

International Televangelism/American Ideology:
The Case of the 700 Club

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Introduction

There has been an explosion of religious broadcasting throughout the world. Privately owned religious radio stations have popped up throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America. Most of these stations are partners in international broadcasting networks such as Trinity Broadcasting Network or the Christian Broadcasting Network, to name just two. In addition, state broadcasters such as the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation and the South African Broadcasting have entered into contracts with international religious broadcasters, effectively extending the reach of the latter throughout the world.

Significant scholarship has been devoted to the ideological content of religion. For example, Abelman and Hoover (1990) published a volume of studies on religious televangelism, from audience, organizational, institutional, historical and ideological perspectives. Paul Freston (2001) has published a volume on the growth of new pentecostal and charismatic religions and their impact on political processes and community organization in various parts of the world. And a recent conference on the Bible and the Ballot Box, held in Washington DC in November 2002 and keynoted by Samuel P. Huntington of Harvard University further highlighted the growing importance of religion in politics in the Third World.

Although televangelism's growth has been phenomenal, very little attention has been paid to how it may serve neocolonialist and neo-imperialist ambitions. This seems to be an important arena for research, given the tremendous growth of religious broadcasting, the entry of religious broadcasters into the contest for ownership and control of digital technologies, and the phenomenal growth of fundamentalist Christian religious movements (Jenkins, 2002), and the

frequent congruence between the ideological perspectives of some religious programs and the international policy objects of the U.S. government.

This paper takes a closer look at one of the mammoth international religious broadcasters, The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). CBN programs, in particular the **700 Club**, are carried on national and local television stations throughout the world through a network of cable, satellite, television, internet and radio distribution. CBN has regional offices to support this effort in Africa, Asia, China, Europe, India, Indonesia, Latin America, the Middle East, Nigeria, Siam, and Singapore (www.cbn.com). Given the reach of programs like the 700 Club and its increasing availability through international distribution networks, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What ideologies are emphasized in the 700 Club?
2. What are the congruencies between U.S. government policy and 700 Club content?

BACKGROUND

According to the CBN website:

“CBN is a multifaceted nonprofit organization that provides programming by cable, broadcast and satellite to approximately 166 countries. Chief among CBN's broadcasting components is [The 700 Club](#), a daily television program featuring [Pat Robertson](#), [Terry Meeuswen](#), [Gordon Robertson](#), [Lisa Ryan](#), [Kristi Watts](#) and News Anchor [Lee Webb](#). On the air continuously since 1966, [The 700 Club](#) is one of the longest-running programs in broadcast history. Seen in 95% of the television markets across the United States, the show's news/magazine format presents a mix of information, interviews, and inspiration to an average daily audience of one million viewers.

“Beginning in the year 2000, an international edition of The 700 Club, and other CBN television programs could be seen in more than 180 countries. CBN programs have aired in approximately 71 languages from Chile to Iceland and from the West Indies to the Far East. In 1990 CBN International launched special projects in the Commonwealth of Independent States (formerly the Soviet Union) that included primetime specials and later The 700 Club and Superbook, an animated series of Bible stories. The broadcasts were followed by 190 rallies throughout the region that resulted in the establishment of 190 churches. Similar special projects were implemented in the Philippines and Romania in

1994. CBN International also distributes videos and literature and provides follow-up ministry through a network of approximately 55 centers around the world.

In 1995, CBN launched [CBN WorldReach](#) with a mission of converting 500 million people to Christianity using Gospel programming to targeted international audiences.

[Middle East Television \(METV\)](#), CBN's TV station in Southern Lebanon, broadcasts news, sports, family entertainment, and religious programming by satellite to a potential audience of 200 million people in 15 nations including Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Cyprus. METV also distributes free videotapes and religious literature and provides food and clothing -- through CBN's humanitarian affiliate, Operation Blessing International -- throughout the Middle East."

Pat Robertson, who ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. presidency in the 80s, heads the Christian Broadcasting Network CBN, the conglomerate which produces the 700 Club and other religious programs and services. CBN grossed over \$200 million dollars in 2001 (Ministry Watch, 2002). Robertson disseminates his views on current events through the 700 Club program and invokes Christian scriptures to support conservative political positions.

The 700 Club has been described as a carrier of right wing ideologies by several researchers who have examined its content (Gifford, 1991). In it, Robertson skillfully combines religion with politics to form a show that disseminates opinion and news coverage on current events. For its viewers both here and abroad, the 700 Club frames discourse about the causes of world problems

Robertson has had a longtime association with the Christian Right (CR), which advocates a Christian-based government and rallies behind the ideas of free/open market enterprise. In the United States, this religious right supports Israel in its struggle with the Palestinians and advocates Christian prayer in public schools. It opposes large scale government-funded social programs, public assistance, affirmative action and abortion. In the past, the group has equated America with Christianity and proposed that the Founding Fathers would have agreed with CR politics (Gifford, 1991).

This religious right has fused religion with an international political agenda, maintaining that it is the duty of America to bring the American way of life to every corner of the globe. More extreme versions of this perspective claim God as the champion of the American people and the chief architect of American business and political success (Gifford 1991, p. 12).

Alexander's (1994) study on the role of televangelism and politics suggests a political impetus also motivates viewers of religious television. He concludes that "televangelism helps mobilize religious conservatives as confident and militant warriors to undertake the moral regeneration of American society through political activism" (page 162).

Robertson's 700 Club television program is built around the notion of presenting a bulwark for the protection of America as a Western Christian nation. As he sees it, "There has got to be some unifying ethic for society" and he thinks that unifying ethic should be fundamentalist Christianity (Peck 1993, page 82).

In 1982, Miller examined the political content of two nationally televised religious programs, the 700 Club and the PTL Club. He hypothesized that both shows would contain political comment because of the hosts' involvement with the New Christian Right (NCR) movement. Miller found that The 700 Club took a much stronger stance than The PTL Club on political topics and that both shows contained political comment aligned with the Christian Right.

Describing the 700 Club, Hoover (1988) said of the political orientation of the program:

The 700 Club "embeds" politics in its program in a variety of ways. Pat Robertson and the other hosts often comment on issues of the day, typically focusing on news events related to the "social agenda" of the new right. Content analyses of the program have revealed that many such issues appear in the program's news and documentary segments and typically are then commented upon by the hosts and their guests (page 77).

The CR is organized around the notion of a “Christian Civilization,” or the idea that there are moral absolutes supported by and explicitly stated in scripture by which society should be governed. The liberal shift of the 1960s and 1970s, in which women and minorities gained a increased civil rights were viewed by the more extreme members of this movement as a threat to the ideal of a “Christian Civilization” (Peck, 1993). Commenting on the Christian Right movement in The God’s of Televangelism (1993) , Peck said that it originated from the ideals of conservative protestants who began to align politically with the right in the 1960s. After Supreme Court rulings in 1962 and 1963 against school prayer and Bible reading in public schools, these protestants became concerned that “American society was undergoing a moral and spiritual crisis” (Peck, 1993). The CR’s founding member organizations were the Moral Majority (now known as the Liberty Foundation) the Religious Roundtable, and the Christian Voice.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to demonstrating how the content of the 700 Club promotes a conservative international political agenda. Both content analysis and framing analysis are deployed to identify dominant themes and ideological thrusts in CBN programs.. Framing analysis of this program reveals the conservative political bias of the news stories, while content analysis describes the relative salience of each type of theme and the frequency of its deployment in the 700 Club.

Research Approach

The first step in the research was to view and analyze the 700 Club program for recurring themes and to identify the distinct ideological vehicles or genres deployed in its shows. Once this content was identified, a list of categories was created and program content was classified into these categories.

Study of the 700 Club show segments led to the formation of 12 content categories. The sample content was analyzed and classified following the category definitions, with mutually exclusive rules for classification of program content into each of the categories. Decisions on coding rules were developed as a result of a pre-test, which allowed the researcher to refine category definitions and increase the reliability of the coding process. The researcher also selected subcategories of the content for further analysis.

One constructed sample week of 700 Club programming was selected and recorded for the pilot study. This constructed week comprised shows aired from May to November 2002, taking care not to repeat any day in the week. The sampled program dates were Monday, May 27; Tuesday, July 30; Wednesday, October 9; Thursday, August 8, and Friday, November 8. A total of 304 minutes of 700 Club was recorded and analyzed.

Programming time was first tabulated in seconds devoted to each program segment for each show in the sample. Percentages were calculated for the content in each program category, as a percentage of total programming. Appendix A presents a table of the actual and relative lengths of all program segments. Operational definitions of each category are provided in Appendix B.

Framing Analysis

According to Robert Entman (2000) “frames highlight and link data selectively to tell more or less coherent stories that define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies” (page 49). This research also wanted to take a look at how recurrent themes in 700 Club programs shape the way its viewers understand world problems such as poverty, racism and underdevelopment and the solutions it proposes to them. This was achieved by doing a qualitative analysis of the material in each of the content categories. The researcher attempted to identify the salient perspectives, paying particular attention to politics, culture and economic

issues, asking the following questions of the content: What was most often talked about? What were the most commonly invoked explanations for problems in world? What kinds of appeals were made to viewers of the program? Who and what were singled out for praise and for blame? What remedies were suggested? The findings from both the content analysis and the framing analysis are presented in the next section.

FINDINGS OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Results for 304 Minutes of Programming

(Show dates: 5/27, 7/30, 10/9, 8/8, and 11/8)

SEGMENT	MINUTES	PERCENT
FEATURES	77:16	25
NEWS	52:51	17
GUESTS	37:09	12
NEWS COMMENTARY	25:30	8
BRING IT ON	24:54	8
COMMERCIALS	19:24	6
PREVIEWS	14:24	5
PRAYER/PRAYER REPORT	14:15	5
RELIGIOUS COMMENTARY	12:51	4
PRODUCT PLUG	4:27	1
CLOSING (no closing on one show)	3:06	1
INTRODUCTION	2:45	1
FUNDRAISING (direct appeals on show; seen in three shows)	2:12	1
TOTAL	304	100

(Note: Percentages are rounded)

Most of the programming time was devoted to news (17%), features (25%) and guests (12%). News Commentary and Bring It On both represented eight percent of the programs. Less than 15 minutes was spent on prayer in 304 minutes of programming. Prayer and Prayer Report counted for only five percent of programming, while religious commentary was less at four percent. Commercials were six percent of programming and previews were five percent. Finally, product plugs, introduction and closing, and fundraising each comprise one percent of the program sample. One can conclude that news, features and guests are the principle vehicles for disseminating ideology and the 700 Club.

FINDINGS OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SUB-CATEGORIES

News about the United States government and politics constituted the majority of news content, with 12 such stories in the sample. Non-political United States news stories were second with seven stories in the sample. Next, was World News totaling six stories; World News on developing countries accounted for three stories. There were four stories on health and scientific research findings, one of which was also a “Focus Report Segment.” Finally, there was one story about African countries, which was also tallied as a story on developing countries, as this category comprised three stories.

Most of the commercials were CBN programs were product promotions, totaling 14. Commercials with a missionary appeal, or those which showed images of people of developing countries at worship or being helped, came in second with three. Next, were commercials that were not produced by CBN, which numbered two. Both were Time/Life product offers. Finally, there was one commercial with a general appeal to Christians. Clearly, commercials and promotions also are a significant part of the 700 Club program.

There were five general features and all five focused on reporting missionary work. There were also 13 life changing/miracle stories in the sample. This seemed to be the most frequent genre of feature story, reflecting a robust appeal to the supernatural.

A variety of guests were seen in the program sample, but there were no celebrity guests.

The researchers counted two interviews with other evangelists. Last, there were two interviews with professional guests, which included segments with experts, authors, doctors and other professionals. The guests often promoted books written about their Christian experiences, and testimonials on how they used Christianity to achieve success in their careers or to overcome trials in their lives. There were two interviews with guests classified as “other,” which did not fall into the previously mentioned categories.

SOME REUSLTS RESULTSFROM THE FRAMING ANALYSIS

The 700 Club frequently invokes the frame of individual sin and individual salvation. vs. collective responsibility and collective salvation. For example, in a feature report on 5/27, “Monty” turns his life around. His alcoholic father had abused him as a child, and as he grew up he began to drink and fell into a life of crime. He changed *himself* for the better and found God’s love after a man came to talk to him in jail.

Another frame is that giving to the needy of the world will bring material prosperity to the giver. In a commercial that aired on 11/8, host Terry Meeuswen asks viewers to write or call and give their testimonials about the law of reciprocity. A commercial on 5/27 showed how a couple with *debt problems* turned them around by giving money to CBN. They gave to the CBN ministry even when they did not have much money to give and now, because of divine compensation, they are doing well and have no debt. This belief, promoted by Robertson and other televangelists, says that one’s riches will increase when one gives them to others via

charitable contributions to the Christian Broadcasting Network, rather than through investment in collective/communal projects or direct social action.

Another frame is Christianity is good, Islam is evil and Christians are being persecuted by Muslims. On 5/27, a news story titled “Saudi’s Deport Christians” reported that two Philippine Christians were deported when a Bible and Christian music was found in their houses. The “Christians Persecuted” story on 8/8 told of a Jihad terrorist striking in Indonesia. The “Muslim warriors” attacked a Christian community. Indeed, the 700 Club maintains an anti-Muslim stance almost consistently whenever Islam or Muslims are invoked.

Christians in the former communist states are in need of Christian revival. Revival is going on in countries around the world and the 700 Club seems to feel the need is particularly acute in the Newly Independent States (N.I.S) and other “developing” areas. A feature on 5/27 discussed how gypsies are accepting Christ “faster than any group. The 8/8 show featured a profile on the Ukrainian man who is the fictitious Rubic the Robot of CBN’s “Superbook” cartoon. He spreads the gospel to thousands of children in the Ukraine by dressing up as the popular cartoon character. The robot is a “superhero” to the children. In the 10/9 show Robertson talks of his trip to the Philippines where he ministered to 2.8 million at the “Jesus is Lord” Convention. He said, “God wants the Philippines to be a blessing to Asia.”

Miracles are happening for people in developing countries because of televangelistic and missionary intervention. A commercial on 11/8 shows a black couple, then a testimony from the woman that she prayed for a miracle. She says she sees miracles on the 700 Club every day but never thought a miracle could happen to her. At the end, the voice prompts for the viewer to call and “provide hope that changes lives forever.” The 8/8 show featured a long interview with another televangelist, Reinhard Bonnke. He is talking about the success of his crusades in

Africa. He is introduced as “bringing a message of hope in a dark world.” Africa is positioned as a hopeless continent, which can only be helped by miraculous *external* intervention rather than rational problem solving.

It is the responsibility of Christians (Americans) to help people in developing countries.

Many commercials showed images of disadvantaged people being helped, all because of contributions to CBN. For example on 5/27, a commercial shows emotional testimonials from doctors doing mission work with Indian people. It ends with “join us in sharing the gospel.” Another commercial on 7/30 shows images of sad children, Indian people eating, people worshipping, a sickly African boy in a hospital, and Middle Eastern women praying. The CBN logo is then shown, so it is subsumed that CBN is helping these people. The theme of “Christian responsibility to help the disadvantaged” frames aid efforts as the rightful response to poverty abroad, rather than for example, re-ordering of the terms of trade between the U.S. and developing states.

America needs to pray for the victory of Israel of the Palestinians. This 700 Club program featured coverage and commentary on the conflict which was clearly pro-Israeli, and supportive of Ariel Sharon.

Americas schools are a failure and private Christian-based schools are the solution. This story, which aired the same day, was pro school vouchers, and stressed drugs and sex are taking over public schools. Because it excluded blacks in a helping role, it seemed to promote whites as the savior/patriarchs over black to black mutual assistance.

DISCUSSION

We can conclude that more than 20 years after Miller's 1988 study, Pat Robertson's 700 Club remains a highly political show in which news and other content are framed within a reliably Christian conservative perspective and where scripture is frequently used to justify conservative social and political ideology. The topics of discussion are centered on the thesis of the Christian Right, i.e., that domestic and world problems can be solved by accepting the message of Jesus Christ and interventionist activities by American groups and organizations. U.S. viewers are encouraged to financially support Christian missionary work and outreach while underwriting the dissemination of U.S. conservative political ideology and the message of individual vs. collective determination and salvation throughout the world.

News discussions on the 700 Club promote a conservative ideology and a significant amount of program time spent on news of a political/governmental nature. Robertson organizes the news discussion within a number of recurring themes to promote conservative views and reinforces this with his commentaries.

The frequency of references to problems in developing countries is apparent in a variety of segments. From stories about tension between India and Pakistan to revival meetings in the Philippines and Africa and missionary work, the 700 Club devotes significant program time to international issues. Government and politics dominate the news content of the program. It is not surprising then that terrorism is frequently discussed. It is noteworthy that on the program aired 8/8/2002, Robertson recommends prayer while endorsing "a surgical strike to attack Saddam and execute him," as a solution to the problem. As with much of the coverage of problems in developing nations, little attention is paid to uncovering the global political and

economic causes of the problems that people face in those countries and none to U.S. complicity in much of that suffering (An Unseen World, 2002).

A still unexamined part of the effect of 700 Club content is the extent to which it provides support for reactionary and regressive social forces and political regimes in countries in which it is carried by national broadcasters or private stations and satellite operators. Arntsen (1997) has suggested that in Zimbabwe, conservative leaders might derive support from 700 Club type programs, which typically suggest to their listeners that they abandon political involvement and pursue the goal of individual spiritual salvation instead. Other researchers argue that some leaders in Africa, Asia and Latin America have apparently found it expedient to cloak themselves in the ideology purveyed by these televangelists and even seek their endorsement in order to gain support from the leaders of influential church congregations.

Also still unexamined is the extent to which affiliation with 700 Club type programming and with international religious organizations broadcasting organizations like CBN lends status, credibility and viability to political and religious leaders in the less developed states. In the age of increasing globalization, access to and the ability to align oneself with or imitate the symbols deployed by transnational broadcasters is a source of social power and cultural capital. Indeed, there has been a proliferation of home-grown televangelism in most of the countries reached by CBN and like broadcasts. The question that remains is to what extent these home-grown televangelists replicate and propagate American cultural and political ideologies or interrogate and challenge them, and the effects this might have or is having on national politics and political consciousness in their countries.

Limitations of this Study

The research was limited by having a small sample and difficulties in constructing an reliable instrument to measure the exact number of times each theme or frame occurred. Future research should be based on a larger sample and conduct a more exhaustive framing analysis analysis.

Suggested Agenda for Further Research on Televangelism and Ideology

Research Questions

1. What are the characteristics of the major televangelistic programs distributed in Africa, Asia and Latin America by CBN and TBN?
2. How is footage from the developing world used by CBN, TBN, and other Christian broadcasters?
3. How does the CBN network compare with the TBN network in its world coverage?
4. How do the two networks compare in financial revenues?
5. How does the content and organization of religious programming produced by selected African televangelists compare with or reflect that of CBN and TBN?
6. What has been the political and ideological influence of televangelists in developing countries?
7. How are other developing countries framed in the 700 Club?

Proposed Methods

This research agenda can be accomplished using the following data sources:

- 1) A content analysis of the 700 Club program;
- 2) A study of documents posted on the TBN and CBN websites;
- 3) Email and phone interviews with personnel at CBN; interviews with scholars on religion;
- 4) Interviews with religious ministers from the less developed world.
- 5) Material gathered from organizations which monitor televangelistic organizations;

6) Review of scholarly works on the subject by Rosalind Hackett and others who emphasize the power the media have to not only transmit religious theology, but also the discursive and ritual role media play in conferring status and legitimacy on religious leaders and their particular ideological perspectives.

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APPENDIX A

PROGRAM SEGMENT TOTALS FROM SAMPLE: 18, 242 seconds

SEGMENT	TOTAL SECONDS	PERCENTAGE
Features	4347	24
News	2397	13
Guests	2230	12
News Commentary	1530	8
Bring It On	1495	8
Commercials	1165	6
Previews	865	5
Prayer/Prayer Report	856	5
Religious Commentary	771	4
News Guests	461	3
Mission Report	290	2
News Focus Report	313	2
Product Plug	267	1
Closing	187	1
Intro	165	1
Fundraising	132	1

(Percentages are rounded)

APPENDIX B

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF AND CODING CATEGORIES

News

News A- stories on World news

- A1 developing countries
- A2 established countries
- A3 African countries

News B- stories on United States (American) news

B1 Government/Political

B2 Non-Political

News C- stories on health, research findings, and other general topics

News D- **News guest** interviews in news portion of show as part of a news story

News E- **Focus Report**-News segments on Fridays that cover a topic in-depth

News Commentary—Pat Robertson interjects his opinions on today’s news stories

Religious Commentary-Any commentary that makes reference to scriptures in the Bible, Jesus, or God, or Christianity. Usually appears in latter half of the show or in-between features and prayer. The speaker often asks viewers to call in for prayer, or call to receive free products for help with studying the Bible and living a Christian lifestyle.

Commercials- in 20- 30- or 60-seconds formats ask for donations by telling viewers to call and become a CBN partner. Each show features three to four commercial breaks.

4A-700 Club/CBN program and product promotions May feature testimonials from people about CBN programs and products that have helped them overcome debts and marriage problems. Includes any promotion of Pat Robertson’s products, teachings, and books.

4B-Commercials that show images of people in developing countries being helped by food and medical missions

4C-Commercials that show people in church, people in worship and praying, any appeals to Christians in general.

4D-Non-CBN produced commercials. Product offers from other companies.

Product Plug-When Robertson plugs a 700 Club product or offer

Intro—Usually done by Robertson. A preview of what will be featured on the show.

Closing—Closing wraps up show with a Bible verse. It is usually followed by a preview of what viewers can expect tomorrow.

Previews- short previews of next segments on the show. Done before commercial breaks (usually by Terry)

Features-

9A-Includes interviews with guests that do not appear on show, and other on location stories.

9B-(Life-Changing Story/Miracle Story) people who have changed their lives because of God give their testimony. Person is going down wrong path until something bad, often near death or terrible accident happens, and then the person becomes closer to God and changes life. Person is healed from a disease or near death experience and becomes closer to God.

9C-Mission reports of sermons on location, usually in developing countries. Also reports of success of missionary program **CBN World Reach**.

Guests-Interviews done with guests near the end of the program

10A-Celebrity guests. Interviews with pro-athlete, entertainers, musicians, who are Christians

10B-Evangelists. Interviews with other evangelists

10C-Professional guests. Interviews with experts, authors and other less known professionals

10D-Other guests

Prayer report and prayer-Gordon, Terry and Pat pray for the viewer

Bring It On-an e-mail Q & A session. Viewers write in and ask for Pat's advice.