In February 2007, Oprah Winfrey introduced viewers of The Oprah Winfrey Show to The Secret. Proclaiming that the book’s message could transform the lives of readers, Oprah’s guests explained the “universal law of attraction” that they claim governs the universe. The Law of Attraction states that “like attracts like,” and that individuals control their circumstances through their thoughts. For example, the authors of The Secret claim that in order to achieve weight loss, one needs to think about thin people and avoid thinking of (or even looking at) the overweight. The Secret teaches that if individuals focus on weight loss, this will become reality. The power of positive thinking is hardly a novel concept, but Oprah’s February show thrust it back into the mainstream, catapulting The Secret to the top of the New York Times bestsellers list. For those of us familiar with popular televangelists like Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, Paula White, Creflo Dollar, or T.D. Jakes, The Secret was no revelation at all, for these preachers have long been associated with a religious movement with a secret of its own. Since its emergence in the 1950’s, Word of Faith advocates have advanced the religious concept of positive confession, a technique that allows practitioners to “name it and claim it.” Beginning with the assumption that the Bible is a contract between the believer and God that guarantees humans worldly and heavenly prosperity, the doctrine of positive confession teaches that believers must affirm their “divine right” to health and wealth. The Secret and positive confession are simply religious and secular sides of the same coin which promise that prosperity and happiness can be realized through correct thoughts and speech.

Positive confession may be the most contested and public face of Word of Faith Christianity, with Word of Faith leaders occasionally coming under criticism for their interpretation of the doctrine. For example, Word of Faith leaders sometimes encourage believers to give beyond their means in order to receive exponential financial blessing. On his program Behind the Scenes, Paul Crouch, founder of Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), encouraged viewers to: “Pledge and say, ‘God I don’t know where I’ll get a thousand dollars I don’t know where I’ll get ten thousand’…Why don’t you try pledging fifty thousand dollars and just see what God will do? I dare you. I double-dog dare you in Jesus’s name.” Since wealth, acquired through positive confession, is a sign of God’s blessing Word of Faith leaders are often compelled towards conspicuous consumption. Indeed, national attention was recently drawn to the alleged excesses of some Word of Faith movement when ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, Sen. Charles Grassley, requested that six major Word of Faith ministries—coined “the Grassley Six” by the media—turn over their financial records for government scrutiny. Concerns for financial integrity and theological legitimacy have consumed most analyses of the Word of Faith movement.
While scholars and theologians have paid some attention to the Word of Faith movement as a controversial and potentially dangerous form of Christianity, they have done little to place the movement within its historical and cultural contexts. Given the popularity of Word of Faith pentecostalism, these oversights are especially unfortunate. This essay will attempt to open a conversation about Word of Faith that examines evidence from Trinity Broadcasting Network, the largest Word of Faith broadcaster. The paper will argue that broadcast media, specifically television and satellites, have shaped the content of Trinity Broadcasting Network’s conception of the end of the world. Moreover, by taking account of ideas about the end times, this essay will also explore how broadcasting technology opens new ways of thinking about and engaging religious community and experience through electronic media.

**Understanding the End Times: Christian Premillennial Dispensationalism**

Before considering the integration of media in the Word of Faith view of the end times, a basic understanding of premillennial dispensationalism is necessary. For evangelical Christians today, premillennial dispensationalism is the primary framework for understanding how end time events will unfold (prior to the twentieth century, most Christians adopted the more optimistic postmillennial view of the end times). Inaugurated by John Nelson Darby and popularized in 1909, premillennial dispensationalism periodizes human history according to biblical “dispensations” and posits that Jesus’s second coming will usher in a millennium of peace. Like many Christians, Darby believed that humans were living through the last days of history and emphasized the events of the latter days. These events included now-popular ideas of the second coming of Christ, the rapture, the tribulation, the reign of the anti-Christ, and the final battle between good and evil. Lahaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ *Left Behind* series have found premillennial dispensationalism to be an especially powerful tool for connecting current events and political concerns to Biblical prophecy. Hal Lindsey’s book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* ably demonstrates the procedure: when the book was first published in 1970, the forces of evil were identified as the Soviet Union. In subsequent editions, published after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Lindsey had to reconfigure his now-anachronistic interpretations. Today, Lindsey continues to provide analysis of current news events through the lens of biblical prophecy on his television program “The Hal Lindsey Report.” On this program, Lindsey connects natural disasters, events in Israel, and contemporary politics to the Bible as evidence that humans are currently living in the end times. Lindsey is not alone; in 2005 popular religious leader and one-time Presidential candidate Pat Robertson reflected on hurricane Katrina and the December 26 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, saying that “if you read back in the Bible… [Paul] said that in the latter days before the end of the age that the Earth would be caught up in what he called the birth pangs of a new order.” The soundness of the interpretive leap between the biblical phrase “birth pangs” and a series of 2005 natural disasters may not be obvious to all readers of the Bible, but for many late twentieth century evangelicals the connection is valid. As will become clear later in this essay, while the specific elements of TBN’s end time prophecies are idiosyncratic, the general process by which contemporary events are mapped onto biblical precedent is neither controversial nor new among evangelical Christians.

Another important element of evangelical Christian belief about the end times has to do with a biblical passage known as the Great Commission. This passage from the Gospel of Matthew is often interpreted to contain a mandate to spread the Christian message via whatever technological means necessary: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Combined with scriptural passages such as Matthew 24:14, “and this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come,” Christians throughout history have believed that their attempts to spread the gospel to all people have been vital to hurrying the imminent end of the world. For example, according to Tzvetan Todorov’s book *The Conquest*...
TRINITY BROADCASTING NETWORK

of America, even Christopher Columbus’ journey to the Americas was motivated by a desire to evangelize the world in order to expedite the second coming of Jesus and the subsequent end of history. Because of this important connection between conversion, technology, and the end times my discussion of TBN will begin here.

Experiencing Religion through the Television Church

When Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) purchased their first television station in Southern California, they professed that, “one of the greatest secrets hidden in the Bible for centuries is the miracle of TV and radio.” Calling TBN’s partners (the network’s name for its tithing viewers) “God’s modern day heroes of faith,” Jim Bakker, Tammy Faye Bakker, Paul Crouch, and Jan Crouch joined the dozens of Christians recognizing the political and evangelical power of communications technology. When examining the content of TBN’s newsletters and website, it quickly becomes clear that communications technology is a central component of the ministry’s identity. The importance of technology is vividly illustrated on TBN’s official website, tbn.org. TBN uses its “About Us” webpage, where one might expect to find a statement of faith, to display its extensive technological prowess. Notice the use of impressive technical vocabulary:

TBN is on the cutting edge of technology with our state-of-the-art Virtual Reality Theaters... The 50-seat theaters present visitors with an incredible experience combining high definition digital video technology and an exclusive 48-channel digital audio system.

Similar content is present on self-released videos detailing the ministry, such as “25 Years of TBN.” These videos spend more time explaining the progression of technological innovation and the spread of the ministry than discussing Christian doctrine. Like many other evangelical Christians, Jan and Paul Crouch believe that, while technology may cause moral decay, their Christian message can transform technology into a sacred tool to spread the gospel, save souls, and bring about the end-times.

Simon Coleman, a scholar who has done extensive work with a Word of Faith church in Sweden speaks to this phenomenon, arguing that “mass media are significant... because they illustrate an ability to reach out into the world, appropriating profane technology and, with God’s help, saving souls as well.” In their efforts to revitalize the world, Jan and Paul Crouch embrace technology to propagate their message. Technological innovation is equated with soul winning and the spread of the Christian message, making technology a sacred tool.

According to Paul Crouch, God has issued a specific call to Christians, himself in particular, to use satellite technology. In 1974, just one year after TBN was founded, Crouch reported a vision. Crouch saw the ceiling of his office turned into what he described as a giant television screen displaying the radiation of satellite beams throughout a map of the world. At the end of his vision, God spoke to Paul saying only “one ringing, resounding word to my spirit—‘SATELLITE’ ”. Because of the extraordinary nature of this event, Paul believes that media technology is divinely ordained. It is also interesting to note the impact of media on the form of Crouch’s vision which he described as a “giant television screen.” Here we see a traditional Christian idea, communication from God through a vision, transformed to reflect the importance of media. The medium is literally the message.

According to TBN, the primary stated motivation for forming a Christian broadcasting network is the conversion of souls for Christ. As
shown earlier, this project is inextricably tied to the second coming of Jesus since many Christians, including Word of Faith believers, read Scripture to require that all people have the opportunity to hear the Gospel before Jesus can return. Of course the process of conversion through television, as opposed to direct mission work or community outreach, takes a different character. Conversion cannot occur through personal contact; rather, inspirational television programming and vibrant personalities motivate happenstance viewers to come to Jesus. Like other television genres, religious programs on TBN attempt to create feelings of intimacy between viewers and television personalities. Media scholars like Mimi White, John Langer, and Janice Peck have all noted the way that some television formats—for example, soap operas and talk shows—are deliberately constructed to simulate personal relationships between viewers and television personalities. Programming on TBN is no different. Tightly focused shots of television personalities, hosts announcing their concern for viewers, and audience reaction shots are designed to create emotional connections and religious experiences. It is not surprising, therefore, that people on TBN believe and testify that television provides religious experience. TBN presents evidence that viewers engage with the television programming, join in ritual, and receive the benefits of religious practice—healing, financial blessing, and miracles—through technology. For example, during an episode of *Praise the Lord*, Dwight Thompson, a preacher and frequent host of the program, asked viewers to touch their televisions as they prayed together. Later in the show, he encouraged viewers to place their hands on the TV to receive the healing sent over the “television waves.” Similarly, viewers are often asked to join in singing, dancing, raising their hands to the Lord, or simply praise together with people in the studio. Techniques like these offer viewers the feeling that they are engaged in active exchange rather than passive observation.

As a consequence of changing models for conversion necessitated by the limitations and opportunities presented by television, TBN has found itself winning souls in unlikely places. While traditional missions often rely on face to face contact, education, and the establishment of congregations, according to TBN, television converts may not always have access to a religious community or church. Or, in Biblical terms, “Our Lord has children in some places that often surprise us, providing a witness that otherwise might not exist.” For this reason, TBN has developed an identity as a television church. In an ad for “Trinity Christian Church (Trinity Broadcasting Network)” printed in a 1993 newsletter, TBN invited viewers without a home church and viewers who considered TBN to be their main source of spiritual nourishment to become official members of Trinity Christian Church. The advertisement featured Trinity Christian Center Church pastors Jan and Paul Crouch and promised that new members would receive certificates indicating their official membership in the church congregation. Indeed, this text openly admits the fact that Jan and Paul promote Trinity Broadcasting Network as a legitimate church with a global congregation.

The outright assertion of church identity has come at a cost for TBN since many Christians criticize religious broadcasters for offering an alternative to local church attendance. Some critics expressed concerns that tithes would be spread thin between TBN and local ministry or that congregants would stop attending church services. For others, such as scholar of religion Martin Marty, the danger is both religious and sociological. He said of the so-called electronic church, “The electronic church threatens to replace the living congregation with a far-flung clientele of devotees to this or that evangelist,” and is “fostering in our midst a completely private ‘invisible religion’ [which] is—or ought to be—the most feared contemporary rival to church.” As a Christian himself, Marty is concerned that religious broadcasting undermines the fundamental importance of physical communities to Christian practice.

Despite concerns such as these from some Christians, TBN has maintained that its network’s mission should not be limited to winning souls. TBN claims that broadcasters need to “feed and encourage” those without local congregations as much as they “need to preach the gospel to the unconverted.” By linking work to save the unconverted to the nurturing of converts through a virtual church, TBN attempts to validate its
TRINITY BROADCASTING NETWORK

controversial media ministry through an appeal to the generally accepted importance of converting the unsaved. In addition, TBN’s belief in the prophetic nature of technology implies that any Christian use of that technology can justifiably be understood as a part of God’s plan for the end times. The establishment and maintenance of a virtual church through technological means, therefore, gains legitimacy and divine authorization.

The position that TBN is a television church is interesting for a number of reasons. First, this claim demonstrates the impact that media has had on traditional categories of religious life like the brick and mortar church. Second, TBN offers viewers a new model for religious life: conversion, church attendance, and religious experiences can be attained through television. Finally, understanding TBN as church demonstrates one way that media has changed Christian views of what might be required in order to expedite the coming of the end times. In the past, the project of spreading the gospel throughout the world as a prerequisite for Christ’s return, led Christians to mobilize themselves physically and geographically to spread the gospel, build congregations, and educate individuals about Christianity. Today, TBN viewers participate in global evangelism without leaving their living rooms. Here, a quotation from a TBN viewer illustrates the powerful opportunities just a few dollars to TBN can unleash:

I haven’t traveled much, nor spoken “in person” to multitudes, yet—as a TBN partner—I preach the Good News of Jesus Christ, 24 hours a day around the world, without leaving my living room! I know as I support “my TBN,” my voice joins this MIGHTY VOICE, shouting the Good News to everyone, everywhere:

“Jesus SAVES—Jesus HEALS—Jesus is COMING AGAIN!”

In this quotation, media’s role in the end times is clear. TBN and its viewers can actively participate in global evangelism to spread their message of the second coming of Christ without boarding a plane or leaving their homes. Indeed, this viewer takes credit for individual evangelism, boasting that she never had to leave her home to share the gospel. Instead, with her monthly contribution, TBN (a

Paul Crouch holding a miniature globe in his hand. This is a common image in TBN’s promotional literature used to emphasize the tremendous power Crouch (and his company) has to impact the world through Christian media. This particular image was taken from a collage purchased at TBN’s international headquarters in Costa Mesa, California.
much more effective institution) evangelizes on behalf of its partners, building a global congregation for its viewers to join. The introduction of broadcast technology has made this viewer’s virtual religious practice possible.26

In the Word of Faith pre-millennial dispensational worldview, spreading the gospel is just one of many factors that must be in place for the second coming of Jesus. Interestingly, this project has allied evangelical Christians with some conservative Jews also looking to bring about the coming of their messiah. One example of this alliance culminated in the breeding of a red heifer in 1999. Back in 1989, conservative Christian and now Pentecostal preacher, Clyde Lott, learned of the imminence of the second coming from a preacher in Mississippi. Lott knew that prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, and dispensational premillennial thought, set out three conditions for the coming of the messiah: the restoration of the state of Israel, Jewish control of Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. Since 1967, two of these conditions had been met while the rebuilding of the temple has been complicated by the common belief that the Dome of the Rock now exists on part of the former location of the Second Jewish Temple destroyed in 70 C.E. However, Lott learned that, according to Scripture, the rebuilding of the third temple would be inaugurated by sacrificing a red heifer, a breed of animal that no longer existed.27 A cattle rancher himself, Lott joined forces with The Temple Institute, a Jewish organization dedicated to rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, to breed this rare and religiously important beast.28 Though efforts have not yet proven successful, many Jews and Christians hope that the herd maintained in Israel will eventually help to usher in their respective messiahs.

While Trinity Broadcasting Network has not, to my knowledge, participated in the Red Heifer project, the importance of rebuilding the Jewish Temple has not escaped their attention. In 2005, one week before the bi-annual Praise-A-Thon, in an episode of Behind the Scenes, a daily TBN program hosted by founder Paul Crouch to keep viewers up to date on the activities of the ministry, Crouch offered a testimony about the importance of the reconstructed temple to the end times. Looking to his Bible, Crouch noted that Jesus said that human beings are temples. He subsequently concluded that by converting people to Jesus Christ, TBN was building temples around the world. The context of his comments suggested a double meaning for temple building. Christ’s return requires the physical renovation of Jerusalem and the spiritual renovation of humans. Crouch now explains this human renovation:

We are the temples of the living God, he wants more temples and we can build them! As we send this gospel and this message to the ends of the earth by the fastest most important means available to us, the Internet, satellite, TV, cable, I don’t know, and if they invent something else we’ll buy it too! And we’ll use it to present the gospel of Jesus Christ and lift Jesus high.29

Crouch says that TBN is building the temples required for Jesus’s return, not only tying technology to the coming of Christ, but also granting TBN a central role in the second coming.

But the physical space of the holy land still matters for TBN, and whatever temples are built within individuals are not the only ones that matter. For example, the network recently bought an Orlando, Florida area theme park called “The Holy Land Experience.” The attraction contains facsimile reproductions of the Second Jewish Temple, Jesus’s empty tomb, the Qumran Caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, and features a daily reenactment of Jesus’s crucifixion. In addition, the theme park contains museums, educational tours similar to those found at the nearby Disney-owned Epcot theme park, and the usual assortment of souvenir shops selling replicas of period costume and food, such as Roman Legion armor and crackers, alongside popular Christian ephemera such as stuffed animals and Christian films. It would be a mistake to assume that the TBN believes “The Holy Land Experience” substitutes for actual Christian control of the holy land in Palestine, that the construction of temples within individuals makes rebuilding the Second Temple in Jerusalem moot, or that the presence of a replica of a Second Temple in Florida supersedes the need for an actual temple in the Middle East.
Rather, the ongoing emphasis on the holy land and the temple serve to highlight the inadequacy of any measures short of the complete and literal fulfillment of Christian scriptures. For TBN, the Dome of the Rock stands in the way of the Biblical commandment to reconstruct the Second Temple. No substitution is possible.

Thus far, this article has explored the way that media technology has been used to expedite the second coming of Jesus through soul-winning. TBN has found that the winning of souls also requires their maintenance, and has therefore developed a virtual infrastructure to support their followers. Within this new television-mediated Christianity, it is possible for believers to evangelize, be healed, have religious experiences, and attend church. This new form of Christianity is a consequence, possibly unintended, of the integration of broadcast technology into Christian practice. The next section of this essay will consider the religious importance of specific technological instruments: the sacred history of satellites.

Purified Air, Flying Angels, and the Bible Chip: TBN’s Satellites

On the “About Us” section of TBN’s website, the importance of Christian space technology is explained:

Today’s satellite technology has opened up opportunities for the gospel as never before imagined—and TBN is at the forefront of utilizing this mighty tool to reach people around the world! Currently carried on 33 international satellites, the following is a partial list of TBN’s great satellite network: Europe and the Middle East are being reached through Eutelsat Hotbird 6 and Intelsat 906; Eutelsat W4 covers Central Africa with direct-to-home service; the Express 6A satellite is providing Russian language programming to the Russian continent; Spain and Portugal are being reached by Hispasat; Intelsat 701 broadcasts to Australia, New Zealand, the South Pacific islands and Southeast Asia; Intelsat 702 covers Taiwan; Palapa C-2 reaches India, Indonesia and Southeast Asia; TBN broadcasts Portuguese language programs to Brazil on Brazilsat B-2; and PanAmSat 9 blankets all of Latin America and Spain.

This elaborate explanation which contains an extensive list of satellite names appears on a webpage where one would expect to find a simple, succinct description of TBN’s beliefs and its mission. The list is clearly designed to impress the reader, and is perhaps intended to inspire religious awe at the global power and reach of TBN. When new satellites are launched, TBN performs on-air rituals to welcome the new entities into the fold, installing “Bible Chips,” which contain an electronic version of the Biblical text, into some satellites before they enter space. When television stations and satellites “go live,” TBN preachers use a large switch to briefly take the entire television network offline to emerge a moment later a new and larger TBN. According to TBN, satellites also appear in the Bible.

Paul and Jan Crouch have indicated that passages in Revelation which speak about angels refer to satellites. For example, Revelation 14:6 reads “then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.” When Paul Crouch interpreted this passage for his viewers, he explained that the authors of the Bible were unfamiliar with satellites, and therefore described them as angels. Additionally, Crouch explained that the “angel” described in the Bible was actually engaged in the activities of a satellite carrying Christian television: flying through the air and spreading the gospel. Although this may sound odd to outsiders, Crouch’s appeal to scripture for the justification of his television ministry is a typically Protestant strategy for gaining legitimacy. For Protestants, human activities are divinely validated only insofar as they correspond with Biblical scripture. Crouch’s appeal to the Bible moves from general to specific when he cites a passage from Zechariah. “Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, a flying scroll! And he said to me, ‘What do you see?’ I answered, ‘I see a flying scroll; its length is twenty cubits, and its breadth ten cubits.’” Crouch explains that the above passage describes a vision of the future and asserts that the flying scroll
is actually a satellite. Armed now with detailed information about the measurements and appearance of the Biblical satellite, Crouch reveals that TBN launched a satellite with the same dimensions and similar appearance in 1995. Whereas the passage from Revelation could have referred to any satellite, Crouch now assures his viewers that Zechariah predicted a satellite that TBN launched. Taking the passages in Zechariah and Revelation as biblical prophecy, Crouch communicates that satellites are both prophesied as a sign of the end times and a vehicle for hurrying the second coming. By arguing that satellites appear in Revelation, a book of the Bible dedicated to describing and explaining the last days and the second coming of Christ, satellites are given a divine role in the end times.

As one might imagine, the idea that Trinity Broadcasting Network fulfills end-times prophecy is particularly potent, and it is therefore emphasized during fundraising events. For example, during TBN’s winter 2004 Praise-A-Thon, the following commercial was aired several times throughout the week, detailing the powerful way that technology makes a physical space for Jesus to return:

Do you know the most important and powerful element on earth is not the earth itself but it is the air? Satan is called the prince of the power of the air. Why? Because the air has the most crucial power in existence; it affects everything we hear, see, or feel. The radio waves or television waves control the world. Who controls the air controls the entire development of mankind. That is why today it is important that we support TBN cause [sic] TBN is filling the airwaves with the truth-- with the gospel of Jesus Christ. What we see, what we hear everyday determines what we think and as a man think [sic] it so is [sic] he. So when you support TBN and the programs on this powerful station around the world you are also supporting a change of the environment and a change of the earth. Jesus Christ said when we comes he will meet us in the air. That means we’ve gotta take the air before he comes. So support TBN as we spread the good news of the kingdom of God around the world in Jesus’s name.  

In this clip, TBN suggests the construction of a space in the world as satellite beams change the air. The air is sacralized through contact with the purifying power of satellite beams that carry TBN’s programming. Jesus demands pure air for his return, and TBN has undertaken the task of providing it. The importance of purifying the air is emphasized when we learn that although TBN’s satellite signals cover the world, they are not always...
received by the stations. However, the network constantly highlights the fact that their satellites send signals all over the world. By taking over the air—the realm of Satan—TBN pleases God with their ministry and expedites the return of Christ.

By arguing that it is necessary for TBN’s broadcast signals to sacralize the air to make it suitable for the return of Jesus, technology is not only a tool for evangelism but also a necessity for the second coming.

Now Playing! The End of the World: The Apocalypse comes to Theaters

As 2000 approached, secular and religious individuals braced themselves for social upheaval. People hid in basements and bunkers, withdrew money from bank accounts, and stockpiled canned foods, gas masks, and firearms while awaiting the end of the world. Though predictions of the Y2K meltdown, the second coming of Christ, and the apocalypse resulted in disappointment, the frenzy over the coming millennial disaster did produce a great deal of cinematic creativity. Movies like Independence Day (1997), The Postman (1997), Armageddon (1998), End of Days (1999), Deep Impact (1998), The Day the World Ended (2001), and Planet of the Apes (2001) offered moviegoers glimpses into the scary and sometimes romantic events that might accompany worldwide destruction. In the climate of cultural curiosity about the end of the world and the rash of box office hits, TBN executives perceived an opportunity to share their own story about the end of the world.

In conjunction with Gener8xion Entertainment (a film company owned by Jan and Paul Crouch’s son Matt), TBN produced The Omega Code (1999) and Megiddo: The Omega Code II (2001) as their own response to, and capitalization upon, the apocalyptic frenzy building up to the year 2000.

Both movies detail a pre-millennial dispensationalist perspective on the end of the world, and while they detail Biblical events, the films were designed to be enjoyed by both Christian and secular audiences. Marketing for The Omega Code and Megiddo emphasized the film’s special effects and the disclosure of a vaguely specified secret “truth,” elements that producers believed would entice non-Christian audiences. In The Omega Code and Megiddo, Michael York plays Stone Alexander, chairman of the European Union and mastermind of a sinister plot to unite the world under one government. In Megiddo, after Christians disappear unexpectedly in the rapture, it becomes clear that Alexander is more than the usual bad guy: he is the anti-Christ. Together The Omega Code and Megiddo tell the story of the last days, the rapture, the reign of the anti-Christ, and the final battle between good and evil. In the final scenes of Megiddo, Satan is defeated by Jesus, who also ushers in the thousand year millennial reign of peace. Audiences are left with an idyllic scene of the millennial world and a passage from Revelation, “The Kingdoms of this world have become the
kingdoms of the Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”

*The Omega Code* and *Megiddo* grossed a disappointing twelve million dollars and six million dollars respectively, and although neither movie can be properly viewed as box office successes, they were lauded by Christians as powerful tools for evangelism and important counters to the secular stories of the apocalypse so popular at the time. Hal Lindsey, author of the *Late Great Planet Earth*, reviewed *Megiddo* saying, “*Megiddo* is an epic adventure into the heart of the coming Apocalypse. Stunning visual effects and gripping performances explode across the screen, bringing the climactic battles of the Book of Revelation to life like never before. See it and believe!” Tim Lahaye, author of the *Left Behind* series took a similarly hyperbolic tone in his review of *Megiddo*, “I commend Matthew Crouch for his determination to win people to Christ through movies—the most powerful vehicle the human mind ever invented.” Together these comments point to important themes about the religious presentation of the end times in media. First, *The Omega Code* and *Megiddo* promote the idea that the facts of the Bible, in this case the story of Revelation, are made for the big screen. Revelation interpreted through premillennial dispensationalism produces cinema with massive battles between absolute good and evil, disappearing humans, mystery, hideous beasts, and happy endings. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2005) and Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956) offer additional evidence that Biblical stories are both good cinema and good tools for education and evangelism. Lahaye’s discussion of cinema as a “vehicle” suggests that the true purpose of film is not to entertain, but to present Biblical truths in an accessible format. Here again we see the idea that media—TBN’s media especially—is made to communicate the religious ideas necessary to expedite the end of the world.

A closer look at the content of Gener8xion’s films exposes yet another way that media will play a role in the end times. In both *The Omega Code* and *Megiddo*, antagonist Stone Alexander gains much of his power through skillful manipulation of his extensive broadcasting network called “Alexander Satellite Network.” Stone inherited ASN, which includes radio, wire services, newspapers, cable and satellite media, from his father, allowing him access to the financial and propaganda resources necessary to win a bid to lead the European Union. Alexander’s real plan for the EU involves uniting the world under one government in an effort to defeat God. Earlier in the movie, a young Stone Alexander overhears his father speaking about the importance of media, a conversation that he recalls later in life during his attempt to take over the world and defeat God:

> I’m going to tell you now, the world is on television, and that’s where people will form their opinions, people like me will shape those opinions, I have more than 100 televisions, magazines, newspapers; if you read, watch television, listen to the radio, you’re gonna hear what I have to say.

It seems reasonable to think of the fictional Alexander Satellite Network as a foil for the real TBN. By demonstrating the potentially destructive (if ultimately defeated) power of media in the wrong hands, *Megiddo* reinforces the importance of Godly forces maintaining their control of media. TBN, like Alexander’s father, recognizes the importance of media for social and religious power. A quotation from the 2004 *Praise-a-Thon* advertisement noted earlier in the essay will better illustrate this point: “The radio waves or television waves control the world. Who controls the air controls the entire development of mankind.” In this quotation, TBN notes the social power of media to direct people’s perceptions of the world while also offering a “scientific” and religious claim about the importance of the radio and television waves themselves. The real-world political battle for control of media complicates TBN’s end time story, however. According to TBN’s interpretation of Revelation, signs of the latter days include worldly descent into corruption, the unification of the world under a single anti-Christ controlled government, and loss of worldly order as non-Christians fall victim to immorality. However, TBN’s insistence on providing an alternative to the secular world, along with their desire to control media, convert everyone to Christianity, and reform the political order.
point to a cautious balance between premillenial expectation and pragmatic, immediate political concerns. Though they believe that only Jesus can redeem the world from corruption, evangelicals are nonetheless constantly engaged in a struggle to transform the world by legislating and sharing their values.

I do not intend to engage the complex theological justifications some Christians deploy to explain this ambivalence. We can, however, go a long way toward explaining the tension between pre-millenial expectation and political action by realizing that evangelical Christians have found the premillenial dispensationalist schema extremely amenable to advancing political goals. In other words, for TBN and other evangelical Christians, visions of the end of the world are very much about accomplishing this-worldly political agendas. TBN’s satellites allow them to communicate political messages (the need to “vote the Bible,” pray for the President, and convert Muslims from their depraved, violent, backward, and erroneous religion to Christianity) to a large audience, well-prepared by appeals to Biblical authority and the imminent end of the world, ready to listen to the message. Research on the demographics of American audiences of religious television reveal that most viewers are church-going Christians, suggesting that despite their claims that religious television is designed to convert un-believers, programming exists to sustain and educate already-existing communities of believers. Subtly encoded political messages, such as the directive to “vote the Bible” are therefore successfully transmitted to an audience prepared with “ears to hear” those messages. Finally, one of TBN’s contributions to the evangelical political message is implied by its emphasis on satellites and media technology: the next battlefield between the forces of the secular world and Christianity is control of the propaganda power of media, “the power of the air.”

Word of Faith, Media, and the End of the World: Concluding Thoughts

The influence of media technology is an essential framework for understanding that way that media has shaped TBN’s perspective on the end times and the practice of Christianity. TBN not only views its ministry as a part of a divine plan for educating the world about Christianity to facilitate Jesus’s return, but also imagines the rays of its satellites battle Satan, “the prince of the power of the air.” TBN reifies technology and validates its ministry by situating the network and its technological holdings as important players in the end times drama. This process occurs by connecting the secular (technology) with the religious (scripture), thus transforming technology into a vital part of TBN’s religious worldview. A consequence of integrating media into Christian religion has been the development of an infrastructure that supports the translation of Christian practice into media interactions. Individuals can be converted and healed, have religious experience, attend church, and evangelize by participating in a rarefied “community of the air” linked together by TBN’s extensive technological holdings.

While articulating their concerns over the end times in terms of religion, TBN also used its premillennial dispensational thought as a way to understand contemporary events and advance political agendas. Although Word of Faith theology developed as a fertile environment for TBN’s technology-based message, Paul Crouch’s idiosyncratic fixation on technology is equally responsible for TBN’s reification of technology. Unlike some other Christians—for example, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell—Paul Crouch does not simply see technology as a means to an end. Technology is, rather, fully integrated into TBN’s religious worldview via its sacred character and divine origin. While it is certain that all Christians do not believe that satellites purify the air for Jesus’s return or interpret Biblical texts to speak about radio and television, TBN remains the largest Christian television network in the world. By making assertions about the divine mission of their ministry, TBN remains within conventions of Protestant and pentecostal models of authority, appealing to Scripture to justify and authorize their idiosyncratic interpretations of media technology and the end of the world. TBN must be taken seriously as an institution that shapes Christian culture generally and Word of Faith Christianity in particular.
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Notes
3 The six ministers targeted by Grassley were Creflo Dolar, Paula and Randy White, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, and Eddie Long. All six ministers broadcast regularly on TBN. The investigation into the ministries centered around the alleged use of church donations for the purchase of expensive cars, plastic surgery, private planes, and million-dollar homes. More information on the Grassley Six is available through The New York Times: Laurie Goodstein, “Senator Questioning Ministries on Spending” November 7, 2007; Neela Banerjee, “Senator Awaiting Records of Ministries’ Finances” December 24, 2007.
4 Scholar Milmon F. Harrison, who authored the first scholarly text on Word of Faith, Righteous Riches, estimates that the Word of Faith movement is comprised of approximately “2,300-2,500 churches, ministries, fellowships or television networks in the United States and in more than 60 countries abroad.” Milmon F. Harrison, Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 18.
5 Postmillennialism teaches that the apocalypse will be brought about through human activity that perfects the world; premillennialists believe that the only Jesus has the power to create the millennial realm of perfection.
8 Peter W. Williams, America’s Religions from their Origins to the Twenty-First Century (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 379.
11 Matthew 24:14 (NRSV).
13 Praise the Lord, October 1973 in Trinity Broadcasting Network Thirtieth Anniversary (2003). Trinity Broadcasting Network Thirtieth Anniversary is a three-volume bound collection published by TBN containing all newsletters published between 1973 and 2003. Viewers could receive the collection by giving a substantial financial donation to TBN in 2003, but the collection is otherwise and currently out of print. I was able to purchase the collection from a private owner through an Internet auction, but it currently seems to be unavailable at libraries, and TBN does not offer it for sale.
14 Ibid.
17 Paul Crouch, Hello World! (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 120.
19 Praise the Lord (Trinity Broadcasting Network March 17, 2005). Television Program.
24 It is important to note that though there is clear evidence that Jan and Paul believe that TBN is a church, their claims do not necessarily imply that their viewers agree. It may be the case that many viewers do not see themselves as congregants of Trinity Christian Center Church. Though much of the viewer mail published in the monthly network newsletters points to individuals who use TBN as a church, we have no way to confirm these assertions without conducting a viewer survey.
26 TBN’s use of media may be fairly read as a contemporary continuation of the colonial project as media broadcasts are explicitly intended to Christianize and Americanize populations all around the world.
TRINITY BROADCASTING NETWORK

27 Numbers 19-22 (NRSV).
29 Behind the Scenes (Trinity Broadcasting Network March 17, 2005). Television program.
31 Revelation 14:6 (NRSV).
33 Praise the Lord (Trinity Broadcasting Network, November 4, 2004). Television program.
34 Box office revenues for these movies are as follows: Independence Day $306,169,255; The Postman $17,438,249; Armageddon, $201,578,182; Deep Impact, $140,464,664; End of Days, $66,889,403; Planet of the Apes, $180,011,740.
35 Brian Trenchard-Smith, Megiddo: The Omega Code 2 (Gener8xion, 2001).
36 Cf. footnote 34 for a list of box office grosses of other movies in the genre.
38 Ibid.
39 Brian Trenchard-Smith, Megiddo: The Omega Code 2 (Gener8xion, 2001).
41 Bruce Lincoln uses the phrase “ears to hear” in an essay discussing the religious rhetoric of Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush after 9/11. His argument, similar to the one made here, is that Bush encoded religious messages about the relevance of Biblical texts to the interpretation of Bin Laden’s activities in his political speeches, directing his subtle religious messages to audience members with “ears to hear.” Bruce Lincoln, Holy Terrors (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 19-32.
42 The fact this infrastructure exists does not imply widespread use. Though many TBN viewers describe themselves as members of the TBN church and worship in their homes, it would be a mistake to suggest that this is mainstrea