

Digital

Could tablets and the digital revolution be a godsend for Christian television?



Dropped like a rock.

That's how the Inspiration Network (INSP) felt after cable television provider Dish Network suddenly decided, amid ongoing rate negotiations between the two, to no longer carry the faith-based network's programming. The decision came in early August, and within minutes of discovering the news, thousands of faithful INSP viewers flocked to social media sites to voice their outrage.

Using Facebook, Twitter, email and other online vehicles, the army of supporters lobbed a massive yet organic onslaught of complaints toward Dish and furthered the attack with a digital petition demanding that INSP's family-friendly programming be returned. Dish even removed posts from its Facebook wall because of the swell of people complaining. And by the end of the month, the two sides reached an agreement and INSP returned to its familiar channel 259 spot.

"Social media has democratized the flow of information in this country," INSP Chief Strategy Officer Bill Airy said during the ordeal. "It's not a one-way process anymore. People who never had a voice now have one. It's phenomenal to see how many people have seized on social media as a way to express themselves."

Yet the irony of INSP's short-lived war is that the network no longer relies solely on Dish to air its programming. In March, Time Warner Cable asked INSP to be one of the first channels featured on its new iPad app, which allows customers to watch live programming, browse archived content and use a DVR

remotely—all from the tablet device. INSP is also on Comcast's Xfinity TV app, which provides on-demand television programming for the iPad, iPhone, Android and other devices.

"People don't necessarily want to watch what we're playing at any given time," says Paul Crouch Jr., vice president of Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), which has developed its own on-demand system for desktop and mobile devices. "In the old days, you had to be at a certain place at a certain time to watch certain programs—if, in fact, that's what you wanted. Now with technology and hard drives and digital file formats, people are getting used to watching what they want to watch when they want to watch it."

✖ TBN is one of several Christian networks moving into a new era of on-demand, mobile programming. Last month the charismatic ministry launched iTBN, which can be best explained as a "Christian Hulu" with which viewers can search a variety of video content and watch any TBN program ever aired—anytime, anywhere. iTBN allows viewers to search the network's 38 years of archives and watch video selected by topic, program, network, format or even personnel (e.g., anytime T.D. Jakes or Jentezen Franklin appeared on the network). Equally as impressive, its content is accessible on tablet devices and smartphones and is completely free.

Crouch says the network's normal broadcasts aren't going away, but that the ministry is simply changing with the times to reach every medium possible.

"If you don't evolve, you'll get buried," he says. "The way TBN did production 30 years ago and the way we're doing it now are drastically different."

Crouch remembers when the pioneering TV ministry aired alongside only five other stations. As the number of stations has grown, so has the technology used to power the network, prompting TBN to shift from antennas to cable and now to

digital-only.

“We started before the Internet even existed,” Crouch says, “so we’ve had to go through that learning curve of the Internet and getting picture and sound through those channels.”

Other younger networks such as God TV and Daystar Television Network may have experienced fewer generations of technology, yet how quickly they adapt to new media is just as crucial to fulfilling their ultimate mission.

“Like the apostle Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:19-23: ‘I’ve become all things to all men so that men might be saved,’” Daystar Marketing Director Daniel Woodward says. “Any time you have a different interface, it is a mission field.”

Like TBN, Daystar has developed an on-demand video tool accessible from almost every digital avenue, including tablets, smartphones and websites. Users can search and watch Daystar’s content by program topic or show title, among other search mechanisms.

Though the digital age has certainly made Christian television content more accessible, Skyangel President and COO Tom Scott says it’s also produced a more cost-effective way for TV ministries to spread the Word of God: “[Digital] made television cheaper to deliver and easier to reach the audience and, with the explosion of video on the web, provides ministries an opportunity to reach Christians 24/7 with specific programming. Ministries can meet their audience where they are, and Christians can literally take church home because they can now get content delivered to them in so many ways that they could have content available from the time they wake up to the time they go to sleep.”

If that’s what it takes to impact lives and further God’s kingdom, these major Christian TV outlets—most of which operate on donations—are proving they’re willing to adapt for

a higher purpose.

“At the end of the day, what we care about is spreading the message of Christ,” Woodward says. “Whatever that takes, whatever form that’s in, that is really the emphasis. We can’t be attached to one particular medium. ... If telegraphs became really popular again, we’d be looking into telegraphs. Where people are is where we need to be.”

Felicia Abraham is associate editor of Charisma and can hardly wait for the iPhone 5 to release this month.

TBN’s New Sensation

Paul Crouch Jr. reveals major changes with TV ministry—plus a cool new tool

Strang: *What’s the most exciting thing happening right now for TBN in the digital world?*



Crouch: All ministries must evolve. The message of the gospel doesn’t change, but the way we get it out does. For television, we’re now in a five-screen world. When TBN started 38 years ago, people got TV over the air with a rabbit-ear antenna or an outside aerial, and they usually watched in their living room. But over-the-air viewing in the U.S. is down to 15 percent now. So we’re using any technology available to propagate the gospel.

[In the past] a lot of the church has ignored or shunned new technology. In the early days in radio, many pastors preached against going on radio: “It’s sinful ... there’s entertainment on there. We should be separate from the world.” When television came around, it was the same thing. When the Internet came: ‘We can’t be part of the Internet. There’s

horrible things on the Internet.” But we need to use any technology available to us to preach the gospel.

What iTBN will do is provide what people want to watch, when they [want to] watch it—on demand. If you’re dealing with family issues, if you’re dealing with a divorce, if you just get one of these calls out of the blue that your son or daughter has been killed in a car wreck, you don’t need to watch a movie at that point; you need the Word of God.

Strang: *Describe to me what you think will happen to Christian television in the next five years.*

Crouch: Certainly distribution has changed dramatically, but it’s going to come down to content, content, content. Your content has to be relevant. It’s got to be professional. It’s got to be seeped in truth. The Word of God has got to be there.

[Ministries like ours] are not in the entertainment industry. We are not there to sell you vitamins or Chevrolets or Kleenex; we are truly in the soul-winning business. But you have to capture that audience first, and it’s got to be done through the best quality, the best production, because audiences have gotten more sophisticated. They’ve gotten a little more ADD and need it in smaller bites. But content is still king, and that’s what we’re trying to focus on.

✖ We’ve had a master control for 38 years that played programs to the air. But now we’ve created the pipeline that anything going through our master control will not only be played on the air—and we’re not taking away anything that you can watch over the air, or on DirecTV or Dish Network—[it will also go through] an additional pipeline that then takes that content to iTBN to streaming. So you’ll be able to find Joyce Meyer, the *700 Club* ... any program that airs on TBN’s network will be viewable the next day on demand.

Strang: *How are all these changes with delivery mechanisms*

changing your ministry?

Crouch: The way we produce programs has changed a little bit. Again, we've tried to push the envelope in quality. For example, almost all of our major studios are high definition. We went through that change over the last 10 or 15 years where we went from standard definition to high definition.

HD is everywhere now. That transition has taken place. But like I said, content is still king. We still have to bring the truth, we have to preach the Bible, we have to preach salvation, we have to preach hope. Whether it's done in high definition or in black and white or whatever, that really doesn't change. We want to be where people need us when they need us. And that to me is the most exciting thing about iTBN.

You can't talk about the history of Christian television without mentioning Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), which in 1973 began paving the way for many of today's networks. Yet when TBN Vice President Paul Crouch Jr. recently met with *Charisma* Publisher Steve Strang, any reminiscing of the past was dwarfed by a genuine excitement for the latest vehicle to propel the ministry into the future.