

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Baseball TV rights future uncertain, if you ask Newt Minow*

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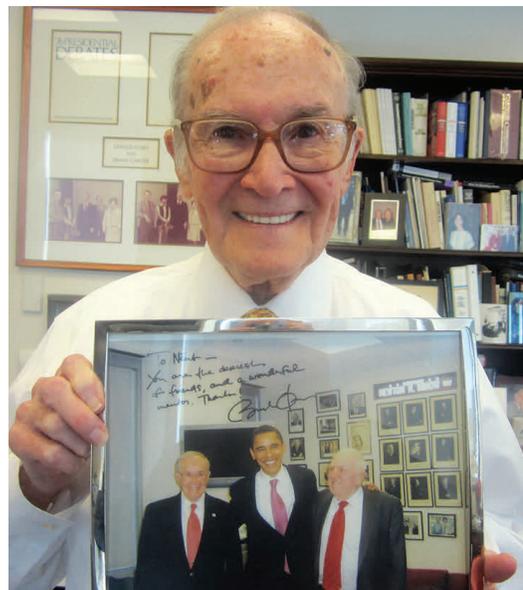
Spend an hour with Newton Minow, a living, breathing museum of history with all his faculties at 90, and inevitably you want any question connected with broadcasting answered.

The most prominent former Federal Communications Commission chairman in history and godfather of the presidential debate system took me on a time trip in his Sidley Austin law office in the Loop. Along the way, I asked how the sports-TV rights bubble could be maintained, given the wrenching changes in the media due to the internet and ubiquitous, hypnotic iPhones.

Why shouldn't Minow, commonly known to friends as "Newt," be given a crack at forecasting the future? Beyond his most famous proclamation of TV being a "vast wasteland" in 1961, Chicago's own renaissance man was an early backer of communications satellites and all-channel (UHF tuners) TV receivers. The latter decision to make all new TV's UHF-compatible by 1964 has had a definite impact on Chicago baseball history, given the White Sox's premature jump to a UHF station long before those old VHF-only TV's were retired.

"Lets' go back 60, 70 years," Minow said. "Every new technology – radio, TV, cable, satellites, the computer – changes the way people use it. We're in the midst of a technological revolution. We're maybe not even halfway through. We don't even know where this is going. We haven't really figured it out yet."

The baseball salary explosion was dependent on hyper-profitable TV networks showering billion-dollar contracts on Major League Baseball. Owners spent their windfall on inflated salaries almost from the moment they got their cut, sometimes in advance. Now cable cord-cutting is rampant among Millennials. They are content to watch video



**Newt Minow in his office displaying a 2006 photo of then-Sen. Barack Obama with him and Abner Mikva.**

on iPhones, illogically on the smallest screens ever commercially available. They are smaller than the first TVs sold en masse in the late 1940s.

Next generation Laura Castle, certified Millennial and cord-cutter, explained the appeal of the tiny screens: “instant gratification.” Even younger Millennials chimed in the other week when I spoke to Howie “Disco Schoss” Schlossberg’s sportswriting class at Columbia College. Portability and privacy – your own personal phone/screen – were among the responses.

Bottom line is the ad market gets fractured into so many more pieces through this Balkanization of media via the iPhone. No longer is the revenue concentrated in one legacy outfit, a la a major national network.

“I think it’s a very serious question,” said Minow. “When ESPN started, you thought are these people nuts? ESPN doing nothing but sports all day? ESPN turned out to make more money than ABC. So maybe now we’re getting to the point where something else will come along instead.”

Minow could not define what will be the newest, best and most profitable flavor of media. Whatever it is, the bottom line doesn’t seem to be there to sustain the baseball bubble. And that could put a crimp on the Cubs’ long-rumored plans for their own TV network by 2020.

### **Fat salaries endangered?**

“Probably salaries can’t” be sustained at their present levels, Cubs fan Minow said. “It seems professional sports are dependent on revenue from different media. Even if you sell out every ballgame, that’s not enough to pay the salaries.”

After his FCC days in the early 1960s, Minow became a bigwig in public broadcasting, at both the national level and locally at WTTW-TV. He even persuaded Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf to recently underwrite a Jackie Robinson program at WTTW. But I did not know he was a broadcasting Zelig, serving on the CBS board at the very moment it showered \$1 billion on baseball for the first time late in 1989, yanking the national TV rights away from their longtime home at NBC.

“Henry Kissinger also was on the board,” Minow said. “A number of us on the board were asking how do you justify spending a billion dollars on baseball? The meeting was devoted to a presentation by the CBS Sports staff. This is Henry’s first meeting. The presentation finished. He raises his hand.

Minow can mimic a German accent almost perfectly.

“The first words from him, everybody’s listening very carefully: ‘Vat about soccer?’” I never forgot that,” he recalled.

Baseball coverage has not benefited from the media changes. Suburban newspapers nationwide have totally pulled or cut down (via bans on regular travel, etc.) their local MLB coverage. Major metro papers don’t automatically send writers to the World Series anymore.

On-line operations have not filled the coverage and employment gaps, and even big internet companies have made repeated big cuts. The ad dollars simply did not migrate in sustainable numbers. Fox Sports eliminated writers at all their regional web sites like Detroit, Cincinnati and Phoenix. Tom Gage and Hal McCoy, two Spink Award inductees in the writers' wing of the Hall of Fame, lost their gigs in the Fox moves. ESPN's city outlets have dropped regular coverage of less-popular teams. The World Wide Leader laid off 300 a few months back. It now concentrates on the nation's 100 most popular sports franchises. That aces out the White Sox.

Minow is not happy with the situation. He once served on the board of directors of Field Enterprises, the former owner of the Chicago Sun-Times and the defunct Chicago Daily News, and Tribune Co. He is a newspaper junkie hurt by the rapid decline of the industry.

"I see them dying," he said. "It's terribly depressing. I love the print media. I still read four newspapers a day. I see my children and grandchildren get their news in other different ways. We all have to adapt to all the technologies."

### **Mic jockeys once packed pressboxes**

Minow's FCC once had firm regulations that radio stations maintain a percentage of their programming for public service. That's why Sundays were once programming "ghettos" for religious and news shows. But the big side benefit was even music-heavy FM stations starting in the 1970s had to maintain news departments. In turn, that meant more "mic jockeys" going to baseball games to interview players. The average baseball consumer had varied multi-media sources of information. There was plenty of competition to get the inside story.

The back row of Chicago ballpark pressboxes once were jammed with "mic jockeys" from up to 10 local stations, including the rock and urban outlets. Then de-regulation of the industry hit in the 1990s. The news departments and inquiring reporters disappeared.

Right now, Minow uses the Cubs' journey to a possible championship as his main distraction from the most rancorous presidential campaign he has ever witnessed since his first involvement in 1952, for Adlai Stevenson. He bemoans the loss of humor in the process, recalling how the range of candidates from John F. Kennedy to Ronald Reagan used wit and quips to liven up the campaign slog.

Minow's time tripping featured several revelations away from the toy factory of baseball. Included in the "ExComm" White House meetings that had the fate of the world in its collective hands during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Minow learned he would be evacuated with JFK and other top officials if the bombs started falling. His family would be left behind to their fate. A man's man, Newt declined to be included in the evacuation in order to go home to wife Jo and their three daughters, who are now all attorneys like their old man.

Kennedy's refusal to invade Cuba, against all his military brass' advice, was his finest hour, Minow said. The invasion would have triggered World War III as the Soviets in Cuba would have used tactical nuclear weapons to destroy U.S. forces. Minow con-

firmed the non-action on invasion of an island 90 miles away was the surest indication if JFK had not been assassinated, he would not have deployed 500,000 troops 10,000 miles away in basically a civil war in Vietnam, and thus screwing up the U.S. for decades to come.



**Hubert Humphrey strangely declined to give a speech he had solicited from Newt Minow that might have given him an edge over Richard Nixon in the 1968 presidential race.**

In 1968, Minow authored what he firmly believed was the best speech of his life for Democratic presidential candidate Hubert H. Humphrey. HHH was supposed to deliver the speech at the strife-torn 1968 convention in Chicago.

“It started off: ‘Eight years ago, I ran for the Democratic nomination for president against Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy defeated me. Then all of us helped Jack Kennedy defeat Richard Nixon. Jack Kennedy’s gone. Richard Nixon is still here. And I’m not going to see the man Jack Kennedy defeated eight years ago become president of the United States. And neither are you.’

“You tell me (why Humphrey declined to give the speech). He would have been elected. The country did not want Nixon. But they didn’t want the Democrats more than they didn’t want Nixon. I regret that because it led to Watergate and everything else.”

Minow has satisfaction in Barack Obama’s completion of his two presidential terms. He was a major factor in the president deciding to run in the first place, 17 years after playing unofficial matchmaker for Barack and Michelle Obama. The former had been hired at Sidley Austin as a 1989 summer associate working under then-staff attorney Michelle Robinson. Sparks soon flew.

“He said, ‘I tell you what I’m worrying about,’” Minow said of Obama’s 2006 meeting with him and fellow political mentor Abner Mikva. “If I run for president, I’ll never be home. Can I (still) be a good father? I know each of you has three daughters. Each of them has turned out pretty well. If I do this, can I still be a good father?’

“Abner and I said if you’re lucky enough to be elected, you’ll be living above the store, and you’ll see them more than if you’re a senator. We weren’t sure if he had a chance to be elected. But I think he took us seriously because he kept writing down what we were saying. I said, ‘Barack, I’m not a psychiatrist. But I believe a father’s greatest influence on their children is not when they’re small, but when they’re teen-agers. That’s when you can help your kids.’ He said he would tell this to Michelle. He ran, and he won.”

Newt traditionally gave good advice. HHH ignored him to his regret. Obama benefited. Given his track record and experience in broadcasting and technological advances in communications, perhaps he should also be a consultant to the Lords of Baseball, who privately have to be worrying about the game’s future.