networks many of the affiliates were not allowed to accept paid religious broadcasting.

By the 1970's, however, this situation was changing.

The networks no longer dominated their affiliates, and the F.C.C. had ruled that it would consider paid religious broadcasts as satisfying the public-service requirement; therefore, one affiliate after another had begun to sell off its Sunday-morning hours. Since there was—initially—little competition for the "religious ghetto" hours on Sunday morning, the evangelists could buy this time cheaply. The new technology of television—cable systems, communications satellites, and UHF stations—made air time even more available. And it made it even cheaper, too, since many cable stations would pick up the religious broadcasts free to fill their programming schedules. 10

A few of the well-known evangelists, Billy Graham, Oral Roberts and Rex Humbard, had been on television since the 1950's, but as America entered the 70's, the number of religious broadcasters increased rapidly. These were men in their thirties and forties who, in many cases, created their own organizations to buy broadcast time, and acquire distribution systems such as satellite and cable networks.

Along with the older evangelists, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, James Robison, Jerry Falwell, and others bought up most of the public-service time on Sunday-morning TV, pushing much of the main-line religious programming off the air and making television evangelism a big business for the first time. In the nineteen-seventies, the annual expenditure of TV ministries for air time went from around fifty million dollars to six hundred million. By the end of the decade, there were thirty religiously oriented TV stations, more than a thousand religious radio stations, and four religious networks—all of them supported by audience contributions. 11

Because of the changes in policy by both the FCC and the networks, most religious broadcasting is now done only by those organizations who are willing to pay for the time. Very little "free" public-service air

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.
time is available for religious programs. Kenneth L. Woodward has summarized the reversal in this way:

In the infant days of television, evangelical preachers felt like voices crying out of the wilderness. What little free air time the national networks were willing to devote to religion was divided principally among Roman Catholics, Jews and the main-line Protestant denominations; independent evangelicals were frozen out. So they raised money, bought their own air time and eventually created an "electronic church" of their own. Today, with such telegenic evangelical preachers as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson dominating the religious air waves of the United States, it is the mainstream clergy that feels frozen out. Faced with declining membership and influence, the main-liners are now trying to get back into the game... "The main-liners have finally realized that if they don't do something fast, they will be left behind," says Ben Armstrong, the director of the evangelical National Religious Broadcasters (NRB). 12

As the number of religious programs and evangelical organizations producing them increases, so also the number of radio and television stations and, most recently, cable networks owned by religious groups continues to grow.

Between 1945 and 1960 approximately ten (radio) stations a year started broadcasting at least two hours of religious programs per day. Today there are more than a thousand stations in this category. Of these, six hundred broadcast religious content virtually full time and are owned by evangelical believers. Among these all-religious stations, approximately half do not sell time but rely on the support of their listeners. 13

In 1972 Pat Robertson was operating the only religious television station in America. 14 Today, however,

There are thirty-six television stations with full-time religious schedules, some of which broadcast twenty-four hours a day. Hundreds of commercial TV stations are


13 Ben Armstrong, op. cit., p. 56.

completely sold out on Sunday morning—or any other time they are willing to sell to religious telecasters. Sunday evening is fast becoming as lucrative as the morning for those willing to sell to religious syndicators. There is virtually no home in the United States into which the electronic church cannot send its songs, sermons, and appeals in generous measure.15

Writing for T.V. Guide, William F. Fore said of this evangelical movement to the broadcast media:

The 'electronic church' had to happen. Sooner or later, fundamentalist preachers, convinced that they have a message for everybody, were bound to merge their interests with the newest and most effective mass delivery systems; TV, cable, satellite, computerized mail and WATS phone lines. Out of it a whole new style of evangelism has emerged.16

Philosophies and Objectives

Assessing the value of the "electronic church" is a complicated issue which has been studied, discussed and debated among broadcasters, sociologists and theologians for the past several years. In discussing the question of whether the electronic church is good or bad, Theodore Baehr, President of the Episcopal Radio-T.V. Foundation, suggests that the answer is both.

Recently there has been a hectic rush into telecommunications by the religious community. Whether this rush is the product of a sincere commitment to present the gospel through all media and to serve the church, or the fabricated sentiments of a covetous desire to become celebrity evangelists presiding over billion-dollar satellite empires is impossible to say. What is clear is that this rush to telecommunications has both a good and a bad side.

The bad side, of course, is intricately related to the celebrity evangelist infection, which drives us to try to get anything on the electronic media, with total disregard for the rules and grammar of those media. So we clog the

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15 Hadden and Swann, op. cit., p. 8.
airwaves, satellite transponders, and cable channels with 'vanity video' and 'make believe mission' in the interest of saying, 'here we are.'

The other side is related to a sincere commitment to the gospel, and involves understanding the electronic media and working carefully and intelligently to use them to proclaim the gospel in its entirety, to call people into the community of believers, and to minister to the needs of the church.17

As Baehr points out, there are no simple answers to this question of "good or bad." There are arguments to support both the positive and the negative points of view which deserve further attention.

On the positive side, these broadcast religious messages can reach millions of people. Ben Armstrong, Executive Director of the NRB, states: "I believe that God has raised up this powerful technology of radio and television expressly to reach every man, woman, boy, and girl on earth with the even more powerful message of the gospel."18

Armstrong claims that the major objective of religious broadcasting is to change lives through preaching the gospel message.19

Some point out that the electronic church has the possibility to reach those who would otherwise not have the opportunity to attend church; many elderly and shut-ins are regular viewers. Others, who would never set foot inside a church under normal circumstances, may view programs which awaken their interest in religion.

Dr. William F. Fore, a United Methodist Church minister and head of Communication for the National Council of Churches, cited a poll that indicated some 47 percent of Americans see at least one religious program a week on T.V. while only 42 percent would actually leave their

19 Ibid., p. 137.
homes to attend some kind of religious service. He also refers to a statement by Sociologist William C. Martin, who claims that electronic preachers are "the contemporary fishers of men, while the local churches have become the custodians of the aquarium."\(^{20}\)

Tom Bisset, General Manager of a 50,000-watt Christian radio station in Maryland, points out that the subject matter of the electronic church has shifted from the traditional topics of atonement, justification, and sanctification to more contemporary subjects such as caring, loving and understanding.

What we are seeing today, then, is a programming drift away from teaching and preaching toward counseling, interpersonal relationships, holistic living, and physical healing. Not surprising, the CHRISTIANITY TODAY-Gallup Poll shows a correlation between these programming trends and the felt needs of the Christian radio and television audience.\(^{21}\)

Through a network of prayer and counseling systems many lonely and desperate people are comforted and helped. Figure 2-1 is an example of one of the forms used by prayer line volunteers at the PTL Club. According to Forbes magazine, "If you call the PTL Club's prayer line and talk to someone, you not only get solace and biblical quotations, but you also get your name entered in PTL's computerized mailing list."\(^{22}\)

People in the electronic church encourage their listeners and viewers to write or call and share their problems and needs. The more personal information available, the easier it is to target responses directly to individuals. If the caller is faced with family or marital problems, difficulties with children or with managing money, etc., most

\(^{20}\) William F. Fore, op. cit., p. 15.


\(^{22}\) Allan Sloan with Anne Bagamery, "The Electronic Pulpit," Forbes, 7 July 1980, p. 118.
### Prayer Request Form

**Contact Information**
- Counselor ____________________________ Date ____________

**Counselor Notes**
- Please pray for each person individually, lifting up Jesus and claiming the promises of God with the person calling.

**Prayer Request**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ailment</th>
<th>Request</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Doubts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>Ear Trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Eye Trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back Problems</td>
<td>Family Troubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptism of Holy Spirit</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone Fracture</td>
<td>Female Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer</td>
<td>Financial Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closer Walk With God</td>
<td>Financial Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>Flu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colon</td>
<td>Guidance in a Problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Hemorrhoids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>Heart Trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disbelief</td>
<td>High Blood Pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discouragement</td>
<td>Infection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insomnia</td>
<td>Job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kidney Ailment</td>
<td>Marital Problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nervousness</td>
<td>Occult, Spiritualism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>Smoking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>Stomach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be Saved</td>
<td>Traveling Mistricts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulcer</td>
<td>Weakness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mail Preference**
- Do you currently receive mail from PTL?  Yes  No
- Would you like to? Yes  No

**Additional Information**
- Address or Box Number: ____________________________
- Phone: ____________________________ Age: ____________________________
- Channel you are watching: ____________________________
- Is this a Cable Station? Yes  No

---

**Figure 2-1**

SAMPLE PRAYER REQUEST
likely there are enough other people with the same type of
problem so that materials have already been prepared. 23

On the negative side, one of the most prevalent criticisms of the
electronic church is the competition it provides for local churches'
congregations and monetary contributions. As one might expect,
ministers of many main-line Protestant and Catholic congregations are
not enthusiastic about the work of the electronic church.

For openers, the great expansion of paid religious
broadcasting all but drove the mainliners, who relied on free
time from local stations for their programs, off the air.
Add to this the fact that they profoundly disagree with what
they consider to be the fundamentalists' simplistic
theological messages. The main rub, however, is a growing
concern that their own constituencies are deciding to take
their religion in the comfort of their living rooms and that
they may be sending their offerings to the television
preachers instead of dropping them into the local collection
plate. 24

Some advocates of organized (main line) religion claim that true
Christian worship cannot take place through a broadcast electronic
signal.

In this acknowledged battle between 'organized' and media
religion, the church has one great secret weapon. Media
religion may be flashier, but worship can only take place in
the gathered body of Christ. The pastor and the congregation
must be present to one another, physically as well as
spiritually. In the Lord's supper, in baptism, in
ordination, people actually have to touch one another. A
radio church cannot administer sacraments. 25

Ben Armstrong agrees that the fellowship of local congregations is
important, but he does not think the electronic church takes people away
from local churches.

23 Jeffrey K. Hadden, op. cit., p. 610.

24 Hadden and Swann, op. cit., p. 7.

25 Virginia Stem Owens, The Total Image or Selling Jesus in the
Modern Age (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing
Company, 1980), p. 64.
Radio and television have broken through the walls of tradition we have built up around the church and have restored conditions remarkably similar to the early church. We may not like to hear this, for we fear that the absence of the 'koinonia,' the gathering together in community of believers, will suffer. Central to our understanding of the church is this element of fellowship one with another. That must never be eclipsed by the electric church, but the electric church has been and is being used to draw people into that kind of local church worship. When people substitute the electric church for a commitment to involvement locally, it is not the fault of the broadcast medium, it becomes the personal accountability of the individual. . . . As in New Testament times, worship takes place in the home, speaker is guest.26

Some support for Armstrong's claim is found in a study for the National Council of Churches, in which electronic church consultant Robert M. Liebert, professor of psychology and psychiatry at New York University, stated:

There is little reason to believe that the electronics are actually pulling people away from churches they would otherwise be attending. Rather, people have left the traditional denominations and their traditional services and then found satisfaction or identity with electronic church offerings . . . there is some research suggesting that exposure to electronic services moves people to join local churches, and not to estrange themselves from community involvement.27

Further support for Armstrong's views are found in William Fore's article for T.V. Guide. Fore points out that, for some, the electronic church may serve as an easy option to church attendance, but for others it serves to simply reinforce already held religious beliefs.

The electronic church undoubtedly reinforces the religious convictions of many regular churchgoers. But for others it provides an easy and convenient substitute for face-to-face church attendance. . . .

The electronic church is not a church. There is no such thing as a TV pastor. As Robert Schuller of the "Hour of


"Power" admits, 'I can't baptize your children, comfort your sick or bury your dead.'

One of Fore's major concerns is that, in their efforts to attract and maintain large television audiences, the broadcast preachers will cautiously avoid direct confrontations with what might be called "hard doctrines." "To maintain these huge audiences," says Fore, "you have to please—never offend, or challenge, or put the hard questions that genuine religion requires."

And if Ben Armstrong and members of the NRB feel that the major objective of the T.V. evangelist is to change lives, those changes must come through the kinds of challenges and confrontations eluded to by Fore. However, television may not be the proper media for such a challenge.

According to Hadden and Swann:

Most mass communications research has shown that television is inefficient as a way of changing people's minds. What it does best is reinforce the opinions and beliefs that viewers already hold, and thus the TV preachers who do not challenge viewers' beliefs are the most successful.

Another criticism leveled at broadcast religion is that some feel the glossy, commercialized production style is antithetical to the true spirit of Christianity.

According to some accounts, advertising has been the largest component of the social revolution in this country. Poor people saw and lusted after what they supposed to be the common lot of all average Americans. The sexually repressed and timid were bombarded with ideals of beautiful, accessible bodies. People everywhere began to expect and demand what they presumed everyone else had.

28 William F. Fore, op. cit., p. 16.
29 Ibid., p. 18.
The same dynamic seems to be operating among Christians. They are universally pictured as successful, svelte, and integrated. Our current notions of both evangelism and edification are borrowed from image advertising. The meek, the misfit, the poor in spirit, the suffering servant are not allowed inside the picture.31

Despite the many pointing fingers of criticism, the big-time evangelists still feel that they are working for a common objective. Jerry Falwell says:

God has allowed the development of modern technology in the electronic media to provide the church with tools for the propagation of the gospel... Religious broadcasting is used of God today to reach thousands who would never hear the gospel any other way, and to be a source of ministry to the sick and elderly... We must use these opportunities while they are available to us.32

And this comment comes from Oral Roberts:

Religious broadcasting is designed to supplement the local church and not to be a surrogate church... May we in the church seriously reevaluate our responsibility to use the TV and radio medium as a real supplement to reach those who can be attracted to the church, and to minister to them when they are confined away from the church services.33

With some of these objectives in mind, as well as the differences in philosophical approaches to the electronics church, one might ask is this religion of the airwaves accomplishing its mission?

Audience and Accomplishments

"Starting in the predawn hours of each Sunday morning, the largest religious gathering in America takes place, drawing almost 130 million people to their radio and television sets."34

32 J. Thomas Bisset, op. cit., p. 31.
33 Ibid.
34 Ben Armstrong, op. cit., p. 7.
So began Ben Armstrong's book, _The Electric Church_ (1979). So also began a major media myth. Perhaps because Armstrong is a minister, a good man, and the executive director of the National Religious Broadcasters, most people who have written about or commented publicly on the phenomenon of electronic evangelism seem to have taken Armstrong at some version of his word. His estimate of the size of the weekly audience for broadcast religion has been repeated uncritically by people who should have known better. Similarly impressive figures on specific television evangelists—Jerry Falwell is a prime example—have been accepted as truth.35

This from Sociologist William Martin of Rice University who has studied the actual surveys and statistics of religious broadcasting for several years. He explains further that:

Claims such as these would be understandable if we had recourse to nothing more substantial than faith, hope, and guesswork. Fortunately, we can do better. In the course of a decade of research on the electronic church, I have examined a substantial number of audience surveys, some conducted by academics, some by the Harris and Gallup organizations, and some by private market-research companies. I have also looked closely at several years of audience data published by Arbitron and Nielsen, the two major rating services for broadcast media. The results are remarkably uniform, and the conclusion to which they point is that the audience estimates cited above, however, much they may differ from one another, have one feature in common: they are all absurd.36

In researching their book, _Prime Time Preachers_, Hadden and Swann also found discrepancies between the audience figures claimed by the religious broadcasters and those presented by the major audience measuring services.

Virtually all televangelists exaggerate their audience size. Many of them sincerely believe that they do reach literally millions. ... Some confuse potential audience with real audience. They seem not to grasp the fact that only a fraction of all television sets in a given viewing


36 Ibid., p. 8.
area are turned on at one time, and of those, only a very small percentage are tuned to their show.\textsuperscript{37}

Arbitron and A. C. Nielsen have both collected survey data about the audiences of approximately sixty syndicated religious programs. Their findings conclude that both overall audiences, as cited by Armstrong, and the estimates by individual television ministers are much smaller than claimed.

Like all survey data, their figures are estimates, based on samples and sampling procedures that, as the rating services freely acknowledge, are subject to minor error. Further, the total audience for the electronic ministries is somewhat larger than indicated, since the ratings reflect average audiences—not all viewers who ever watch a given program or viewers who watch periodic prime-time specials produced by some of the ministries. Also, no audience figures are supplied if fewer than one percent of the television households in a given market were tuned to the program in question, with the result that a small number of viewers are not counted. Finally, the rating-service estimates do not include figures for audiences viewing the programs over some cable systems. Though several electronic preachers make much of their cable outlets, claims of enormous audiences for cablecast religious programs should be regarded with great skepticism.\textsuperscript{38}

Figure 2-2 indicates the total number of syndicated religious television programs and their combined audience sizes from 1970 to 1980 according to Arbitron. Note that the number of programs and size of audience increased significantly until reaching a peak in 1978 with 72 syndicated programs drawing a combined audience of 22,538,000. By 1980 the number of programs had dropped to 66 with audience size falling to 20,538,000, an average of 311,182 viewers per program.\textsuperscript{39}

Figure 2-3 shows the audience ratings for ten of the most watched, nationally syndicated television ministries as measured by the A. C.

\textsuperscript{37} Hadden and Swann, op. cit., p. 48.

\textsuperscript{38} William Martin, op. cit., p. 10.

\textsuperscript{39} Hadden and Swann, op. cit., p. 55.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Syndicated Programs</th>
<th>Combined Audience Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>9,803,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>20,806,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>22,812,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>21,998,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>22,538,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>21,477,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>20,538,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: The Arbitron Company

Figure 2-2
TOTAL SYNDICATED PROGRAMS AND AUDIENCE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>Stations</th>
<th>Rating (% of viewer households in coverage area)</th>
<th>Total Audience</th>
<th>Total Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral Roberts</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2,351,000</td>
<td>1,553,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Schuller</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2,130,000</td>
<td>1,427,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex Humbard</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2,079,000</td>
<td>1,308,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy Swaggart</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1,789,000</td>
<td>1,148,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry Falwell</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1,440,000</td>
<td>986,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day of Discovery</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1,267,000</td>
<td>879,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTL Club</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1,050,000</td>
<td>776,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700 Club</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>705,000</td>
<td>569,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Robison</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>575,000</td>
<td>383,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Copeland</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>381,000</td>
<td>277,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13,767,000</td>
<td>9,306,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 2-3

AUDIENCE DATA ON TEN SYNDICATED TELEVISION MINISTRIES
Nielsen Company. This shows Oral Roberts with the highest rating for that period followed closely by Robert Schuller. It is interesting to note that Jerry Falwell's program was broadcast on more television stations than Oral Roberts, but was actually seen by a smaller percentage of the potential audience. This was also the case with Rex Humbard, Jimmy Swaggart, the PTL Club and Day of Discovery.  

A look at the demographics of these audiences reveals additional worthwhile information.

Demographically, this audience is predominantly female, over fifty, working- and lower-class, and, true to stereotype, likely to live in rural areas, towns, and small cities in the South and Midwest. It is also composed almost entirely of believers, most of whom are members of conservative Protestant churches.  

This description of the electronic church audience is interestingly close to the demographics of those who attend regular church services.

For as long as sociologists have gathered statistics on religious behavior, it has been consistently observed that women attend church more than men. Also consistent is the pattern of greater church attendance among older people than among the young. In light of this, it should not come as a surprise to learn that women also watch religious programs on television more than men do and that older persons do so more than young people. . . .

Virtually all the syndicated programs had audiences of which two-thirds to three-quarters are fifty years of age or over. . . .

Among those persons fifty and over who watch religious television programs, about two-thirds are female.  

In addition to Hadden's and Swann's comparison of the demographics of church goers with electronic church watchers, it is important to note the principle strength of the electronic church is in the southern and mid-western parts of the United States. Figure 2-4 gives a breakdown of

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40 William Martin, op. cit., p. 11.
41 Ibid.
42 Hadden and Swann, op. cit., pp. 61-62.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>East</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral Roberts</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex Humbard</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Schuller</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy Swaggart</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Day of Discovery&quot;</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry Falwell</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% U.S. population in region</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** The Arbitron Company, February, 1980.

*Figure 2-4*

**PERCENT OF AUDIENCES BY REGION**
four major regions in the U.S. and the percentage of the audience from each region which tunes in to the programs listed. Just less than one-third of the population of the United States lives in the south, and yet both Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart draw more than half of their audience from there.

On the other hand, 22.5 percent of the total U.S. population lives in the east, but most of the organizations listed draw only around half of that proportion as an audience. Only Robert Schuller comes close to being represented proportionately in all four regions.43 Indeed, it would seem that

... the electronic church is still heavily a Bible Belt phenomenon, with less than half the proportional share of audience in the eastern region of the United States, and considerable underrepresentation in the west as well. Virtually all of the programs have audiences in which two-thirds to three-fourths are 50 years of age and older; they are also primarily women.44

According to a Christianity Today-Gallup Poll taken in 1980, it does not appear that the religious broadcasters are reaching the unbelieving, non-Christian audiences they are hoping to convert. Rather, it seems like a case of the minister preaching to the choir.

Compared to the public as a whole, those who watch religious television or listen to religious radio are more likely to have had a conversion experience, believe the Bible is free of mistakes, oppose abortion, believe in a personal Devil, abstain from alcohol, and hold to or engage in a host of other beliefs and practices characteristic of evangelicals.45

43 Hadden and Swann, op. cit., p. 60.


45 J. Thomas Bisset, op. cit., p. 28.
William Martin concludes that,

Since according to a Gallup survey, fewer than 5 percent of the 61 million Americans not affiliated with any church could recall ever having watched a television preacher other than Oral Roberts (12 percent) or Billy Graham (11 percent), the usefulness of the broadcasts as tools of evangelism—the primary justification used to raise money—must be seriously questioned.46

But these evangelists of the airwaves don't seem too concerned with the discrepancies between their own inflated audience figures and those considered to be much closer to the actual facts. Perhaps they are somewhat unconcerned with the actual size of the audience as long as their "bread of life," the money from viewers, continues to roll in.

Jerry Sholes, a former writer for Oral Roberts, seriously questions how much real good comes of the contributions that are solicited by television ministries.

With the advent of electronic religion . . . the church has been artificially extended into our homes. The offering plate that gets passed by televised religion has grown so large that it includes the contributions of millions of dollars by millions of people. When you endeavor to trace the 'good' that those contributions do, you begin to run into muddy water. . . . A large television ministry tends to localize its funds in and around whatever project the television minister wants to 'push.' No real good ever finds its way back into the communities of those millions who contribute to large television ministries.

What does happen is that television ministers enjoy extremely high standards of living . . . million dollar homes, expensive cars, big business deals, computerized mailing lists, and cash flow patterns that boggle the mind! You begin to suspect that the entire pattern of large electronic ministries is much more closely related to the ego of the television minister than to anything else.47

But where does the money come from that can support this kind of

46 William Martin, op. cit., p. 16.

lifestyle? The answer, of course, is that it comes from the viewers, but it is not usually solicited directly over the air.

The FCC has some pretty strict rules about soliciting funds over the air. So most revenue is generated through direct mail—a method the record companies have found quite lucrative.

A segment of each program—a commercial minute, if you will—is set aside to offer a "giveaway": a book, record, cross, bible. The viewer is urged to write in for his personal copy at no charge. His name then becomes part of the mailing list. Most reputable religious organizations do not sell their mailing lists. Neither are most of them charlatans or "Elmer Gantry's" who prey on vulnerable folks, then take the money and run.48

For many of the most notable personalities of the electronic church this system of direct mail solicitations seems to work extremely well. On the surface one would assume that many "worthy causes" are being helped by these millions of dollars in contributions. A close look reveals that a very high percentage of the money collected simply goes to pay those involved in the money-raising system. For example:

In 1979, income raised by Falwell's TV program was $35 million, while its operating costs for direct-mail appeals, promotion, and administration (including maintaining Falwell's 12-room house and private jet) amounted to $26 million. Thus, "the fund-raising vehicle itself spent more than five dollars for every seven dollars it earned."49

And Falwell is not alone. Other well known electronic preachers are also living more like celebrities than old fashioned ministers.

A lot of evangelists live nicely. Rex Humbard and his two sons recently managed a $175,000 down payment on $650,000 worth of Florida real estate, not long after he was pleading for donations to pull his Cathedral of Tomorrow out of debt. Most of the big-time religious show-biz types are more professional managers than pastors. Take Jim Bakker. He and his wife, Tammy, draw $75,000 in salary between them, and their expense allowance raises the take to about $100,000.

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48 Wendy Marquardt, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Paid Religion," Television/Radio Age, 28 March 1977, p. 79.

49 William Fore, op. cit., p. 939.
They live, rent free, in a lavish house provided by a PTL supporter, and they drive cars PTL owns. PTL buys the fancy suits Bakker uses on his show, employs his brother and sister and gives his parents rent-free quarters. Bakker is not making poverty wages, to be sure, but he has never taken a vow of poverty. What he's making isn't unreasonable for someone who has helped build PTL into a $53 million (revenues) business. It's no more than a good many fairly ordinary doctors, lawyers, and midlevel business executives make these days. 30

What segment of the viewers of the electronic church are actually involved in providing financial support? According to one poll, 38 percent of the viewers contribute five percent or more of their income.

While we cannot tell precisely where contributions to religious broadcasting come from, we do know that members of the electronic church are among those evangelicals who give the most money to 'church or other religious organizations.' According to CHRISTIANITY TODAY-Gallup Poll data, 26 percent of those who watch religious television said they contribute 10 percent or more of their income to religious causes. An additional 12 percent reported giving between 5 and 9 percent. The figures are even higher for radio where 28 percent contribute 10 percent or more, and another 15 percent give between 5 and 9 percent. Even if one allows for considerable audience overlapping, it is apparent that religious broadcasting is in touch with a sizeable group of generous contributors. 51

With these kinds of estimates being discussed it is easy to see why many of the ministers of local community congregations feel that their own donation plates are suffering because of the rapid growth of the electronic church.

This growth is expected to increase, at least for the next few years. Already there are three religious television networks and plans are underway to launch the first Christian satellite by 1985. This will be the first of three planned for use by a world Christian Consortium.

50 Allan Sloan with Anne Bagamery, op. cit., p. 124.
51 J. Thomas Bisset, op. cit., p. 29.
The first will broadcast to North and South America, the second to Europe and Africa, and the third to Asia and the Pacific Islands.\textsuperscript{52}

As Tom Bisset declared in an article for \textit{Christianity Today}, "it must be apparent to even the casual observer that religious broadcasting stands on the edge of a brave new world."\textsuperscript{53}

The first definitive study of the electronic church is in progress. NRB is sponsoring a cooperative survey by the Gallup organization and the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. This study is being financed by diverse sources.\textsuperscript{54}

More than twenty-five organizations are participating, including CBN, PTL and most of the Catholic and mainline Protestant groups, as well as the electronic church groups affiliated with NRB.\textsuperscript{55}

The research will include four main parts: first, an analysis of the format and content of religious TV; second, an analysis of who watches (personality profile, religious involvement), how (other TV viewing, social circumstances of viewing) and the relationship of viewers to church attendance and funding, and the support systems (telephone, letters); third, a study of the gratification received by the audience and the degree of increase or decrease in their social interaction; and fourth, the behavioral effects (how viewing relates to concepts of reality, religion, society, values, and to participation in church and other social activities).

The project is expected to cost about $150,000 and will take 12 to 14 months to complete. Eight major research organizations have made official proposals, and the Ad Hoc Committee is expected to complete the funding and award the contract in the fall of 1981, so that data gathering can begin in early 1982, with a joint release of the data hoped for about a year later.\textsuperscript{56}


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} Rodney Clapp, p. 46.

\textsuperscript{55} William Fore, op. cit., p. 940.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 940-1.
In hopes that this information would be available for inclusion in this thesis project, telephone calls were made to the Annenberg School of Communications in Philadelphia on October 21 and October 24, 1983. However, due to unforeseen delays, the statistics have not yet been compiled into meaningful data. Nancy Signorielli stated that they hope to have the results of the study interpreted into meaningful information by February or March of 1984.  

57 Telephone interview with Nancy Signorielli; she in Philadelphia, Pa. and I in Provo, Ut., 24 October 1983.
CHAPTER THREE
The "Mormon" Way

Historical Background

The first message to be broadcast to the public from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) consisted of a few verses from the Doctrine and Covenants, a book that members of the Church hold as scripture. The broadcast originated with radio station KZN in Salt Lake City, Utah, on Saturday, May 6, 1922 at 8:00 p.m.

That evening President Heber J. Grant stepped to a microphone and read from Doctrine and Covenants 76:40-42, 23, 24, and announced that this was his message to the world. He was the first of several speakers on the broadcast program that evening. As the technology continued to develop, the LDS Church took a very active interest in this new tool of communication.

Radio broadcasting of the general conference sessions became a reality in October 1924, when KFPT, now KSL, ran a direct wire to the main pulpit of the tabernacle. The resulting letters and telegrams that came in from all points of western America and Canada were very reassuring. But perhaps the greatest thrill to come to the radio men who sat at the controls was knowing that many elderly persons who could no longer come to conference in the tabernacle, were now having the conference brought to them in their homes.¹

In an article published in the LDS Church magazine dated April, 1947, Albert L. Zobell, Jr. posed a question that seems almost comical

as we look back on it today. However, the people of that day had no idea what kinds of complex communications systems would further develop from the early days of radio.

What will the next quarter-century bring for the Church in the field of radio? What is the next great invention that will enable the Church to help fill the divine command and challenge: 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations ... to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:19, 20)?

The LDS Church continued to maintain a very close relationship with the broadcast media, and in 1925 Sylvester O. Cannon, Presiding Bishop of the Church, loaned KFPT money as an investment by the Church in the station. During that year a regular Sunday evening church service was broadcast consisting of a twenty-five minute sermon and thirty-five minutes of music from the station's studios. The station's call letters were changed to KSL, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir started regular broadcasts on KSL during their Thursday evening rehearsals.

In 1928, KSL became an NBC network affiliate and by 1929 the Tabernacle Choir broadcasts were being carried over the network on a regular basis, weekday afternoons. In 1930, as Richard L. Evans became the announcer of the choir broadcasts, it was estimated that ten million people were tuning in to the weekly program.

It was 1932 when KSL changed affiliation from NBC to CBS, the choir broadcasts were moved to Sundays, and the program became known as "Music and The Spoken Word from Temple Square."

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\[\text{\ldots}\]

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2 Ibid.


LDS Church leaders began to realize the value of these choir broadcasts as a missionary tool, and reports flowed into church headquarters of many tourists wanting to visit the "crossroads of the west" (the phrase used as part of the introduction to Music and the Spoken Word.) As missionaries were preparing to serve in their various areas, they were given training in the use of radio as a missionary tool and some missions in the U.S. were able to get local stations to carry these missionary oriented broadcasts.5

Television became a significant part of the Mormons' use of the media in 1949 when the October sessions of General Conference were broadcast for the first time over KSL-TV. These broadcasts have taken place twice each year ever since. In that same year the Hill Cumorah pageant was televised locally from its location near Palmyra, New York.6

By 1963, the General Conference sessions held in April were broadcast by some 156 television stations and 30 radio stations in the United States and Canada. Also in '63 the LDS Church purchased controlling interest in KIRO AM-FM-TV located in Seattle, Washington.7

During all of its history in broadcasting, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had relied primarily on the free air time made available by radio and television stations because of the F.C.C. requirements discussed in Chapter 2. As stations started filling their public service requirements with religious programs that were paid for by the early pioneers of the electronic church, the amount of "free" public service time available was drastically reduced and the Mormons,

5 Robert W. Donigan, op. cit., p. 54.
6 Ibid., p. 57.
7 Ibid., p. 88.
if they were to continue to get effective public exposure, needed to consider buying broadcast time for their messages.

The one major exception to this is the fact that Music and the Spoken Word is still carried by the CBS radio network without charge to the church. Heber G. Wolsey, Managing Director of Public Communications for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1978 to 1983 explained that, by definition, CBS does not consider the choir broadcast to be a religious program. CBS has defined Music and the Spoken Word as "a public service program of cultural value." For this reason it is aired as a public service while other religions are not eligible for such free air time because of the purely religious nature of their programs. 8

Trends and Philosophies

In discussing the purposes of the LDS church in its broadcasting efforts, Richard L. Evans, the original host of Music and the Spoken Word and a former general authority of the church stated that,

The Church's objectives in broadcasting are the same as they are in all other areas of activity — to deserve the respect and earn the confidence of all people, and to present to them the most important message on earth, from a common ground of understanding, through cultural and artistic and intellectual and spiritual and all other worthy means. 9

John Kinnear, Director of Media Planning for the LDS Church, explains that "we must use the media effectively and efficiently to get


the message of the church out. . . . We have a story to tell; to preach the principles of the gospel."¹⁰

Heber Wolsey explains that the major purpose of the media for a church is not conversion, but to get people ready for conversion. Generally speaking, the media does not do the whole selling job. He also cautions that we must be careful not to preach only a "social gospel." By this he means such things as the results of being honest, kind, helpful, etc. Although he agrees that such principles are important, he feels that the church must combine this "social gospel" with the very central, most important part of religion which is Jesus Christ and his gospel.¹¹

The church has done a respectably good job, in the last 10 or 11 years, of getting across the high concern that we have for families; family unity and holding families together, helping your children, working out husband-wife relationships, all of those things; and our research shows that that story is getting over pretty well. People are beginning to recognize that the Church of Jesus Christ truly is concerned about holding families together, and that's positive; it's good. In my judgement we've got to go beyond that, to bring this central reason for all the good we have to offer; and the central reason is Jesus Christ and his gospel.¹²

As Wolsey points out, the church has achieved a strong reputation in areas that may be termed as this social gospel. This has been done primarily through the exposure the church has received in free, public service time. The messages presented in the "Homefront" series of 30 and 60-second public service announcements, and the sermonettes given as part of Music and the Spoken Word have all strengthened this image of

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¹⁰ Interview with John G. Kinnear, Salt Lake City, Utah, 17 October 1983.

¹¹ Interview with Heber G. Wolsey.

¹² Ibid.
the Mormons as being family oriented, believing in the standard 
principles of the social gospel.

John Kinnear explains that in using public service time, "we have 
to find a message that does us some good, but that is also compatible 
with what the stations will accept."13

On a number of occasions, according to Wolsey, people have said, in 
effect, 'The Mormons do a great job of talking about family unity. 
There's no doubt about it. They're concerned about holding families 
together. It's just too bad that some good Christian organization 
doesn't do as well.' He uses this statement to point out his concern 
that people know the Mormons' feelings about families, but they don't 
know that Mormons are Christian.14

The 'social-gospel' approach is important, but it's not 
足够的 to do that only. We get millions of dollars worth of 
free time for the family oriented messages. We should do 
everything we can to hold on to those; they're highly 
beneficial to the church; they're highly beneficial to the 
non-member that we're addressing. They are top notch, top 
quality type of messages that are nothing but good for 
people.

But even as good as we have done those, we're not 
getting over that we are Christ-centered. What I'm saying is 
that we've got to combine the two to let people know that the 
real values of this church are centered in the Savior.15

This concern for stressing the more important part of the message 
of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not a relatively 
new philosophy in the church as some might think. In a letter to Val 
Limburg written in 1963, Sterling W. Sill, who was then serving as an 
Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wrote:

13 Interview with John G. Kinnear.
14 Interview with Heber G. Wolsey.
15 Ibid.
Lowell Thomas was once telling about the great amount of money that people spend in the United States to get their messages sent out across the major radio networks. Somebody asked Mr. Thomas what was the greatest message he could conceive as being broadcast to the people of the world. Mr. Thomas said that the greatest message that he could conceive would be that God had again spoken to this people upon the earth.

It is, of course, the message of the Church that God has not only spoken again, but he came in person. And not only did he come in person, but he caused his message to be written down in three great volumes of new scriptures, giving complete direction about how our lives might meet their maximum in accomplishments. Of course, this message is of no value unless somebody understands it, and it is the obligation of the Church to carry this to the people of the world.16

By the mid 1970's church officials began to realize that if they wanted to have more control over the kind of programming they could broadcast and the size of audience they could reach, they would need to move into the field of "paid-time" broadcasting. Buying time on television would allow the church to get its message to the public during the "prime-time" viewing hours when the most people are tuned in.

Heber Wolsey discussed the challenges of creating a program that would hold the interest of these larger audiences. "If we can figure out ways to appeal to the broader audience and make religion more meaningful, then we're truly using the media in a way to help the Lord's work. The secret is to make religious concepts highly meaningful in people's lives." For example, he asks, how do you show that following the example of the good samaritan will really bring satisfaction into a person's life today, in 1983? "We need the combination, in the media, of the religious precepts plus the religious practices so that you can translate the precepts into daily living."17

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16 V. E. Limburg, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

17 Interview with Heber G. Wolsey.
John Kinnear explains that perhaps the major difference between the church's use of public service time and paid broadcast time is found in what we hope to accomplish with the message. If we are using the media as a tool for church expansion, he says, then paid broadcasting is most effective. If we are using the media to simply make friends for the church, and create a positive attitude toward the church, we can be very effective in public service.\footnote{Interview with John G. Kinnear.}

**Audience and Accomplishments**

In 1976, the LDS church launched its first major effort with paid broadcasting. The program was a one-hour special entitled "The Family and Other Living Things" and it featured several big-name T.V. personalities of the day.

According to Lorry Rytting, Director of Communication Analysis for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the program was seen by an estimated twelve million people. In the Los Angeles area alone the show received better ratings than six other programs scheduled during the same hour. In opinion polls conducted before and after the program was aired, it was found that there was an increase in favorable attitudes toward the LDS church as a direct result of the show, and there was also an increase in the number of people wanting to learn more about the Mormon religion.\footnote{Interview with Lorry E. Rytting, Salt Lake City, Utah, 17 October 1983.}

The next television special that the church bought time for was "Mr. Krueger's Christmas." The show featured Jimmy Stewart in the leading role, and included a special appearance by the Mormon Tabernacle
Choir. Krueger's Christmas was aired first in December of 1980 and again in 1981.

Figure 3-1 shows the audience sizes for the three major paid-time broadcasts that have been sponsored by the church to date. With Krueger's Christmas the emphasis in the message content had changed from emphasizing the importance of families to conveying the message that Mormons are Christians. In surveys conducted for the church it was found that those who watched Krueger's Christmas were more likely to associate the church with Christ than those who did not.

In 1980, Krueger's Christmas was aired in 163 U.S. television markets and 44 markets in Canada. When it was shown again in 1981 it was broadcast in the top 125 U.S. markets and also on 37 T.V. stations in Australia. The Australian audience included 2,068,866 people, or approximately 13.8% of the total population.21

In addition to these two earlier programs, the church is planning an Easter Special to be aired in April of 1984. According to Heber Wolsey this program will star Art Carney who plays the part of an old, unsuccessful painter living in New York. The story is an adaptation of O'Henry's "The Last Leaf." The program itself will present aspects of the Social Gospel while the "commercial messages" will tie the church directly into the message of the Savior. "By combining the two we let the world know that we're concerned about them as individuals, and that following the teachings and example of the Savior can bring people the happiness that they're looking for."22

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Interview with Heber G. Wolsey.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Aired</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>% of U.S. Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>The Family and Other Living Things</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>12,000,000</td>
<td>(not available)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Krueger's Christmas</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>20,500,000</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Krueger's Christmas</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>12,700,000</td>
<td>8.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** LDS Church Public Communications Department

**Figure 3-1**

U.S. AUDIENCE SIZE FOR LDS PAID-TIME TELEVISION SPECIALS
In buying time for these specials the church hires an agency and gives the agency direction as to how many markets the church would like to buy time in; for example, they want to buy time in the top 100 U.S. markets. The agency then goes to each market and makes the best time buy, in the best time slot for the best hour and day they possibly can. "We buy access or early prime time to avoid heavy competition with the biggest, strongest network programs."23

Another factor considered in the overall design, production and time buying is the church's target audience. John Kinnear explained that, "Right now we know that the majority of the people who join the LDS Church (about 74% of the converts) are between the ages of 14 and 34. That becomes our target audience."24

But the Mormons haven't given up on the use of public service messages. The "Homefront" series has been extremely successful. According to John Kinnear, 48-52% of all commercial radio stations in the U.S. are using the "Homefront" series, and as high as 90% of television stations have aired certain "Homefront" campaigns. He points out that some of the free brochures mentioned in some of the early campaigns are still being requested, and, he says, for all media (radio and TV) in the past five years, over a million requests for brochures and about 58,000 requests for representatives of the church have been received.25

In the fall of 1983 the church announced that a new "Homefront" campaign is soon to be released. This campaign is designed especially

23 Interview with Heber G. Wolsey.
24 Interview with John G. Kinnear.
25 Ibid.
for children and has been named "Homefront, Jr." These 30 and 60-second public service announcements will teach the importance of honesty and are designed to be shown "during Saturday morning cartoons, or whenever children's programming is scheduled."26

John Kinnear suggests that in addition to buying time for the broadcast specials, some thought could be given to buying time for commercial-type 30 and 60-second spot announcements.

The danger there is, we don't want to compromise our position with public service. We're getting so much public service time already; we've achieved such a reputation for excellence through our agency (Bonneville Productions) in producing the materials that are aired at no charge that we wouldn't want to compromise that. For instance, broadcasters may say, well they're buying time for these messages, why can't they buy time for the others as well? The answer to that is, if we're going to buy the time, we want to get much more direct with our message than we are in the Homefront series.27

This last point is one that seems to point to some of the philosophy that may be involved in future productions of paid broadcast specials produced for the LDS Church. Kinnear mentions it in reference to the spot announcements, and again in his discussion of future special programs.

We can certainly get much more direct with our paid broadcast messages than we have in the past. I think we've been too nervous in terms of how direct we can get with our message in the time that we are buying. If we are buying the time then we can pretty much determine what the message is that we'd like to go out over the airwaves. It has to be packaged so that you never lose sight of the audience you're trying to reach.28

27 Interview with John G. Kinnear.
28 Ibid.
Obviously, the LDS Church plans to continue its use of the broadcast media. What remains to be seen is to what extent they will use paid broadcast time, and whether they will be able to continue their successful use of public service time.
CHAPTER IV
Findings

Contrasts

There seems to be no doubt that paid religious broadcasting is here to stay. The Mormons have learned that lesson and are well on the road to making the best of those circumstances by trying to find successful formulas for attracting a significant audience and holding their attention long enough to effectively accomplish their objectives.

The preachers of the electronic church have also realized the strength of religious broadcasting in our day, and they too are trying to find the best possible formulas for insuring the success of their broadcasts. As they strive to meet their objectives, however, there are some very basic differences between their approach and that of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

First of all, the style of the paid electronic church programs is quite different. In many cases the electronic church has simply brought the television cameras, and the frills of electronic staging into a slightly modified chapel setting with a preacher and a congregation. Heber Wolsey points out that this set-up may not be designed to best use the strengths of the broadcast media.

As radio and T.V. were invented, religionists were excited at the potential for converting the world with these new means of communication, but instead of asking themselves 'what are the strengths of radio,' or 'what are the strengths of T.V.' they saw each as an extension of the pulpit so they first put
a microphone on the pulpit and later pointed a T.V. camera at it.

The LDS approach to their paid broadcasts has been to use well-known personalities, and place them in situations as characters in a well-produced story that the audience can relate to, and therefore learn a lesson from. The "commercial breaks" that air during the program are designed with a somewhat more direct message related to the beliefs of Mormonism. The two work together to teach a principle of the gospel and create further interest in the church itself.

Within the electronic church, in many cases, the entire broadcast focuses the audience's attention on one individual whose message is extremely direct such as Oral Roberts or Jerry Falwell.

John Kinnear explains another very basic, yet very important difference between the electronic church and the LDS programs.

The basic difference between them and us in that regard is, yes, they are also buying time to air their message, but in airing the message they do something that we don't do; that is they solicit funds that help pay for the time so they can be self perpetuating. We don't.2

He points out that all of the paid broadcast time used by the LDS Church is purchased with money from the tithing funds of the church. These funds, which represent the voluntary contribution of ten percent of each church member's income, are considered sacred, and decisions concerning their use are made very carefully and with great deliberation by church leaders. On the other hand, electronic church leaders live, for the most part, extremely luxurious lives and are able to pay all of

1 Interview with Heber G. Wolsey.
2 Interview with John G. Kinnear.
their production expenses using money generated through their broadcasts as discussed in Chapter Two.

Public communications officials for the LDS Church do keep track of what other Christian organizations are doing in the field of religious broadcasting just as these other organizations pay close attention to the work of the Mormons. John Kinnear points out that the Mormons have many friends in other religious broadcasting circles. The LDS has been given eight Gabriel awards from the National Catholic Broadcaster's Association for the "Homefront" series. The Mormons are seen by other religious broadcasters as leaders in the field of public service messages. In turn, LDS leaders also try to keep abreast of what other religious broadcasters are doing simply to see what is happening, and how well their approach is working. ³

Recommendations

Based on careful analysis of the many facts and opinions studied in the compilation of this thesis, the following recommendations are made concerning the future use of television by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

1) That the LDS Church continues to make use of public service time wherever and whenever possible. Although for many religious groups the doors to public service time have been closed ever since the F.C.C. started accepting paid religious programs in fulfillment of the "public service" requirements, John Kinnear has pointed out that the Mormons are considered to be leaders in the field of public service announcements.

³ Interview with John G. Kinnear.
According to Lorry Rytting, 50 percent of individuals surveyed in most areas of the United States had heard or seen the church messages such as the "Homefront" series on radio or television.\(^4\)

This kind of audience certainly has positive implications for the church in terms of creating a good public image, and may be instrumental in the church's proselyting efforts as the PSA's pave the way for Mormon missionaries to be accepted into non-member's homes and teach gospel discussions that may result in conversions. It has already been pointed out that this process, as described above, has taken place unnumbered times as a result of the "Music and the Spoken Word" broadcasts (even though not considered a "religious" program).

The fact that the air time is free of charge is, in itself, a strong, positive factor, but the other important element to keep in mind is that the Mormons have established a reputation for quality in the researching, writing, production, and distribution of these public service announcements. If they are to continue to earn this "free" time, they must continue to stress the same type of high standards they have been known for and respected for in the past.

2) That the LDS Church not follow the pattern of other religious broadcasters, especially in the electronic church, and develop a program that could air weekly and act as a form of competition for the audience of the electronic church. Some people have suggested that the LDS Church develop a program that is very similar to the style of the electronic church, but, of course, the teachings would be in line with the "Mormon" faith.

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\(^4\) Interview with Lorry K. Rytting.
John Kinnear said in response to such a suggestion, "We're not going to follow the pattern of other churches. We want to find our own pattern, and have our own unique and inspired way of using the media."  

With the talent and technology available to the LDS church today, undoubtedly it could create a weekly program that would look very much like the other "members" of the electronic church. After a while such a program, broadcast during "paid time," may even receive good, competitive audience ratings, but the problem is that the LDS version would then be quite simply, 'just another church show' on Sunday morning. Considering the boldness and uniqueness of the Mormon's message to the world, it doesn't seem appropriate for them to be sponsors of 'just another religious program.'  

3) That LDS church officials very carefully monitor the accomplishments of their paid television specials in an attempt to identify which program elements make the broadcasts successful, and then try to use those elements in maximizing future paid broadcasts.  

There is no question about the fact that these paid broadcasts seem to be furthering the overall goals and objectives established by the church in its use of the media. The challenge now is to determine which elements of the programs are most effective. As Heber Wolsey puts it, their challenge is "to analyze the things that are most attractive to the audience out there about religion; to analyze what we have to answer those desires, and to use the media as a door-opener to get people thinking positively about our concepts rather than trying to do the full job of conversion."  

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5 Interview with John G. Kinnear.  

6 Interview with Heber G. Wolsey.
He also stresses his feelings that if the LDS church can continue to let people know that they are really genuinely concerned about them; their lives and their families, and that these positive aspects are centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ; "If we can combine those two, then I think we'll be more successful than we've ever been." 7

Although the use of paid broadcast time does give the LDS broadcasters the freedom to be much more direct with their message, they must be sensitive to the needs of the audience, and find ways to let their message offer the opportunity of filling those needs through the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATUS OF PAID RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING ON NATIONAL TELEVISION

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Department of Communications
M.A. Degree, April 1984

ABSTRACT

In examining the use of paid television by various evangelical organizations (the "Electronic Church") as contrasted with its use by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), several important differences were discovered. First, the programs of the electronic church are usually designed much like a normal Sunday service with a "preacher" and "congregation" (the T.V. viewers). The LDS approach has been to communicate religious principles through the use of a story. Their productions are attractive to a large audience because they often feature a well-known television or motion picture celebrity, and are aired during prime-time viewing hours.

The electronic church pays for its air time and production costs with money solicited from viewers. A part of every broadcast is devoted to increasing the mailing lists of the particular organization. The Mormons, on the other hand, do not ask for donations from the television audience. Their television time is paid for with the contributions of their church members.

The study recommends: 1) That the LDS Church continue to make use of public service time wherever and whenever possible. 2) That the LDS Church not attempt to develop a program that could air weekly and act as a form of competition for the audiences of the electronic church. 3) That LDS communications officials carefully monitor the results of paid television specials in an attempt to identify which program elements make the broadcasts successful, and then use those elements in maximizing the success of future paid broadcasts.

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