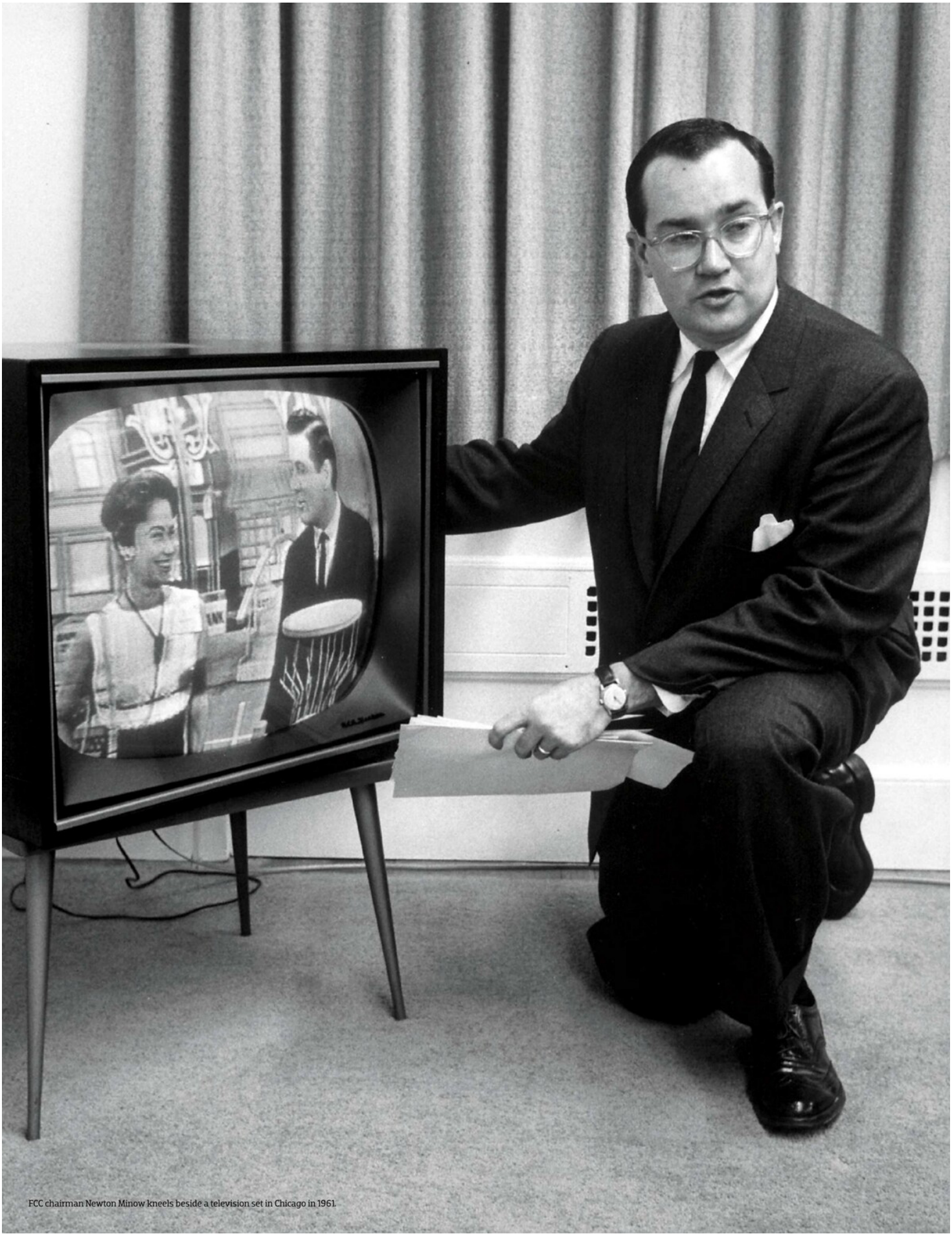


FCC chairman Newton Minow kneels beside a television set in Chicago in 1961.

As FCC chairman under President John F. Kennedy, Newton Minow became known for his blunt criticism of commercial television. But his focus was always squarely on the public interest: how could television and other technology — like those newfangled satellites — be put to best use for the people? Six decades after his "vast wasteland" speech, his daughter, writer **Nell Minow**, asked him to look back — and forward.

FOR THE PEOPLE

WALTER BENNETT/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sixty years ago, on May 9, 1961, Newton Minow made three significant appearances.

In Washington, the thirty-five-year-old chairman of the Federal Communications Commission gave his famous "vast wasteland" speech to the National Association of Broadcasters, telling them, "When television is good, nothing is better," but adding that he expected them to do more to uphold their statutory obligation to serve "the public interest, convenience and necessity."

Next, he went back to the FCC office, where he met with Elizabeth Campbell to sign the original license for WETA, the first educational television station in the nation's capital (WETA today produces, among other programs, the Ken Burns documentaries and the nightly *PBS NewsHour* program).

Then he flew to Chicago to attend the father-daughter dinner for my Brownie troop.

I've often thought about how those three events defined his character: inspiring those around him to do better, supporting people who make enriching cultural content and reliable news widely available, and always putting his family first.

Over the next decades he was a founder and board chair of PBS and a director of CBS; helped create the Commission on Presidential Debates, where he served as vice-chair until this year; worked to require the V-chip and closed captioning; helped secure startup funding for *Sesame Street* and argued for rescinding the radio license of a station that broadcast virulently racist and anti-Semitic programming.

I talked to my dad, who is now ninety-five, about some of his formative experiences, including the words from Bobby Kennedy that inspired him to focus on telecommunications, why he told President John F. Kennedy that the first telecom satellite was more important than putting a man on the Moon and what he will advise the new FCC chair.

How did Bobby Kennedy influence your interest in television?

Bob and I worked on Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign in 1956. We were almost exactly the same age, and we sometimes roomed together on the campaign trail. Adlai was speaking in Springfield, Illinois, and we decided to skip the speech and visit Lincoln's house.

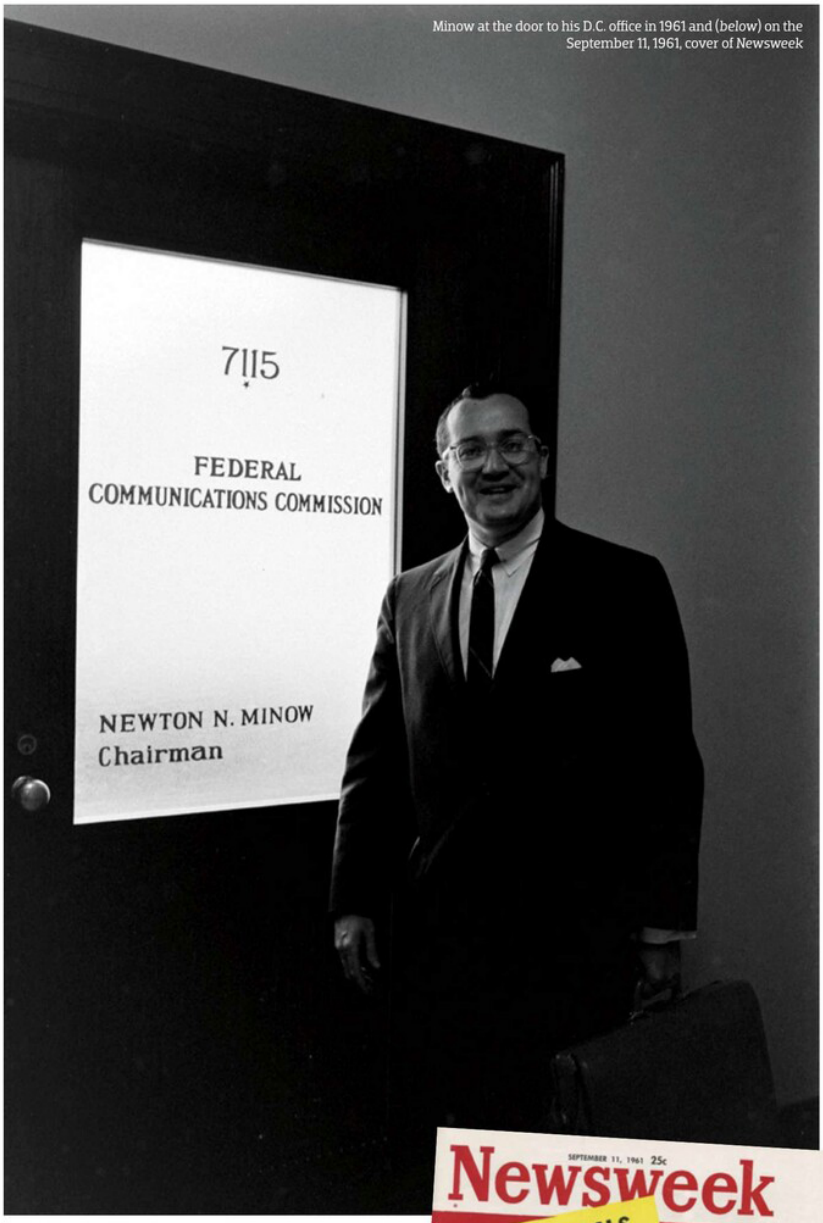
As we walked back, Bob said, "When I grew up, there were three great influences on a child: the home, school and the church.... Now I see with my children, there's a fourth great influence. It's television, and some of it is really not good for them." At the time, there was no national education programming for children, and very little of any kind [locally]. And the networks had just one fifteen-minute news broadcast a day.

President Kennedy spoke to the National Association of Broadcasters before you did in 1961, right?

Yes, the day before. I went to the White House to go with him, and he had just been meeting with Commander Alan Shepard, the first American in space, and his wife, and asked if we could bring them with us to the NAB. I said I was sure they would be delighted. Then he asked me to come with him while he changed his shirt to talk about his speech.

I told him that he should praise the broadcasters for their coverage of the space launches, unlike the USSR, which did not let anyone see their failures and successes. We all went over together, and — without a note — he gave a perfect speech, including what I suggested. The broadcasters loved it.

The next day was my speech — not as big a hit! [Laughs] Sherwood Schwartz was so insulted, he named the sinking ship on *Gilligan's Island* after me in retaliation. I'm so proud of that. My law partners gave me a lifesaver from the SS *Minnow* as a ninetieth-birthday present.



Minow at the door to his D.C. office in 1961 and (*below*) on the September 11, 1961, cover of *Newsweek*

ALFRED EISENSTAEDT/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY MINOW FAMILY ARCHIVE

But that night Joe Kennedy, JFK's father, called to tell me he loved the speech. I'm glad it is remembered, but wish that instead of "vast wasteland" the two words people would remember are "public interest."

President Kennedy said your record of getting legislation passed was better than his. You had three major statutes in two and a half years.

I told him that was because all three were bipartisan. One required all new televisions to have UHF receivers to make more channels available.

Another was the Educational Television bill, the first time that any federal money helped build not-for-profit stations, now PBS. Both President Kennedy and I came from cities with what were then called educational television stations, WGBH [Boston] and WTTW [Chicago], and we were dismayed to find that Washington and New York and many other places did not have them.

The third was the legislation that enabled the United States to take the lead in developing communication satellites. They have really changed the world, [enabling] GPS, cheap telephone calls and the ability to see what's going on anyplace in the world, live.

Why did the president call you?

He called me twice. The first time was to get the ratings for Jackie's tour of the White House! [Laughs] I had to call Frank Stanton, the head of CBS, to find out. I told the president her ratings were better than his, and he loved it.

The second time, he called me at home as we were having dinner. He was furious about NBC's coverage of his fight with the steel companies and asked me to do something about it. I said, "Yes, sir," but did nothing and called the White House the next day to say I was not going to do anything. A couple of weeks later, the president called me over at a party and whispered, "Thank you." Even a president has to be turned down sometimes.

What does the "public interest" requirement in the law mean today?

The concept of the public interest, I'm sorry to say, has pretty much disappeared in today's world. Originally, broadcast licenses for radio were awarded on the basis of a bargain that broadcasters would be given a license at no charge, to use a public resource. In exchange, they were to serve the public interest, convenience and necessity. And as a result of that, the FCC developed a set of standards that you had to have local news and different forms of service to the community, including fairness and covering controversial issues.

Over the years, that has slowly but surely disappeared, and the multiplicity of voices is seen as the alternative way to deal with it. I'm in favor of a wide range of choices, but in this case commercial pressure and ideological extremism have turned television into a Tower of Babel.

If it were possible to bring back the Fairness Doctrine, which was official policy from 1949 to 1987, would you be in favor of that?

Yes. It just means that a broadcaster should cover controversial issues, presenting different sides of the issue so that the public gets a fair understanding. I believe that it is a correct doctrine. It does not infringe in any way on free speech. A broadcaster can put anything on as long as he puts out an alternative view.

Unfortunately, by getting away from the Fairness Doctrine, we have divided the country because we now have certain stations that only give one side of an issue. The public, as a result, is not

getting a balanced view. I think that has greatly contributed to the division in our country.

Senator Pat Moynihan said, "This is a free country. Everybody's entitled to his own opinion. But no one is entitled to his own facts." And what is presented as facts today is often not factual, is often not true at all. If you have people who don't agree on facts, it becomes impossible for a consensus or for willingness to deal with the other side.

And I think the FCC has made a big mistake by not requiring that the funders of political advertising be disclosed to the viewer, including those not directly authorized by the campaign.

If you were made the news director of a broadcast station today, what would be the first changes you would make?

First, I would stop being only concerned with controversy, with something going wrong. All the emphasis on most local news throughout the country is on crime, fires, disasters. Very seldom is there good news, or a triumph, or somebody overcoming adversity, or a family overcoming an addiction problem or a kid doing well in school after failing. I would change that so that we got a better balance of good as well as bad news.

Second, I would make sure that opinion is not presented as news, and that facts are presented as facts, showing sources.

What is the answer to the problem of fake news?

I think the answer is more care given by news directors to be sure that what they're reporting as news is true. And it is also media literacy on the part of viewers, [so they] have a better understanding of how the media reports and the way it reports. And you've got to teach that in school — not just with television but all forms of social media, too.

What do you watch on television?

I'm a news junkie, so I watch a lot of news. My favorite is the *PBS NewsHour* with Judy Woodruff. Through the years, it has shown that it's possible to have an hour newscast which is fair, which is detailed, which is unbiased and is in a class by itself. I love *CBS Sunday Morning* and *60 Minutes*. I also loved *The Sopranos*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Shtisel* and *The Crown*. And I never miss anything Ken Burns does.

Minow with his daughter Nell in 2006, when he received the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service

COURTESY MINOW FAMILY ARCHIVE

You've been involved in every presidential debate going back to Kennedy-Nixon, which was moderated by your college classmate, Sander Vanocur. Who was the best debater?

JFK, no question. A combination of intellect and character and personality. He was able to think very clearly, to speak very clearly. And also, when you saw him, you liked him.

You spent pretty much all your time last fall on calls with other members of the Commission on Presidential Debates, trying to cope with the interrupting and the virus. How can we do better?

First, we need to schedule future debates earlier in the campaigns. Early voting will become even more widespread, and the next presidential debates should be finished by the end of September 2024.

In the Oval Office on May 29, 1963, JFK posed with Minow and his wife Josephine Baskin Minow (they'll mark their seventy-second wedding anniversary in May) and their daughters Martha, Nell and Mary.

Second, try innovative formats and a broader range of moderators and questioners. My own preference is for a traditional debate, in which the moderator's role is simply to keep time and the debaters talk directly to each other. But we have seen how effective and impactful the town-hall format is, and we should also consider other questioners: historians, governors, teachers, local journalists.

Third, continue to think about how best to use new communications technologies. Social media has changed the communal experience of watching the debates. This makes the televised debates more important than ever. The commission already works successfully with the major technology companies. Social media can help us be more innovative and inclusive.

What is your advice to the new chair of the FCC?

This is one of the most important jobs in the government. [In January, President Joe Biden appointed Jessica Rosenworcel as acting chair; an official chair is yet to be nominated and confirmed.]

Everybody in America who makes a telephone call, sends an email, listens to the radio, watches television, who watches cable, watches satellites — all [these actions] are regulated by the FCC. All are essential for work, education, democracy. Where would we have been during the pandemic without them?

There's no more important government responsibility than being sure that our communication system — which I'm very proud to say is the best in the world — that it operates well, it operates fairly, it operates without discrimination and that it serves the American people in the public interest, not the private interest.

What was it that you said to President Kennedy about why telecommunication satellites were important?

He once asked me, "Why are you pushing us so hard on this communication satellite thing?" And I said, "Mr. President, putting a communication satellite into space is more important than sending a man because communication satellites send ideas, and ideas last longer than people."