

THE EMPIRE GOD BUILT

INSIDE
PAT ROBERTSON'S
MEDIA MACHINE

The Hidden Power Behind
The Family Channel,
the Christian Coalition,
The 700 Club, and
The Ice Capades

ALEC FOEGE

The Empire God Built

Inside Pat Robertson's Media Machine

ALEC FOEGE



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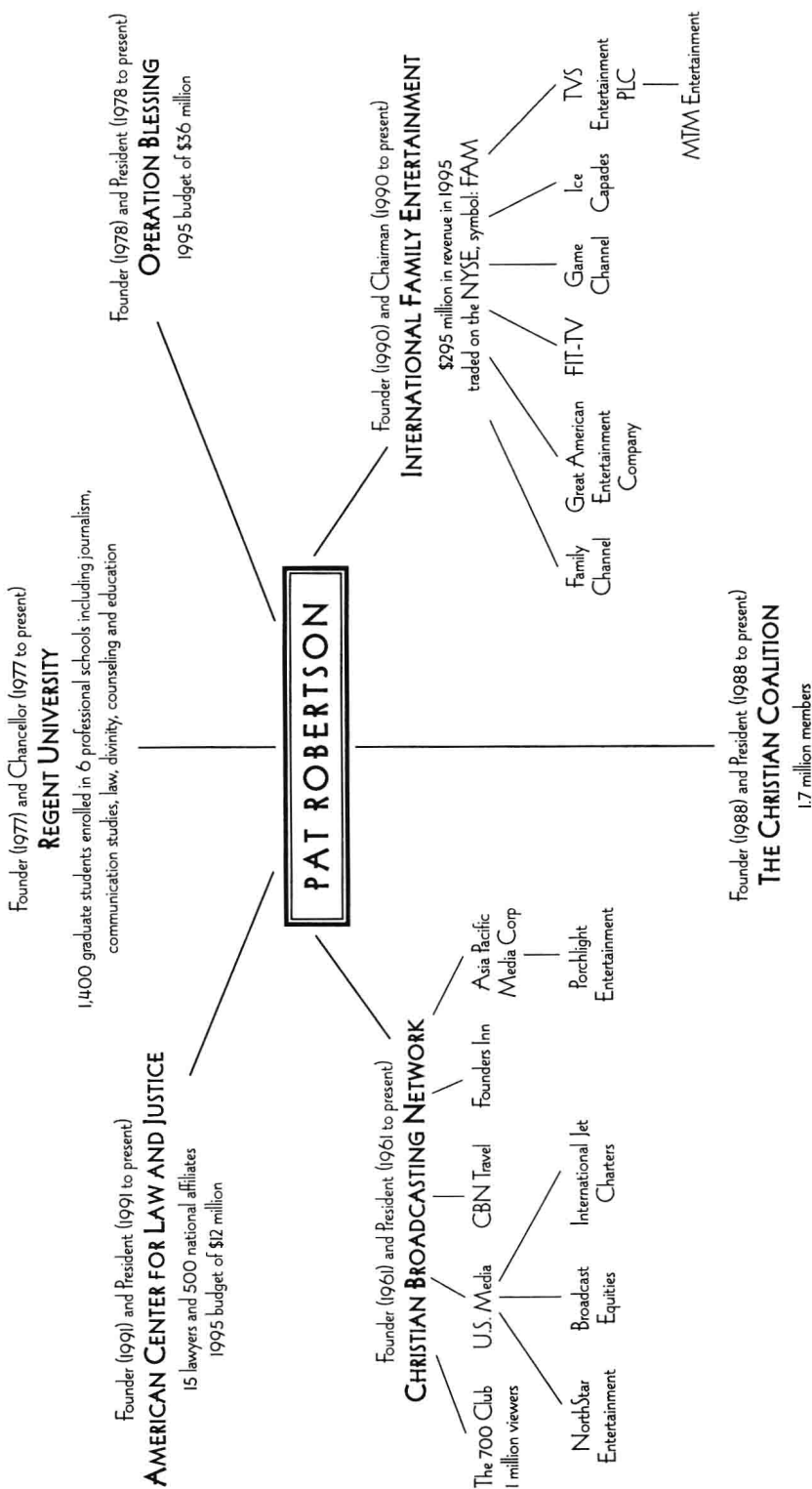
A man of genius has a right to any mode of expression.

—Ezra Pound

*Every man thinks God is on his side. The rich and powerful
know he is.*

—Jean Anouilh

THE EMPIRE



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CHAPTER ONE



The Television

Channel-surfing has revolutionized television-viewing.

This in itself is hardly news. But recall for a moment the not-so-distant past when TVs had manual dials instead of infrared remote controls and antennas rather than a cable box and a coaxial cord snaking through the side of the house: The contrast between then and now seems drastic and primordial.

Commercial advertising spots—television’s *raison d’être* and main source of income—for many years played to relatively captive audiences. Since TV viewers weren’t likely to get up, walk to their sets, and switch channels every single time a three-minute block of ads showed up, advertisers more often than not could count on an attentive consumer. Furthermore, the majority of those viewers/consumers watched the three major networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC. As a result, TV advertising gained legitimacy as a cultural force.

From the 1950s on, a popular mythology filled with characters like the Marlboro Man, the Jolly Green Giant, and Mr. Clean enjoyed vast recognition and currency. Regardless of their message—which was, invariably and simply, to buy green beans or household cleaner or whatever product was being sold—these commercials were successful in lodging their fictional pitchmen in the minds of millions.

It was because of, and not despite, their basic and constant message that these commercials became so memorable. Set free from the need to devise fresh viewpoints or messages, advertising-firm creative departments were able to focus on window dressing. In advertising,

concepts, characters, presentation, colors, artwork, and production values comprise the bulk of the creative effort.

And rightly so: Television is reductive; television viewers can be fickle. All programming, regardless of its content or message, has only seconds to establish a mood—a whole environment, really. An up-to-the-minute, appealing look and feel is how one gets noticed.



Remote controls and cable television have put this whole system somewhat into question. No longer can advertisers assume that the majority of a program's viewers will stick around for the commercial breaks.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a whopping 61 percent of United States households with televisions in 1993 received cable TV, as compared with a mere 20 percent in 1980.

With the surfeit of channels provided as part of most basic cable TV packages—mine includes somewhere between 60 and 70, a number that increases and decreases regularly as new ventures start up and old ones fail—and the lightning maneuverability afforded by today's remote controls, one need never again watch another commercial from beginning to end.

Now advertising must compete directly with programming. Why watch a commercial when you can check out the latest video on MTV? Or a news update on CNN? Or an old movie that you haven't seen in years? Or a new movie that you're hoping to catch when it repeats again next week?

This is how I first lit upon *The 700 Club*, Pat Robertson's star vehicle and the flagship broadcast of the Family Channel.

I watch television holding the remote in my right hand. The split second a program I am watching fades into a commercial, my finger glides to a button. In even less time, I'm somewhere new—possibly somewhere related.

Say, I were watching Mary Tyler Moore in *Stolen Memories: Secrets From the Rose Garden*, a recent TV movie starring the 1970s icon as a childlike adult woman getting by in the segregationist South of the 1950s.

The intricate latticework of cable television programming is such that on the commercial breaks I could potentially catch Moore on either *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, the 1960s sitcom where she got her start, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the 1970s sitcom that made her a star, or perhaps even *Ordinary People*, the 1980 movie that established her as a serious dramatic actor.

To me, this channel-hopping has become so natural—almost innate—that I might not even notice that *Stolen Memories* was being broadcast on Pat Robertson's Family Channel, the cable network that funded its production.

A flip to the Family Channel at some other time might uncover a rerun of *Evening Shade* from the reserves of MTM Productions, the production company founded by Moore and her ex-husband, NBC chief Grant Tinker, and now owned by International Family Entertainment, the publicly held corporation chaired by Pat Robertson. (Reruns of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, however, are licensed to Nickelodeon, a Family Channel rival, until 2005.)

Each program would be broadcast on a different channel (Nickelodeon, TNT, HBO, or USA perhaps). Each would be most likely discovered at random, piecemeal, and in progress. All would be related, but not due to any broadcaster's master plan.

By stumbling about with my remote control's directional buttons or by punching its numbers or by zapping the last-channel button, I myself find and gather these interrelated programs. With a deft wrist and alert mind, I can create an audiovisual collage that is at once entertaining, informative, and yet blissfully temporary.

Constantly flitting from aisle to aisle (from channel to channel) instead of waiting to see what each aisle might serve up produces a different and heightened viewing experience. Channel surfing is a pointedly apt term for this technique; assembling the most energizing combination of programming bits is indeed something akin to riding the perfect wave.

While I'm watching TV, I tend to lose track of where I started, why I departed, and what I was looking to watch in the first place. Regardless of how interested I am in the first program I settle upon, as soon as the first commercial break arrives (it's rarely more than ten minutes between commercials, frequently closer to five), I

surf. When I find another program that appears at least marginally interesting, I stop.

Soon enough, that program will reach an advertising break—or else, after a couple minutes or seconds of viewing I discover either that it's dull, not what I thought it was, or that even a millisecond's lull in the action is more than I can possibly stand.

So I hop back to the first channel. Perhaps the commercials are still running. Time to check the news or the weather. Or if there's a better sitcom or a rare old movie or a new drama series or riveting documentary or the same old music video or a new stock market high or a familiar talk show or a smarmy infomercial or some whole new channel devoted to a specific area of interest. (The Food Network and the Sci-Fi Channel are a couple of the recent additions to my basic package.)

A few hours later, my viewing desires sated, I turn off the tube. Whether I emerge zonked out or relaxed or invigorated, I am quick to realize that I have not watched a single show or movie or music video or commercial in its entirety. And yet I genuinely believe that I have panned my way through a segment of television's endless river of programming, filtered out the dross, and captured only the most valuable nuggets.

Ironically, while the amount of original television programming available at any given time has increased exponentially, the quality of each segment of that programming has stayed about the same (and possibly declined in the case of networks and channels trying to fill voluminous tracts of air time with fresh material but finite budgets and talent pools).

My hunch is that an increasing percentage of viewers watch cable TV the way I do, even if it's only because when one is paying monthly bills for more channels and better reception the instinct is to get one's money's worth. The evolution is a perfectly natural one.

What seems odd is that few networks or programmers have acknowledged this sea change in viewing habits. The original big three—NBC, CBS, and ABC—trudge on in their old, tattered overcoats. Inexplicably, CBS is still referred to as the Tiffany Network, for its supposedly classy programming geared toward older viewers. Never mind that its lineup is virtually indistinguishable from that of its competitors and that 1995 witnessed CBS's worst decline ever.