



NEWTON MINOW

ADDRESS TO THE BROADCASTING INDUSTRY

I invite you to sit down in front of your television set. . .and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland.

Newton Minow (1926–) was appointed by President John Kennedy as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, the agency responsible for regulating the use of the public airwaves. On May 9, 1961, he spoke to 2,000 members of the National Association of Broadcasters and told them that the daily fare on television was "a vast wasteland." Minow's indictment of commercial television launched a national debate about the quality of programming. After Minow's speech, the television critic for *The New York Times* wrote: "Tonight some broadcasters were trying to find dark explanations for Mr. Minow's attitude. In this matter the viewer possibly can be a little helpful; Mr. Minow has been watching television."

. . . **Y**our industry possesses the most powerful voice in America. It has an inescapable duty to make that voice ring with intelligence and with leadership. In a few years this exciting industry has grown from a novelty to an instrument of overwhelming impact on the American people. It should be making ready for the kind of leadership that newspapers and magazines assumed years ago, to make our people aware of their world.

Ours has been called the jet age, the atomic age, the space age. It is also, I submit, the television age. And just as history will decide whether the leaders of today's world employed the atom to destroy the world or rebuild it for mankind's benefit, so will history decide whether today's broadcasters employed their powerful voice to enrich the people or debase them. . . .

Like everybody, I wear more than one hat. I am the chairman of the FCC. I am also a television viewer and the husband and father of other television viewers. I have seen a great many television programs that seemed to me eminently worthwhile, and I am not talking about the much-bemoaned good old days of "Playhouse 90" and "Studio One."

I am talking about this past season. Some were wonderfully entertaining, such as "The Fabulous Fifties," the "Fred Astaire Show" and the "Bing Crosby Special"; some were dramatic and moving, such as Conrad's "Victory" and "Twilight Zone"; some were marvelously informative, such as "The Nation's Future," "CBS Reports," and "The Valiant Years." I could list many more—programs that I am sure everyone here felt enriched his own life and that of his family. 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 you to sit 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.

You will see 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. And, most of all, boredom. True, you will see a few things you will enjoy. But they will be very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, try it.

Is there one person in this room who claims that broadcasting can't do better? . . .

Why is so much of television so bad? I have heard many answers: demands of your advertisers; competition for ever higher ratings; the need always to attract a mass audience; the high cost of television programs; the insatiable appetite for programming material—these are some of them. Unquestionably these are tough problems not susceptible to easy answers.

But I am not convinced that you have tried hard enough to solve them. I do not accept the idea that the present overall programming is aimed accurately at the public taste. The ratings tell us only that some people have their television sets turned on, and, of that number, so many are tuned to one channel and so many to another. They don't tell us what the public might watch if they were offered half a dozen additional choices. 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. . . .

Certainly I hope you will agree that ratings should have little influence where children are concerned. The best estimates indicate that during the hours of 5 to 6 p.m., 60 percent of your audience is composed of children under twelve. And most young children today, believe it or not, spend as much time watching television as they do in the schoolroom. I repeat—let that sink in—most young children today spend as much time watching television as they do in the schoolroom. It used to be said that there were three great influences on a child: home, school and church. Today there is a fourth great influence, and you ladies and gentlemen control it.

If parents, teachers, and ministers conducted their responsibilities by following the ratings, children would have a steady diet of ice cream, school holidays, and no Sunday school. What about your responsibilities? Is there no room on television to teach, to inform, to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacities of our children? Is there no room for programs deepening their understanding of children in other lands? Is there no room for a children's news show explaining something about the world to them at their level of understanding? Is there no room for reading the great literature of the past, teaching them the great traditions of freedom? There are some fine children's shows, but they are drowned out in the massive doses of cartoons, violence, and more violence. Must these be your trademarks? Search your consciences and see if you cannot offer more to your young beneficiaries whose future you guide so many hours each and every day.

What about adult programming and ratings? You know, newspaper publishers take popularity ratings too. The answers are pretty clear; it is almost always the comics, followed by the advice-to-the-lovelorn columns. But, ladies and gentlemen, the news is still on the front page of all newspapers, the editorials are not replaced by more comics, the newspapers have not become one long collection of advice to the lovelorn. Yet newspapers do not need a license from the government to be in business—they do not use public property. But in television—where your responsibilities as public trustees are so plain—the moment that the ratings indicate that Westerns are popular, there are new imitations of Westerns on the air faster than the old coaxial cable could take us from Hollywood to New York. . . .

Let me make clear that what I am talking about is balance. I believe that the public interest is made up of many interests. There are many people in this great country, and you must serve all of us. You will get no argument from me if you say that, given a choice between a Western and a symphony, more people will watch the Western. I like Westerns and private eyes too—but a steady diet for the whole country is obviously not in the public interest. We all know that people would more often prefer to be entertained than stimulated or informed. But your obligations are not satisfied if you look only to popularity as a test of what to broadcast. You are not only in show business; you are free to communicate ideas as well as relaxation. You 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. . . .

Let me address myself now to my role, not as a viewer but as chairman of the

FCC. . . I want to make clear some of the fundamental principles which guide me.

First, the people own the air. They own it as much in prime evening time as they do at 6 o'clock Sunday morning. For every hour that the people give you, you owe them something. I intend to see that your debt is paid with service.

Second, I think it would be foolish and wasteful for us to continue any worn-out wrangle over the problems of payola, rigged quiz shows, and other mistakes of the past. . . .

Third, I believe in the free enterprise system. I want to see broadcasting improved and I want you to do the job. . . .

Fourth, I will do all I can to help educational television. There are still not enough educational stations, and major centers of the country still lack usable educational channels. . . .

Fifth, I am unalterably opposed to governmental censorship. There will be no suppression of programming which does not meet with bureaucratic tastes. Censorship strikes at the taproot of our free society.

Sixth, I did not come to Washington to idly observe the squandering of the public's airwaves. The squandering of our airwaves is no less important than the lavish waste of any precious natural resource. . . .

What you gentlemen broadcast through the people's air affects the people's taste, their knowledge, their opinions, their understanding of themselves and of their world. And their future. The power of instantaneous sight and sound is without precedent in mankind's history. This is an awesome power. It has limitless capabilities for good—and for evil. And it carries with it awesome responsibilities—responsibilities which you and I cannot escape....

What was the main point of Mr. Minow's address?

Scoring Guide

Score & Description
<p>Evidence of full comprehension</p> <p>These responses identify the main purpose of Mr. Minow's address. These responses consider Minow's overall ideas about how to improve television, not just trivial details from his speech.</p>
<p>Evidence of partial or surface comprehension</p> <p>These responses specify a superficial purpose based on trivial details from the speech (e.g., "Minow wanted to reduce the number of cartoons.").</p>
<p>Evidence of little or no comprehension</p> <p>These responses suggest an idea which is clearly unrelated to Minow's main point. Or they describe a main point in general terms that could apply to any number of speeches.</p>

Evidence of full comprehension - Student Response

1. What was the main point of Mr. Minow's address?

He is asking the television industry
to look at the programs they have on
the air and change them so they
will educate America's television audience,
not just entertain.

1. What was the main point of Mr. Minow's address?

The main point was that there
must be an effort made to try to
change the quality of the programs
on television.

Scorer Comments:

Both responses demonstrate understanding of Minow's address by identifying that his main point was to encourage change in the broadcasting industry.

Evidence of partial or surface comprehension - Student Response

1. What was the main point of Mr. Minow's address?

To inform them how important T.V. has become
and how much influence it has. It also says
that the influence is usually not a good one.

1. What was the main point of Mr. Minow's address?

The T.V. is made up of trash.
There is too much violence on T.V.
Kids as well as adults watch too
much T.V.

Scorer Comments:

These responses provide some information that Minow addressed in his speech, but do not demonstrate understanding of his main point.

Evidence of little or no comprehension - Student Response

1. What was the main point of Mr. Minow's address?

It is help to Mr. Minow

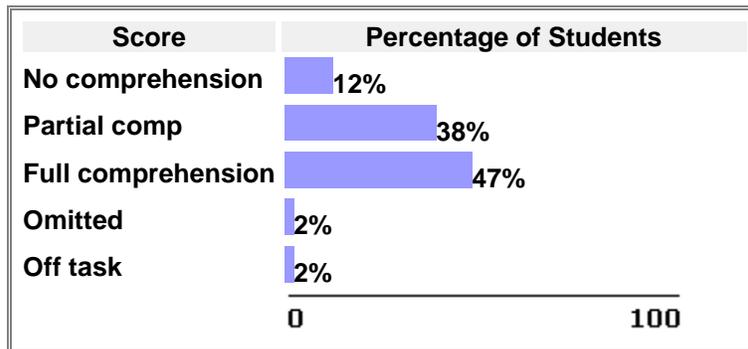
1. What was the main point of Mr. Minow's address?

Freedom of speech. To make
and effort to make it clear
what is on your mind

Scorer Comments:

The first response is unrelated to Minow's main point: Minow was not interested in helping himself. The second response makes an unclear reference to freedom of speech.

2002 National Performance Results



Note:

- These results are for public and nonpublic school students.
- Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Reading for Information

- Involves the engagement of the reader with aspects of the real world

Reading for information is most commonly associated with textbooks, primary and secondary sources, newspaper and magazine articles, essays, and speeches. Some features that distinguish informational text from literary text are organization and the way information is presented. Informational text is organized by topic and supporting details, whereas literary text is organized by the structure of a story, poem, or drama. Informational texts may have boldface headings, graphics, illustrations, and captions that signal importance in the text. However, some commonalities exist between literary and informational text and the skills and strategies required for reading each. Both require people to critically analyze the text, reflect on it, and draw conclusions.

When reading for information, readers need to know the specific text patterns, or forms of organization (e.g., cause and effect, sequential order, comparison/contrast, opinion and supporting arguments), to develop understanding. People frequently have different purposes for reading text of this nature—for example, to find specific pieces of information, answer a question, or get some general information when glancing through a magazine article. Reading informational text calls for orientations to the text that differ from those used in reading for literary experience because readers are specifically focused

on acquiring information. When people read for information, they may select parts of the text they need, rather than reading from beginning to end.

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Aspects of Reading

Forming a General Understanding

To form a general understanding, the reader must consider the text as a whole and provide a global understanding of it. Students may be asked, for example, to demonstrate a general understanding by giving the topic of a passage, explaining the purpose of an article, or reflecting on the theme of a story. Tasks and questions that measure this aspect of reading include the following:

- Write a paragraph telling what the story/poem is about.
- Which of the following is the best statement of the theme of the story?
- Write a paragraph telling what this article generally tells you.
- What is this text supposed to help you do?
- What would you tell someone about the main character?