

NICHOLAS JOHNSON ON CENSORSHIP, VIOLENCE, PROPAGANDA

Nicholas Johnson, generally referred to as "the maverick member of the FCC," has, in his role as one of TV's fiercest critics, occupied as much prime time as many a product-pushing media star. He was interviewed recently in Washington, D.C., by Peter Collier, who's on the Editorial Board of Ramparts.

Q: It has been estimated that a child who watches television regularly will have seen something like 18,000 people being killed by the time he is 14. Some parents who aren't particularly bothered by the old charge that TV is a "vast wasteland" are concerned about the level and extent of the violence.

A: It is hard for me to separate violence from the general low quality of the programming. The argument can be made that television uses violence as a technique because it wants to capture the viewer's attention but doesn't have anything much of real value to offer. It uses violence as a crutch. A child sees too much violence and he learns too little respect for it. Most psychologists and pediatricians would certainly agree that at the very least we're subjecting our children to a needless risk. But the way that violence is portrayed—unrealistically—as just good clean fun—is at least as dangerous as the fact that there is so much of it. The child or anyone else watching television gets the impression that you can beat, maim and shoot people without anybody ever really getting hurt. It is very American, this notion that actions don't have lasting consequences.

Q: Aside from the question of violence, do you agree with those who accuse television of generally blunting children's sensibilities?

A: At minimum you can say that a child who's watching television all the time isn't doing anything else. He's not interacting with other people; he's not developing physically; he's not contacting reality. And what he's being subjected to doesn't have much to

be said for it. All of us, adults and children alike, are bombarded with propaganda in both the programs and commercials we see. We're told that the solution to life's problems can be found in over-the-counter drugs and other chemicals; that there's magic in cosmetics and fulfilling sexuality in automobiles and a variety of other possessions. When you get down to basics, it's a pretty hollow existence that is preached over television. It puts 200 million minds to sleep during prime time every night, and to my way of thinking that is a crime of substantial proportion.

Q: Actually, though, you could also say that the current generation has turned its back pretty emphatically on this "propaganda."

A: Partly. Mason Williams, the Emmy Award winning writer for *The Smothers Brothers* show put it something like this: the way in which American business has sold its product is creating an America that will no longer buy its product. Even young children learn a couple of painful lessons from television by the time they're 10 or 11: that adults will lie to you for money; and that advertising isn't to be trusted. I'm sorry they have to see this so soon, but if we're going to have a situation where they'll spend the rest of their lives being manipulated and cheated as consumers I guess you could argue that the sooner they learn to be suspicious the better. But I'm not sure all this cynicism leads anywhere. You've got to remember that for every child of affluent parents who goes to a good university and then either drops out to a commune somewhere or comes away committed to reform, there are

lots of young people his same age who don't have the opportunity to escape the system. I haven't noticed a decline in the number of automobiles being turned out every year, or a decrease in the sales of breakfast foods filled with empty calories. Don't think television's effectiveness as a merchandising tool has been all used up.

Q: A recent Harris poll taken for *Life* shows that a majority of viewers aren't satisfied with what they're being offered on television. It seems to me that it would be in everybody's best interests to have better programming. It's hard to believe that sponsors demand mediocre programs. Is it all the responsibility of the networks?

A: First of all, you shouldn't assume that institutions of broadcasting and advertising are manned by people that are much different from each other. In fact, there's very little distinction between the marketing man for the large advertiser, the man who handles the account at the advertising agency and the man who deals with both of them at the network. They're probably all about the same age, motivated by the same values and have the same degree of cynicism toward the audience they're trying to coerce into buying a product that may be worthless, overpriced, unnecessary or perhaps even dangerous. It wouldn't matter which of the three guys in this example—or the dozens of people actually involved—made the decision about a specific show or series: none of them really cares that much about its quality. Again, as Mason Williams says, television wants to keep people stupid so they'll keep on watching it. The only people who care about what's on television are the viewers, and they have absolutely nothing to say about what they get. It is one of the great ironies that networks with unlimited

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power and 3 billion dollars a year in revenues should have been unable to come up with a show like *Sesame Street*. They had felt the need for years, but they just ignored it. This mentality is what makes the living rooms of America into intellectual smudge pots every night. Television today is not in the programming business; it is in the business of selling an audience to a merchandiser.

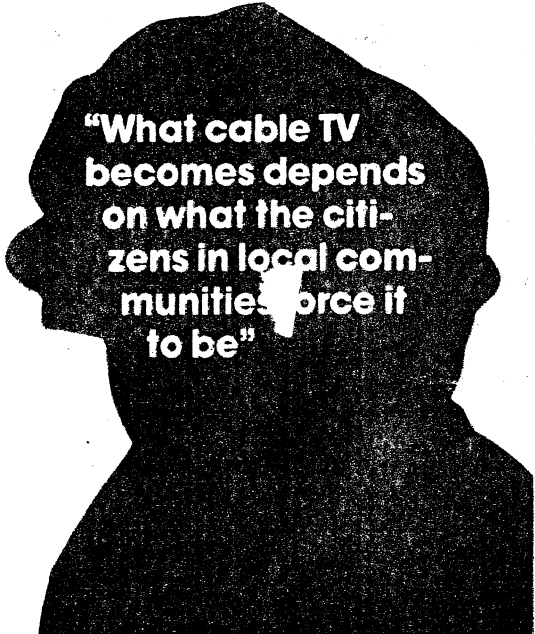
Q: This kind of uniformity is reinforced by the development of media conglomerates, or a class of "media barons" as you call them in *How to Talk Back to Your Television Set*. It's pretty hard to talk back to this kind of institution.

A: At least people are beginning to understand what the problem is. They're starting to see that the real gap in this society is not between the young and old, black and white, unemployed and blue-collar workers, or any of the other antagonisms we're always being told about. It is between those middle-class white males from 40 to 65 who run all the major institutions and practically everyone else. The mass media should operate as a check on this kind of concentration of power, but instead they've become part of it. The implications of a single group combining ownership of a number of television stations, book publishing operations, magazines, cable television systems, newspapers and the like is obvious. There is also the danger of a conglomerate using media under its control to serve its other corporate interests. But the basic thing is that power continues to fall into fewer and fewer hands. The same kind of people are coming to own all the vehicles of opinion and the opportunity for the average American to feel himself represented, let alone for there to be any real diversity of expression, diminishes year by year. I might add that sadly enough this is a trend the FCC hasn't chosen to fight.

Q: But the Commission is becoming increasingly visible. A number of its recent cases have gotten publicity, especially the decision last spring about music—that stations had the responsibility to review records, especially rock records, before playing them on the air to find out if they advocated drug use. You dissented from the decision. [continued on page 221]

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Nicholas Johnson—on censorship, violence, propaganda

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A: It seemed to me that the FCC's decision amounted to an attempt by a group of establishmentarians to determine what youth can say or hear. There was a serious question in my mind as to whether the FCC was really as concerned about drug abuse as it was with striking out blindly at a form of music which is a part of the youth culture. It was a political decision. Why ignore lyrics glorifying the use of alcohol, which is clearly the number one drug abuse problem in the country? Why ignore television commercials where gray flannel pushers spend almost \$300 million a year advertising all kinds of middle-class drugs? It seems to me that to focus on rock music lyrics was really part of a tendency to harass the counter culture and to suppress the anti-establishment tone and message of its music.

Q: Aside from this particular matter, there has been a lot of talk in the last couple of years about "censorship," especially about the current administration being antagonistic to the media and waging an offensive against broadcasting. Is this true?

A: In the last year or so there have been broad subpoenas to newsmen for their notes. There has been the question of the filmed "outtakes" of *The Selling of the Pentagon*. There have been injunctions against the publication of newspapers during the Ellsberg affair. The Vice President has continued to make statements that you have to interpret as menacing. And, something that is less known, there has been the continuing use of false press credentials by government investigators seeking information from various dissident groups. So I don't think it can be denied that an atmosphere of intimidation has developed. But one of the reasons it has is that the media—especially television—has let it. The people who put together news shows and documentaries, which I feel represent TV's finest hour, are probably concerned about the threat to their First Amendment rights, but it seems like the only time broadcasting generally gets concerned is in commercial matters. The networks fought the FCC on antismoking ads all the way to the Supreme Court. But they don't say anything at all in situations such as that in which the Pacifica stations were facing FCC sanctions purely because of the *content* of what they put on the air. In the last analysis, it isn't the FCC or even the Nixon administration that stands in the way of freedom of the press so much as the broadcasters themselves. They are the ones doing all the serious censorship—in the name of saving or making money, or as a way of currying favor with advertisers, politicians and others they don't want to offend.

networks' hold on the television industry—their "triopoly" — discourages competition or real innovation. Public broadcasting was supposed to offer an alternative to the networks. There are obviously a few exceptions, but don't you think it has turned out to be pretty dull itself?

A: On that subject I'd refer people to Les Brown's new book *Television*. He's written a pretty severe and accurate indictment of public broadcasting. It's awfully hard to justify yourself as a public anything if you are only serving one percent of the audience. But in all fairness, you've got to understand that the people involved are under a lot of pressures. Among other things, they're dependent on the handouts of government and corporations for the small budget they have. We've never really gotten behind the concept, and the net result is that public broadcasting is public in name only. If we spent as much on it per capita as other countries do, it would have a budget of about \$500 million. Then it might become something.

Q: Everybody seems to agree that cable TV offers the best possibility for making a breakthrough in mass communications. The FCC freeze on its development is loosening up now, and nobody seems sure what will happen.

A: What cable TV becomes depends on what the citizens in local communities force it to become. It can be just another way of bringing the same stale commercial programming into the home; but if people insist that cable systems come in with 40 channels rather than the 5 to 12 being put in some rural communities, it can be much more. With this channel space you could put on a tremendous variety of programs and the system could be designed to reach the social and economic groups that are left out of mass communications now. In addition to making the space available, there must be a provision requiring the cable operator to put on the programming of anyone who asks for it. Everything turns on the access concept. If the city councils and other local groups who'll be giving the franchises make up their minds to permit anybody to come in and use the airwaves—for pay if he's able and for free if he's not—then pluralism will have a chance. But the same broadcasting interests that got the FCC to freeze cable's development in the first place know what the potential is too. That's why they're buying up franchises right and left. I've said before that the real issue in cable TV is not where all the wires will be put but rather who gets to hold the switch.

Q: There are broadcasting reform groups beginning to spring up now for the first time. Do you think they can have an impact on the people who control television?

A: That's hard to know. The movement to reform the mass media is like the ecology and consumer protest movements, although not quite so developed yet. People are just now coming to understand how central the media are. Whether your ultimate concern is the war in Vietnam, Women's Liberation, the quality of the air and water, or whatever, you've got to start by straightening out the media. People are starting to realize that they, not the broadcasting industry, own the airwaves and that channels of information must be made available to all viewpoints, not just a select few. The protest actions so far have involved things like license renewal challenges, which have led to negotiations between broadcasters and citizens' groups over issues like children's programming and minority hiring. The group called Action for Children's Television, in Boston, has proposed that we ban commercials from children's shows. There is an increasing volume of fairness doctrine complaints. The doctrine of access has been getting attention too. In the *Businessmen Against the War* case, a U.S. Court of Appeals reversed the FCC and said that a commercial station could not have a flat ban on the sale of commercial time to groups with ideological messages. I think this movement will grow. People are getting fed up. The broadcasting industry should realize this. Even at this late date, it still has an opportunity to sit down and try to get a sense of what is really going on in this country. If broadcasters did this, which they probably won't, they could come up with reforms that would allow them to continue as a profit-making industry selling commercial time. What the industry cannot do is what it seems most committed to—ignoring the protests against its policies and the demands for change. Whether the broadcasting industry realizes this before it brings about its own downfall is one of the fascinating stories we can watch unfold in years to come.