Launched in 1964 by Mary Whitehouse and Norah Buckland, the ‘Clean-up TV’ campaign entered the public spotlight at a large, rowdy meeting at Birmingham Town Hall that May. The campaign’s manifesto, with 366,355 signatures, was delivered to Parliament in June 1965, the year in which the campaign became the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association (NVALA), purporting to be the unofficial voice of viewer opinion, feeding this back to influence broadcasters. It combined its case for a viewers’ council with a stream of invective directed at political leaders, programmes (the ‘disbelief, doubt and dirt that the BBC projects into millions of homes through the television screen’, as the manifesto put it) and Director-General Hugh Carleton Greene. With broadcasting axial to its worldview, it fired diatribes on issues from abortion to satire and pornography, the whole gamut of liberal permissiveness or profanity. What started as a single-issue campaign, rapidly developed aspirations to be a broadcasting pressure group or NGO, voicing viewer opinion and held forth on a host of broader issues to take on the facade of a social movement.

NVALA can then be understood in terms of the history of NGOs and social movements. Quite contrary to its portrayal in narratives of the period, it seems emblematic of the 1960s. A non-party, extra-parliamentary, anti-establishment, grassroots campaign utilising the media, led by a woman and employing a participatory rhetoric of viewers’ rights, seemed modern in form, if not content. But NVALA rarely features in recent surveys of social movements, which have taken environmental, peace and feminist movements as their model; echoing New Left assumptions about their liberal-radical politics.
NVALA was avowedly traditionalist and critical of progress and modernity, more readily comparable to the US Christian right, although not achieving anything like its influence or media access. Historians can learn from NVALA’s failures or marginalisation and ought to explain not reflect its marginality.

NVALA’s campaign was not to repeal legislation, nor in favour of new laws, but for enforcement of the BBC’s professed values (the manifesto quoted the dedication to ‘almighty God’ and ‘peace and purity’ at Broadcasting House) and the 1964 Television Act that prohibited broadcasting material that ‘offends against good taste or decency or is likely to encourage or incite … crime … disorder or to be offensive to public feelings.’ It claimed to influence the 1982 Indecent Displays Act and the Broadcasting Standards Commission established in 1988. Affinities between Thatcher and Whitehouse (made a CBE in 1980) were grounded in moral notions of ‘Victorian values’. Whitehouse became one of the ‘populist heroines of the right’ – reactionary she was, but she was a portent of the future.

NVALA was critical of, yet contingent upon, popular affluence. Affluence seemed to afford a more expressive politics, concerned with moral and cultural issues of taste and choice more than instrumental economic interests. Parkin’s seminal study *Middle Class Radicalism* focussed on the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and shifts away from mass, class, party politics. Since it was preoccupied with values and the quality of life, NVALA also makes demands upon concepts such as Inglehart’s postmaterialism.

Suggestive parallels can be drawn with the New Left, which like NVALA defined culture as the key political terrain and the power of the media as paramount. As the New Left and CND were products of discontent with the politics of the left, so NVALA grew from what it perceived as a loss of values in the Church and amongst Conservatives. Like CND, its Christian core of activists hinted religion was more of a factor than political historians (who have assumed a process of secularisation other than when addressing multiculturalism) have allowed in modern British history.

In other ways, NVALA fits familiar themes. It deployed (exploited, critics argued) the rhetoric of participation that was rife in 1960s Britain – opening up the BBC to viewer power, as women, workers, students, consumers and nationalists tackled other institutions. For Nash, Whitehouse personified not only moral retrenchment against permissiveness, but the fear and isolationism that coincided with de-colonisation and European integration. Their vision of Britain was