Down the Tube: Religion on Australian Commercial Television

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Despite being one of the few areas of required program content mandated by parliamentary legislation since television's inception, there has been little scholarly attention given to religious programming on Australian commercial television. While this can be attributed to a large extent to a perceived lack of consequence or relevance of public religion within a modernist framework, the recent resurgence of religion onto the global public stage is prompting a rethinking of this framework (Casanova 1994, Castells 1997, Derrida 2001, Meyer and Moors 2006) and adds pertinence to a reconsideration of the topic. Recent debates in Muslim-majority states about the effectiveness of broadcast religion in a global media environment suggest also that studying the Australian experience may have wider social and political relevance.[1]

A mandate requiring religious content to be continuously presented on Australian commercial television would suggest that religion would be a significant aspect of commercial television. Arguably, this potential has not eventuated. An analysis of this shortfall exposes a range of underlying ambiguities and ambivalences in the legislation and its implementation involving governing authorities, the broadcasting industry, community groups and religious bodies. There are inherent tensions generated by the dual nature of broadcast licences as a commercial enterprise and a social responsibility. Disagreements constantly emerge between different players on what constitutes "religion." Implementation of the legislation has been affected by the changing place and perspectives on religion and religious institutions in Australian society. There has been a lack of resolution on the relative responsibilities of government, stations and churches in administration of the legislation. Unresolved questions

about the constitutionality of government mandated religious activity have undermined determination to enforce compliance with full provisions of the Act. Churches, as partners in the legislation, have been ambivalent about the purpose of programming and the value of committing resources to a medium many considered to be of dubious value.

The legislative and administrative background

The regulation of religion on television needs to be seen in the light of its regulation on radio and the administrative patterns set in implementing that regulation. The question of compulsory religious programming on Australian broadcasting first arose in 1941 and 1942 out of the meetings of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Broadcasting (The Gibson Committee) and its successor, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Broadcasting. The question reflected the dominant perception at the time "that Australian is a Christian nation and that Christian teaching, both in its spiritual and moral aspects, is of great importance to national morale and national development." (Australia Parliament 1942, para 14) It was pushed also by the devoutly Catholic Arthur Calwell from his position as Minister for Information and Chair of the Standing Committee.

Most radio stations were already broadcasting some religious programming in cooperation with churches but they opposed making this a compulsory requirement of their licence. They argued that the mandatory imposition of religion was an infringement of the freedom for which the country was fighting. Rather than force all stations to broadcast religion, they suggested giving religious bodies licences to compete in the marketplace on their own merit. The chairperson of the ABC argued that the Broadcasting Acts of 1932 and 1942 made the Commission responsible for its own programming, and it could not abdicate this responsibility to any other body, including the churches. (quoted in Tasker 1980, p.12)

Despite the opposition from the stations, religious content was made compulsory in the Act of 1948, giving the new Australian Broadcasting Control Board (the Board) responsibility

to ensure that divine worship or other matter of a religious nature is broadcast for adequate periods and at appropriate times and that no matter which is not of a religious nature is broadcast by a station during any period which divine worship or other matter of a religious nature is broadcast by that station. (Australian Broadcasting Act (1948) Section 6K(2)(b)(ii))

While this seemed to be little more than consolidation of what was existing practice for many stations, the legislation immediately encountered problems. Three paradigmatic issues emerged in the first year of the legislation that established a template of administration that would impact on the subsequent regulation of religion on television.

One was opposition from stations to the government dictating content management non their stations. In order to implement the legislation, the Board proposed that stations devote at least one hour on Sundays, free of charge, to the broadcasting of divine worship held in a church or other place where services were normally held. (ABCB 1949 quoted in Tasker 1980, p.18) FACBS immediately objected, arguing that neither divine worship nor Sunday was specified in the legislation. The Board backed off, agreeing instead to determine in consultation with the stations and the churches the best way of implementing the legislation (ABCB 1950).

A second related problem was the question of what was religion, latent in the clause, "matter which is not of a religious nature." In 1949 radio station 3AW sought clarification from the Board on the appropriateness of the "religious nature" of a talk involving political and social comment given during a broadcast of the Catholic Hour. In reviewing the text of the talk, the Board initially determined that the talk was not religious in nature. This brought a sharp reaction from the Catholic Radio Board, which argued that "the church was the best judge of what

constituted religious broadcasting" and that "from a study of its real inner content there would be found justification for its place in the category of really religious thought." (quoted in Tasker 1980, pp. 20-21). While the initial purpose of that clause was to keep religious programming free of other material such as advertising, the Board realised how ambiguous such a clause was, how difficult it would be practically for them to make judgments on the issue, and the potential position it placed the Board in as a censor of religion. In its Second Annual Report (1950) the Board requested Parliament to review the matter and clarify the Board's obligations under the Act. No such clarification was forthcoming, resulting practically in stations and churches largely negotiating their own path, with the Board offering its services in negotiating any disputes.

A third emblematic issue was the constitutionality of the statute. In 1949 the Rationalist Association of Australia wrote to the Board arguing that imposing such a religious observance contravened S.116 of the Constitution. The Secretary of the Board replied that the stations had been providing air-time for religious programs for years and the Board's function was simply to "determine the principles which would guide the commercial system" and that "these principles had been drawn up after consultation with the stations and with their agreement." (quoted in Tasker 1980, pp. 22-23) This response clearly avoided the constitutional question. Ambiguities about the legislation's constitutionality, which have never been tested nor resolved legally (Armstrong 1980), have created an ongoing uncertainty that has influenced the certainty of its implementation.

These early disputes reflect the inherent difficulties in governments creating such a legislative provision in the first place. In its Third and Fourth Reports (1950-51, 1951-52) the Board again asked the Parliament to clarify aspects of the Board's obligations. That clarification was never given. Acting to clarify such ambiguities was a political minefield. It risked incurring the wrath and possible legal action from the stations with their commercial and editorial interests on the one hand or the wrath of the churches and their constituents with their interests on the

other. The safer alternative was political and bureaucratic procrastination. Once that pattern was set, it was difficult to change, and the Board steadily moved from a determinative position to a more consultative one.

The Royal Commission on Television

This was the context for the Royal Commission's consideration of whether, and on what basis, to mandate religious content on television (Commonwealth 1954). Broadcast and advertising industry members and prospective licensees opposed compulsory religious programs on television, arguing that providing air-time free of charge would "impose an undeniable burden on the operators," their experience in radio showed that having guaranteed free time was a disincentive for churches to produce programs that attracted competitive audiences, and religion is a matter that you cannot legislate for (Commonwealth 1954, para 475, 480). The churches reaffirmed the argument that as religion was an important aspect of Australian community life and as licences were being granted as a privilege to be exercised in the public interest, the televising of religious matter should be continued as a compulsory requirement on a licence. While acknowledging the importance of commercial competitiveness, the churches argued that without such a provision they would not be able to afford use of the new medium. (Commonwealth 1954, para 473, 474)

The Royal Commission recommended the continuation of mandatory religious content into television, departing from the previous Standing Committee's view that religion was a social and national good, opting instead for a community service basis that "the presentation in suitable form of religious services and other religious matter is one of the important obligations of television stations to the public." Though it avoided laying down rules until the specific characteristics of the new medium could be evaluated, the Commission recommended that this obligation continue to "be discharged in co-operation with the Churches and other religious

bodies." (Commonwealth 1954, para 482) The recommendation was adopted into the Broadcasting and Television Act 1956 as Section 103:

> A licensee shall broadcast or televise from his station Divine Worship or other matter of a religious nature during such periods as the Board determines.

The Commission made two significant changes to the previous legislation in the light of previous administrative problems: it dropped the contentious clause "matter not of a religious nature," and shifted the onus of responsibility from the Board to the licensee. It recommended also that an Advisory Committee be established to assist the Board in interpretation of the legislation. The *Television Programme Standards* of 1956 set out terms for implementation of the legislation, specifying that stations were to allocate "at least one percent of the normal weekly hours of service, with a minimum of thirty minutes each week" for religious programming, "scheduled either as a complete unit…or as a series of programs on one or more days of the week," Churches were also included as partners in programming. Stations were to provide air-time free of charge to churches or other religious bodies on a demographically proportional basis and make available "the normal facilities of a studio" free of charge for production of the programs. (ABCB 1956, Appendix D)

The Standards positioned licensees as carriers of the programs, with the church or religious body responsible for their production and provision. This became the standard pattern of religion on commercial television for the next three decades. The arrangement was acceptable to both stations and churches for a number of reasons. From a station perspective, if they were going to be forced to air non-commercial (and potentially contentious) program material, it was advantageous to them to have someone else carry the responsibility and significant costs of generation and production of the material. The advantage to the churches

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was that it gave them the chance to have a presence on this new medium and communicate their message, either to their own members or the general public.

Most of the establishment churches set up television agencies to produce programs and liaise with stations. Larger denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church and Church of England established their own agencies, generally on a diocesan or state basis. Smaller Protestant denominations mainly combined forces in state-based Christian Television Associations. Some churches that were strong in particular regions, such as the Lutheran Church in South Australia, worked on their own. Though different community groups have agitated at times to broaden access to the free time provision to include minority religions, non-religious community groups or consideration of non-religious topics of wider ethical, moral or social concern, the "demographically proportional" clause of the Standards means that access to the provision was limited almost totally to hat was provided by the major Christian churches.

These decentralized arrangements reflected the denominational and theological differences of Christianity in Australia at the time, but it resulted in a scattered effort that over-stretched resources. Collaboration between church agencies took place on a national level through the Australian Churches Media Association (ACMA), which provided a mechanism for joint approaches to the Board or the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) and a forum for sharing of program material across states. But ACMA was consultative in nature. It had no authority to bind members in common action or to discipline and was dominated by the several larger church production agencies who exercised a form of effective veto on decisions that were not to their interest. The different agencies reflected different theological, aesthetic, regional and strategic emphases that restricted and hampered the development of a coherent and consistent approach and the pooling of resources.

Added to that was the lack of resourcing for this work that came from church hierarchies, who in general were suspicious of television as a primarily entertainment medium and saw little gain for their churches in terms of "bums on seats" for resources they invested in it. As a result, the church television agencies were chronically under-staffed and under-resourced for the work they were required to do. The major church production agencies rarely throughout their history had more than three full-time people working for them, and agencies in the smaller states commonly generally had a part-time person doing all the creative writing, production, program sourcing and distribution, station liaison, media releases, and replying t audience feedback. Duffy provides a useful insight into this in his description of the work-load of one of the larger Catholic agencies which in the mid 1980s. It also illustrates the types of programs that were produced. With a full-time staff of three, the agency serviced three commercial television and eight commercial and community radio stations with the following annual production schedule: one 30-minute weekly news, comment and interview TV program; one 30-minute weekly TV liturgical presentation; two 30-minute weekly TV youth affairs programmes produced in other centres; one three-hour counselling programme a week; two one-hour weekly radio programmes of news, comment and interviews; sixteen 60-second radio 'spots' on prayer and thoughts for daily life each week; twelve 60-second weekly music radio 'spots' presenting a Gospel message through popular music; four 30-minute weekly news and discussion programmes on community radio; and additional extended radio and television presentations at Easter and Christmas. (Duffy 1987, p.77)

This lack of resourcing limited the scope of most religious programs to what could be done within the limited studio facilities provided by stations, generally with a skeleton technical crew in studio down-time out of hours. This largely excluded the most effective formats on television, drama and documentary, and ended up narrowing the bulk of religious programs to primarily in-studio talking-head monologues, discussions and interviews.

Making churches partners in this way has had a number of consequences for Australian television. It effectively removed stations as creative producers and interpreters of religious content, effectively restricting the consideration and portrayal of religion on commercial television to the interests and perspectives of the established religious institutions. The effect this had can best be seen by comparison with the scope of religious content broadcast on the ABC, which from the earliest days, set up its own Religious Programs Department and consistently developed religion as one of its specialist areas of programming. The coverage of religion on the ABC has been much broader, critical and social in its scope, has included consideration of other-religions and non-religious ethical and values questions in its programming content and has engaged more readily with the growing plurality and de-institutionalisation of Australia's religious demography.

In 1959 the Board established the recommended Advisory Committee on Religious Television Programs to help it in administration of the legislation. The Committee was comprised of six eminent churchmen, further consolidating the churches' dominance of religious interpretation. The Committee (some of whom did not own a television set) worked from an idealistic basis, shaping their understanding of television to a significant extent on the religion departments of the BBC and ABC. Its first report in 1961 was an extensive statement on religious broadcasting with recommendations ranging from ideas for different types of programs, organisation of station liaison, program scheduling and representation of smaller religious groups. Ignoring the realities of denominational difference, they considered that religious programs should be ecumenical as much as possible and cater as much for the non-church-goer as for the church-goer. Theological content of the programs should be at least as important as the techniques employed in their presentation. (ABCB 1962)

The Report was well received by the Board, which reproduced it in some detail as an appendix in its 1962 Annual Report (ABCB 1962). Whether because of the Committee's

proposals or for other reasons, the Board's Annual Report of 1962 indicated that "a greater variety of religious programs has been televised during the year," that there had been an increase in the number of shorter programs being used, and that "several stations now regularly include religious matter in programmes designed for children." (ABCB 1962, p.52) During the seventeen years of its life, the Advisory Committee identified and reported to the Board on issues that it considered needed to be addressed in the implementation of the legislation, organised a broad consultation on religious programming (Consultation 1966), and was an important reference point for the ABCB on a number of important administrative and policy issues that had important consequences for the production and scheduling of religious programs, such as changes to Sunday morning programming (ABCB 1963, para 203); the move of religious programs from Sunday afternoon to Sunday morning; (ABCB 1968, p.88) and advertising in Sunday morning programs (ABCB 1970).

Not everyone was as enthusiastic about the contribution or effectiveness of the Advisory Committee. Tasker (1980), who for many years was Director of the Christian Television Association in Victoria and an active policy analyst for the church agencies, considers the Advisory Committee was a failure and its failure was a significant factor in the stunted development of religious programming on television. Its idealism betrayed an ignorance of, and therefore distracted from effective dealing with, the practicalities of commercial television and the commercial interests of the licensees. While identifying problems, the Committee's reports reveal a lack of power to have any of these problems addressed or resolved either by the Board or the stations or even their own churches.

One of the crucial issues in religious broadcasting were disputes and contests over the scheduling of religious programs, which persisted from the early 1960s through the 1980s. In such a cooperative and voluntary arrangement, personal relationships between church producers and station managers were crucial elements in the management of the weekly issues

of program planning, access to station facilities and resources, and program production and distribution. Those relationships and creative ideas that took seriously station programming needs often elicited more than the minimum required of stations in terms of resourcing and assistance. Church media producers, though not on the payroll, were frequently at local stations on a weekly basis, were recognized by staff, and at times participated in other station activities. The issue that couldn't be resolved through personal relationship was the issue of when religious programs were aired, because it went beyond just practical arrangements to the inescapable conflict between the pressures on stations as commercial businesses and the direct or indirect costs of meeting statutory obligations. This conflict between commercial realities and statutory obligations is not unlike that that currently being played out in the disagreements between the Howard government and the Board of Telstra over the privatisation of Telstra.

One of the areas where this played out through the 1960's, was in the stations' persistent challenge to the Board to lift the restrictions placed by the Board on broadcasting on Sunday mornings, which the Board believed should be of a different character from other days of the week. Religious programs, which for a long time were associated with the wider social sense of the sacredness of Sunday, were caught up in the stations' drive to open up Sunday for more commercial programming. Underlying this was the ambiguous nature of the Board's Standards. Though the Program Standards of 1956 stated that the time when religious programs were to be broadcast was to be a matter of "mutual agreement" between stations and churches (ABCB 1956, Appendix D), the Standard did not specify an acceptable range of hours for broadcast, the arrangements to be followed should those hours be changed, nor what was to be done should "mutual agreement" not be reached. Since stations had responsibility for managing their own programming schedule, religious programs became one of the pawns as stations moved programs around to maximise commercial competitiveness. In its Annual Reports of 1963, 1966

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and 1970, the Board noted the growing encroachment of commercial programs and advertising into Sunday morning and the continued displacement of religious programs in the process, frequently without consultation or prior advice, and certainly without the required mutual agreement. But the Board was unable to enforce what it believed should be the character of Sunday morning broadcasting, or to stop the displacement of religious programs without agreement.

In 1970 FACTS presented the Board with a legal opinion that questioned the Board's right to prohibit content of programs in distinction from qualitative aspects of programs. (ABCB 1971, pp. 40-41) In the face of these persistent challenges, the Board sought an amendment of the Act to clarify its powers. No such amendment was forthcoming and the power of the Board's Standards and its authority to enforce them was undermined. Tasker (1980) considers that this inability of the Board to clarify its authority and enforce its own Standards reduced its capacity to act effectively on the implementation of religious programming as one of the community service obligations of the stations.

One of the attempts to bypass this marginalisation of religious programs in the broadcast schedule was a renegotiation of programming time to include thirty- and sixty-second religious "spots" scattered throughout the different time zones with a fewer number of longer religious programs being broadcast on Sunday mornings. The religious spot concept, developed by Doug Tasker at CTA Victoria, was an international innovation that received local and international awards and established a precedent that was adopted by subsequent community service programs. The spots, many of which were animated by some of Australia's leading cartoonists, achieved a high (and at times notorious) recognition factor and served for a time as a vehicle for liberating liberate religious content out of the early morning and late evening ghettos.

The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (1976)

The Self-Regulation Enquiry (1976) of the ABT basically maintained the status quo in relation to religious broadcasting, reaffirming religious programming as part of a licensee's obligation to the community. In its emphasis on self-regulation, the Tribunal reflected no desire to become involved directly in disputes between stations and churches over implementation of the legislation, defining itself primarily as a mediator of last resort in relationships between stations and the churches and considering that adequate safeguards were in place through the licence granting/renewal procedure if stations were not considered to be fulfilling their obligations. (ABT 1976)

In a broader clarification of the Standards, necessitated by several successful legal challenges to them (Armstrong 1980), the Tribunal directed station licensees to allocate at least one percent of their normal weekly hours of service, with a minimum of 30 minutes each week, free of charge, for the broadcast of Divine Worship or other matter of a religious nature. The minimum amount could be varied through mutual agreement if church agencies wanted to provide less. Stations were also required to provide studio facilities for production of the programs. (ABT 1985) Despite the greater legal clarity, the Direction left undefined the key conflictual issue of scheduling, even though it had identified this as an issue in an earlier discussion paper (ABT 1983, p.9). The lack of clear guidelines in this key issue continued the downward cyclical pattern for religious programs, in which pre-emption and marginal broadcast times given to their programs created difficulties for church agencies in building an audience and attracting church support for production. Approaches and alternative strategies put to the Tribunal Efforts by church agencies and bodies to have the scheduling issue addressed (ACMA 1987) resulted in no action from the Tribunal, which reaffirmed its role as that of a facilitator, with involvement only as necessary in ongoing discussions between industry and church bodies. (ABT 1987)

The Tribunal's move towards greater self-regulation encouraged growth in the number of U.S. evangelical programs purchasing time for broadcast from the late 1970s. In the year of the Tribunal's Self-Regulation Enquiry, metropolitan stations were broadcast an average of roughly 30 minutes each of locally produced religious content broadcast on free-time and overseas religious content broadcast on time purchased from the station. In the year following the Self-Regulation Enquiry, the amount of locally produced programming had dropped by a quarter while the amount of overseas program had almost tripled, suggesting that the stations saw the self-regulation emphasis of the new regime as an opportunity to meet their mandatory religion obligation by selling time for religion rather than providing it free. In the peak year of 1980-81, metropolitan television stations across Australia were putting to air an average of two and a quarter hours of religious content each week. But the amount of overseas religious content broadcast was more than double Australian content – more than 97 minutes on average per station compared to 40 minutes.

Given the limited resources available in the area, and the small place and importance religious programs have in the whole television schedule, there has been little collated research on the size or composition of their audiences, or uses made of the programs by audiences. The types of programs broadcast over the years have varied extensively from agency to agency, state to state, and station to station, to the extent that it is difficult to provide any summary of audience size, composition or uses of programs that would give meaningful insight into trends and significance. The research conducted overseas on audiences of religious programs supports what might be expected: that the audiences vary according to the program, and viewers of religious programs are most likely to be those who have an existing interest in or commitment to religion (Hoover 1988, Buddenbaum 1979).[2]

Recent developments

The Broadcasting Services Act 1992 continued the inclusion of religion as a condition of licence, but also its progressive minimisation. Schedule 2, Part 3, Clause 7 includes the following provision:

> (2) Each commercial television broadcasting licence is also subject to the following conditions: …. (c) the licensee will broadcast matter of a religious nature during such periods as the ACMA determines and, if the ACMA so directs, will do so without charge.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority has not made such a direction on the amount of broadcast material nor whether it is to be provided without charge. By this time, however, most of the major churches who had fought the battles and contributed most to the provision of programs for broadcasting within the mandatory regulation were facing serious resource crises because of aging and declining membership and television activity, which had never been generously funded, was considered one of the more dispensable expenditures.

The current situation reflects the movements taking place in religion and culture as a whole. The major mainstream Christian denominations, whose literate, rationalist theology and culturally affirming programs were supported by the universal, integrated modernist world-view of the modern nation state, have not only lost the membership to resource their universalising mission, but in a post-modern context of competing ideologies, identity differentiation and marketing appear not to have the inner dynamism to renew their institutional structures or strategies. By the end of the 1990's, most of these major religious production agencies had closed or become only minimally active. There is now only a scattering of religious programs broadcast on free air-time, with the occasional specials around the major Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas. The old staple, *Mass for You at Home*, the longest running program on Australian television, has been moved from broadcast to cable television.

On the other hand, the alternative appears not to have fared any better. The more conservative programs, largely overseas-originated, which purchased their air-time from stations, can be seen to have reached a peak in the early to mid 80's and declined to the point today where their presence on television is minimal. As overseas research indicates, it is unlikely that these programs were ever watched by any other than those who already had an affinity, if not a form commitment, to their message and ethos. However, as Hoover has argued cogently (Hoover 1988), the greater impact of these evangelical broadcasters was not in mass conversion of the nation (U.S. or Australia), but in re-positioning evangelical and fundamentalist Christians away from the cultural margins to the cultural middle, giving them a claim on the cultural mainstream, and modelling the building of conservative networks for common cause.

As has been noted elsewhere (Horsfield 1984, Hoover 1988, Castells 1997), a good deal of the evangelicals' and fundamentalists success in television has come from their readiness to define and market their difference, their promotion of religious identity, their openness to and skilfulness in adapting to the commercial interests of stations and the consumer marketplace, their ability to construct and operate large organisations with advanced technology and sophisticated fund-raising capacities, and their readiness to build political coalitions across religious lines on common concerns in protecting conservative social values – all vital elements of creating a significant presence in a post-modern culture, as Lohrey (2006) has recently illustrated in her study of Hillsong and the new Christian right in Australia.

It is unlikely that the requirement for Australia's commercial television stations to broadcast a certain amount of religion as part of their regular schedules will be rekindled as the cause of argument and contest in the same way that it was in the first thirty years of television's life. That does not mean, however that religion as such is likely to disappear from television. As various analysts have noted, the post-modern globalized religious/political context is seeing the rise of religious groups who are engaging media in quite different ways: responding to the challenges

of secularization and globalization not by arguing privilege but by becoming active player in globalization's own terms (Casanova 1994); forming international alliances and religio-political coalitions around common cultural and value issues (Castells 1997); aggressively marketing their version of Christianity in the open market through commodifying and repackaging faith and practice (Clark 2005); pitching materials that respond to young people's active manipulation of cultural symbolic material in more autonomous processes of making meaning; perhaps purchasing time on television but as part of a broader marketing, internet, media and recruitment strategy; soliciting funds not only from members but also from the sympathetic public with common concerns; and actively pursuing their religious and moral agendas in the cultural political arena (Adam Shand, *The Bulletin*, 20th October 2004).

Notes

[1] In November 2005 I attended the International Conference on Media and Religion in Iran, one of a series of international conferences now held on media and religion and the first in a Muslim-majority country. Jointly organised by the Tehran University and IRIB, the Iranian Broadcaster, it included discussions about the effectiveness of state Islamic programs, particularly in reaching young people, who were more actively involved in constructing their own religious meaning from content accessed from internationally available media sources.

[2]The one exception to this was the religious spots, which appeared without notice during general programming, including in prime-time, and anecdotally achieved a significant level of market penetration and recall.

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