

APOCALYPSE SOON: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF BROADCAST COVERAGE
OF HAROLD CAMPING'S 2011 APOCALYPSE PREDICTION

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ABSTRACT

In reports regarding nontraditional religious organizations, the news media commonly present these groups in a satirical manner. Harold Camping's May 2011 prediction of a biblical rapture was widely reported and was no exception to this satirical scrutiny. This study examines the television news media coverage of Camping and his prediction. Through narrative analysis, I examine how news reports on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and FOX constructed their narrative of Camping. I examine the narrative scripts that are presented in each news report in order to further understand how television news outlets present Camping, his followers, and the impact of his advertising campaign to the audience. Camping is primarily presented as untrustworthy, foolish, and manipulative toward his followers. Most reports utilized satire either directly through the correspondent or through visual and auditory elements. Each news outlet focused on the spread of information through social media and pop culture, as well as the widespread advertising campaign.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the early months of 2011, whispers of an impending doom began to surface. Harold Camping, the 90-year-old founder of California-based radio network Family Services, Inc. (frequently referred to as Family Radio), began spreading the word of the coming apocalypse. Camping predicted that a religious rapture would occur on May 21, 2011, culminating in the complete destruction of the world five months later on October 21, 2011. In the preceding months, followers of Camping and Family Services, Inc. dispersed across the country to spread the “good news” of the coming apocalypse. In an RT¹ report, one Camping follower claims, “This is the greatest and the biggest advertising campaign in the world. There’s never been anything like this before, since God created this world. The Bible promised that everybody, all nations, will get this message before May twenty-first, twenty-eleven” (Kwadeithers, 2011).

Though we cannot deny the magnitude of this particular campaign, we should not go so far as to claim that the world has never seen anything like this. Eschatology and apocalyptic predictions date back thousands of years and have been widely studied throughout the past century. In his book, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, Bart Ehrman (1999) writes,

For nearly two thousand years there have been Christians who have thought that the world was going to end in their own lifetimes ... it can be traced all the way back to the beginning, to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus thought that the history of the world would come to a screeching halt, that God would intervene in the affairs of this planet,

¹ RT is an international news network that broadcasts in English, Spanish, and Arabic. Many of these broadcasts can be found on RT’s YouTube channel (About RT, n.d.).

overthrow the forces of evil in a cosmic act of judgment, and establish his utopian Kingdom here on earth. And this was to happen in Jesus' own generation (p. 3).

Examples of apocalypse and doomsday predictions date to the beginnings of recorded history. These predictions are varied in their descriptions and originate from a range of sources, including the Mayan calendar, the Millerites of the mid-1800s, the radical Heaven's Gate² group, and even the Y2K computer virus at the turn of the 21st century. The past century has seen a rise in media technologies and, thus, a rise in media coverage of these predictions. Media outlets have developed a knack for reporting the "bizarre," and nothing seems to get more bizarre than predictions of the end of the world. Whether the stories surround David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, pastor Jerry Falwell, or Harold Camping himself, the media and their audiences continually express interest in these doomsday predictors.

As we reflect on many previous doomsday predictions, it is particularly curious to note the media construction of the predictors and their followers. A March 2008 blog post discussing the Heaven's Gate group is of particular interest when considering representations of alternative religions in the media and how those representations influence the audience. The author of this blog post, in fewer than 500 words, insinuates that the members of the group were vulnerable and perhaps unintelligent, that both founders of the group were suffering from mental illnesses, and that the group was based primarily on issues of homophobia (Tagg, 2008). Though all of these particular insinuations are potentially true, references to "crazy-ass" groups with "beyond-insane"

² Heaven's Gate was a small, radical religious organization. A large number of the group was found to have committed suicide in March of 1997 in an effort to leave their bodies and travel with the Hale-Bopp comet (Heaven's Gate, n.d., para. 4).

(Tagg, 2008, para. 1) followers have the potential to further marginalize these nontraditional religious groups.

This thesis examines recent apocalyptic predictor, Harold Camping of Family Radio, Inc., in order to examine how television news narratives present Camping to the audience. This topic was chosen for an in-depth narrative analysis because of the sudden and widespread interest in Camping's May 2011 prediction. Information spread rapidly through social media outlets, quickly becoming a topic of conversation on Facebook, Twitter³, and a number of other social media websites. Due to the interest and discussions on various social media platforms the prediction quickly became a topic of conversation in the television news media. A variety of both local and national television news program covered Camping's prediction, but for the purposes of this research, reports from nightly news programs on national television news outlets will be examined. Reports from networks ABC, CBS, and NBC, and cable news outlets CNN and Fox News will be utilized in this study.

The intent of this analysis is to discover what type of narrative script each news outlet constructs when reporting about Camping, his followers, and the large-scale advertising campaign used to spread the prediction. Each news outlet has a predetermined narrative structure to each program as well as an understood network discourse. Both the narrative structure and discourse may affect the way in which each news outlet discusses Camping, as well as other nontraditional religious groups in future. Through an examination of the visual elements in each report, we may gain better understanding as to

³ Twitter is a social media website which aims to "give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" (Company, 2016).

how symbols and signs help the audience understand each television narrative.

Examining each news outlet's constructed narrative will provide further insight into how Camping and other nontraditional religious organizations are portrayed in the television news media, which may provide insight into news outlet constructs that could help or hinder the spread of religious information in the news media.

CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Commonly lumped in with Apocalypticism or Millennialism theories, eschatology is the overarching theological theory that concerns itself with the end times or the end of humanity (Eschatology, n.d.). Beginning early in recorded history, end times and apocalyptic predictions have been widely discussed in a number of societies. Though often thought of in reference to Evangelical Christian beliefs, eschatological concepts can be found in a number of religions throughout the world.

Ancient Apocalyptic Predictions

Some of the earliest recorded eschatological concepts come from the Zoroastrian religion, originating in approximately the sixth century B.C.E. near what is now Eastern Iran (Cohn, 1993, p. 77). A priest of the ancient Iranian religion, Zoroaster is said to have had visions of Ahura Mazda – which translates to “Lord Wisdom” – prompting his interest in reformation of the old religion (Cohn, 1993, p. 77-78). Sacred hymns of the Zoroastrian faith, the Gathas, speak of limited time on Earth and a universal ordeal in which all human beings, both living and dead, would face judgment (Cohn, 1993, p. 97). John Waterhouse (1934) writes, “The theological statements of the Gathas may be summed up in the creed that Ahura the creator is One, and that his demands are ethical” (p. 29).

Zoroaster preached ethical monotheism and believed that after death each person would be judged based on his or her ethical achievements; each person would come to a bridge where few individuals would be allowed to pass over into paradise, while the

others would fall to the netherworld (Cohn, 1993, p. 96). Upon the end of the “limited time,” both the living and the resurrected would assemble for judgment. Citing the Bundahishn¹, Norman Cohn (1993) writes, “All human beings who have ever lived will come together ... every individual will be confronted with his good and evil deeds, and the saved will be distinguished from the damned as clearly as a white sheep is from a black” (p. 97).

Though the Gathas may not have provided a specific date for this judgment day, Cohn suggests that a sense of urgency is noticeable in Zoroaster’s writings. Similar to many of the apocalyptic predictors of today, Zoroaster may have felt that the judgment would come during his time and may have been encouraging others to align with the words of Ahura Mazda (Cohn, 1993, p. 99). As can be seen in a number of ancient religions, the Zoroastrians also believed in a prophet or savior figure, the Saoshyant; Waterhouse (1934) explains that the Saoshyant would be the one to bring about the bodily resurrection and would provide immortality to all (p. 94-96).

Several centuries after the founding of Zoroastrianism, the world was introduced to Jesus of Nazareth. Though there are numerous examinations of the historical Jesus, let us consider Ehrman’s book *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* for the study at hand. The author argues that Jesus can be considered an early apocalypticist; in his opening thesis, Ehrman (1999) proposes that a belief in the end times and a final judgment of the world are as old as the Christian religion itself and that this belief stems from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth (p. 1). Ehrman (1999) writes, “Like other

¹ The Bundahishn was a later Zoroastrian work concerned with the final state of the world (Cohn, 1993, p. 80).

apocalypticists from his time that we know about, Jesus maintained that there will be an actual cosmic judge sent from God to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in God's good kingdom" (p. 147). Of particular importance to apocalyptic prophets is the imminent destruction of the present world and judgment upon all. According to Ehrman (1999), apocalypticists believed that in order to remedy a corrupted order, everyone must be judged and everything must be wiped clean by an almighty deity (p. 159). Based on biblical scripture, Jesus believed this event would occur during his lifetime, similar to the belief of the Saoshyant of Zoroastrianism; Ehrman goes so far as to argue that the imminent judgment day may have been the motivation behind Jesus's teachings of morality and ethics.

Ultimately, Ehrman argues, Jesus's messages of the coming judgment and a need to repent were not all that different from prophetic writing in the Hebrew Bible. The primary difference between these prophecies was the apocalyptic context through which his teachings were framed. During the first century A.D., many people expected God would soon rid the Earth of evil forces, removing anything opposed to the "good Kingdom on earth" (Ehrman, 1999, p. 161).

Centuries after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, medieval writings warned that 1000 A.D. would be the year of yet another apocalypse. Apocalypse predictions warning of the rise of the Antichrist are present in a large number of medieval manuscripts in the years leading up to 1000 A.D. (Abanes, 1998, p. 172); however, when 1000 A.D. came and went with no sign of the Antichrist or apocalypse, these medieval predictors looked to a new date. Richard Abanes (1998) writes, "after the year 1000 passed, a new date was immediately seized upon: 1033. The former deadline was based on the passage of one

millennium from Christ's birth, whereas the latter date measured a millennium from Jesus' crucifixion" (p. 173). The dates of Jesus' birth and death would be used to determine the date of the coming apocalypse for centuries to come and by a variety of religious figures – including famed 19th century preacher William Miller.

Apocalyptic Predictions of the 19th and 20th Centuries

The turn of the 19th century saw the beginning of the Second Great Awakening. George M. Thomas (1989) explains, "Revivals were planned and coordinated among different denominations and towns. A large number of religious newspapers and journals gave regular accounts ... of revivals around the country" (p. 1). In the 1830s and 1840s, lay preacher William Miller travelled throughout the northeastern United States preaching of the coming return of Jesus Christ. From approximately 1804 to 1816 Miller identified himself as a Deist and claimed a belief in God, but not the Bible as the true word of God (Judd, 1987, p. 18). While serving in the military during the War of 1812, Miller began to question his Deist beliefs and upon returning to his family in Low Hampton, New York, he began regularly attending Baptist church services. Subsequently, Miller spent two years analyzing biblical scripture. Wayne R. Judd (1987) writes,

Miller concluded that the prophecies of the Bible were always literally fulfilled, and that God had provided rules for interpreting figures and metaphors. To his great satisfaction, he learned "that the Bible contained a system of revealed truths, so clearly and simply given that the 'wayfaring man, though a fool,' need not err therein." Miller identified fourteen rules of interpretation (p. 20).

Jonathan Butler (1987) explains that several predictions for the return of Jesus Christ were based on a Jewish calendar, which cited both March 21 and April 3, 1844 as two possible dates for the Second Coming (p. 195). As both dates passed, the Millerites

were faced with what is referred to as the “first disappointment,” but this only heightened the interest in predicting the date. Soon after the initial dates had passed, the “Seventh-month” faction predicted October 22, 1844 as the date of the Second Advent (Butler, 1987, p. 196). Though these dates are frequently credited to Miller himself, Butler suggests that he merely observed the goings-on during much of the time leading up to the predicted Second Advent.

After October 22, 1844 came and went, this failed prediction came to be known as the Great Disappointment. In the months following the Great Disappointment, Miller explained that his beliefs had not changed and urged that there was no reason to question the principles of his faith (Judd, 1987, p. 33). Miller never believed that he had misled anyone and maintained his belief that the second coming of Jesus Christ was soon to come (Judd, 1987, p. 33). Though Miller did not provide any specific dates following the Great Disappointment, some Adventists continued to predict the Second Coming throughout the next several years.

Decades after the Great Disappointment, pastor Billy Graham became a staple in the Evangelical Christian community. Born in 1918, Graham was ordained in 1939 and has spoken about his beliefs throughout the world (Billy Graham, 2016, para. 6,10). According to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, “Mr. Graham has preached the Gospel to more people in live audiences than anyone else in history – nearly 215 million people in more than 185 countries and territories” (Billy Graham, 2016). Though an outspoken preacher for many years, Graham has given no specific date for future apocalyptic events; rather, he encourages his followers to remain vigilant in their spiritual preparations for the return of Christ.

In the late 20th century, the United States watched as a tragedy took place at the Mount Carmel Center in Waco, Texas. The Branch Davidians are most commonly known for the 51-day standoff with the FBI that occurred in 1993, resulting in the deaths of approximately 80 members of the religious organization (Burnett, 2013). Considered an “offshoot of an offshoot” of the Adventist movement, the Davidians were founded by Bulgarian immigrant Victor Houteff (Newport, 2006, p. 49-50). Houteff emigrated from Bulgaria to the United States in 1907 and began his affiliation with the Seventh-Day Adventist church around 1919 (Newport, 2006, p. 49-50). In 1930 Houteff wrote *The Shepherd's Rod*, which would become one of the primary readings for the Davidians. The book urged reform of the Seventh-day Adventist church and doctrine in several ways, prompting the church elders to bar Houteff from services and meetings (Newport, 2006, p. 52-53). In 1935, Houteff relocated the Davidian headquarters, along with twelve volunteers, to the new Mount Carmel compound in Waco, Texas (Newport, 2006, p. 57).

After Houteff's death in 1955 there began a struggle for leadership at Mt. Carmel and within the Davidian community. Ben Roden assumed a leadership position, focusing much of his energy on locating the 144,000 people who the Davidians believed would be saved upon the arrival of the end times (Newport, 2006, p. 136). During Roden's leadership term, the name Branch Davidians was introduced. Kenneth Newport (2006) writes:

The message to be delivered was multifaceted, but at its heart was a surprising claim: Jesus had changed his name to 'Branch'. His followers were therefore to change their name also. No longer should the remnant be called 'Christians' or 'Seventh-day Adventists' or even the 'Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, but rather 'The Branch' (p. 137).

From this point, Roden's beliefs veered away from traditional Seventh-day Adventism; he preached of coming messages from the angels – three angels to deliver messages during the “judgment of the dead” and two angels to deliver messages during the “judgment of the living,” which he claimed would begin in 1964 (Newport, 2006, p. 141-142).

Upon Roden's death in 1978, leadership in the Branch switched hands as it had with the Davidians. Arriving at Mount Carmel in 1981, David Koresh (born Vernon Howell) moved quickly through the rankings of the Branch Davidians (Newport, 2006, p. 178), taking on a leadership role within during the mid-1980s. He focused much of his beliefs on the Book of Revelation, which he believed to be a “summary of prophecy, a sort of coded shorthand to the rest of scripture” (Newport, 2006, p. 215). Newport (2006) writes, “Koresh ... made the claim that he was the antitypical leader of God's people, the end-time King David” (p. 216). Newport (2006) explains that through analysis of interviews with Koresh, it becomes clear that he believed himself to be the literal king of a coming pre-millennial kingdom (p. 229).

In 1993, after several years as the leader of the Branch Davidians, Koresh was “suspected of polygamy, having sex with underage girls and stockpiling illegal weapons” (Burnett, 2013, para. 3). After a raid by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms resulted in the deaths of several Branch Davidian members and bureau agents, the FBI managed a 51-day standoff at the compound before conducting a gas raid on April 19, 1993 (Burnett, 2013, para. 4-6). The standoff and subsequent raid were heavily reported at the time. According to Newport (2006), “the world's media indulged in a feeding frenzy ... Koresh was portrayed as the archetypical leader ... a man whose hold over his

followers was complete” (p. 2). The reporting frenzy surrounding Koresh and the Branch Davidians was by no means the first instance of heavy media coverage surrounding religious groups, but these lasting memories and the extensive reporting helped pave the way for future media fascination with nontraditional religious organizations.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this thesis is to examine media coverage of Harold Camping's May 2011 rapture prediction. In order to better understand how the television news media construct their stories about Camping and his followers, the primary theory used in this study is narrative analysis. Narrative analysis focuses primarily on understanding the events of a story, plot development, and the emerging characterization (Kitch, 2007, p. 40) and can focus on the accounts of an individual or a larger group of individuals. Catherine Riessman (1993) explains that a specific definition of narrative is difficult to provide for a number of reasons – narrative can be overly broad or very succinct, it can have a linear or nonlinear sequence, and it can be held together based on thematic or consequential sequencing (p. 17). In this study, narrative analysis will be used to examine how each television news outlet constructs its story of Camping and how that story is presented to the audience.

In addition to narrative analysis, this study is also informed by discourse analysis. Closely related to narrative, the discourse of a particular culture reveals the ways in which beliefs and ideas are constructed and utilized. James Paul Gee (2011) explains, "Discourse analysis is the study of language-in-use" (p. 8). Though there are various approaches to discourse analysis, most approaches examine either the content or the structure of a media source (Gee, 2011, p. 8). Discourse analysis allows the researcher to examine language in its various presentations and uses. This theory will assist in

examining how predisposed discourses from each television news outlet may inform or affect the constructed narrative of Camping and his followers.

Keeping in mind the inherently interpretive nature of narrative, this study is also informed by semiotics. Semiotics is the in-depth study of how humans create meaning, specifically through the creation and interpretation of signs or symbols. For the purposes of this research, semiotics should be considered in order to more closely examine how visual elements are presented to the audience. Advertisements on clothing, billboards, and vehicles played a crucial part in the dissemination of Camping's prediction. The intended meaning behind each of these advertisements as well as the news program presentations of them can be examined through the lens of semiotics.

Narrative Analysis

A precise definition of narrative is difficult to provide, but Riessman does provide citation from William Labov's study of narrative structures. Labov explains that a fully formed narrative should contain six primary elements: "an abstract (summary of the substance of the narrative), orientation (time, place, situation, participants), complicating action (sequence of events), evaluation (significance and meaning of the action, attitude of the narrator), resolution (what finally happened), and coda (returns the perspective to the present)" (as cited in Riessman, 1993, p. 18-19). By its very nature, narrative is interpretive and adaptive. Narratives find their meaning in the reader and may be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on a given reader's personal ideology. In qualitative writing, Thomas Lindlof (1995) sees narrative as a "foundational concept;" he explains that researchers narrativize experiences they have studied and later retell these

narratives “through a medium of analytic discourse” (p. 259). In retelling a narrative, it is the researcher’s job to guide the reader through this specific study and interpretation of the narrative.

Though specific definitions vary widely, Stokes (2003) explains that narrative is present in almost all media forms due to an ingrained human desire to interpret our world and its cultural ideologies (p. 67). Humans are inclined to tell stories or find patterns in order to make sense and meaning of the world. There are times in which a medium may not directly convey narrative, but the medium can still be interpreted through human narrative. Stokes (2003) uses the example of a modern art exhibit to explain how this is possible; she writes,

Martin Creed, winner of the Turner Prize for Modern Art in 2001, had a light going on and off every five seconds in his exhibit at Tate Britain. This minimal piece had no ‘story’, but the press attempted to interpret it as a product of Creed’s philosophy of art (p. 67).

Because of human proclivity for meaning and understanding, it is still possible for narrative to be created even in the absence of narrative.

In order for a text to qualify as narrative, Marie-Laure Ryan explains three distinct conditions any text must feature. First, a text must have characters and objects within a constructed world; second, this world must undergo changes through physical events that are either accidental or deliberate actions; and third, the text must have plans or motivations that work around the changes, thus giving the text plot (Ryan, 2004, p. 8-9). Ryan (2004) defines a text that fulfills these three conditions as “narrative script;” a text may fulfill all of these requirements, but it is not clear what – if any – elements may interest an audience (p. 9). Due to the structure of television news, narrative script is

present in a majority of news reports. In order to gain the interest and understanding of an audience, news reports must explain the characters, the changes surrounding these characters, and how the audience may deal with these changes. Each news network discussed in this study first presents the audience with the constructed character of Camping, and then explains the details of Camping's predicted rapture. Depending on how each news outlet structures the narrative, the plans and motivations may focus on Camping's warnings to repent before the predicted rapture date or they may focus more on how the audience should consider this warning irrelevant.

Often narrative is used to convey a particular ideology. Helen Fulton explains that narrative is a representative construct of structures that are familiar to the audience. She notes, "Since the media are now the major controllers of narrative production and consumption in the Western world, the stories that seem the most 'natural' are the ones to which the media have accustomed us" (Fulton, 2005, p. 1). Fulton notes that specific narrative structures are not a natural part of a culture, but there are many common narratives that have become frequent and expected in Western media. Narrative analysis, as it pertains to the news media, is a "search for the common thematic and structural choices reporters and editors made, consistently over time and across media" (Kitch, 2007, p. 40). In this sense, the news media often creates its own ideology by actively choosing what stories to feature and in what context they will be presented to the viewers. One of the primary ways in which news media holds the attention of the audience is through narrativization. An audience is more likely to remain consistent if the news outlet presents them with a good story (Dunn, 2005, p. 142).

Narrative is an inherent part of human interaction and plays a particularly large role in media. Though narrative theory has been developed and studied from a variety of angles, theorists generally believe “the first, and central, issue about narrative is that stories always operate within a social context” (Schirato & Webb, 2004, p. 83). Based on ideology, each individual culture will determine the structure of narrative in the media; media and cultural ideology form a symbiotic relationship, in which the cultural ideology may both determine and be determined by media content and structure. Ryan (2004) explains,

Even when they seek to make themselves invisible, media are not hollow conduits for the transmission of messages but material supports of information whose materiality, precisely, “matters” for the type of meanings that can be encoded. Whether they function as transmissive channels or provide the physical substance for the inscription of narrative messages, media differ widely in their efficiency and expressive power (p. 1-2).

Because of the relationship between media and cultural ideology, the media are not silent players in the dissemination of information. As Ryan stated, the media play a major role in determining how information is disseminated and, more importantly, how the audience interprets that information. That being said, it is important to keep in mind that media narratives are very frequently structured to support the economic aspect of media conglomerations. Fulton (2005) explains, “Media narratives do not exist, then, simply to entertain us, the consumer, to tell us stories in order to amuse us, or to provide us with a service and a range of choices from which we can make our selection” (p. 4). The audience plays a role in determining the narrative of media, but it should be taken into account that the media are always working to determine what narratives best support their business structure. Each television news outlet examined for this study must determine

the importance of Camping's prediction for the purposes of audience interest, but also must consider how the narrative can be structured to maintain and support the business ideology for each network.

Discourse Analysis

As previously stated, discourse analysis allows a researcher to examine how language is utilized in a variety of presentations; furthermore, discourse analysis also allows for a developed understanding of how the language of a specific community translates to personal identity. Gee (2011) argues that there are four "tools of inquiry" used to produce personal identity and practices: social languages, discourses, conversations, and intertextuality (p. 28-29). A specific discourse or identity is created through the comingling of language and – for lack of a better term – non-language. Gee (2011) expounds on this creation of discourse using gang members as an example: to be recognized as a gang member, one must look, act, speak, feel, and interact as a gang member (p. 28). Identification with a particular group and its discourse require an understanding of, a belief in, and an implementation of language relevant to said group; as Gee (2011) says, "You can't just 'talk the talk,' you have to 'walk the walk' as well" (p. 28). With this in mind, we must consider the similar effect this will have on interpretations of Harold Camping in the various media outlets. Each news outlet, depending on their predetermined discourse and specific identification with the audience, may present the story in a different way.

Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy (2002) write, "Without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse, we cannot understand our reality, our

experiences, or ourselves” (p. 2). Phillips and Hardy (2002) go on to define discourse as “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception” (p. 3). Our own realities are created through these processes; without these various discourses we do not understand our own identities. Grant, Kennoy, and Oswick explain that texts that provide us with particular discourses may come in the form of spoken words, written words, symbols, and a variety of other formats (as cited in Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 4). Discourse analysis, then, allows for an understanding of how the spoken words, written words, and symbols of a group produce their individual identity and discourse.

Semiotics

Semiotics can help to understand how humans construct meaning through the interpretation of symbols. In his discussion of Saussurian linguistics, Paul Bouissac (2010) summarizes linguistic signs saying, “signs are not the elementary sounds or the syllables into which we can analyze the flow of our speech, but rather the meaningful units that we combine in our sentences” (p. 90). Saussure’s initial studies in linguistics cited the “acoustic image” and the “concept” as the two distinct pieces of an understood form or meaning (Bouissac, 2010, p. 92). Researchers now primarily reference the signifier, the signified, and the sign as the distinct pieces used to construct meaning.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (1972) explains myth as a study of “ideas-in-form” (p. 112), considering myth to be a “second-order semiological system” (p. 114). As a second-order system, myth is constructed from a sign – a signifier that has already been associated with the signified meaning – that becomes a signifier and is then associated

with a second-level signified idea to create myth. Barthes (1972) points out that myth has become a type of speech and form of communication for the modern world, thus, “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse” (p.109). In examining each report’s coverage of Harold Camping, we must take into account that Christianity has a previously constructed mythology while Camping himself has a previously constructed discourse rooted in Christian mythology; at the same time, each news outlet also has a previously constructed discourse that may contrast with Camping’s personal discourse and understanding of Christian mythology.

CHAPTER IV: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature informing this study primarily focuses on the relationship between the media and religion, an increased interest in reporting about religion, and how nontraditional religious groups are portrayed by the news media. Some research references other marginalized religious groups in order to examine varying stories of religion in media.

Media Interest in Religion

An engrained societal interest in and desire to understand religion has created a vast array of religious discussion in media. John C. Lyden explains that religion in films is of increasing interest to communication and religion scholars alike. According to Lyden (2003), “Scholars of religion are also more interested in interdisciplinary study than they used to be ... today, there is a greater awareness of academic fields that study the surrounding culture, including popular culture studies such as those regarding film” (p. 1). With this increasing interest in religious representation in media, there have also been an increasing number of news reports regarding religious groups. Hill, Hickman, and McLendon (2001) explain, “Increasingly recognized as a force shaping both public events and personal lives, religion is now more “newsworthy” than at any time in postwar American history (p. 24).

With constantly advancing technologies, most social institutions, including religious institutions – are making a natural shift toward greater use of technology and becoming evermore entwined with the media. S. H. Hosseini examines three distinct

approaches to the study of the relationship between religion and media. The functionalist approach, the first of the three viewpoints discussed, views the media as a tool to be used by religious scholars. According to Hosseini (2008), “from the functionalist viewpoint, the media lack an independent cultural identity but could be employed for the dissemination of messages” (p. 58). Citing Neil Postman, Hosseini explains that tool-using cultures would use a technology such as the media as an intermediary for dissemination of information. Thus, from a functionalist perspective, the media functions as a tool for religious groups. The essentialist approach – the second of the three – sees the media having “an independent cultural and historical identity” (Hosseini, 2008, p. 59). In his discussion of media essentialism, Hosseini (2008) explains that there is an “opposing relationship between religion and media” (p. 61), which is discussed in depth by Postman. Hosseini (2008) writes, “He [Postman] emphasizes that any new medium or tool is capable of imposing its essential form and content on public opinion and, consequently, determines the ideas, ways of thinking, and the sentiments of the people” (p.61).

The final approach examined in this study, the interactive approach, is frequently left unaddressed in studies of religion and media. Primarily citing Stewart Hoover, Hosseini (2008) explains that interaction between religion and media can be seen as a “social necessity” in order to further interaction and convergence within a religious culture (p. 63). Arguing that “religious pluralism” may create a better balance between religion and the media, Hosseini (2008) writes, “there is no doubt that the theory of religious pluralism shapes our understanding about culture and, in a balanced way, interacts with religion, media diversification, and globalization” (p. 68). By more readily

utilizing Hosseini's (2008) theory of religious pluralism, media would focus more on the "ultimate objectives, goals, and meanings" (p. 68) of each religion rather than specific beliefs or teachings.

While religion has become a more newsworthy topic in recent years, it should be noted that the influence of media and religion flows both ways. Religion influences media topics, in cases such as Camping's apocalypse prediction, but the media also influences how the public perceives various religious groups. Daniel A. Stout discusses the varying opinions regarding accuracy and fair treatment of religion in the media. Although some religious leaders believe that the media present religions inaccurately, many journalists find their practices to be fair and objective. Stout (2012) writes, "Journalists and editors ... argue that religion must be reported objectively, even if the coverage is critical from time to time" (p. 103). It is noted, however, that one of the primary pitfalls of religious news coverage is that a large majority of reporters have little – if any – formal education in religious studies and must educate themselves on the topic which leaves much room for error or omitted facts (Stout, 2012, p. 105). Stout (2012) points out that it is of great importance that journalists educate themselves on various religious organizations, covering each story as accurately as possible and being inclusive toward various religions (p. 106-107). Many religious denominations rely on public relations teams or public declarations of stances on controversial issues to disseminate their information and beliefs, but this allows for many religious groups to be overlooked by the general public (Stout, 2012, p. 107). "The inclusivity principle," Stout (2012) explains, "requires journalists to get beyond restrictive perceptions and make a serious effort to cover as wide a range of religions as possible" (p. 107).

Marginalized Organizations in the Media

In his article, “Media Coverage of Unconventional Religion,” Stuart A. Wright discusses the biases in the reporting of “minority faiths” and nontraditional religion. Wright (1997) argues, “A growing number of scholars have expressed concern about the role of the media in constructing narratives that accentuate a particularly sinister picture of new religious groups” (p. 101). Targeting journalists for their lack of understanding regarding these religious groups, Wright argues that media biases of new religious movements are based on six main factors. He includes,

- 1) [J]ournalists’ knowledge/familiarity with subject matter, 2) the degree of cultural accommodation of the targeted religious group, 3) economic resources available to journalists, 4) time constraints of journalists, 5) journalists’ sources of information, and 6) the front-end/back-end disproportionality of reporting. (Wright, 1997, p. 104)

Wright (1997) points out that journalistic biases of religion are sometimes based primarily on lack of knowledge regarding new religious movements (NRMs) (p. 103). Many journalists also find these NRMs to be “culturally offensive” due to their being nontraditional (Wright, 1997, p. 103). Wright (1997) explains, “hostile media reactions to contemporary groups ... have tended to focus on unconventional marital and sexual arrangements ... news stories often parrot heresy/deception charges of religious elites or secular anticult themes” (p. 103). According to the article, not only do journalists have little knowledge of NRMs, many of their sources are often anticult organizations or advocacy groups. With some primary information coming from organizations with a clear bias against NRMs, religious reporting cannot be taken at face value. Wright (1997) urges that there should be more dialogue between journalists and academic scholars with a background of study regarding NRMs (p. 104). He notes, “journalists who cover

religion have an obligation to become familiar with the insufferable role of religious intolerance in history and to exercise caution to avoid becoming parties to reactionary elements aimed at repression of dissident religious expression” (Wright, 1997, p. 111).

Hill, Hickman, and McLendon quantitatively examine reports from several sources that discuss religious reference to the millennium or an apocalypse. The authors examine neutrality, favorability, and consistency of news coverage between established religions and newer religious organizations (Hill, Hickman, & McLendon, 2001, p. 26). Hill, Hickman & McLendon (2001) explain, “Our broad purpose in conducting this research was to advance the discussion of the issue by presenting more precise and objective evidence than might be obtained through impressionistic and unsystematic analysis of anecdote” (p. 26). Using content analysis, the authors examined five sources during 1999. Each of the sources, including two elite newspapers and three wire services, reported on religious groups of both a “traditional” and “nontraditional” nature. The research found that “mainline Protestant” groups, the Roman Catholic Church, and Evangelical groups were all presented in a more positive manner; each of these groups was characterized by positive or neutral reporting, using words such as “religion,” “church,” “group,” or “denomination” (Hill, Hickman, & McLendon, 2001, p. 31).

Regarding new religious groups, the authors explain that there are no studies of the “attitudes of members of new religious movements towards the press” (Hill, Hickman, & McLendon, 2001, p. 31), but the general feeling seems to be fear or anger toward the public and the news media. Groups such as Heaven’s Gate, Aum Shinri Kyo, and the Solar Temple were most often referred to as cults rather than a religious organization or group (Hill, Hickman, & McLendon, 2001, p. 31-32). Individual

members, however, were portrayed in a more neutral fashion than the groups or organizations themselves. Hill, Hickman, and McLendon (2001) write, “While groups were called ‘cults,’ members were called ‘members,’” (p. 33).

Hill, Hickman, and McLendon (2001) go on to explain that the media, more often than not, fail to report any information on new religious movements unless there appears to be some sort of controversy or eccentricity (p. 34). They argue that this style of reporting is unfair and dangerous, saying

First, the movement must gain access to the media ... new religious movements typically gain this access only in the most negative circumstances. Second, the media “transforms” the events they report by offering interpretations of the events that often bear little resemblance to the perspective of the group about which they report. Finally, this transformed perspective can have an impact on the movement itself (Hill, Hickman, & McLendon, 2001, p. 34-35).

By changing and interpreting the event, the media can have a direct effect on these new religious groups. Through continually reporting incorrect or negative information, the media may inadvertently assist in further misunderstandings and possible violence. Hill, Hickman, and McLendon (2001) conclude, “it would be more preferable to use terms less likely to reinforce mutual mistrust and more conducive to real understanding” (p. 35).

While few scholarly studies specifically mention Harold Camping and Family Radio, Inc. many studies examine “nontraditional” religious organizations – frequently referred to as cults. However, in his chapter of *Images That Injure*, James W. Brown points out that negative stereotyping of religion applies to both nontraditional and major world religions. Brown discusses the negative stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. By no means a small religious group, Muslims have been frequently criticized and ostracized in the United

States since these terrorist attacks. Brown (2003) explains that the days immediately following the attack yielded not only negative portrayals of the Arab and Muslim communities, but also physical attacks on organizations and individuals (p. 67). Many who fit the perceived Arab stereotype – which included virtually anyone with darker skin – were targeted as threats. “Within six days after September 11,” Brown (2003) says, “there already had been hundreds of acts of violence and harassment directed against Muslims and others perceived as Muslims” (p. 67).

Brown goes on to explain the bias that the media have fed to the American public regarding the Arab and Middle Eastern communities, even citing the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City and the initial turn on the Middle East. Dr. Sayyid Sayeed of the Islamic Society of America described his personal experience immediately after the 1995 bombing, saying, “from the beginning the media was directly jumping to the conclusion saying this was the job of Islamic fundamentalists ... they got the local congressman from Oklahoma, and he said ... it is the job of Islamic terrorists” (as cited in Brown, 2003, p. 70-71).

Apocalypse in the News

2012 was a remarkable year for apocalypse reporting, marking the year in which the Mayan calendar came to an end and doomsday was expected to begin. In an article for *Skeptical Inquirer*, David Morrison addresses looming concerns about the expected doomsday in 2012. He begins with a discussion of Nibiru, the long hypothesized extra

planet looming in the outer reaches of the solar system¹; Morrison (2011) assures the reader, “Any planetary mass approaching the inner solar system would perturb other planets ... Astronomers would already be seeing changes in the orbits of Mars and Earth. There have been no such changes detected” (p. 55). Morrison (2011) goes on to discourage a fear of solar outbursts, specifically citing Hollywood science-fiction such as the film *2012* as a major source of this concern in the public (p. 55). “In describing solar activity,” Morrison (2011) writes, “use of such phrases as ‘solar tsunami’ of ‘solar storm’ is unfortunate. It makes people think of destructive tidal waves or storms on Earth – but the Sun is 150 million kilometers away!” (p. 56). In the closing section of the article, Morrison explains that those who promote a fear of a 2012 doomsday are simply instilling unnecessary fears in the minds of the public. None of the major doomsday prediction – including the appearance of Nibiru and a change in the orbit of Earth – had come true and, thus, the concern was unnecessary (Morrison, 2011, p. 56). News outlets, Hollywood productions, and a variety of internet sources all played a major role in the promotion of the 2012 hoax and, in the end, any public concern on December 21, 2012 was all for naught.

¹ Since the publishing of Morrison’s article, further evidence has been discovered that claims a large planet in the outer solar system is much more probable than astronomers previously believed.

CHAPTER V: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In an attempt to understand how television media narrative techniques develop and construct narratives of “nontraditional” religious organizations, this research examines discussions of Harold Camping on nightly news programs featured on ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC. What general narrative is each news outlet presenting in regards to Camping? How does each featured segment utilize visuals of Camping’s followers, advertisements, and interview clips to construct a narrative of the preacher? Which advertisements were shown and how do they assist each news outlet in forming their narrative? Do the correspondents use references to pop culture in order to develop an audience connection to Camping’s story? What connections, if any, do the nightly news programs draw between Camping and other nontraditional religious organizations? Finally, what conclusions can be drawn regarding television news presentations of Harold Camping’s “nontraditional” religious organization?

CHAPTER VI: METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions above, I will utilize narrative analysis as the primary method of study. Stokes (2003) explains that narrative is present in almost all media forms due to an ingrained human desire to interpret our world and its cultural ideologies (p. 67). By utilizing narrative analysis, this study will seek to develop a better overall understanding of television news stories in regards to alternative religious organizations, specifically examining Harold Camping and Family Radio. Selected news reports will be closely examined to determine overall narrative structures, presentations and themes specific to each news outlet, and any symbolic or mythological representations.

Analyses of each report will take note of Ryan's (2004) study of narrative structures, keeping watch for the three primary elements of textual plot: characters and objects within a constructed world, changes to that world through physical events, and plans or motivations that work around the changes (p. 8-9). This breakdown of a narrative structure will be of particular importance for initial understandings of each news segment; examining each news story for these elements will help to decipher if each segment has provided a well-rounded narrative script of Family Radio's marketing campaign and in what way that story was presented to the audience. It will be of importance, however, to consider the interpretive nature of narrative. Stokes (2003) explains that narrative analysis allows us to understand the importance of structures within narratives, but warns that researchers should not be caught up in a constructed

storyline; rather, the researcher should “adopt a critical distance” from the text in order to understand and analyze the structure (p. 67).

Because this research focuses on television news segments, a number of visual elements come into play in the understanding of narrative structure. For this reason it is beneficial to touch on semiological and mythological concepts in order to interpret the usage of certain images within the story. Regarding semiotics, Stokes (2003) says, “It is about how the producer of an image makes it *mean* something and how we, as readers, *get meaning out*. It is not always the case that the reader gets the same meaning out of something that the producer put in” (p. 71). Utilizing semiological concepts will allow for a more critical examination of the visual news elements that were displayed in each news segment, including flyers, billboards, and buses.

To begin the process of researching, nightly news segments featuring coverage of Harold Camping’s apocalypse prediction were chosen and viewed at the Vanderbilt Television News Archive in Nashville, Tennessee. To narrow the scope of study, each selected news segment had an original airdate between May 11, 2011 (10 days prior to the predicted apocalypse) and May 31, 2011 (10 days following the predicted apocalypse). Selected news reports included segments from ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC. By examining news outlets from both network and cable stations in a small window of time, connections may more easily be drawn between common narrative construction, usage of visual elements, and general presentations of Camping.

Each news segment was viewed once in its entirety for general impressions. This initial viewing of each segment allowed for a more generalized understanding of the narrative construct as the news audience may have observed. Several subsequent

viewings of each segment assisted with identifying any common story themes, any common language, verbal and non-verbal cues, or visual aids that were utilized. Notes were also taken regarding the tone of each correspondent to assist in understanding the nature of the story as perceived by the audience. Several of the news segments studied also relied very heavily on interviews, both with followers and non-followers of Camping. Specific notes were taken regarding the interviewees' tones and levels of interest as they pertained to the marketing efforts.

After the early viewings, each news segment was viewed more slowly for transcription purposes. Though initially intended only for later referencing purposes, transcription of each segment allowed for a much closer examination of language and tone utilized by different correspondents, anchors, and networks. Language and tone have the potential to speak volumes about the narrative structure and, thus, will play an important role in the analysis of each news segment.

CHAPTER VII: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Born in 1921 in Boulder, Colorado, Harold Camping holds a degree in civil engineering from the University of California at Berkeley (Rey, 2011, para. 2). Camping founded Family Stations, Inc. with two others in 1958 (Rey, 2011, para. 6). The Open Forum radio program, hosted by Camping, was formed in 1961 (Camping, 2005, back cover); “Open Forum ... continues to be broadcast on more than 140 stations in the U.S.” (Rey, 2011, para. 8). According to Camping (1992), he was a “forty-year student of the Bible” and “has been steadfast in his attempts to provide biblical answers to questions posed by Open Forum listeners” (p. 552).

In Camping’s (2005) book *Time Has an End: A Biblical History of the World 11,013 BC – 2011 AD*, he states, “We ... have found considerable evidence that there is a high likelihood that the year 2011 will be the year in which the end will come” (p. xv). *Time Has an End* and the predictions that lie within the book became the focus of intense media frenzy as Family Radio listeners and followers took to the streets in 2011. In a Huffington Post article, Jaweed Kaleem (2011) writes, “In the last week, variations of ‘End of the World May 21st’ and ‘Harold Camping’ have remained among the top search terms on Google” (para. 4). Kaleem (2011) goes on to explain, “Complex Biblical numerology partially based on a literal reading of the King James Bible and partially based and [sic] obscure interpretation of the book’s many symbols form the basis for Camping’s warnings (para. 7).

In the days immediately following May 21, 2011, various news outlets made mention of Camping's failed prediction. A CNN article explained, "This just in: Doomsday is doomed. And the world is still here. After months of warnings and fear ... as darkness fell on many parts of the world, it appeared that heaven could wait" (It's NOT, 2011, para. 2-3). Feigning excitement, Brad Knickerbocker (2011) of the Christian Science Monitor wrote, "There's a lot I still have to do. Like organize my sock drawer and change the strings on my banjo" (2011, para. 4). Jessica Ravitz (2011) shed light on the new hardship for some of Camping's followers, saying, "Theirs had been an unwavering belief, the sort that inspired some to quit jobs, leave their homes and walk away from family and friends to issue a doomsday warning" (para. 1).

Following the May 2011 prediction date, a final date was set for exactly five months after the May apocalypse prediction on October 21, 2011. In the days after the October prediction, amidst stirs of naysayers and many referring to him as a false prophet, Camping and Family Radio issued a small number of brief statements to the press. When approached by the Associated Press, Camping's daughter Susan Espinoza said, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but we at Family Radio have been directed to not talk to the media or the press" (Harold Camping, 2011, para. 3). Camping, when approached by Reuters, insisted, "We're not having a conversation ... There's nothing to report here" (Harold Camping, 2011, para. 5). Several reports following the final failed prediction noted that the company experienced financial difficulties. In March of 2012, Camping issued a lengthy statement to the employees and listeners of Family Radio. In his letter, Camping writes,

The May 21 campaign was an astounding event if you think about its impact upon this world. There is no question that millions, if not billions of people heard for the first time the Bible's warning that Jesus Christ will return ... Yes, we humbly acknowledge we were wrong about the timing; yet though we were wrong God is still using the May 21 warning in a very mighty way. In the months following May 21 the Bible has, in some ways, come out from under the shadows (as cited in LeClaire, 2012, para. 4-5).

After the final prediction date passed, several reports mentioned possible declines in Family Radio listenership and funding for Family Services, Inc. Adelle M. Banks (2013) reported that the failed 2011 predictions might have resulted in the downfall of Family Radio (para. 1). Banks (2013) mentions that stations had been sold, staff members had been laid off, and net assets had dropped by over \$100 million between 2007 and 2011 (para. 2). One former employee, Matt Tuter, suggested that selling off several of the Family Radio stations was the company's way of "killing it off" (Banks, 2013, para. 6-7). On the other hand, Family Radio board member Tom Evans suggested that the company was simply facing difficult financial times (Banks, 2013, para. 8). As of the completion time of this research, both Internet and mobile streaming services remain available through the Family Radio, Inc. website, featuring playlists and on-demand program options.

General Overview

In each of the studied television news outlets, Camping is understood as the primary character in the narrative script and is most commonly depicted as the outlandish, outspoken preacher. One report even compares Camping to the story of the Boy Who Cried Wolf, a well-known morality tale in which a shepherd boy is ultimately punished for continually lying about a wolf that terrorizes his flock. Camping followers

such as Robert Fitzpatrick – mentioned in ABC reports from May 21 and 22, 2011 – are most commonly presented as secondary characters to the narrative script; they are primarily viewed as another vehicle through which Camping was able to spread his prediction. An important aspect of Ryan's (2004) definition of narrative script is changes through physical events in the constructed world (p. 8-9). Unfortunately, Camping's followers are presented as the characters that will see the brunt of this change. Many followers are reported to have used their life's savings to spread Camping's prediction to the masses.

The final feature of Ryan's (2004) theory of narrative script, motivation to work around the changes to the constructed world (p. 8-9), is presented to the audience from different angles. In the earlier reports from ABC, CBS, and NBC, video footage is shown of Camping and his followers urging the audience to take action and join their cause. Rather than urging any motivation for action, the news outlets seem to tell the audience that they may work around these changes by simply taking a "we'll see what happens" approach to Camping's prediction.

Of all the studied news outlets, CNN featured the most nontraditional narrative script. Though the report does contain Ryan's (2004) essential features for a narrative script, the narrative structure of CNN's report varies greatly from the other reports. With heavy emphasis on satirical reporting, CNN's Anderson Cooper produces a highly cynical and unimpressed narrative of Camping. In the context of Labov's six primary elements for narrative, Cooper focuses the majority of his report on the evaluation element which produces a report that focuses greatly on the attitude of the narrator toward Camping. CNN's evaluation of Camping's prediction contains much of the same

viewpoints as the other reports, but Cooper uses the most mocking tone of all the featured correspondents. Through the use of interview clips of Camping bumbling through the explanation of his prediction, as well strategically chosen musical elements and pop culture references, Cooper creates a narrative in which Camping is simply a disingenuous, intolerant buffoon.

The implied discourse of almost all of the studied reports suggests little belief in Camping and his followers; rather, each of the reports suggest that there is a mutual skepticism of Camping between the news outlets and the audience. Whether it be through smirks from the correspondents, emphasis on how shocking it is that many are willing to believe Camping, or through references to social media trends, each news outlet seems to understand that the majority of its audience will not see the facts of this story as important to their everyday lives. Through a tongue-in-cheek style of reporting, each news outlet makes the audience comfortable with their distrust of Camping. A number of the reports reference the satirical representation of Camping through various social media outlets. In its May 20, 2011 report, Fox News utilizes a satirical discourse through host Trace Gallagher. The host converses with religious correspondent, Lauren Green, creating a dual discourse on this notoriously conservative news outlet. While Gallagher mocks Camping, asking if anyone is actually taking the prediction seriously, Green is often more willing to openly make biblical references. In her closing statement, Green cites a biblical verse in which it says, “No one can predict when judgment day will happen” (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 20). In order to relate with the Fox News audience, Green and Gallagher produce this dual discourse, which provides an accessible discourse for the audience despite any religious affiliations.

Almost all of the studied reports spent time discussing the impact of Camping's advertising campaign, with particular emphasis placed on billboards, video advertisements, and clothing worn by Camping supporters. These audio and visual elements produce familiar Christian symbols that may resonate with some of the television news audience; however, when coupled with a previously understood discourse, the mythology behind each Christian symbol may no longer hold as much weight with the audience.

Both CNN and NBC make references to the R.E.M. song "It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)." The popular song, known for its fast-moving lyrical style and references to a number of political leaders and pop culture figures, furthers the relationship between the news outlets and their audiences. By the nature of the song title and lyrics, it can be interpreted as each news outlet telling their audience not to take Camping's prediction to heart – it may be the end of the world, but everyone at CNN and NBC feel fine about it. In addition to the R.E.M. song, CNN also utilizes particularly dramatic music at various times during the report. Most likely a stock recording, the music is dramatic and threatening in a way that brings to mind soap opera plotlines. The music peppers in a bit of humor to Cooper's already satirical report, rather than actually making the audience feel concerned. During Cooper's report, he briefly references Yo Mama's Big Fat Booty Band. The band itself is completely irrelevant to Camping and his prediction, but the intriguing name of the band symbolizes the lighthearted and satirical way in which CNN presents their story.

Each news outlet and its corresponding reports are examined in further detail in the sections below. Particular attention is paid to Camping's role as the narrative figure of

each report, language and terminology as it pertains to the discourse of each news outlet, and any featured visual or audio elements that may contribute to the audience interpretation of the report.

Network News Reports

ABC

The first ABC report studied aired on the May 20, 2011 episode of ABC World News. In his introduction to the story, host David Muir mentions the widespread interest and belief in Camping's prediction. As he begins his introduction to the story, on the right of the screen we see "End of the World..." displayed, with an image above of one of Camping's most popular billboard advertisements. The advertisement features "Judgment Day May 21" prominently at the top, with a man's crouched silhouette as the sun sets in the background. Muir reads a quote that states, "Beyond the shadow of a doubt, May 21 will be the date of The Rapture and the day of judgment" (as cited in ABC, 2011, May 20) The quote, which is credited to Camping, appears on screen overtop of an image of a red and yellow sky with a cross depicted in the bottom right corner of the screen. Before the story even moves to the correspondent, the audience has already been presented with visual imagery that evokes a feeling of uncertainty and concern that is directly associated to the religious imagery. Muir's delivery and body language convey a very neutral introduction to the story, but the audience may still feel a strange uncertainty that has been created through the brief visuals utilized in this opening.

Conducted by correspondent David Wright, this report features a narrative structure that is only loosely centered on Camping. Despite the fact that his prediction is

the root of the story itself, he is only featured twice during this report. Shown in the first minute of the report is a very brief segment of an interview in which Wright sits down with Camping. In this interview, Camping is shown in what appears to be the Family Radio, Inc. studio, a somewhat drab room with only a few pieces of décor. Camping wears a nondescript beige suit and speaks slowly as he discusses where and when his predicted doomsday will begin. Wright clarifies the timing for the predicted rapture with a sly smile on his face. His physical reaction, coupled with a slight tone of sarcasm, shows the audience early on that the correspondent is not convinced of this prediction, and maybe the audience shouldn't be either. The second and final time the audience sees this interview with Camping, Wright asks him if he would be "the preacher who cried wolf" (ABC, 2011, May 20) should his prediction not come true. By associating Camping with the widely known morality tale of the Boy Who Cried Wolf, Wright has planted an overall lack of belief in the minds of the audience.

One of the most important aspects of ABC's narrative is the advertising capability of Camping and his followers. Camping's supporters are presented as widespread, enthusiastic advertisers who will travel wherever necessary to spread their message. Wright begins his story by touching upon several locations within the United States in which Camping's advertisements have been featured. With each city or state mentioned in his introduction, images of various advertisements are shown on trucks, billboards, the walls of subway platforms, and even the clothing of Camping's followers. All of the advertising presented to the audience is bold in its wording or symbology, with one advertisement on the wall of a subway station claiming, "Global Earthquake: the Greatest Ever!" Advertising such as this is clearly meant to arouse a strong fearful reaction from

passersby in the wake of the 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami that had occurred only two months prior in Japan.

In addition to the Family Radio, Inc. paid advertisements, Wright makes it a point to mention the impact that social media had on the spread of Camping's prediction. He cites top Google searches and Twitter trends as well as a Twitter post from comedian Jon Stewart; Stewart's post exclaimed, "Happy Friday! Consider this tweet your daily reminder of the coming apocalypse. Your days are numbered. Have a good one!" (as cited in ABC, 2011, May 20). By including this quote near the end of the report, Wright once again reinforces the general disbelief that seems to permeate his story.

The second ABC report aired on May 21, 2011, the date of the rapture prediction. The report begins with host Josh Elliott, smirking a bit as he says, "The apocalypse is running a bit behind" (ABC, 2011, May 21). Unlike the first ABC report that was examined, no religious imagery or ominous statements were utilized in the opening of this report. On the right of the screen we again see a photo of the popular billboard that exclaims "Judgment Day May 21" and depicts the silhouette of a crouched man. The banner beneath the photo reads, "World Still Standing." The combination of this popular advertisement and the tongue-in-cheek caption alerts the audience from the very beginning of the report that this story is primarily to mock Camping and his failed prediction. Elliott turns the report to correspondent Ron Claiborne, who stands on the street of Times Square. Claiborne mentions that it had begun to rain around Camping's 6:00 p.m. prediction time, but with a slight smile he says, "Nothing like the cataclysm that was predicted" (ABC, 2011, May 21). Before even moving past the opening to this

report, the audience can already infer Camping's lack of credibility from the host and correspondent's comments.

Claiborne's report begins with video footage scanning quickly around a small, unremarkable room, full of what can only be assumed are Camping followers, as Camping himself stands at a podium for his sermon. The audience sees a brief portion of David Wright's interview with Camping from the previous ABC report, in which he claims, "I am utterly, absolutely, absolutely convinced it [the rapture] is going to happen" (ABC, 2011, May 21). By placing this particular quote in the report on the predicted date of the rapture, it is quite evident how little belief the ABC audience is expected to have in Camping. After this brief interview clip has been shown, he is only shown once more in the report.

In the primary narrative of this ABC report, the audience is given a real world example of the effects this failed prediction has had on those who believed in and monetarily supported the Family Radio, Inc. advertising campaign. Claiborne introduces Robert Fitzpatrick, a follower of Camping who spent over \$100,000 on advertising in New York City to warn others of the predicted rapture. Claiborne speaks to Fitzpatrick shortly before 6:00 p.m. as he waits in Times Square for the event to begin, still confident in Camping's prediction. As the report moves forward, the correspondent informs the audience that, as Fitzpatrick realized that nothing would become of this prediction, he seemed "stunned and a little bit saddened" (ABC, 2011, May 21). The end of the report leaves the audience left with a sense of sadness for this man. Fitzpatrick had spent the majority of his life's savings on advertising and now had nothing to show for it. The story of Robert Fitzpatrick carried into the third ABC report, making ABC the only network to

remain with a Camping follower through the 6:00 p.m. prediction time and meet with that follower the next day.

Though Claiborne and the ABC network do not exhibit sympathy toward Camping in particular, it would seem that narrative focus has shifted to concern for the wellbeing of those who held a belief in his prediction. After Fitzpatrick's story is first mentioned, Claiborne says, "Inevitably, these doomsday prophets were the target of ridicule" (ABC, 2011, May 21). A brief clip from an unidentified YouTube¹ video is shown in which the subject – a young man with dreadlocks, ripped jeans, and a shirt that reads, "Do you have what it takes?" – stands in various spots of a living room shouting at the camera about the rapture. Almost certainly a mockery of Camping's prediction, this brief YouTube clip is simply another channel through which ABC can express just how little credibility the preacher and Family Radio, Inc. now hold. An advertisement for "After the Rapture Pet Care" appears on screen next as Claiborne explains, "this service promising, for a small fee, to take care of the pet you leave behind if you ascend to Heaven" (ABC, 2001, May 21). A variety of entrepreneurial businesses were advertised in the wake of Camping's prediction, offering services to those who believed they would leave behind loved ones or properties at 6:00 p.m. on May 21, 2011. This particular instance may be intended to provide the audience with a few different reactions. The audience could simply see both of the businesses as mockery of Camping and his followers, but when considering the monetary tragedies so many followers felt upon the

¹ YouTube is an open forum-style website for individual content creators to share videos. The website "provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire other...and act as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers" (About YouTube, n.d.).

failed prediction, it is easy to feel sympathy for those who were purely duped into paying for post-rapture services.

In addition to the major focus on Camping's followers, this report points out the popularity and frequency of apocalypse predictions in world culture. In a statement from Michael Moyer of Scientific American Magazine he says, "This has been going on pretty much since the Bible was written nineteen-hundred years ago, if not before then" (ABC, 2011, May 21). Claiborne goes on to compare Camping's failed prediction to another well-known prediction, the Great Disappointment of 1844. When speaking of the Great Disappointment, the same background of a red and yellow sky with a cross in the bottom corner appears on screen. This background was previously used in David Muir's introduction to the ABC report from May 20, 2011. By once again showing this religious imagery coupled with Camping's ominous words of warning, ABC has provided the audience with a direct association between Camping and the phrase "the Great Disappointment." To ensure the audience does not miss this association, Claiborne reminds the audience that May 21, 2011 was the second failed prediction for Camping, the first being in 1994.

The final ABC report from May 22, 2011 largely shifts its narrative purpose to that of Camping's follower, Robert Fitzpatrick, first mentioned in the ABC report from May 21, 2011. Camping is mentioned only briefly during this report. Video footage is primarily recycled from the previous report, but the audience does receive a brief look at the exterior of Camping's home as Claiborne says, "He is home in seclusion ... he's mystified that his doomsday prediction did not come true" (ABC, 2011, May 22).

At the start of this final report a photo of Fitzpatrick is shown with a tagline beneath it that reads “Apocalypse Not,” a reference to Francis Ford Coppola’s Vietnam War film, *Apocalypse Now*. The tagline features a similar red and yellow background to previous ABC report taglines, directly providing the audience with the ability to associate this report with previous ABC reports. Host David Muir reminds the audience of the monetary loss suffered by Fitzpatrick, but concludes his introduction asking, “How does he now explain himself?” (ABC, 2011, May 22). Through this introduction the audience is presented with conflicting ideas of Fitzpatrick. From one perspective, Fitzgerald is a follower of an evangelist with outlandish ideas of the apocalypse; from another perspective, he has now lost his life’s savings trying to warn the public of, what he believes to be, impending danger. During the first two ABC reports the audience was carefully led down a path of mistrust and lack of sympathy for Camping, but feelings towards his followers have been less clear. Should the audience feel remorse for Fitzpatrick or should they ridicule him?

Ron Claiborne’s report begins with footage of Fitzpatrick waiting in the streets of Times Square at 6:00 p.m. on May 21, 2011. Cameras and onlookers surround him as they await his reaction to the failed rapture prediction. The camera zooms in on a very somber Fitzpatrick as people in the crowd begin to celebrate that the predicted time has come and gone with no apparent changes. Claiborne says, “As some of the crowd jeered, Fitzpatrick looked stunned” (ABC, 2011, May 22). Fitzpatrick dejectedly tells Claiborne that Camping’s predictions all indicated that 2011 would be the year of the rapture and eventual apocalypse. Later in the report Claiborne visits Fitzpatrick in his home, where they read a newspaper article with the headline “The End Comes and Goes” with

Fitzpatrick's photo printed beneath. Though suffering from a severe monetary loss, the Camping follower maintained his optimism saying that the posters would remain and "the warning on those signs is still valid" (ABC, 2011, May 22). Through this story of hardship, a much more emotional narrative connection to Camping's followers has been presented.

The impact of social media is, once again, touched upon during this report; Claiborne says, "The internet was brimming with mockery of Camping and his followers, some posting photos of empty clothes, ridiculing the rapture that was supposed to have occurred on doomsday" (ABC, 2011, May 22). Empty clothing is shown arranged on a park bench, sidewalk, staircase, and a couch – on the couch, the clothing is arranged facing a laptop that has been opened to Facebook. The photos are shown only briefly, but a very clear story begins to emerge in regards to the social media impact Camping's prediction has made. The outstanding impact of social media on the spread of Camping's prediction did not necessarily translate to an understanding of or respect for his followers. However disrespected or marginalized Camping's followers may have been during the lead up to the predicted rapture date, it seems as if this final ABC report may have assisted in humanizing Fitzpatrick and other followers to the audience; rather than remaining an anonymous portion of a Google search, Twitter trend, or Facebook photo, at least a few of these followers may now be seen as alienated citizens who have been fooled into spiritual and monetary distress.

CBS

CBS News featured two reports during the studied time frame, with the first airing on May 20, 2011. In the opening to the program, anchor Harry Smith briefly introduces each of the reports that will be shown in that evening's episode. When introducing the topic of Camping's prediction, Smith makes with a subtle reference to Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, saying "Apocalypse when? How about tomorrow?" (CBS, 2011, May 20). This brief introduction marks the second time that the Vietnam War film is referenced in the studied reports, the first being in ABC's final report on May 22, 2011. Though only a brief mention, this connection between Camping's prediction and the popular film marks an immediate link in narrative structure and presentation between networks.

Later in the episode, as correspondent Bill Whitaker introduces the report, a number of advertisements for Camping's prediction flash quickly across the screen. In a matter of only 15 seconds, the audience sees several versions of the billboard featuring a crouching man, two separate signs displaying "Be not wise in thine own eyes" from Proverbs 3:7, a van advertising "Judgment Day May 21," and a backpack mounted sign warning of earthquakes and Armageddon. These visual elements, along with a recording of Camping ominously saying, "May 21, 2011 is the day of judgment," immediately constructs the character of an outlandish, fear-mongering minister. Contributing to the idea of a fear-mongering minister, CBS features a portion of the audio from Camping's interview in which he says "There's going to be a huge earthquake that's going to make the big earthquake in Japan seem like a Sunday school picnic" (CBS, 2011, May 20). A similar reference to the 9.0 magnitude earthquake in Japan is shown on a billboard in the

first ABC report from May 20, 2011. This connection to the large-scale earthquake is used by Camping to convey and symbolize the degree of importance of his prediction. CBS plays the audio of Camping's statement while showing images of people running from collapsing buildings during the earthquake in Japan; rather than conveying an importance of his prediction, CBS is reminding the audience of the effects of this natural disaster and cleverly pointing out how Camping may be playing into preexisting fears to find more followers.

Similar to the ABC report from May 20, 2011, an interview clip is shown in which Camping sits in the Family Radio, Inc. studio; curiously, the interview footage looks almost identical to the interview footage from ABC. Camping is shown once again wearing a nondescript beige suit, his tie the only discernable difference in his physical appearance from the ABC interview. A bible lies open on his lap as he speaks somewhat slowly to the interviewer. With such a direct similarity in Camping's appearance, these brief interview segments feel more like stock footage than an actual interview; since a CBS interviewer is never actually shown, it is difficult to say if this interview was given directly to CBS or if it may indeed be footage from an outside source.

As with the ABC reports, one of the most important aspects to the CBS narrative script is the mastery of advertising. In addition to the various advertisements featured in the opening to the report, Whitaker goes on to say, "He [Camping] spread his prophecy around the world on his Family Radio network in 84 languages...on RV caravans, on twelve-hundred billboards around the country" (CBS, 2011, May 20). Throughout the report we continue to see signs advertising Family Radio, Inc. and Camping's predicted rapture date, along with footage of Camping's followers standing near crowded city

streets and urging others to adopt their beliefs. Rev. Michael Seiler of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church chimes in on Camping's predicted rapture date and the widespread advertising campaign. Rev. Seiler says, "It's a combination of a very new and rather peculiar way of reading the Bible, coupled with brilliant 20th century American marketing" (CBS, 2011, May 20). This statement brings to light the only direct seeds of doubt featured in this report. Though the interview clip may be intended to plant distrust of Camping in the minds of the audience, Whitaker mostly remains careful not to insert any personal biases or hints of satire into his own dialogue.

This CBS report spends less time focusing on Camping's followers than ABC reports. Rather than showing a number of interviews, CBS focuses primarily on the paid advertisements around the country. Featured only briefly is Camping follower Ken Ronning, who stands on the street corner of a busy intersection with another follower of Camping. The pair are shown passing out pamphlets while both wear hats and sweatshirts advertising the predicted rapture date. Ronning speaks only a few words of warning before the report quickly turns back to footage of various advertisements and begins discussing the monetary aspects of Camping's advertising campaign. Interestingly, this report features one of the only moments during the studied time frame in which specific monetary value of the advertising campaign is mentioned. Whitaker says, "Family Radio spent as much as \$1,000,000 on the billboard campaign" (CBS, 2011, May 20). He goes on to explain that the value of the company has increase tremendously in a relatively short period of time, jumping from approximately \$22 million in 2002 to more than \$117 million by 2008 (CBS, 2011, May 20).

The impact of social media and pop culture on the spread of Camping's prediction was not lost on CBS. Immediately after Rev. Seiler mentions the brilliance of the marketing campaign, Whitaker says, "The end has become a cultural touchstone for late-night comics" (CBS, 2011, May 20). In a short clip from the Late Show with David Letterman, we briefly see a list of "Ways to Make the Apocalypse More Fun;" in the top spot on the list, Letterman says, "More fun? What's more fun than the apocalypse?" (as cited in CBS, 2011, May 20). Similar to Ron Claiborne's reporting style in the ABC segments, Whitaker remains mostly neutral in his general presentation. Rather than have the correspondent directly express distrust in Camping, it appears as if CBS has utilized pop culture references in order to indirectly express to their audience a distrust of and lack of belief in Camping and his prediction.

The second report from CBS aired on the date of the rapture prediction, May 21, 2011. Anchor Russ Mitchell is outwardly critical of Camping in the introduction to the report, calling the prediction a "much ballyhooed end of times prophecy" (CBS, 2011, May 21). Correspondent Ben Tracy presented this second CBS report in a very similar style to Bill Whitaker's previous report. Tracy introduces the report by pointing out that mankind has wondered about the end for centuries, but Hollywood in particular seems highly interested in apocalypse stories over the last several decades. In yet another connection to Coppola's film, Tracy references this Hollywood obsession with the end times, saying "welcome to apocalypse now" (CBS, 2011, May 21). The report initially opens with scenes from the films *2012* and *The Day After Tomorrow*, depicting natural disasters of epic proportions as citizens run – or in the case of *2012*, fly – toward shelter. Though brief, the featured scenes from these films are used to familiarize the audience

both with Hollywood's obsession with apocalypse stories and with Camping's belief of how the world may end. In comparing his prediction to these highly constructed dramas, CBS is essentially creating the narrative of Camping as the storyteller, not Camping as the prophet.

Interview footage of Camping was used only briefly in the second CBS report, and the small amount of footage that was shown had been shown previously in the May 20, 2011 CBS report. Interesting to note, however, is the change in language between the first and second reports; on May 20, 2011 Camping was cited as "President, Family Stations, Inc.," but in the second report he is cited as "Christian Evangelist." His position is shown only briefly in each report, but this abrupt change from the respectable title of "President" to the more generic title of "Evangelist" indicates a shift in the standpoint of CBS's narrative structure. This title change implies to the audience that, now that his prediction has failed, CBS no longer considers Camping worthy of the respect due to the president of a company. His position within Family Stations, Inc. and Family Radio, Inc. did not change in the one day between these reports, but CBS did change the narrative script.

More so than the previous day's report, this segment featured a number of short clips in which the general public was asked what they thought of Camping's predictions. Rather than speaking with any Camping supporters, those who were interviewed generally seemed skeptical or disinterested in the prediction. One woman called the predicted rapture "bologna" while another woman mocked the sheer number of apocalypse predictions, saying, "How many times can the world end?" (CBS, 2011, May 21). Rev. Seiler is featured once again, saying, "It [the rapture prediction] doesn't say

anything about the Bible. It says a lot about their imagination” (CBS, 2011, May 21). As with the previously mentioned subtle change in Camping’s title, CBS chose to feature interviews such as these in order for the audience to see a clear change to the narrative script. Camping’s impending rapture time had come and gone, leaving no reason to take him seriously or interview any of his followers.

It seems as if this second report is made to focus more on explaining why the public is interested in an apocalypse story rather than how the predicted apocalypse may have come to pass. Rather than focusing on the impact of social media and pop culture, this report featured only one brief clip from a British news report in which the host pokes fun at Camping, saying, “It’s particularly good to be with you tonight since the world was supposed to come to an end ten minutes ago” (as cited in CBS, 2011, May 21). Even though CBS doesn’t seem to have a problem expressing the invalidity of Camping’s prediction, the report still seeks to use sarcasm via comedians or other reports rather than directly satirizing the story like many other news outlets.

NBC

NBC featured two reports that fell within the studied time frame, allotting almost the exact same amount of airtime to this story as CBS. From the onset of the first report, on May 20, 2011, there is an air of satirical narrative script. Host David Gregory begins, “Big plans this weekend? If so, you may never get to them if you believe a Christian broadcaster and all the people around the world who buy his prediction” (NBC, 2011, May 20). In this opening statement an emphasis is put on the word “buy” in an effort to indicate to the audience that some people wholeheartedly believe Camping’s prediction,

even if it is a bit bizarre. Interestingly, though the word “buy” is emphasized in the opening, this report features no discussion of the monetary value of Family Radio, Inc. or the extent to which Camping followers were willing to pay for advertising.

In this report, the combination of interviews with Camping supporters and those who do not believe his prediction makes for a somewhat balanced examination of this story. As correspondent Kerry Sanders begins the report, we briefly see footage of Camping supporters preaching in public about the coming rapture date, followed soon after by an interview with Camping spokesman, Gunter von Harringa. This interview with von Harringa marks the only moment in the studied time frame in which a Camping representative is interviewed on camera. He fervently assures Sanders that he will not be able to interview Camping after the predicted time of the rapture, “because he won’t be here after tomorrow” (NBC, 2011, May 20). Later in the report, Sanders speaks briefly with a Camping follower who says that none of her friends and family believe Camping’s prediction and all think her to be crazy. Between these interviews with Camping followers, we see a brief clip of a woman who jokingly says, “No cooking for my husband or...cleaning up the house. I’m done!” (NBC, 2011, May 20). This response to the predicted rapture makes a fairly clear statement in regards to the public sentiment toward Camping; even with what appears to be a large amount of support for him, the general public still doesn’t seem convinced by or invested in the predicted rapture.

In addition to interviews with Camping supporters and non-supporters, this NBC report features the only interview with an outspoken skeptic, Michael Shermer. Shermer is the founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, a contributing writer to *Scientific American*, and an author of various nonfiction books, including *The Believing Brain*:

From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies – How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths (Shermer, 2015). In his interview, Shermer says, “No one ever says, ‘You know what? We were wrong. This was a completely bad idea’” (NBC, 2011, May 20). In this brief interview clip, NBC utilizes Shermer’s statement to construct a crucial part to the narrative of the apocalyptic predictor – only rarely will someone admit failure as a prophet for fear of losing followers, credibility, and in some cases, monetary gain.

In a small portion of the interview with Camping spokesman, von Harringa, he attempts to explain the biblical numerology used to determine the May 21, 2011 rapture date. Camping’s particular method of deciphering the rapture date should have been of interest to each of the news reports, but only two other reports – CNN’s May 20, 2011 report and Fox News’s May 20, 2011, both discussed later in this chapter – briefly discuss the mathematic equation used to determine the date of the rapture. In von Harringa’s interview, he only begins to explain the mathematic equation; he says, “If you go from 4990 B.C. and you add 2011, minus 1” (NBC, 2011, May 20), but the interview clip is abruptly cut off at this point. In only a few seconds, von Harringa has made any ability to understand this predicted date even more convoluted and confusing. The interview segment seems to have been cut off before the audience lost interest or was further confused by his explanation. Sanders explains away the mathematical aspect of this prediction, saying, “The biblical story of Noah’s ark, when the earth flooded exactly 7,000 years ago, set the table for another apocalypse tomorrow” (NBC, 2011, May 20).

To conclude his report, Sanders appears on screen and asks the audience what they would do “if tomorrow were the end” (NBC, 2011, May 20). He smiles and says he

plans to relax, then puts on a pair of headphones to “listen to some R.E.M” as the song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)” begins to play. The song continues through his outro as Sanders smiles and waves to the audience. All of the studied news outlets made some reference to the impact of social media or pop culture on the spread of Camping’s prediction, but this report is one of only two that featured music and lyrics specifically tailored to the story at hand. This connection to musical culture functions in much the same way as previous connections to major motion pictures or social media interest. The link to this well-known song familiarizes the audience with longstanding media interest in the apocalypse and presents Camping within the narrative of a previously understood story.

NBC’s second report, which aired on May 21, 2011, is introduced by anchor Lester Holt. In his introduction, Holt mentions that Camping spent “millions of dollars in contributions from his followers to advertise the end of days” (NBC, 2011, May 21). This brief mention of the advertising cost is the only time in either NBC report that monetary concerns are discussed. Furthermore, correspondent George Lewis mentions only once in his report that information was disseminated through a widespread advertising campaign. Of the news outlets studied for this research, NBC appears to be the least concerned with the direct costs behind the advertising campaign or how this might have impacted the lives of Camping’s followers.

Featured in the first minute of Lewis’s report is an interview segment in which Anthea Butler, of the University of Pennsylvania Religious Studies, cites the large number of apocalyptic predictors over the years. Butler states, “There’s a long history of people making prophetic statements about the end of the world, and Harold Camping is

just in a long line of failures” (NBC, 2011, May 21). Several of the other featured interviews hint at distrust of Camping, but Butler’s is the only statement featured in the studied reports that directly calls him a “failure.” Lewis had previously mentioned in the opening to the report that “nothing out of the ordinary” happened at Camping’s predicted rapture time, but the choice to feature this statement from Butler draws a clear line in the narrative script for NBC. The network is explicitly telling the audience that there is no reason for any further trust or belief in Camping’s prediction. Later in the report, more of Anthea Butler’s interview is featured, in which she expresses concern for the wellbeing of Camping’s followers. She mentions her concern for their mental state following the failed prediction, saying “I think it’s important to watch out for people who were in the midst of this group to make sure that they don’t harm themselves, or that they don’t harm others” (NBC, 2011, May 21). NBC never directly mentions the use of large monetary contributions from Camping’s followers.

In his report Lewis points out the large impact the prediction has had on social media sites in the days leading up to Camping’s predicted date. Lewis explains, “People had a field day in the social media, posting pictures and video of empty suits” (NBC, 2011, May 20). Of the reports studied for this research, this was one of only two reports to mention this very common social media post associated with Camping’s prediction. On the date of the predicted rapture, photos appeared all over the Internet of empty articles of clothing, laid out as if the owners had suddenly been raptured with only their outfits left behind to prove it. Continuing with the connection between Camping’s prediction and social media, Lewis cites posts from Twitter in which one user said, “This is my first rapture. I’m trying to figure out what to wear,” while another wrote, “People

are making rapture jokes like there's no tomorrow" (as cited in NBC, 2011, May 21). The influence of social media on the spread of Camping's prediction is clear, but Lewis also points out that recently occurring natural disasters around the world may have also lent credence to public belief that an apocalyptic disaster was looming. NBC quickly flashes through video footage from the Japanese earthquake, tornadoes moving through the southern United States, and flooding along the Mississippi river. As with CBS's report from May 21, 2011, it seems that Lewis has shifted the NBC narrative toward an attempt at understanding why many people may believe that a rapture or apocalypse date may be approaching.

Lewis closes out the report with a brief mention of Jim Jones and the mass suicide of his followers in Guyana. Though he clarifies that no one has suggested this type of outcome from Camping's followers, it is an interesting reference to leave the audience with at the end of the report. Even though there have been no rumors that Camping followers may be suicidal, concluding this report with a mild comparison between Camping and Jones entirely shifts the previously constructed narrative. This reference to a maniacal cult leader has shifted the overall narrative tone from one of mild, lighthearted social media chatter to a somewhat more sinister outlook.

Overall, this report featured far less focus on visual imagery associated with Camping's prediction. Photos and video footage of Camping or his followers was previously used in the May 20, 2011 NBC report. Rather than focusing on an ominous prediction, this report provides the audience a more lighthearted approach to Camping's prediction. The mentions of social media posts and the frequency of apocalyptic

predictions all but removed any possible trust the audience may have developed for Camping.

Cable News Reports

CNN

Deviating in almost every way from the reporting format of the other studied networks, the only report from CNN that fit within the studied time frame was bursting with irony. This report aired on the May 20, 2011 episode of Anderson Cooper 360°. As the episode begins to wind down, anchor Anderson Cooper introduces the Ridiculist, a recurring segment in which absurd or comical stories are discussed. Due to the nature of the Ridiculist segment, it is made immediately clear to the audience that Cooper and his staff will not be presenting this story in a serious manner.

Rather than placing Camping or his followers on the Ridiculist, Cooper begins the report saying, “Since the world is certainly, definitely coming to an end tomorrow, tonight we’re adding anyone who’s ignored this indisputable fact and made plans for the weekend” (CNN, 2011). The narrative structure and tone of this report are immediately set with this brief introduction to Camping’s story. Cooper sarcastically says that the world will “certainly, definitely” end, indicating to the audience that CNN’s narrative will be a satirical presentation that the audience is not intended to take seriously. Cooper goes on to emphasize the lack of reliability he sees in Camping. When discussing how the predicted date was decided upon, Cooper chuckles and mockingly says, “Well, it’s just simple math” (CNN, 2011). Immediately following are several low-quality video clips in which Camping stumbles through an attempted explanation of his numerological basis

for the prediction. Cooper goes on to mention a number of scheduled events on the date of the rapture prediction, sarcastically assuring the audience that a Dodgers baseball game is “not gonna happen” and those with tickets to a Yanni concert “should have saved your money” (CNN, 2011).

Though the narrative CNN presents is certainly one of satire, the Anderson Cooper 360° segment allowed for the largest amount of footage in which Camping himself is featured. The majority of the other studied reports featured only brief segments of interviews, short audio clips, or stock video and photos; Cooper’s report, on the other hand, allowed for three separate clips of Camping discussing his predictions and various background footage or photos. The report did allow Camping to speak for himself via the video footage, but it appears that the intention of the report was to feature some of the most absurd statements thereby allowing Camping to present himself as foolish.

Cooper’s report seems to spend less time focusing on Camping’s followers than many of the other studied reports. In the opening of the report a still photo is shown featuring a crowd of Camping supports holding signs and wearing clothing warning of the predicted judgment day. Featured prominently in the front of the photo is a man who balances on his shoulders a sign that reads, “Judgment Day May 21, 2011 ‘be not wise in thine own eyes’ Prov. 3:7” (CNN, 2011). This particular photo choice adds greatly to the satirical narrative that Cooper is trying to construct for the audience. The featured proverb, roughly translated, tells the reader not to assume one’s own knowledge is absolutely correct. For the purposes of CNN’s satirical narrative, this proverb seems to be telling people not to worry about their own understanding of the world and just to accept Camping’s understanding of the world.

CNN was one of only two networks – the other being NBC – to utilize music with a thematic reference to the report. In the opening to the report, Cooper quotes the R.E.M. song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine).” He smugly says, “Although I don’t like to argue with [lead singer] Michael Stipe, I don’t feel fine about it” (CNN, 2011). Also referenced in NBC’s May 20, 2011 report, the connection between this very popular song and Camping’s prediction informs the audience of a longstanding narrative regarding doomsday predictions. Cooper continuously uses music throughout his report to assist in the development of the satirical CNN narrative. In his introduction to the story, Cooper says, “By now you have probably heard tomorrow is judgment day” (CNN, 2011), and is immediately met with ominous music. The anchor pauses and looks to the side, acknowledging the threatening tone with a nod and a somewhat snide look on his face. Cooper goes on to provide background information on Camping and his predicted rapture date, pausing once again for the ominous music after he says, “He [Camping] says the beginning of the end is tomorrow” (CNN, 2011). This same music plays a third time in the report when Cooper says, “those of you with tickets to the Yannii concert in McAllen, Texas tomorrow night ... you’ll get some new age alright. A new age of Armageddon” (CNN, 2011). This time through, Cooper plays along with the music, giving a wide-eyed, severe stare directly to the camera.

In addition to these musical references, Cooper goes on to say “Sorry Atlanta, but you’re gonna miss the Yo Mama’s Big Fat Booty Band concert” (CNN 2011), pausing for himself and off-camera crew members to laugh before showing a brief video clip of the band. The music itself has no direct connection to Camping, or any rapture predictions for that matter, but the name of the band was clearly used in order to develop

an even more absurd narrative that is fitting with the Ridiculist segment. The music and other references to pop culture – including the Los Angeles Dodgers, Miley Cyrus, and *Star Wars* – are all used to develop a comfort and rapport with the audience. This rapport allows the audience to better understand CNN’s narrative script of Camping. Rather than finding any believable factors in his predicted rapture, CNN clearly informs its audience that Camping is an irrational, outlandish preacher who shouldn’t be taken seriously for any reason.

FOX

Fox News featured three segments in the studied time frame, but only one of these was a full report while the other two were brief follow-up reports that each lasted less than one minute. The first Fox News report, which aired on May 20, 2011, briefly touches on Camping’s doomsday prediction in the opening to the program. Interview clips are shown in quick succession, featuring Camping, a man and a woman who are interviewed on a public sidewalk, and a theology expert. Fox News was the only network to feature interview segments in the opening to the program. In the interview clips, both Camping and the unnamed man fervently express belief in the predicted rapture, while the unnamed woman seems only slightly concerned and the theology expert fervently denies the coming rapture. Though this portion of the program introduction lasts only a few seconds, it seems as if the narrative script presented by Fox News may allow for a more consideration of Camping’s prediction than other news outlets.

This was the only studied report that featured a consistent dialogue between the program’s host, Trace Gallagher, and the correspondent, Lauren Green. The two maintain

a conversation throughout the report, turning only briefly to interview segments. It seems as if the more conversational tone between Gallagher and Green allows Fox News to provide a more balanced narrative examination of Camping. Throughout the report Gallagher maintains more of a joking tone, asking, “Is anyone else taking this seriously?” (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 20); Green takes a more neutral approach in her presentation, focusing more on reporting the facts of the story.

In the introduction the report, Gallagher cites the worth of Family Radio, Inc. as \$72 million as of 2009. This number shows a discrepancy between news outlet reports; in CBS’s May 20, 2011 report, Whitaker cites the company’s worth at more than \$117 million by 2008. It is unclear from the information reported where these monetary values were found and how accurate either of them was to the value of the company at the time.

Of all the news outlets studied, Fox News seems to rely the least on visual elements to assist in the narrative script. Despite the fact that brief interview clips are used in the opening to the program, no further portions of the interviews with the unnamed man and woman are featured. One visual element does remain consistent through almost all the studied reports: the billboard image of a man’s silhouette crouched before an ominous red and yellow sky. This image is practically synonymous with Camping’s rapture prediction and was one of the most often featured advertisements. Fox News primarily utilized stock video footage of the billboard as well as stock video footage of a Camping follower handing out pamphlets at a subway station. Only two brief interview clips are shown, one featuring Camping discussing his plans for the day of the rapture and the other featuring a short interview with Dr. Serene Jones.

In the interview clip with Dr. Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary, she is quick to express her distaste for Camping's prediction. She says, "I say this is ridiculous ... I am absolutely certain, as a person of faith, that that is not going to happen" (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 20). Her disbelief in Camping's prediction adds to the narrative being promoted by Gallagher – the narrative of a misguided preacher, which seems to be a prevalent theme in a majority of the studied reports. To further emphasize his tongue-in-cheek reporting role, Gallagher also mentions Eternal Earthbound Pets, a paid service to care for pets after the rapture. A similar service was previously mentioned in ABC's May 21, 2011 report. Not only does Gallagher assist in promoting the narrative of Camping as the misguided preacher, he also promotes the idea that Camping's followers may be naive and misguided. With a sly smirk on his face, Gallagher says, "There are also websites that will send letters to loves ones left behind on judgment day. One site even offers to hand-scribe you message on medieval style parchment sheets ... the cost for that: \$800" (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 20).

While Gallagher maintains his satirical, joking tone through the majority of the report, Green more directly attempts to explain Camping's prediction and the effect it may have on his followers. She mentions Camping's previous failed prediction in 1994 as well as the lifestyle and monetary consequences some of Camping's followers might face. Green says, "Thousands worldwide have spent thousands of dollars, drained bank accounts, altered their lives because they believe Camping's predictions" (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 20). In this report, Green supports a narrative more focused on understanding the effects of the advertising campaign on Camping's followers. Neither

Gallagher nor Green come across as favorable toward Camping, but Fox News does present a more balanced discussion when it comes to Camping's followers.

The second Fox News segment, airing on May 21 2011, lasted approximately 30 seconds and served as more of a update than a full report. As host Harris Faulkner begins speaking, the FOX Report logo at the bottom right side of the screen flips over to read "STILL HERE." This small change in a visual element on the screen conveys a slight tone of satire, but does not drastically change the narrative structure of the update. Faulkner begins, saying, "fortunately, the world did not end" (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 21) and cuts briefly to a live shot of Times Square in New York City. This report is one of three that shows a live feed of Times Square, the others being the May 21, 2011 NBC report and the May 21, 2011 ABC report. Each time a network has turned the cameras to a live shot, it has been on the date of the predicted rapture, in order to prove to the audience that nothing is amiss.

Faulkner very briefly mentions the advertising campaign's international stretch over the days leading up to Camping's predicted rapture. With no official statement from Camping, there was very little new information to report in this update. To conclude this update Faulkner says, "We're told the curtains have been drawn tightly on Camping's California home all day" (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 21). This short, final quote seems to present Camping as a man in hiding, ashamed of his wildly incorrect prediction.

The third Fox News segment aired two days later on May 23, 2011. This report lasted approximately 45 seconds and served as a final update on Camping. Anchor Shepard Smith began the update with a fairly neutral tone, but his reporting style quickly shifted as he made one of the least formal references to Camping. Smith says, "Many

apparently want answers from the dude who made the doomsday prediction” (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 23). This reference to Camping as “dude” implies a very casual, apathetic tone to the narrative; now that the predicted rapture date has come and gone, Fox News seems to have little interest in lending respect to Camping. This casual moniker harkens back to the subtle change in title, from “President” to “Evangelist,” featured in the CBS reports.

As with the other Fox News reports, Smith mentions the impact of the advertising campaign on the spread of Camping’s prediction. Rather than allotting any further time to discuss the advertising campaign, Smith questions the monetary effect it may have had on Camping’s followers. He says, “Many believers quit their jobs, even spent their life’s savings warning other of the world ending, and now many are wondering if he’ll pay back those who’ve lost money” (Fox News Channel, 2011, May 23). This is the only moment in the studied reports in which a reporter directly questions if Camping will repay his followers for their efforts. As this is the final Fox News report in the studied time frame, the audience is left with this newly formed narrative of Camping as a thief who now has to answer to his followers.

Lack of Updates After Failed Prediction

Following the examined time frame around Camping’s May 2011 prediction, there was very little in terms of updates from any of the examined news outlets. The only news outlets that followed up with Camping’s prediction at a later time were NBC and CNN. NBC featured Camping’s rapture prediction on December 30, 2011 in a brief

segment about why 2011 was “a bummer.” On November 2, 2011, CNN’s Anderson Cooper added rapture doubters to the Ridiculist saying that Camping was “checking his notes.”

The lack of updates on Camping and his followers reinforces how quickly interest waned once the predicted rapture date came and went. This disinterest began to factor into some of the later reports that were examined for this research. After May 21, 2011 only ABC and Fox News featured any further reports, but both news outlets seemed primarily concerned with Camping’s disappointed followers and how he would explain himself in the days to come.

CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSIONS

Through this research, it was discovered that the narrative of Harold Camping in the television news media is that of a disingenuous, fear-mongering preacher. Though he may simply be the preacher who cried apocalypse, each news outlet entered into the reports with a tactically constructed narrative into which Camping was made to fit. For this brief moment in time, Camping became the court jester for various media outlets and countless social media conversations.

CNN featured the most obviously mocking narrative, but the other news outlets all constructed a skeptical narrative for the audience. Through the use of specific language and discourse, each of the news outlets questioned Camping's prediction before telling the audience any details, ultimately setting him up for ridicule in later reports. The opening to all of the reports from May 20, 2011 emphasized Camping's fervent belief that his predicted rapture would begin the following day at 6:00 p.m. and, by all accounts, Camping was particularly insistent on the time and date of the predicted apocalypse. The news outlets frequently emphasized how shocking it was that anyone was willing to believe his prediction. However shocking this belief may be in modern culture, it is clear from the historical research that Camping was never alone, and likely never will be alone, in his attempts to pinpoint the end.

Each news outlet added to the narrative script through interviews with Camping and his followers. Interview segments with Camping primarily featured outlandish statements, such as "There's going to be a huge earthquake that's going to make the big

earthquake in Japan seem like a Sunday school picnic” (CBS, 2011, May 20). If outlandish statements were not featured, interview segments featured a clumsy attempt at explaining the math behind his prediction. Several interviews with Camping were conducted on the dull, nondescript sound stage of Family Radio, Inc., and in almost every interview Camping wears an unexceptional beige suit. The aging look of these interviews suggests to the audience that Camping may not quite be with the times; the preacher does not seem to have an interest in reaching his audience through more updated forms of technology, adding to the skepticism that is already inherent in each report.

A great amount of time was spent focusing on the spread of Camping’s prediction through a mass advertising campaign. Camping and his followers sacrificed enormous amounts of money to spread the information on a global scale. Through an entirely grassroots marketing campaign, Camping’s prediction spread to countries throughout the world. Each advertisement featured in the studied reports featured bold statements or visuals to catch the attention of the audience, including the most frequently shown advertisement featuring a man’s silhouette crouched before an ominous sky. The design of this and other Family Radio, Inc. advertisements were meant to strike interest and concern in the general public. Shown in conjunction with a previously understood satirical narrative and discourse, these advertisements came across to the television news audience as little more than a waste of money and a reminder of Family Radio’s outdated form of advertising.

Connections and trust were built with the audience through frequent references to social media, popular films, and music. These familiar cultural references created an understood discourse between the news outlets and the audiences. With the popularity of

social media in recent years, direct connections to social media impact played an important role in the narrative of public interest. This was a story that gained its footing through the social media platform, and most of the new outlets saw the importance of that position. With a waning interest in traditional news media over the past few years, this connection social media is a crucial step in the discourse of all television news outlets. This connection between social media and television news media marks an interesting shift that has occurred in the past decade. As television news becomes a less sought-after medium, news outlets must begin to adapt their formats to fit with the ever-changing landscape of the Internet. The interest in Camping's rapture prediction, however brief it may have been, marks a significant moment in which a news story became cross-generational. Interest spread through a newer form of media that is primarily utilized by a younger generation, gaining enough attention that an older form of media was inclined to cover the story. This blending of newer and older forms media is abundantly clear in those reports that reference Facebook and Twitter posts while reporting through a traditional news style.

The only direct connection drawn between Camping and other nontraditional religious organization is mentioned in the NBC report from May 21, 2011. In the closing remarks of the episode, the correspondent reminds the audience of Rev. Jim Jones, who was also based in California. Though no direct comparison is drawn between Camping and Jones, the mention of such a sinister religious leader forces the audience to push away any trust that may have been held for Camping. No connection is ever drawn between Camping and early apocalyptic predictors; rather than explain his predictions as similar to those of Zoroaster, Jesus of Nazareth, William Miller, or a variety of other

nonviolent predictors, it appears that Camping and violent cult leaders are all considered in the same way for the sake of television news. With little credence given to Camping in each of these reports, it is impossible to say that other nontraditional religious organizations may be given balanced coverage in the news media in the future. While these particular reports do not necessarily reflect how other nontraditional religious organizations may be presented in the news, the marginalization of one religious leader by the news media has the ability to influence future new reports.

This study is important to consider for further research because of the impact that religion has on media and culture, as well as the influence of media and culture on religion. The mingling of established world religions with new media forms is analogous to the relationship between television news and social media; the old and the new come together to tell an entirely new kind of story. Religious ideology and symbology is reflected throughout modern culture in a variety of ways, including political and personal beliefs, the creation of art and music, and media production. Belief and religion blogs abound on the Internet, including websites managed by major news outlets. Religion has the ability to influence culture in a number of ways, while culture has a similar ability to influence religion. The news media, as well as social media and other developing media forms, have the ability to adapt the way in which religion is studied and reported in the future. News reports regarding mainstream Christianity are typically given far more consideration than those regarding nontraditional religious groups, but in order for the audience to continue learning and adapting to possible new ways of thinking, the channels of discussion must be opened. The influence of media on lesser-known religious

movements must be considered for future research; after all, any major school of thought was, at one time, considered lesser known until the lines of discussion were opened.

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