



REPORTS & COMMENT

TELEVISION

THE BIRTH OF A MEDIA MYTH

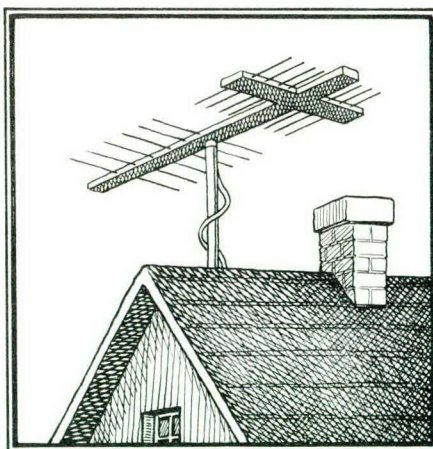
Someone seems to have miscounted in checking the roll at the electronic church



“**S**TARTING 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.” 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 and, depending on one’s point of view, allowed to stir either unrealistic alarm or false hope.

In an August, 1980, series on the “electronic church,” the *New York Times* quoted Armstrong’s figure of 130 million without challenging it, though the *Times* did note that some estimates for individual ministers, including Falwell, appeared to be inflated. Earlier in

the year (January 21, 1980), the *Times* had credited four television ministers with a total audience of 47 million. The *Wall Street Journal* said on July 11, 1980, that “every week television evangelists like Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, and Jerry Falwell reach an estimated 128 million viewers.” *U.S. News & World Report* referred in its September 15, 1980, issue to “TV gospel shows beamed to 50 million viewers each week by evangelists such as Falwell, Robertson and [James] Robison.” In a December 8, 1979, story, United Press International estimated that “about 115 mil-

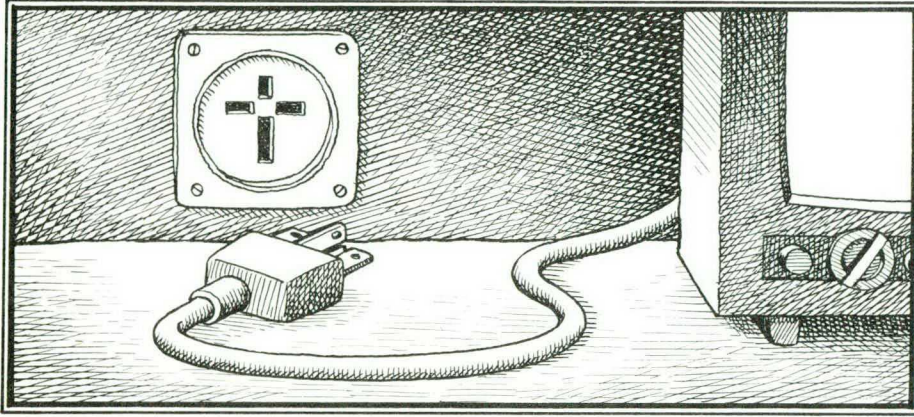


lion persons listen to at least one religious radio show and about 40 million watch at least one religious TV show each week.” An article in the October 6, 1980, edition of *New York* magazine not only set the membership of the electronic church at 130 million but also asserted that “contributions to telecommunications may be measured in the billions”—a figure far above the \$500 million that newspapers and magazines usually attribute to the fund-raising

enterprise of all radio and television ministries combined. The same article credited Rex Humbard with “playing to an audience of 100 million worldwide.”

Since early last year, most media attention to the electronic church has focused on Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. Though few reporters claimed to know any Falwell supporters personally, they were sure the woods and towns and cities were full of them. In a strident article about the New Right, *Penthouse* set the audience for evangelical television at between 40 and 60 million, and *Playboy* reported that “each week as many as 30,000,000 Americans tuned in to Jerry Falwell’s *Old-Time Gospel Hour*.” Jimmy Breslin whittled Falwell’s audience down to 25 million; the *Today* show and Bill Moyers gave him only 20 million; and Joseph Sullivan and Anthony Lewis, of the *New York Times*, various reporters at *Newsweek*, and the Knight-Ridder newspapers seemed finally to settle on 18 million as the appropriate estimate. On occasion, however, the *Times* has noted that Falwell’s actual audience might be as small as 6 million.

Such estimates appall main-line church leaders, who are already anxious over the willingness of television stations to broadcast paid evangelical programs instead of providing free time for programs produced by more liberal religious bodies. One of the most persistent critics of electronic evangelism has been William Fore, head of communications for the National Council of Churches. Despite his extensive acquaintance with religious broadcasting, Fore wrote in *TV Guide* (July 19-25, 1980) that “some 47 per cent of Americans see at least one religious



program a week on TV." Another influential main-liner, James M. Wall, editor of *The Christian Century*, wrote in the October 22, 1980, issue of that publication that "these fundamentalist television preachers now reach over 100 million persons each week." (Wall's editorial, ironically, was based on Richard Hofstadter's essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics.")

Some TV ministers avoid such claims, but others have given new meaning to the phrase "evangelistically speaking"—an insider's reference to the tendency of some preachers to count arms and legs instead of heads. Jim Bakker, for example, has claimed that his *PTL Club*, a television talk show, has an audience of 20 million, even though fretful *PTL* associates declared to the Charlotte, North Carolina, *Observer* that the figure was "a total fabrication." Rex Humbard's press materials once claimed that his program was seen by "up to 100 million"; his current promotional literature makes the more modest claim of 1.4 million. Jerry Falwell's *Faith Aflame* magazine has estimated his audience at 15 million, although Falwell admits he really does not know how many people watch and hear him. Publicists for James Robison claim that his television show has a potential audience of 50 to 60 million people, though they fail to note that fewer than a million actually tune in. In a recent fund-raising letter, Robison stated, "Over ten million homes are reached and helped each week by our TV program." Other evangelists make even more extravagant claims. Early this year, Frances Swaggart asked supporters of the ministry of her husband, Jimmy, to send money to buy TV equipment that would "reach approximately 300 million people with God's love in 1981." But no electronic preacher out-

strips Bert Clendennen, who has often told his radio listeners that his program reaches "one out of every two people on the face of this earth."

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.

Several polls have indicated that between 45 and 50 percent of adult Americans listen to some type of religious radio program at least once a year, but the regular audience is much smaller. A 1978 survey, conducted by the Gallup organization and published in a series of articles in the evangelical journal *Christianity Today* in 1980, found that only 5 percent (7.75 million) claim to listen as much as three hours a week. Another Gallup poll, conducted in 1980 for the American Research Corporation, of Irvine, California, and published in a report titled "Profile of the Christian Marketplace," showed that only 15.5 percent (24 million) said they had tuned in on a radio preacher during the previous thirty days. Similar findings obtain for religious television. Perhaps as many as 40 million adults

watch some religious programs on a reasonably regular basis, and 12 percent (18 million) say they watch two or more hours per week. Many of these, of course, watch denominational programs and local church services instead of or in addition to the programs of the nationally syndicated ministries listed in the table accompanying this piece. But since these national ministries have generated most of the interest in the electronic church and its audience, I shall focus specifically on them.

Both Arbitron and A. C. Nielsen provide extensive information about each of approximately sixty syndicated religious programs—taped or filmed series available for telecast by individual stations. 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. Only 16 million American homes were receiving cable television in mid-1980. Available data on cable audiences indicate that most subscribers use cable primarily to improve reception of programs on VHF and UHF stations, and to receive entertainment and sports programs available only on cable.

As the table makes clear, the weekly audience for syndicated television preachers is small, with only Oral Roberts and Robert Schuller attracting viewers in as many as 2 percent of the households in the areas in which their programs are broadcast. Fewer than 10 million households containing television sets were tuned during November of 1980 to one of the top ten programs produced by independent (nondenomi-

national) ministries. Even this figure may be high, since it assumes no overlap between audiences—an assumption no one familiar with the electronic church would make. The stars of the movement appear on the same programs, speak at the same rallies, and, increasingly, cooperate in various ventures, with clear confidence that they are appealing to the same people. Fund-raising organizations sell mailing lists of people known to contribute to more than one ministry. And the Gallup/*Christianity Today* poll revealed that about half the “Orthodox Christians” who watch religious television watch at least two hours a week, indicating that they watch more than one program.

Examination of Sunday-morning viewing patterns, in a random sample of market areas surveyed by Nielsen, provides good circumstantial evidence of audience overlap. In city after city, regardless of the numbers involved, religious programs typically draw quite small audiences between 7:00 and 8:00 A.M., then pick up sharply for two or three hours, after which most syndicated preachers abandon the field to *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation*, and various local shows. This pattern suggests that many viewers of religious

television get up at about 8:00 A.M., turn the set on, and watch whatever appears until it is time to leave for church. To be sure, they discriminate among programs—Oral Roberts and Robert Schuller almost always outpoint the *Kroezee Brothers' Crusade* and the *R. A. West Revival*—but they are favorably disposed toward religious programming, and are likely to watch whatever is on. 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.

If the hypothesis of multiple-program viewing is valid, and I have no doubt it is, the average weekly audience for the top ten programs is considerably smaller than the 13,767,000 cumulative viewers ascribed to them by the Nielsen service. A figure of 7 to 10 million seems fair. Perhaps two to three times that many watch the programs on an occasional basis, an estimate that squares with a Harris Poll survey placing the audience for television preachers at approximately 23 million.

Whatever the true size of the total audience for the leading television preachers, that audience does not appear to be growing. On the contrary, it seems to have reached its peak and begun to shrink. Last November, nine of the ten most popular television ministries were reaching fewer households than in February of the same year. Losses suffered by these nine ranged from Jerry Falwell's minimal 2.3 percent decline, during a period of enormous publicity, to declines of 21 percent for Rex Humbard and Oral Roberts. In the case of the top six ministries, all had recorded larger household totals prior to 1980; thus, these figures are not an aberration but part of a continuing decline. Oral Roberts, for example, has lost more than 40 percent of the audience he had in February of 1977. The average number of viewer-households per station has also declined in the case of each of the ten ministries.

These findings have several implications, but three are particularly noteworthy. First, they make clear that the impact—political or otherwise—of television ministries such as Jerry Falwell's and James Robison's is based more on organization, dedication, and diligence than on overwhelming numbers. Second, though the electronic ministers have been able to raise astonishing sums of money from their generous and committed followers (at least four television ministries have acknowledged annual incomes in excess of \$50 million), the money pool appears to be finite and fund-raisers may already have approached its limits. This could prove especially significant to ministries committed to courses of action that presuppose continued growth. Jim Bakker's *PTL Club* had to scale down an ambitious building program to avoid financial chaos; Oral Roberts's City of Faith medical complex in Tulsa appeared to be in fiscal danger before the evangelist reported his vision of a 900-foot Jesus who gave the enterprise His blessing, which stimulated a flow of cash gifts; and one hears rumors that other organizations have overbought and overbuilt without taking sufficient thought for the morrow, and that this has forced them into ever more desperate appeals for funds.

Finally, because the audience for evangelical broadcasts is not only modest but composed largely of active church members, and since, accord-

AUDIENCE DATA ON TEN SYNDICATED TELEVISION MINISTRIES

Ministry	Stations	Rating (% of viewer households in coverage area)	Total Audience	Total Households	% Change in Total House- holds since February, 1980
Oral Roberts	177	2.1	2,351,000	1,553,000	-21.6
Robert Schuller	161	2.0	2,130,000	1,427,000	-3.6
Rex Humbard	209	1.8	2,079,000	1,308,000	-21.0
Jimmy Swaggart	207	1.5	1,789,000	1,148,000	-10.0
Jerry Falwell	244	1.35	1,440,000	986,000	-2.3
Day of Discovery	180	1.3	1,267,000	879,000	-14.1
PTL Club	193	1.3	1,050,000	776,000	-11.9
700 Club	123	.9	705,000	569,000	-4.7
James Robison	69	1.2	575,000	383,000	+7.3
Ken Copeland	69	.7	381,000	277,000	-14.4
			13,767,000	9,306,000	

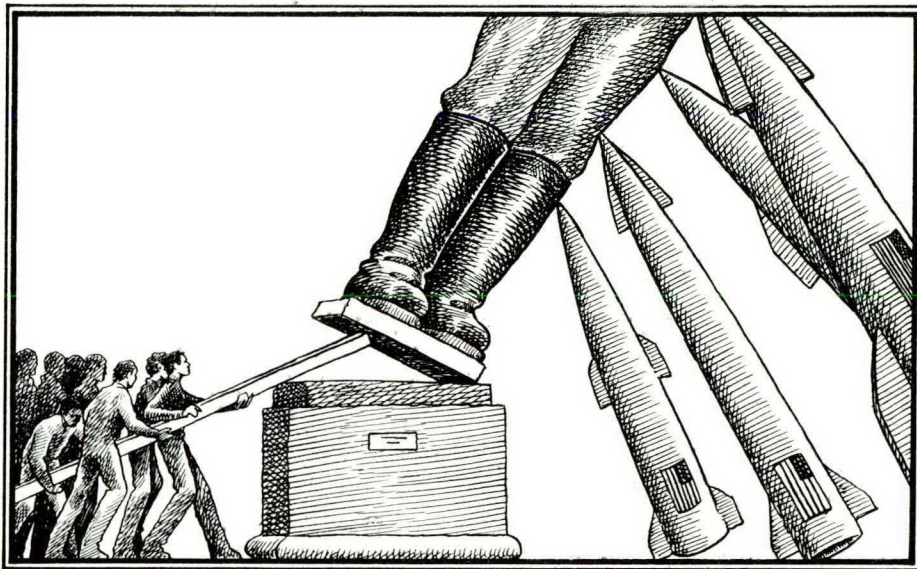
SOURCE: A. C. Nielsen Company, *Report on Syndicated Programs* for February and November, 1980. Used with permission. Arbitron data are similar, but tend consistently to report slightly smaller audiences than Nielsen.

ing 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. This is not to say, however, that the electronic church is dying, or that it brings no benefits to the evangelical community. Religious broadcasts doubtless strengthen and deepen the faith of listeners by providing them with instruction, exhortation, inspiration, hope, encouragement, entertainment, example, and opportunity for service. They also serve a symbolic

function of considerable importance. As evangelicals notice that virtually all the religion on radio and television is their kind of religion, that the secular media are fascinated by it, and that liberal Christians are panicked by it, their confidence is buoyed, and their hearts cheered. They realize that they are no longer a beleaguered, backwater minority but a significant and thriving part of mainstream American Christianity. And that may well assure the electronic church a congregation that is sufficient to keep the cards and letters coming.

—William Martin

William Martin teaches sociology at Rice University and writes often about religious matters.



PAKISTAN A RISKY BET ON GENERAL ZIA

*State Department officials
are worried that Reagan
may be making a major change
in U.S. non-proliferation policy*



WHEN PRESIDENT ZULFIKAR Ali Bhutto was deposed in 1977, Pakistan lost the one political leader capable of preserving the precarious balances on which the country's security depends—among the superpowers, the Soviet Union, China, and the United States; with its neighbors, Afghanistan and India; and among a dozen contending

political parties, secessionist tribesmen, religious sects, unruly military officers, and jealous bureaucrats.

In Bhutto's place came General Zia ul-Haq, the army chief of staff, who later had Bhutto tried and executed on trumped-up murder charges. General Zia is short on admirers, within his country and overseas. But the Reagan Administration apparently has decided to make a major and risky investment in Zia—an investment involving money, arms, and perhaps even a basic change in American policy on nuclear proliferation. It does not matter that State Department officials used to dealing with the General have described him as “an extraordinarily weak ruler with extraordinarily weak legitimacy.” Zia is in charge at a moment, when, in the White House view, Western strategy in the region is being sorely tested.

Apart from aid to Europe, the United States has spent more for military and economic assistance to Pakistan—about \$5.8 billion from 1946 to 1980—than for all but four other countries (Israel, Korea, India, and Turkey). From time to time, Pakistan has been unruly and unresponsive enough for U.S. and international aid officials and foreign lenders to lose their patience and impose tough conditions for further credit or grant assistance. In recent years, the most trying of these occasions involved Pakistan's determination to develop its own nuclear bomb, to match the capability possessed by its traditional enemy, India. Before Bhutto was overthrown, he had been pursuing nuclear weaponry, with financial support from Libya. When General Zia met with officials of the U.S. Embassy shortly before the coup in 1977, he promised that he would not go so far as to test a nuclear bomb, nor allow the technology to fall into Arab hands. In 1979, President Carter cut off all military credits and economic assistance to Pakistan, invoking a congressional prohibition against aid to countries that persist in unrestricted nuclear-technology development. This embargo is still in force.

After the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan's shortcomings were forgiven, first by the Carter Administration and then by the Reagan Administration. U.S. military advisers now call for lifting the embargo, sending large-scale military reinforcements, and perhaps even signing a mutual-security treaty.

An unclassified report by Francis Fukuyama, a military analyst with the Rand Corporation last year and now a member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff, reveals what Zia and his Joint Staff Headquarters are demanding in assistance. One proposal would involve the U.S. in financing and equipping an entirely new corps with two infantry divisions, to be deployed along the Afghan border in Baluchistan and the Northwest Frontier province. In addition to tanks, artillery, and anti-tank missiles, the proposal calls for an elaborate air defense—radar, an anti-aircraft missile system, F-16 aircraft to counter Soviet MiGs, and advanced helicopters with anti-tank weaponry. Appended to this proposal is a request, similar to ones already accepted from Turkey, Egypt, and Greece, for U.S.

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