**Video Script**

**Lecture 22 – The Vast Wasteland**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Last week, we looked at film in the 1950s: how Hollywood film responded to television, and how film from outside Hollywood met audience needs for new and different kinds of stories. So, what are we talking about today? Today we’re moving ahead to the 1960s, and we’re talking about a man named Newton Minow, and we’re talking about our old friend, television. And what we’ll find is that in the 60s, maybe not everything is *so* hunky-dory in TV world, like it was when it first rolled out.

**Key Terms**

Here are your key terms for this lecture.

**Dual Market Model**

Let’s pick up with the quiz show scandals. Part of the problem that led to my pal Herb blowing the whistle was that advertisers had *so much control* over programs. Because Revlon was the sole sponsor of *The $64,000 Question,* they could force the producers to boot a contestant like Dr. Joyce Brothers if they didn’t like her.

Once the scandal comes to light, Congress responds with new legislation that makes it illegal to air phony competitions. But more important to our discussion this week is the response from the television industry. They take back control of their programming. Instead of a one sponsor/one show model, TV networks sell 30-60 second blocks of time during a program to many different advertisers, loosening the grip any one company has on a program.

This change gives us a good opportunity to break down how *exactly* television makes its money.

TV has what we call a dual market model. **[ANIMATION]** So you’ve got a television network, right? First of all, they need to sell their programs to audiences. They need to make great shows *and* advertise the crapola out of them to make sure lots of people are parked in front of their televisions, tuned to their channel at the right time. So, right now literally everything I try to watch on YouTube has an ad for an upcoming Zoom-based pandemic comedy on NBC that I would rather eat a bowlful of glass than watch. But the whole point of buying a bajllion dollars-worth of YouTube ads is to try to drum up ratings for this show. The success of this first market is measured in *ratings.*  Why do they need high ratings?

**[ANIMATION]** Because they turn around and sell your eyeballs to advertisers. That’s the second market. The bigger the audience, the more they can charge advertisers for air time. That’s why buying a commercial block during the Super Bowl is so expensive: the audience is *massive*.

**Mad Men**

So, what does this mean in practicality? Well, it means a couple of things.

**[ANIMATION]** First, it means that TV doesn’t make money off of *you*. Ratings don’t equal money. Networks convert ratings *into* money by selling your eyeballs to advertisers. Post-quiz show scandals, companies have to create commercials and branding in ways we’re familiar with today—the pithy, one-minute ad—and that’s why I’ve got these great *Mad Men* gifs, here.

In order to charge companies the most money possible for commercial air time, networks need to build the biggest possible audiences. The answer, for the most part, is known as “lowest common denominator” programming. This is programming that doesn’t offend anyone, isn’t very provocative, but is entertaining enough that a large swath of people will turn it on. You can get a lot of people to sit in front of lowest common denominator shows, but the trade-off is that they’re, at best, sort of blandly amusing.

*Plenty* of shows still fit this bill today. Think about *Law & Order: SVU.* How many of us are willing to plop down in front of an episode of that show if it’s on? Why do you think CNBC can air 12-hour blocks of *Shark Tank*? Why do you think the Food Network creates five different shows that revolve around Guy Fieri? Because they’re *fine*. They’re FINE. They’re widely relatable, not very controversial shows that are *fine*. And fine can get you a big ass audience.

**Clips**

I’m going to play you a couple of theme songs of shows from the era that sort of encapsulate lowest common denominator programming. First up, here’s *The Beverly Hillbillies*. **[Play clip.]** You get the idea. Country fish out of water in the big city.

Here’s another one—this is the theme song to a show called *Green Acres*. And honestly, I kind of think this theme song slaps, but, I dunno, maybe that’s just me. **[Play clip.]**

Do you get it?? Look, it’s a *city fish* out of water in the *country*. How did they ever come up with such an incredible, unique story? You can see that these are basically just the same show, just reversed. There’s something for country people! There’s something for city people! It’s the universally appealing story of the fish out of water! There’s something to turn on while you’re making dinner, and it’s *frigging fine*.

**Newton Minow**

Enter the not-so-mild mannered Newton Minow. He’s the crusading chair of the FCC from 1961 to 1963. He’s appointed by President Kennedy because he worked on his campaign, and in that capacity Minow and the president’s brother, Robert F. Kennedy, bonded about how much television their kids watched. It was concerning to the both of them.

So Minow really wanted this FCC job, even though he only serves in it for a couple of years. He’s influential—his whole later career revolves around communications law—but these two years he served with the FCC set a lot of precedents for things we do in the future. He’s particularly famous for one speech he gives in 1961, but before we get there…

**FCC**

…let’s just recap, like, what is the FCC again? The last time we talked about them was when we were talking about licensing television stations. So, let’s just review for a second.

**[ANIMATION]** FCC stands for the Federal Communications Commission.

**[ANIMATION]** They’re an independent government regulatory agency that answers directly to Congress.

**[ANIMATION]** They were established by the Communications Act of 1934.

**[ANIMATION]** They regulate interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable, including the internet—all stuff that falls under the federal level of jurisdiction.

**[ANIMATION]** And finally, their functions include licensing stations, analyzing complaints, conducting investigations, developing regulatory programs, and taking part in hearings.

The key thing to remember, just generally, is that the government decided the airwaves were public, but that broadcast would be commercial. The vague phrase that works its way into the legislation was that broadcasters should act in the *public interest*. All of my foreshadowing about the problematic vagueness of this phrase is about to pay off.

**Minow**

So, Minow (wearing a pair of glasses that I would truly give my left arm for) addresses this very issue in a speech he gives in 1961. It’s the first major speech he gave as FCC chair, and he delivers it at the convention of the National Association of Broadcasters—so, basically every television bigwig gathered in one room. And Minow *comes in hot*.

**[ANIMATION]** It’s known as the vast wasteland speech. Historians look back at this speech and see it as signaling that the golden age of television in the 1950s (the era of the anthology drama, of stuff like *Twelve Angry Men)* is dead, and that we’ve entered a new era of television that’s highly commercial, and kind of mindless.

The key issue of this speech is public interest vs. commercial imperatives. What does TV owe to the public? And what does the public deserve from TV?

So, he begins by kind of flattering them. He says: *“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.”*And he agrees that there is *some* good stuff on TV—the anthology dramas were good. He also likes *The Twilight Zone*—me and Newt have that in common—and Bing Crosby’s specials.

**[ANIMATION]** But then we get to the famous part, where Newt says tbh, most of television is hot garbage. He challenges the broadcasters in the room to sit in front of their own stations for an entire day with no distractions, and he argues that what they would see is a vast wasteland of *crap*.

**Minow (new quote)**

**[ANIMATION]** He says that TV is filled with crud like game shows, formulaic comedies, violent westerns, and cartoons that are *chock full* of commercials that are pitched right at our kids’ tender little brains. And at the time, cartoons like the Flintstones are selling Winston Salem cigarettes, so kids are truly seeing all kinds of wild ads. And that is the crux of his argument—that TV isn’t just brainless, it’s constantly trying to sell you stuff, and that’s a toxic combo.

**Minow in control room**

[**ANIMATION]** So, he points out that broadcasters are using the *public* airwaves, which are a public resource, and because of that, programming should serve the public interest. He sees himself as a representative of the people. He’s fighting to get them better shows.

**Six principles**

He lays out six principles in his speech. First, the people own the air. Second, that they need to move beyond the quiz show scandals and deal with bigger problems—that legislation didn’t do anything to address the quality of TV programming. Third, he says we should *not* nationalize the broadcast system. He believes in free enterprise and is committed to our commercial model. Fourth: the government and broadcasters need to pull together to address the lack of educational options on TV.

Fifth, he promises that the government is not going to censor what broadcasters show—he’s not going to start blacking out *Green Acres* because it’s hella stupid—but he *is* going to take his job seriously, because squandering the airwaves is squandering a limited public resource.

**Pause**

So, we’re going to pause for a second and do a little thinking exercise. **[ANIMATION]** Imagine that you are Newton Minow, wearing that fabulous pair of glasses. What kinds of programs do you think *should* be on the air? What would a program that serves the public interest look like? What would it talk about? What’s missing from the 1960s commercial television landscape?

**[ANIMATION]** Now, take another moment and imagine that you are one of those TV fat cats sitting in the audience, and you are like “TV is *just fine* the way it is.” How could you argue that commercial TV is valuable? How do shows like *Green Acres* and *The Flintstones* and other lowest common denominator showsserve the public interest?

Take a second to think about this, and come on back.

**Programming in the public interest**

Here’s what Minow suggests. Later in his speech, he lays out a few characteristics he thinks belong to television that serves the public interest. He says it should have “a soul and a conscience,” that it should build character, citizenship, and intellect, that it should “ring with intelligence and leadership,” that it should make our people aware of the world, and that it should enlarge the capacities of our children. Nodding to the interests of the broadcasters in that room, he argues that television can do two things at once: it can communicate ideas as well as relaxation. He’s saying we should have shows that make you a better thinker, a better citizen, and a better person, in addition to just letting you unwind.

At the end of the day, he sees himself as coming to the public’s defense. He’s saying that people are not as stupid as television seems to think they are **[ANIMATION]** He says *“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*.” And he *does* sort of have a point, if you think about what’s happening in the film industry at the time. You’re seeing the rise of arthouse cinema because there’s a big enough chunk of the public that’s sick to death of the pablum that Hollywood keeps putting out. He’s saying there’s a floor to the stupid shit people will watch—although I’m not sure Minow could have predicted they’d try to make a show out of the Geico caveman commercials, so, who knows.

**Commercial imperative**

Let’s take a look at his argument from the opposite side, though. What’s the commercial imperative? Why *don’t* networks serve the public interest?

**[ANIMATION]** Here are a few problems. Networks are subject to the demands of advertisers, and because they make money off of advertising, they need to build the biggest audience possible. There are a finite number of people, eyeballs, and television sets in the country, so they have to compete with each other for ratings. They know that if they suddenly opt to air lectures about art history at 8pm on Wednesdays, audiences not into that kind of programming will simply flock to a competitor showing something more entertaining. They also argue that the public has expressed an interest for the so-called “bad” shows Minow is pooping on, and that they serve the public interest by providing those shows.

They also question whether educating the public is really their job. Newspapers, libraries, schools, and colleges exist for that reason. Is it really on private entertainment corporations to educate the nation’s children?

**[ANIMATION]** At the end of the day, the commercial imperative means that *profit* is the number one goal of television broadcasters. To the extent that profit and public interest are in conflict, broadcasters in a commercial system will always choose profit! It is literally their job. Educating kids is certainly a worthy goal, but if you expect a corporation to do that instead of maximizing their earnings, you’re nuts.

**SS Minow**

So, some people agree with Minow. Other people say that he’s an elitist snob and he should keep his grubby mitts of their shows and let them watch *Green Acres* in peace. Commercial television corporations are kind of like…whatever, Newt.

…but there’s also this kind of apocryphal story—I’ve never seen any proof it, but it bounces around media studies classes and I’ve been taught the story, so *why not* repeat it? If you’re not familiar with the show *Gilligan’s Island,* it’s a dopey show from the 1960s about a bunch of people who get stuck on a desert island. The boat that crashes is called the S.S. Minnow, and there’s a rumor that it was named after Newton Minow as kind of a dig.

So, in some ways he fails to get the networks to change their kinds of programming.

**Presidential Medal of Freedom**

But he is remembered for a few things. The vast wasteland speech does resonate with a lot of people, and it inspires some folks to think in new ways about what television might do to serve the American public—particularly American children. We’ll revisit that next week.

He also clears the way for communications satellites, which lays a crucial technological infrastructure for…almost everything we do today?

He also helped pass—and this is going to sound a little finicky and inside baseball, but stick with me—the All Channel Receiver Act in 1961. Remember when we talked about that old Zenith commercial, *Fog Over Portland*, which was extremely melodramatic about their televisions getting both UHF and VHF channels?

Well, Minow’s legislation made it so all televisions sold in the US had to get both kinds of channels. And UHF stations are where a lot of *public* stations begin to broadcast, and where our earliest educational programs lived. This seemingly very technology-focused act in fact helps to get more kids more educational programs.

**Final Quote**

And Newt is actually still with us! He’s still kicking at 94. He gave an interview to *Ad Age* back in 2011, on the 50th anniversary of his famous speech, and they asked whether he thought television was still such a vast wasteland.

Minow says that the argument he was truly making was about *choice*. He never wanted to censor bad shows, but he was concerned that in the 1960s, when most people got just three or four channels, there were no other options. There wasn’t an alternative for folks looking for more educational shows for themselves or their kids. And he argues that it’s a very different environment now, and that’s probably a pretty good thing. People have hundreds of channels at their disposal, both very educational and very not, but a larger smorgasbord of programming is all he really ever wanted.

**[ANIMATION]** He also makes this very prescient observation. He says that the flipside of all that choice is that perhaps we’ve lost a “common shared experience” through television. When we gain endless choice in programming—particularly in news programming—people can always find a presentation of current events that cements their already existing world view. And, nine years later, we see this argument all the time—that filter bubbles, algorithms, cable news, and other aspects of our endless media buffet contribute to the polarization of opinions. He says there might have been something valuable to everyone watching Walter Cronkite deliver the news of the day.

Obviously, that’s something that’s very much up for debate. People fall on all sides of this argument—I sometimes think different things about this depending on what’s going on in the world. But it’s something that’s interesting to consider, and it’s particularly interesting coming from a man who was deeply concerned with what television could do for us, the viewers, and our democracy.