

Winston Barclay, "Transcriptions: TV's Promise Perverted,"  
The Daily Iowan, Feb. 16, 1976, p. 4.

Nicholas Johnson was a joke on the system. He was a momentary awkward pause in the mindless shuffle of the federal bureaucracy. He came onto the Washington scene looking so much like another in the horde of bright-eyed, energetic enthusiastic young men destined to become mulched up in the government's version of "The Divine Comedy." And then something went wrong.

First, perhaps because he was a little brighter and a little more energetic than the norm, he found himself chairperson of the Federal Communications Commission. Second, by one those twists of human nature which bureaucracies, by their very nature, are unable predict or assimilate, he underwent a radical awakening analogous to what the Buddhists call "the great revulsion."

From his vantage point at the top of the government's media watchdog agency he looked out, and all about him he saw greed, and mediocrity, and hypocrisy, and deviousness, and decay. And he resolved that something must be done about it.

Although he was chairperson of a federal commission, which in this case was commissioned to regulate the communications media in the public interest, he knew that there was no hope of pressing reform through the mechanisms of the commission. It's not that the system was resilient enough to insulate itself against the blunder that established a militant in a highly visible post, but rather, that he still had only one vote on the commission. And the majority of the commissioners were sluggards, conservatives who had no intention of altering the commission's ineffectual posture to serve the interests of the media-consuming masses.

Instead, he exploited the respectability of his official position and his irreversible appointment to speak directly to the people, to educate them about the nature and methods of the commercial media. What he advocated, and what his bureaucratic colleagues found so shockingly radical, was quality programming and honest advertising.

What he said then, as chairperson of the FCC, and says now when ever he can get a chance, is valuable and bears repeating. Not because it is

ingenious or revolutionary, but because it is a simple, common-sense analysis which issues so rarely from the bureaucracy.

His initial observation is that television has the greatest potential of any communications medium. It is not only inexpensive and versatile, but pervasive as well. The American home without a TV set is an anomaly.

The great crime of commercial television, Johnson asserts, is that, while possessing this great potential, it has sought to entertain rather than enlighten, to pacify rather than educate. He contends that it is the duty of the broadcast industry not to play to the lowest common denominator, but to raise the common denominator.

Needless to say, most commercial television is insipid, decerebrating pabulum which demands little of the viewer except that he be situated in front of the set when the commercials drop their nets. If programs were inspiring and challenging, the viewer would soon be off doing something meaningful and-or productive, instead of watching vaudevillian scrub brushes or slices of life in which people painfully broach the subject of constipation with their friends.

It is on commercials that Johnson makes his most vehement attacks. He points out that it is often not the product itself that is advertised, but rather an allegiance, an emotion, or a value in which the product is embedded as if it were inherent. Whenever you come up with something good, he says, Madison Avenue will find a way to sell it back to you.

ITT, for instance, is anxious to sell you "natural" Roman Meal bread. "Organic," "honest," and "real" are packaged as everything from food to shampoo. That advertisers are capable of selling "natural" artificial hair color illustrates the extent to which the public has grown blind to this psychological manipulation.

The biggest seller these days is, of course, the nation's birthday, which has reached its depth in the marketing of bicentennial caskets.

But Johnson traces this psychological manipulation to a more basic level. He asserts that each commercial advertises not a single product, but an entire way of life based on habitual and ever-expanding consumption. The

worth and identity of individuals is depicted as contingent not on the quality of their character, but on the kind and amount of products they consume. The success of human relationships is shown to be not the result of understanding and openness, but on choosing the proper toothpaste. It is a world view which undercuts self sufficiency and conservation with exploitative materialism.

It is this clear thinking which insured Johnson's exit from the bureaucracy, and we may take a lesson from that. The bureaucratic system militates against common sense, for common sense would prove a self-incriminating process for bureaucrats, whose prime concern is self-perpetuation rather than positive action. The bureaucracy cannot allow common sense, just as commercial television cannot produce educated and aware viewers. For an educated viewing public would be immune from the manipulation which lies at the heart of the commercial medium.

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