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Against the Vast Wasteland: A Conversation With Former FCC Chairman Newton Minow

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In this interview, former Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Newton Minow reflects on his regulatory tenure, his famous "Vast Wasteland" speech, and the state of news media today. His insights have deep relevance for our contemporary policy debates, from the future of journalism to regulating tech firms.

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Figure 1. Former FCC Chairman Newton Minow.

At a time of growing political ferment and institutional crisis in our news media, debates about the quality and accountability of communication systems have resurfaced. Although contemporary concerns about the integrity of our news and information sources encompass a range of technologies, from print journalism to cable news to digital platforms, they ultimately arrive at one key question: How do we ensure the media system fulfills the information needs of citizens necessary for self-governance and a democratic society? This question is not new and has preoccupied activists, academics, concerned citizens, and policy makers for decades, if not centuries. Historicizing these questions can help correct the misguided belief that

the status quo is natural and inevitable, and it can serve as a reminder that seemingly technocratic debates about regulating our communication infrastructures are inherently political. In this spirit, we interviewed former Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Newton Minow.

President John F. Kennedy appointed Newton Minow to head the FCC in 1961, where he served as chairman until 1963. During his tenure he acquired the reputation of a staunch defender of the public interest, especially around then-emerging media such as satellite, cable, and educational television. He played a key role in elevating the cause of public broadcasting, helping to convince policy makers that the existing, largely commercial broadcasting system represented a public policy problem. He argued that the government must help support a new media system devoted to education and public service instead of simply profit.

Minow, born on January 7, 1926, is best known for his famous "Vast Wasteland" speech, which he delivered to the annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters on May 9, 1961 ("Television," 2019). The speech, his first major address after becoming FCC chairman, was a distilled critique of commercial broadcasting. In what has been hailed as one of the major political speeches in American history, Minow likened television programming to that of a vast wasteland bereft of quality content. He lambasted broadcasters for their slavish devotion to ratings, which he rightly condemned as a poor indicator of public desires when other programming choices were nonexistent:

> 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. ("Television," 2019, para. 27)

Calling for public hearings to evaluate whether license holders were adequately serving their communities, he demanded greater accountability from broadcasters. He offered a robust definition of what this responsibility to the public interest meant: "[Broadcasters] 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" ("Television," 2019, para. 34).

Since leaving the FCC, Newton Minow has continued to engage with important debates about the role of media in a democratic society. He chaired the board of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) for a number of years, and he has authored several books on media policy and media criticism (see, e.g., Minow & LaMay, 1996). On the "Vast Wasteland" speech's 50th anniversary, he revisited that critique with another trenchant analysis of contemporary news media outlets, arguing that they were failing to serve their public interest mission (Minow, 2011). Most recently, he coauthored an article with former FCC commissioner Michael Copps to argue that presidential candidates should engage the contemporary journalism crisis and place it at the top of their agenda (Copps & Minow, 2019).

In the spring of 2019, we conducted a phone interview with Commissioner Minow. Our questions focused on the legacy of his FCC tenure, his reflections on the "Vast Wasteland" speech, and his thoughts on the current state of the media and the FCC. We shared a draft of our questions with Minow beforehand. This interview forms part of a broader oral history project for which we are collecting narratives from media reformers who are defined by their commitment to the public interest and their resistance to the "regulatory capture" that commonly plagues agencies such as the FCC. For example, in 2018 we wrote an in-depth report for the Benton Foundation on the legacy of Commissioner Michael Copps that was based on over a dozen interviews, including with Commissioner Copps himself (Pickard & Popiel, 2018).[1] As media policy scholars, we are both interested in the political and institutional history of the FCC (see, e.g., Pickard, 2015), and this interview is part of an ongoing long-term project. Among other important insights, our conversations with these significant figures reveal that such historical voices and narratives are deeply relevant for our contemporary policy debates, from net neutrality to the future of journalism.

The FCC and the Role of FCC Commissioners

Pickard & Popiel:
In your mind, what is the ideal role of an FCC commissioner? What should their public role be?

Minow:
The first duty of a commissioner is to enforce the law, the Federal Communications Act, which has been on the books now for many years. It was passed originally involving the regulation of radio, and then through the years has been amended. The law always moves more slowly than technology. Even after television was created, the word *television* didn't appear in the law, but from time to time [the act] is amended. The first job of the commissioner is to enforce the law. The second role is to inform and educate the public about the duties and obligations of the broadcasters, common carriers, Internet operators, and everybody who uses communications. I've told different presidents that in my opinion the FCC commissioner is one of the most important jobs in government.

Pickard & Popiel:
You put your finger on something that we've been talking a lot about, that an FCC commissioner serves this very important role of translating sometimes complicated and wonky policy issues to the broader public.[2] Do you see that as an important role of the FCC commissioner?

Minow:
Well, I do, and I'm afraid that most citizens do not know enough about what the law is or what their rights are. When you think about it, every time you make a telephone call, every time you send an e-mail, every

[1] We also should note two excellent interviews of former FCC commissioners Nicholas Johnson and Michael Copps featured in the *International Journal of Communication* in recent years (see Kirkpatrick, 2016; Lentz & Kirkpatrick, 2014).

[2] Our conversations draw on the concept of translation from Seeta Gangadharan's work (e.g., Gangadharan, 2013).

time you listen to the radio, every time you listen to television, every time you use what you don't realize is a communication satellite, you are dealing with something that the FCC deals with.

Pickard & Popiel:
Regarding the politics around the time that you were at the FCC, we were wondering whether there were any particular challenges or obstacles to some of your initiatives? What was the dynamic like at the FCC at the time?

Minow:
Well, the broadcasters were very well organized in dealing with Congress and had a very powerful lobbying force, which, if you were a member of Congress, there was nobody more important to you than your local broadcaster. I had one incidence when the chairman of an important congressional committee called and told me he had a local broadcaster in his office complaining about the FCC and asked if I would see him. I said, "Of course. Send him over." He told me he was in trouble with our staff because he had no local programming. I said, "I wish you had been here a half hour before because I had the firemen and the police people here begging us for more use of the spectrum so they could communicate better to enforce against crime and against fires." I said, "We don't have much more spectrum, but currently you're not really using yours locally to provide any local service, so why don't we just give it to the firemen and the policemen and you can go home?"

Public Media

Pickard & Popiel:
What would you say is the achievement, or the policy initiative, that you were involved with in the early '60s that you're most proud of today?

Minow:
I think there are several things. First was the introduction of communication satellite technology, which enabled us to see and hear what's going on all over the world much more rapidly. And second, to launch what has grown into public media, public radio, public television, to offer a noncommercial alternative service to the public.

Pickard & Popiel:
Even though the Public Broadcasting Act didn't come out until 1967, you were involved in some of those earlier debates stemming from the movement to create that alternative system. Can you tell us about those efforts?

Minow:
When I came to the FCC, I came from Chicago. President Kennedy had come from Boston. Each of us had lived in a community where there was a public television station. I was amazed to find there was no public television station in Washington, DC, the nation's capital. There was none in New York or Los Angeles, the two largest cities in the United States. So, we had a lot to do to catch up. [. . .] After I joined the FCC, one of the first congressional hearings at the Senate that I participated in [discussed] was whether the federal government should be involved in helping launch public television. I was very proud to go to the Congress and say on behalf of the FCC that we supported it enthusiastically, and urged the government to help.

Pickard & Popiel:
That seems very different from policy makers' position today, which seems to be that if the market doesn't support the journalism that democracy requires, there is very little that the government can do.[3] Do you think that there's a parallel with some of the problems we are facing today with news deserts and loss of journalism across the United States? Do you see a need for a greater role for public media today?

Minow:
Unquestionably. It's particularly true of local news, particularly with local newspapers, which are dying because of many reasons. Democracy depends on informed citizens. That's the whole guts of the whole system.

Pickard & Popiel:
And you see a potential role for public media to fill in those gaps and step into the vacuum?

Minow:
I do, and I think in some places it's doing very well and in some places it's nonexistent.

Legacy of "The Vast Wasteland" Speech

Pickard & Popiel:
Now you could anticipate that we would have to ask you about "The Vast Wasteland" speech. One of the questions we had about that is, Do you think it has been interpreted correctly? I'm sure when you gave the speech, you couldn't have known that it would be so famous. To this day, people still talk about it all the time. How do you feel about that legacy?

Minow:
Years later, one of my daughters was taking an SAT test to get into college, and one of the questions involved a sentence from that speech, and you had to interpret it. My daughter gave me the question, and I got the answer wrong.

Pickard & Popiel:
That's a great story! What initially prompted you to make that speech? What would you describe as the wasteland, and is it still with us today?

Minow:
When I went to the FCC, there had been scandals at the FCC itself. President Eisenhower had been forced to get rid of the FCC chairman, replace him. There had been scandals in the broadcasting world with the quiz show scandals, with payola in radio. Things needed to be cleaned up in both the government and the broadcasting field. But I said in that speech right at the beginning, "There's a new sheriff in town. Let's forget about the past, and let's start on a new course. Remember that your job as broadcasters is to serve the public, not the private interest."

[3] For a historical analysis of this policy failure, see Pickard, 2020.

Pickard & Popiel:
Do you think that's still a problem today?

Minow:
Yes, it definitely is.

Pickard & Popiel:
It seems to us you were also putting your finger on the problem of commercialism that's driving so much of our media system.

Minow:
Herbert Hoover, before he was president, was the Secretary of Commerce. He was in charge really of what was a nascent developing radio system. And Herbert Hoover, a conservative, strong Republican, said, "Let this medium not be drowned in advertising chatter." I'm afraid we're doing that even today.

Pickard & Popiel:
Yet there have been FCC commissioners over the years that have tried to ring the alarm bells. We've written about this in our own work, that there's a kind of forgotten historical tradition of media reform, activism, at the FCC. One could trace this from Clifford Durr and Larry Fly to you to Nick Johnson to Mike Copps to Mignon Clyburn. Do you see that? Do you think that there has been a continuity, although it's often unfortunately in the minority?

Minow:
Yes. I think that there have been times when the FCC has gone off course. Many scholars and observers think that's true not just of the FCC but of many of the administrative agencies that have become captives of the industries that they were created to regulate.

Pickard & Popiel:
It seems like they often forget about this idea of the public interest. [In your] piece in *The Atlantic* that you wrote back in 2011 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of "The Vast Wasteland" speech, you were writing about how those two words, *public interest*, are so important and so central to what the FCC should be doing (Minow, 2011). Do you think it's still a meaningful category today? Do you think the public interest still has regulatory value?

Minow:
Yes, I do, and of course today the big issue is what to do about the new technology with the Internet, with social media, whether there's any appropriate role for government or not. Whether the first amendment stands in the way of any regulation, and if so, what kind of regulation. We're beginning to face up to the fact that the law falls behind the advances in technology. That's always been true. Probably always will be true. But it's our duty as citizens to keep our eye on what is the public, as well as the private interest. That's creating many dilemmas today.

Contemporary Policy Issues

Pickard & Popiel:
What are some of the most pressing regulatory issues that you see facing us today? Would you consider, for example, net neutrality to be one of these problems?

Minow:
I think net neutrality is a major issue. I think the Internet, which is a blessing, provides us with a chance to communicate with each other much more quickly and much more easily. It was originally created with government help. We've forgotten that and think that the government has no role with it.

Pickard & Popiel:
Yeah, that's an important lesson. It also goes back to what we were talking about earlier with the role of public media. What is your response to people when they say, "The government should not be involved in our media system. We have the first amendment that forbids it." As commissioner back in the '60s and as a concerned citizen today, how would you respond to those charges?

Minow:
I'm a great believer in the marketplace. The marketplace has given us a standard of living that is unparalleled in history, but the marketplace does not provide everything. The market does not provide everything. There are certain things that don't exist with success in the market, and we need them. Above all, we need education. We need the arts, and the marketplace is not the answer to everything in the world.

Pickard & Popiel:
That understanding, what you just articulated, do you think we've lost sight of that? Do you think, for example, back in the '60s, that people did understand that better than they do today?

Minow:
I think there's a wide diversity of opinion in this country, which there should be, but I think that we need a healthy debate, particularly about what our social media is doing, good and bad, for the country, and what, if any, rules ought to exist. . . . This is not just a US issue. This is true in other parts of this world. I mean, all societies are grappling with trying to figure out what public policy [to address these problems with].

Pickard & Popiel:
So it's an ongoing debate. And you feel like this debate's been going on even since you were at the FCC in the 1960s.

Minow:
No question. I think it'll go on forever.

Pickard & Popiel:
We have one final question for you that we touched on earlier. Do you still see the FCC as an agency that's capable of advancing media reform? Is there still hope that we could return to a more progressive FCC?

Minow:
I don't think there's any question about it. I think that there's a pendulum that swings back and forth, and in the future there will be a time when the more progressive philosophy will prevail.

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