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A Diversity of Voices in a “Vast Wasteland”

Condace L. Pressley*

I believe Newton N. Minow had a crystal ball.

In 1961, in his first speech as Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC”), he challenged members of the National Association of Broadcasters to:

[S]it 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.¹

Imagine if Minow sat in his living room today, remote control in hand, with a cable or satellite signal being fed into his television set. He would find his “vast wasteland” more of an understatement than the prophecy it seemed to be.

Minow spoke of 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.”² Did he know there would be a television channel devoted to game shows? Could he see Jerry Springer, Maury Povich, and Jenny Jones in television’s future? Was he anticipating “Must See TV” where *Friends* replaced families, where children would rule the roost? Was he predicting the degree

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1. Newton N. Minow, *Television and the Public Interest*, Speech Before the National Association of Broadcasters (May 9, 1961).

2. *Id.*

of crime and violence that would enter the family home not only during prime time, but also during the evening news? "Vast wasteland"? An understatement indeed.

And yet, television also provides programming that is educational and entertaining. Consider the children's programming on PBS, or programs such as *Nova* and *The American Experience*. *Oprah* thrives in syndication and is educational and entertaining. Television offers viewers The History Channel, the Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, and valuable programming on the Food Network and Home & Garden Television. Programming from these sources serves a purpose and provides valuable information to the viewer.

For all that is wrong with television in the twenty-first century, much is right. Minow suggested television breeds boredom. If that were the case, why do cable and satellite beam hundreds of channels into American homes? These hundreds of channels also bring hundreds of choices for viewers. These hundreds of channels bring a diversity of voices to the cacophony of ideas for viewers to consider. Diversity in television is a good thing.

There was a time when news and information was broadcast into my home only between 6:00 and 7:00 P.M. At 6:00 P.M. there was a half-hour of local news. One half-hour later, a network news anchor summarized the so-called news of the day. That was the extent of information broadcast into my home. The last decades of the twentieth century brought the 24-hour news cycle with CNN, CNBC, MSNBC, and the FOX News Channel, among other news and information providers ready with information on my schedule, not theirs. Where before, the evening news was limited to only twenty-two minutes, now the news consumer can receive as much or as little news and information as he or she wants.

The diversity of voices that exists today in television also reflects the diversity of the American experience. Would Newton Minow have found fault with *Roots*, the 1977 landmark television miniseries loosely based on Alex Haley's autobiography of the same name? The program garnered one of the largest audiences for dramatic television in the history of the medium with a 44.9 rating and a 66 share.³ The program exposed white viewers to black history.

With the choice that exists today in television comes opportunity. The growing number of channels and programs, whether good or bad, creates a wealth of job opportunities for men and women seeking careers in the

3. Raul D. Tovares, *Alex Haley*, in THE MUSEUM OF BROADCAST COMMUNICATIONS ARCHIVES, available at <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/H/htmlH/haleyalex/haleyalex.htm> (last visited Mar. 14, 2003).

medium. The consolidation of media ownership now endorsed by the FCC, however, threatens to limit opportunity to employment in this industry. This is an instance where the industry must show initiative and do what is in the public interest.

Does television cater to the lowest common denominator of its viewers? As Minow might have said in 1961, “yes and no.” Television teaches. Programs such as *Cable in the Classroom* use the medium to educate a new generation of viewers. Television also makes our global community smaller. For one generation the question was: “Where were you when President Kennedy was assassinated?” For another generation the question was: “Where did you see the Challenger tragedy?” Still more of us continue to grieve over the television images of September 11, 2001, when terrorists turned airplanes into bombs and crashed into the World Trade Center towers. We watched in horror as lives were lost when the buildings collapsed into tons of rubble and dust.

For as much as there is junk on television today, there are also images of immense value to our community and to our culture. Where we once observed the governance of our nation through the eyes of a select few newspaper reporters, today we watch government in action on C-SPAN. Via satellite, journalists provide instantaneous coverage of government. World leaders often establish foreign policy based on the images they see on CNN. CNN brought the world the first images of the Persian Gulf War. Viewers saw images much different than those broadcast into American homes during the Vietnam War. Yet, in each instance, television amplified the message and brought greater understanding.

Newton Minow was accurate in the fault he found with television of his era. But it is easy to find fault. It is more difficult to find the good. Is television the “vast wasteland” that Minow described? In many cases the answer is yes, and it will always be that way. But for every disappointment we may find on television today, there are many other examples of programming that is good for our society. Whether it is news and information, music, children’s programming, or prime-time entertainment, television will always be thought-provoking—challenging the viewer in some way to make a difference, or at the very least, to change the channel.

