



Newton's Great Insight

Hal Berghel, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Newtonian indebtedness usually goes to Isaac. However, there's another Newton to whom we owe a great deal: Newton Minow—a pioneer in the field of media crap detection.

In his first speech as US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairman, delivered to the National Associate of Broadcasters on 9 May 1961,¹ Newton N. Minow observed that “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.”

Minow continued: “Why is so much of television so bad? I’ve 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 the reasons. Unquestionably, these are tough problems not susceptible to easy

answers. But I am not convinced that you have tried hard enough to solve them.”

He followed with the sardonic observation that “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.” This gets at the heart of the matter. Minow cautioned that the forces at play regulating commercial TV weren’t serving the public’s long-term best interests. His drawing attention to the uncritical acceptance of mainstream media content is as justified today as it was in 1961, only in the digital media realm it applies equally well to sundry lies, fake news, alt-facts, and post-truths. Minow only scratched the surface with his criticisms of TV. It has gotten much worse than he imagined at the time.

THE FOURTH R

To expand on Minow’s observation, if neoliberals and the power elite have their way, children will have a steady diet of mind-numbing media distractions so that they’re not prepared to think critically about the important issues of our time. The distractions that undercut any reasonable expectation of worthy public debate of important issues



are traceable back to inferior and largely irrelevant treatments of social issues in primary and secondary education. From this perspective, children continue to be thoroughly immersed in status-preserving propaganda.²

Education has covered the three Rs pretty well to the exclusion of an equally important fourth R—reality checking. Minow was definitely on to something, but he didn't recognize that the forces that produced "the vast wasteland" on TV would yearn for a far vaster cesspool of disinformation, misinformation, falsely labeled content, trolling, and so on. Unbeknownst to Minow, while he was drafting his speech, computer scientists and engineers were concurrently developing packet-switched networks that would conveniently and economically interconnect the entire world. The resulting Internet would make the panderers of Minow's vast wasteland puce with envy. As in Minow's time, the FCC would be called upon to make critical decisions about whether and how this new communications infrastructure should be regulated. And then, just as now, the FCC would be pressured by commercial and political interests to ensure that any such regulation would be minimal and based on narrow parochial interpretations of the public interest. The TV wasteland to which Minow objected was largely passive, mind-numbing, unenlightening media tripe. The Internet cesspool has this as well, but the tripe has become weaponized and interactive.

Digital media critics should consider giving Newton Minow as much credit for forecasting the abuse of media in the digital revolution as Isaac Newton has received for nurturing the scientific revolution. Whereas Isaac gave us a method for finding approximations to roots, Minow challenged us to remain vigilant in our scrutiny of broadcast media and commercial

communication to ensure that it serves the public interest and to refine the art of crap detection.

TRUTHY OR CONSEQUENCES

Minow was criticized at the time for proposing government censorship of television when the record showed clearly that he was doing nothing of the sort. He was challenging broadcasters to engage in self-examination as to whether their practices conformed to the spirit of the public interest requirements of the Communications Act of 1934. Then as now the FCC routinely renewed broadcast licenses, so there was no threat of government censorship. Minow said as much in his speech.

responsibilities on broadcasters to attempt to provide alternate points of view when covering controversial issues, from FCC policy. This was done specifically to prevent any requirement on the part of broadcasters to (a) cover controversies not of their choosing, and (b) to provide contrasting viewpoints with which they disagreed. Reagan's neoliberal idea was that commercial interests and the power elite were in the best position to determine what was fair and what could be covered by the media, over which they maintained strong influence with a minimum if not direct control.

This position is very much with us today and for many of the same

Education has covered the three Rs pretty well to the exclusion of an equally important fourth R—reality checking.

In Western democracies, the threat of government censorship is usually invoked as a strawman by partisan interests who seek to de-legitimize opposing positions. This was true in Minow's time by those who sought to remove consideration of public interest from regulatory content controls in favor of business or commercial interests. In this context, censorship is a vacuous term. With rare exceptions relating to "national security," there never has been a problem with government censorship. In democracies, censorship isn't promulgated by governments but by special interests—usually businesses, religions, and dogmatists.

The Reagan administration used this strawman argument successfully when in 1987 it removed the fairness doctrine, which imposed affirmative

reasons. Then as now, a Republican congressional majority and FCC chair sought to minimize the effect of the regulatory apparatus. In 1987, the issue was the fairness doctrine; today, it's net neutrality.^{3,4} Current FCC Chairman Ajit Pai⁵ and Fox News cohorts Megyn Kelly⁶ (now at NBC) and Peter Johnson Jr.⁷ all used the "government censorship" strawman to de-legitimize Indiana University's Truthy project, which uses "complex computer models to analyze the sharing of information on social media to determine how popular sentiment, user influence, attention, social network structure, and other factors affect the manner in which information is disseminated" (<http://truthy.indiana.edu>). Pai's assessment of the project in a *Washington Post* op-ed was "a government-funded initiative [that] is going to 'assist in the

preservation of open debate' by monitoring social media for 'subversive propaganda' and combating what it considers to be 'the diffusion of false and misleading ideas'? The concept seems to have come straight out of a George Orwell novel.³ As I've previously pointed out,³ Pai comes across in his op-ed as a paradigmatically Orwellian character in his use of double-speak as he deliberately distorts the project's research agenda.

The strawman is most pronounced when Pai states that "Truthy's entire premise is false. In the United States, the government has no business entering the marketplace of ideas to estab-

affiliates which reject programming offered to their areas." It is the same Mr. Minow who threatens to revoke the license of any station that does not comply with his views on programming—and who claims that that is not censorship. ... "Censorship" is a term pertaining only to governmental action. No private action is censorship. No private individual or agency can silence a man or suppress a publication; only the government can do so. The freedom of speech of private individuals includes the right ... not to finance one's own antagonists.

lexical confusion framed by ideological blinders.

While one may criticize Rand as pedantic or quodlibetic on this issue, she was certainly not guilty of ambiguity. Unfortunately, Pai and his allies lack this penchant for clarity and have resorted to a shotgun rhetorical approach to criticism of Truthy. Reading the critiques of Pai, Kelly, and Johnson leaves one perplexed as to the object of their wrath. The claim that government overreach was involved was clearly misguided. Do they have something against social science research as such and in general? Do they have an axe to grind with Indiana? Are they against literacy? Or is this just the attempt of modern Falangists to satisfy their corporate patrons. Their entire argument barrage was nothing more than smoke and mirrors that seems to me to be a preemptive attack on those who would dare accuse the political elite of participating in a fake news epidemic. Such is the stuff of disinformation campaigns—what they lack in imagination and intelligence, they make up for in causticity and boorishness.¹¹

What disinformation campaigns lack in imagination and intelligence, they make up for in causticity and boorishness.

lish an arbiter of what is false, misleading or a political smear. Nor should the government be involved in any effort to squint for and squelch what is deemed to be subversive propaganda." The government did no such thing—this peer-reviewed project was funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The only connection between the NSF and the government is the tax support—it's no more an instrument of government policy than NPR or PBS. The similarity between the strawman attack on the Truthy project and the attack on Minow's speech is noteworthy—both came from the same right-wing authoritarian playbook.⁸ (Here, right-wing authoritarian designates a psychological and not necessarily a political disposition.)

Political immoderate Ayn Rand, a contemporary of Minow, was more specific in her attack of him:⁹

And then there is [FCC Chairman] Newton N. Minow who declares: "There is censorship by ratings, by advertisers, by networks, by

Rand is to be commended for the clarity of her specious argument—no doubletalk here. She was obviously taking a very parochial view of censorship derived from the literal text of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." However, Minow was using the customary, lexical meaning of the term that equates censorship with any suppression of speech or communication irrespective of agent or motive. On this—the received account—censorship isn't restricted to governments: religious organizations, corporations, and museums can censor, and authors and creative artists may self-censor. Minow's suggestion that networks, advertisers, and affiliates might legitimately be accused of censorship not only accords with the received definition, it was a truism. He was articulating the customary account of private systems of controls over media.¹⁰ By refusing to admit of any censorship that isn't the product of government action, Rand engaged in a *reductio ad absurdum* that betrayed a

THE GOLDEN ERROR OF TELEVISION

Minow's observations weren't unique—others had similar criticisms of the subcerebral quality of commercial TV.¹² Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman created a short video on this topic entitled "Television Delivers People" in 1973 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvZYwaQIJsg). Full-length documentaries have also been made, such as *Orwell Rolls in His Grave* (<http://orwellrollsinhisgrave.com>). George Orwell and Aldous Huxley wrote about the corruption of the media in their classic dystopian novels, as did media critic Neil Postman.¹³ Propagandists/public relations expert Edward Bernays¹⁴ built a career on manipulating the media. C. Wright Mills¹⁵ and Ferdinand Lundberg¹⁶ wrote extensively about the abuse of media by the controlling elite in the mid-twentieth century. The problem wasn't that scholars

and educated people hadn't noticed the corrupting influences of mass media, but that it wasn't in the interest of the mass media to disclose this fact to the public. Hence little attention was given to it and the public remained largely in the dark. Minow's single most important contribution was that he was the most influential public official to confirm the problem of the dumbing down of media for commercial interests. And for this audacity he was widely castigated from both inside and outside the communications industry.

It's appropriate that the *S.S. Minnow*, the ship wrecked in the sitcom *Gilligan's Island*, was named for Minow. He takes considerable pride in being sarcastically recognized by the show's creator and producer, Sherwood Schwartz, in this way—for Minow it remains a badge of honor. This isn't to deny that *Gilligan's Island* had comedic value. It served its escapist purpose: it distracted people from the affairs of the day while the commercial breaks encouraged the consumerism that drove the business community that paid for it—just as Edward Bernays described in his book, and just the sort of thing predicted by Orwell and Huxley. While many scholars realized this, it was Minow who used his FCC chairmanship bully pulpit to tell the American public. But social changes come gradually. Minow's vast wasteland speech was a deflection point that at least got the issue in the public record. And Schwartz got his disapproval on the record. In their own way, both advanced the public narrative.

Minow isn't given enough credit for casting doubt on the public value of media interests. And his insights aren't lost on the Internet, where he continues to advance the case for independent news, freedom of thought, the expansion of educational opportunities through telecommunications, and free airtime for political speech and campaigns¹⁷—exactly those principles under attack during the Reagan, Bush I and II, and Trump administrations.

Had we had more Newton Minows, perhaps we could have avoided many of the current problems with hate speech, fake news, alt-facts, online trolling, Russian campaign interference, and so forth.

Today our mantra should be how to avoid being taken in by digital media and the Web. This is a complex issue commanding considerable scholarly attention.^{18,19} Unfortunately, empirical studies tend not to be reassuring.²⁰ Sam Wineburg and his colleagues at Stanford University have documented that most primary and secondary students are untrained to identify primary web sources, webpage patrons,

But let's not be deluded by unjustified optimism. As Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim puts it, if we really want the Internet to liberate society, we first need to liberate the Internet.²¹ Rather than democratize politics, social media amplifies existing polarizations. To paraphrase Ghonim, there are five challenges to any political activism that hopes to be successful:

- ▶ it must effectively deal with rumors—fake news, alt-facts, lies, disinformation, and so on;
- ▶ activists need to penetrate filter bubbles lest they just enlarge the echo chamber;

Today our mantra should be how to avoid being taken in by digital media and the Web.

sponsored content from objective information, examples of astroturfing (sites that purport to represent grassroots efforts but are actually paid partisan propaganda), and so forth. The ultimate problem is that students haven't been trained in digital critical thinking and digital media literacy—what Wineburg calls being “digitally savvy.” One of his observations is that the best way to learn about the integrity of a website is to leave it—what he refers to as “lateral reading” of web content. And this is surely good advice. In fact, California has legislation pending to mandate such education in schools. However, proponents of digital savviness will face the same uphill fight as Minow, for the digital infrastructure is ultimately controlled by the same business and class-based interests who were against any attempt to regulate the airwaves and are represented by Pai and his FCC allies. Any effort to change educational systems to ensure digital media literacy will run afoul of all authoritarian interests—religious, political, commercial, or dogmatic.

- ▶ activists must overcome the problem of tribalism inherent to demand-side social media;
- ▶ social media needs to make communication more deliberative and measured instead of a venomous shouting match; and
- ▶ social media must de-emphasize broadcasting, posts, and shallow comments in favor of engagement, discussions, and deep conversations.

This is pretty much the same position that Minow articulated nearly 60 years ago. ■

REFERENCES

1. N.N. Minow, “Television and the Public Interest,” audio transcript of speech delivered 9 May 1961 to the Nat'l Assoc. of Broadcasters, Washington, DC; www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm.
2. J.W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, rev. ed., Touchstone, 2007.

3. H. Berghel, "Net Neutrality Reloaded," *Computer*, vol. 50, no. 10, 2017, pp. 68–72.
4. H. Berghel, "Net Neutrality vs. Net Neutering," *Computer*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2016, pp. 73–77.
5. A. Pai, "The Government Wants to Study 'Social Pollution' on Twitter," *The Washington Post*, 17 Oct. 2014; www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/truthy-project-is-unworthy-of-tax-dollars/2014/10/17/a3274faa-531b-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773_story.html.
6. "Feds Creating Online Tracker to Search for 'Hate Speech' & 'Misinformation,'" *Fox News Insider*, 26 Aug. 2014; insider.foxnews.com/2014/08/26/feds-creating-online-tracker-search-e2%80%98hate-speech-e2%80%99-e2%80%98misinformation-e2%80%99.
7. "'1984' in 2014? Fed Gov't Funds 'Truthy' Database to Monitor Hate Speech, Suspicious Memes," *Fox News Insider*, 28 Aug. 2014; insider.foxnews.com/2014/08/28/federal-govt-funds-truthy-database-monitor-hate-speech-suspicious-memes.
8. R. Altemeyer, *The Authoritarian Specter*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1996.
9. A. Rand, "Man's Rights," 1963; <https://ari.aynrand.org/issues/government-and-business/individual-rights/Mans-Rights#filter-bar>.
10. E.S. Herman and R.W. McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism*, Cassell, 1997.
11. H. Berghel, "Disinformatics: The Discipline behind Grand Deceptions," *Computer*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2018, pp. 89–93.
12. E.S. Herman and N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, reprint ed., Pantheon, 2002.
13. N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Business*, Penguin, 2005.
14. E. Bernays, *Propaganda*, reprint ed., lg Publishing, 2004.
15. C.W. Mills, *The Power Elite*, reprint ed., Oxford Univ. Press, 2000.
16. F. Lundberg, *America's 60 Families*, reprint ed., Lundberg Press, 2007.
17. N.N. Minow, "A Vaster Wasteland," *The Atlantic*, Apr. 2011; www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/04/a-vaster-wasteland/308418.
18. D. Spiegelhalter, "You Can Handle the Truth," BBC World Service Documentary, 10 June 2018; www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p069jz0j.
19. H. Rosling, O. Rosling, and A.R. Ronnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World—and Why Things Are Better than You Think*, Flatiron Books, 2018.
20. S. Wineburg et al., *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning*, Stanford History Education Group, Stanford Univ., 2016; <http://purl.stanford.edu/fv751yt5934>.
21. W. Ghonim, "Let's Design Social Media That Drives Real Change," TED talk, 4 Feb. 2016; www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiwJ0hN1Fw.

HAL BERGHEL is an IEEE and ACM Fellow and a professor of computer science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Contact him at hlb@computer.org.

Call for Articles

IEEE Pervasive Computing seeks accessible, useful papers on the latest peer-reviewed developments in pervasive, mobile, and ubiquitous computing. Topics include hardware technology, software infrastructure, real-world sensing and interaction, human-computer interaction, and systems considerations, including deployment, scalability, security, and privacy.

Author guidelines:

www.computer.org/mc/pervasive/author.htm

Further details:

pervasive@computer.org
www.computer.org/pervasive

IEEE
pervasive
COMPUTING
MOBILE AND UBIQUITOUS SYSTEMS