

# HOW VAST THE WASTELAND NOW?

■ NEWTON N. MINOW ■

*MAR 9, 1991*

THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF  
"THE 'VAST WASTELAND'"

GANNETT FOUNDATION MEDIA CENTER  
AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK



## INTRODUCTION: NEW FRONTIERS

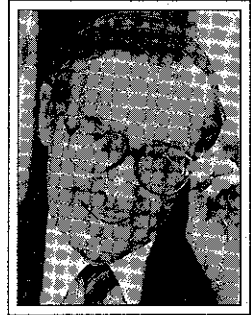
Thirty years ago today, Newton N. Minow stood before the annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters to deliver his first public address as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and forever changed the way Americans think about television.

Rumors had circulated for weeks before the event that President Kennedy's young appointee would use the occasion to promulgate a vigorous new regulatory order: In the late 1950s the broadcast industry had been stung by scandal, and a recent FCC chairman had been forced to resign in disgrace. The new administration had promised regulatory reform, and Minow himself fueled industry speculation when, not long after his appointment, he summed up his qualifications by saying: "I'm here to do what I think needs to be done....I'm not interested in being reappointed, and I don't want a job in the industry."

So when Minow stepped to the podium on May 9, 1961, the broadcasters assembled to hear him expected a lecture on manners and morals, and with it the promise of closer scrutiny by the FCC. What they got instead shook their industry to the core.

Minow dismissed the industry's recent problems as a closed chapter in its history and focused instead on broadcast programming. He challenged local broadcasters and network presidents alike to look closely at their daily fare — "a procession of game shows, violence,...sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons" — and to ask themselves if they were truly honoring the "public interest" they were licensed to serve.

And then, with extraordinary candor, Minow answered the question himself with a resounding "no." Commercial broadcasting, he said, was a "vast wasteland."



NEWTON N. MINOW

The broadcasters were shocked and outraged. As one station manager in attendance put it, Minow had alienated “the whole goddam industry.” Public reaction to the address, however, was “quick, abundant and overwhelmingly positive,” writes communications scholar Mary Ann Watson. “Within six weeks, 6,000 letters, lopsidedly favorable, flooded the commission offices....The phrase ‘vast wasteland’...immediately entered the American vocabulary.”

Minow left the FCC two years later to return to private law practice, but during his tenure as chairman he was unrelenting in his pursuit of the goals he had outlined before the NAB. Like no FCC chairman before or since, his became a household name. Minow made more radio and television appearances than any other member of the Kennedy administration except the president himself, and he received both a “Top Newsmaker” award from the Associated Press and a Peabody Award, the first ever given to a government official. The decision of the Peabody Committee to bestow one of broadcasting’s most prestigious honors on the industry’s most powerful nemesis infuriated many top executives, and Minow became the object of repeated attacks in the trade press and the subject of editorial cartoons, most favorable, in mainstream media. Minow became virtually ubiquitous; in late summer 1961, comedian Jimmy Durante opened an NBC entertainment special by saying, “Da next hour will be dedicated to upliftin’ da quality of television....At least, Newt, we’re tryin’.”

Today “The ‘Vast Wasteland’” is recognized as one of the seminal documents of American communications history. It is one of the most quoted speeches of the 20th century and, among the hundreds of places where it has been reprinted, is included in Diane Ravitch’s recent and acclaimed anthology of “words that moved a nation,” *American Reader*. In the broadcast industry — where it is still known as “the speech” — its metaphorical characterization, as the title of Minow’s present text suggests, has

endured as a symbol of television's unfulfilled promise.

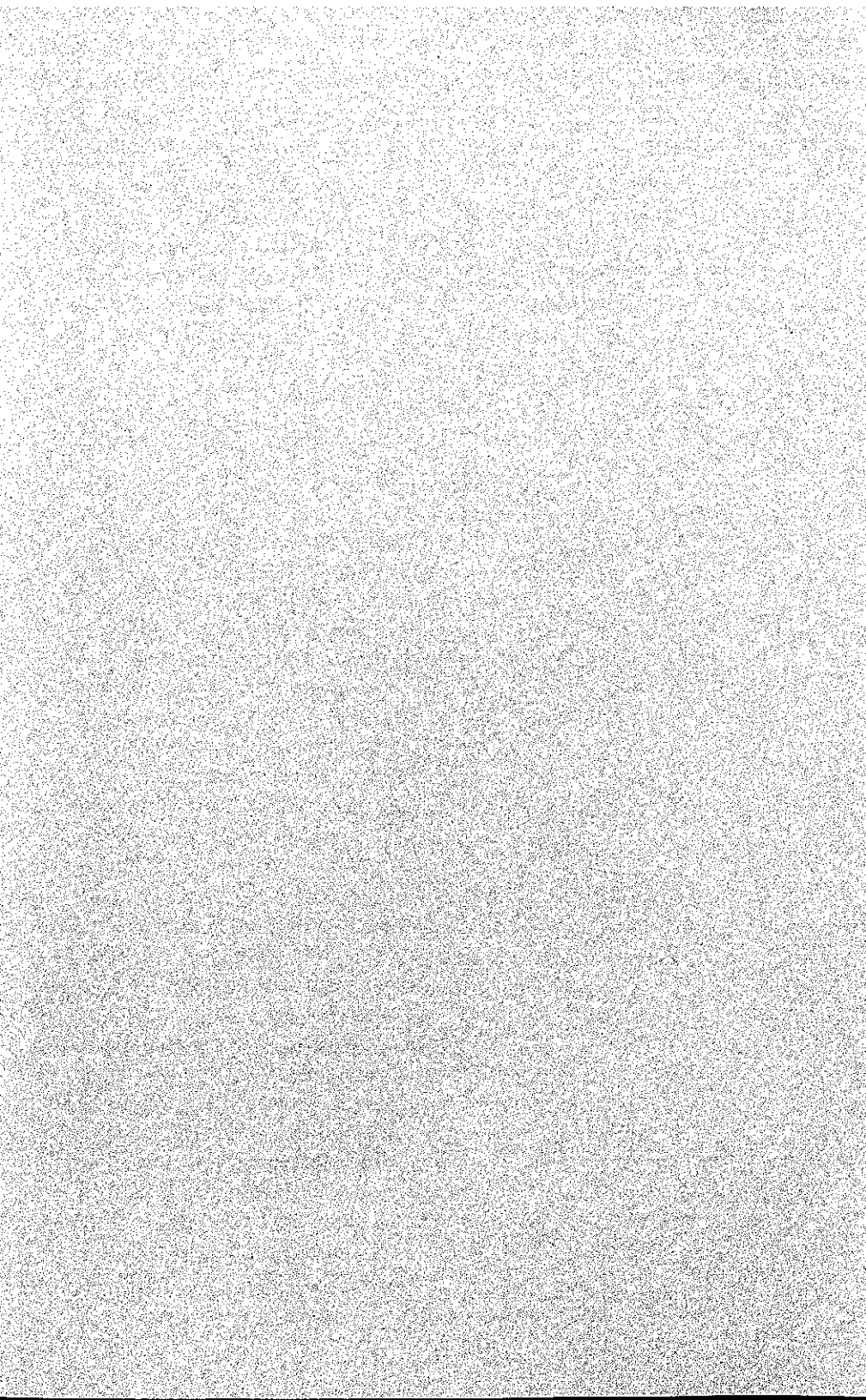
Minow's articulation of the public's interest in television has affected public and scholarly perceptions of the medium ever since, not least because "The 'Vast Wasteland'" encouraged a generation of students and professionals to rethink television's role in society and to monitor its performance. But Minow also put his finger on the inherent conflict of interest unique to the American broadcast system, in which profit-making institutions are supposed to operate under the legal test of "the public interest, convenience and necessity," a standard applicable to public utilities. Only in the United States did commercial broadcasting precede a public service system; in virtually every other nation broadcasting developed the other way around.

In the last thirty years, advances in communications technology have increased television's reach and programming exponentially, but whether they have adequately served the public interest is an open question. Indeed, in an increasingly global television marketplace, where many nations' public service systems are being undermined by commercial pressures, the issue stands in sharper relief than it did even in 1961. Then, as it happened, FCC Chairman Minow was a young attorney with no experience in the broadcast industry; today, no one who might revisit the wasteland can draw on a richer or more varied background.

Since leaving the FCC in 1963, Minow has seen virtually every other aspect of the broadcast business. He has been chairman of the Public Broadcasting Service and an educational television station; a member of the boards of directors of both an international advertising agency and CBS; the chair of a bipartisan commission on politics and the electronic media and twice co-chair of the presidential debates; a congressional witness on broadcast performance and director of the Annenberg Washington Program; a lawyer for many communications organizations, a classroom teacher and an author.

In "How Vast the Wasteland Now?" Minow looks at the new television landscape and a new generation of viewers, but he asks much the same question: Can television become a leading institution in public life and not merely a reactive one? He outlines the four areas — education, children's programming, public television funding and political campaigns — where he believes television has failed in the intervening years; and, as he did in 1961, he points to the good and the bad, prescribing remedies for television's systemic problems and specific suggestions for better programming.

Even as he looks back at the hopes of the New Frontier, Minow looks ahead to the potential of the many new frontiers where television extends its reach today. Looking back, he says "that 1961 speech is remembered for two words — but not the two I intended to be remembered. The words we tried to advance were 'public interest.' To me, the public interest meant, and still means, that we should constantly ask: What can television do for our country? — for the common good? — for the American people?"



## HOW VAST THE WASTELAND NOW?

Address by Newton N. Minow, Director,  
The Annenberg Washington Program in  
Communications Policy Studies of  
Northwestern University  
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Given at the Gannett Foundation Media Center,  
Columbia University, New York City  
May 9, 1991

After finishing that speech to the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) thirty years ago today, I remained near the podium talking with LeRoy Collins, a former governor of Florida who was serving as NAB president.<sup>1</sup> A man from the audience approached us and said to me, "I didn't particularly like your speech." A few moments later the same man returned with, "The more I thought about it, your speech was really awful." A few minutes later he was back a third time to say, "Mr. Minow, that was the worst speech I ever heard in my whole life!"

Governor Collins gently put his arm around me and said, "Don't let him upset you, Newt. That man has no mind of his own. He just repeats everything he hears."

Thirty years later I still hear about that speech. My daughters threaten to engrave on my tombstone "On to a Vaster Wasteland."

My old law partner, Adlai E. Stevenson, loved to tell a favorite story about the relationship between a fan and a fan dancer: There is really no intent to cover the subject — only to call attention to it. Like a fan dancer, it is not my intent today to cover every part of that speech, but rather to use its anniversary to examine, with thirty years' perspective, what television has been doing to our society and what television can do for our society.

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1. Governor Collins died several months ago—after an exceptionally distinguished career of public service of the highest quality.

Thirty years cannot be covered fully in thirty minutes, but let us begin by reminding ourselves of the times, circumstances and optimistic spirit of the Kennedy administration in the early '60s. What was broadcasting like at that stage of development?

President Kennedy started off with a dream of a New Frontier, but made a major blunder on April 17, 1961, at the Bay of Pigs. A few weeks later, on May 5, there was a great triumph: the successful launch of the first American to fly in space, Commander Alan Shepard. Commander Shepard returned from his flight to meet President Kennedy and Congress on May 8. On the same day, President Kennedy was to speak to the National Association of Broadcasters and invited me to accompany him when he gave his speech. I was to meet him outside the Oval Office in the morning and to ride with him to the Sheraton Park Hotel.

As I waited there, President Kennedy emerged and said, "Newt, how about taking the Shepards with us to the broadcasters?" Of course, I said, and the president went back into his office to make the arrangements. He returned to say, "It's all set. Now come with me, I want to change my shirt. And what do you think I should say to the broadcasters?"

Although I had known Jack Kennedy before he was president, it was the first time that I was in the bedroom of the president of the United States watching him change shirts and being asked to advise him on what to say. Nervously, I mumbled something about the difference between the way we handled our space launches compared to the Soviets: that we invited radio and television to cover the events live, not knowing whether success or failure would follow. On the other hand, the Soviets operated behind locked doors. President Kennedy nodded, took no notes, and led me back to his office, where Commander and Mrs. Shepard and Vice President Lyndon

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Johnson were waiting. We went out to the cars. The vice president and I ended up on the two jump seats in the presidential limousine, with the president and the Shepards in the back seat in an ebullient mood as we rode through Rock Creek Park. After we arrived, President Kennedy gave a graceful, witty, thoughtful talk about the value of an open, free society, exemplified by the live radio and television coverage of Commander Shepard's flight. The broadcasters responded with a standing ovation.

The next day I returned to that same platform for my first speech as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. Many people think I should have asked President Kennedy to watch me change my shirt and give me advice on my speech because, as you know, the audience did not like what I had to say.

In that speech, I asked the nation's television broadcasters "to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there without a book, magazine, newspaper, profit-and-loss sheet or rating book to distract you — and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland....

"Is there one person in this room who claims that broadcasting can't do better?...Your trust accounting with your beneficiaries is overdue."

That night, at home, there were two phone calls. The first was from President Kennedy's father, Joseph Kennedy. When I heard who was calling I anticipated sharp criticism; instead Ambassador Kennedy said, "Newt, I just finished talking to Jack and I told him your speech was the best one since his inaugural address on January 20th. Keep it up; if anyone gives you any trouble, call me!" The second call was from Edward R. Murrow, then director of the U.S. Information Agency. He said, "You gave the same speech I gave two years ago. Good for you — you'll get a lot of heat and criticism, but don't lose your courage!"

Those two calls gave me the backbone I needed. What was the situation at the time? In the late

'50s, scandals damaged both the FCC and the television industry. President Eisenhower had to replace an FCC chairman who had accepted lavish entertainment by industry licensees. Broadcasters had to explain quiz show and payola scandals in congressional hearings. Television was still new — in its first generation of programming. The word “television” did not yet appear in the Federal Communications Act.

While at the FCC, we followed two fundamental policies: 1) to require that broadcasters serve the public interest as well as their private interest, and 2) to increase choice for the American home viewer. In the long run, we believed that competition was preferable to governmental regulation, especially where a medium of expression was involved. So we worked to open markets to new technologies, to help build a noncommercial television alternative and to provide educational opportunities through television. Satellites, UHF, cable — we encouraged them all.

Today that 1961 speech is remembered for two words — but not the two I intended to be remembered. The words we tried to advance were “public interest.” To me, the public interest meant, and still means, that we should constantly ask: What can television do for our country? — for the common good? — for the American people?

Alexis deTocqueville observed in 1835: “No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of tumult....all around you everything is on the move.” What would Tocqueville have said about the explosive expansion of telecommunications — particularly the electronic media — during the thirty years between 1961 and 1991?

In 1961 there were 47.2 million television sets in American homes; by 1990 that number had more than tripled, to 172 million. Fewer than 5 percent of the

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television sets in 1961 were color; in 1990, 98 percent of American homes receive television in color. Cable television, which started by bringing television to people who could not receive signals over the air, now brings even more television to people who already receive it. In 1961, cable television served just over a million homes; now it reaches more than 55 million. Between 1961 and 1991, the number of commercial television stations in American doubled, from 543 to 1,102. Noncommercial — now called public — television stations quintupled from 62 to 350.

Americans spend more time than ever watching television. Since 1961 the U.S. population has risen from 150 million to 245 million, and the amount of time Americans spend watching television has skyrocketed from 2.175 hours a day to a staggering 7.3 hours per day. In 1961, television viewers spent more than 90 percent of their viewing time watching the three commercial networks; today that figure is around 62 percent.

While the U.S. government slipped from a \$3 billion surplus in 1960 to a deficit of more than \$161 billion today, total advertising revenues for the television industry rose twentyfold in the same period, from \$1.2 billion to \$24 billion. In 1961 cable advertising revenues were zero; in 1988 cable advertising revenues were \$1.16 billion. And cable subscribers, who paid an average of \$4 per month in 1961, today pay around \$25 for cable service. Cable subscriptions accounted for revenues of \$51 million in 1961; now they amount to almost \$20 billion.

Video revenue in the movie industry, which was zero thirty years ago, is now \$2.9 billion — more than \$700 million larger than current movie theater receipts. VCRs — unavailable commercially in 1961 — are now in more than 58 million American homes.

Children today grow up with a remote control clicker, cable and a VCR. Former NBC President Bob Mulholland, who now teaches at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, says that these children don't remember the days when television signals came to

the home through the air to an antenna on the roof as God and General Sarnoff intended. My own children used to say, "Is it time for the 'Mickey Mouse Club' yet?" My grandchildren say, "Can I watch the tape of *Peter Pan* again?"

Today, new program services like CNN, C-SPAN, HBO, Showtime, Disney, Nickelodeon, Discovery, Lifetime, Arts and Entertainment, ESPN, USA, TNT, Black Entertainment TV, Bravo, Cinemax, TBS, Home Shopping, Weather Channel,

Univision, CNBC, Galavision, Nashville, MTV, FNN, American Movie Channel — and even more — enter the home by wire for those who can pay the monthly cable bill. Choice has skyrocketed. The VCR means you can watch a program when you want to see

it, not just when the broadcaster puts it on the schedule. If you are a sports fan, a news junkie, a stock market follower, a rock music devotee, a person who speaks Spanish, a nostalgic old-movie buff, a congressional-hearing observer, a weather watcher — you now have your own choice. The FCC objective in the early '60s to expand choice has been fulfilled — beyond all expectations.

Yet, to many of us, this enlarged choice is not enough to satisfy the public interest. There are several reasons. Although some viewers have gone from a vast emptiness to a vast fullness, others have been excluded. Choice through cable comes at a price not all can afford, and cable is still not available to the entire nation. (Where I live in Chicago, we did not receive cable service until last year, and of course many parts of New York City and Washington, D.C., do not have cable either.) And as CBS President Howard Stringer said in a speech at the Royal Institution in London last year, "We see a vast media-jaded audience that wanders restlessly from one channel to

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another in search of that endangered species — originality....more choices may not necessarily mean better choices.”

One evening as I watched, with my remote

control in hand, I flipped through the channels and saw a man loading his gun on one channel, a different man aiming a gun on a second, and another man shooting a gun on a third. And if you don't believe me, try it yourself. Remember Groucho Marx's advice: "Do you believe me or your own eyes?" I think

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the most troubling change over the past 30 years is the rise in the quantity and quality of violence on television. In 1961 I worried that my children would not benefit much from television, but in 1991 I worry that my grandchildren will actually be harmed by it. One recent study shows that by the time a child is 18 he has seen 25,000 murders on television. In 1961 they didn't make PG-13 movies, much less NC-17. Now a 6-year-old can watch them on cable.

Can this be changed where television is concerned? My own answer is yes. If we want to, we can provide the American people with a full choice, even if the marketplace does not meet the demands of the public interest. I reject the view of an FCC chairman in the early '80s who said that "a television set is merely a toaster with pictures." I reject this ideological view that the marketplace will regulate itself and that the television marketplace will give us perfection. The absolute free market approach to public good has been gospel in our country in the case of the savings and loan industry, the airline industry, the junk bond financing industry, and in many other spheres of commerce and common interest. If television is to change, the men and women in television will have to make it a leading institution in American life rather than merely a reactive mirror of the lowest common denominator in the marketplace. Based on the last thirty years, the

record gives the television marketplace an A+ for technology, but only a C for using that technology to serve human and humane goals.

Bill Baker, president of Thirteen/WNET here in New York (and like me a veteran of both commercial and public television) said it all in two short sentences: "To aim only at the bottom line is to aim too low. Our country deserves better." Felix Rohatyn, a star of the marketplace, was on target when he said, "Though I believe the marketplace knows best most of the time, I am skeptical that it should always be the ultimate arbiter of economic action, and I am more than willing to interfere with it when it becomes a distorting rather than a benign influence."

In the last thirty years, the television marketplace has become a severely distorting influence in at least four important public areas. We have failed 1) to use television for education; 2) to use television for children; 3) to finance public television properly; and 4) to use television properly in political campaigns.

First, education. Suppose you were asked this multiple-choice question: Which of the following is the most important educational institution in America? (a) Harvard, (b) Yale, (c) Columbia, (d) the University of California, (e) none of the above. The correct answer is e. The most important educational institution in America is television. More people learn more each day, each year, each lifetime from television than from any other source. All of television is education; the question is, what are we teaching and what are we learning? Sometimes, as in the case of the splendid Annenberg/CPB-sponsored educational course on the Constitution (created here at Columbia by Professor Fred Friendly), we see what television can do to stretch the mind and the spirit. In Ken Burns' brilliant programs about the Civil War, millions of Americans learned more about that terrible period in American history than they ever learned in school. We are slowly

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doing better each year in using television for education, but too much of the time we waste television's potential to teach — and viewers' to learn.

Second, television for children. Bob Keeshan, our Captain Kangaroo for life, has seen how television for children all over the world is designed to be part of the nurturing and educational system. But "in America," he says, "television is not a tool for nurturing. It is a tool for selling." True, there are glorious exceptions like Joan Cooney's work, starting with "Sesame Street." But far too often television fails our children. And it fails them for more hours each day than they spend with a teacher in a classroom.

Competition, it is said, brings out the best in products and the worst in people. In children's television, competition seems to bring out the worst in programs and the worst in children. Children lack purchasing power and voting power, and the television marketplace and the political process have failed them. Cooperation instead of competition — among broadcasters and cable operators — could do wonders for children. Congress last year and the FCC this year have finally started to address these issues, and the attention is long overdue. If they would give the

same time and attention to policies for children's television as they give to industry fights about the financial interest and syndication rules, our children would begin to receive the priority concern they deserve.

Third, public television should become just as much a public commitment as our public libraries, hospitals, parks, schools and universities. Yet it is a stepchild, struggling to provide

outstanding public service while remaining in the role of a perpetual beggar in the richest country in the world. We have failed to fund a strong independent alternative to commercial television and thus failed, in Larry Grossman's words, to "travel the high road of education, information,

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culture and the arts.”

There are many ways to establish a sound economic base for public broadcasting. For example, Congress could create a spectrum-use or franchise fee for all commercial broadcast and cable operators to fund public broadcasting on a permanent basis. If this were set in the range of a 2 percent annual fee on broadcasting and cable’s \$50 billion total annual revenues, it would produce about \$1 billion a year. Even at that figure, we’d still be

behind Japan. If we added \$5 as a tax on the sale of new television sets and VCRs and earmarked the funds to match private contributions to public broadcasting, we could catch up to Japan — which now spends twenty times as much per person for public broadcasting as we do!

Finally, the use of television in political campaigns. Studies of the 1988 campaign show that the average block of uninterrupted speech by a presidential candidate on network newscasts was 9.8 seconds; in 1968 it was 42.3 seconds. As Walter Cronkite observed, this means that “issues can be avoided rather than confronted.” And David Halberstam adds, “Once the politicians begin to talk in such brief bites...they begin to think in them.”

A United States senator must now raise \$12,000 to \$16,000 every week to pay for a political campaign, mostly to buy time for television commercials. A recent United Nations study revealed that only two countries, Norway and Sri Lanka (in addition to the United States) do not provide free airtime to their political parties. If we are to preserve the democratic process without corrupting, unhealthy influences, we must find a bipartisan way to provide free time for our candidates and stop them from getting deeply in hock to special interests in order to pay for television commercials.

More than twenty years ago, I served on a biparti-

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san commission for the Twentieth Century Fund which recommended the concept of “voters’ time” for presidential candidates. Voters’ time would be television time purchased with public funds at half the commercial-time rates and given to candidates. In exchange, we would prohibit by law the purchase of time by the candidates. And while we’re at it, we should institutionalize the presidential debates — make them real debates by eliminating the panels of journalists. And we should clean up our political campaigns — once and for all.

In these four areas, the television marketplace has not fulfilled our needs and will not do so in the next thirty years. These four needs can be met only if we — as a nation — make the decision that to aim only at the bottom line is to aim too low. If we still believe in the concept of the public interest, we can use television to educate, we can stop shortchanging our children, we can fund public broadcasting properly, and we can provide free television time for our political candidates. My generation began these tasks, and the time has now come to pass the responsibility on to the next generation — the first generation to grow up with television.

What will happen in television in the next thirty years — from now until 2021? As Woody Allen says, “More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and hopelessness. The other to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”

In the next thirty years, four main forces — globalization, optical fiber, computers and satellite technology will illuminate the crossroads.

Today’s able FCC chairman, Al Sikes, is wisely trying to keep public policy in pace with rapidly changing technologies. As Al observes, “Today we can see the new world....in it, tomorrow’s communications networks will be dramatically improved. Copper and coaxial cables are giving way to glass fibers, and wavelengths are being replaced by digits....”

Well before 2021, I believe there will be conver-

gence of the technologies now used in telephones, computers, publishing, satellites, cable, movie studios and television networks. Already we see tests of optical fiber demonstrating the future. In Montreal tonight, a home viewer watching the hockey game on television can use his remote control to order his own instant replay, order different camera angles — and become his own studio director. In Cerritos, California, a viewer today can participate in an experiment to summon any recorded show at any time, day or night; and he can stop it, rewind it, or fast forward it.

Here in New York City, Time Warner is building a two-way, interactive cable system with 150 channels. People will be able to order any movie or record album ever produced and see and hear it when they themselves want to see and hear it. We see 400- and 500-channel systems on the horizon, fragmenting viewership into smaller and smaller niches, and we need to remember that for all their presumed benefits these developments undermine the simultaneous, shared national experiences that comprise the nation's social glue.

At the Annenberg Washington Program of Northwestern University, we are developing a blueprint for the future of optical fiber. As this new technological world unfolds, the risk remains that we will create information overload without information substance or analysis, of more media with fewer messages, of tiny sound bites without large thoughts, of concentrating on pictures of dead bodies instead of thinking human beings. Henry Thoreau warned us more than 125 years ago: "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."

When we launched the first communications satellite in 1962, we knew it was important — but we had little understanding of its future use. I did tell President Kennedy that the communications satellite was more important than launching a man into space, because the satellite launched an idea, and ideas last longer than human

beings. The last thirty years have taught us that satellites have no respect for political boundaries. Satellites cannot be stopped by Berlin Walls, by tanks in Tiananmen Square or by dictators in Baghdad. In Manila, Warsaw and Bucharest, we saw the television station become today's Electronic Bastille.

Thirty years is but a nanosecond in history. If President Kennedy were alive today, he would celebrate his 74th birthday later this month. He would be seven years older than President Bush. He would be astonished by the technological changes of the past thirty years, but he would be confident that the next thirty years will be even more advanced.

Before he was elected president, John F. Kennedy once compared broadcasters and politicians in these words, "Will Gresham's law operate in the broadcasting and political worlds, wherein the bad inevitably drives out the good? Will the politician's desire for reelection — and the broadcaster's desire for ratings — cause both to flatter every public whim and prejudice — to seek the lowest common denominator of appeal — to put public opinion at all times ahead of the public interest? For myself, I reject that view of politics, and I urge you to reject that view of broadcasting."

I went to the FCC because I agreed then and agree now with President

Kennedy's philosophy of broadcasting. As I think back about him, and also think of our future, I propose today to the television and cable industries: Join together to produce a unique program to be on all channels that will have enduring importance to history. Seldom in history

have we had five living American presidents at the same time: Right now, Presidents Reagan, Carter, Ford and Nixon are with us, in addition to President Bush. You can

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bring all of them to the Oval Office in the White House to discuss their dreams of America in the 21st century, and you can give every American the opportunity to see and hear this program and to share a vision of our future.

The '60s started with high hopes, confronted tragedy and ended in disillusion.

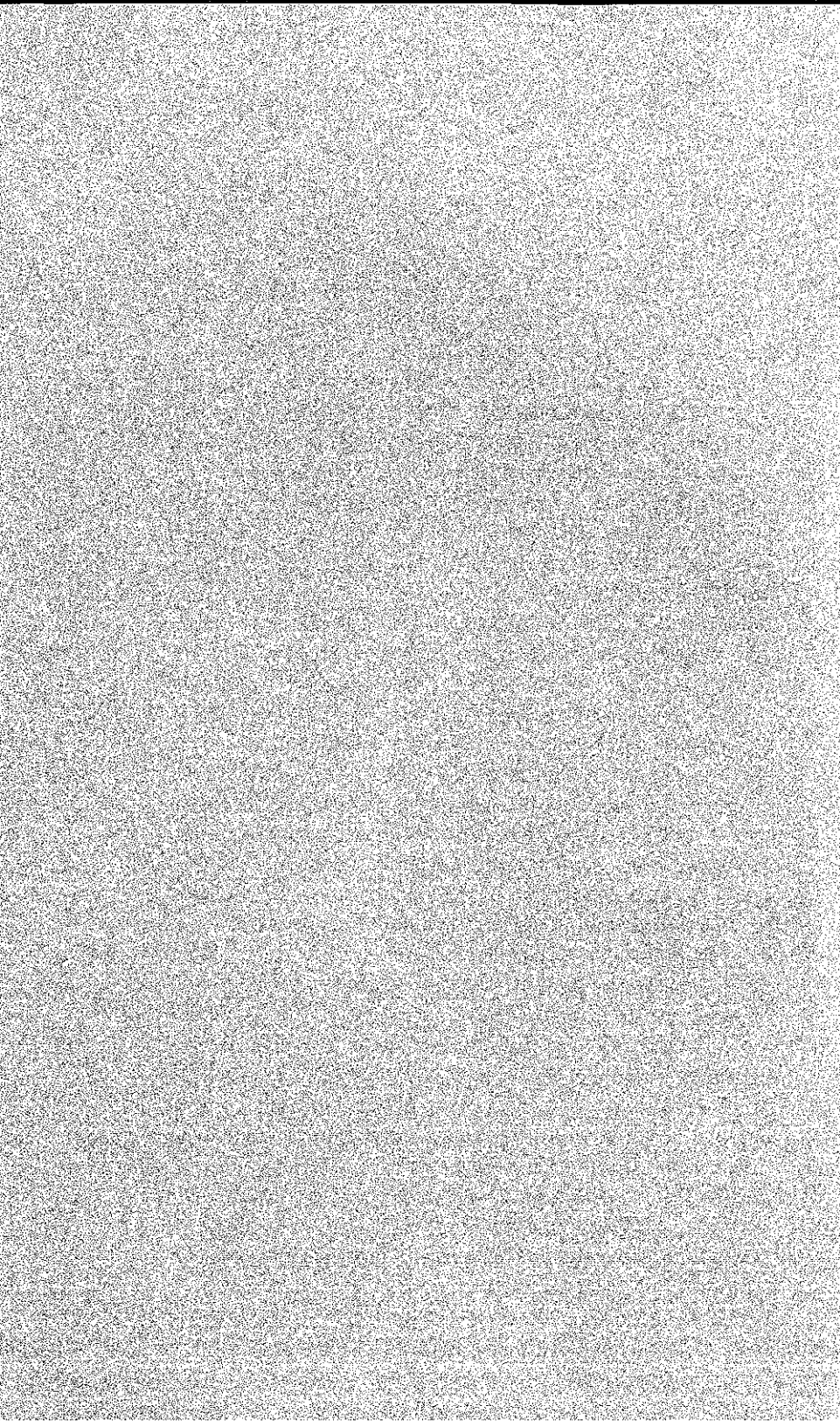
Tragically, our leaders — President John F. Kennedy, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Pope John XXIII, left too soon. We cannot go back in history, but the new generation can draw upon the great creative energy of that era, on its sense of national kinship and purpose, and on its passion and compassion. These qualities have not left us — we have left them, and it is time to return.

As we return, I commend some extraordinary words to the new generation. E.B. White sat in a darkened room in 1938 to see the beginning of television — an experimental electronic box that projected images into the room. Once he saw it, Mr. White wrote: “We shall stand or fall by television — of that I am sure....I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision, we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance to the general peace, or a saving radiance in the sky.”

That radiance falls unevenly today. It is still a dim light in education. It has not fulfilled its potential for children. It has neglected the needs of public television. And in the electoral process it has cast a dark shadow.

This year, television enabled us to see Patriot missiles destroy Scud missiles above the Persian Gulf. Will television in the next thirty years be a Scud or a Patriot? A new generation now has the chance to put the vision back into television, to travel from the wasteland to the promised land, and to make television a saving radiance in the sky. □

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## THE "VAST WASTELAND"

Address by Newton N. Minow to the National  
Association of Broadcasters, Washington, D.C.  
May 9, 1961

Governor Collins, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for this opportunity to meet with you today. This is my first public address since I took over my new job. When the New Frontiersmen rode into town, I locked myself in my office to do my homework and get my feet wet. But apparently I haven't managed to stay out of hot water. I seem to have detected a certain nervous apprehension about what I might say or do when I emerged from that locked office for this, my maiden station break.

First, let me begin by dispelling a rumor. I was not picked for this job because I regard myself as the fastest draw on the New Frontier.

Second, let me start a rumor. Like you, I have carefully read President Kennedy's messages about the regulatory agencies, conflict of interest and the dangers of *ex parte* contracts. And of course, we at the Federal Communications Commission will do our part. Indeed, I may even suggest that we change the name of the FCC to The Seven Untouchables!

It may also come as a surprise to some of you, but I want you to know that you have my admiration and respect. Yours is a most honorable profession. Anyone who is in the broadcasting business has a tough row to hoe. You earn your bread by using public property. When you work in broadcasting, you volunteer for public service, public pressure and public regulation. You must compete with other attractions and other investments, and the only way you can do it is to prove to us every three years that you should have been in business in the first place.

I can think of easier ways to make a living.

But I cannot think of more satisfying ways.

I admire your courage — but that doesn't mean I would make life any easier for you. Your license lets you use the public's airwaves as trustees for 180 million Americans. The public is your beneficiary. If you want to stay on as trustees, you must deliver a decent return to

the public — not only to your stockholders. So, as a representative of the public, your health and your product are among my chief concerns.

As to your health: Let's talk only of television today. In 1960 gross broadcast revenues of the television industry were over \$1,268,000,000; profit before taxes was \$243,900,000 — an average return on revenue of 19.2 percent. Compare this with 1959, when gross broadcast revenues were \$1,163,900,000 and profit before taxes was \$222,300,000, an average return on revenue of 19.1 percent. So, the percentage increase of total revenues from 1959 to 1960 was 9 percent, and the percentage increase of profit was 9.7 percent. This, despite a recession. For your investors, the price has indeed been right.

I have confidence in your health.

But not in your product.

It is with this and much more in mind that I come before you today.

One editorialist in the trade press wrote that "the FCC of the New Frontier is going to be one of the toughest FCCs in the history of broadcast regulation." If he meant that we intend to enforce the law in the public interest, let me make it perfectly clear that he is right — we do.

If he meant that we intend to muzzle or censor broadcasting, he is dead wrong.

It would not surprise me if some of you had expected me to come here today and say in effect, "Clean up your own house or the government will do it for you."

Well, in a limited sense, you would be right — I've just said it.

But I want to say to you earnestly that it is not in that spirit that I come before you today, nor is it in that spirit that I intend to serve the FCC.

I am in Washington to help broadcasting, not to harm it; to strengthen it, not to weaken it; to reward it, not punish it; to encourage it, not threaten it; to stimulate it, not censor it.

Above all, I am here to uphold and protect the public interest.

What do we mean by "the public interest"? Some say the public interest is merely what interests the public.

I disagree.

So does your distinguished president, Governor Collins. In a

recent speech he said, "Broadcasting, to serve the public interest, must have a soul and a conscience, a burning desire to excel, as well as to sell; the urge to build the character, citizenship and intellectual stature of people, as well as to expand the gross national product . . . . By no means do I imply that broadcasters disregard the public interest . . . . But a much better job can be done, and should be done."

I could not agree more.

And I would add that in today's world, with chaos in Laos and the Congo aflame, with Communist tyranny on our Caribbean doorstep and relentless pressure on our Atlantic alliance, with social and economic problems at home of the gravest nature, yes, and with technological knowledge that makes it possible, as our president has said, not only to destroy our world but to destroy poverty around the world — in a time of peril and opportunity, the old complacent, unbalanced fare of action-adventure and situation comedies is simply not good enough.

Your industry possesses the most powerful voice in America. It has an inescapable duty to make that voice ring with intelligence and with leadership. In a few years this exciting industry has grown from a novelty to an instrument of overwhelming impact on the American people. It should be making ready for the kind of leadership that newspapers and magazines assumed years ago, to make our people aware of their world.

Ours has been called the jet age, the atomic age, the space age. It is also, I submit, the television age. And just as history will decide whether the leaders of today's world employed the atom to destroy the world or rebuild it for mankind's benefit, so will history decide whether today's broadcasters employed their powerful voice to enrich the people or debase them.

If I seem today to address myself chiefly to the problems of television, I don't want any of you radio broadcasters to think we've gone to sleep at your switch — we haven't. We still listen. But in recent years most of the controversies and cross-currents in broadcast programming have swirled around television. And so my subject today is the television industry and the public interest.

Like everybody, I wear more than one hat. I am the chairman of the FCC. I am also a television viewer and the husband and father of other television viewers. I have seen a great many television pro-

grams that seemed to me eminently worthwhile, and I am not talking about the much-bemoaned good old days of "Playhouse 90" and "Studio One."

I am talking about this past season. Some were wonderfully entertaining, such as "The Fabulous Fifties," the "Fred Astaire Show" and the "Bing Crosby Special"; some were dramatic and moving, such as Conrad's "Victory" and "Twilight Zone"; some were marvelously informative, such as "The Nation's Future," "CBS Reports" and "The Valiant Years." I could list many more — programs that I am sure everyone here felt enriched his own life and that of his family. When television is good, nothing — not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers — nothing is better.

But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there without a book, magazine, newspaper, profit-and-loss sheet or rating book to distract you — and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland.

You will see a procession of game shows, violence, audience participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western badmen, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons. And, endlessly, commercials — many screaming, cajoling and offending. And most of all, boredom. True, you will see a few things you will enjoy. But they will be very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, try it.

Is there one person in this room who claims that broadcasting can't do better?

Well, a glance at next season's proposed programming can give us little heart. Of seventy-three-and-a-half hours of prime evening time, the networks have tentatively scheduled fifty-nine hours to categories of "action-adventure," situation comedy, variety, quiz and movies.

Is there one network president in this room who claims he can't do better?

Well, is there at least one network president who believes that the other networks can't do better?

Gentlemen, your trust accounting with your beneficiaries is overdue.

Never have so few owed so much to so many.

Why is so much of television so bad? I have heard many answers: demands of your advertisers; competition for ever higher ratings; the need always to attract a mass audience; the high cost of television programs; the insatiable appetite for programming material — these are some of them. Unquestionably these are tough problems not susceptible to easy answers.

But I am not convinced that you have tried hard enough to solve them.

I do not accept the idea that the present overall programming is aimed accurately at the public taste. The ratings tell us only that some people have their television sets turned on, and of that number, so many are tuned to one channel and so many to another. They don't tell us what the public might watch if they were offered half a dozen additional choices. A rating, at best, is an indication of how many people saw what you gave them. Unfortunately it does not reveal the depth of the penetration, or the intensity of reaction, and it never reveals what the acceptance would have been if what you gave them had been better — if all the forces of art and creativity and daring and imagination had been unleashed. I believe in the people's good sense and good taste, and I am not convinced that the people's taste is as low as some of you assume.

My concern with the rating services is not with their accuracy. Perhaps they are accurate. I really don't know. What, then, is wrong with the ratings? It's not been their accuracy — it's been their use.

Certainly I hope you will agree that ratings should have little influence where children are concerned. The best estimates indicate that during the hours of 5 to 6 p.m., 60 percent of your audience is composed of children under twelve. And most young children today, believe it or not, spend as much time watching television as they do in the schoolroom. I repeat — let that sink in — most young children today spend as much time watching television as they do in the schoolroom. It used to be said that there were three great influences on a child: home, school and church. Today there is a fourth great influence, and you ladies and gentlemen control it.

If parents, teachers and ministers conducted their responsibilities by following the ratings, children would have a steady diet of ice cream, school holidays and no Sunday School. What about your responsibilities? Is there no room on television to teach, to inform,

to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacities of our children? Is there no room for programs deepening their understanding of children in other lands? Is there no room for a children's news show explaining something about the world to them at their level of understanding? Is there no room for reading the great literature of the past, teaching them the great traditions of freedom? There are some fine children's shows, but they are drowned out in the massive doses of cartoons, violence and more violence. Must these be your trademarks? Search your consciences and see if you cannot offer more to your young beneficiaries, whose future you guide so many hours each and every day.

What about adult programming and ratings? You know, newspaper publishers take popularity ratings too. The answers are pretty clear; it is almost always the comics, followed by the advice-to-the-lovelorn columns. But, ladies and gentlemen, the news is still on the front page of all newspapers, the editorials are not replaced by more comics, the newspapers have not become one long collection of advice to the lovelorn. Yet newspapers do not need a license from the government to be in business — they do not use public property. But in television — where your responsibilities as public trustees are so plain — the moment that the ratings indicate that westerns are popular, there are new imitations of westerns on the air faster than the old coaxial cable could take us from Hollywood to New York. Broadcasting cannot continue to live by the numbers. Ratings ought to be the slave of the broadcaster, not his master. And you and I both know that the rating services themselves would agree.

Let me make clear that what I am talking about is balance. I believe that the public interest is made up of many interests. There are many people in this great country, and you must serve all of us. You will get no argument from me if you say that, given a choice between a western and a symphony, more people will watch the western. I like westerns and private eyes too — but a steady diet for the whole country is obviously not in the public interest. We all know that people would more often prefer to be entertained than stimulated or informed. But your obligations are not satisfied if you look only to popularity as a test of what to broadcast. You are not only in show business; you are free to communicate ideas as well as relaxation. You must provide a wider range of choices, more diversity, more alternatives. It is not enough to cater to the nation's

whims — you must also serve the nation's needs.

And I would add this — that if some of you persist in a relentless search for the highest rating and the lowest common denominator, you may very well lose your audience. Because, to paraphrase a great American who was recently my law partner, the people are wise, wiser than some of the broadcasters — and politicians — think.

As you may have gathered, I would like to see television improved. But how is this to be brought about? By voluntary action by the broadcasters themselves? By direct government intervention? Or how?

Let me address myself now to my role, not as a viewer, but as chairman of the FCC. I could not if I would chart for you this afternoon in detail all of the actions I contemplate. Instead, I want to make clear some of the fundamental principles which guide me.

First: the people own the air. They own it as much in prime evening time as they do at 6 o'clock Sunday morning. For every hour that the people give you, you owe them something. I intend to see that your debt is paid with service.

Second: I think it would be foolish and wasteful for us to continue any worn-out wrangle over the problems of payola, rigged quiz shows, and other mistakes of the past. There are laws on the books which we will enforce. But there is no chip on my shoulder. We live together in perilous, uncertain times; we face together staggering problems; and we must not waste much time now by rehashing the clichés of past controversy. To quarrel over the past is to lose the future.

Third: I believe in the free enterprise system. I want to see broadcasting improved and I want you to do the job. I am proud to champion your cause. It is not rare for American businessmen to serve a public trust. Yours is a special trust because it is imposed by law.

Fourth: I will do all I can to help educational television. There are still not enough educational stations, and major centers of the country still lack usable educational channels. If there were a limited number of printing presses in this country, you may be sure that a fair proportion of them would be put to educational use. Educational television has an enormous contribution to make to the future, and I intend to give it a hand along the way. If there is not a nationwide educational television system in this country, it will not be the fault of

the FCC.

Fifth: I am unalterably opposed to governmental censorship. There will no suppression of programming which does not meet with bureaucratic tastes. Censorship strikes at the taproot of our free society.

Sixth: I did not come to Washington to idly observe the squandering of the public's airwaves. The squandering of our airwaves is no less important than the lavish waste of any precious natural resource. I intend to take the job of chairman of the FCC very seriously. I believe in the gravity of my own particular sector of the New Frontier. There will be times perhaps when you will consider that I take myself or my job *too* seriously. Frankly, I don't care if you do. For I am convinced that either one takes this job seriously — or one can be seriously taken.

Now, how will these principles be applied? Clearly, at the heart of the FCC's authority lies its power to license, to renew or fail to renew, or to revoke a license. As you know, when your license comes up for renewal, your performance is compared with your promises. I understand that many people feel that in the past licenses were often renewed *pro forma*. I say to you now: Renewal will not be *pro forma* in the future. There is nothing permanent or sacred about a broadcast license.

But simply matching promises and performance is not enough. I intend to do more. I intend to find out whether the people care. I intend to find out whether the community which each broadcaster serves believes he has been serving the public interest. When a renewal is set down for hearing, I intend — wherever possible — to hold a well-advertised public hearing, right in the community you have promised to serve. I want the people who own the air and the homes that television enters to tell you and the FCC what's been going on. I want the people — if they are truly interested in the service you give them — to make notes, document cases, tell us the facts. For those few of you who really believe that the public interest is merely what interests the public — I hope that these hearings will arouse no little interest.

The FCC has a fine reserve of monitors — almost 180 million Americans gathered around 56 million sets. If you want those monitors to be your friends at court — it's up to you.

Some of you may say, "Yes, but I still do not know where the

line is between a grant of a renewal and the hearing you just spoke of." My answer is: Why should you want to know how close you can come to the edge of the cliff? What the commission asks of you is to make a conscientious good-faith effort to serve the public interest. Every one of you serves a community in which the people would benefit by educational, religious, instructive or other public service programming. Every one of you serves an area which has local needs — as to local elections, controversial issues, local news, local talent. Make a serious, genuine effort to put on that programming. When you do, you will not be playing brinkmanship with the public interest.

What I've been saying applies to broadcast stations. Now a station break for the networks:

You know your importance in this great industry. Today, more than one-half of all hours of television station programming comes from the networks; in prime time, this rises to more than three-fourths of the available hours.

You know that the FCC has been studying network operations for some time. I intend to press this to a speedy conclusion with useful results. I can tell you right now, however, that I am deeply concerned with concentration of power in the hands of the networks. As a result, too many local stations have forgone any efforts at local programming, with little use of live talent and local service. Too many local stations operate with one hand on the network switch and the other on a projector loaded with old movies. We want the individual stations to be free to meet their legal responsibilities to serve their communities.

I join Governor Collins in his views so well expressed to the advertisers who use the public air. I urge the networks to join him and undertake a very special mission on behalf of this industry: You can tell your advertisers, "This is the high quality we are going to serve — take it or other people will. If you think you can find a better place to move automobiles, cigarettes and soap — go ahead and try."

Tell your sponsors to be less concerned with costs per thousand and more concerned with understanding per millions. And remind your stockholders that an investment in broadcasting is buying a share in public responsibility.

The networks can start this industry on the road to freedom

from the dictatorship of numbers.

But there is more to the problem than network influences on stations or advertiser influences on networks. I know the problems networks face in trying to clear some of their best programs — the informational programs that exemplify public service. They are your finest hours, whether sustaining or commercial, whether regularly scheduled or special; these are the signs that broadcasting knows the way to leadership. They make the public's trust in you a wise choice.

They should be seen. As you know, we are readying for use new forms by which broadcast stations will report their programming to the commission. You probably also know that special attention will be paid in these reports to public service programming. I believe that stations taking network service should also be required to report the extent of the local clearance of network public service programming, and when they fail to clear them, they should explain why. If it is to put on some outstanding local program, this is one reason. But, if it is simply to carry some old movie, that is an entirely different matter. The commission should consider such clearance reports carefully when making up its mind about the licensee's overall programming.

We intend to move — and as you know, indeed the FCC was rapidly moving in other new areas before the new administration arrived in Washington. And I want to pay my public respects to my very able predecessor, Fred Ford, and my colleagues on the commission who have welcomed me to the FCC with warmth and cooperation.

We have approved an experiment with pay TV, and in New York we are testing the potential of UHF broadcasting. Either or both of these may revolutionize television. Only a foolish prophet would venture to guess the direction they will take, and their effect. But we intend that they shall be explored fully — for they are part of broadcasting's new frontier.

The questions surrounding pay TV are largely economic. The questions surrounding UHF are largely technological. We are going to give the infant pay TV a chance to prove whether it can offer a useful service; we are going to protect it from those who would strangle it in its crib.

As for UHF, I'm sure you know about our test in the canyons of New York City. We will take every possible positive step to break through the allocations barrier into UHF. We will put this sleeping

giant to use, and in the years ahead we may have twice as many channels operating in cities where now there are only two or three. We may have a half-dozen networks instead of three.

I have told you that I believe in the free enterprise system. I believe that most of television's problems stem from lack of competition. This is the importance of UHF to me: With more channels on the air, we will be able to provide every community with enough stations to offer service to all parts of the public. Programs with a mass-market appeal required by mass-product advertisers certainly will still be available. But other stations will recognize the need to appeal to more limited markets and to special tastes. In this way we can all have a much wider range of programs.

Television should thrive on this competition — and the country should benefit from alternative sources of service to the public. And, Governor Collins, I hope the NAB will benefit from many new members.

Another, and perhaps the most important, frontier: Television will rapidly join the parade into space. International television will be with us soon. No one knows how long it will be until a broadcast from a studio in New York will be viewed in India as well as in Indiana, will be seen in the Congo as it is seen in Chicago. But as surely as we are meeting here today, that day will come — and once again our world will shrink.

What will the people of other countries think of us when they see our western badmen and good men punching each other in the jaw in between the shooting? What will the Latin American or African child learn of America from our great communications industry? We cannot permit television in its present form to be our voice overseas.

There is your challenge to leadership. You must reexamine some fundamentals of your industry. You must open your minds and open your hearts to the limitless horizons of tomorrow.

I can suggest some words that should serve to guide you:

Television and all who participate in it are jointly accountable to the American public for respect for the special needs of children, for community responsibility, for the advancement of education and culture, for the acceptability of the program materials chosen, for decency and decorum in production, and for propriety in advertising. This responsibility cannot be

discharged by any given group of programs, but can be discharged only through the highest standards of respect for the American home, applied to every moment of every program presented by television.

Program materials should enlarge the horizons of the viewer, provide him with wholesome entertainment, afford helpful stimulation, and remind him of the responsibilities which the citizen has toward his society.

These words are not mine. They are yours. They are taken literally from your own Television Code. They reflect the leadership and aspirations of your own great industry. I urge you to respect them as I do. And I urge you to respect the intelligent and farsighted leadership of Governor LeRoy Collins and to make this meeting a creative act. I urge you at this meeting and, after you leave, back home, at your stations and your networks, to strive ceaselessly to improve your product and to better serve your viewers, the American people.

I hope that we at the FCC will not allow ourselves to become so bogged down in the mountain of papers, hearings, memoranda, orders and the daily routine that we close our eyes to the wider view of the public interest. And I hope that you broadcasters will not permit yourselves to become so absorbed in the chase for ratings, sales and profits that you lose this wider view. Now more than ever before in broadcasting's history the times demand the best of all of us.

We need imagination in programming, not sterility; creativity, not imitation; experimentation, not conformity; excellence, not mediocrity. Television is filled with creative, imaginative people. You must strive to set them free.

Television in its young life has had many hours of greatness — its "Victory at Sea," its Army-McCarthy hearings, its "Peter Pan," its "Kraft Theater," its "See It Now," its "Project 20," the World Series, its political conventions and campaigns, the Great Debates — and it has had its endless hours of mediocrity and its moments of public disgrace. There are estimates that today the average viewer spends about 200 minutes daily with television, while the average reader spends thirty-eight minutes with magazines and forty minutes with newspapers. Television has grown faster than a teenager, and now it

is time to grow up.

What you gentlemen broadcast through the people's air affects the people's taste, their knowledge, their opinions, their understanding of themselves and of their world. And their future.

The power of instantaneous sight and sound is without precedent in mankind's history. This is an awesome power. It has limitless capabilities for good — and for evil. And it carries with it awesome responsibilities — responsibilities which you and I cannot escape.

In his stirring inaugural address, our president said, "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Ask not what broadcasting can do for you — ask what you can do for broadcasting.

I urge you to put the people's airwaves to the service of the people and the cause of freedom. You must help prepare a generation for great decisions. You must help a great nation fulfill its future.

Do this, and I pledge you our help. □

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