CHALLENGES TO THE MEDIA

HOW VAST THE WASTELAND NOW?[1]

NEWTON N. MINOW[2]

On May 9, 1961, a young appointee in the Kennedy administration, Newton N. Minow, stood before the annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters to make his first public address as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. Recent scandals in the broadcasting industry, the resignation in disgrace of an FCC chairman, and rumors of new government regulations had led the assembled broadcasters to expect a lecture on manners, morals, and closer scrutiny. What they got instead shook their industry to the core.

Craig La May describes the speech as follows:

> 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 ask themselves if they were truly honoring the "public interest" they were licensed to serve.
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> And then, with extraordinary candor, Minow answered the question himself with a resounding "No." Commercial broadcasting, he said, was a "vast wasteland." (From the written introduction of the publication of Minow's "How Vast the Wasteland Now?" by the Gannett Foundation Media Center, 1991.)

The broadcasters were shocked and outraged. Public reaction to the speech, however, was "quick, abundant, and overwhelmingly positive," according to communications scholar Mary Ann Watson. Within six weeks, Minow received over six thousand favorable letters. The phrase, "vast wasteland," immediately entered the American vocabulary. Although Minow left the FCC two years later, his unrelenting pursuit of the goals he outlined to the NAB had made him a household name.

[1]Delivered to the Gannett Foundation Media Center at 4:30 P.M., May 9, 1991, in the Kathryn Bache Miller Theatre, Columbia University, New York, New York.
[2]For biographical note, see Appendix.

After leaving the FCC in 1963 to pursue his private law practice, Minow was active in public television, serving as a director of the Public Broadcasting System from 1973–1980, including a two-year term as its chairman. He also was director of the bipartisan advisory commission for the 1988 presidential debates. Minow currently is director of the Annenberg Washington program in Communications Policy Studies at Northwestern University and counsel to the law firm of Sidley and Austin.

Thirty years to the day after his original speech, Newton N. Minow delivered an address to the Gannett Foundation Media Center on the question, "How Vast the Wasteland Now?" Minow presented his views on the current condition of television at 4:30 P.M. in the Kathryn Bache Miller Theatre at Columbia University in New York City to an audience of more than 200 media executives, reporters, educators, students, foundation representatives, businessmen, and authors. He was introduced by Everette E. Dennis, executive director of the Gannett Foundation Media Center (now known as the Freedom Forum Media Center). Several newspapers, magazines, and scholarly publications carried excerpts and stories on the speech.

Newton N. Minow's speech: 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. A man from the audience approached us and said to me, "I didn't particularly like your speech." A few minutes 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 to our society.

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 sixties. What was the 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 to 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 have handled our space launches compared to the Soviets: that we invited radio and television to cover events live, not knowing whether success or failure would follow. On the other hand, the Soviets operated behind closed doors. President Kennedy nodded, took no notes, and lead me back to his office, where Commander and Mrs. Shepard and Vice President Lyndon 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 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 waste-land. . . . 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 telephone 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 phone calls gave me the backbone I needed.

What was the situation at the time? In the late fifties, scandals damaged both the FCC and the television industry. President Eisenhower had to replace the 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 functions: 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—not the two words 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 de Tocqueville 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 television sets in 1961 were 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 America doubled, from 543 to 1102. Noncommercial, now called public, television stations quintupled from 62 to 530.

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 sevenfold in the same period, from $3.2 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 subscribers accounted for revenues of $51 million in 1961; now they amount to almost $10 billion.

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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, says former NBC President Bob Mulholland, who now teaches at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. 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 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 could 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 sixties 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 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. I think the most troubling charge over the last 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 eighties 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 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, 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 the 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 most important in the educational institution of 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 educational; the question is, what are we teaching and what are we learning? Sometimes, as in the case of the splendid, Annenberg/CPB [Corporation for Public Broadcasting]-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's 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 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 a 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 the 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, 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 broadcast-

ing 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 air time 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 bipartisan 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 the 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 only be met 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 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 crossroads. One path leads to despair and hopelessness. The other to total extinction. Let us pray that 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 widely 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 convergence 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 recorded album ever produced and see it and hear it when they themselves want to see it 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 underline 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 of 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 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 would be 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 get 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.

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 the 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 in 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 has 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.