

**Everyday a Miracle:
History According to Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN)**

Victoria Meng
Visiting Assistant Professor
Department of Film and Media Studies
Arizona State University

Abstract

Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) ranks among the largest television station conglomerates and the most longstanding televangelist programmers in America today. Since its founding in 1973, TBN has published promotional documents to “write its own history.” These documents connect TBN’s religious legitimacy to its success as a business and claim that the former causes the latter and that the latter is proof of the former. This study uses textual analysis to show that TBN represents itself as a divinely directed organization to earn its targeted viewers’ trust and to help it to remain competitive as a modern media enterprise.

[1] Television has become a medium through which many contemporary American evangelical Christians experience their faith. According to the entry on televangelism in the *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication, and Media*, published in 2006, thirteen million, or approximately 4%, of Americans regularly watch televangelists and 43 percent of American adults had seen Christian programming during the month in which the survey was conducted.¹ The best established suppliers of American evangelical Christian television programming are networks that operate both broadcast stations and cable channels such as Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), Daystar, and EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network).² TBN in particular promotes itself as “America’s most watched faith channel and the world’s largest religious network.”³ TBN acquires and distributes a range of Christian programs through local stations, cable,

satellite, and the World Wide Web, and was ranked as the tenth largest broadcast group owner in America by the independent trade journal *Broadcasting and Cable Magazine* in 2004.⁴ TBN also produces original media content such as variety shows featuring Christian celebrities, lifestyle shows that target niche viewer groups like women and teens, and Hollywood-style Christian-themed movies. TBN's promotional materials stress its international reach through its 33 satellites and multilingual programming.⁵ In sum, evangelical Christian television in general and TBN specifically can be seen as a notable minority constituent within the contemporary American television industry.

[2] TBN differs from non-religious television networks in both purpose and structure. There exists some overlap in equipment and markets between TBN and commercial networks such as CBS, NBC and ABC: a television set that receives TBN programming would also be able to receive mainstream network programming. However, TBN is not a for-profit, publicly traded company but a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. It does not base its revenue on delivering audiences to large corporate advertisers, nor is it beholden to shareholders to capitalize on their investments. Instead, TBN is an organization whose earnings do not benefit private interests, whose political lobbying activities are restricted, and whose purpose is charitable, religious, scientific, literary, and educational.⁶ With respect to its legal status, TBN thus more resembles Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) or the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).⁷ However, while member donations provide just over half of PBS's operating budget, with government sponsorship supplying most of the remainder, individual viewer pledges account for more than two-thirds of TBN's revenues.⁸ In this sense, TBN's financial operations most resemble the direct-response shopping model, such as the Home Shopping Network. Unlike the Home Shopping Network, however, pledging TBN viewers are not buying items for their own

consumption. Instead, they are sponsoring evangelists who use television to proselytize. Month after month, contributing viewers confirm their support of TBN's mission by bearing the substantial cost of maintaining an ever-expanding television network and producer. TBN's visible long-term success "testifies" to its history of satisfying the evangelical Christian community of which it is a member. Therefore the texts that TBN produces to document its history provide insight into how TBN represents itself to its contributing viewers to earn their trust.

[3] TBN claims to have influenced the fundamental beliefs of millions of viewers since it began to broadcast in 1973; however, its media coverage is mostly self-generated. The intersection of television and religion remains marginal to discussions of both television and religion in either popular or academic contexts. Popular institutions such as the Emmy awards or *TV Guide* through which mainstream broadcasting and cable networks are often publicized tend not to focus on niche programming, including religious television. Religious television has also received relatively little coverage in the mainstream American press.⁹ Historian Mark Silk writes, "When the news media set out to communicate religious subject matter, they run up against institutions jealously guarding what they take to be their own prerogative."¹⁰ The late 1980s was an exception, when several prominent televangelists received significant mainstream news coverage, from sober to scandalous: Pat Robertson campaigned for president; Oral Roberts raised funds by threatening his own death; and Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker were both involved of sexual and fiscal misconduct.¹¹ TBN was also embroiled in controversy as its founder Paul Crouch was accused of spiritual and financial wrongdoing.¹² These cases underscored the televangelists' ability to appeal to a large and loyal following and to induce immediate action. This convergence of modern televisual and religious practices stimulated a

wave of critical interest in televangelism. Several scholarly and general books on American religious television were published during the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹³ These texts provide important perspectives for understanding the social, theological, and economic issues surrounding American religious television and televangelism in particular. However, as televangelists stopped making headline news, both general and academic interest in this particular type of American religious television has also waned. Thus with the exception of some works published between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, much of the available literature about TBN's founding and development can be considered to be an "internal" literature – published by TBN for the evangelical viewers who financially support the network.

[4] Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by "evangelical," which connotes different things to different readers. This paper uses "evangelical Christianity" to refer to a contemporary American religious subculture, the subject of religious historian Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. Balmer writes,

Evangelicals generally believe that a spiritual rebirth, a "born-again" experience (which they derive from John 3) during which one acknowledges personal sinfulness and Christ's atonement, is necessary for salvation ... [Many] have insisted on a literalistic hermeneutic for understanding the Bible ...

Evangelicalism has also been characterized by a proselytizing zeal that, at various points in its history ... has erupted into large-scale revivals or spiritual awakenings. Part of what defines an evangelical, however, transcends mere doctrine or belief; in greater or lesser degrees, evangelicals place a good deal of emphasis on spiritual piety.¹⁴

Balmer also notes that evangelicals do not form a monolithic or internally uniform culture.¹⁵ Nonetheless, per his description, it is possible and useful to discuss evangelicals as a group with common beliefs and values, including a fairly orthodox approach to worshipping the Christian God and converting others to also subscribe to evangelical Christianity. Evangelicals often cite a passage from the close of the Gospel of Matthew, also known as the “Great Commission,” as evidence that Christians have the duty to proselytize; indeed, the word “evangelize” itself means to convert or to seek to convert someone to Christianity.¹⁶ For evangelical Christians, including TBN’s core viewership, proselytizing is an important part of their religious conviction and practice.

[5] This paper explores how TBN has written its own history over a span of thirty-some years to transmit, sustain, and interpret the values of the subculture of American evangelical Christianity of which it is part. Specifically, I argue that TBN’s practice of history writing teaches its regular viewers that their participation in the expansion of a Christian television network constitutes a way to proselytize by proxy. TBN produces its historical texts in a self-conscious way, not just as a record of its activities but also as evidence of its divine mission to convert viewers. Thus, through writing history, TBN embeds the technology and business of television within its interpretation of the evangelical Christian belief system, which emphasizes the importance of the mission of conversion, evangelism, or proselytizing. TBN’s explicit bottom line is neither profit nor social service but “souls saved,” as seen in the plaque it mounts in its corporate headquarters to publicize the number of “salvation slips” it has collected since its founding (see image 1).¹⁷ This mission defines both the content and style of TBN history, which tends to be ahistorical and ecstatic. TBN’s strategy of self-representation has helped it to establish its spiritual authority with its viewership and material success among broadcasters, and through

textual analysis, can also be studied as a case of how this religious community has adopted and adapted modern media technologies for its own purposes.

Witnessing in the Text

[6] This paper performs qualitative, not quantitative, textual analysis to show how TBN produces its history. TBN has published monthly newsletters for its viewers since its founding in 1973. Black and white facsimiles of these newsletters have been collected and bound in three volumes, each covering approximately one decade, and made available to the public.¹⁸ While TBN began broadcasting on May 28, 1973, it did not begin publishing newsletters until October of 1973; until September 1974, newsletters were only published every other month. Over the years the newsletters underwent many changes in layout. However, they consistently contained some combination of the following materials: a letter to viewers by Paul Crouch; publicity photographs; pledge forms; letters to TBN from broadcasters, viewers, and church leaders; news clippings; announcements; and personnel and studio information. Because the newsletters do not name an editor, it is strongly implied that Paul Crouch, Sr., TBN's founder and president, is responsible for any text that is not specifically attributed to another author. This paper's other main primary document is the latest edition of Crouch's autobiography cum TBN history, titled *Hello World! A Personal Letter to the Body of Christ*, published in 2003. Both *Hello World* and the newsletter collection represent an effort by TBN to record and to represent its own history.

[7] Textual analysis of *Hello World* and the newsletter collection yields insight into how TBN represents itself, primarily to its viewers. First, the texts span the entirety of TBN's existence without any significant gaps. The newsletters provide a more detailed and less retrospectively dramatized version of events than *Hello World*, which in turn presents much needed context and structure for interpreting the newsletters' scrapbook-like data. Second, TBN self-consciously

and explicitly regards these texts as authorities about its own history. Many of TBN's other efforts to document its history refer to the newsletters and *Hello World* as their source. For example, a substantial part of the "About Us" section of the TBN website consists of electronic duplicates of TBN's more recent monthly newsletters. When hosts of TBN programs refer to important moments in the network's past, they tend to cite Crouch's book as the definitive version of TBN history and recommend it to viewers who want more information. In answering caller inquiries about past events, TBN's business office also refers to both the newsletters and *Hello World*.¹⁹ Finally, in the evangelical Christian community, words can carry immense power: written and spoken words in the form of the Bible is seen as a manifestation of God and a medium by which souls can be saved. Evangelical Christians look to the Bible not only for instruction and comfort, but also as a way to prove the truthfulness and righteousness of their approach to Christianity and life. TBN's promotion of its own history in the form of two "authoritative texts" participates in this tradition of exalting the power of words, especially in print. The newsletter collection and *Hello World* have acquired an elevated, almost sacrosanct status in TBN history; and their author, Crouch, becomes a prophet of the business, technology, and history of Christian broadcasting by association.

[8] Neither the newsletter collection nor *Hello World* can be characterized as scholarly histories; both employ colloquial diction, do not contain references that make it easy for readers to corroborate their accounts, and are not organized for quick reference. According to the Online Computer Library Center's WorldCat union catalog, no libraries in America hold a copy of the newsletter collection and only 47 carry *Hello World*. Of the 47, most are seminary or public libraries instead of research libraries.²⁰ The texts demonstrate a kind of homespun style, with faux red leather covers on paperback volumes. The early newsletters look like handmade

scrapbooks, collaged and decorated with graphical flourishes, and even occasionally handwritten (see image 2).²¹ Meanwhile, *Hello World* is liberally punctured by italicized and/or capitalized passages and exclamation points. On almost every page one finds a sentence that looks like this: “The FCC had granted the transfer of the license in the “*SEVENTH MONTH*” and on the “*ONE AND TWENTIETH DAY*”—yes, July 21, 1977!”²² Both texts are almost hermetic: they seldom cite ideas or information that originated beyond TBN and the evangelical community. Moreover, whenever they do incorporate “outside” sources, they decontextualize and imbue them with evangelistic significance. For example, in the above quotation, Crouch found the date of the license transfer significant because it was a date named in Haggai 2:1, a Bible verse that Crouch’s wife, Jan, had recently read. Such practices support TBN’s aim to provide a history that is legitimized by being steeped in the textual traditions of evangelical Christianity. Crouch’s autobiography and the TBN newsletters thus mobilize the same set of rhetorical devices to convey an insular, ahistorical, and yet internally consistent worldview.

God’s Family History

[9] The newsletters and *Hello World* are intended for, and very likely consumed by, a broad cross-section of TBN’s regularly contributing viewers but not the general public or casual viewers. While TBN programming mobilizes beliefs of evangelical Christianity that may fascinate, disorient, or repel viewers who are unfamiliar with or critical of this tradition, it nevertheless ostensibly addresses a general audience, including non-believers who need to be “saved.”²³ Unlike TBN’s programming and its other “outreach programs,” neither Crouch’s memoir nor the newsletters were produced for casual “channel surfers.” The process of becoming a newsletter subscriber requires viewer-initiated contact with the TBN Corporation, although not necessarily a money donation. Viewer may call to request free copies of the

newsletter, and those who donate any amount to TBN become automatic subscribers. In addition to informing viewers of TBN developments, the newsletters urge recipients to financially support TBN. Some pages resemble shopping catalogs, containing information about TBN's Christianity-themed direct-sale items, often called "love gifts," such as a framed print titled "Pilate's Judgement [sic] Hall;" a novelization of a TBN film, "The Omega Code Book;" and an "alabaster box with spikenard" (see image 3).²⁴ *Hello World* was offered as a "love gift" in exchange for any pledge in May 2003, the month of TBN's thirtieth anniversary. Both the autobiography and the newsletter collection are still available for purchase through TBN's website and at its bookstores for \$7.99 and \$19.99.²⁵ It is worth noting that it is through large numbers of such small sales and donations that TBN gains its multi-million dollar operating budget. In other words, TBN has been extremely successful in maintaining viewer loyalty and largess. TBN's historical texts, which encourage a sense of ownership, purpose, and community in its contributing viewers, are a part of how it sustains these relationships. For example, the July 1974 newsletter reproduced a letter from a contributor that begins, "Whoever heard tell of one on a welfare grant owning a TV station? Well, I do! My Heavenly Father bought me one tonight!!!"²⁶ Both the newsletters and *Hello World* contain many similar accounts that bring to mind the lesson of "the widow's mite," in which the amount of donation is less important than the spirit in which it is given.²⁷ By reproducing these accounts in its official history, TBN affirms the value of viewer contributions and perpetuates its growth as a business.

[10] While most of TBN's media productions that are ostensibly aimed at broader audiences—programs, films, live performances, and web content—have high production values, *Hello World* and the newsletter collection contain many traces of "amateur" production. Unlike the other media productions, the historical texts were not primarily produced to induce conversion

but instead to strengthen the relationship between the network and its existing contributors. The newsletters and *Hello World* represent “insider” documents to memorialize past triumphs and tribulations and also to provide information on present objectives and obstacles. These texts help TBN viewers to develop a collective identity, or to borrow political philosopher Benedict Anderson’s term for a group that forms a sense of unified purpose through self-recognition in print, an “imagined community.”²⁸ For many evangelicals including the Crouch family, part of their religious communicative tradition involves public displays of emotional excess, verbal performances of uncontainable heights and depths of feeling that often invoke literal and metaphorical familial ties and intimacies.²⁹ Crouch’s competence as a performer and communicator within the evangelical framework helps him to gain the trust of his audience. Anthropologist Richard Bauman writes with respect to the power of performance within speech communities, which is one way to characterize evangelicals:

It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication. Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance they will allow themselves to be caught up in it. When this happens, the performer gains a measure of prestige and control over the audience—prestige because of the demonstrated competence he has displayed, control because the determination of the flow of the interaction is in his hands.³⁰

In print, this tradition partly translates into the graphic flourishes, emphatic fonts, and dramatic language that are found in *Hello World* and the newsletters. In their introduction to the newsletter collection, Paul and Jan Crouch write, “Finally, this is *YOUR* story; the story of what God has done through *YOU*—God’s great, big, beautiful family!”³¹ This short passage contains three important leitmotifs in TBN history writing. The first is that TBN is collectively “owned” by all its contributors, so that TBN history is also their story, or their history. The second is that God is the ultimate cause of any story or history, and that people and their institutions, including TBN and its contributors, are only instruments “through” which God acts. Finally, the Crouches equate membership in TBN with membership in “God’s family.” Community worship through a church is generally an important part of Christianity in practice, and TBN presents itself as an electronic church that offers an experience that is analogous to the close fellowship available in face-to-face ministries. By contributing to TBN and becoming a part of its “story,” a viewer becomes a member of “God’s family” via the network. The word “family” carries strong positive associations with love, belonging, and intimacy, as well as a subtler connotation of responsibility. TBN writes its history not with the dispassionate tone of most academic, official, or mainstream histories. Instead it adopts the anecdotal, stirring, and intimate tone of amateur “family histories” as a way to demonstrate its familial ties and responsibilities to both God and its viewers. This rhetoric can also be found in *Hello World*, which is both Crouch’s autobiography and a history of the founding and growth of TBN. In other words, these texts imply that there is no difference between Crouch’s immediate family and his “extended” family through TBN, and no difference between his personal history and TBN’s “family” history. Crouch’s position as a patriarch in his family thus doubles and reinforces his role as TBN patriarch and prophet.

Let There be Satellite

[11] Perhaps the most obvious, significant, and defining characteristic of TBN's approach to history is the way it ascribes divine purpose to all historical change. Evangelicals believe that God holds ultimate agency, nothing can occur in contradiction to God's plan, and it is the responsibility of evangelicals to proselytize this message.³² This belief does not deny the importance of human reason and will; however, it assigns to human agency an auxiliary function: to apprehend, praise, and help realize God's designs, which is by faith perfect and incorruptible. TBN, as a member of the evangelical community, thus writes its history as a form of witness, describing its expansion as the result of obedience to God's instructions. Paul Crouch writes in *Hello World*:

As I was praying and seeking the Lord for the future of TBN, that familiar voice spoke again! This time it came in the form of a vision so vivid and startling, I had to catch my breath. I saw on the ceiling of our den a giant map of the United States. Hovering high above it was a bright light, and issuing from it were beautiful streams of light moving toward the outline of the map. The streams of light then began to strike the major population centers: Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Seattle, and so on until the whole country was surrounded. As the streams of light landed, secondary lights were illuminated, and then, in extremely rapid succession, small, threadlike streams of light began to spread out. As they spread, little dots of light began to glow until the whole map was literally bathed in a network of lights!

I sat there transfixed by what I was seeing as I cried out to God to show me what all this meant. As I waited upon the Lord, He spoke one ringing, resounding word to my spirit—“*SATELLITE!*”³³

Crouch delivers his tale without irony or qualification, as though it were only natural that of all the moments to all the people in the world, God would visit Paul Crouch’s den in October, 1975 to give him a vision about expanding TBN through satellite broadcasting. Indeed, this account, which might seem hyperbolic to those who are not members of the evangelical speech community, exemplifies Crouch’s skill as a performer within the evangelical rhetorical framework.³⁴ Crouch’s vision about converting to satellite broadcasting is not an exceptional moment in TBN history. Indeed, from beginning to end *Hello World* describes TBN’s growth as a series of events that resulted from God’s direction. Crouch recounts these events in an animated and entertaining way to underscore God’s active presence his development of TBN. TBN’s story, as Crouch produces it, thus serves as both the product of and witness to God’s role as the ultimate writer of history.

[12] Crouch’s description of TBN’s entry into satellite broadcasting performs one of the leitmotifs that I identified earlier, that TBN is an instrument through which God acts. It contains two additional related and recurring themes in TBN’s self-representation: the miraculous potential of technology and the importance of prayer as a way to support TBN’s growth. Technological change is not the only kind of historical occurrence that is described as miraculous in TBN history. Crouch and other TBN writers use the word “miracle” to mean any positive occurrence, especially those that enable TBN to expand its viewership. Some of these events, such as instant faith healing of severe injuries or the transmission of broadcast signals through a hitherto impassible mountain range, appear to be as yet unexplainable by science and

thus to fit the more common understanding of the word miracle.³⁵ Most of the time, however, Crouch considers the overcoming of any technological or financial obstacle to be a miracle. Sociologist Steve Bruce asserts that televangelists have routinized, trivialized, and even domesticated the term miracle:

No coincidence is too small to be claimed as a miracle. An unemployed man getting a job, a son giving up drinking in response to his mother's pleas, a fund-raising financial target having been met, a viewer getting promoted, house hunters finding a suitable property; all of these are hailed as miracles.³⁶

To Bruce, the word miracle denotes the occurrence of an unexplained or extremely unlikely phenomenon, and thus he critiques the televangelists' use of the term for relatively mundane events. However, for the evangelical community, the word miracle denotes divine causation. All change is thus fundamentally and primarily miraculous; there is no alternative explanation.

Crouch writes:

... so many believe that the "*day of miracles*" is past. But as our brother, Benny Hinn, has taught us: "There has never been a '*DAY*' of miracles – but a *GOD OF MIRACLES*, who is the same, *yesterday, today, and forever!*"³⁷

It is impossible to distinguish between everyday and miraculous events within this rhetorical framework, and TBN history participates in this tradition by calling attention to its own "miraculous" nature.

[13] TBN not only writes about its own history using a rhetorical framework of divine causation, but also sometimes appropriates non-TBN history in its accounts. For example, Crouch describes the first program that TBN broadcasted live via satellite in these terms:

Many of you viewed that night as Christian Television history was made ... I believe that some day historians will look back (if Jesus tarries) and compare the events of that December 23, 1976 with [sic] Sameul F. B. Morse as he tapped out, “What hath God wrought?”, on the Morse Code key. I believe we witnessed a greater miracle than did Alexander Graham Bell as he spoke the first human words though the first telephone.³⁸

Crouch makes the point that TBN’s first satellite broadcast is as historically significant as the invention of the telegraph and the telephone. He also implies that the two earlier inventions are “miraculous” in the sense of being directly caused by God, even though non-evangelical media histories do not. Nevertheless, Crouch groups these innovations with TBN’s own technological advancement by updating his interpretation of the Bible:

A few years ago, as we read this scripture (Isaiah 40:5) we thought that the passage, “All flesh shall see it together”, was simply a beautiful poetic reference to heaven. But praise the Lord, now we see that God has given us the means and technology to literally reveal the Glory of God to **ALL FLESH NOW** by satellite!³⁹

History writing serves many possible purposes; to TBN and its evangelical community, history writing provides an opportunity to worship through witnessing and proselytizing. TBN thus absorbs any media technology—print, telephone, television, and satellite—that enables the transmission of Christianity’s salvation story into its own history as an expression of the strength of its faith.

Acting in the World But Not of the World

[14] The evangelical community that TBN history addresses believes that secular models for historical change erroneously focus on proximal, secondary causes and that the divine source of all change will become clear to non-believers in retrospect, either after conversion or the end of the world. In the September 1978 issue of the TBN newsletter, evangelist Paul E. Billheimer writes:

The PRAY-ERS, NOT the mayors or prime ministers or presidents or president's men or any other political personalities, are the molders of history. This is because human events are only a reflection or projection of activities spawned, promoted, and propagated in the unseen ... Although all authority in heaven and in earth belongs to Christ and Christ alone, He has vested that authority over Satan in the members of His body, the Church.⁴⁰

Billheimer's statement contains and alludes to several aforementioned motifs in TBN history: that prayer is an agent of change and that the Christian God is the ultimate source of change. His final point—that Christian communities have been empowered by God to effect change— dovetails into TBN's self-representation as a community that is not only a member of "God's family" but that also together owns a television network. By claiming that political figures are not the ones with the ability to mold history, Billheimer makes a populist and religious call: he displaces the power of the elite onto the masses, and the power of secular institutions onto the Christian church. Per the rhetorical framework of his community, he appeals to the authority of the Bible to prove his point. Billheimer, like Crouch and the other authors of TBN history, have multiple reasons to refer to the Bible as a source of legitimacy that supersedes other social or technological authorities.

[15] One criticism that may therefore be leveled against TBN's approach to writing history is that it is reductive, presenting issues in an oversimplified form, and totalizing, rejecting positions that do not fit within its worldview. Historian Hayden White maintains that certain "authoritarian" ideologies, including those of Apocalypticists, Reactionaries, and Fascists, are by nature not "cognitively responsible":

Although spokesmen for these viewpoints may engage in polemics with representatives of other positions, they do not regard it as necessary to establish the authority of their cognitive positions on either rationalist or scientific grounds. Thus, although they may offer specific theories of society and history, these theories are not regarded as being responsible to criticism launched from other positions, to "data" in general, or to control by the logical criteria of consistency and coherence.⁴¹

White defines an "Apocalypticist" as someone who "bases his prescriptions for action on the authority of divine revelation," a description that partly fits the evangelical speech community to which TBN belongs. For example, in 1989, five years before the end of Apartheid and almost a year before Nelson Mandela's release from prison, TBN celebrated the South African government's approval of their application to broadcast in these terms:

Powerful forces are still at work who are totally committed to a bloody revolution and overthrow of the legitimate South African government. How our friends have been maligned and misrepresented in the world by the secular media. Yes, Apartheid *has to go*; yes, there have been many wrongs inflicted on the black and colored races, but things *ARE* changing and one of those changes is **CHRISTIAN TELEVISION!** Oh beloved partners, do you see what God is doing? He is

entrusting *you* and *me* to reach out a hand of *reconciliation* to black and white – to tell them *JESUS* is the *ONLY* answer to *EVERY* problem in Africa and the *World!*⁴²

Crouch, as the spokesman for TBN's viewpoint, engages in polemics with "the secular media" regarding their representation of contemporary South Africa. He accuses them of bringing more strife to the situation by "maligning" and "misrepresenting" a "legitimate" government. Per White's characterization, Crouch does not participate in a dialog with other "rationalist or scientific" positions on the causes of and responses to social injustice; instead, Crouch quotes Bible verses to establish his authority. Crouch offers his theory—peace and justice in South Africa will result from the expansion of TBN's broadcasting range and the associated revival of Christianity—in a way that is consistent with his belief that God is the sole source of historical change. This position, which TBN's history writing perpetuates within its faith community, cannot be "responsible to criticism launched from other positions." Within TBN's historical framework, anyone who does not agree with its position is another soul who needs to be saved, another potential member of "God's family" through TBN.

[16] This is not to say that TBN does not respond to "outside" information, authority, and criticism. In order to function as a media corporation, TBN is highly aware of the secular institutions with which it must contend in order to accomplish its mission of continuous and expanding broadcast. One arena in which TBN does engage in a kind of dialog with "outside" positions is the adoption of media technologies. Crouch uses the TBN newsletters to show his contributing viewers that they are also political constituents and media consumers. As such, they can collectively influence the decisions made by the government and corporations. The period from mid-1995 to mid-1996 is illustrative because two "outside" organizations, the US Congress

and the DISH network, made decisions that were favorable to TBN. Congress did not pass a bill that would “un-bundle” cable channels in the Fall of 1995—subscribers would have been able to select individual channels instead of only being able choose from programming “packages” or “tiers.”⁴³ By way of analogy, bundled cable television service is like ordering from a *prix fixe* menu, while un-bundled service would have resembled selecting food from a buffet. Retaining the “bundled” cable delivery structure was advantageous to TBN and other channels that addressed niche markets because more subscribers would receive their programming by default. Meanwhile, Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) systems such as DirecTV and the DISH network were becoming popularized as an advanced distribution model. Crouch informs his readers of their community’s collective preference: “Many of you have expressed serious interest in becoming a DBS subscriber, but *only IF TBN was a part of the package.*”⁴⁴ Crouch continues to report on his efforts to contact General Motors (of which DirecTV is a subsidiary) in order to influence their programming decision: “... we estimate that TBN Partners would represent over \$165,000,000 in equipment purchases for any DBS service wise enough to include TBN on one of its channels!”⁴⁵ Crouch concludes his letter by exhorting his readers not to choose a DBS carrier until TBN has completed its negotiations: “***IF YOU WANT TBN, I WOULD ADVISE YOU TO HOLD UP BUYING ANY SATELLITE DISH UNTIL WE ADVISE YOU WHO WILL BE CARRYING TBN. THE EQUIPMENT WILL NOT BE INTERCHANGEABLE.***”⁴⁶ By March 1996, Crouch had secured TBN’s distribution on the DISH DBS system and promoted it in a letter titled “Devil Bustin’ Satellite!” that creates a Christian pun on the acronym “DBS.”⁴⁷ In other words, TBN mobilizes the sense of community that it has produced through its history writing to influence patterns of media consumption in its viewership and the world at large. Readers receive from Crouch’s letters the impression that they are a large, active,

and faithful viewership with sufficient clout to compete with institutions that do not share the evangelical Christian agenda. They also learn that their input to TBN and other organizations—in the form of prayer, votes, letters, and financial contributions—can effect change in a world that might otherwise be hostile or indifferent to their mission. Again, TBN's historical texts present acts that support the network as a way to demonstrate one's membership in the evangelical Christian community.

Rendering Unto Caesar to Serve God

[17] The financial potential and accountability of Christian broadcasting has undergone much scrutiny. Lay press and scholars also approach televangelism demographically, psychologically, and politically, but the intersection of religion and consumption presents rich topics for news and cultural research.⁴⁸ A historical reason for this attention is that some of the best publicized scandals in the history of televangelism involved histrionic solicitation techniques followed by gross misappropriations of funds.⁴⁹ As Bruce points out, American religious television presents unique opportunities for financial mismanagement. Government agencies are reluctant to risk being accused of breaching the public's constitutional right to religious freedom, and faithful contributors are strongly disposed to trust the ethics of their spiritual leaders.⁵⁰ Violations of such deeply cherished forms of personal freedom and trust provoke strong reactions, including extensive examinations of the systems that allow such abuse. Journalistic and scholarly discussions of televangelists' fundraising strategies also underscore the marginality of religious programming. People from both within and beyond the evangelical Christian community generally agree upon the criteria, procedures, and institutions for assessing fiscal responsibility even when they have difficulty in reaching consensus regarding other issues. Money—its acquisition, management, and reporting—becomes a common language through which

evangelical Christians and non-believers can communicate. Returning to Crouch's account of how God told TBN to become a satellite broadcaster, one can recognize that it is presented as a decision that simultaneously secured religious integrity and worldly success. Actually, the two values can be interchangeable in the evangelical community. Theologian and academic Peter Horsfield writes, "Success in one's endeavors, indicated by followers, finances, or miraculous occurrences, is frequently understood and promoted as an indication that God is blessing one's enterprise."⁵¹ Bruce argues that televangelists belong to the same tradition that prompted Max Weber's theory on the Protestant work ethic, and that contemporary evangelical Christians still view the pursuit of money and worldly status as a legitimate way to glorify God.⁵² TBN must convince its contributors of its financial competence in order to present itself as a legitimate evangelical organization.

[18] TBN consistently provides two levels of argument for its financial fitness and integrity in its histories. Sociologist Razelle Frankl argues that televangelism is essentially a hybrid enterprise whose viability depends on its ability to draw upon both religious and broadcasting conventions to secure regular viewer contributions.⁵³ On one hand, both the newsletters and *Hello World* insist that TBN's financial decisions are solely based on direction from God. By invoking the indisputable authority of the divine, TBN places itself in a position within the evangelical community that is in theory beyond reproach. On the other hand, TBN publishes excerpts from the financial statements that it submits to various legal authorities, and cites them as proof of the network's financial security and success. This double-proof strategy can be seen in the April 1988 newsletter, printed during the aftershocks of the televangelist scandals of the previous year. In his letter, Crouch interprets the scandals and reactions as a phase in the war

between God and Satan. Crouch proceeds to dismiss critical inquiry against Christian broadcasting and to solicit more pledges:

How the world howls with glee at the exposure of some moral failure in the Church. I wonder what we would *see* if the cover were pulled back fully on the *hypocritical finger pointers* of the world!... Beloved Partners, get your eyes *off* satan's diversionary tactics. **WE HAVE A JOB TO DO!** What about Christian Television? Shall we *quit*? ... It is *true*, you know HIS CHURCH is going to be **Victorious**. The question is: *Do you want to be a part of it?*⁵⁴

Crouch's fiery response against criticisms from "the world" and his Apocalyptic conviction that God will prevail recall White's characterization of authoritarian ideologies. However, the same newsletter carries a short article, also written by Crouch, which announces TBN's total income in 1987 as well as its annual budget in a pie chart:

By the way, TBN was audited by the Internal Revenue Service in 1987 and a parting remark by the agent was, "You RUN A TIGHT SHIP HERE." ... If you desire to inspect the audited financial statement, contact your nearest TBN station manager for an appointment. We can PROVE that your investment in YOUR TBN NETWORK is a good one—that is bringing many souls into the Kingdom.⁵⁵

Crouch includes TBN's IRS audit in TBN's historical documents to show that TBN has no difficulty negotiating with and competing against secular institutions. Viewers are reminded of their collective stake in the TBN mission—to save souls—and of their possessive and familial relationship to the network—it is "THEIR" TBN. According to TBN's historiography, responsible and lucrative business practices are a means to the end of "bringing many souls into the Kingdom." In other words, TBN history presents good business as good worship.

Conclusion

[19] The central purpose of TBN history writing is to document and promote three ideas that adopt and adapt the rhetorical and performative traditions of the evangelical community to support TBN's growth as a broadcasting network. First, nothing happens in contradiction to God's will. Second, TBN—its people, technology and business—is an exemplary example God's power at work. And finally, participation in TBN through prayer and pledges affirms one's membership within and familial bonds with the evangelical community. Through *Hello World* and the newsletters, TBN writes itself into the narrative of evangelistic community of which it is part. When Crouch jubilantly announced that “... we poured Holy anointing oil upon your new Holy Beamer, mobile TV station and dedicated it 100% to the Lord,” he was declaring TBN's willingness to apply its convictions to every aspect of its operations (see image 4).⁵⁶ TBN's way of viewing history infuses all historical events with a sense of the miraculous, which has helped it to affirm a worldview that it shares with its viewing community.

[20] TBN's founding and expansion reflect general trends in contemporary American and global television history: the deregularization of public access programming during the 1970s, the proliferation of cable and satellite dishes as delivery systems since the 1980s, the concurrent popularization of “narrow-casting” channels that serve niche viewerships, and the use of the internet and other new technologies to reach global audiences. This paper has sought to demonstrate the specific ways in which TBN has thrived in these broad historical, regulatory, and technological changes by representing them through the rhetorical traditions of its community. Perhaps this research into TBN's modes of self-representation to its core viewership can support future research into models of communication and modern media use in faith communities, especially in terms of theories of public relations.⁵⁷ This qualitative study

also complements quantitative research into the legal and fiscal practices of TBN and other religious broadcasters. It remains to be seen whether TBN's consistently insular yet materially successful strategy of self-representation and "autobiography" will continue to help it to maintain a faithful viewership in the decades to come.

References

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

Bauman, Richard. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1977.

Blumenthal, Howard J. and Lover R. Goodenough. *This Business of Television*. New York: Billboard Books, 2006.

Broadcasting and Cable Magazine. "Top 25 Station Groups," *Broadcasting and Cable Magazine*, <http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA411414.html> , accessed October 2, 2009.

Bruce, Steve. *Pray TV: Televangelism in America*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Crouch, Paul F. *Hello World! A Personal Letter to the Body of Christ*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003.

Fischer, Edward. *Everybody Steals from God: Communication as Worship*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.

Frankl, Razelle. *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Gordon, Melton, J., Phillip Lucas and Jon Stone, eds. *Prime-Time Religion: An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997.

Hendershot, Heather. *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Hoover, Stewart M. *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1988.

_____. *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998.

_____. *Religion in the Media Age*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Horsfield, Peter G. *Religious Television: The American Experience*. New York: Longman, 1984.

Internal Revenue Service, "Tax Information for Churches and Religious Organizations," <http://www.irs.gov/charities/churches/index.html>, accessed October 2, 2009.

Newman, Jay. *Religion vs. Television: Competitors in Cultural Context*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996.

Public Broadcasting Service. "About PBS: Corporate Facts," http://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/aboutpbs_corp_financial.html, accessed October 2, 2009.

Schultze, Quentin J. *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991.

Silk, Mark. *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Stout, Daniel A., ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication, and Media*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Trinity Broadcasting Network. "About Us," <http://www.tbn.org/index.php/3.html>, accessed October 2, 2009.

Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletters. Costa Mesa, CA, 1973-present.

Walker, James and Ferguson, Douglas. *The Broadcast Television Industry*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998.

Ward, Mark. *Air of Salvation: The Story of Christian Broadcasting*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996.

White, Hayden. *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

Notes

¹ *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication, and Media*, ed. Daniel A. Stout, 423 (New York: Routledge, 2006).

² Howard J. Blumenthal and Lover R. Goodenough, *This Business of Television* (New York: Billboard Books, 2006), 192. Other religious networks in America include INSP (Inspiration Network), i, Total Living Network, and Sky Angel. In addition to religious networks, Christian

ministries often purchase paid programming slots from local and cable television networks and full-time religious broadcasters comprise almost ten percent of America's commercially licensed television stations.

³ TBN, "About Us," TBN, <http://tbn.org/index.php/3.html> (accessed April 29, 2008).

⁴ Broadcasting and Cable Magazine, "Top 25 Station Groups,"

<http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA411414.html> (accessed May 4, 2008). TBN cites this study in its promotional packet, available as a PDF download on its website's "About Us" page. However, TBN reports itself as the seventh largest American broadcaster by percentage of American household coverage. While TBN's version correctly represents the raw data, *Broadcasting and Cable* performs statistical adjustments to take factors such as UHF signal strengths into account. The trade journal's top ten station group rankings for 2004 are, in order: Viacom (CBS and former UPN), Fox, NBC, Paxson (PAX), Tribune, ABC, Univision, Gannett, Hearst-Argyle, and Trinity Broadcasting.

⁵ TBN, "About Us: The TBN Story", <http://tbn.org/index.php/3/18.html> (accessed April 29 2008).

⁶ Internal Revenue Service, "Tax Information for Churches and Religious Organizations," <http://www.irs.gov/charities/churches/index.html> (accessed April 30, 2008). Donations to 501(c)3 organizations such as TBN can be applied toward tax deductions.

⁷ It is interesting to note that government regulators such as the Internal Revenue Service and the Federal Communications Commission do not distinguish between religious and non-religious charities in their policies, excepting an explicit relaxation of Equal Employment Opportunity requirements with respect to denominational hiring. Blumenthal, 197.

⁸ "PBS Financial Highlights 2007," downloadable as pdf from Public Broadcasting Service, "About PBS: Corporate Facts," Public Broadcasting Service, http://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/aboutpbs_corp_financial.html (accessed April 30, 2008). Also Blumenthal, 195.

⁹ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 18.

¹⁰ Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 3.

¹¹ *The New York Times*, "Pat Robertson; Evangelist Joins Race in a Flourish of Petitions," sec. 4, September 20, 1987. *The New York Times*, "Oral Roberts Vigil Ends in New Plea for Funds," sec. A, April 1, 1987. *The New York Times*, "Financial Woes Follow Swaggart Confession of Sin," sec. 1, March 6, 1988. *The New York Times*, "Bakker Convicted on All Counts; First Felon Among TV Evangelists," sec. A, October 6, 1989.

¹² *Prime-Time Religion: An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting*, ed. J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Lucas and Jon Stone (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997), 73.

¹³ Of the books on American religious television published during the immediate aftermath of the televangelist scandals, the following four remain outstanding in both breadth and depth and coverage: Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987). Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1988); Quentin J. Schulze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).

¹⁴ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 18; Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: a Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America, Fourth Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xiv.

¹⁵ Balmer, xv-xvi.

¹⁶ Matt 28:18-20 (Revised Standard Version).

¹⁷ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "The Third Day is Here!" (January 2002), 1.

¹⁸ The bound edition of the TBN newsletters cited in this paper, like the leaflets that subscribers receive, does not contain standard publishing or copyright information. Starting with the December 1988 issue, newsletters contain the following disclaimer: "©year Trinity Broadcasting Network, Inc. All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of TBN." I cite newsletters by month and year, and when possible, article heading.

¹⁹ Based on author's calls in Spring 2008. TBN's business office telephone number is (714) 665-3608.

²⁰ Exceptions are the Library of Congress, the Harvard College Library, and the Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Search for "Paul Crouch" at OCLC website: <http://firstsearch.oclc.org/WebZ/FSFETCH?fetchtype=holdings:entityholdingsortpage=normal:holdinglimittype=default:next=html/holdings.html:bad=error/badfetch.html:format=FH:numr ecs=1:resultset=1:recno=1:entitylibrarycount=47:sessionid=fsapp1-37296-ffnoq30g-2q5o96:entitypagenum=4:0> (accessed April 29, 2008)

²¹ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "TBN Rally Moves to Shrine Auditorium" (April 1976), 1.

²² Paul F. Crouch, Sr., *Hello World! A Personal Letter to the Body of Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 138.

²³ For a statistical and interpretive analysis of televangelism's audience, refer to Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications), 1988. Hoover argues that while televangelism portrays itself as a tool for conversion, people who watch Christian programs generally considered themselves to be partial members of the community. While this may be true of habitual viewers, most television viewers with cable access have had some exposure to televangelism regardless of their religious background.

²⁴ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "Our Love Gift to You for March Only ..." "For Any Pledge," and "For \$25 a Month or \$250 One Time" (March 2000), 4.

²⁵ TBN Gold Frankincense Myrrh, "TBN Books," TBN Gold Frankincense Myrrh, <http://www.parable.com/tbn/group.TBN-Books.1346.htm> (accessed April 29, 2008). The newsletter collection costs \$19.99 with an online order discount, but costs \$49.95 at a TBN bookstore.

²⁶ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "PTL for Letters" (July 1974), 3. This viewer letter is reproduced almost verbatim on p. 112 in *Hello World*.

²⁷ Mark 12:38-44; Luke 20:45-47; 21:1-4 (Revised Standard Version).

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 21.

²⁹ Crouch, 2-4. Crouch begins his autobiography with an anecdote about his grandmother's experience with faith healing, thereby demonstrating his genealogical credentials in evangelical Christianity. Crouch's grandmother's experience began as a family miracle, but became an opportunity for public witnessing. This mixture of and equation between familial and community histories occurs throughout TBN's history writing.

³⁰ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1977), 44.

³¹ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, Dedication.

³² There are disagreements within the evangelical subculture regarding theological issues; however, God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence are generally accepted. For an example of the evangelical discourse on theology and media, refer to Edward Fischer, *Everybody Steals from God: Communication as Worship* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 1977.

³³ Crouch, *Hello World*, 120.

³⁴ Richard Bauman writes, "In other words, in artistic performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, 'Interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean hat the words alone, taken literally, would convey.' This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretative frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal" (*Verbal Art*, 9).

³⁵ Crouch, *Hello World*, 3-4, 60-63.

³⁶ Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (London: Routledge), 93.

³⁷ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "Thou Shalt Arise..." (June 1996), 1.

³⁸ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "TBN Outreach By Satellite," p.1, February 1977.

³⁹ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "TBN Outreach By Satellite," p.2, February 1977.

⁴⁰ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "Destined For The Throne," p.4, September 1978.

⁴¹ Hayden White, *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 23.

⁴² *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "South Africa—Born in a Day!" (June 1989), 1.

⁴³ For more information, consult the *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter* issues from July to September 1995 as well as Blumenthal, 197.

⁴⁴ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "Must-Carry Survives—DirecTV Says No to TBN!" (September 1995), 1.

⁴⁵ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "Must-Carry Survives—DirecTV Says No to TBN!" (September 1995), 1.

⁴⁶ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "Must-Carry Survives—DirecTV Says No to TBN!" (September 1995), 2.

⁴⁷ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "Devil Bustin' Satellite1" (March 1996), 1.

⁴⁸ Two recent scholarly books explore this subject in depth: Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴⁹ I am referring to two financial scandals from 1987. First, longtime radio and television evangelist Oral Roberts solicited funds for his "City of Faith" research complex by claiming that God would "take him home" if his fundraising goals were not met. Second, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker who hosted The PTL Club, possibly the most popular and profitable

Christian program at the time, were found to have embezzled hundreds of millions of dollars for personal use. Many accounts of these scandals exist; for an unusual version that is biased toward the broadcasters refer to Mark Ward, *Air of Salvation: The Story of Christian Broadcasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 167-182.

⁵⁰ Bruce, *Pray TV*, 146-7.

⁵¹ Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience* (New York: Longman), 101.

⁵² Bruce, *Pray TV*, 154-161.

⁵³ Frankl, *Televangelism*, 128-142.

⁵⁴ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "The Church Triumphant is Alive and Well!", (April 1988), 1.

⁵⁵ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "TBN Financial Statement" (April 1988), 3.

⁵⁶ *Trinity Broadcasting Network Newsletter*, "Holy Beamer Dedication" (June 1980), 6.

⁵⁷ Donn James Tilson and Anuradha Vekantewaran, "Toward a Covenantal Model of Public Relations: Hindu Faith Communities and Devotional—Promotional Communication," *Journal of Media and Religion* 5,2 (2006): 111-33.