

**Transcript of KMYR series on The Public Affair:
“The Nicholas Johnson Tapes”**

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Albuquerque Museum, gift of Zane Blaney

This radio program is a five-part series from a Nicholas Johnson speech before a Santa Fe media conference. The speech’s subject was the F.C.C. and the Fairness Doctrine.

Keywords and topics: media, television, broadcasting, advertising, F.C.C., Federal Communications Commission, monopolies, industry, lobbying, legislation, statistics, business, marketplace, society, National Citizens Communications Lobby, Nicholas Johnson, National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, National Organization of Women, media reform

WOMAN’S VOICE: You are watching Scramblevision, a free service of charge-a-card. This is the time to punch up the chan- [static]

NICHOLAS JOHNSON: Two-thirds of all American industries are shared monopolies. So, you know, we don’t really have a competitive economic system next time you encounter a businessman who suggests that we do. [static]

MAN’S VOICE: Anointed with oil on troubled waters, oh heaven –

JOHNSON: The eight largest oil companies, for example, control sixty-four percent of all the oil, sixty-percent of the natural gas.

MAN’S VOICE: Angels: 3, Devil –

[static]

JOHNSON: Twenty-nine corporations control twenty-one percent of all the crop land in the United States.

[static]

Tonight, right now, there are one hundred million Americans who are sitting there with their eyes plugged into that little phosphorescent screen soaking up all that radiation.

BLANEY: “The Nicholas Johnson Tapes”, on “The Public Affair”.

MAN’S VOICE: And please, don’t touch that dial.

[01:07]

[static]

BLANEY: At a recent conference in Santa Fe, former commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission [F.C.C.], Nicholas Johnson, talked about the state of the art and the world. Johnson is not a politician, nor a broadcaster. He's a concerned American and doesn't mince words when it comes down to the tube and the light at the end of the transmitter. He spoke for almost an hour and a half and over the next five days, we'll try to present thirty of the best minutes.

[static]

JOHNSON: That's what I'm going to share with you is kind of my perspective as a – as a government official who's been concerned about this whole media scene and what it means and what it's doing to us. And observations about what commercial television is doing to us and the ties of all this to big business. The relationship between the power in the country and media power. Um, alright. First, the bad news. [laughs] Um, let me just say something about where I perceive the country as being right now in terms of allocation of power. And, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this but I kind of want to set the stage so you do have a sense of the depth of the hostility of the environment in which it is you are trying to function.

[laughter]

Um, lest that not be immediately apparent to you already.

[laughter]

We have little statistics like this: that two-tenths of one percent of the American people, uh, own thirty percent or more of all of the stock. Eighty-five percent of the American people own no stock at all, which raises the interesting question of why it is we always put that on the evening news. Who is that on there for? Um, we hear a lot about the free private enterprise capitalist competitive system, but it's very hard to find in America. Uh, economists say that any industry that is dominated by four firms or fewer, uh, that is to say where they have more than fifty percent of the gross revenues or assets or whatever. That's not a competitive industry. It's what they call a shared monopoly or an oligopoly. And in such an industry you do not have competition, you have imitation. And you do not have price competition, you have price setting. Either in an all-out cartel as you have in oil and sugar and so forth -- just illegal on its face -- or in kind of a price copying behavior, and that, of course, is why you have inflation. I mean, on the one hand you do not have marketplace competition and on the other hand you do not have regulation by government of prices, you will of course have inflation. I mean, how could you not? When you've absolutely nothing to hold the price down?

Alright, measuring this standard of shared monopoly, the networks are of course an example in the broadcasting industry. Uh, they are affiliated with hundreds of stations throughout the United States, but they own outright fifteen stations out of the eight-thousand-five-hundred radio and television stations in the United States. Fifteen television stations are owned by the

networks. Those fifteen gross one-half of all the industry revenue. That's what we're talking about in terms of shared monopoly in industries. Two-thirds of all American industries are shared monopolies, so we don't really have a competitive economic system next time you encounter a businessman who suggests that we do.

Um, furthermore, the growth of the trans-national conglomerate, the company that's doing business all around the world, has rapidly accelerated way beyond even the economists reporting of it or governments taking it into account. They move around the labor base or raw materials or governments or what-not as they need to. One of the consequences of this is that of the one hundred largest money powers in the world, which one would normally think of as the gross national product of a country, right? Thirty-six of the one hundred largest are not countries, they are corporations and it is often the case that a company will be larger than the country in which it is doing business. They operate like countries. They have their own air forces, they have their own intelligence networks, their own computer systems and so forth. The eight largest oil companies, for example, control sixty-four percent of all the oil, sixty percent of the natural gas. Twenty-nine corporations control twenty-one percent of all the crop land in the United States, an industry which we thought of as being dominated by small farmers. Agri-business corporations now control eighty-five percent of the citrus business, one hundred percent of the sugar business, ninety-seven percent of the chicken raising broilers business, and so forth.

Alright, now inevitably, this gets translated over into political power. It turns out that ninety-percent of the political funds are contributed by one percent of the people. And there tends to be some overlap between that one percent and the one percent that controls all the wealth. And that's no coincidence. And this tie between corporations and business is something we'll – I mean, between government and corporations is something we'll explore. Um, that reminded me of an item that I saw in the paper the other day that banks – to avert robberies, have now a new service available to them. A neon sign which flashes on and off and says "Robbery In Progress".

[laughter]

While the robbery is going on, so I guess that people know not to go in at that particular time, you know, and ask for their money. And it seemed to me that there was some kind of poetic beauty about that. That perhaps we could arrange to have the sign flash all the time [laughs] that, uh--

[applause]

[static]

BLANEY: "The Nicholas Johnson Tapes" were recorded by Rising Sun at the New Mexico Media Conference at Santa Fe. I'm Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[music]

[07:43]

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[music]

BLANEY: Former F.C.C. Commissioner, Nicholas Johnson, continues his discussion of industry and government and media industry and government. The shared monopoly.

[static]

JOHNSON: If you read the whole paper and kind of juxtapose the stories, you get a whole different picture. You all are into that, you do these things visually. But, like, I'll read the paper and on the front page it will say, "President Ford says we must send three hundred million dollars to Southeast Asia" and then back on the business pages, a little tiny item that says "Mobiloil discovers oil off the coast of Vietnam". And I always put those together, you see? Because it seems to me a truer view of the news.

Um, the amounts of money involved are – are enormous in terms of political contributions but not much in terms of what they get back. Um, Northrup Aviation was, uh, competing for a 13.2 billion dollar defense contract. A thirteen billion dollar defense contract for a prototype of something, I mean God knows what the thing's gonna cost, you know, once they develop the prototype. A few days later, it was reported that they had a 1.2 million dollar slush fund. Well, with 1.2 million dollars a year, you can make a payment to every congressman, every senator, the presidential candidates in both parties, every time they run for office in at least four and five figure amounts. I mean, a million dollars goes a long way in political contributions and yet, that works out to be 1/100th of one percent of what one company is getting on one contract.

In general, the return to the corporation is two-thousand to one, for the investor. Because we have an F.C.C. who paid billions of dollars more for your telephone service, because we have a federal power commission, you have a very powerful argument in government for not having any regulation at all on natural gas prices and so forth. The total subsidies are now running about ninety-five billion dollars a year from the federal government. The principle purpose of government being the transferring of money from the poor and the middle-class to the rich and once it is perceived in that light, a great deal of what goes on in Washington becomes very much clearer than it otherwise would be.

Now, what comes about as a part of this corporate power? Economic power, the political power it represents, the ties between government and business? Well, let's start with the matter of death. I mean, if nothing else gets to you, you know, in terms of quality of life, uh, there are fourteen thousand preventable on-the-job deaths every year from industrial accidents. Uh, thirty-thousand people die every year from unsafe household products. Sixty-thousand people die every year from unnecessarily unsafe automobiles, and so forth. Alright.

Beyond that, the litany of harmful products, most or many of which would be known to you is almost endless. The Red 2 [Red Dye No. 2] story is one of the best, I suppose. This is a cold tar dye, it's carcinogenic, uh, causes birth defects, I mean causes fetal death, uh, in pregnant women. Um, it's used in some thirty-five billion dollars worth of products a year. It's banned in most countries in the world. Um, the Soviet Union permits levels one percent of those that we permit in this country. There's enough in a couple bottles of cherry soda to can cause fetal death in a hundred-pound pregnant woman. It's found in virtually anything that's red that you buy: lipstick, a pill, a jello, ice cream, you know? It's probably got Red 2 in it. The F.D.A. won't do anything about it, although its own staff has been urging it to for fifteen years. But if, by chance, they are banned here, they then take the residue and they sell it abroad in some country where, uh, they have better control of the government. There is, of course, if anything, an even more serious impact on the planet Earth as a life-system. Uh, we're a very small part of that, as you know. Um, the ozone thing has been talked about a lot. What hasn't been mentioned is that the guy that developed the valve on the spray can was Abplanalp [Robert H. Abplanalp]? Do you remember him? Yeah.

Um, one million tons a year now. Abplanalp, for those of you who don't remember that difficult name, uh, was one of Richard Nixon's good friends who made it possible for him to say, "We can get the million. That would be easy, but would it be right?"

[laughter]

That was Abplanalp. And where that million came from were those little valves on those aerosol cans, which had not been banned by anybody even though they are destroying the ozone layer and increasing the skin cancer ten percent around the world. We've not yet sorted out in our minds the difference between growth and consumption. The wonderful American economic machine began by satisfying needs. We did that so well, that it started in satisfying appetites. Now, that's a rough, quick sketch of the power system in which the mass media are functioning. And let's try to tie it into it a bit and see what happens.

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[music]

[13:47]

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[music]

BLANEY: Nicholas Johnson is an advocate of public access to the media. He works actively with citizen's groups attempting to make the electronic media and government more responsive to citizen's needs. His understanding of the problems involved is complete.

[static]

JOHNSON: There is a song you'll remember, but maybe not in this context. In this moment I will remind you of Jim Buckley's "The king and the queen in their castle of billboards / sleepwalk down the hallways dragging behind / all their possessions and transient treasures / as they go to worship the electronic shrine / on which is playing the late late commercial / in that hollowest house of the opulent blind." [Jim Buckley's lyrics to his song "Goodbye and Hello"]

Uh, puts it rather nicely, I think. Uh, the sets are running six-and-a-half hours a day now across the United States. The average five-year-old, by the time, uh, entering college, will have received more hours of instruction from television than the number of hours he or she will later spend in a college classroom earning a B.A. [Bachelor of Arts] degree. Uh, counting in 24 hour days, 365 day years, the average sixty-five-year-old will have spent nine full years of life watching television.

You know, how would you like that epitaph? You know, 'He watched TV'.

[laughter]

But, you know, we've got to think in comparative terms. Um, in order to have the impact that I used to have with a ten, fifteen minute appearance on The Dick Cavett Show, we'd need to have a group like this in at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, another one at nine, another one at ten, another one at eleven. And then take an hour break, and bring another group in at one, two, three, and four. Keep running new folks through this auditorium all day, every hour on the hour, five days a week, fifty weeks a year, for five hundred years.

[laughter]

I mean, tonight, right now, there are one hundred million Americans who are sitting there with their eyes plugged into that little phosphorescent screen, soaking up all that radiation. That's where they are. That's why I'm so proud that you came out here tonight.

[laughter]

It's affected the process of socialization. The average American father spends with a child in undivided attention with that child, an average of seven minutes a week. Which, whatever one may say for it, is somewhat less than it was fifty years ago. Let's stay worried about the advertising side of the business because, uh, the television business is a business as you know. A business of selling. But we sometimes don't think of what it is selling. It's selling the viewer, not a product – it's selling the viewer as a product. The viewer is the product. The consumer is the advertiser. And the salesman is the broadcaster. That's the way the money works in the marketplace and that's what's going on. The advertiser comes to the broadcaster and says, "I

want to buy so many folks.” And maybe they get into precise definitions of demographics and how old they’re to be and stuff like that. And the broadcaster says, “Well, I got a sale on them this week. So many per thousand.” Just like cattle. And the advertiser says, “I’ll take them.” And he does.

[laughter]

Um, but that’s what’s going on. You’re being – you’re being sold to the advertiser, but obviously none of the money gets back to you any more than any of money gets back to the cattle. It all goes to broadcasters. Advertising revenue of the broadcasters is now five billion dollars a year, it doubles every, you know, five years or so. Commercials sell for over two-hundred-thousand dollars per minute on something like the Superbowl and *Godfather*. And the power of this to affect behavior has been documented many times over. And this is one of the great ironies. The broadcasters will go out in the early part of the week and sell advertisers on giving them five billion dollars a year on the grounds they’ve got more power over all human behavior than any other instrument available. And then come to Washington in the middle of the week and argue that we shouldn’t be concerned about the impact of the programming because after all, it’s just entertainment. It doesn’t have any impact. I just say they can’t make both of those arguments and expect to sustain it. Many products are created inside advertising agencies rather than inside factories. I talked to the guy that, uh, invented freeze-dried coffee. And he worked for an ad agency and their problem was that you’ve got a coffee market and an instant market and the reason you keep coming out with new products all the time – hairsprays or whatever – is you’re just carving up that old market that’s there. And somebody’s coming and getting part of your share and you come out with a new product that’s just as bad as the old product but it’s got a new name, an image, and whatnot and you capture back part of that market until they become disillusioned in you, again. And so what they were trying to do was come up with something new. And so he thought, what can we do because everything either looks like instant or looks like coffee and what can we have that will be different? And he says, “Well, maybe we have little pieces of coffee.” And everybody said, “That’s preposterous, how can you have little pieces of coffee?” And he said, “Well, what if you have frozen coffee, all broken up into pieces, you have little bits of coffee?” So, he called up the coffee factory and he said, “I want you to -- that’s right, freeze it. Uh huh. Yeah. And then I want you to – that’s right, break it – that’s right, freeze-dried coffee. Can you do that?” And so they went away and sure enough they did. And they came back and they made this whole third market called freeze-dried coffee. Uh, but that didn’t come from consumers coming in and pounding on the door of Maxwell House and saying, you know, “Where is my freeze-dried coffee?”

[laughter]

And it didn’t come from some guy in a lab who said, you know, “Eureka! I’ve found the freeze-dried coffee.” That came from this guy on Madison Avenue that was trying to figure out a marketing strategy.

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[music]

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[music]

[20:32]

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[music]

BLANEY: Nicholas Johnson continues his discussion of the media power to alter attitudes and change the very fiber of our society.

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JOHNSON: National Organization of Women concerned about the way in which women are perceived in our society and the roles they play. It didn't start off being a media reform organization, it was the farthest thing from their mind. They're interested in the problems of women, but they very quickly discovered that if they were going to have any success, they were going to have to get involved in the way in which women are portrayed on TV.

You know, we spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year in this country on doing research on cancer and heart disease, two leading killers. And yet, virtually every one of the causes of those disease are wholly within our control. They have nothing to do with research in medical laboratories, never will. Nothing to do with discovering new drugs and treatments. They have to do with the way we live. The products we buy and consume. And note that all of these behavior patterns are created and stimulated and reinforced and encouraged by television. Which encourages us not to exercise, which encourages to eat a high fat, high sugar diet. And on and on with these statistics, the point is that there are strains in our society right now which all of us feel in one way or another. Whether or not you are a part of any of those statistics I've just enumerated, you nonetheless are living in a country in a society in which you feel those pressures and you respond to them in one way or another. And so the core of this that emerged in my own mind that led to the book, *Test Pattern for Living*, is what television is doing in terms of undermining our potential as human beings to reach more of the fulfillment of which we are capable. And that that may be its single greatest sin. All these other things, as serious as they are, that was the end. And as I looked at television again from that perspective, I began to see the way in which it is – It gains – corporations gain by forcing us into a mold. Forcing us to look outside of ourselves for our identity. To the products we consume. We identify with the character in the commercial, we want to be like that man or woman, who is,

according to the commercial, like that because of the – the gusto in the beer or the Pepsi or the, uh, mouthwash or the hairspray or the, uh, sex appeal toothpaste or whatever. Uh, we're identified with the car we drive, the clothes we wear, the house we have, with the things with which we surround ourselves. And on that notion is based the whole success of the corporate state. So you're talking about something very fundamental that relates back to those dry statistics I was reeling off to you at the beginning of the hour. Now when you look at commercials in this light, you begin to see that a commercial is not just a commercial for a product. It is a commercial for a way of life, a lifestyle, a philosophical idea known as materialism.

The impact on kids is probably one of the most vicious and difficult to justify, morally. Here's a quote from an advertiser explaining what he's doing: "It takes time, yes, but if you expect to be in business for any length of time think of what it can mean to your firm and profits if you can condition a million or ten million children who will grow up into adults trained to buy your product as soldiers are trained to advance when they hear the trigger words, Forward March!" And then you get the idea, see? I mean, it's not accident what's happening. It's done deliberately and they know full-well what they're doing. Now, with that in mind listen to this commercial.

"Once upon a time there was a girl who dreamed of a doll that had everything and then came Dawn. The doll that comes with these beautiful things." Not these beautiful feelings, not these beautiful friends, not these beautiful parents, but these beautiful things. "Like the car with Dawn at the wheel. Just look at Dawn go! There's a music box with Dawn on top and a fabulous Dawn fashion show, the only one in the world with a revolving stage like this. Dawn comes with it, watch her walk and model all by herself. And start collecting all these accessories. A handbag, elegant furniture with a phone, a beauty parlor set. You can display Dawn, her friends, her fabulous clothes, right in your own home. Make your dreams come true with Dawn, the doll that has so many beautiful things. Dawn's clothes are so beautiful, so stunning, so elegant that you'll want to collect more than one doll to show them off. And it's so much fun to put two Dawns here, three Dawns there, call it Midnight Magic, then change their clothes, set them up, and call it Sweet Dreams." And then they have the gall to add, "Use your imagination!"

[laughter]

"Dawn! Fun to play with, fun to collect". Well, you can't help but wonder, you know, how many people are now living in that dollhouse.

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[music]

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BLANEY: Nicholas Johnson is the guiding force behind the National Citizens Communication organization, Access Magazine, the consumer report of the media reform movement, and the National Citizens Communications Lobby, which is the common cause of broadcasting. Today, Johnson concludes his discussion of the media by explaining what can you do about all this.

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JOHNSON: Access is the concept. Access not only to the media, not only to the screen, but access to the decision-making process. And access requires awareness, a raising of consciousness. So that we end up including things like, uh, courses in grade school, junior high, high school, colleges, about media and advertising and what it does to us. It will make kids more aware and more able to deal with this environment that is, uh, [mumbled] they're swimming through. Training and use of equipment, and that does something for a person psychologically, too. To realize that TV is something you can do, it's not just something that's done to you. Um, as well as being necessary if we want to create any really good television. I mean, if you want to have, uh, a couple good tennis players in the United States, you'd better have twenty million people out playing tennis every weekend. And out of that twenty million, you'll find a couple who can play all right. And the same thing is true with making television. Um, if we want to really improve this industry, the stations and networks ought to be among the first to see that of course we need to have millions of people trained in how to use this equipment. But that's not the principal reason. No, the principal reason is what it does for us. What it does to make this a more diverse and rich nation and what it does for us as individuals to feel this capacity to express ourselves.

Uh, a third thing is public broadcasting. It's largely come to be simply an adjunct of commercial broadcasting. Most of the programs are brought to us by the same sponsors who sponsor the programs on the other networks, but it still stands as something of an alternative and something to be encouraged and something that I continue to lobby for and try to help. Uh, cable television, the access channels on cable television, uh, can be a very potent force in communities. Listener-supported stations other than public broadcasting stations, the Pacifica Network. Challenges to the employment practices of stations to provide better treatment for minority groups, women, can end up having an impact on a program as a form of access, a way of participating in the process. Journalism reviews are a way of keeping a constant check on the performance of the media which is supposed to be checking on everything else but obviously doesn't do the best of jobs of checking on itself. We need people who will monitor the output

of radio and television stations. We need license renewal challenges. We need for people to know that they own the airwaves, nobody has a right to broadcast. If they own that license for a three-year period and then it's over with. We need some kind of a loose association, and that's what the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting represents. We are involved in things like trying to have an influence in who gets selected as F.C.C. Commissioner. We created a lobby organization called National Citizens Communications Lobby to offset the frightening political power that the broadcasting lobby has. It is without question the single most powerful lobby in the history of any nation. Any other American industry can be taken on by a senator or congressman. The oil industry, the oil depletion allowance is now being attacked, as you know. Uh, the American Medical Association of healthcare programs. The whole United States Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Manufacturers are with the Consumer Protection Agency, but not the Broadcasters Association. There's not a single senator or congressman who will stand up to them and make that his or her issue and really go with it. Um, even the public interest groups stay away from it. The foundations stay away from it, the universities stay away from it, the media stays away from it, the congressmen stay away from it. There's nobody really to take them on and that's why we created this lobby and last year, in our first little skirmish and trial effort with it, were successful in defeating a broadcasting industry's effort to get a license renewal bill through that would have given them all virtually automatic renewal, five-year terms, no effort to challenge ownership patterns, and a requirement that appeals be taken all over the United States for our Washington-based law firms couldn't have handled them. That went through the House, incidentally to give you a sense of their power, by a vote of 189-14 which is typical of the way the votes go through.

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BLANEY: The National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting may be contacted at 1346 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D.C. 20036. "The Nicholas Johnson Tapes" were recorded by Rising Sun at the New Mexico Media Conference in Santa Fe, and edited by Zane Blaney on KMYR.

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[32:28]

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