

**IT'S NEW
IT'S BOLD
IT'S ON**



Encoding and Decoding a New Religion: The Scientology Network in Action

Massimo Introvigne
European Academy of Religion
Bologna March 6, 2018

Television: A “New” Field for Sociology



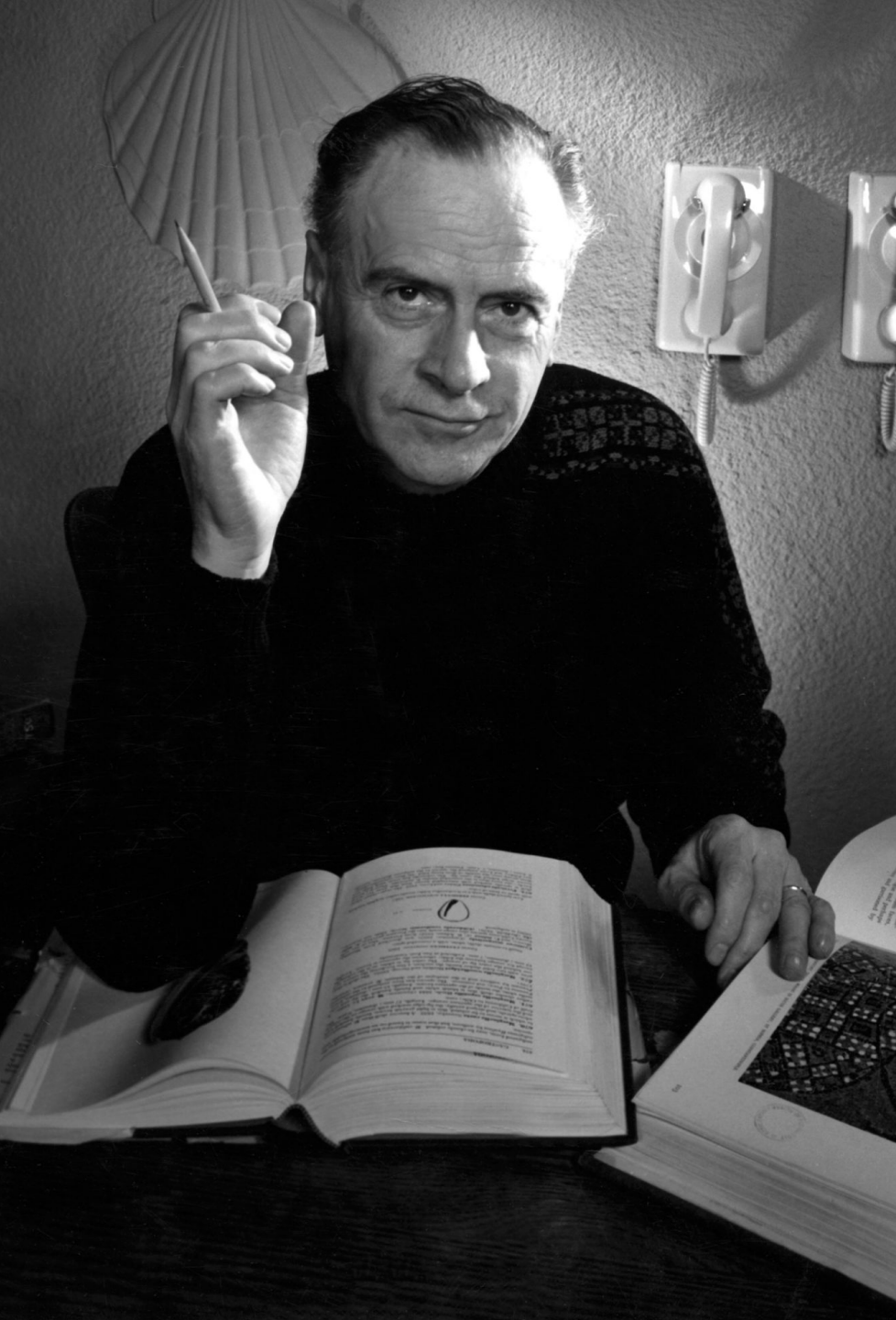
- “With no other form of impersonal communication has the sharing of experience been possible on so universal a scale and to so intense a degree as with television”

American sociologist Leo Bogart (1921-2005),
writing in **1956**

Television Utopias

- In the field that would be called "Television Studies," early works were quite optimistic. At the University of Chicago, John Dewey (1859-1952, above) and Robert E. Park (1864-1944, below) argued that television would encourage citizens to debate public matters and lead to more democratic participation, in a form comparable to traditional town meetings



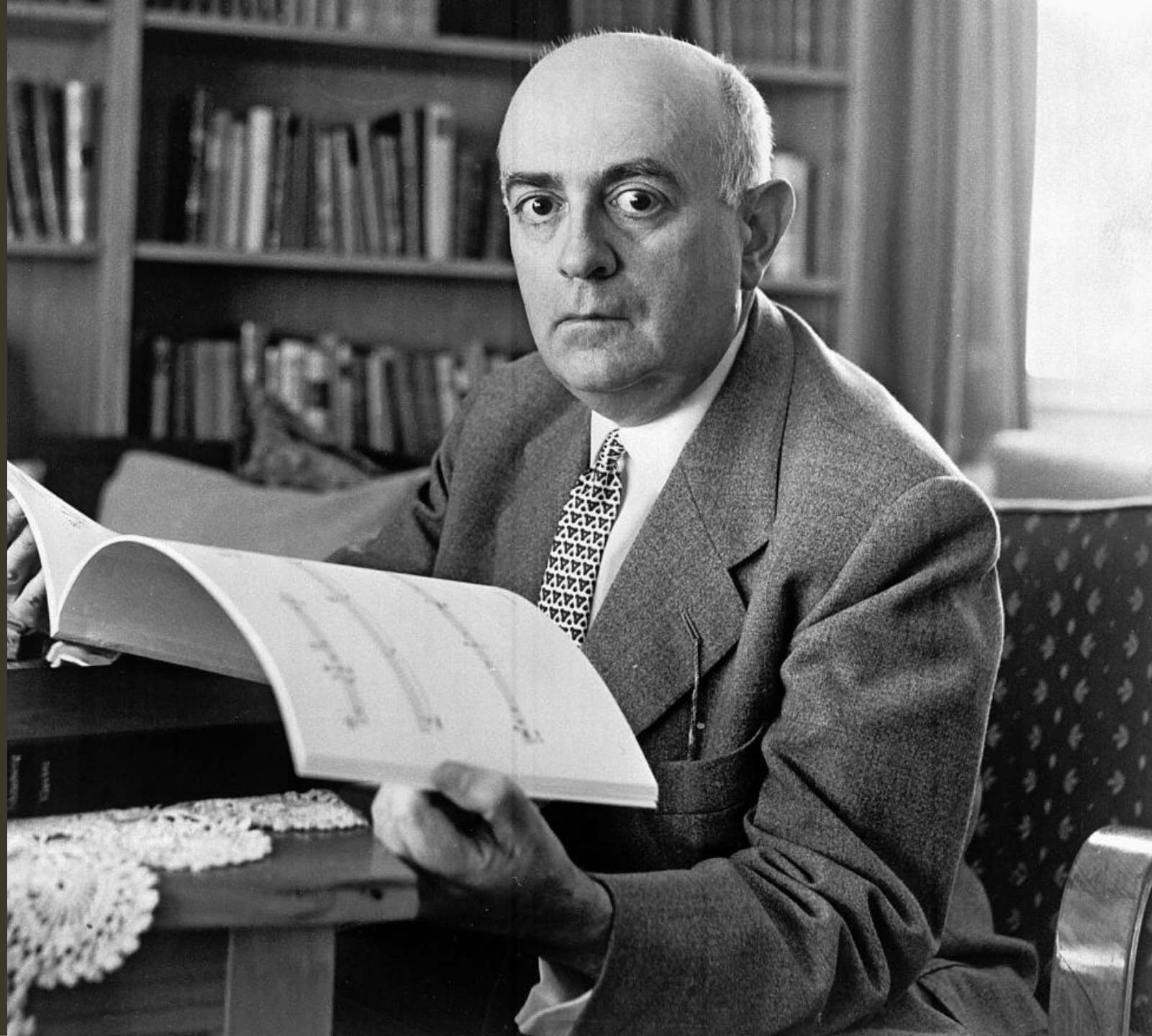


McLuhan's Global Village

- Dewey and Park wrote when commercial TV broadcasting had just started. But as late as 1964 Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was still celebrating television as a brave new force for creating a peaceful and democratic "global village"

Adorno for the Prosecution

- ▶ As early as 1957, in his seminal text "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture," Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), took the opposite position. Television networks were in the hands of a few capitalists, who went beyond the usual control of the time the masses spent in the workplace by colonizing also their leisure hours at home



Would the Real Adorno Please Stand Up?



- Adorno's work shared the fate of many famous essays: it was quoted more often than it was read. It generated a cottage industry of Marxist criticism of the capitalist manipulation of the masses through television, which largely pointed its fingers at who owned the largest TV networks
- In fact, Adorno's argument was more subtle. He claimed that the television's *mode of production* is inherently capitalistic, with the consequence that, no matter who owns the networks and even what political positions are broadcasted, the masses' capability of a reflexive engagement with the world is diminished rather than enhanced

Baudrillard and Simulacra

- ▶ In the 1980s, the critical approach to television studies was dominated by Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). TV, for Baudrillard, was the end stage of a century-old process during which signs lost their contacts with the reality. The image of television is a *simulacrum*, a sign that does not refer to any reality



The Dangers of Simulacra

- “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none”
- Through television, Baudrillard argued, we live in a dangerous artificial world of pure simulacra, and lose our capability of combating evil in the real world

JEAN BAUDRILLARD



SIMULACRA AND SIMULATION

Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser

MICHIGAN

TV Studies as Cultural Studies: R. Williams



- Writing from within the Marxist tradition, influential British scholar Raymond Williams (1921-1988) was among the first to criticize the technological determinism of early TV studies (i.e. the theory that a certain technology would necessarily generate certain social consequences). While by no means optimistic about television, he suggested that television be approached within the framework of cultural studies, focusing on its aesthetics, audiences, and the “flow” of different, fragmented texts

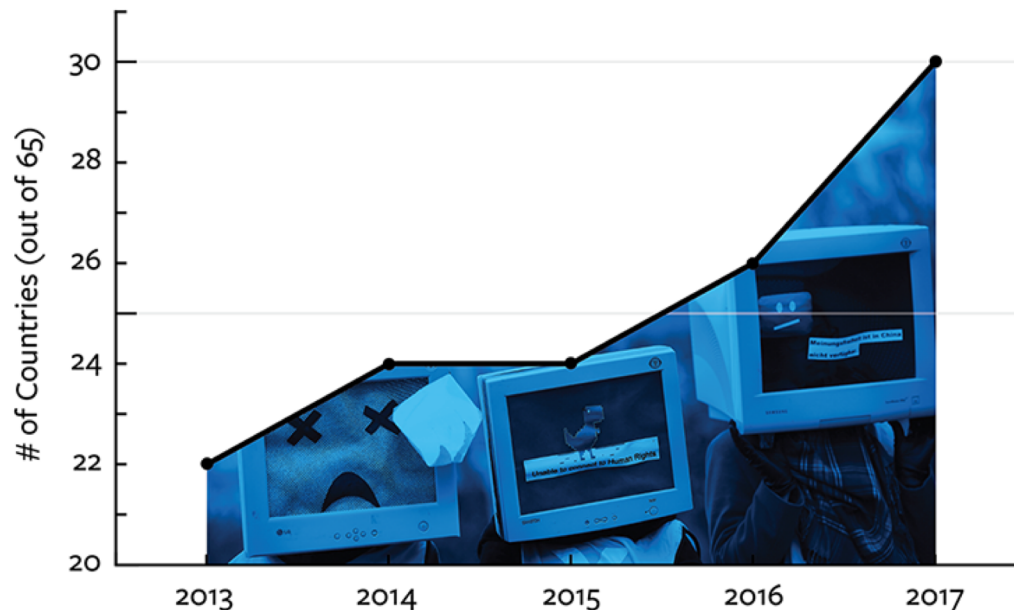
Hall: Encoding and Decoding

- Within the cultural studies paradigm of TV studies, a key essay was "Encoding/Decoding," published in 1980 by Jamaican Marxist Stuart Hall (1932-2014). He argued that, while TV messages are indeed "encoded" by the dominant capitalist establishment, they are "decoded" in three different ways, acquiescent, negotiated, and oppositional. Not everybody agreed, but many accepted the argument that TV audiences are not simply passive



But Didn't Internet Change Everything?

Growth of Disinformation Efforts in 65 *Freedom on the Net* Countries



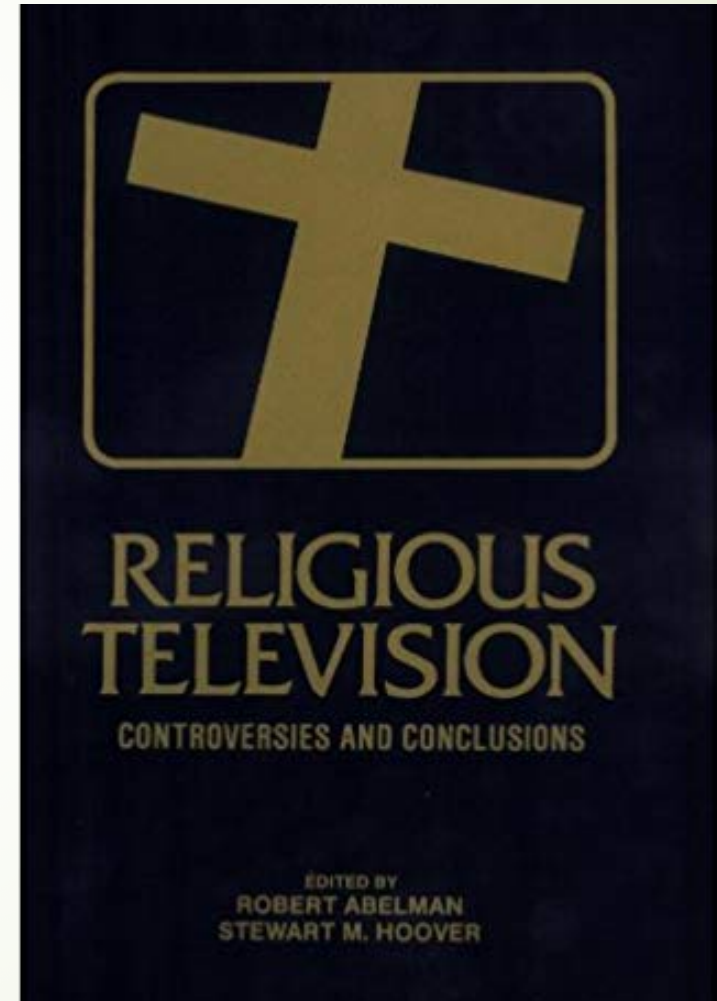
www.freedomonthenet.org

Paid progovernment commentators were found in 30 of the 65 countries surveyed, a new high.

- The fact that many view television via the Internet, and the rise of Amazon and Netflix, reinforced the cultural studies paradigm in television studies and Williams' idea of "privatization" of TV audiences
- However, Marxism is still a strong presence in the field and many would argue that the new technologies are in turn not inherently democratic but are still (or more) open to capitalist and governmental manipulation and control

What About Religious Television?

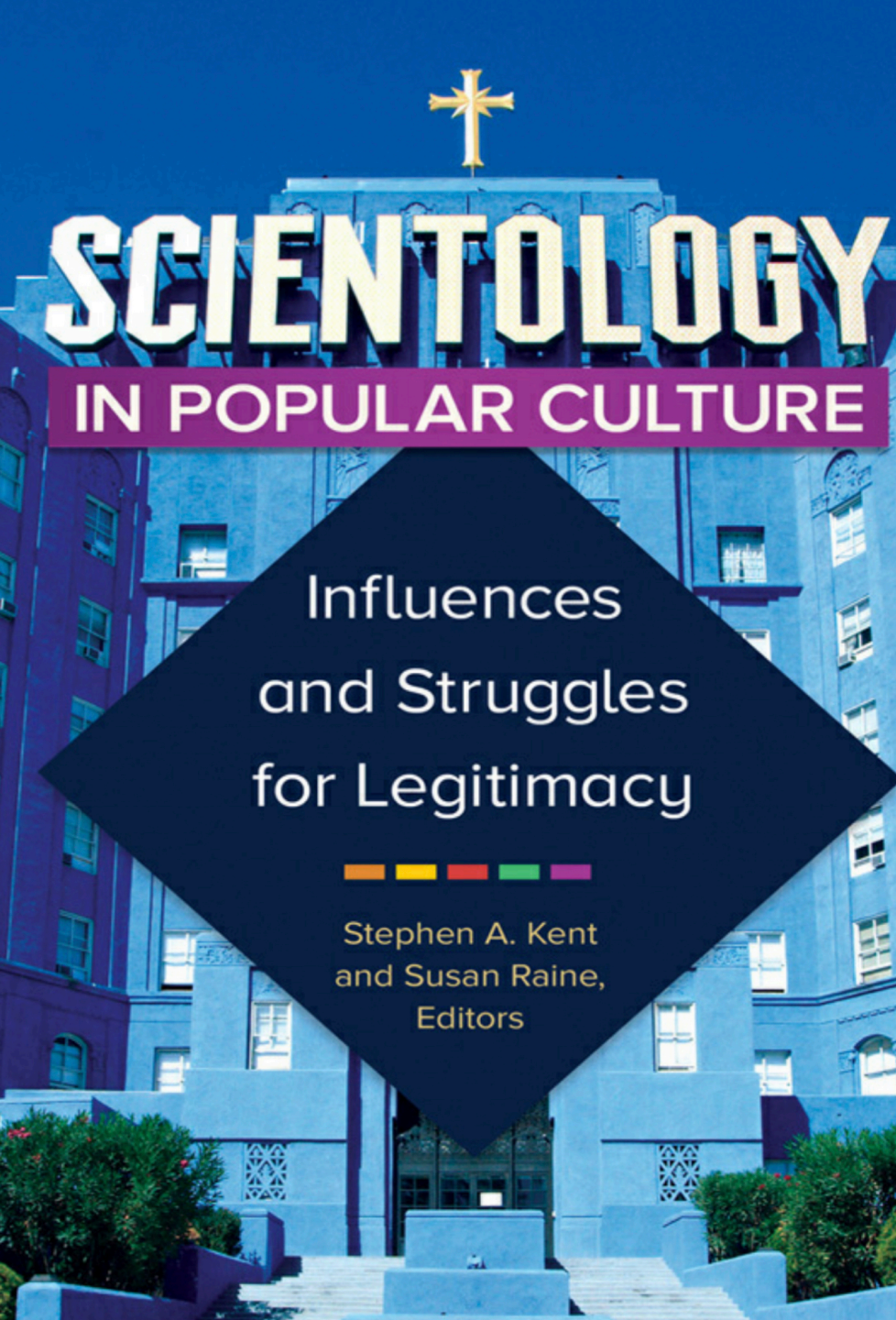
- Religious broadcasting is very much studied—but mostly by scholars of religion such as Jeff Hadden (1937-2003) and political scientists interested in how televangelists influenced American elections. The continuing prevalence of Marxist scholars in the field of Television Studies has made the study of religious programming somewhat neglected. Exceptions exist, such as *Religious Television* edited by R. Abelman and S.M. Hoover (1980: but most contributors did not come from TV studies)





What is Religious Television?

- One pertinent question raised by the Abelman-Hoover book was what “religious television” exactly is. In fact, the label covers two different models: TV networks *owned* by religions (but offering a mixture of religious and non-religious programs) and TV networks and programming *advertising* religion
- Counter-intuitively, religion-only TVs fare better than religion-owned “mixed” networks (which compete with richer and better-equipped non-religious alternatives)
- While media reports often decry how religious TV manipulates its audience, some scholars argue that it is *less* manipulative than generic TV. The latter manipulates subtly and invisibly, while religious TV makes its agenda immediately obvious



Television *versus* Scientology

- In 2017, veteran critic of Scientology Stephen Kent co-edited a book that addressed, inter alia, the relationship between Scientology and television.
- The book got one fact right, that most TV programming and news about Scientology are *against* Scientology

A Naïve/Biased Approach

- In furtherance of a narrow anti-cult agenda, the authors adopted a “naive” model assuming that “if most TV programs agree that you are evil, then you are evil.” But this is precisely what most work in the Tv Studies field call into question. Social groups are marginalized and demonized by TV for a variety of reasons, most of them having little to do with their alleged “evil” behavior



Scientology Strikes Back

- Among the very first words uttered when Scientology Network was launched on March 12, 2018 by the religion's leader, David Miscavige, were: "Frankly whatever you have heard, if you haven't heard from us, I can assure you, **we are not what you expect**"



NETWORK LAUNCH SPECIAL
DAVID MISCAVIGE



But What Does It Mean?



- This sentence offers rich material for cultural and sociological analysis. Scientology (a) is aware that its TV image is largely negative; (b) understands that, litigations and other efforts notwithstanding, correction of that image would never fully succeed; (c) resorts, as part of the solution, to **its own TV network**

Premature Criticism

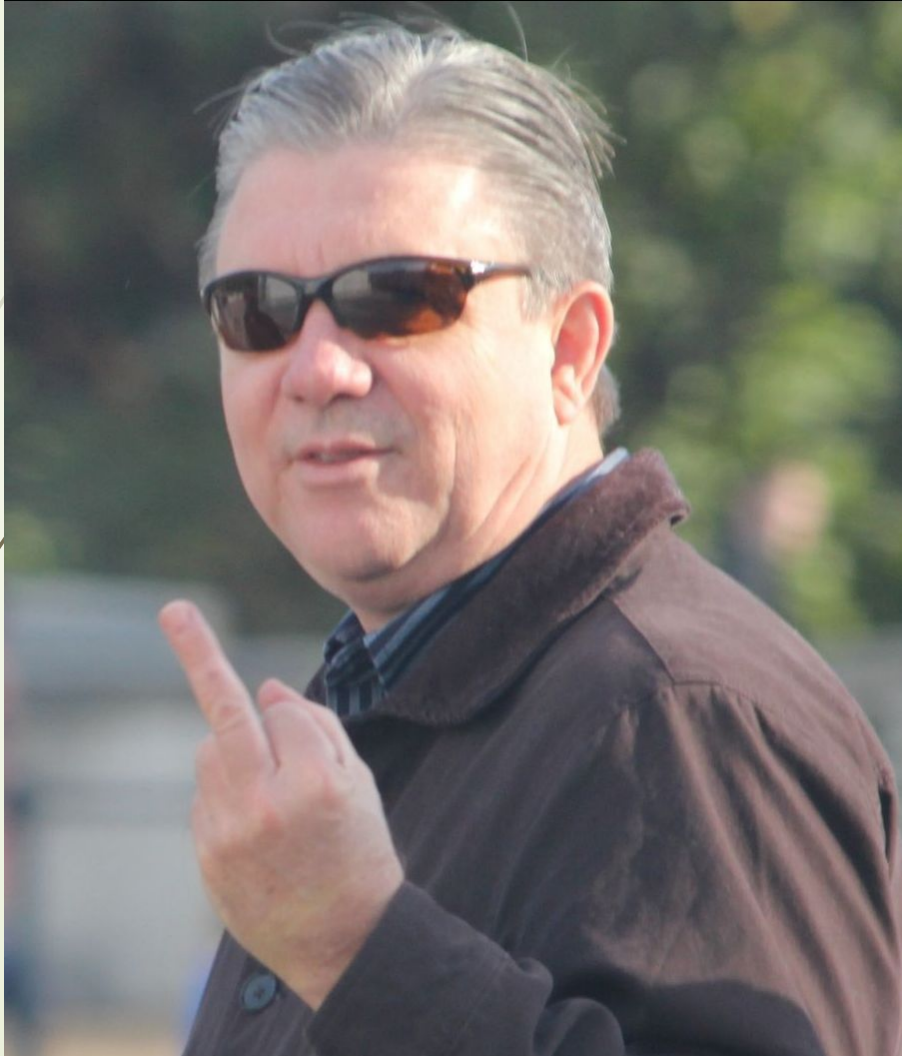
Scientology TV (Cult Shopping Network) Fail

July 23, 2018 By [Mike Rinder](#) — [95 Comments](#)



- Suspiciously, Scientology critics started claiming the Scientology Network was unsuccessful a few weeks after it had started. Their evidence was the modest number of Google searches for “Scientology Network” or “Scientology TV” —but the address [scientology.tv](#) had been so widely advertised that many didn’t need Google to access the network

Impossible Evaluations




- Finally, Scientology arch-opponent Mike Rinder admitted that “there is no way of getting actual audience figures for Scientology TV.” He might have added that most TV Studies scholars do not believe in ratings, either: “the measurement techniques used in ratings research construct the very thing being measured” (Eileen Meehan, “Why We Don’t Count,” 1990)

What Kind of “Religious TV”?

ABOUT THE DOCUMENTARY SHOWCASE

Welcome to the Scientology Network Documentary Showcase



Fundamental to Scientology is a humanitarian mission of extraordinary scope, now extending to some 200 nations. Included therein are programs for human rights, human decency, literacy, morality, drug prevention and disaster relief.

For this reason, the Scientology Network provides a platform for Independent filmmakers who embrace a vision of building a better world.

[MORE](#)

Submit a
Film or Documentary

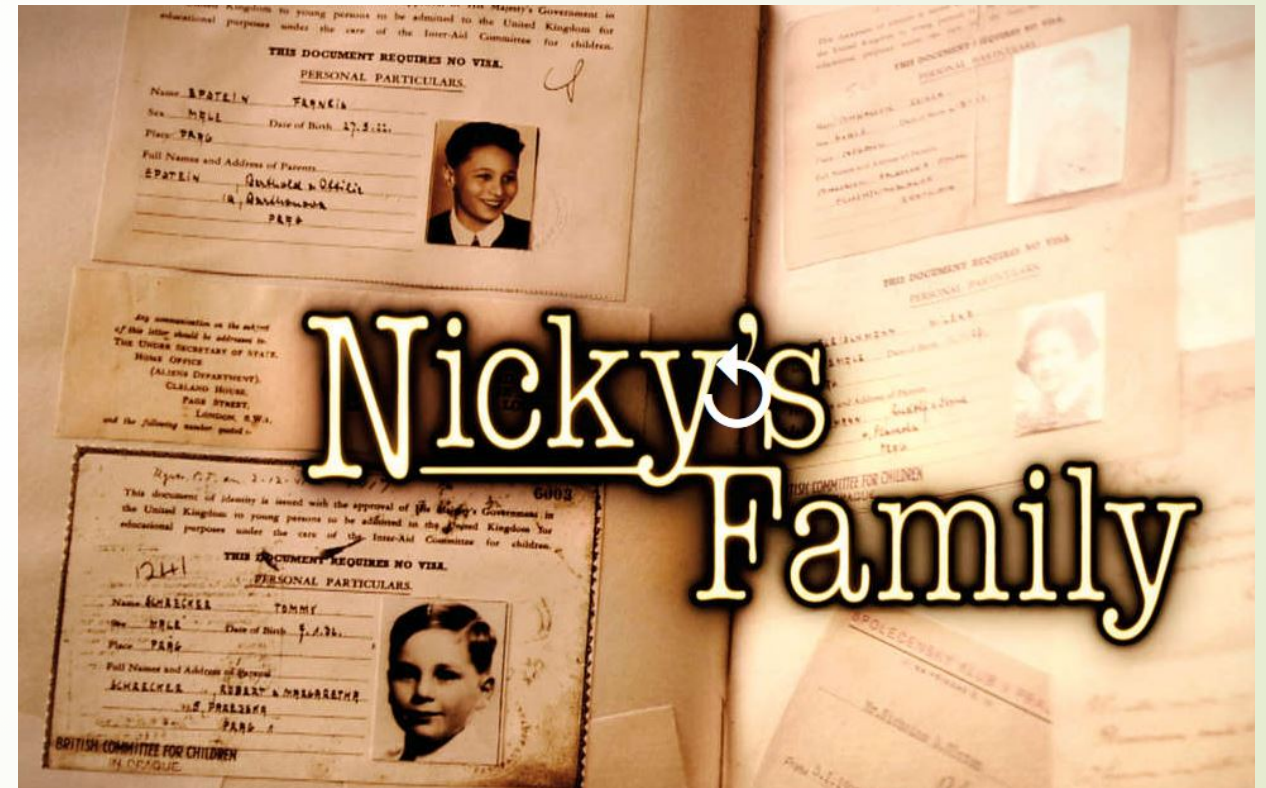
The Scientology Network is accepting submissions of films and documentaries.

[Submit Your Film >](#)

- A content-oriented analysis of Scientology Network shows that 95% of the programming relates directly or indirectly to Scientology. Human rights and anti-psychiatry programming features non-Scientologists but its main theme is related to Scientology's allied organizations. The significant exception is Friday night's *Documentary Showcase*, featuring independent documentary movies normally unrelated to Scientology

Assisted Decoding

- Friday night documentaries are often award-winning, powerful movies and are used for what I would call “assisted decoding.” I witnessed in Clearwater, Florida, the live showing of *Nicky's Family*, by renowned Slovak director Matej Mináč (not a Scientologist) to an audience of visitors of the Scientology Information Center, who accepted to stay for the movie (and some coffee and cookies)
- After the showing of the emotional, beautiful documentary of how Czech Jewish children were rescued from the Nazis, a Scientologist led the audience in a discussion on how, if we are not vigilant in preserving human rights, horrors like Nazism may happen again



Religious Programming



- However, the main mission of Scientology Network is to inform its audience about Scientology, countering the negative and often aggressive portrait presented by other media. For instance, the series *L. Ron Hubbard in His Own Words* offers rare images and details about the life of Scientology's founder; and *L. Ron Hubbard Library Presents* summarizes and comments basic texts by Hubbard (1911-1986)

Meet a Scientologist



- One of Scientology Network's aim is presenting Scientologists as "normal" people, countering the opponents' caricature. This has been done by independent scholarly voices such as Donald Westbrook or Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, but here TV aesthetics is mobilized to make the point

Most of the Scientologists featured are not celebrities. They are presented as successful both in jobs unrelated to Scientology and in their family life, such as the Swedish roofers David and Vanessa Frykman

Meet a Celebrity



12 paintings about
Switzerland.

- Some in *Meet a Scientologist* are, however, well-known in their fields, although so far the series stayed away from superstars like Tom Cruise. Painter Carl-W. Röhrig was interviewed in his Zurich studio as an example of how many artists are Scientologists (and some Scientologist artists were discriminated during the anti-Scientology crusade in Germany)

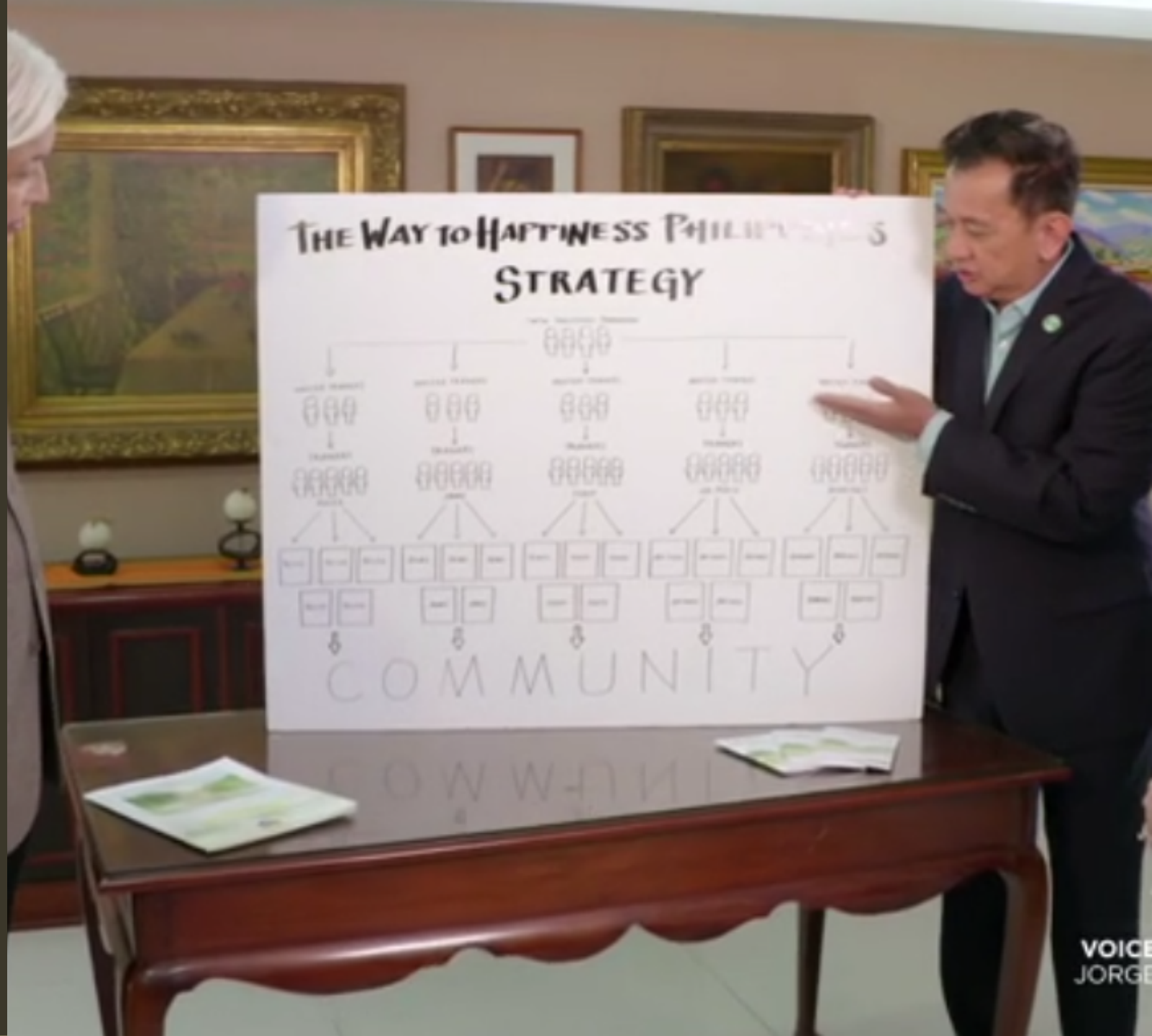
“Futuristic Innovation”



- The two series *Inside Scientology* and *Destination: Scientology* are an example of what Bernadette Rigal-Cellard has called Scientology's “futuristic innovation,” through an ambitious real estate program and the establishment of cutting edge facilities for its various activities. As Rigal-Cellard noted, these buildings are not only functional but serve the symbolic purpose of introducing visitors to what is presented as an alternative, better world

The Way to Happiness

- Rigal-Cellard also described how 110 million copies of Hubbard's simple moral code *The Way to Happiness* were distributed and how, as a "secular document," it became "one of the best tools for outreach programs facilitating links with secular groups as well as religious ones." Obviously, how the little book was used through police and other public bodies (here, in the Philippines) is often reported in the *Voices for Humanity* series of the TV



Criticizing Psychiatry



The Marketing of Madness: Are We All Insane? (Trailer)

Psychiatry and Big Pharma market drugs for illnesses made up in marketing meetings.



Psychiatry: An Industry of Death (Trailer)

An unflinching investigation into psychiatry's dark history from its origins up to the present day.

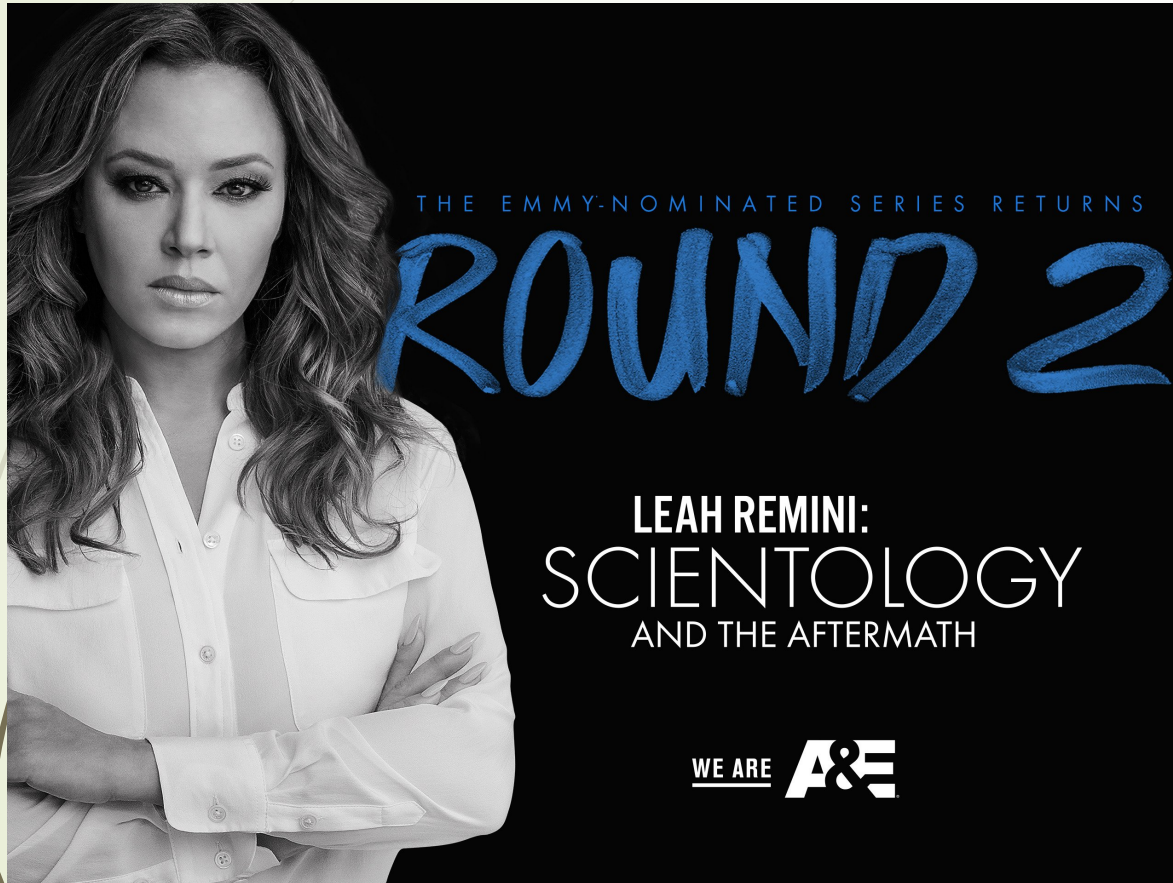


Diagnostic & Statistical Manual: Psychiatry's Deadliest Scam (Trailer)

Psychiatry's Diagnostic & Statistical Manual (DSM) and the role it plays for profit-driven motives.

- For reasons several scholars have analyzed, few causes are dearer to Scientologists than the criticism of the abuses of the psychiatric profession and the pharmaceutical companies advertising and selling psychiatric drugs (which retaliate by supporting anti-Scientology campaigns). Both *Voices for Humanity* and *Citizen Commissions on Human Rights Documentaries* frequently showcase Scientology's signature criticism of psychiatry and Big Pharma

Some Conclusions



- 1. Scientology has an optimistic worldview. It experienced first-hand the negative impact of television as described by many in Television Studies: it is largely in the hands of a small clique of corporate interests, and it effectively demonizes its opponents. However, Scientologists also believe, as the cultural studies perspective in TV studies emphasizes, that audiences are not entirely passive and that striking back is possible

Quality Matters

- 2. In order to fight back, Scientology tries to beat the hostile TV networks at their own game, with cutting edge facilities and state-of-the-art quality (as Rigal-Cellard noted, using “only the best” serves a symbolic and theological purposes rather than only a functional one)



A Religious Network



- 3. Although the Friday night documentaries offer a quality pause, Scientology decided to build a network consisting mostly of religious or quasi-religious programming about Scientology and its allied activities, rather than competing with larger outlets with a general-purpose channel. Studies about religious broadcasting confirm that this choice made sense

Help in Decoding



- 4. Evaluations of the Scientology Network's success and impact are premature. And they should take into account that decoding in a religious television is not a completely spontaneous process

Apart from the “assisted decoding” in dedicated group meetings in Scientology centers, decoding is an interactive process involving many different ways in which those who watch Scientology TV simultaneously interact with Scientology.



SCIENTOLOGY
NETWORK

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the app!



For more information: maxintrovigne@gmail.com