

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 298 TRANSCRIPT

Steve Skrovan: It's the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. [Music] Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan along with my co-host David Feldman. Hello, David.

David Feldman: I'm going to watch what we say today because we have an FCC Commissioner on.

Steve Skrovan: That's right. You don't want to get busted.

David Feldman: No.

Steve Skrovan: And we also have the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody. This one is going to be really unique. Wait and see, listeners.

Steve Skrovan: That is right, Ralph. On the show today, we welcome back media expert and law professor, Nicholas Johnson. In the late 60s, early 70s, Mr. Johnson was a commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission. He also later served as an advisor to President Jimmy Carter for the White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services and for decades, he taught law at the University of Iowa and has been recognized in *The Yale Biographical Dictionary of American Law* as one of the 700 most influential lawyers, from get this, from the colonial era to the present day.

David Feldman: When you say colonial era, you mean going back as far back as the 1970s?

Steve Skrovan: I'm talking about going back as far as the 1770s--only 700.

David Feldman: OK Boomer. [lots of laughter]

Steve Skrovan: His landmark book, *How To Talk Back To Your Television Set* was prescient in its critique of media consolidation and the manufacturing of news. So we're going to talk to him about his latest work, one, a memoir entitled *Catfish Solution: The Power of Positive Poking*. I have no idea what that means. Maybe we'll get some insight into that; and another book entitled *Columns of Democracy*, which is both a book of columns but also refers to the pillars, the institutions that hold up our democracy such as independent media, K-12 and higher education, independent judges, accessible voting systems and public libraries. They are all under attack all over the world, including America in the Age of Trump. That will be the bulk of the show. As always, in between, we will take a minute to check in with our corporate crime reporter Russell Mohkiber who will give us the latest on the corporate crime that never sleeps. But first, speaking of columns, let's talk to a legendary pillar of the legal profession. David?

David Feldman: Nicholas Johnson is best known for his controversial term as a dissenting FCC commissioner in the Johnson/Nixon era. His most recent work is twofold, a memoir entitled *Catfish Solution: The Power of Positive Poking* and *Columns of Democracy*, an examination of the institutions needed to support democracy. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Nicholas Johnson.

Nicholas Johnson: Thank you so much.

Ralph Nader: Thank you very much, Nick. I'll tell you, people don't have any idea what a marathon runner is in quest for justice, but you're one. President Lyndon Johnson appointed you, Nicholas Johnson, no relation, to head the Federal Maritime Administration at age 29. When was that?

Nicholas Johnson: 1964. I was one of his first appointees, I believe, after he became president; I mean, aside from the folks he asked to stay over from the Kennedy administration.

Ralph Nader: Right. And he expressed great confidence in you when people said, what? 29-year-old lawyer heading this Maritime Administration, ships all over the country and world. What's going on here? But, you spent couple of years or so there and then you got appointed to the Federal Communications Commission, which regulates radio, television, so-called, and does a lot of other things in terms of telecommunication. You became known as “the great dissenter”, which meant that you represented the American people against opinions by some—not all—commissioners who represented the big broadcast industry and the cable industry.

So you write this book, *Catfish Solution: The Power of Positive Poking*. And I want you to talk to us about the media then back in the late 60s and early 70s, and the media now. Before you do that, and I hope you relate it to what I always harp on, is that the people own the public airways. Repeat: the people own the public airways, but they don't control any of it. 24/7 it's controlled by radio and TV stations having a license from the FCC for which they pay nothing. You pay more for your auto license than the biggest broadcast television station in New York pays for its license to decide who says what and who doesn't, 24 hours a day. So I hope you'll key it into that. But just first, how'd you get this name? Catfish Solution?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, as it explains on the back of the book, that is a mystery, which will remain one, except for those who make their way through the entire book, who will somewhere in there discover where that title came from. And so I've never revealed it publicly, but it's not necessary in order to read the book.

Ralph Nader: You tantalizingly say, “How could a catfish strategy benefit you and your country?”

Nicholas Johnson: Right.

Ralph Nader: Well, you know, we're asking you this question about the media then and the media now at a time when the FCC, 3-2 vote has approved the merger between Sprint and T-Mobile, leaving our country with just three giant telecommunication firms--Verizon, AT&T and this merger, unless it's overturned in court. So take it away, Nick Johnson, the media then and the media now.

Nicholas Johnson: Well, they say that there's a difference between the differences of degree and differences of kind and I think that differences of degree in the media from sort of 1920 to 1980 were things like going from AM to FM radio and black and white television to color television. Those were differences of degree, but what we've experienced since then is a difference in kind because what we did have were three dominant networks and I spent a lot of my time on the commission writing 400 dissenting opinions about how horrible things were back then, but it's a time that we look back on now as the golden age of responsible FCC regulation. What we have

now is a real problem trying to figure out what to do about social media and the old concerns about anti-trust are not really what the problem is about. Facebook has 2 billion users, all of whom are capable of uploading their own material and the other social media as well. The Twitter accounts and all like that. It's just totally out of control. We don't know what to do about it. We like to admire the notion under the First Amendment that the remedy for speech you don't like is more speech. And that worked fine when we had three dominant networks, but now that we've got all these channels on cable and satellite and more than that, all this social media that is addicting, particularly young people in the junior highs and high schools. Suicide rates are up among young girls. This is a very serious problem of addiction and the business plan, which involves making something available to you, but then collecting as much as 20,000 data points of information about you, which combined with others is a very profitable product to be used and to be sold. And we didn't have that business plan before and that has made all the difference.

Ralph Nader: Well, you know, things are just getting worse at a rapid pace in the sense that the technology of communication is just exploding, and we don't have a legal ethical framework to even discuss it, much less regulate it. And now we're seeing in the media the release of a new technology by Zuckerberg and Facebook, which is called the Oculus Quest. And it comes in the form of a goggle, 3-400 dollars, who knows how much in different versions, and a teenager or an adult can wear and well, they can climb Mount Everest; they can smash adversaries. In other words, they live in a make-believe world at their own initiative and it can become hugely addictive. If parents now think the video games are addictive, wait until they see the Oculus Quest. Now, has that been evaluated by anybody other than Facebook? Has there been discussion on NPR or PBS? No, other than a gee whiz, look what's coming, folks. So Nick Johnson, what do we do about a legal and ethical framework or let's start with an ethical and legal framework because out of the ethics often come the laws. What would you do for this burgeoning technology and you know, having personal information floated without your permission all over the world and hacking? I hear they now can use a laser to hack into Alexa. You can't even trust Alexa anymore, as if I ever would. Give us some guidance here.

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I think we've got a real problem. I wished I could provide some guidance, but I don't think we have an intellectual structure right now to address this and there's talk about using the anti-trust laws, but in my opinion, it's the algorithms. It's the playing upon the amygdala in the brain instead of the cerebral cortex that is the problem. And if you broke up the Facebook into ten different companies and you kept the business plan of gathering and selling people's data and trying to addict them and try to increase what the industry calls TOD (Time On Device), you would just have, every one of ten companies would have 200 million people instead of the current Facebook's 2 billion. But that doesn't affect the business plan and the invasions of privacy and the manipulation and the ability of politicians to use this to create what was once a nation is now as tribal as Afghanistan ever was.

Ralph Nader: Let me ask you this, isn't there some little challenge to Facebook saying to people who want to drop out of Facebook no more Facebook account? Sort of like a cooperative one. As part of a larger question is, why is Facebook not facing any competition? It's not enough to say, well, it's so hard to get off Facebook transaction cost. Isn't there some equivalent like crowd-sourcing group that's starting up?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I would say anybody who can put together a customer base of 2 billion people living on planet earth would be in a position to compete with them, but shy of that, I think you've got a real problem.

Ralph Nader: There is no competitor on the horizon. Why not?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, because of their absolute total size and grip on 2 billion people.

Ralph Nader: All right, let's put it this way; let's say 100 million people were willing to start a new competitor to Facebook, that is they're willing to open up accounts; they'll leave Facebook and open up accounts. How would this competitor look like in terms of behaving itself and doing the right thing?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, for starters, it's gonna have to have its own business plan. Is it going to charge for this service? People like things that they think are "free", when in fact you are paying in the form of giving away your personal data to be sold and to be used to manipulate you. So I don't see how, you know, they've got to figure out a way to do it. There are people who've talked about trying to strip the evil out of the business plans of Facebook and create a competing thing, but there's gotta be some way for them to fund the operation. People don't want to pay for what they're used to getting for free, they think. And so that's a real tough one.

Ralph Nader: Well here, actually, they're also paying for the advertising, indirectly, which is passed on to them in terms of consumer prices. But let's look at it in another way. Facebook is becoming like a private government. I mean, 40% of people get their news from Facebook. Facebook now decides whether there are going to be political ads. They can be totally lying, total defamatory against innocent people. And Facebook's supposed to decide and it's deciding by saying, we're not going to decide. We're not going to be the arbitrators even though Twitter is decided to ban all political advertising. At what point does Facebook become such an "essential utility" that the government has to step in, in some way?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I think you could argue that's already the case.

Ralph Nader: In what way?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, in the sense that when we decided that television receiving sets were so essential to life that someone in bankruptcy did not have to get rid of their television. I mean that's now what we're doing with the social media and the internet. And think about this in terms of an addiction. If somebody has a glass of wine once or twice during the week with dinner, they can manage that, but if somebody wakes up in the morning, the first thing they do is reach for the bottle of vodka, they got a problem. And that's the problem we have now with the amount of time

people spend looking at screens. I thought it was rather impressive back in the day of television that the average American, when they died, would have spent 13 years of their life, 13 years in 24-hour days watching television. You put it on their tombstone. She watched TV. That's what they did, but that was as nothing compared to what you see now. Students on a college campus,

kids in high school walking down the hallways, walking down the streets, looking down. Thank goodness, there aren't any open manholes; they'd fall right in. They're not looking where they're going. You look in a restaurant where people used to be sitting around a table talking to each other, young people, old people; they're now sitting there and they're all looking down in their laps at their smartphones. Nobody's talking to anybody.

Ralph Nader: What's the end game here?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I think we have to begin, frankly, with education. You'll recall that when our first public schools were created, the idea was that we needed civic education, a variant of what you have called throughout your professional life, "the public citizen", and that the schools were devoted to providing civic virtues and civic skills and civic understanding--preparing people to function in a democracy in ways that would sustain that democracy. And we did that more or less, sometimes better than others, but in the last 20 years or so, that has really kind of faded from the curriculum. And I think that students need training in media literacy. They need training in what a democracy requires of them as a citizen. And I think until we start that with the young, it's going to be hard to accomplish anything.

Ralph Nader: Is there a possibility that the next generation of youngsters is going to get sick of this? They're going to get sick of what some have told me is a trap--looking hours in a day, text messaging endlessly at the screen. Is there a chance that it becomes a novelty that wears off or is it so ingrained in the psyche of human beings all over the world, no matter what culture or language, that it's here for good?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I think some variation is. When you think about it, they started with MySpace and email and then they went to Facebook and then they went to Instagram and now they're doing Snapchat and I think they move from one app to another, but this really needs to be studied, Ralph, as a matter of neurology and the functioning of the human brain. They are pulling together, Facebook and the and the social media; they're pulling together what we know about newspaper and television advertising, what we know about propaganda in authoritarian regimes, what we know about gambling casinos. How do you keep a time on device and the gambling casino? Every once in a while you drop a few coins in the tray, or you used to back in the days before electronic machines, and that stimulated the dopamine and the serotonin and people were excited and they were rewarded. And that's what text messaging provides or a post on Facebook. People put something up on Facebook and then an hour or two later they come back and see how many people gave it a like or a share or put in a comment. And every time they have, well then that's a little boost to their self-esteem and, and they're feeling good about themselves.

Ralph Nader: Well, you know, I've called the modern corporation the most sensually demanding institution in the history of the world. And you just pointed out one pervasive example why I've said this, but does this mean that we can't look abroad? That in Ireland, in Nepal, in Russia, in France, in Japan, in Brazil, no one has any solutions to this, that no matter what language, what culture, no matter what they wear, they all have this dopamine situation?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, yeah, that's human biology.

Ralph Nader: But do they have any institutional changes? Anybody going after the way Facebook is operating in these foreign countries. Like Europe, Western Europe especially, has passed a privacy law, which is tougher than anything we have, and Facebook doesn't like that. Is there anything on the horizon, Nick?

Nicholas Johnson: Not that I'm aware of, but I would not necessarily be. I mean, I'm no longer an FCC Commissioner and as you know, I've been writing about a spectrum of subjects and policies and whatever. So I'm not tracking all that the way I once was.

Ralph Nader: We're going to get that, the book that we're going to get to is *Columns of Democracy* by Nicholas Johnson. It's a beautiful book. *Catfish Solution*, which we've been talking about. Before we leave *Catfish Solution*, tell us what your view is of the current Federal Communications Commission with the five commissioners, three Republicans, two Democrats.

Nicholas Johnson: Well, you know, I thought it was pretty bad when I was there. And as I said earlier, we now look back on that as the golden age of responsible regulation. Starting in 1980, it was not just broadcasting, it was across the economic spectrum, the drive to deregulation and reregulation, less concern about conglomerate corporations and what would otherwise have been considered anti-trust violations. The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, so that stations with licenses who were licensed to serve the public interest can now put out one-sided propaganda all day long, something that would have caused them to lose their license back in the 1920s and even in the 1960s when I was on the commission. So no, I don't have a lot of respect. I think it's more and more corporate driven than it was even when I was there and this whole business about well, let's leave it to the marketplace; things will work their way out and the best speech for the speech or hate is more speech.

Ralph Nader: What amazes me is that even after people learn that they own the public airways, they're the landlords, the radio and TV stations are the tenants. They control 24 hours a day the area on the spectrum that they're license pertains to--the radio and TV stations. They decide who says what and who doesn't on our property. And because of Congress and the FCC, they don't pay anything to the landlords, us. So you know, I've said this, you've said this; millions of people have heard this message and they don't seem to have an ownership interest. Is this something that can be cured by first grade, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth grade?

Nicholas Johnson: I think that's a good place to begin. But you know, the story I've always hoped was apocryphal of the poll done in a community asking, what do you think is the worst problem in our community, Ignorance or apathy? And the plurality response to the question was, I don't know, and I don't care.

Ralph Nader: That's a realistic commentary, I'm afraid to say but if you were, let's say, president of the United States, how would you change it? What would you do immediately to give people a sense of proprietorship that they can have their own networks, their own programs; they don't have to beg for corporate sponsors. They can take a piece of the day--two-hour, three-hour, whatever. What would you do? Set aside political opposition by the corporations and their toadies. What would you do if you had the power?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I think what I would do was what I assumed Barack Obama would do when I had my first conversation with him back in 2007, I guess it was, and in Iowa, you get to meet all these presidential candidates and I've been meeting them now since the time of Harry Truman. And the question I was put to them is, let's assume that everybody in this living room thinks that you are what we call right on the issues and let's assume that you are elected president. Now tell me how is it going to come about that coal miners are going to be safer in the mines than they are now, and I won't take up time telling you the responses of all of them, but most of them are totally flummoxed by that. They'd never thought about it. But what Barack Obama told me, he said, well, Nick, I'm a...been a community organizer, and we went on talking about the Midwest Academy and all that. And I assumed that what he recognized was that the only thing that has ever really brought about change is an organized millions in a march or a mob demanding change. So that as president, what I would do is I would try to build something similar to what Bernie did back in 2016, which is an organization of millions of Americans who you email and text and so forth, and you get 'em organized around individual issues and they go to work on elected officials. I would also, as president, do some Roosevelt Fireside Chats on TV and talk about this stuff with folks.

Ralph Nader: You know, I had the same experience with these presidential candidates over the years. The question I say is, what's your program to shift power from the few to the many? And I give examples. They don't have a clue, Nick. It's all, if you elect me, I will do this, I will do that. And they know very well that they can't do anything. If they look back and there's no organized citizenry and they look forward and you've got a swarm of giant corporations coming in at them through Congress and the media and elsewhere.

Nicholas Johnson: Absolutely.

Ralph Nader: They don't have a clue. Have you met in the current presidential campaign, Nick Johnson, in Iowa, any of the candidates that are coursing through your state for the Iowa caucuses coming up in less than a hundred days? They're going all over, small towns, Storm Lake, Iowa City where you are. What do they say? What do you say to them?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I put that same kind of question. But yeah, you really do see the candidates...here in Johnson County, there are 99 counties in Iowa and Johnson County is referred to by people in Western Iowa as the People's Republic of Johnson County. And the candidates love to come to Johnson County because they're among friends, you see. But no, most of what I hear, I'm just trying to think who beside me—Bernie is still talking about the need for a revolution, which is kind of what you and I are talking about, but I have not heard either from them in private conversation or in their speeches. They will attack Wall Street and corporate interests and lobbyists and what, but I have not heard from them what they are going to do besides making speeches about how awful it is.

Ralph Nader: Well, do you think the people in Iowa that go to these clam bakes and fairs and living room sessions with people like Elizabeth Warren or Kamala Harris or Corey Booker or Bernie Sanders or Joe Biden, do you think they're sufficiently informed to really make an impact on these candidates?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I think what they are able to communicate to the candidates, and as I've said, Franklin Roosevelt handed the Democratic Party a coalition that if it had been serviced and maintained and addressed and met with and talked to from time to time, we would today, the Democrats would be electing every member of school boards all across America, mayors, state legislatures, House and Senate in Washington and the president who occupies the White House. But they've really turned their backs, thinking that all they need to do is get the money out on the East Coast and the votes out of the West Coast, and they can ignore that 80%, and it is literally 80% of the counties in the United States; if you look at a county map and you paint the ones red that Trump carried, 80% of them, the majority went for Trump. Now that's the state of the nation. And that's no national party. That's not a national party. If you only can carry 20% of the counties in the country and most of them are in urban areas and you never been on a farm or ranch, you know, you never worked in a John Deere Foundry, it's very hard. And so what they do get, what the candidates do get, I think, is they hear directly from, because Iowa has a wonderfully diverse population of minorities and various religions and I think more private colleges per square mile than any other state and young professionals and business people and major industry and three state universities that are well ranked and so forth. So we've got a lot of different kinds of people here, but it includes some homeless and working poor and working class and tradespeople and farmers and whatever. And they're pretty darn articulate about what their lives are like and what they need and so forth. So they are getting that input as a result of this retail campaigning here.

Ralph Nader: Well, you know, you just mentioned public universities in Iowa. We're going to shift now listeners to his other book, *Columns of Democracy*. You can get these books online, Barnes & Noble and other places, but we're gonna tell you that you can get them from an independent bookstore, right in Iowa City and Nick Johnson will autograph them for you. These are extremely concise essays. They are in big print, dark print; you don't have to squint. They're written in a very folksy and popular, understandable manner and you've been hearing Nick in the last few minutes and if you go to prairielights.com, that's the Prairie Lights Bookstore in Iowa City. Go to prairielights.com and you can get these two books. They're reasonably priced and Nick will autograph them for you and if you want to personalize them to some student that needs to read this kind of material, just indicate who you want to be personalized right next to Nick's autograph. And Nick, this is an amazing column that you wrote, and it needs a lot of repetition. It's on page 45 of your book, *Columns of Democracy* and it's titled "The Public Universities Not Using Radio Well". You've done a lot of work; you're still doing a lot of work at the local level. That's where it all starts, in Iowa City. Tell our listeners what you mean by that, "Public Universities Not Using Radio Well."

Nicholas Johnson: Well, as somebody pointed out, it took higher education 30 years to get the overhead projector out of the bowling alley and into the classroom. They're not the swiftest in this, but when Frieda Henneck at the FCC, back in the day, required that frequencies in the FM band, down around the left end of the band, were to be set aside for educational, nonprofit, noncommercial use. Many of the stations that had been experimenting with radio and the University of Iowa was one of the first in the country to have its own radio station and then in the 30s, to have a classroom material delivered by television cameras. So these schools, these colleges and universities then applied for these educational stations. But we have the same problem, that then they didn't use them. I mean, here they have a problem. Legislatures all around the country, and certainly in Iowa, are cutting back on their support of higher education,

one of the columns of a democracy. When I taught at the University of California Berkeley, with your sister Laura, there was no tuition charged at the handful of universities of California, the California state universities, the community colleges, was all tuition free, and I think a lot of the credit for the fact that California is the fifth or the seventh largest economy in the world, goes to that fact and now the legislatures are cutting back on that kind of support. The universities need to be able to reach the legislatures. Now can you imagine being handed the multimillion dollar asset of 29 radio stations covering the State of Iowa and you want to make a favorable impression on the people of Iowa and for them in turn to make up demands on the legislature to provide you more funding and more opportunity for students to get a college education and for those students to contribute their skills to businesses in Iowa. The problem in Iowa's is not in the lack of jobs. The economic problem in Iowa is finding people with sufficient skills to take and hold those jobs

Ralph Nader: And you're saying they don't use these radio stations, Iowa's universities?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, no, they created something called Iowa Public Radio and they turned the whole thing over to Iowa Public Radio and I'm not putting down Iowa Public Radio. They're full of commercials, which I find a little unsettling from time to time because they're not being funded by the universities like they were supposed to be.

Ralph Nader: We were talking with Nicholas Johnson, author of the book *Columns of Democracy*. Do universities like University of Iowa just gave these licenses, radio station licenses to public radio free? No conditions?

Nicholas Johnson: I am not familiar with whatever documents may have passed at that time, but the appearance is that no, there are no conditions; there are no requirements. But imagine what it would mean if the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, University of Northern Iowa--if they would band together their faculty resources and put some folks from one or two or three towns out in Western Iowa and talk via radio on subjects of interest to every small town in this state. Like how can we keep the young people in our communities? How can we build more tourism? How can we do a better job of purifying the water? You know, there are all kinds of shared problems and there are all kinds of, you know, you've had so many wonderful lines over the course of your lifetime, but one I've always enjoyed is "We have more problems than we deserve and more solutions than we've ever tried".

Ralph Nader: Sure.

Nicholas Johnson: And a lot of those solutions are to be found in the academic community, which I must say is not all that enthusiastic about getting involved in things that might someday touch on something controversial.

Ralph Nader: Can they get these radio stations back or they gave it away permanently?

Nicholas Johnson: I don't know the answer to that. I would assume they could get them back. They are still the licensees as I understand it.

Ralph Nader: I see. You know, a lot of our listeners, they've been hearing these programs over the years on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* and they're on national issues, international issues,

which you've commented on, but you've also provided people with real nitty-gritty advice right down to the school board. So one of the essays that you wrote in this book *Columns of Democracy* just a few years ago, 2014, is called "Public Comments about Public Comments Guidelines" and you start with the Iowa City Community School [District] Board. You want to elaborate that for our listeners?

Nicholas Johnson: [laughter] Well, one of my goals and yours over the years has been to get more public involvement in matters of importance to the public. And one of those is the school system, which if people are only interested in economics, takes a big chunk of the property taxes that they're paying. But what's much more important is you want to have people working in the stores who can do basic math when the computer goes down. I was on the school board for a term and said when I ran, I was only going to serve one term and I only did serve one term, but I tried to bring some management practices to it that I think helped. But this particular thing was that sometimes the school boards make the public comments be the last thing on the agenda. And so somebody has to come and sit for two or three hours before they get to talk. Oftentimes, school board members don't respond from the bench to what the person says. They just talk and that's the end of it and they go to the next person. Then the problem arises that sometimes you do get people who come and appear who use foul language and are attacking the school board in ways that it's not going to produce constructive conversation or the development of solutions. So how can you handle that? Can you limit the amount of time anybody has and so forth? And so that's what I meant by public comments about public comments--what are the comments? What's the discussion we might have about how we're gonna handle that public comments portion of the school board meetings?

Ralph Nader: Yeah, and it's a very useful one. And some other column you had called "Create a Caring Community". And you said there are 2.2 billion people try to subsist in the world on less than \$2 a day. How do you create a caring community?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I think you start with, and it's not a coincidence that both community and communication begin with the same beginning. You need to build interaction between people. You need to encourage people to stop looking down at their phones and look up. I tried to do my Fitbit stepping in a park right across the street from my house and I make it a point that every single person I pass, I give them a greeting--a good morning and a big smile, tip of my hat if I got one on, or a wave. And not everybody responds positively, but I'd say that 98 or 99 out of 100 do. When I encounter somebody who's here from another country and we have, I know there's one elementary school that has 34 different languages being spoken there. We have a lot of people from around the world here. Incidentally, I should mention with regard to that Prairie Lights bookstore, Iowa City was the third city in the world to be recognized by the United Nations as a city of literature and that was partly because of the Iowa Writers' Project, the international writers project and so forth.

Ralph Nader: Right. That was very widely known, the Iowa Writers' Project.

Nicholas Johnson: And it's work I did in other countries. We were doing the things that would be equally applicable here, if anybody cared and wanted to do them and you need to build a civil society; you need to have trade unions and organizations and neighborhood meetings and you

know, bring people together for everything from serious discussions to festivals and concerts in the summertime and whatever.

Ralph Nader: Well, you know, we don't have all the time to go through this book. You have a column "Six-step Program for Avoiding War" that you wrote. You have the question, is war the best answer? I can't imagine how you answered that. Spending on military always comes at a cost back home. Why don't you give us the nugget of that column, Nick Johnson?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I think one of the examples I used in that column was a single shelling exercise that the president engaged in and I figured up the price of all the missiles and weaponry used during a very short period of time basically, and then I transposed that into how many new teachers could we hire and put in Iowa schools with just that one brief military exercise. I mean, the numbers are just beyond our comprehension. It's very hard for Americans to understand millions and when you get into billions and trillions and the Defense Department is spending at those multitrillion dollar levels and it's so complex, they can't even be audited. Nobody knows what they're spending on and so forth.

Ralph Nader: That's a violation of federal law going back to 1992. They've never submitted a comprehensive audit to the Government Accountability Office of Congress and is the only department that doesn't. They spend over \$2 billion a day. You want to break that down listeners per hour, staggering. It's what Eisenhower said and his Cross of Iron speech in 1953 as president says is this the way we want to live, and he did what you did, Nick. He said, every tank, every battleship; look, how many schools it can build. Look how many parks it can establish. Look how many this, look how many clinics, community health clinics, no president has done that since. I was really taken by one of your columns, Nick, it's called "Syria's refugees job one and job two" and we're deep in Syria, the US. Last year, Trump only took in 63 Syrian refugees. What did you say in that column?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, that's just pitiful. I referred to what we did in Iowa. We had a Republican president at the time, but that didn't mean that he wasn't civil and humanitarian oriented, and we invited the Vietnamese boat people into Iowa. These immigrants are our strengths. They're not our enemies. There's an authoritarian playbook. Most democracies are destroyed from within, not from without. And if you want to destroy a democracy and become its authoritarian leader, there are certain steps you go through and that's what we are now going through in the United States. And I think there's something like 20% of the American people who say they would prefer to have an authoritarian dictator rather than a democracy.

Ralph Nader: Yes.

Nicholas Johnson: So you know, we're not in the best of shape right now and it's a tossup whether we're going to make it out of this and even if we do, whether we can ever come close to recreating what we did in our post World War II days in the United States when the top tax rate was 70 or even 90% at one time, I think, and the wealthy were doing just fine with that.

David Feldman: Now they don't want to pay 38% tax. They're making more money than ever before. I really liked your column "Six-step Program for Avoiding War". You can find these columns, listeners, by getting in these books, *Catfish Solution: The Power of Positive Poking* and

Columns of Democracy by Nicholas Johnson. You get them online. You'll see what I mean. They're really engrossing. They relate to you. Nick Johnson is all about people showing up at meetings, eyeball to eyeball, you know the old grange tradition and that's what gets things done; not just looking at screens. You can announce a meeting on the screen. You can get the information, but it doesn't work in virtual reality the way it works in dozens of people getting together in a town or at a town meeting or a rally or what have you.

You can go to prairielights.com to get that book autographed. If you don't care about the autograph, you can get it online. I guarantee you you'll find these short essays, these short observations and also, the great dissenting opinions on behalf of you, the television viewer and the radio listener, when he was on the Federal Communications Commission known as the FCC. Before we leave, Nick, I want to bring Steve and David. Any comment?

David Feldman: Yes. I have a couple of questions, but the first one, I want to ask you an FCC question. As an FCC Commissioner, if you were to discover, hypothetically, I've heard this, and I've read this, but let's just say hypothetically, that Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity pay their callers \$50, they're actors, to phone in with opinions and the calls are set-up questions. As an FCC Commissioner, what is your obligation when you learn about this?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, there's not a prayer that anybody's gonna look into that now, but forgetting about paying the caller's 50 bucks to call in, Rush Limbaugh would be off the air in the New York minute back in the 1920s and 30s, the way that material is going out now with one conservative commentator right after another throughout the day on many radio stations across this country.

David Feldman: I don't mean to interrupt you but just, I'm sorry, but when you were an FCC Commissioner and you discovered that there was a radio show where a man was espousing political beliefs and then having callers talk to him and he didn't disclose that these were actors being paid...

Nicholas Johnson: Yes, that would be a problem and I would want to have that investigated and documented and do something about it at license renewal time.

David Feldman: Are there laws against that?

Nicholas Johnson: There were then regulations. I mean, that's fraud, basically.

David Feldman: Okay. And one other question is, if you were to discover, say hypothetically, that Rush Limbaugh or Sean Hannity was integrating talking points from say, oh, I don't know the Koch Brothers and being paid as kind of like an infomercial without telling the audience that his opinions are bought and paid for. Because I have heard people say there are rumors that people like Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh are paid to deliver talking points, seamlessly integrate them into their monologues. Are there regulations against that?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, again, there were back in my day; I think now there would be very little concern about that.

David Feldman: Is an audience entitled to know when they're being advertised to...

Nicholas Johnson: Yeah, sure.

David Feldman: ...either for a soap product or a political opinion?

Nicholas Johnson: Yeah, commercials have to identify who paid for the commercial and we had cases...

David Feldman: Even if it's a political commercial.

Nicholas Johnson: Yeah. And ABC/ITT merger dissent that contributed toward that merger ultimately being called off by the parties, I dealt with some examples of the kind of thing you're talking about.

David Feldman: So Americans who listen to talk radio are literally being brainwashed. If this is true, if what I'm suggesting is true, there's a concerted effort to brainwash anybody who's listening to AM talk radio to have a specific belief.

Ralph Nader: David, what Nick is saying also, there's no Fairness Doctrine if Limbaugh's on touting one side of a controversial issue. In the old days, the station had to offer a challenging or contrary view. They revoked the Fairness Doctrine in the Reagan years by the FCC, revoked it and that's what unleashed all these people you don't seem to like, like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, because they can engage in a soliloquy and because government doesn't advertise, they can beat up on public policy in Washington, but the corporations who give them millions of dollars each a year, they advertise and so they respond to the advertising and I think sometimes they cross the line. I saw a situation like that where [a] General Motors ad was involved, and I complained to the FCC a few years ago and they just brushed it off. They didn't do anything. I think Nick is right. Today's FCC will not respond to any concerns like you've just articulated. It's bought and sold. The head of the current FCC, he's looking for a big-paying job the way a lot of his predecessors [have]. They go to law firms, they get appointed to the FCC, spend a few years there and then they go to higher pay as corporate lawyers or in the broadcast industry itself. Steve?

Steve Skrovan: I have a question, Mr. Johnson. David and I are both in the Writers Guild of America and one of the Writers Guild's big issues is net neutrality. What are your views on net neutrality and whether it should be or not, or how we can change it or not?

Nicholas Johnson: Well, I will give you an analogy. I think we need net neutrality. Let me answer your question at the top rather than make you wait. But if you think about the old AT&T, which had its problems and I participated in creating the mess we have now, but ATT had no interest in what you said over the phone. Now, you could be prosecuted for engaging in fraudulent sales or running some stock operation or giving away national secrets or whatnot, but not by AT&T. And once you got the phone you could say anything you wanted to say on the phone and everybody's call went through at the same speed and everybody could call everybody else and now around the world. So what the internet is today or should be in that respect, the equivalent of what AT&T was back in the first part of the 20th century [chuckle] with regard to that particular item. I have other problems with AT&T then. So I don't think that the people who are providing the conduit ought to be permitted to be in the business of slowing up some people's content and speeding up others, censoring entirely others. In fact, I was troubled with the cable

television at its origins for that reason, that somebody who owns a cable distribution system should not also have a financial interest in the programming which is being carried. But needless to say, that didn't go anywhere.

Ralph Nader: Now, Nick the FCC has abolished net neutrality, but have they implemented it yet?

Nicholas Johnson: I don't know the answer to that, but I think so.

Ralph Nader: If you pay more, they speed you up and if you can't pay more, they slow you down. Is that already begun?

Nicholas Johnson: Ralph, like I say, I'm not your best source on what the current status of it is.

Ralph Nader: Okay. Well, we're out of time. Nicholas Johnson, former FCC Commissioner, "the great dissenter", local activist in Iowa, tremendous writer of all kinds of columns, served on school boards, interviews presidential candidates before the Iowa caucus and basically a renaissance man. If you want his two books they're just out, *Catfish Solution* and/or the *Columns of Democracy*, you can get them online or you can get them autographed by Nick Johnson by contacting prairielights.com. That's the Prairie Lights bookstore in Iowa City, prairielights.com. Thank you very much, Nick.

Nicholas Johnson: Thank you, Ralph. I have a friend who when somebody had gone on like that would say, I'm going to give you just 30 minutes to go on talking that way until you've got to stop.

Ralph Nader: [laughter] We don't have sound bites on this radio program, that's for sure.

Nicholas Johnson: Give my best to good old Russ Mohkiber still going after the corporations.

Ralph Nader: We'll do that.

Nicholas Johnson: Thank you so much, all three of you. This has been really great.

David Feldman: We've been speaking with Nicholas Johnson. We will link to his two new books at ralphnaderradiohour.com. We're going to take a short break now to check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mohkiber. You are listening to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* back after this.

Russell Mohkiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your Corporate Crime Reporter Morning Minute for Friday, November 22, 2019. I'm Russell Mohkiber. Earlier this year, Justice Department prosecutors were on the verge of charging biotech giant Monsanto with a felony for illegally spraying a banned, highly toxic pesticide and nerve agent in Hawaii not far from beachside resorts on Maui. But then, according to an internal April 2019 government document, that decision was overruled. That's according to a report from the Project on Government Oversight. Monsanto had its Washington lawyers intervene at the highest levels of the Department of Justice to stop the felony case. A key attorney handling the matter for Monsanto was Latham and Watkins partner, Alice Fisher. The felony case against

Monsanto was halted after the company's lawyers launched a last-minute appeal to the office of then Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. For the Corporate Crime Reporter, I'm Russell Mohkiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan and along with David Feldman and Ralph and you're back just in time for us to close the show because that's our show. I want to thank our guest again, Nicholas Johnson. A transcript of this show will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website soon after the episode is posted.

David Feldman: Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* YouTube Channel and for Ralph's weekly column, it's free, go to nader.org. For more from Russell Mohkiber, go to corporatecrimereporter.com.

Steve Skrovan: And Ralph has got two new books out, the fable, *How the Rats Re-Formed the Congress*. To acquire a copy of that, go to ratsreformcongress.org., and *To the Ramparts: How Bush and Obama Paved the Way for the Trump Presidency and Why It Isn't Too Late to Reverse Course*. We will link to that also.

David Feldman: The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music “Stand Up, Rise Up” was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody. And in a few weeks, we've got a new book coming out, Mark Green and me, called *Fake President*, a book on Donald Trump like no other book on Donald Trump. By that I mean, it's usable for you, the voters. [Music]