

Retoryka wizerunku publicznego

Rhetoric of the public image

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Newton N. Minow's "Vast Wasteland": Rhetoric of the end of the golden age of television

„Rozległe pustkowia” Newtona N. Minowa: retoryka końca złotego wieku telewizji

Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the landmark 1961 speech given by the Federal Communications Commission chairman, Newton N. Minow (born 1926). It includes a discussion of the rhetorical situation in which the oration was delivered, review of the persuasive tactics employed by the orator and the goals he attempted to achieve, as well as assessment of the degree to which his effort was successful. The speech is analyzed against the political background of the early days of the Kennedy administration, marked by social optimism and rapid technological progress. Widely regarded as the most significant speech on television in the history of American rhetoric, Minow's oration was delivered during turbulent times for the U.S. media and has indeed led to far-reaching changes in the nation's broadcasting environment, including the establishment of the system of public media in the second half of the 1960s. The landmark speech caused a great deal of stir in the national consciousness as well, becoming a part of the popular culture of the decade, with the words "vast wasteland" still remembered today.

Artykuł stanowi analizę głośnej oracji z 1961 r., wygłoszonej przez przewodniczącego Federalnej Komisji Łączności, Newtona N. Minowa (ur. 1926). Tekst zawiera omówienie sytuacji retorycznej, w której przemówienie zostało wygłoszone, przegląd taktyk perswazyjnych zastosowanych przez mówcę i celów, które chciał osiągnąć, jak również ocenę skuteczności jego inicjatywy. Przemówienie zostało przeanalizowane z uwzględnieniem kontekstu politycznego wczesnego okresu kadencji Kennedy'ego, charakteryzującej się optymizmem w sferze inicjatyw społecznych i gwałtownym postępem technologicznym. Powszechnie postrzegane jako najważniejsza oracja na temat telewizji w historii retoryki amerykańskiej, przemówienie Minowa zostało wygłoszone w okresie trudnym dla mediów amerykańskich i faktycznie doprowadziło do daleko idących zmian w środowisku nadawczym w Stanach Zjednoczonych, włącznie ze stworzeniem systemu mediów publicznych w drugiej połowie lat 60. XX wieku. Głośna oracja wywołała również znaczne poruszenie w świadomości narodowej, stając się częścią kultury popularnej dekady, a sformułowanie „rozległe pustkowia” jest pamiętane do dzisiaj.

Key words

rhetoric, media, United States, television, vast wasteland

retoryka, media, Stany Zjednoczone, telewizja, rozległe pustkowia

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Newton N. Minow’s “Vast Wasteland”: Rhetoric of the end of the golden age of television

It is not that often that a single rhetorical act defines a nation’s public discourse on a given topic for decades to come. Yet, that was exactly what happened with Newton N. Minow’s 1961 “Television and the Public Interest” oration. Widely regarded as the most significant speech on television in the history of American rhetoric, the Federal Communications Commission chairman’s address was delivered during turbulent times for the United States media and led to far-reaching changes in the country’s broadcasting environment, including the establishment of a system of public media in the second half of the 1960s. The landmark speech caused much stir in the American national consciousness as well, becoming a part of the popular culture of the decade, with the words “vast wasteland” still remembered today.

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of Minow’s speech. It includes a thorough discussion of the rhetorical situation in which the oration was delivered, review of the persuasive tactics employed by the orator and the goals he attempted to achieve, as well as an assessment of the degree to which his effort was successful. The speech is analyzed against the political and public communication background of the early days of the Kennedy administration, marked by social optimism and rapid technological progress as well as the 35th United States President’s oratorical use of his trademark “New Frontier” imagery.

It should be noted, however, that the significance of the rhetorical act in question transcends far beyond the time and place of its delivery. “Television and the Public Interest” was first and foremost an exercise in the effective use of common tropes (including the “New Frontier” metaphors) in order to accomplish a certain persuasive objective, which remains relevant to orators everywhere. Universal lessons to be learned from Newton N. Minow’s famous speech comprise, among many other matters, issues of how to cope with a hostile audience, how to build one’s credibility (against any odds), and how to use (pop)cultural references to reach out to your listeners and gain rhetorical leverage – making it a useful source material in teaching public speaking¹. An added layer of relevance concerns the topic of

1. It has been successfully used as such by the author of this paper for many years at the Jagiellonian University and its School of Rhetoric.

Minow's oration: dilemmas that were troubling the audiovisual media industry in its childhood decades have not waned with time and remain today as pertinent as ever. Incidentally, it might be argued that the questions of purpose, significance, and the social impact of television, including the role of non-commercial outlets in shaping a nation's broadcasting landscape, are of even greater importance now – as the recent emergence of the digital channels of communication has created new reasons for redefinition of the medium. For the readers in the countries with notoriously tempestuous relations between the realms of broadcasting and politics – and there is no doubt that this includes Poland as well – the content and legacy of Newton N. Minow's 1961 address will be an illuminating insight into how media policy is done.

1. Rhetorical context

The 1950s have often been hailed as the Golden Age of the audiovisual broadcasting in the United States. While at least a part of this sentiment may be associated with the influential Baby Boomer generation's nostalgia for the literal "Happy Days" of their childhood, there is no denying that many of the decade's landmark TV productions indeed captured the imagination of Americans and created a canon of the medium's formats (including sitcoms, variety shows, and anthology dramas) that shaped the programming in the years to come. It might be also argued that television played a highly significant role in gluing the nation together², through a communion of values, narratives, and topics for discussion, during a period of rapid economic development and the loosening of the traditional social ties in the 1950s (Boddy 1998, 28). Still, when the decade was coming to the end, it became more and more obvious that the promise of the audiovisual medium had not been fulfilled.

As television first gained mainstream popularity in the United States (spreading like "a prairie fire"; Day 1995, 15-16) in the latter half of the 1940s, the late 1950s were always destined to be a period of assessment of the medium after its first decade on the air. What was revealed, however, was far from rosy: TV not only failed at being a "virtual townhall" and an instrument for social advancement of the underprivileged groups of the American society, but also developed quite a few problems on its own. The first thing was the growing criticism of the violent content in programming, including crime and western shows, e.g. *The Untouchables*, *Dragnet*, and *Gunsmoke*. Media monitoring groups were afraid of the potentially harmful effect of such programs on the vulnerable groups of

2. According to social scientist Robert Putnam (2000, 55), American society in the 1950s was rich in social capital which for various reasons declined afterwards.

audience (in one well-publicized case, a teenager killed his father following an argument about switching channels; Castleman, Podrazik 2016, 70). Another issue was the gigantic scandal concerning the televised quiz shows of the *Twenty-One*, *The \$64,000 Question*, and *Dotto* sort, whose producers rigged the programs in favor of the more popular contestants. When a whistleblower (and a former star of *Twenty-One*) Herb Stempel broke the news in 1957, television networks could no longer pretend they had not been putting their commercial interests over respect for the audience³. It might be thus argued that the analyzed speech was reflecting the *Zeitgeist* as the nation was becoming increasingly restless about the inadequacies of the audiovisual medium – and that the situation seemed ripe for change.

Minow was the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission⁴ (nominated for the position at the modest age of 35 by President John F. Kennedy) when he presented his famous oration. The venue for the speech was a gathering of the National Association of Broadcasters, the leading organization of the radio and television industry in the United States. As the majority of the NAB members, representing commercial broadcasting companies, were wary of what they saw as governmental intrusions into their area of business, they might be best described as a resistant audience (Ramage, Bean, Johnson 2018, 85-86). Taking into consideration the youthful appearance and relative inexperience of the orator (in comparison with the high professional status of many of the audience members), Newton N. Minow had to construct his rhetorical posture and credibility on the prestige of his office as well as his position as the frontman for the new administration's policy in the field of broadcasting. His oration had the two essential goals of presenting the plans of the FCC for the audiovisual media market and building support for them amongst the industry's key players. Following the principle of the harmony of rhetorical genres, "Television and the Public Interest" combines all three main varieties of oratory described in Aristotle's classification (Aristotle 1358b): it might be read as a sort of a new regulator's ceremonial welcome message to the TV sector, providing a glimpse into what values are going to be important for his office, it offers a damning critique of the shortcomings of the industry (resembling a forensic speech), and it is undoubtedly a deliberative (political) address, recommending specific actions to be undertaken in the future.

3. It is worth noticing that in contrast to the vast majority of other countries, the American broadcasting system began as an almost entirely commercial enterprise and only in the late 1960s a public media system was established in the United States (arguably, as one of the late consequences of Minow's speech). Pretty much everywhere else the media evolution dynamics were exactly the opposite, with for-profit broadcasters appearing a long time after state-run institutions of radio and television (for reasons of this, see Engelman 1996, 38).

4. Established in 1934 under the provisions of the Communications Act as a replacement for the Federal Radio Commission.

2. Analysis of the speech

Newton N. Minow's oration was delivered on May 9th, 1961 in Washington, D.C. It lasted 39 minutes and was infrequently interrupted by applause from the audience.

It is sometimes suggested that *exordium*, or the introductory part of an oration, is the most important part of a speech as it is the first, and sometimes the last, opportunity for the speaker to get the attention (and the goodwill) of the audience. In Minow's case, this task was doubly difficult as the people in attendance were, as indicated above, preponderantly hostile or at least distrustful towards the orator. To combat this, Newton N. Minow used a trifold strategy of drawing his rhetorical *ethos* from a respected figure⁵ (in this case, the National Association of Broadcasters President LeRoy Collins, mentioned several times in the oration), associating himself with a powerful political movement: the buzzword of the day – “New Frontier” – appeared twice in the *exordium* alone and the orator was eager to remind the audience from the very beginning that “we at the Federal Communications Commission will do our part” in the Kennedy administration's new initiatives, as well as attempting to ingratiate himself with the audience with humor (“I emerged [...] for this, my maiden station break”, “I was not picked for this job because I regard myself as the fastest draw on the New Frontier”, “I may even suggest that we change the name of the FCC to The Seven Untouchables” (Minow 1961). It is worth noticing that many of Minow's light-hearted remarks – as seen above – actually referenced successful TV shows of the period and general broadcasting practices, bringing him closer to his audience. The speaker also emphasized his “admiration and respect” for the industry, saying, *inter alia*, in one memorable passage: “I can think of easier ways to make a living. But I cannot think of more satisfying ways” (Minow 1961).

Narratio, the next element of the classical oration structure, is generally supposed to be a brief explanation of the factual background of the rhetorical act, allowing listeners to follow the argumentation in the latter parts of the speech. The FCC chairman decided to avail himself with rational persuading tactics (*logos*) in this case, deluging the audience with numerical data of the broadcasting industry's performance in the recent years. This not only helps Minow to add another layer to his *ethos*, presenting himself as a well-prepared and knowledgeable orator, but also – focusing on the declared sound financial results of broadcasting institutions – insulates his future argumentation against potential charges that the Federal Communications Commission's initiatives are unfeasible for the industry due to economic reasons. Having asserted that he has “confidence in your health”, Newton N. Minow adds “but not in your product. It is with this and much more

5. Not unlike Kennedy in the famous Berlin oration of 1963.

in mind that I come before you today” (Minow 1961), gracefully moving to the *partitio* segment of his address.

The presentation of the oration’s “thesis” begins with Minow tensing his muscles by quoting an editorialist who argued that “the FCC of the New Frontier is going to be one of the toughest FCC’s in the history of broadcast regulation”, while at the same time assuring the audience of his good intentions: “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” (Minow 1961). He then goes on to introduce the main theme of the oration: the significance of the public interest in broadcasting. Carrying on with the tactics of producing rhetorical assistance from people around him, Minow quotes Governor Collins’ lofty words on how broadcasting must involve “the urge to build the character, citizenship, and intellectual stature of people”, before focusing on the scale of contemporary, both external and domestic, challenges to the United States. In this time “of peril and opportunity” – the FCC chairman suggests – the broadcasting industry, blessed with the “most powerful voice in America”, has “an inescapable duty to make that voice ring with intelligence and with leadership” (Minow 1961). This part of the oration is also significant for its references to the 1960s technological achievements: “Ours has been called the jet age, the atomic age, the space age. It is also, I submit, the television age” (Minow 1961). This rapid progress, warns Newton N. Minow – comparing broadcasting to nuclear power technology and continuing with the “with great power comes great responsibility” trope⁶, can nevertheless be utilized both for beneficial and detrimental purposes. To present his argument in a compelling manner, Minow disassociates himself from his office (“Like everybody, I wear more than one hat. I am the chairman of the FCC. But I am also a television viewer and the husband and father of other television viewers”; Minow 1961) and offers the audience a recollection of his personal experiences with the medium, musing on his favorite TV shows, before moving to a scathing condemnation of the networks’ programming:

When television is good, nothing – not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers – nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. 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

6. It perhaps should be noted that this commonplace is frequently employed in the contemporary American popular culture, with Marvel’s Spider-Man franchise as a notable example.

of all, boredom. True, you'll see a few things you will enjoy. But they will be very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, I only ask you to try it" (Minow 1961)

The words "vast wasteland" were actually a creation of Minow's friend, author John Bartlow Martin, who used them to describe watching television for twenty straight hours (for a journalistic project), not unlike the challenge proposed in the May 9th, 1961 oration⁷.

The task of persuading the audience to the orator's view may be divided into two main parts – the *confirmatio*, in which arguments supporting their position are presented, and the *confutatio* (or *refutatio*), where the task of the speaker is both to summarize the opposing views and respond to them (Ramage, Bean, Johnson 2018, 18). Given the expected negative reaction of the audience to any potential governmental interferences in the broadcasting business⁸, Minow's speech is primarily an exercise in *refutatio*. The FCC chairman starts with a series of well-arranged, escalating rhetorical questions intended to soften the listeners' hostile attitude toward his thesis: "Is there one person in this room who claims that broadcasting can't do better? [...] Is there one network president in this room who claims he can't do better? Well, is there at least one network president who believes that the other networks can do better?" (Minow 1961). He then goes on with refuting some of the default explanations of the problems of the medium, including "the idea that the present overall programming is aimed accurately at the public taste" (Minow 1961), as well as questioning how the TV ratings are used by the networks⁹. Continuing his strong criticism of the broadcast media, Newton N. Minow compares children's television programming to "a steady diet of ice cream, school holidays, and no Sunday school", before switching back to his official persona: "Let me address myself now to my role not as a viewer but as chairman of the FCC" (Minow 1961), in order to present his ideas for the audiovisual media policy.

Revealing the plan for action only in the second half of the oration stems from the speaker's choice to go with the multisided argument tactics, giving due time to discuss potential objections and alternative views, as "in the long run, multisided arguments have more staying power" (Ramage, Bean, Johnson 2018, 84). Here, Minow offers a sixfold creed including confirmation that the airwaves are a good

7. Martin actually used a stronger phrase: "vast wasteland of junk" (Fallows 2011).

8. One of the traditional tenets of rhetoric is adjusting the oration's argumentation to the specific expectations, hopes, fears, etc., of a particular audience, which is exactly what Minow did here.

9. Especially interesting, from the point of view of the history of the American media, is that the orator collates print press with broadcast media, praising the former for not replacing editorials with comics even though comics are much more popular with the readers. This is the opposite of the position expressed by Richard Nixon in his infamous "last press conference" speech, delivered roughly in the same period, in which he condemned the press and highly complimented radio and television (even thanking them for "keeping the newspapers a little more honest"; Nixon 1962).

belonging to the American people¹⁰, focusing on the future rather than the past problems of the industry, his belief in the free enterprise system, high emphasis on the plight of educational television, opposition to governmental censorship, and the conviction of the significance of his role as a regulator: “The squandering of our airwaves is no less important than the lavish waste of any precious natural resource. I intend to take the job of chairman of the FCC very seriously. I happen to believe in the gravity of my own particular sector of the New Frontier” (Minow 1961).

To achieve these ends, the Federal Communications Commission had at its disposal the instrument of license renewal (in the American localized broadcasting system it is the individual station, and not the network, that is bound to secure such a license in order to operate), which, as Newton N. Minow announced, would be used more proactively (“I say to you now: renewal will not be *pro forma* in the future”; Minow 1961). Carrying on with the motif of progress, Minow paints before his audience a rosy vista of opportunities that will be possible due to advances of technology (UHF broadcasting) and new initiatives in the audiovisual media industry (pay television). Still, all this marvelous potential would go to waste if no concerted effort from the television industry is done to assure that the form is matched in quality by the content. The metaphor of the frontier, already mentioned several times in the oration, makes another apt appearance in this context:

Another and perhaps the most important frontier: Television will rapidly join the parade into space. International television will be with us soon. No one knows how long it will be until a broadcast from a studio in New York will be viewed in India as well as in Indiana, will be seen in the Congo as it is seen in Chicago. But as surely as we are meeting here today, that day will come; and once again our world will shrink. [...] We cannot permit television in its present form to be our voice overseas (Minow 1961)

Heading to the finishing part (or *peroratio*) of his oration, Newton N. Minow quotes a lengthy, lofty passage from the industry’s own Television Code, suggesting to the audience that there are no substantial, insurmountable differences between the thinking of the new FCC officials and the voices of the broadcasting community. Then he begins the last segment of the address by sharing a heartfelt story of his

10. The idea of public responsibility of broadcasters was first expressed in the Radio Act of 1927 (Campbell, Martin, Fabos 2013, 169) and then reaffirmed in the Blue Book report, published by the FCC in 1946. Since radio and television frequencies were a scarce possession belonging to the whole nation and were only temporarily leased to broadcasters, the stations had to acknowledge that they were bound by specific public service requirements. Already earlier in his speech, Newton N. Minow said: “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” (Minow 1961).

meeting with Alan Shepard, the first American in space¹¹, the previous day. Once again, Minow attempts to inspire the listeners with high notes of rhetorical *pathos*, alluding to the potential greatness of the television industry and its significance for the American nation:

And Commander Shepard said to me, “Where are we going?” “What is this group?” And I said, “This is the National Association of Broadcasters at its annual convention.” This is the group, this is the industry that made it possible for millions of Americans to share with you that great moment in history; that his gallant flight was witnessed by millions of anxious Americans who saw in it an intimacy which they could achieve through no other medium, in no other way. It was one of your finest hours. The depth of broadcasting’s contribution to public understanding of that event cannot be measured. And it thrilled me -- as a representative of the government that deals with this industry -- to say to Commander Shepard the group that he was about to see (Minow 1961).

The FCC chairman concludes the speech with a direct reference to – and a paraphrase of – John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address: “I say to you ladies and gentlemen: Ask not what broadcasting can do for you; ask what you can do for broadcasting. And ask what broadcasting can do for America” (Minow 1961), before voicing to the audience one last call to cooperation in improving the nation’s television programming.

One more thing that is remarkable about Newton N. Minow’s rhetorical effort lies in its *elocutio* (or stylistic) aspect. Like many of the 20th century successful political orations, “Television and the Public Interest” is written primarily in a plain, easy-to-comprehend style¹², but with a vivid rhetorical imagination as well as a predilection for elegant vocabulary choices and an occasional unusual turn of phrase to keep the audience amused and to provide structure to the disquisition: “first let me begin by dispelling a rumor [...] second, let me start a rumor” (Minow 1961).

3. Vast Wasteland and the New Frontier

Minow’s speech, as indicated above, draws heavily from the New Frontier rhetoric championed in the 1960s by President John F. Kennedy. It should be noted that the very idea of the frontier as a concept defining the American identity is derived from a paper presented by historian Frederick Jackson Turner during

11. While Shepard was indeed the first NASA astronaut to go to space (only a few days before his meeting with Minow), he stayed on suborbital trajectory during his mission; it was only in 1962 that John Glenn completed a full orbital flight – to match Yuri Gagarin’s earlier achievement.

12. An automated readability analysis (conducted with the use of WebFX online tools) indicated that the oration has an average grade level of 8.6 at the standard Flesch-Kincaid scale, which means that it should be easily understood by 14 to 15 year olds (WebFX 2021).

the 9th annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 1893 (Carpenter 1977, 117). Jackson's "Frontier Thesis" proposed that the American character included such features as

that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom (cited in Carpenter 1977, 123)

This was a product of the nation's frontier¹³ experiences. This assertion was in stark contrast with the hitherto dominant belief that the characteristics of the American spirit were in the most part derivative of the British and Germanic cultural roots of the country, yet it soon gained widespread acceptance in the United States historiography.

In her analysis of the frontier myth, conducted with the use of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical pentad (Burke 1969, xv), Janice Hocker Rushing argues that "the harsh frontier range (scene) called for a «rugged individualist» (agent) who fought to conquer the land and its endemic inhabitants (act), using horses, guns, and force (agencies) for the expansion of the country (purpose)" (Rushing 1986, 265-296). This suggestive imagery proved to be very attractive for American authors and artists, permeating into many facets of the United States culture – from the early stories about Davy Crockett, through such diverse works as *The Little House on the Prairie*, *The Revenant*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, and all the way to *Star Trek*'s famous "space, the final frontier". It has been as well used as a useful rhetorical vehicle for many American politicians, including the archetypical "frontiersman" Theodore Roosevelt, who actually spent a few years in the American wilderness and built his political *ethos* on qualities such as strength and individualism, as well as the erstwhile vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, whose "mama grizzly" rhetoric was an attempt at postfeminist interpretation of the frontier myth (Gibson 2014, 101-104).

There is no doubt, however, that the trope of the frontier was most famously employed by John F. Kennedy in his 1960 acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, during which the future President said:

We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960s, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats. ... The pioneers gave up their safety, their comfort, and sometimes their lives to build our new west. They were determined to make the new world strong and free - an example to the world. ... Some would

13. The word "frontier" was understood in Turner's writings not in its original meaning of a border or a separating zone, but as the broadly defined "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Bowden 2020, 672-677), reminiscent of another trope in the United States culture – the idea of "Manifest Destiny", which posited that the American settlers had a historic mission to spread civilization to the westernmost parts of the continent, "from sea to shining sea", i.e. to the Pacific Ocean.

say that those struggles are all over, that all the horizons have been explored, that all the battles have been won. That there is no longer an American frontier. ... And we stand today on the edge of a new frontier, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils. ... Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. ... I'm asking each of you to be pioneers towards that New Frontier" (Kennedy 1960).

Kennedy's speech might be seen as a shrewd strategy to get the most of the listeners' good will, altruism, and enthusiasm by comparing them to the heroic role models of the frontier myth. Its theme of personal sacrifice for a greater good has been echoed later in one of the most celebrated American orations of all time, JFK's iconic inaugural address, with the words "ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country" (Kennedy 1961) remembered to this day. It is worth noting that Kennedy was able to exploit this ingenious rhetorical device in numerous political endeavors during his time in office, including – among many other initiatives – the establishment of the Peace Corps (Dorsey 1996, 46) and (perhaps most famously) the energizing of the U.S. space program (Rushing 1989, 266); in his 1962 Rice University speech, JFK said: "What was once the furthest outpost on the old frontier of the West will be the furthest outpost on the new frontier of science and space" (Kennedy 1962).

It might be argued that the same adventurous spirit and heroic imagery pervades the analyzed oration of the FCC chairman. The speech presents the field of broadcasting as yet another "sector of the New Frontier" – with vast riches and opportunities to exploit but also difficult challenges to overcome – awaiting dedicated, selfless, enlightened individuals; there is little doubt that Newton N. Minow saw himself as one of them. The extensive use of the frontier metaphor (the word appears no less than six times in the entire address) allowed the orator to add, if only jokingly, some of the perceived Western American agency and grit – in all of its cinematographically derived glory – to his rhetorical *ethos*, as in "when the New Frontiersmen rode into town" or the already cited "I was not picked for this job because I regard myself as the fastest draw on the New Frontier" (Minow 1961). This actually plays well with Minow's self-declared "Untouchable", tough guy persona¹⁴, employed many times throughout the oration, including: "It wouldn't surprise me if some of you had expected me to come here today and say to you in effect, 'Clean up your own house or the government will do it for you.' Well, in a limited sense, you would be right because I've just said it" and "There will be times perhaps when you will consider that I take myself or my job too seriously. Frankly, I don't care if you do" (Minow 1961). A glorified form of frontier justice seemed to be arriving in town soon.

14. As well as his affinity for employing the classic Churchillian wartime rhetorical tropes: "finest hours" (used twice in the speech) and – reversed – "never have so few owed so much to so many" (Minow 1961).

4. Impact and legacy

Predictably, Newton N. Minow's message was not received with much enthusiasm among the immediate audience of the 1961 speech, as the commercial broadcasting industry was determined to thwart any challenges to its operations (it should be noted that the TV networks had long traditions of presenting their business as both a symbol of American patriotism and the "very lifeblood and magic of television"; Boddy 1998, 30-31). Besides media industry executives, among Minow's detractors were also right-wing ideologues such as Ayn Rand, who accused the FCC chairman of trying to establish a kind of bureaucratic authoritarianism (Rand 1961)¹⁵.

Still, it might be argued that Newton N. Minow's lament over the "vast wasteland" resonated well with the American people. The orator himself, reminiscing about the speech in 2021, sixty years after its delivery, said: "the public reaction was very positive on all counts, except for the people in the business" (Hiltzik 2021). Due to his famous wording's catchiness, it went on to be forever associated with the criticism of broadcast media; even today (as of September 2021), a quick query on Google reveals almost 850 thousand individual hits for "vast wasteland", with a substantial majority of them being references to Minow's speech.

The orator himself was not forgotten in the popular discourse either; even after he left the Federal Communications Commission in 1963, his name was jokingly given to the unlucky vessel of the shipwrecked protagonists of the CBS hit comedy series "Gilligan's Island" (Castleman, Poniewozik 2016, 167). Thanks to his longevity and activity in both professional and political fields, Minow remains to this day one of the prominent voices of the American liberalism.

The real significance of the oration has proven, however, to be much larger. By defining and channeling the society's dissatisfaction with the commercial system of broadcasting, it helped to create momentum for the progressive plans for its reform. These projects materialized in subsequent years; first with the enactment of the Educational Television Facilities Act of 1962 (constituting the first instance when the federal government financially supported non-commercial broadcasters; Engelman 1996, 86), and then with the establishment of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television in 1965 (Witherspoon, Kovitz 2000, 14).

The Commission, gathering leading figures in the fields of science, culture, media, business, and education (and led by James R. Killian of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), was tasked with assessing the state of the United States non-commercial broadcasting and proposing changes to the nation's media system. Its 1967 report was filled with the same progressive spirit as Minow's

15. Future actions of the Minow-led FCC did not prove these charges to be correct, as eventually no station lost its license for controversial programming during his tenure in office (Minow 2011).

oration, with the poignant words of author E. B. White¹⁶ as the best summary of the Commission's intentions:

Noncommercial television should address itself to the ideal of excellence, not the idea of acceptability – which is what keeps commercial television from climbing the staircase. I think television should be the visual counterpart of the literary essay, should arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty, take us on journeys, enable us to participate in events, present great drama and music, explore the sea and the sky and the woods and the hills. It should be our Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minsky's, and our Camelot. It should restate and clarify the social dilemma and the political pickle" (Carnegie Commission on Educational Television 1967, 13).

The direct result of this initiative was the enactment of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 (signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on November 7th) and the founding of the American institutions of public radio and television. While by no means perfect, non-commercial media organizations such as the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) have henceforth provided the American audience with an alternative to the for-profit fare served by the country's media system. With a wide range of quality programs, including *PBS NewsHour*, *Sesame Street*, *Nova*, or *Masterpiece Theatre* (Kuś 2013, 109-146), there may be no doubt that these establishments, free from the "constraints, however necessary in their context, of commercial broadcasting" (Carnegie Commission on Educational Television 1967, 99), are the most durable legacy of Newton N. Minow's dream of civilizing the "vast wasteland".

5. Conclusion

It might be argued that Newton N. Minow's acclaimed oration could not have been written and delivered by an FCC official in any other decade than the 1960s, the age of the spectacular political, social, and technological projects, for which the sky – or if I may, space – was the only limit (and the final frontier)¹⁷. "Television and the Public Interest" involved much of this mindset, becoming an inherent part of the Kennedy era grandiose rhetorical legacy. While the speech – quoted, rebuked, admired, made fun of, analyzed, and misunderstood¹⁸ many times – remains a source of controversy even today, it is my opinion that at heart it was a love message to the medium of television, an astounding invention capable of

16. Best known for his children's books, such as *Stuart Little* (1945) and *Charlotte's Web* (1952) as well as his contribution to the ever-popular *The Elements of Style* (1959).

17. Merely twenty years later, Ronald Reagan's nominee at the post of the Federal Communications Commission chair, Mark S. Fowler, famously described television as a "toaster with pictures" (Boyer 1987).

18. There has even been a story about Minow's daughter who was asked to interpret a sentence taken from her father's famous speech as a part of a school test – and Minow, later at home, chose the wrong answer in that test himself (Pickard, Popiel 2019, 5894).

achieving the greatest things, which – as E. B. White put it, years later – “once in a while it does, and you get a quick glimpse of its potential” (Carnegie Commission on Educational Television 1967, 13).

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