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A Vaster Wasteland

FIFTY YEARS AFTER HIS LANDMARK SPEECH DECLARING TELEVISION PROGRAMMING A "VAST WASTELAND," THE AUTHOR SURVEYS THE RESHAPED MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND LAYS OUT A PLAN TO KEEP TELEVISION AND THE INTERNET VIBRANT, DEMOCRATIC FORCES FOR THE NEXT HALF CENTURY.

By Newton N. Minow

IMAGE CREDIT: STEPHEN WEBSTER

FIFTY YEARS AGO next month, I stood before the annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters for my inaugural public address as President Kennedy's chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. My first objective in the job was to clean up the agency and the industry, which before I arrived had been embroiled in quiz-show, payola, and agency scandals. My second was to expand choice for viewers, by advancing new technologies in the belief that more choice would result in more and better content.

My objective at the convention was to tell broadcasters that the FCC would enforce the law's requirement that they serve the public interest in return for their free and exclusive use of the publicly owned airwaves. Too much existing programming, I said, was little more than "a procession of game

shows violence, sadism, murder, Western bad men, Western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons." Television, I said, was too often a "vast wasteland."

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I knew broadcasters would not be happy. My favorite response was from the Hollywood producer Sherwood Schwartz, who named the sinking ship in *Gilligan's Island* after me. The "vast wasteland" was a metaphor for a particular time in our nation's communications history, and to my surprise it became part of the American lexicon. It has come to identify me. My daughters threaten to engrave on my tombstone: ON TO A VASTER WASTELAND. But those were not the two words I intended to be remembered. The two words I wanted to endure were *public interest*. To me that meant, as it still means, that we should constantly ask: What can communications do for our country? For the common good? For the American people?

We did some great things, to be sure. We expanded choice with public broadcasting, cable, and satellites. *Sesame Street* became one of the most-watched television programs in the world. Our televised presidential debates, once groundbreaking and then abandoned until 1976, became the most substantive view of our presidential campaigns. We launched the first communications satellite in 1962. On a visit to the space program, President Kennedy asked me about the satellite. I told him that it would be more important than sending a man into space. "Why?" he asked. "Because," I said, "this satellite will send ideas into space, and ideas last longer than men."

But our failures were equally dramatic, particularly in using television to serve our children and to improve our politics. For 50 years, we have bombarded our children with commercials disguised as programs and with endless displays of violence and sexual exploitation. We are nearly alone in the democratic world in not providing our candidates with public-service television time. Instead we make them buy it—and so money consumes and corrupts our political discourse.

The past 50 years have seen sizzling and explosive advances in technology. Fifty years ago, the FCC regulated telephone service that came by wire, and television service that came through the air. Today, as MIT's Nicholas Negroponte predicted, these services are mostly reversed. The next 50 years will see even more technological miracles, including the marriage of computers, television, telephony, and the Internet. What we need, to accompany these changes, are critical choices about the values we want to build into our 21st-century communications system—and the public policies to support them. I believe we should commit to six goals in the next 50 years.

Our first must be to expand freedom, in order to strengthen editorial independence in news and information. Freedom of thought is the foundation of our national character, and at its best the Internet represents the full flowering of that freedom. The Internet itself is the result of an open system that has encouraged technological innovation and creative energy we could never have dreamed of—and, happily, the FCC, under its talented chairman, Julius Genachowski, is leading public-interest advocates and industry groups to both meet the practical needs and uphold the democratic values at stake.

Our second commitment should be to use new communications technologies to improve and extend the benefits of education at all levels, preschool through postgraduate. In the midst of a bloody civil war, the Land Grant College Act of 1862 made the United States the world leader in higher education and established the foundation upon which the nation's defense, diplomacy, and economic competitiveness have relied for 150 years. But today it no longer makes sense to let television broadcasters use the largest and most valuable swath of our electromagnetic spectrum to send out signals that more than 80 percent of American households don't need because they receive their television service through cable or satellite. We should auction off this precious real estate and use the money to invest in education. It's time for a new land grant act—a Land Grant of the Airwaves.

Our third commitment should be to use new technologies to improve and extend the reach of our health-care system. Other developed countries are far ahead of us in telemedicine, using wireless communications and high-definition imaging to provide preventive health care at low cost. No organization in the world is a more sophisticated user than the U.S. military, which provides primary care through telemedicine to many of its personnel around the world. Certainly we should commit to using telemedicine to serve Americans at home. Last year's telecommunications-policy proposal by the FCC wisely includes improved health care as a goal.

Fourth, the nation's communications infrastructure for public safety and local and national security is a dangerous disgrace. We learned that most vividly on September 11, 2001, when first responders could not communicate with one another, and the nation's commercial and emergency networks were virtually overwhelmed with traffic. Congress and the FCC must build and maintain a new and secure communications network as a national-security priority.

Fifth, we need to give greater support to public radio and public television. Both have been starved for funds for decades, and yet in many communities they are essential sources of local news and information—particularly public radio, which is relatively inexpensive to produce and distribute and is a valuable source of professionally reported news for millions of Americans. There is virtually nothing else like it on the air. Public-television stations, as I saw when I was the chairman of PBS, are overbuilt, sometimes with four competing in the same market. Where that is so, stations should be sold and the revenue dedicated to programming a national news and public-affairs service, built on the foundation of the splendid PBS *NewsHour*. And a crucial part of that service—as with public media around the world—should be to promote the country's arts and culture.

Finally and critically, if over-the-air television is to survive as a licensed service operating in the public interest, we must make better use of it in our politics. It is simply unconscionable that candidates for public office have to buy access to the airwaves—something the public itself owns—to talk to the public, unlike in most other major democratic countries.

The U.S. Supreme Court has moved aggressively over the past decade to overturn congressional action to reform campaign finance. I believe the Court is wrong in thinking that money is speech and speech is money. A lawyer arguing a case before the Court is allowed 30 minutes for oral argument. The Supreme Court would laugh if a lawyer who wants more than 30 minutes went to the court clerk's office to buy it.

Put simply, candidates for public office have to raise huge amounts of money to buy access to the public airwaves so they can talk to us. And because airtime is so expensive, they talk to us in slogans

and slurs, and only obliquely, if at all, about substance. Recent court decisions that it is constitutional to limit contributions but not expenditures seem to me to threaten the life of the democratic process. The logic of this arrangement reminds me of Justice Robert Jackson's warning, two generations ago, that the Constitution is not a "suicide pact."

Of course, any limitations on free speech are a concern in our constitutional system, and no one should suppose that the problem of cash in our campaigns has an easy First Amendment answer. But television is another matter. If broadcasters are to continue as the lone beneficiaries of their valuable spectrum assignments, it is not too much to require that, as a public service, they provide time to candidates for public office. That time is not for the candidates. It is for the voters.

As we think about the next 50 years, I remember a story President Kennedy told a week before he was killed. The story was about French Marshal Louis-Hubert-Gonzalve Lyautey, who walked one morning through his garden with his gardener. He stopped at a certain point and asked the gardener to plant a tree there the next morning. The gardener said, "But the tree will not bloom for 100 years." The marshal replied, "In that case, you had better plant it this afternoon."

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