

## **Audio's Vast Wasteland**

In 1961 Newton Minow, FCC Chairman, characterized the then current state of television programming as a “vast wasteland.” Sixty years later, TV content continues to validate Minow’s rhetoric as prophecy, and in recent years the Internet has risen to eclipse this distinction, especially as it relates to audio discussion.

If you thought political discourse had hit an all-time low in the pages of social media, try checking out any online audio forum for a real taste of unmitigated hostility and misinformation. Forget about common courtesy or mutual respect that’s the norm in polite face-to-face encounters. The Internet has become the Wild West of anonymous personal confrontation absent of consequence with zero tolerance for those of differing views. To make matters worse, we’re now inundated with so-called “trolls” who slime from forum to forum, spewing gratuitous animus and inflicting toxic comments and lies upon the few innocent souls hoping to snag a bit of knowledge or advice from their forum brethren. At a recent meeting of our audio society, a member brought up the totally reasonable suggestion to add a discussion forum to the club’s website where members can exchange ideas and share knowledge. My initial thought was, “What a great idea!” After a few moments of perspective, my second thought became, “What a terrible idea!” For the past 40 years, our positive meetings and exchanges always exuded friendliness, sincere good will, and helpfulness. The thought of creating a tool like the online audio forums sent chills up my spine with fear of injecting negative drama into the lives of a bunch of good folks simply wanting to enjoy each other’s company and share in constructive audio discussions.

My assumptions were validated when I came upon a recent post from a member of an online audiophile forum I recently joined. My contribution to social media has generally been as a non-poster unless it came to wish someone (sometimes unknown to me) “happy birthday” or clicking a “like” next to a raucous cat video. The post that set me off featured a full-color collage of test instrument screen shots and measurement charts compiled by the poster “proving” his assertion that the audio component under test was grossly over-valued, overpriced, and sonically mediocre. On top of this, he *proudly* confessed that he never listening to the product, nor that he would need to. The reviewed component was from an acclaimed, highly respected manufacturer. This provided the poster with an opportunity to posture himself as a “giant killer.” New and impressionable visitors wishing to gain knowledge from the more experienced forum members praised him profusely for his bravery and knowledge in taking on the “establishment” high end audio industry. With this, I ignored my own good advice and levied a response to the poster, who eventually backed down and finally gave up on getting the final word.

Continuing to prove my gluttony for punishment, I came upon another poster’s opinion that “audiophiles believe in magic”, and any differences heard in like components was simply a psychological game our brains were playing to justify differences, for whatever reason (i.e., it cost us a lot of money, it cost little money, the reviewer hypnotized us into believing it was better, we were high, we were drunk, we were practicing confirmation bias, etc.). In other words, to be an audiophile you can’t possibly be a believer in

**SCIENCE** or **THE LAWS of PHYSICS**. In other words, if that expensive speaker cable sounds better than lamp zip cord, you must be fooling yourself to justify the money that you stupidly wasted on the product.

It doesn't help that a few promoters exist who seek the opportunity to take advantage of vulnerable audio enthusiasts who are only too anxious to reach that next step in audio nirvana, but one shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater because a few dishonest souls discovered a way to scam folks out of their hard-earned cash. At the same time, virtually every tweak (with a few notable exceptions) I've tried has made a difference, and some even improved things. It seems that most everything makes a difference, good or bad, when applied to highly resolving audio systems, but reviewers should lay down the law with manufacturers to provide some semblance of a reasonable scientific explanation for their promised benefits. I guess the industry itself has earned some blame in contributing to the trash heap of audio's vast wasteland.

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