ONE of the things we’re trying to do with general semantics is to relate a lot of things going on in this country right now that involve trying to raise levels of consciousness, making us more aware of the way in which we live and of all those forces that have some impact upon us.

When I travel I try to stay with friends instead of at hotels because I really don’t like hotels. I think they’re bad for your head in the same way automobiles are. And this morning, when I woke up, I couldn’t find any towels. The folks I was staying with weren’t up yet and I didn’t want to wake them up, so I used a very small towel. It may have been a bath mat although I am not sure. Later in the morning I discovered where the towels in this house are located. They are in enormous piles in the corner of my bedroom. Now at the moment it didn’t seem to me that any lesson whatsoever could be drawn from that experience. But perhaps it can be.

This morning I also read a book called Open Marriage. Many of you may have read it already. That book tells you how to look for the towels in the corner of your bedroom; in other words, how to be more aware of the unspoken assumptions in our lives—in this particular instance, the relations between men and women. The authors of Open Marriage characterize the most conventional American marriage as “closed.” They describe alternative ways of dealing with marriage relationships.

A general semanticist once observed that we are no more conscious of our language and our language behavior than a fish would be conscious of the waters of the sea. The fish is always swimming in the water and therefore doesn’t think about the water. It is in the same sense that we are always swimming in this verbal environment that surrounds us and we tend not to be very conscious of it. We tend not to think about the language in which we think. It’s not an obvious thing to think about. And that is, in

*This text is a lightly-edited verbatim transcript of Mr. Johnson’s extemporaneous remarks at the ISGS conference in Santa Monica, April 1973.

**Nicholas Johnson is the author of How To Talk Back To Your Television Set and Test Pattern for Living, and from 1966 to 1973 was a Commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission.
part, what general semantics is trying to do for us—and our students and our children and anybody else we care about. It is trying to help us to be more perceptive about the thinking our language does for us.

Now, as we become conscious of communications and the communication process, we find that it is intimately involved in virtually everything we think of as human. Someone once said that man is the only animal that is able to talk himself into difficulties that would not otherwise exist. The only thing that really distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom (of which we are still a part, even though we often fail to behave as if that were so) is that we are capable of creating and manipulating symbols and in turn we are being manipulated by them.

But communication also involves psychology and physiology—working with stutterers; it involves electrical engineering—ways in which communications systems are designed; and it involves the mass media. It also involves the area that I am now involved in as a Federal Communications Commissioner, which is public policy formation about communications.

Public policy in communications is formulated today by the executive branch, the Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, and perhaps a dozen agencies in Washington, such as the Office of Telecommunications Policy in the White House, the Defense Communications Agency, and a unit of the Department of Commerce. As with most undertakings by government, it is scattered around town. One of the difficulties, I think, is that most of the people making public policy having to do with communications do not perceive it as something that involves the ultimate quality of humanness. They don’t see the impact of it upon individuals and the society, and the opportunity it provides for individual growth—the ultimate necessity of communication as a factor in living, simply being a human—and how that should affect the kinds of communications policies that we have. They often even fail to see the more obvious kind of social and political implications.

Here’s one example. The fact that we charge for telephone service by distance results in the fact that we do not have a United States for citizens of California, Hawaii, and Alaska. If they want to call their representatives in Washington they must pay much more in order to do that than does a citizen in Maryland or Virginia. We assume, of course, you should have to pay for distance.
Well, I ask, why “of course”? In an age of satellites all communications go 44,000 miles, no more and no less. It’s 22,000 miles up and it’s 22,000 miles back down. And it makes no difference to that satellite whether the ground stations that it is connecting are 100 miles apart or 10,000 miles apart. It’s still a 44,000-mile trip. So why is it we’re charging by distance? That’s an example of political implications.

There are social implications, too. In an age of far-flung families, where grandparents are one place and children are another, how we charge determines whether people make what we call “long distance” phone calls. Isn’t that interesting? We call them “long distance” phone calls. I mean, there is a national telephone system and it costs so much to create it and maintain it and operate the switching capability and so forth. But to use it for one more call doesn’t cost anything, really, in terms of the additional cost to the telephone company. The system is just sitting there, a $50 billion plant. The cost of running a long-distance telephone service for which you must pay is 50% of what you pay for the call. Did you know that? In other words, of the total cost to the phone company for the long-distance phone call, 50% represents the cost of billing you for the call. If they stopped billing you for each call, half of the cost of operating the system would disappear.

In general, people don’t think in these terms about national communications policy. I won’t take a lot of time to tell you about the FCC. You don’t need to know much about it. But you do need to know something about it.

We have a presumption in this country that what, in civilized nations, are run as public corporations will here be run as monopolies. Therefore, they must have some kind of “regulation.” What happens, in fact, is that we end up with unregulated monopolies which are the worst of all possible alternatives. It is a far cry from anything that might be called private enterprise since there is no competition, or at least no meaningful competition. And also you don’t get the benefits of public ownership. It’s the worst of both systems.

The FCC is a regulatory commission that functions in the area of communications — just like the Federal Power Commission sets your natural gas rates and the Civil Aeronautics Board sets airline rates. What you may not realize is these rates are often set much higher than they would be if the agencies did not exist.

If you’re interested in why we have inflation, I can explain that
to you in these terms. A study was recently done for the Congressional Joint Economic Committee that showed that the existence of the Interstate Commerce Commission costs the American people $5 billion per year in excess-trucking costs above what you would pay if there wasn't an Interstate Commerce Commission. There is some correlation between this and campaign contributions, I regret to say. There tends to be about a 2,000 to 1 ratio between what is paid in cash and what the corporations get in return. Sometimes they get to you as a taxpayer and sometimes as a consumer. The corporation doesn't really care so long as you pay. The milk case is one of the most dramatic and well-known examples. In exchange for $325,000 to Nixon's campaign the price of milk was increased $700 million the next day by the Department of Agriculture, on orders of the White House. We've now added that $700 million to the $5 billion a year you are paying in excess-trucking costs.

Let's look at airline costs. In California, if you fly intrastate, where there is no CAB that can get hold of the rates, you pay approximately 4 cents a mile. If you fly on the East Coast from Washington to New York, say, where the CAB is "protecting" your interests, instead of paying 4 cents a mile you pay 11 cents a mile.

The natural gas industry contributed, in 1970, some $700,000 in campaign contributions. And the day after the election in 1972 the price of natural gas went up by 25%.

At the FCC we at least had the style to wait a few days. We happened, symbolically, to choose Thanksgiving Eve as the moment for announcing a $1.3 billion increase per year for the telephone company. This was despite the fact that the FCC trial staff believed an 8% return was enough. The Administrative Trial Judge thought that about right. My own staff and I believed that 8% was enough. The FCC Commissioners, nonetheless, granted 9%, and thus the $1.3 billion, please, from you.

You've heard about the energy crisis. The energy crisis came about shortly after the election, you recall, and the suggested solution to the problem was that the wellhead price of natural gas be raised from 26 to 50 cents per 1,000 cubic feet. The suggestion is that if your natural-gas bill is doubled every month, then we will no longer have an energy crisis. The energy crisis is, in part, a function of the fact that we have a policy known as the oil import quota. The theory of the oil import quota is that we need oil in time of war for national defense. It's very important when fighting a war to have oil, and so, in order that we will have oil in time of
war, we should use up all our oil now and keep out foreign oil because if we use foreign oil we wouldn't be using our own oil. That's the national defense theory behind this policy. But as we all know, national defense costs a good deal and in this instance it cost you $7 billion a year in excess prices — 5 cents a gallon every time you drive up to the pump above what you would pay if there were foreign competition. That's in addition to the $7 billion a year you are already paying the oil companies because of the tax privileges they get and the welfare payments that you make to them by paying the income taxes they won't pay. So that in the 1960's the major oil companies in this country averaged a 5% tax rate — substantially below what I suspect you are paying. One, Atlantic-Richfield Oil, in one three-year period earned some $350 million on which it paid nothing in taxes.

So it goes throughout all these agencies. They exist principally to serve the industries they are ostensibly set up to regulate. They do that quite handsomely. They do it, in part, by giving away your tax dollars in subsidies to large corporations, and by increasing the taxes you pay because big businesses are not paying their fair share.

The FCC is a part of this pattern in Washington. That's the agency that I'm with. It's headed by seven Commissioners. I am one. It has about 1,500 employees, a budget of about $35 million, which is very small by Washington standards — roughly what the Secretary of Defense spends for morning coffee. We have a responsibility not only for the telephone rates which we raise, but also for land-mobile radio (the radios in police cars and taxicabs), the communications satellites (Comsat, Intelsat, the domestic communications satellite system — if we ever get one), the under-ocean cables that connect us with other countries of the world for telephone communication, private microwave systems used by business to interconnect the television stations of the country and so forth, cable television which has just come along in the last ten years or so, and finally, broadcasting.

Of all our activities, it is broadcasting that creates the greatest interest in most people. In some ways it has the greatest impact on the country, although, as I mentioned at the outset, all that the FCC does has an implication in its own way.

A problem that many of you who are teachers confront is the competition that you face from the television set. The television stations have available to them some $4 billion a year from industry
which they spend on programming for the same students you are trying to reach. They are talking to your students more hours per day than you are. They have substantially larger budgets than you have at your disposal. An advertiser can easily spend $100,000 or $300,000 on 60 seconds worth of his presentation and then pay $50,000 to $75,000 per minute to the network in order to present it. Imagine what kind of teaching you could do with even $30,000 per minute, say, to pick a very modest production budget much below that which most advertisers would insist upon. You could probably use techniques that you are not now using. You might come up with some new ideas. Well, that's the competition you're up against.

The average child receives hours of instruction from television. And don't mistake it, it is instruction — the only question is, what is television teaching? That's a separate question. But it is teaching. The average child, by the time he enters kindergarten, has received more hours of instruction from his television set than the number of hours he will subsequently spend in a college classroom earning a BA degree. By the time he's a teenager, he's been exposed to some 350,000 commercials. The power of this thing is absolutely overwhelming.

Now, if TV would in some instances reinforce what you are trying to do and what parents are trying to do, or reinforce the standards of our society and religious values, or if it was just neutral, it wouldn't be so bad. But the fact is, TV is diametrically opposed to almost everything you are trying to do, which makes your job very much more difficult than it might otherwise be. You are trying to tell students that some effort and work is necessary in order to develop one's abilities. Television tells them that the only thing necessary to give them all the joys in life and the values that are important is the acquisition of yet another product. You are telling them that education is important. Television is telling them to sit there and keep still and don't think. You are telling them to try to develop their own capabilities, restore some of their own potential, develop their own individuality. Television is telling them that they are to be treated as a mass.

It is important to understand this force in our society if you are to deal with it. In order to understand it, the most important thing to know about television is that it has nothing whatsoever to do with programming. Television is a business. It is the business of selling. But what it is in the business of selling is you and your
students. You are the product that is being sold. You are not the consumer. You don't buy anything from your television. You don't give the stations any money. You have no impact whatsoever on the programming. It's not like a marketplace where you can boycott meat for a week and maybe affect the price. There is no way you can have an economic impact on programming. You are not a consumer. You are the product. Who are you being sold to? You're being sold to an advertiser. It is the advertiser who is the consumer in this equation. The advertiser is buying you, like cattle, at a cost per thousand. The advertiser is buying you from the broadcaster. The broadcaster is collecting you in groups and is trying to do that at the lowest possible cost to him—the lowest possible cost per thousand that he can sell. This is the marketplace into which the advertiser comes. He tries to bargain one broadcaster against another. He says, "Well, I can get a thousand from Joe for so much, and you can charge me so much per thousand for your people." "Well, my people are better than Joe's people," says the broadcaster. That's what it's about. "My people spend more money. My people spend about $15,000 a year, and therefore you should be willing to pay more for my people than his people." "But I'm selling soap," answers the advertiser, "and you can only use so much soap, and I really don't care how much money they spend." And so on. That's what it's all about. That's the business. And why the advertiser is buying you is because he wants you to look at his message. His billboard, his magazine ad, and in this instance, his TV commercial.

Now, in order to get you to look at the message, the broadcaster has to have something that comes on between the commercials. But the sole purpose of that stuff that's in between the commercials is that it performs the role of an attention-getting device. That's its sole purpose. The scripts are written so as to build to tension before the commercial to hold you there so you'll watch the commercial. And all the stuff is written in little ten- or eleven-minute segments. Can you imagine seriously teaching students, knowing that every ten minutes a guy is going to come in and shove you out the door and sell them some cereal that's 50% sugar—after which you could come back and continue with whatever you were doing earlier? With all the distractions you have in a classroom, can you imagine that on top of it?

Well, it's the same way for a playwright, a guy who writes situation comedy or any other type of format. I mean, he can't do
his thing in that format either. But he's not supposed to. And the difference between broadcasting in this country and broadcasting in the civilized nations of the world is that in other countries the writers write for television. In America the writers do not write for television. The writers are writing Broadway plays, they're writing books, they're writing for magazines, but they're not writing for television.

Television is an exclusive preserve, it is a business. There are television manufacturing plants out there in Los Angeles. They look just like the aerospace companies' plants. They grind the stuff out. It has nothing to do with art or creativity or literature or anything else that you're teaching. Mason Williams, the composer and guitar player, and also a fellow with a great sense of humor, once tried to demonstrate this point when driving into the CBS aerospace manufacturing plant with a truck with a ladder on the back and some workmen in their little white suits. The only reason you can tell it's not an aerospace factory is because of that big CBS eye up over the corner of the building, so you know it's not Hughes or somebody. And they backed their truck up to the CBS plant and raised the ladder up and Mason climbed up the ladder and took an eight-foot-across cream pie and threw it in the CBS eye and climbed down the ladder and drove away. When he quit television he said, "I finally decided that the best I could do for American television was not at all," and left.

So, that's the first thing you need to understand about TV. The business of television is selling — selling you to the advertiser. The advertiser, in turn, is trying to sell you something else. Now what is the advertiser trying to sell you? Products? No. He's trying to sell you a religion. What is it? It's the philosophy known as materialism.

If you watch television closely, you'll see that there's no real difference between the programs and the commercials. Indeed, if you turn on a television set you often can't tell what it is that you've just turned on. Is it a commercial or a program? Suppose you tune into an Hawaiian beach scene. All right, there's a big hotel in the background and palm trees and there's this brand new car on the beach and this couple strolling across the beach. Now you don't know whether that's going to turn out to be a scene out of one of these Hawaii cops-and-robbers programs or whether it's a commercial. It is even more important to note, however, that you don't know what it's going to be a commercial for. That's because every
commercial is a commercial for all products.

Have you ever focused on that? Think about it for a moment. Here you are on the beach. You've got this couple there. You don't know whether this is going to be a commercial for that resort hotel, for the airline that took them out there, for the automobile rental company from which they got the car, for the soft drinks or beer that is about to come out of the foam on the beach, or for the mouthwash she just took before she got the guy. The interior shots in the homes — those are all $125,000 homes. Did you ever notice that? The drapes, the carpets, the furniture, the long gown, the hairspray, the make-up — and then it turns out she's selling a refrigerator. Or she whips out this Lemon Pledge or something. She's about to polish her furniture. Or it may turn out you've just come into the middle of a scene in one of the programs. But the kitchen is the same: brand-new appliances and all this shiny stuff.

That's what's being sold: that the important thing in life, the thing that you should strive for that will give you a sense of happiness and fulfillment and meaning and purposefulness in your life, that will bring you up to the ultimate of which human beings are capable, is to forget about yourself, your soul, your individuality, and look outside of yourself to products. You are defined by the products you keep. The automobile you drive defines whether or not you are successful by the standards of the program that has just explained to you how important it is to be successful. And the commercial then comes along to tell you how you can quickly buy that by going out and getting this automobile.

Pain is not to be used as a way of finding out what is going on inside your body and your soul. It's not something to be experienced and learned from. The moment you begin to feel a pain you must cut off your neck from the rest of your body by taking some chemical that will deaden it. My favorite commercial in Test Pattern for Living is one where a lady is shopping in a store and she has a headache and therefore she is confronting a crisis in which she may have to stop shopping for a while. Instead of stopping shopping, however, she is advised by the clerk to take this headache remedy which will enable her to go on spending money notwithstanding the internal pain which her body is sending her as a message in response to the vibes of that store. That commercial puts TV in about as classic a fashion as possible.

Well, what do you do about this? It says up there on the wall of this auditorium that I must teach hope to all and despair to none.
A bit of advice that A. Lincoln himself had a bit of trouble supplying in his life on occasion, as I recall. And yet it seems to me we must make the most of what we have at hand. In part, we must do this because otherwise we don't get out of bed in the morning at all — towels or not. It seems to me that a part of what you can do is help to make your students more conscious of these waters in which they swim. Use the media itself as a subject for study. Help your students become more aware of the process by which this material is chosen to which they are subjected, and to become more aware of what it is doing to them as people. They're struggling to find their own sense of values. They have a sensation that there's something wrong, something a little hostile about the world in which they live. And I think they're open to this.

You can also, if you want to, do a specific project of some kind on the stations in your community, radio or television stations. Know that it is you who own these stations. The Communications Act of 1934 provides in the very first section having to do with broadcasting that no one shall have a right of property in a station. A broadcaster is a public trustee. His station is public property which he may use to make gargantuan private profit only in exchange for the obligation to serve the public interest. To what degree do you believe the stations in your community are doing that? How can you go about measuring what it is that they are providing to your students and the others in the community? How do you feel they might do a better job?

My other book, How To Talk Back To Your Television Set, deals with some of these issues. In it, I also make an effort to describe the impact of the media in terms of ownership standards. Do you know who owns the stations in your community? That does make a difference, you know. In terms of corporate censorship, what is being kept off the air that the writers would like to put on there for you — do you know why it is being kept off? Do you know how you can tell? Do you know what a difference it makes? There are chapters that tell you what you can do about it and what some national policies might be that would be useful from the FCC, from Congress, and what not, and what an individual citizen can do all by himself to try to improve television. That's what How To Talk Back To Your Television Set is about.

Test Pattern for Living deals with what the content of the television programs is doing, as we appoint presidential commission after presidential commission. We had the Kerner Commission on
race relations in the United States and it ended up devoting a whole chapter to the implications of television on the worsening state of race relations in the United States. Then we had the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and we set up the Eisenhower Commission that ended up devoting two full volumes of staff reports to the implications of television and violence in our society. More recently we had the Surgeon General’s report on the implications of violence on television for children and the growth and socialization process of children. When Senator Fulbright did a study on why it was the military had so much power in America, he ended up calling his book *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*. It discusses the control of the media by the Pentagon, and what that does to militarism in this country and the support of the Vietnam War, and so forth. The women’s liberation movement began investigating why it is women are portrayed in the way in which they are in our society. And the National Organization of Women wound up devoting a great deal of its energy to a national project designed to reform the media — the demeaning images that are portrayed of women in the programs and commercials, which are so essential to selling but are so destructive of the women and men and especially the children who are watching. In area after area we come back to the role of the media in that problem.

So I began to look around at some of the other statistical indicators of rising rates of alienation and social disintegration — suicides, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, disintegrating families. And I asked the question, “Are we going to have to set up a Presidential Commission to study each of these problems that is going to come to the same conclusion?” Isn’t it about time we recognize that the values being taught by television are diametrically opposed, not only to the teachings of Christianity and Judaism, but to the teachings of all the world’s great religions? That’s what *Test Pattern for Living* is about: how to survive in a hostile environment, how to work out a life for yourself when you’re living in a highly urbanized, technological age in an institutionally-dominated society and culture. That’s a hostile environment for human life. What could you do about it hour by hour, day by day? How can you fashion a life for yourself in the city in that culture that makes sense in human terms? How do radio and television figure in that? That’s what *Test Pattern for Living* is about.

That is some of what I would like to share with you. If we had more time, there would be more, but that is an opener.