



The Vast Wasteland:

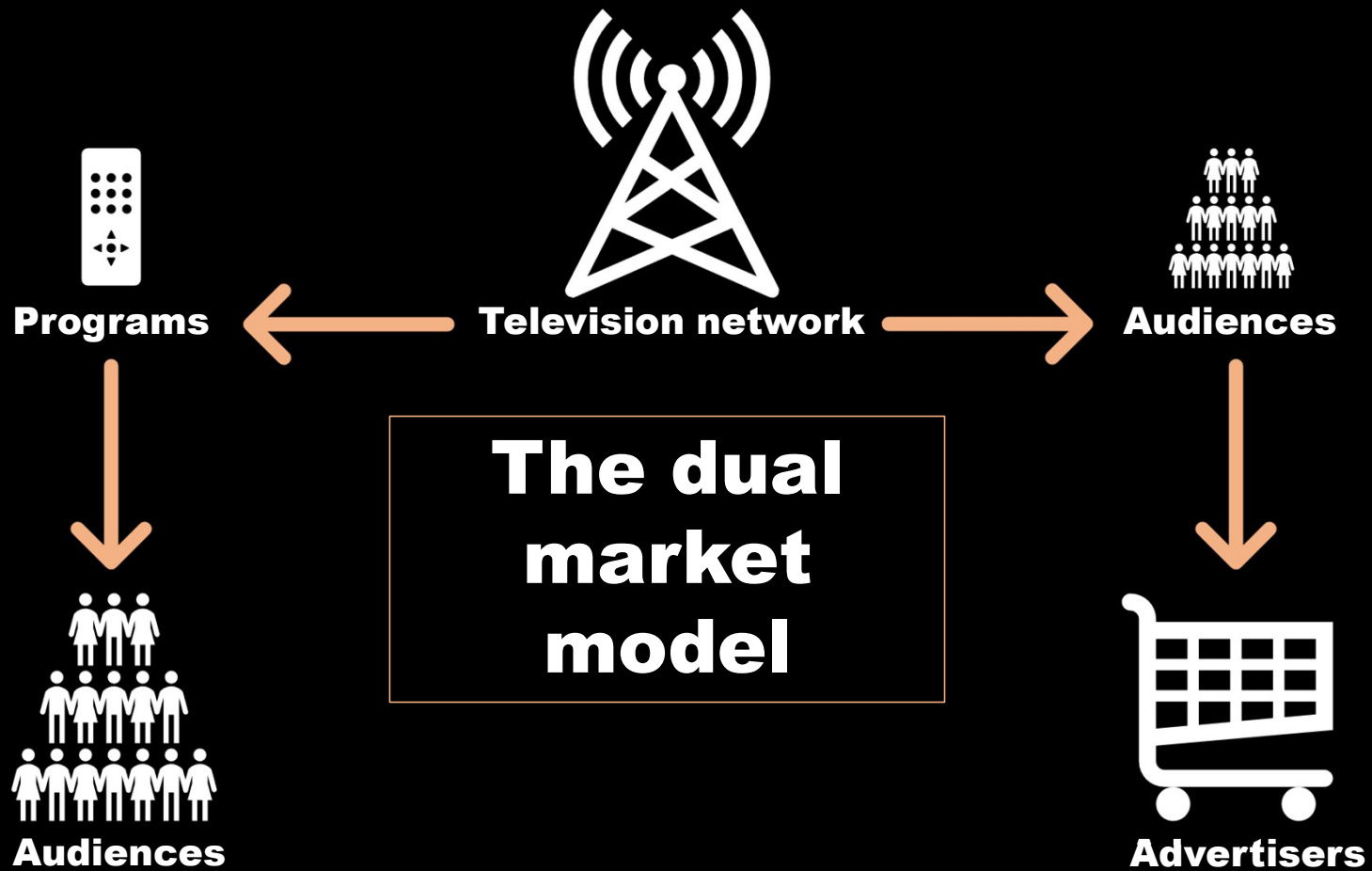
Newton Minow & 1960s TV

RTF 308 // Kathy Cacace



Key Concepts

Dual market model of TV
Newton Minow
The FCC
“Vast Wasteland” speech
Public interest
Commercial imperative





What does the dual market model mean for television?

TV doesn't make money off you
It makes money from *selling* you
Companies create commercials
...enter *Mad Men* & media buys
Shows need to attract big audiences
Lowest common denominator shows



The Beverly Hillbillies
(1962-1971)



Green Acres
(1965-1971)

Newton Minow

FCC Chair (1961 to 1963)





Wait a minute, what *is* the FCC?

Federal Communications Commission

**Independent government regulatory
agency that answers directly to
Congress**

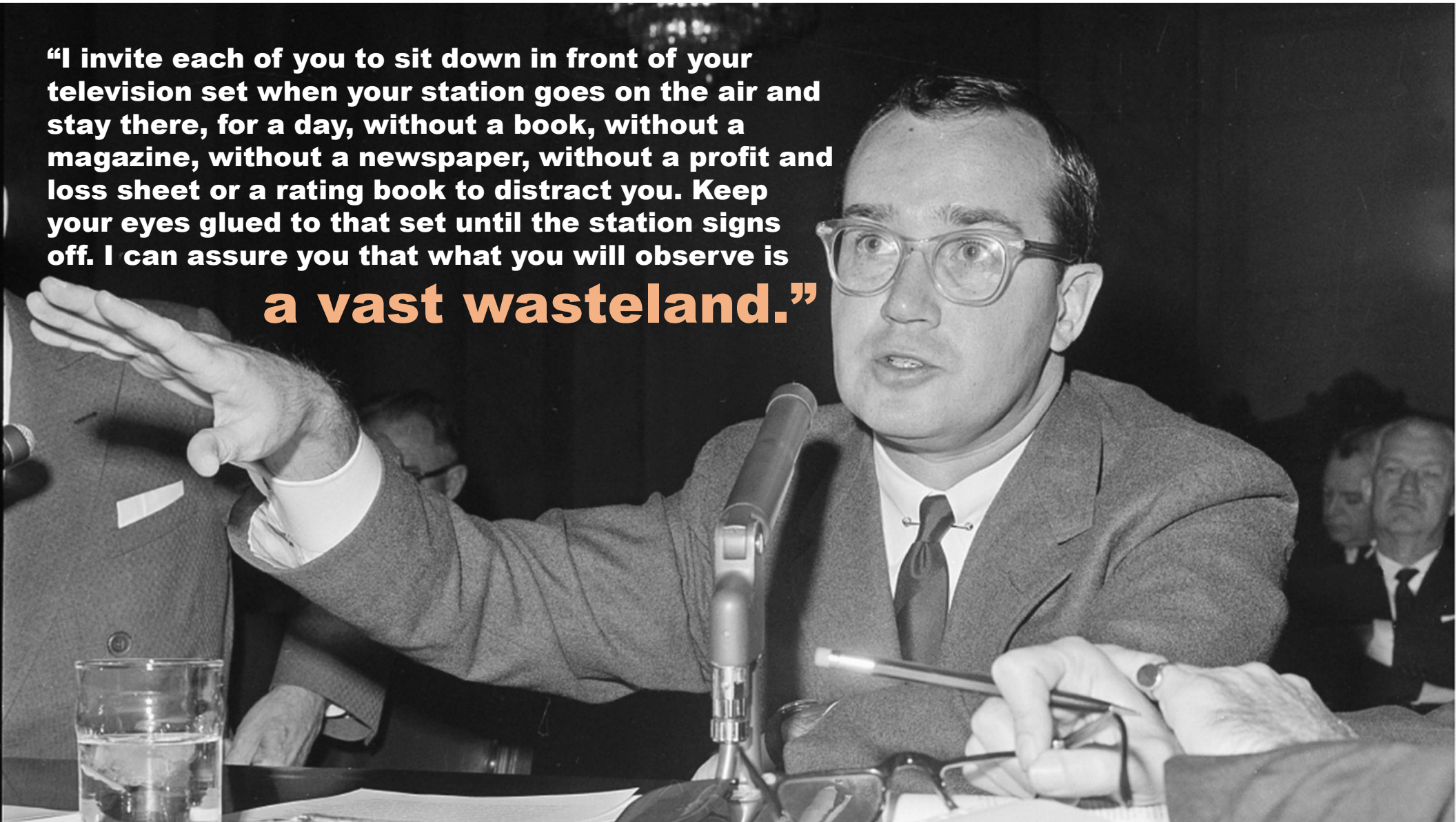
**Established by the Communications Act
of 1934**

**Regulate interstate and international
communications by radio, television,
wire, satellite, and cable.**

**Functions include licensing stations,
analyzing complaints, conducting
investigations, developing regulatory
programs, and taking part in hearings.**

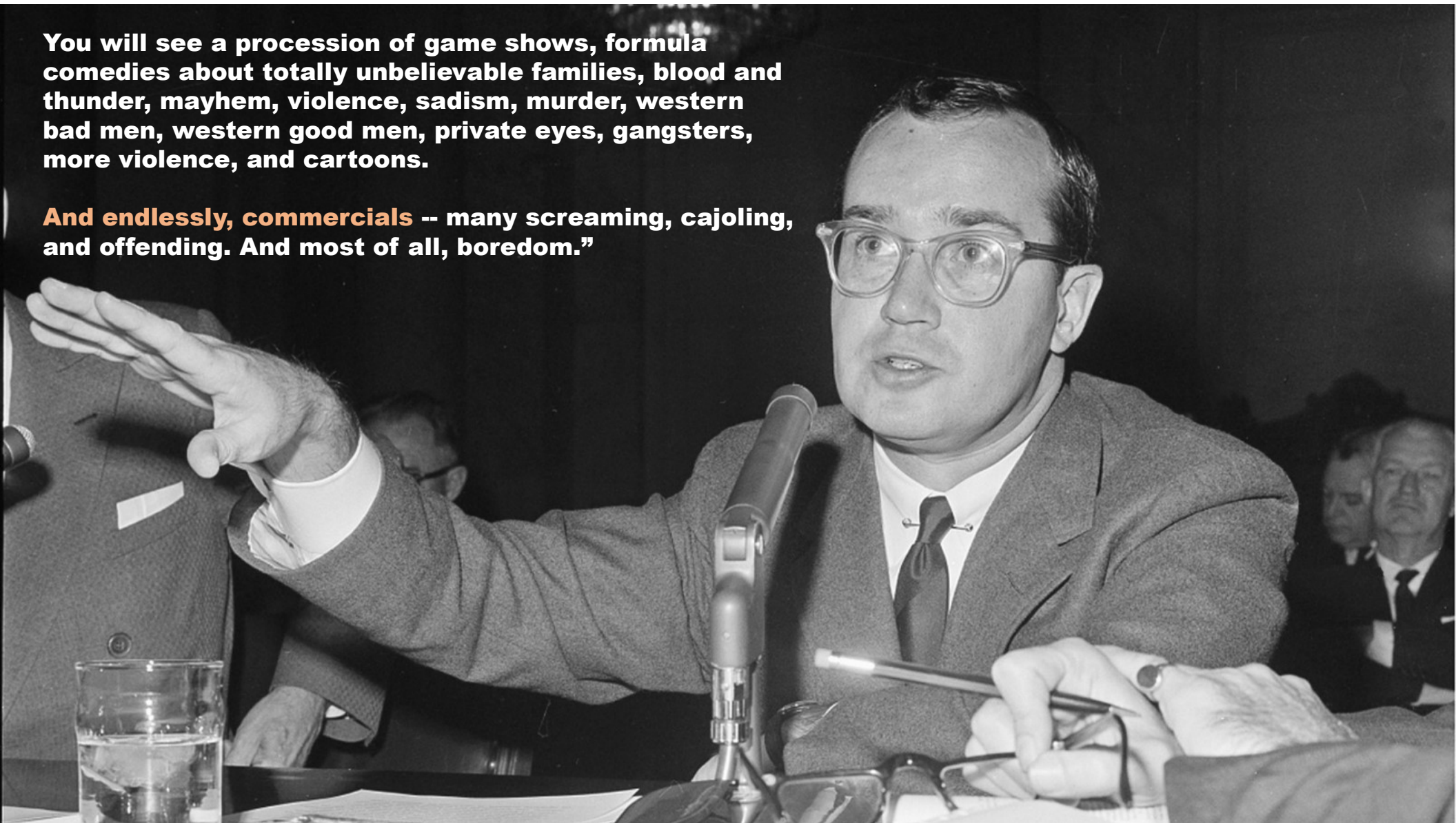
"I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is

a vast wasteland."



You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons.

And endlessly, commercials -- many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom."





“Your license lets you use the public's airwaves as trustees for 180 million Americans. **The public is your beneficiary. If you want to stay on as trustees, you must deliver a decent return to the public -- not only to your stockholders.”**

“I am in Washington to help broadcasting, not to harm it; to strengthen it, not weaken it; to reward it, not to punish it; to encourage it, not threaten it; and to stimulate it, not censor it. **Above all, I am here to uphold and protect the public interest.**

Six principles

1. The people own the air
2. We need to move beyond the quiz show scandal to deal with bigger problems
3. Free enterprise; the US system should be commercial
4. We need to concentrate on the lack of educational television
5. The government should not censor TV
6. He takes his job seriously, because squandering the airwaves is squandering a natural resource



**Imagine for a
moment that:**

**YOU ARE
NEWTON
MINOW.**

**What does it mean for television to serve the
public interest? What kinds of programs
should we have that we don't?**

**Imagine for another
moment that:**

**YOU ARE FOR
COMMERCIAL
TV AS IT IS**

**Why is commercial TV valuable? How do
shows like *Green Acres* and *The Flintstones*
serve the public interest?**

Programming in the public interest

Should have a “soul and a conscience”
Build character, citizenship, intellect
“Ring with intelligence and leadership”
“Make our people aware of the world”
“Enlarge the capacities of our children”
“Communicate ideas as well as relaxation”

“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.”



Why *don't* the networks serve the public interest?

**Demands of advertisers
Need for mass audience
Competition for ratings
Appetite for “bad” shows
Newspapers exist
Is it their job?**

**The commercial
imperative means
profit is TV's
number one goal**



Stills from *Gilligan's Island* (1964-1967)







Newton Minow
AdAge
April 18, 2011

“...one of the downsides of so many choices on TV today is that “*we’ve lost the common shared experience*.” I think it’s increased the polarization of opinion. And now you have news appealing to particular ideologies, the left and the right, whereas before it was more in the middle. So that’s a downside. On the other hand, the possibility that people can find something of their particular interest on television is much greater than it was before.”