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**“A Blessed Boon: Radio, Disability, Governmentality, and  
the Discourse of the “Shut-in,” 1920-1930**

**Bill Kirkpatrick**

*Disability and media shape each other in often surprising ways. Through his analysis of the discourse of the disabled “shut-in” in the first decade of broadcasting, Kirkpatrick reveals how, in the realm of media and social policy, ideas about disability helped shape the U.S. radio system while, simultaneously, ideas about radio influenced the social meanings of disability. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of governmentality and cultural policy, Kirkpatrick argues that disability and media have been co-constitutive since the birth of broadcasting, each helping to produce and regulate the other, with subtle but significant political and cultural consequences.*

In 1929, the *Chicago Tribune* published a feature on the Nighthawks, a Kansas City jazz band that played on the radio late at night. The feature included this anecdote about one of the band’s biggest fans, a “crippled woman” who lived somewhere in the “far north”: “Being a shut-in in a frozen wilderness, for twenty-six years, she had heard no other voice save that of her husband, a trapper. On one of his excursions to civilization, he purchased a new fangled radio set, and one of the boys’ rollicking parties on the air was the first thing she tuned.” The woman sent fan mail to the musicians, making the coda to the story a poignant contrast of old and new media: “Some months later, by many stages of dog team, came her exultant letter, and thereafter she was their heroine, serenaded and greeted every night over the thousands of frozen miles.”<sup>1</sup>

This tale is one of thousands of invocations of disability during the first two decades of radio broadcasting, and it follows a typical narrative pattern: an isolated and miserable “shut-in,” bereft of all joy and of most human contact, one day receives a radio set and—presto—instantly rediscovers the forgotten pleasures of life through the magic of broadcasting. In newspapers, in magazines, in policy documents, and on the radio itself, this discourse of the shut-in was one of the most significant—and heretofore one of the most overlooked—tropes through which Americans came to understand radio in the 1920s and 1930s.

In this chapter, I take a closer look at the discourse of the “shut-in” and its cultural and political work. Although there are many first-person accounts of people with disabilities benefiting from radio, I am primarily interested in the “cripple” or “shut-in” as a rhetorical figure: why were invocations of disability so important to early constructions of this new medium? And what were the consequences of these constructions for both the media system and persons with disabilities themselves? My study focuses on policy, i.e., how cultural and political systems generate and enforce rules, procedures, laws, and structures that govern various spheres of society. There are two areas of policy at play here: (a) media policy, or how we design and regulate the media system (including broadcasting), and (b) disability or health policy, or how we define and regulate individuals and populations as healthy, sick, able-bodied, or disabled. By looking at media policy through a disability lens, and at disability policy through a media lens, we can gain new insights into the interplay of media and disability at a critical moment for both.

I use this case study to argue four specific points. First, disability policy and the cultural production of disability/able-bodiedness influenced the shape and workings of the media system in the 1920s; as such, media policy studies are enriched when disability becomes a category of analysis (analogous to race, gender, and sexuality) through which we examine the differential

exercise of social power.<sup>2</sup> Second, media policy in the 1920s contributed to the production of disability and able-bodiedness not only through the technologies and economies that resulted from those policies, but in and through the processes of policy formation themselves: who speaks, who is spoken for, and how that speech is managed and regulated. As such, media policy deserves a greater place in the field of disability studies. Third, the integration of disability studies and media studies has catalytic effects for our understanding of “policy” more broadly; that is, by reading media policy through the lens of disability policy and vice versa, we can better define “policy” and understand its workings. Finally, the co-construction of media policy and disability suggests new ways to think about how communication technologies are adapted to the project of social regulation and governmentality.

Governmentality is a concept introduced by Michel Foucault to describe “the conduct of conduct”: the ways that our behaviors are shaped, limited, incentivized, or punished through networks of power from the state down to individuals. Foucault argues that our conduct is regulated not just by the state, but also through formal and informal systems of punishment and reward, surveillance and confession, the affordances and constraints of the physical environment, procedures of truth-making, and the enforcement of norms and processes of normalization that include our own self-discipline. These regulatory networks include prominent institutions (schools, prisons, media outlets, the medical establishment, and so forth) as well as the family and individuals: we participate by surveilling and policing our own conduct and the conduct of others. The significance of governmentality for this study is that, from a Foucauldian perspective, policy is not solely about issue-oriented politics, capitalist maneuvering, or technical specifications. It is also an effect of culture: the ways that we come to know—and regulate—ourselves and our society.

Foucault is also central to my approach to disability in this chapter, especially his concepts of biopolitics and biopower. These terms refer to the practices through which modern states manage and regulate human populations as bodies, i.e., as organisms that eat, reproduce, get sick, and die. Biopower includes the state's exclusive claim to the right to kill (including deciding who should be deemed killable and under what circumstances), as well as how the state bases its legitimacy on the health and welfare of the populace. The related concept of biopolitics refers to the extension of state surveillance and control into the lives of citizens, for example by measuring their health, monitoring and regulating their sexuality, encouraging them to eat healthily, establishing norms of physical fitness, and so on. Regarding disability and able-bodiedness, biopolitics includes the discourses, technologies, and structures through which certain individuals are identified and classified as physically "abnormal" and thus of special concern to the state: how some individuals are set apart (physically, culturally, economically, politically) as "disabled," how other individuals are encouraged through processes of normalization to disidentify with disability and strive toward bodily "normalcy," and with what effects on those individuals and society as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

The shut-in is interesting as a trope through which the processes and procedures of governmentality and biopower become visible, and through which broadcasting was refashioned and deployed for biopolitics. It helps us see how the structure and policies of the media—not just media content—came to help regulate conduct and establish the parameters of modern citizenship, with positive and negative implications for people understood as disabled. The historiography presented below thus transcends the specific context of 1920s broadcasting to inform more generally our study of media, disability, policymaking, and social power.

### **The Discourse of the Shut-In at the Birth of Broadcasting**

Invoked routinely throughout the 1920s by journalists, broadcasters, and audiences (including persons with disabilities themselves), the shut-in was second only to another oft-discussed outsider, the noble farmer, as the rhetorical figure of choice in debates over the social meanings of broadcasting and the future of U.S. media. It was such a common trope that *Radio Broadcast* wrote in 1925, “It is dangerously near a bromide to say that radio has taken an almost irreplaceable part in the lives of those who are shut in.”<sup>4</sup>

A catch-all term, “shut-ins” most frequently referred to those who by illness or injury were consigned to long periods of hospitalization or homebound isolation, prominently including tens of thousands of World War I veterans in addition to those impaired by industrial accidents or diseases such as polio. Importantly, it usually connoted people who were *physically* sick or disabled; although the shut-in’s disability might have emotional consequences, the term was rarely used to describe people whose impairment was primarily emotional, mental, or cognitive. Instead, it performed something of a rhetorical sleight of hand, referencing persons with “abnormal” bodies, but simultaneously erasing those bodies in favor of the socio-spatial consequences of their difference: being a shut-in meant, above all, being cut off from the outside world. Thus the trope of the shut-in turned physical disability into a metaphor for social isolation, a quasi-disembodiment that made shut-ins especially useful in discussions of radio, which was understood as the disembodied medium *par excellence*.

Constructed as external to mainstream society, the shut-in was imagined as a silent recipient of culture rather than an active producer of it, the passive beneficiary of radio created by others. In this way, too, the shut-in resembled the farmer, though in the case of the shut-in this passivity was literally embodied through the supposed degradation of disablement, whereas the farmer was ennobled by the physicality of his toil.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, while the farmer may have

wanted for “human contact, human sympathy, and culture,”<sup>6</sup> this was due to his geographic remoteness. In contrast, shut-ins—at least in popular imagination—could not enter the social world even if they wanted to: their broken bodies made them *too* socially remote. In both cases, however, radio was constructed as a symbol of civilization, bringing culture to the literal or figurative wilderness. We see this in my opening example of the Nighthawks serenading a shut-in: only radio could cure the “crippled woman’s” isolation and presumed loneliness; only radio would return to her the joys of socialization of which disability had deprived her.

While invocations of the farmer highlighted radio’s ability to transcend distance and incorporate the pre-modern local-agricultural community into visions of a modern-industrial nation, the great rhetorical usefulness of the shut-in was to assert technology’s ability to complete us as human beings, spiritually and physically, making disability an especially profound site for the healing power of technology. The broken or diseased body of the shut-in became the perfect demonstration of the modern technocratic repair of body and soul, helping to claim broadcasting for biopolitics: radio technology, properly deployed, could assist the modern liberal state in its duty of maintaining the overall health of the population. Both the popular press and the specialty radio press regularly touted the healing power of radio, including the therapeutic use of radio in ambulances and hospitals, entertainment and education for the blind, access to the public sphere for the physically impaired, and even hearing for the deaf, as illustrated by headlines like “Deaf Ears Hear Again through the Magic of Radio” and “Radio for the Deaf.”<sup>7</sup> No less a personage than Helen Keller wrote of spending “a glorious hour last night listening over the radio to Beethoven’s ‘Ninth Symphony.’”<sup>8</sup> Keller was referring to her ability to enjoy the vibrations produced by the radio; her elation seemed no less genuine—and radio no less miraculous—because of it. “Let me thank you warmly for all the delight which your

beautiful music has brought to my household and to me,” Keller wrote. “I want also to thank Station WEAf for the joy they are broadcasting in the world.”<sup>9</sup> (For reasons that will become clear below, it is worth noting here that WEAf was owned by AT&T, a key player in the commercialization of radio and a pioneer of national network broadcasting.)

If radio could heal, or at least help move persons with disabilities back toward a physical norm of able-bodiedness, it could also provide spiritual uplift and repair the soul, functioning as a treatment for the side effects of loneliness, depression, and, in the case of veterans, what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>10</sup> The press eagerly shared testimonials to the therapeutic properties of radio. For example, in 1922 *Radio Broadcast* published a letter from A. J. DeLong of Lafayette, Indiana, headlined “What Radio Is Doing for Me”: “Having listened to daily entertainments, I declare myself less susceptible to fatigue, more alive to everything, and a more contented person. Radio has done for me what medical science failed to do.”<sup>11</sup> That same year, a Brooklyn medical superintendent insisted, “Think what it will mean for some poor devil, friendless, homeless, laid up with a broken back, never receiving any visitors, with nothing to do from one day to another but look at the wall and think.”<sup>12</sup> In his account, the shut-ins in his care seem barely human prior to radio but undergo a kind of rebirth through the act of listening: “I have put headsets over the ears of many such men, and have seen them transformed in a few minutes from creatures that were just dully existing to the intelligent, interested men they once were and now soon will be again, permanently, and much quicker because of the interest, the life, the health that radiates from radio.”<sup>13</sup>

The importance of these discourses for media and disability is profound. They help us perceive how, at a time when Americans were becoming more aware of and interested in radio, biopower came to be exerted in and through the technology. One way this happened was by

using the shut-in to construct broadcasting as a new means of managing previously unmanageable bodies—recuperating persons with disabilities by “remote control” as it were. Where the modern state had previously failed to adequately provide for the inclusion of its disabled citizens—a failure made newly visible (and politically salient) by so many disenfranchised war wounded during precisely this era—broadcasting was fitted to a narrative of more effective inclusion and care. By connecting the ethereal technology of radio to the physical plight of the shut-in, the invisible airwaves could be reembodied, transforming an intangible phenomenon into one that had real, even miraculous physical consequences for the health of the populace. In that sense, the shut-in functioned as an “ideal abnormal”: a paradigmatic outsider by which the state, in the form of proper media policy, could demonstrate its ability to care for all the citizenry. Viewed from the other direction, the ideal abnormal of the shut-in served to underwrite state media policy, proving the rightness and benevolence of regulation that brought “the life, the health that radiates from radio” to people with disabilities. The result was a two-way biopolitical street: abnormal bodies legitimized official radio policy; radio legitimized state responsibility for (and therefore authority over) abnormal bodies.

In the next two sections, I examine these processes more closely, looking first at how the shut-in was enlisted to support specific media policies, then at how radio was enlisted to justify specific policies pertaining to disability.

### **The Shut-In in Media Policy**

Given all those column inches devoted to what radio could do for the shut-in, it pays to ask: what was the shut-in doing for radio? Put another way, how does a disability studies lens reveal ways that the technology was imagined at the time, conceptions that would become official policy by



the end of the decade?

Three ways of “knowing” and thus regulating radio emerged through the trope of the shut-in. First, the shut-in was the perfect passive listener justifying one-to-many broadcasting. Until the 1920s, radio was largely a two-way medium—a “wireless telegraph” allowing operators to communicate around the globe. Although amateur wireless operators were the site of some social anxiety and modest regulatory work, they largely fell outside the concerns of the state as a small, relatively harmless cohort of hobbyists playing with a “toy.” With the advent of broadcasting, however, the social and commercial potential of radio as a mass medium became apparent, dramatically increasing the interest of the state in its operations. If, as had been the norm for fifteen years, anyone could speak to anyone over the ether, what would prevent radio from becoming a chaotic free-for-all beyond governmental control? A full exploration of this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the problems boiled down to the danger of unregulated speech and the commercial and military significance of radio to the state. The primary solution that evolved was, in essence, to separate speaking bodies from listening bodies: limit the microphone to a few hundred delegates (“licensees”) approved by the state, and turn the rest of the population into audiences. This meant eliminating rights of access to the airwaves, licensing transmitters, denying legal standing to the public in disputes over content, and a host of other policy decisions from 1920 to 1934 that effectively removed the public from radio broadcasting and policy.<sup>14</sup> A small but undeniable feature of these discursive struggles was the elevation of passive, socially isolated listeners like the shut-in and the farmer, turning them into privileged stakeholders whose need for broadcasting superseded free speech and other rights. Tapping into commonplace notions of speech as active and listening as passive, the bedridden shut-in became the paradigmatic passive “listening body” and thus a metonym for the radio

audience, helping to legitimize an understanding of radio that worked against a public right to the airwaves.

Second, the purported importance of radio to the shut-in helped allay concerns about emerging mass-consumer culture by assuring observers and policymakers that even the often “frivolous” content of radio could have a noble social purpose. As broadcasting gained popularity in the 1920s, and ever more middle-class families acquired radios, the cultural perception of the radio set shifted from a hobbyist’s “toy” to a bourgeois “luxury.” In this process, anxieties about mass culture and the materialism of emerging consumer culture were displaced, in part, onto the shut-in. In that sense, persons with disabilities often served as structuring others who, unlike people for whom wireless was possibly a mere fad, really *needed* radios: “Radio may prove merely a craze now,” wrote one paper in 1922, but when people are “shut in and denied other entertainment . . . radio can not be said to be merely a craze.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a 1922 syndicated column claimed that radio was not “a fad, a new toy or plaything,” but rather “for invalids—those confined to their homes, it will come as a blessed boon . . . to pass the weary hours.”<sup>16</sup>

The dangers of mass culture that attended to radio became more acute as the trends toward entertainment programming and commercialism intensified, as evidenced by the raft of apologists insisting on radio’s social value to shut-ins in the face of “decadent” jazz music and stultifying advertising. For example, when the “Keep-the-Air-Clean-on-Sunday Society” protested WMCA’s airing of jazz on Sunday evenings, WMCA fought back by claiming that “400 disabled soldiers enjoyed [this] radio hour every Sunday and would miss it greatly if it were discontinued.”<sup>17</sup> In such ways, the shut-in’s enjoyment of entertainment provided, in Paul K. Longmore’s words, “the means by which nondisabled people can prove to themselves that they

have not been corrupted by an egocentric and materialistic capitalist order.”<sup>18</sup> This discourse, in turn, helped justify governmental interest in radio, something clearly so important that it required state management for the benefit of life and the well-ordered society.

The third way of knowing radio pertained to a more specific policy question: the structure of the radio system as a whole. Invocations of the shut-in were most often connected to support for a particular form of radio, namely high-powered, national, commercial broadcasting. This was a system in which a few corporate interests would dominate the airwaves, beaming a narrow range of advertising-supported content to the public, and most of the country would partake in that content. In the 1920s, this was far from a universal vision of what American radio should become.

To understand this, it helps to remember the ways that new media technologies frequently become part of nationalist projects, and that most countries created a state-sanctioned radio monopoly whose content reinforced national identity and ideology. The U.S. instead adopted a system that was dominated by private commercial concerns, funded primarily by advertising, and regulated with great deference to corporate interests. Even without an official state broadcaster, however, U.S. radio was not free from nationalist associations. Indeed, the peculiar structure of American radio quickly became known as the “American system” and was widely articulated with freedom, individualism, entrepreneurialism, and other facets of American ideology.

Importantly, the use of media to construct and defend national identity often depends on marginalization and exclusion of women, racial/ethnic others, queer people, and others from full cultural citizenship;<sup>19</sup> Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell added disability to this list, demonstrating that, in the case of mobile telephony, “people with disabilities were systematically excluded from this nation-building project.”<sup>20</sup> By silencing or marginalizing such others, media

systems could reflect and maintain hegemonic power relations within the imagined national community. However, here I want to highlight a slightly different process: while the recognition of exclusion and marginalization is critical to any understanding of media history, a disability studies perspective can also alert us to the *inclusive* discursive construction of disability at critical times in the development of national media structures. The importance of the shut-in derived from rhetorics of incorporation and privileged status: although persons with disabilities did not enjoy full cultural or political citizenship in the early twentieth century (a condition, one must perhaps redundantly point out, that continues to this day), disability was nonetheless instrumental in helping imagine and promote an inclusive vision of national radio.

How did this intersection of nation-building and disability result in specific media policies? In the early 1920s, the U.S. was enmeshed in debates over the shape of the emerging broadcasting system, including whether radio would be subject to monopoly control (like AT&T's telephone monopoly), whether it would become corporate run and advertising supported, what role state experts would play in its management, and whether it would become primarily a national or local system. Central to this question was whether there would be more local, low-powered community and nonprofit stations serving their city and region, or fewer high-powered stations, owned by national corporations with the resources to broadcast artists and events of national interest to millions of people. Closely tied to these issues was the question of transmitter power, especially as the Commerce Department moved to increase wattages for some stations (thereby increasing the geographical reach for those few broadcasters) at the expense of others. In these debates, the value of serving sparsely populated and rural areas became one way to legitimize high-powered broadcasting: the most efficient way to reach these isolated communities, which were considered way too small and remote to support local stations, was

through big national stations beaming in “civilization” from the urban centers. As *Radio Digest* argued, “Northerners are beginning to consider a radio set not only a wonderful luxury but also a necessity. Being able to receive the broadcast, the voice of civilization, is insurance against stagnation of mind and depression of spirit; it dispels the loneliness even from the farthest frontier.”<sup>21</sup> One imagines desperate, godforsaken homesteaders in a miserable shack on the barren tundra, and the only thing making life bearable is reliable reception of the Metropolitan Opera.

Similar to such tropes of geographical remoteness, the shut-in’s *social* remoteness allowed advocates of high-powered broadcasting to justify special privileges.<sup>22</sup> A good example came in 1925, a critical time in the development of radio policy, when the Commerce Department approved “super-power” for RCA’s station WJZ in Bound Brook, New Jersey. Listeners up and down the East Coast wrote to Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover about the decision—fans of WJZ were thrilled, but because RCA was the dominant corporate force in radio, the move also fueled fears of an RCA broadcast monopoly and the disappearance of low-powered, locally oriented stations. In this dispute, defenders of high-powered radio frequently invoked persons with disabilities to argue their case: the social and physical isolation of the shut-in became evidence of the need for super-power stations and corporate mass entertainment. Ada Harrison of Newark, for example, claimed that WJZ’s offerings were one of the few joys available to her blind and shut-in mother, and thus the station should be allowed to transmit at greater wattages. Contrasting her mother’s legitimate needs with the selfishness of the urban dweller for whom radio was a mere luxury, Harrison pleaded, “For the sake of the older people—the *shut-ins*, the isolated ones—whose pleasures are few, and whose troubles are many, is there not *some way* by which WJZ can broadcast on super-power (reaching and bringing light

and joy to these people) without unduly annoying the selfish and pleasure-loving people around New York and New Jersey?”<sup>23</sup>

The major broadcasters themselves routinely used shut-ins to justify greater policy privileges and make the case for bringing big-budget commercial entertainment to all parts of the country. In 1927, for example, shortly before the newly formed Federal Radio Commission reorganized the airwaves in favor of large corporate broadcasters, NBC’s house conductor, Walter Damrosch, used a profile in the *New York Times* to highlight the importance of high-powered, interference-free transmissions to, of course, shut-ins: “A glance through the letters received by the conductor reveals this scattered, broken world of music lovers brought together by the notes radiating from the central broadcasting station in New York. One letter . . . came from an invalid, shut in for life on an Iowa farm. She lies in her lonely world and listens to Beethoven as played by the orchestra New Yorkers pay and ride through snow in their taxicabs to hear. And she is only one. The bedridden all over the world listen in and write Mr. Damrosch of what it means to them.”<sup>24</sup> In case anyone missed the point—that great New York musicians can entertain the sad shut-ins of Iowa only if we eliminate low-powered local stations and clear the airwaves for NBC’s super-transmitters—it was hammered home again a paragraph later: “Mr. Damrosch is naturally interested in all radio improvements. He expects governmental control to result in cleaning the air for better broadcasting.”<sup>25</sup>

As is by now well known, governmental control did soon result in “cleaning” the air for “better” broadcasting: the Commission eliminated dozens of smaller stations, usually local and often nonprofit, and organized the airwaves to favor large corporate stations broadcasting on high-powered “national” frequencies. Of course this outcome resulted from multiple and complicated political, economic, technological, and cultural factors. Nonetheless, a disability

studies lens on media policy illuminates the importance of the discourse of the shut-in to this complex process, especially by defining broadcasting in moral terms, as well as by constructing key audiences as passive and in need of “quality” national culture provided by trusted stewards of the airwaves—a vision that, not coincidentally, benefited RCA, AT&T, and other large commercial broadcasters. The modern corporate-liberal state, charged with caring for the well-being of the populace, found in the shut-in strong biopolitical justification for what became the “American system” of radio.

### **The Deployment of Able-Bodiedness: Radio in Disability Policy**

Clearly radio was indeed a “blessed boon” for countless disabled individuals; their letters fill the archives and the newspaper columns of the day. “I cannot refrain from expressing to you how much pleasure I receive from your programs,” read one typical letter by a listener who had been bedridden for 38 years. “I never dreamed, I should have such wonderful music and splendid offerings as I have—it has made me so happy! . . . May God bless you in this wonderful work, and I shall be right here to listen whenever you are on the air.”<sup>26</sup> It is impossible to read such testimonials and not be moved by the real joy they express at the advent of broadcasting, and there is no question that untold millions of people, including many identifying as disabled, cherished their radio sets as positive additions to their lives.

At the same time, it is important to consider not just individual experiences with radio but also the social and political consequences of broadcasting’s emergence and of the discourses that gave it meaning. If disability, through the trope of the shut-in, played an important role in media policymaking, how did media, through this same trope, function in disability policy? The elevation of persons with disabilities in radio’s development led to an outpouring of efforts to

help more people benefit from the new technology, but in ways that tended to reaffirm the ableist middle-class politics at the heart of Victorian sentimentality: the impulse for interventionist uplift and moral charity, and the impulse to use modern technology and the expertise of elites to solve social problems.

The charitable work of middle-class reformers has a long history in the U.S.; following World War I, efforts to help veterans and other disabled citizens intensified.<sup>27</sup> This was the era during which the “poster child” came to prominence, with professional charities using the image of the “cripple” to raise funds for the medical rehabilitation of persons with disabilities.<sup>28</sup> Given the purported healing power of radio, some of these charitable efforts unsurprisingly included providing radio sets to shut-ins. The New York City Visiting Committee, for example, solicited funds to outfit hospitals with radio sets through which “[e]ndless vistas are opened for the bed-ridden and shut-ins generally.”<sup>29</sup> Ordinary citizens often donated their used sets to shut-ins; for example, the *Chicago Tribune*’s “Friend in Need” columns featured letters like Harold L.’s offer of “a crystal radio receiving set (except the ear phones) I made myself and which I shall be glad to give to some poor crippled child or shut-in.”<sup>30</sup> The column also featured requests such as: “I hope you can help me to secure a radio with a loud speaker. I am on a lonely farm in Michigan and have an infection in head and hip, which keeps me an invalid. I see only the four walls of my room, day after day, and feel a radio would mean a world of happiness to me.” Added the column’s editor, Sally Joy Brown, “What an outlet into the world a radio would mean for our shut-in friend! Please let us know if you have a radio to give.”<sup>31</sup> The double-edged nature of charity emerges clearly in these discourses. Generosity and compassion spurred the giving of radios that gave countless individuals an “outlet into the world,” but those acts are inseparable from attitudes about persons with disabilities as friendless, culturally limited, socially isolated,



and deprived of all pleasure.

Furthermore, the technology that brought the world to the shut-in could be used to justify the “containment” of disability in troubling ways. A brief review of the historical context will help make this clearer. As Susan Schweik demonstrates, the early twentieth century witnessed intense struggle over the meanings of disability and its relationship to “normalcy.”<sup>32</sup> Longmore and Goldberger argue that the dominant paradigm for physical disabilities in this era was “the crippled,” which joined a wider generic category of “the disabled” that included the blind, deaf, “feeble-minded,” and others marked as abnormal.<sup>33</sup> Public policy often explicitly marginalized and devalued persons with disabilities, preferring the path of segregation over integration. Such persons were routinely isolated in hospitals and other institutions, or sequestered in private homes where friends and relatives were expected to muster the resources to care for them. Courts repeatedly upheld the right of businesses, including railroads and buses, to refuse service to people with disabilities, reflecting attitudes of non-accommodation that resisted the imputation of any societal responsibility to enable access. So-called “ugly laws”—anti-panhandling ordinances that particularly targeted people with disabilities<sup>34</sup>—were of a piece with ableist policies of exclusion in public schools and elsewhere; in an infamous 1919 case, the Wisconsin State Supreme Court ruled that an educable student could be excluded from regular schools because his drooling and facial expressions had “a depressing and nauseating effect on the teachers and school children.”<sup>35</sup>

The early twentieth century was also the heyday of immigration laws banning disabled aliens from entering the country, marking them as an undifferentiated class of unproductive persons representing a drain on society.<sup>36</sup> As Longmore and Goldberger emphasize, some persons were not just physical invalids but were socially *invalid*—not quite full citizens, and

certainly not full cultural citizens: “they were represented as incapacitated for real participation in the community and the economy, incapable of usefully directing their lives, disruptive and disorderly, antithetical to those defined as *healthy* and *normal* . . . the inversion of socially legitimate persons.”<sup>37</sup> At the extreme end of this policy spectrum was eugenics, which enjoyed a highpoint of mainstream support during this period. Courts, medical professionals, and many others used disability as a criterion for establishing not merely an individual’s non-citizenship, but his or her non-personhood, leading to marriage restrictions, forced sterilization, and more.<sup>38</sup> The question of the nature of disability and able-bodiedness—and how society should police those boundaries—was thus an urgent issue involving high stakes for anyone identified as possessing a “disabled” mind or body.

Against this life-and-death political backdrop, the positive and negative dimensions of radio in disability policy emerge more clearly. By presenting radio as an enabler of integration into the national community as well as a technology of physical and emotional healing, the trope of the shut-in functioned as a discourse of both inclusion and exclusion. As discussed above, radio promised to give shut-ins greater access to the public sphere. By conferring partial cultural citizenship on persons with disabilities and conceptualizing broadcasting as a tool of social integration—albeit one-way and often self-serving—the voices championing radio for shut-ins were moving American society toward slightly greater inclusion for bodily non-normativity within the social fabric at a critical historical moment. While it would be a mistake to overstate this point, I argue that it was also no minor matter: at a time when eugenics was enjoying its political zenith, radio *did* play a role in more fully incorporating persons with disabilities—slightly but surely—into a vision of the modern American nation, both in political rhetoric and in fact. Through its articulation to disability, broadcasting helped advance the idea that even the

severely disabled could enjoy increased cultural citizenship through effective media policy, that the social isolation understood to inhere in disability could be reduced, and that the supposedly pitiable or even valueless lives of people with disabilities could be improved and made worth living.

It may help to put this point in more Foucauldian terms. As mentioned above, disability in the 1920s revealed a politically salient gap in the modern liberal state, representing a point of failure in the biopolitical management of the health of the population. One response to this gap was eugenics, a form of disavowal and exclusion: condemn the disabled themselves as inherently unfit to live and work in modern society, and contain or eradicate them accordingly. In contrast, the trope of the shut-in helped invigorate an alternative response to this failure: through radio, pursue the “virtual” integration of persons with disabilities into society (in both senses of virtual— technologized/simulated and effective/almost). One wishes this counter-narrative could have done more; it would be many more decades, many political and cultural developments (including Nazism and the disability rights movement), and many tens of thousands of impacted lives before even the “strong” form of eugenics was discredited in the United States. Nonetheless, it is clear that dominant discourses about radio’s potential social value participated, narrowly but significantly, in the long, slow work of resisting eugenicist policies and reimagining, in the realm of physical impairment, the relationship between the health of the individual body and the health of the social body.

Even on its own terms, of course, this virtual integration through radio remained far from a 21st-century vision of access, inclusion, and social justice. Indeed, the discourse of the shut-in simultaneously functioned as a rhetoric of ongoing exclusion, in part by allowing radio’s potential for social inclusion to substitute for greater physical, economic, political, and cultural

inclusion and participation. As Goggin and Newell point out, “That the social and discursive shaping of technologies proceeds via a promissory note that they will confer unalloyed benefits upon people with disabilities reveals a fundamentally flawed approach to disability.”<sup>39</sup> For example, if allowing disabled children into school had a “nauseating effect” on their able-bodied classmates, perhaps radio could solve the problem by bringing education to the disabled. As one teacher wrote, following a series of educational broadcasts in 1930, “Most gratifying of all were the letters from the mothers of shut-in children who could have through the radio a little of school work and school life brought to their homes.”<sup>40</sup> The prospect of education by radio, perhaps in conjunction with traditional correspondence courses, promised a technological fix to the problem of accommodating disabled students, one that asked little of mainstream society. Similarly, in all spheres of society, the discourse of the shut-in offered radio in lieu of reforms such as accessible spaces, non-discriminatory policies, or shifts in cultural attitudes. Radio thus became a way to *partially* integrate shut-ins into American life while resisting more ambitious attempts at integration that would have required adjustments within the broader society. Furthermore, by constructing the disabled as inherently passive—the “ideal abnormal” broadcast listener—there was no need to consider allowing shut-ins to produce and criticize cultural life, that is, to allow them agency or a voice on the airwaves themselves. Keeping shut-ins shut in also meant keeping them shut out.

A final way that radio and disability worked together in the early days of broadcasting was through normalization and the production of compulsory able-bodiedness. As Robert McRuer has theorized, “compulsory able-bodiedness” is the expectation that one will both agree that norms of able-bodiedness are preferable and that the good citizen strives to attain them. Enforced through “control of consciousness” (a term borrowed from Adrienne Rich) and, if

necessary, through violence (sometimes lethal), compulsory able-bodiedness requires the devaluation of disability as a condition of full citizenship.<sup>41</sup> The role of people with disabilities in this system, McRuer argues, is to embody the abnormal condition against which the able-bodied can be measured. Adds Allison Kafer, compulsory able-bodiedness renders problematic any desire to identify oneself as disabled, “suggesting that a disability identity is to be avoided at all cost.”<sup>42</sup> Here, too, the shut-in functioned as an “ideal abnormal,” this time in a sense akin to the “model minority” trope of racial difference, since this rhetoric consistently presumed that the shut-in wanted nothing more than to be an able-bodied participant in modern consumer culture and the capitalist order.<sup>43</sup>

Discourses of disability harnessed radio to the production of compulsory able-bodiedness by creating and enforcing norms about usage: who could listen to what kinds of radio, when, and where. For example, it is striking how frequently the shut-in was named as the ideal target of religious broadcasting, with the corollary condemnation of the able-bodied who listened to religious programs instead of coming to church. “Radio religion is not a substitute for public worship,” chided Rev. Dr. E. J. Van Etten, a popular Episcopalian pastor who broadcast services for shut-ins from his Pittsburgh church. “[Church] must become active and not passive.”<sup>44</sup> Rev. S. Parkes Cadman of New York had a weekly program on NBC but nonetheless feared losing the able-bodied to radio: “Many people throughout the country are only too willing to seize upon an excuse for staying away from church, and I did not care to offer them such an opportunity.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Rev. J. L. Davis of Manhattan complained that radio was a “cheap substitute,” making religion “too easy” by extracting it from the sociability of church.<sup>46</sup> Through such rhetoric, radio was constituted as a kind of spiritual prosthesis that most “normal” citizens should not need; indeed, if they leaned too heavily or often on the “crutch” of radio, they were likely to become

(spiritually) impaired themselves.

The same pressures toward able-bodiedness also applied to education, as illustrated in figure 1's depiction of a boy feigning illness instead of going to school; he'll make up his lessons by listening to school broadcasts for shut-in children. The cartoon suggests that educational programming is fine for cripples, but children who are able-bodied had better come to class. By representing shut-ins as "allowed" to use radio this way because—and only because—their disabilities prevent them from accessing social spaces, these discourses naturalized continued



Figure 1. Compulsory able-bodiedness at work: fears that broadcasting makes things “too easy” for the able-bodied. Source: *Milwaukee Journal*, March 10, 1929, 6.

non-accommodation in the physical world and enforced norms of able-bodiedness on the rest of the population. To this day, the close association of children's sick days from school with watching TV reveals the anxieties about the loss of social control introduced by the disembodied medium of broadcasting, anxieties that the shut-in helped negotiate at a critical moment in the technology's development.

As a final point in this section, it is worth noting that all this talk about shut-ins and broadcasting in the 1920s is even more striking when we consider what else was effectively absent: real technological accommodation in radio sets. I was unable to find any discussion of the practicalities of radio listenership for persons with disabilities, nor policy proposals intended to make radio itself more accessible. A radio receiver in the 1920s could be a seriously erratic device often requiring near-constant attention, including tweaking small, sensitive knobs and difficult-to-read dials. Broadcasts often veered off their intended frequency, and weather and electrical interference could make maintaining consistent reception a maddening task. On one level, the job of keeping the radio properly tuned was closely articulated to masculinity; as noted above, shut-ins occupied a feminized social space of passivity, meaning that they were already in some ways culturally "disqualified" from mastering the technology. But many shut-ins were physically disqualified as well: the ability to access the set implies a degree of mobility that many persons with disabilities did not have; the ability to tune implies fine motor coordination; etc. It is thus significant that, parallel to the absence of concern with social accommodation to benefit persons with disabilities entering the public sphere, there was almost no concern with technological accommodation to benefit persons with disabilities remaining within the private sphere. Radio set design and operation remained of and for the able-bodied, requiring many

persons with disabilities to enter into relationships of dependency to take advantage of the blessed boon of broadcasting.

### **Conclusions: Governmentality, Policy, and Biopower**

Interestingly, by the mid-1930s, the discourse of the shut-in had all but died out. While people with disabilities continued to figure in discussions of media technologies,<sup>47</sup> it was primarily in the first fifteen years of broadcasting that shut-ins were invoked with striking frequency. Clearly the shut-in was helping Americans think about radio at a brief, crucial moment when the purposes and structures of the medium were still up for grabs. A disability lens on radio thus reveals that the shut-in, as an “ideal abnormal” body, helped legitimize the extension of state power into new realms, justify the “American system” of national commercial radio, and resolve tensions around modernity and mass culture. Similarly, radio was helping Americans think about disability at a brief, crucial moment when U.S. society was coming to terms with an influx of war wounded, the ongoing reform impulses of the Progressive movement, and the implications of eugenicist policies. A media lens on disability thus shows us how radio was connected to new modes of compulsory able-bodiedness and functioned as a cultural technology of both inclusion and exclusion for persons with disabilities.

This study also has implications for the theorization of media, disability, governmentality, and biopower, adding to our understanding of the subtle and diverse ways that media policies became, in Foucault’s words, “techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.”<sup>48</sup> In this, it helps to remember the ways in which broadcasting does not neatly fit into typical categories of biopolitical technologies. The development of modern forms of governmentality are, according to Foucault, about “render[ing] the populace



visible to power and, hence, to regulation,” yet radio introduced new forms of public participation in which the majority of the populace could remain *invisible*.<sup>49</sup> Governmentality is about managing bodies, yet radio was widely seen as *disembodied*, and in contrast to prisons, clinics, and schools, did not directly regulate bodies in space nor require bodies to submit themselves to surveillance. Given those differences, the discourse of the shut-in helped construct radio as a biopolitical technology (despite its invisible listenership) by separating speaking from listening bodies; justifying the state’s control over who may speak; advancing an understanding of radio that reinforced biopolitically inflected ideologies of capitalism, modernity, and nationalism; and functioning as a node for the exercise of compulsory able-bodiedness. In radio’s absence of traditionally visible, confessing bodies, the imagined body of the all-inclusive “shut-in” became a useful mechanism of governmentality, allowing a symbolics of disability and able-bodiedness to guide the policymaking that transferred control of radio from unruly amateurs to disciplined delegates of the state, and then helped secure the place of corporate power and national culture within that sphere.

If instruments of governmentality, as Ouellette and Hay discuss, “[operate] as a network, distributed across various spheres of authority and expertise,” and if broadcasting “has become instrumental to the networks that now link the public, private, and personal programs and techniques for administering welfare,”<sup>50</sup> then the shut-in helps us better understand the ways in which that process unfolded. Radio in the 1920s had not yet been brought fully under the control of authorities and experts to become a technology of cultural citizenship. The shut-in, as a privileged stakeholder in radio, connected the publicness of radio speech, the privateness of radio listening, and the health and welfare of the populace. The trope helped justify the creation of an easily supervised ideological system that had the corollary effect of socially normalizing the

abnormal bodies that, at that key historical juncture, were especially troubling the governmental regulation of the population. Put another way, the trope of the shut-in helped manage the new configurations of bodies and speech that broadcasting introduced. At the same time, institutions that still needed bodies to regulate—churches, schools, workplaces—could draw on the trope of the shut-in to help enforce the performance of able-bodiedness upon which their logic depended.

The consequences for people with disabilities themselves were mixed. As a technological quick fix to the social “problem” of non-normative bodies, radio displaced calls for greater access, accommodation, and equality, and the discourse of the shut-in reinforced disabling stereotypes that justified the perpetuation of segregation and discrimination. Nonetheless, in constructing broadcasting as a technology that gave the lives of persons with disabilities more perceived value—a perception strongly endorsed by many shut-ins themselves—the discourse of the shut-in provided an alternative narrative to the eugenicist claim that abnormal bodies could never be incorporated into the healthy modern nation. For playing even a small part in undermining eugenics at its peak and representing people with disabilities as worthy of greater social inclusion, the discourse of the shut-in in the 1920s was itself, for all the complicatedness of its contributions, a blessed boon.

## Notes

This chapter is a heavily revised version of an essay that first appeared as Bill Kirkpatrick, “‘A Blessed Boon’: Radio, Disability, Governmentality, and the Discourse of the ‘Shut-In,’ 1920–1930,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 29, no. 3 (2012), 165–84. I especially thank Anna Rumbough for her contributions to this revision.

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- 1 Quin Ryan, "Inside the Loudspeaker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 10, 1929, J11.
  - 2 "Another 'other,'" as Catherine Kudlick put it ("Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other.'" *American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003). [www.historycooperative.org](http://www.historycooperative.org)).
  - 3 Shelley Tremain, *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5–6.
  - 4 "Broadcast Miscellany," *Radio Broadcast* 7, no. 6 (October 1925): 758.
  - 5 Despite countless farm women, the "farmer" trope was consistently gendered male, while the shut-in's gender was more ambiguous, in part due to the feminization of disability that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and others have discussed. See Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 28; for more on the gendering of disability see D. Travers Scott and Meagan Bates, "'It's Not Just Sexism': Feminization and (Ab)Normalization in the Commercialization of Anxiety Disorders," in *Disability Media Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (New York: New York University Press, 2017), in press. The shut-ins' seclusion in the private sphere further implied an underlying feminization above and beyond that which attached to their disability.
  - 6 David Sarnoff, "Radio and the Farmer" (Address at the University of Missouri, January 7, 1924), in *Looking Ahead: The Papers of David Sarnoff* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 53.
  - 7 "Deaf Ears Hear Again," *Radio Broadcast* 3, no. 5 (September 1923): 362–63; P. J. Risdon, "Radio for the Deaf," *Radio Broadcast* 2, no. 1 (November 1922): 63–64. See also Joy Fuqua, *Prescription TV: Therapeutic Discourse in the Hospital and at Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), especially chapter 1, on the deployment of radio by hospitals

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and the medical industry.

8 “Helen Keller Gets Music by Radio,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1924, S6.

9 Ibid.

10 See also Ellen Samuels, “Prosthetic Heroes: Curing Disabled Veterans in *Iron Man 3* and Beyond,” in *Disability Media Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (New York: New York University Press, 2017), in press.

11 A. J. DeLong, “What Radio Is Doing for Me,” *Radio Broadcast* 1, no. 5 (September 1922): 452.

12 Quoted in Timothy Taylor, “Music and the Rise of Radio in 1920s America: Technological Imperialism, Socialization, and the Transformation of Intimacy,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 22, no. 4 (October 2002): 425–43, p. 433.

13 Quoted in *ibid.*

14 See Kirkpatrick, “Localism in American Media Policy, 1920–1934: Reconsidering a ‘Bedrock Concept,’” *Radio Journal* 4, nos. 1–3 (2006): 87–110, for more on how the public was gradually excluded from a meaningful role in U.S. media regulation.

15 “The Practical Side of Radio,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 27, 1922, 10.

16 Ernest Pierce, “What Is the Future of Radio?,” *Leavenworth Post*, May 21, 1922, n.p.

17 “Opposes Jazz Airs on Sunday Radio,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1927, 19.

18 Paul K. Longmore, “Conspicuous Contribution and American Dilemmas: Telethon Rituals of Cleansing and Renewal,” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 134–58, p. 136.

19 See, for example, Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952*

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(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

20 Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell, “Foucault on the Phone: Disability and the Mobility of Government,” in *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, ed. Shelley Tremain (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 261–77.

21 Margaret Hastings, “The Arctic Listens,” *Radio Digest* 29, no. 6 (January 1933): 49.

22 A useful analogy here is to the popularity of efforts to “Americanize” immigrants so as to reduce not just the threat of communist infiltration, but also cultural diversity of all kinds. In other words, radio’s imputed ability to unify the nation by flattening linguistic and cultural diversity took many forms, of which the shut-in was but one.

23 Ada D. Harrison to Herbert Hoover, January 20, 1926, FRC Correspondence: Radio Division General Records, 1910–34 (RG173), FCC Office of Executive Director, General Correspondence 1926–47. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md., Box 139, Folder 1732. Emphasis in original.

24 “Conductor Tells Why Radio Won Him From Concert Halls,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1927, XX19.

25 Ibid.

26 Quin Ryan, “Inside the Loudspeaker,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 30, 1925, C14.

27 See, for example, Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

28 Paul K. Longmore and David Goldberger, “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History,” *Journal of American History* 87, no. 3 (December 2000): 888–922.

29 Quoted in Taylor, “Music and the Rise of Radio,” 433.

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- 30 Sally Joy Brown, "White City Chutes to Run Especially for Sally's Party," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 8, 1927, 21.
- 31 Sally Joy Brown, "A Friend in Need," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1925, E4.
- 32 Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
- 33 Longmore and Goldberger, "The League of the Physically Handicapped."
- 34 Quoted in Longmore and Goldberger, "The League of the Physically Handicapped," 894; see also Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 1–2.
- 35 See Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*.
- 36 Douglas Baynton, *Defectives in the Land* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- 37 Longmore and Goldberger, "The League of the Physically Handicapped," 895–6.
- 38 See, for example, Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 120.
- 39 Goggin and Newell, "Foucault on the Phone," 263.
- 40 William C. Bagley, "Radio in the Schools," *Elementary School Journal* 31, no. 4 (December 1930): 256–58.
- 41 Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 88–99.
- 42 Alison Kafer, "Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-Bodiedness," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 77–89, p. 80.
- 43 I thank Anna Rumbough for this insight about alternative meanings to "ideal abnormal."

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- 44 “Rector on Radio Religion,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1923, 5.
- 45 “Prominent Preachers Tell Value of Radio to Religion,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1924, XX13.
- 46 “Religion Too Easy, Dr. Davis Asserts,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1925, 18.
- 47 As in a 1938 NBC guide to programming standards: “Material which depends upon physical imperfections of deformities such as blindness, deafness, or lameness, for humorous effect is not acceptable. Physical infirmities are far from ludicrous to those afflicted, therefore radio must seek other sources for its humor.” National Broadcasting Company, “Basic Broadcasting Policies,” 1938, Box 93, Fldr. 43, National Broadcasting Company Files, 1921–1942. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
- 48 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 140.
- 49 Tony Bennett, “The Political Rationality of the Museum,” in *Critical Cultural Policy Studies: A Reader*, ed. Justin Lewis and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 180–87, p. 186.
- 50 Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 9.