
PRESS & TELEVISION

“hotline” to advise worried editors on deadline. Plaintiffs, too, are realizing there must be a better way to fight libel than through court battles. After he dropped his case against CBS last February, General Westmoreland told the National Press Club: “The route of the libel suit is not good, either for the plaintiff or defendant.”

The Televised Church

“When Watching Religious TV Is Like Attending Church” by Gary D. Gaddy and David Pritchard, in *Journal of Communications* (Winter 1985), The Annenberg School of Communications, Univ. of Pa., 3620 Walnut St. C5, Philadelphia, Pa. 19104-3858.

On April 16, 1984, *USA Today* ran the following headline: “TV Preachers Not Hurting Local Church.”

This headline encapsulated a two-volume study by the Annenberg School of Communications and the Gallup Organization. In 1978 and 1983, Gallup had surveyed more than 1,500 people on their religious-television viewing and churchgoing habits, as well as their commitment to religious values and positions on prominent moral and ethical issues. The study’s conclusion, as stated by George Gerbner, Annenberg’s dean and the principal author, was that evangelical broadcasters “do not reduce the number of people going to local churches.”

Gaddy and Pritchard, professors of journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Indiana University, respectively, wondered how that conclusion could be drawn from the available data. After analyzing the same data—using the same techniques as Annenberg/Gallup, but with more comprehensive controls—they found that the analysis was correct but that the conclusion had been overstated. Their analysis suggests, rather, that “the more people watched religious television, the less frequently they attended church.”

Specifically, they found that a Protestant who watches 45 minutes of religious television per week (an average amount) would attend church about nine times for every ten times a non-viewing Protestant would—assuming the two were alike demographically, with similar values.

Statistically, people who watch religious programs do attend church more frequently than the population at large. The average Protestant, for example, goes to church slightly more than twice a month; and approximately 29 percent of those surveyed said they watched some religious TV. The question on the minds of television analysts (as well as parishioners) is whether those TV viewers would go to church *more* often if there were no religious programs to watch.

Gaddy and Pritchard maintain that the data are still shaky. But when more factors about each person’s religious beliefs and TV watching patterns are taken into account, the numbers seem to indicate that since “staying at home with the television set takes less effort than leaving home to go to church,” many would-be churchgoers probably spend Sunday morning watching the tube.