

An Open Letter to Newton Minow

By Dennis Knight

Dear Mr. Minow: Back in 1961, after President Kennedy made you chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, you told executives in the television industry, "When television is good, nothing is better...but when television is bad, nothing is worse." You invited them to keep their eyes glued to their own stations for a full day and night until signoff. "I can assure you," you said, "that what you will observe will be a vast wasteland."

The television folks took a little dig back at you with a show featuring seven castaways who landed on *Gilligan's Island* in the wreckage of a bucket the producers gleefully christened the "S.S. Minnow." The series is still in its fifth decade of reruns out in the vastness of the wasteland.

As head of the FCC, you pointed the industry from perhaps five stations serving a metropolitan area to hundreds of channels today, but I doubt even you could have anticipated the colorful images in brilliant high definition now splashing across giant screens in our homes.

A phenomenon that has taken television is reality television. The best of it includes programs like *Antiques Road Show* and *This Old House* on public television. I like *American Pickers* on the History Channel about a couple of dudes finding treasure in other people's trash. Another show called *Pawn Stars* has low brow characters who irritate me to no end, but their customers and the fascinating things they bring in the door have me hooked.

For twenty-five years *Cops* has taken audiences along on real police rides, showing us from their viewpoint the world and the people they face. There are other television series about unique folks who live, function and survive in dangerous places. You may wonder just how a camera happens always to be in the right place to capture the action, but sometimes watching the tube requires a leap of faith. I remember making the same compromise to follow Marlin Perkins on *Wild Kingdom* back in sixty-three.

I happily avoid programs like "real" housewives degrading themselves in New Jersey or Beverly Hills, and I vow never to watch what must be the worst thing ever in the wasteland. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is about a precocious monster of a little girl in the world of child beauty contests, where toddlers and primary grade children, exploited by parents living vicariously through their daughters, parade in heavy makeup and adult-like clothing, sometimes with strategic padding, and coached to take provocative poses. That it's carried on The Learning Channel is sadly ironic.

So, Mr. Minow, I must report, with the number of choices in the half century having multiplied by some thirty times, nothing has changed. The best prove that, when television is good, nothing is better, but there is still plenty of bad, and the wasteland is vaster. It's a perfect landscape to introduce my idea for a reality series about my own scintillating life. I'm calling it *Denny Boo Boosed*.