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### "A Blessed Boon": Radio, Disability, Governmentality, and the Discourse of the "Shut-In," 1920-1930

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# "A Blessed Boon": Radio, Disability, Governmentality, and the Discourse of the "Shut-In," 1920–1930

Bill Kirkpatrick

*One of the most frequently invoked figures in U.S. policy discourse in the 1920s was the "shut-in" to whom radio technology promised greater integration in national life. Radio's ability to transcend distance was widely hailed as a "blessed boon" to those whose disability was seen to prevent their full participation in American society.*

*While the technology undoubtedly improved the lives of countless disabled persons, the actual listening practices of shut-ins were largely secondary to political strategies that put disability at the center of media policy. Indeed, the shut-in was second only to the noble farmer as the rhetorical figure of choice in debates over the future direction of American radio, with the discourse of disability used primarily to justify policies favoring fewer high-powered national radio stations over more lower-powered stations. At the same time, the discourse helped shape understandings of disability itself in both negative and positive ways, with radio constructed as a technology of both inclusion and exclusion.*

*This paper situates the discourse of the shut-in within the theoretical concerns of Foucauldian governmentality, and at the intersection of critical cultural policy studies and critical disability studies. It reveals the importance of dis/ability to the processes of refashioning communication technologies into instruments of governmentality, as well as the role of media technology in issues of compulsory able-bodiedness and the imagination of "ideal abnormal" bodies that can be subjected to management.*

*Keywords: Critical cultural policy studies; Critical disability studies; Radio broadcasting; Media policy; Governmentality*

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I am a shut-in, confined to my bed for thirty-eight years, and when a radio was placed by my bed, the world came to me. I never dreamed I should have such wonderful music and splendid offerings as I have—it has made me so happy! I have followed you to the evolution trial, to football games . . . May God bless you in this wonderful work, and I shall be right here to listen whenever you are on the air. (An anonymous letter-writer to Chicago's WGN, quoted in Ryan, 1925, p. C14)

When broadcasting arose in the 1920s, radio was widely hailed as a social and cultural marvel, to the point of quickly becoming a cliché. But for the above listener and countless other persons with disabilities, radio must have seemed not just marvelous but miraculous, a heaven-sent device capable of taking individuals who had been bed-ridden for decades—with all the social isolation that implied—and transporting them to the symphony, the Army–Navy game, or even Dayton, Tennessee. Hundreds of letters to newspapers and stations attest to the joy many “shut-ins” found in listening to the radio.

But as frequently as persons with disabilities spoke about radio, more often they were spoken *for*, held up as especially worthy beneficiaries of the “blessed boon” of broadcasting. Indeed, the shut-in was second only to the noble farmer as the trope of choice in discussions about the social meanings of broadcasting in the 1920s. *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,” and the magazine was correct: the shut-in was invoked relentlessly by journalists, politicians, broadcasters, and audiences as they struggled to make sense of the new technology of radio (Broadcast miscellany, 1925).

More important than the striking prevalence of this trope, however, was the wide range of cultural and political work it performed—both for persons with disabilities *and* for radio. In this essay I will explore how the widespread invocation of shut-ins, in both the popular and radio press, helped to shape radio policy, discipline citizens' attitudes and behaviors regarding the technology, and justify certain economic and social relations in the 1920s. Additionally, I will explore how the shut-in shaped the social meanings of disability and able-bodiedness: the discursive intersection of radio and disability affected Americans' understanding of both, facilitating a re-imagining of wireless technology through the lens of disability as well as the re-imagining of disability through the lens of radio's emerging affordances. In tracing the various ways this co-articulation operated as media policy, as disability policy, and as governmentality more generally, I argue that early media policy both enabled and constrained constructions of disability and empowerment, and that constructions of disability both enabled and constrained the development of the media system in the U.S.

Within this broad thesis, the discourse of the shut-in matters for several reasons. First, the shut-in helps to reveal how new communications technologies came to be incorporated into modern liberal modes of governance, enabling radio to be imagined as a new means of “biopower” managing the health and wellbeing of the populace. Foucault (2007, p. 1) defines biopower as “the set of mechanisms through

which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy,” and a growing body of work uses Foucault to think about how media technologies become part of governmentality, or “the ways in which one conducts the conduct of men” (Foucault, 2008, p. 186; see also Bennett, 2003a; Ouellette & Hay, 2008a; McCarthy, 2010; Mills, 2011). But how do/did specific media technologies themselves (as distinct from the speech that was transmitted through them) come to take their place within a logic of biopolitical governance and self-regulation? As I will demonstrate, one way this happened was by connecting the mysterious, ethereal technology of radio to the physical plight of the shut-in, making an intangible phenomenon more easily imaginable as one that had bodily consequences and effects, thereby facilitating the relationship between broadcasting technology and the conduct of everyday life. At the same time, these discourses reinforced a “compulsory able-bodiedness” (Kafer, 2003) that disciplined how and for what purposes radio was to be used, producing differently abled bodies with differing degrees of citizenship for different applications and techniques of governance.

Second, in terms of media policy, the shut-in helped construct radio in ways that called forth more direct regulatory action to secure it as a noble social good: radio became a nothing less than a therapeutic device (rather than, say, a toy for small boys or a frivolous luxury), and this understanding both animated and helped justify a deeper involvement of the state in determining who would broadcast, under what conditions, and to what ends. In this context, the shut-in became a privileged constituent of the media system, legitimating state intervention in the service of building a “professional” and “national” broadcasting system that would minister to these sad and broken listeners across the country. At the same time, the shut-in became a metaphor for the ideal passive listener, one of the key tropes through which the value of high-powered, one-to-many radio was advanced.

Third, in terms of the ways that media helped to produce meanings of disability and able-bodiedness, the discourse of the shut-in had contradictory effects. In often very practical ways, early conceptions of “correct” uses of radio were often disciplined by an ontology of able-bodiedness; the shut-in functioned as an “ideal abnormal” body for whom broadcasting enabled only partial political and cultural citizenship, while full citizenship was reserved for the “normal” able-bodied citizen. By segregating the able-bodied from the disabled—the active, self-regulating full citizen from the passive, other-assisted partial citizen—the discourse of the shut-in helped reinforce contemporaneous notions about the relative value of disabled identities to the modern state. It is true that broadcasting was imagined as a way to reconnect persons with disabilities to the social fabric: if the problem of shut-ins was their inability to get out into the world and participate in the nation as full cultural citizens, then now they could stay put and broadcasting would bring the world to them. However, this “inclusion via wireless” demanded no real change or accommodation from able-bodied society, no adaptations of the law or the built environment. Nonetheless, and at the same time, radio did promise a technological “repair” to persons with disabilities, providing new ways to turn complete “invalids”

into partial “valids.” Thus the promise of re-abling persons with disabilities through radio, although physically exclusionary, was also culturally inclusionary, contributing in a small but important way to the long and ongoing process of imagining persons with disabilities as full cultural citizens.

Finally, this study seeks to bring media policy studies more effectively into dialogue with disability studies. Over the past decade, critical media policy studies has increasingly taken a cultural turn, drawing heavily on Foucault to reconnect the technical, legal, and economic actions of official policymakers with questions of ideology and the role of culture in public and private life. This move in policy studies has paralleled developments in critical disability studies, which also uses Foucauldian concepts of governmentality, biopower, and biopolitics to understand the practices through which modern states manage and regulate populations through “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies” (Foucault, 1988, p. 140), including the technologies through which certain individuals are classified and set apart as abnormal (Tremain, 2005, pp. 5–6). Bringing these two fields—critical policy studies and critical disability studies—into dialogue allows us to see the operations of disability at work in the structure and regulation of the media system, while also illustrating the benefit to disability studies from greater attention to the ways that media policy produces compulsory able-bodiedness, not merely in the disabling effects of the technologies resulting from those policies, but also in and through the discursive realm of “policy” itself, i.e. media policymaking as a normalizing discourse that works to medicalize and regulate populations.

The analysis presented below thus transcends the specific context of 1920s broadcasting to inform more generally our study of media, disability, policymaking, and governmentality. The co-construction of media policy and disability suggests new ways to think about biopolitics, in this case revealing how new communication technologies were turned into instruments of governmentality and adapted to the management of life: by looking at specific discourses and procedures through which broadcasting and disability were articulated to each other, we see how media structures and policies (not solely, as is usually considered, media content) came to help regulate conduct and establish the parameters of modern citizenship.

### **The discourse of the shut-in at the birth of broadcasting**

In 1929, the *Chicago Tribune* published a feature on the Nighthawks, a Kansas City jazz band that played on the radio late at night, and told the story of 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” (Ryan, 1929, p. J11).

This tale, one of thousands of mentions of shut-ins during the first decade of broadcasting, illustrates many of the qualities that make discourses of disability interesting to policy studies and questions of governmentality. A catch-all term, “shut-ins” most frequently referred to those who by illness or injury were consigned to a life of hospitalization or homebound infirmity; the term gained flexibility by downplaying the specific physicalities of persons with disabilities in favor of the socio-spatial consequences of their “abnormal” bodies: shut-ins were socially isolated and external to mainstream society, silent consumers of culture rather than active producers of it. In this regard, shut-ins resembled the oft-invoked farmer: both were imagined as passive listeners, although in the case of the shut-in this passivity was literally embodied through the degradation of disablement, whereas the farmer was ennobled by the physicality of his toil. Furthermore, while the farmer may have wanted for “human contact, human sympathy, and culture” (Sarnoff, 1968, p. 53), this was due to his geographic remoteness from urban centers. In contrast, shut-ins—in popular imagination if not always in fact—could not enter the social world even if they wanted to: their broken bodies made them *too* socially remote, too unreachable. As in the Nighthawks example, physical isolation functioned as a facile metaphor for social isolation, and in both cases radio was represented as the herald of civilization bringing culture to the literal or figurative wilderness. Only radio could abate this “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 community into the modern nation, the great virtue of the shut-in was to highlight technology’s ability to complete us as human beings, spiritually and physically. The abnormal body of the shut-in thereby became a particularly apt demonstration of the modern technocratic repair of body and soul, helping to claim broadcasting for biopolitics: the healing power of radio technology, properly deployed, could assist the modern liberal state in its duty of maintaining the overall health and wellbeing of the population by “re-abling” society’s weakest members and restoring them to some degree of cultural participation. Radio promised to provide 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 such as “Deaf Ears Hear Again Through the Magic of Radio” and “Radio for the Deaf” (Deaf ears, 1923; Risdon, 1922). Both the popular press and the specialty radio press regularly touted the healing power of radio, including the therapeutic use of radio in ambulances, hospitals, and doctors’ offices, as well as reports of otherwise completely deaf persons who were nonetheless able to “hear” thanks to radio. No less a personage than Helen Keller wrote of spending “a glorious hour last night listening over the radio to Beethoven’s ‘Ninth Symphony’” (Helen Keller, 1924). Although Keller was referring to her ability to feel 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 WEAH for the joy they are broadcasting in the world” (Helen Keller, 1924).

If radio helped move persons with disabilities back toward a physical norm of able-bodiedness, it also provided spiritual uplift and repair for the mind and soul. For example, a shut-in from Lafayette, Indiana wrote in 1922, “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” (DeLong, 1922). A Brooklyn medical superintendent insisted in 1922, “Think what [radio] 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” (quoted in Taylor, 2002, p. 433). Radio could even disrupt the long-held equation of disabled bodies and feeble minds in popular lore as shut-ins, considered barely sentient prior to radio, underwent a kind of mental rebirth through the act of listening in: “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 . . . because of the interest, the life, the health that radiates from radio” (quoted in Taylor, 2002, p. 433).

This conception of therapeutic management through the co-articulation of radio and disability also helped secure, much as Foucault claims that sexuality did, new extensions of power into the realm of bodily regulation, particularly for “abnormal” bodies. For instance, the figure of the shut-in as a privileged stakeholder in radio’s development reaffirmed the middle-class politics of intrusion at the heart of Victorian sentimentality and tapped into two strands of the Progressive movement: the impulse for interventionist uplift and moral charity, and the impulse to use modern technology and expertise to solve social problems. The charitable efforts of middle-class reformers and religious progressives had a long history in the U.S. (see, for example, Boyer, 1978); following World War I, these efforts often turned to helping veterans and other disabled citizens.<sup>1</sup>

Given the supposed 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 provide hospitals with radio in the “firm conviction that in the near future every institution will be equipped with radio apparatus. Endless vistas are opened for the bed-ridden and shut-ins generally” (quoted in Taylor, 2002, p. 433). Ordinary citizens often donated their used sets to shut-ins; the *Chicago Tribune*’s “Friend in Need” columns frequently 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” (Brown, 1927). 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.” The column’s editor, Sally Joy Brown, added: “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” (Brown, 1925).

The importance of these discourses for media and biopolitics is profound. At a time when the populace was becoming more aware of and interested in radio, the shut-in trope constructed broadcasting as a new means of managing bodies and governing those who could otherwise not govern themselves. The “abnormal” bodies and social isolation of America’s shut-ins became the target of middle-class virtue and the evidence of radio’s transformative power; simultaneously, they helped to establish the range of “normal” physical and social life to which other citizens, better able to regulate themselves and their bodies, should strive. In terms of modern liberal governance, radio became a symbol of liberal capitalism and the modern state’s ability to fulfill its own promises: if persons with disabilities revealed the limits of the state’s capacity to manage the health and well-being of the population, radio promised to overcome those limits and confer greater degrees of cultural citizenship on even the weakest. Radio was thus a double win for biopolitics: fixing bodies and, with them, fixing the ability of the modern sovereign to care for its people.

### **“Disabling government”: The shut-in in media policy**

The plethora of references to the shut-in during the 1920s becomes even more interesting when we examine to what specific policy ends this trope was used. 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 the shut-in reveal ways of imagining the technology that would become official state policy in the U.S. by the end of the decade?

I argue that three ways of “knowing” radio emerged in and through discourses of disability in the 1920s. First, the shut-in was the perfect passive listener justifying one-to-many broadcasting. For the first two decades of the twentieth century, radio was primarily a two-way medium—first as “the wireless telegraph” and then as simply “the wireless,” allowing amateur operators to connect around the globe. These wireless amateurs were the site of more than a little social anxiety and regulatory work to contain and control them; when their privileges were suspended during World War II, it was only after a protracted fight that amateurs were allowed to retain any access to the airwaves at all. With the advent of broadcasting, when the potential of wireless as a mass medium became apparent, the interest of the state in regulating its operations grew even greater: if, as had been the norm for 20 years, pretty much anyone could speak to anyone, what would prevent radio—and by extension society as a whole—from slipping governmental control entirely as the hobby went mainstream? The answer that evolved was, in effect, 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 society into audiences. Indeed, the story of radio policy in the 1920s is largely the story of progressively reducing the number of broadcasters, a move that was often justified by the need of shut-ins to receive a clear signal (a point I will return to shortly). Amateurs would continue to be tolerated, of



course, but the government relocated their activities to what was believed to be the most useless part of the spectrum and placed restrictions on what they could transmit. For the rest of the population, radio would quickly come to mean only a loudspeaker, not a microphone. Tapping into commonplace notions of speech as active and listening as passive, the imagined passivity of persons with disabilities as privileged constituents of the radio system helped legitimate this one-way conception of radio.

Second, the shut-in's need for radio entertainment helped allay concerns about emerging mass-consumer culture by assuring observers and policymakers that even the often frivolous (as its critics saw it) content of radio could serve a noble social purpose. As broadcasting gained popularity, and ever more middle-class families acquired radios, the cultural perception of a radio set shifted from a hobbyist's "toy" to a bourgeois "luxury," feeding concerns about materialism, sociability, and the intellectual life of the nation (a perception that remains very much alive, particularly in attitudes toward television). In this struggle over the cultural position of radio, shut-ins 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 newspaper in 1922, but when people are "shut in and denied other entertainment . . . radio can not be said to be merely a craze" (The practical side of radio, 1922). Similarly, a 1922 syndicated column claimed that radio was not "a fad, a new toy or plaything," arguing that "for invalids—those confined to their homes, it will come as a blessed boon . . . to pass the weary hours" (Pierce, 1922).

The whiff of hedonism that attended to radio became more acute as the trends toward entertainment programming and advertising intensified, as evidenced by the raft of apologists insisting on radio's social value in the face of "decadent" jazz music and stultifying hair-tonic ads. When New York's Keep-the-Air-Clean-on-Sunday Society protested WMCA's airing of jazz on Sunday evenings, for example, the station's bandleader fought back by claiming that "400 disabled soldiers enjoyed his radio hour every Sunday and would miss it greatly if it were discontinued" (Opposes jazz, 1927). Thus the shut-in's enjoyment of entertainment provided, in the late 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" (Longmore, 1997, p. 136). This discourse, in turn, helped justify state regulation of radio as a noble social good that was central to the management of life and the well-ordered society.

Third, and most related to "policy" as traditionally understood, invocations of the shut-in were most often connected to support for a particular (and particularly contentious) form of radio: high-powered, national, commercial broadcasting. In other words, the shut-in did not justify simply any kind of radio but specifically *national* radio. New media technologies frequently get deployed for nation-building, and even without the state-sanctioned radio monopolies of most countries, U.S. radio was used to help construct and defend national identity and nationalism, often through racial and gender exclusion (see, for example, Hilmes, 1997). Goggin and Newell (2005), in their study of mobile telephony, add disability to this list of

exclusions, claiming that “people with disabilities were systematically excluded from this nation-building project” (Goggin & Newell, 2005, p. 264). This perspective, however, elides the *inclusive* discursive construction of disability at critical times in the development of national media structures. Although persons with disabilities did not enjoy full cultural citizenship in the early twentieth century (a condition, one feels obliged to point out, that despite improvements continues in the twenty-first century), the rhetoric of disability was nonetheless instrumental in helping imagine and promote an inclusive vision of national radio that, not coincidentally, happened to benefit the largest commercial broadcasters, helping settle the question of who should be allowed to broadcast and why.

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 the telephone), whether it would become corporate-run and advertising-supported, what role state experts would play in its management, and whether it would become a national or primarily local system. Closely tied to these issues was the question of transmitter power: as the Commerce Department moved to increase wattages for some stations, the public divided on whether a more local, low-powered system was preferable or whether fewer high-powered stations, owned by national corporations with the resources to broadcast artists and events of national interest, should dominate U.S. radio. In these debates, the value of serving geographically remote areas (as perceived from the vantage of “civilization,” i.e. of cosmopolitan urban centers) became one way to legitimize high-powered broadcasting.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, and by metaphorical extension, the shut-in’s *social* remoteness allowed advocates of high-powered broadcasting to justify special privileges. One important instance occurred in 1925 when the Commerce Department approved “super-power” for RCA’s station WJZ in Bound Brook, NJ, outraging those who feared an RCA monopoly in radio or the disappearance of low-powered, locally oriented stations. Listeners up and down the east coast wrote to Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover praising WJZ’s offerings, complaining about interference, or objecting to corporate broadcasting. Once again, the social and physical “uselessness” of the shut-in was used as evidence of the “usefulness” of high-powered radio and corporate mass entertainment. A Mrs. Ada Harrison, 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: “Being blind this radio music means so much to her. Of course there are *many others* like Mother in far distant places that will be deprived of WJZ’s splendid musical programs and perhaps get nothing at all of worth, if the station at Bound Brook is cut down in power.” 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?” (Harrison, 1926).

The major broadcasters themselves had a stake in using shut-ins to justify beaming urban culture 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, the shut-in:

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, for instance, 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. (Conductor tells, 1927)

In case anyone missed the point—that if New York musicians are to entertain the shut-ins of Iowa, we need to keep the channels clear and the power high—it was hammered home 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” (Conductor tells, 1927).

As is by now well known, governmental control soon did 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 “national” channels. Of course this outcome resulted from multiple political, economic, technological, and cultural factors; nonetheless, the discourse of the shut-in played its part, especially by defining broadcasting in moral terms and imagining the audience as passive and in need of “quality” culture provided by trusted stewards of the airwaves. One could almost entitle this article “Poster children for NBC,” since the borrowed credibility of the shut-in was invoked primarily to advocate for high-powered, national radio, and almost never for local, non-commercial radio (the only significant exception was religious programming, discussed below). The modern liberal state, charged with caring for the well-being of the populace, found in the shut-in strong justification for refashioning radio for the art of government.

### **The deployment of able-bodiedness: The media in disability policy**

There is no denying that a great many persons with disabilities benefited greatly from radio, and their letters fill the archives and the newspaper columns of the day. “I am not able to write to you myself, but a dear brother is writing this for me,” read a letter to a religious broadcaster from a “wheel chair invalid” who had also been blind for eight years. “How wonderfully I enjoyed hearing the sermon and the music . . . I wish

that all shut in blind people could have [a radio]" (Radio fund). As such letters attest, radio was unquestionably a "blessed boon" for countless individuals.

But how did this pleasure in radio experienced by persons with disabilities at the individual level translate into governance at the societal level? Put another way, if disability, through the trope of the shut-in, played an important role in radio policy, how did radio through this same trope function as disability policy? The short answer is: by producing a new mode of limited, disabled citizenship, partially culturally included through broadcasting, but physically still excluded. It helped move at least some persons with disabilities from a category of non-citizen, with little-to-no value to their life, to a category of limited citizen for whom some quality of life was possible, particularly in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual realms. It did so, however, without ever questioning the disabling structures and attitudes of U.S. society at large, including the disabling technologies of the radio itself. Radio became, in Foucauldian terms, a technology of normalization: through the magic of broadcasting bringing mainstream culture to the homebound, radio promised to reincorporate the disabled body into the social body, i.e. making persons with disability functionally "able-bodied" from a social perspective. The effect of this normalizing work, however, was to keep the shut-in, physically, shut in.

To understand this, it helps to review the cultural and political status of persons with disabilities during this era, including radio's role in reinforcing what Kafer (2003) has called "compulsory able-bodiedness." As Susan Schweik (2009) demonstrates, the early twentieth century witnessed intense struggle over the meanings of disability and its relationship to "normalcy." Public policy often explicitly marginalized and devalued persons with disabilities, preferring the path of segregation over integration. They 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 an attitude of non-accommodation that resisted the imputation of any societal responsibility to enable access. Similarly, public schools often balked at educating students with special needs; 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" (Alexander & Alexander, 2005, p. 486). Persons with disabilities who attempted to live within an able-bodied mainstream were frequently regarded with suspicion or even open hostility, a social current reflected in anti-panhandling ordinances that outlawed many persons with disabilities from even showing themselves in public.<sup>3</sup>

Such laws may have been narrowly intended to prevent begging, but they represent just one facet of the widespread stigmatization of disability in the service of social control. For example, this was also the heyday of immigration laws banning physically abnormal aliens (persons with disabilities, persons who were sexually ambiguous, etc.) from entering the country, marking them as an undifferentiated class of unproductive persons representing a drain on society. In other words, some persons

were not just physical invalids, but, as Longmore and Goldberger emphasize, they were socially *invalid*—not quite full citizens, certainly not full cultural citizens: “[T]hey 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” (2000, pp. 895–896). At the extreme end of this policy spectrum was the use of disability as a criterion for establishing not merely an individual’s non-citizenship, but his or her non-personhood, or as Eden Osucha (2009) put it, for determining which humans are “killable.” This took the form of popular and legal support for eugenics through marriage restriction, forced sterilization, and euthanasia (Schweik, 2009, p. 120). At the birth of broadcasting, then, disability policy was not merely guilty of non-accommodation but was actually premised on cultural and physical exclusion up to and including death.

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” body. As Alison Kafer (2003) and Robert McRuer (2006) have theorized, such “compulsory able-bodiedness” is enforced both through violence (sometimes lethal) and “control of consciousness,” a term borrowed from Adrienne Rich (Kafer, 2003; McRuer, 2006; Rich, 1994, pp. 23–75). Specifically, disability does not reduce to ontological status—no categorical segregation is possible based solely on physical features. Instead, disability is a discursive category, with particular bodies classified as disabled based on their perceived deviance from an idealized norm of able-bodiedness. Since these abnormal bodies threaten the health and wellbeing of the populace at large, as Foucault characterizes one aspect of governmentality, persons with disabilities easily become the object of suspicion and social coercion through technologies of normalization.

In the discourse of the shut-in, we can see early broadcasting’s role in this coercion toward able-bodiedness, helping to segregate persons with disabilities from the able-bodied, with differing privileges and responsibilities for each. One particularly important dimension of this was the ways in which broadcasting gave rise to anxieties over the loss of sociability, anxieties that were displaced onto the shut-in. In other words, as radio introduced new modes of public life, able-bodiedness became the guarantor of a mode of cultural citizenship uncorrupted by radio’s private form of publicness (see Loviglio, 2005). One simple example appears in a letter that a listener sent to Secretary Hoover asking whether one was expected to stand up at home when the national anthem was played on the radio, a question that presumes a degree of able-bodiedness in its concern over how to embody good citizenship within radio’s invisible public (Maerz, 1925). More striking, however, is how frequently the shut-in was invoked 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 an Episcopalian pastor who broadcast services for shut-ins from his Pittsburgh church. “It must become active and not passive” (Rector, 1923). Similarly, Rev. Cadman of New York 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” (Prominent preachers, 1924). His solution was to offer a regular, unbroadcast Sunday morning service for the able-bodied congregation, and then air an afternoon sermon for the shut-ins. Radio thus simultaneously *aided* the souls of those whom corporate worship, dependent on a certain degree of mobility, left out, but *threatened* the souls of those who were perceived as able-bodied, becoming a “cheap substitute” that made religion “too easy” by extracting it from the sociability of church (Religion too easy, 1925).<sup>4</sup>

Just as radio could help the souls of those excluded from church, it could help the minds of those excluded from school. After all, if allowing disabled children into the classroom had a “nauseating effect” on their classmates, perhaps radio could solve the problem by bringing education to the disabled. As one teacher wrote following a series of educational broadcasts, “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” (Bagley, 1930, p. 257). Once again, this was accompanied by a compulsory able-bodiedness, disciplining those who would use radio to substitute for public participation; in Figure 1, for example, the cartoonist invokes the malingering child who tries to stay home and listen to radio instead of properly living out his able-bodied citizenship by getting out of bed and going to school. Through such discourses, broadcasting was constituted as a crutch that most “normal” citizens should not need; indeed, if they leaned too heavily or too often on the crutch of radio, they were likely to become (spiritually, culturally) impaired themselves.

By broadcasting church services and school lessons, as well as cultural events, political speeches, and more, radio promised a technological fix to the difficulty of integrating disabled bodies more effectively into the citizenry. It did so, however, without asking much of mainstream society at all. Radio became a substitute for solutions from the realms of architecture, the law, and health and welfare programs; it hardly needs reiterating that such strategies are problematic.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, by constructing persons with disabilities as necessarily passive, there was no need to consider allowing shut-ins to produce and criticize cultural life, that is, to allow them agency. Keeping shut-ins shut in, then, also meant keeping them shut out.

This emphasis on control of consciousness and denial of agency emerges even more profoundly when we consider what was effectively absent from mainstream discourses of the shut-in and radio: real technological accommodation at the level of the radio apparatus itself. In other words, for all the talk of shut-ins and radio in the 1920s, I was unable to find any discussion of the practicalities of radio listenership for persons with disabilities. A radio receiver in the early 1920s was a seriously erratic device often requiring near-constant attention, including tweaking small, sensitive knobs and difficult-to-read dials. Broadcasts had a tendency to veer off their intended frequency, and weather and electrical interference could make consistent signal reception a maddening task. The technology itself thus had a biopolitics and enforced its own kind of compulsory able-bodiedness: the ability to access the set implied a



**Figure 1.** Compulsory able-bodiedness at work: concern about the social and moral effects of broadcasting making things “too easy” for the able-bodied.

To this day, the close association of children’s sick days 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 alleviate at a critical moment in the technology’s development.

Source: *Milwaukee Journal*, March 10, 1929, p. 6.

degree of mobility that many persons with disabilities did not have; the ability to tune implied fine motor coordination; etc. Many shut-ins were thus physically disqualified from using the technology, meaning they were forced to enter into yet another relationship of dependency to take advantage of the blessed boon of broadcasting.<sup>6</sup> Mara Mills (2011, p. 130) has called this form of biopower “an *ergonomopolitics of objects* . . . the molding and regulation of technology according to human norms”—in the case of radio, norms of able-bodiedness. In terms of how the discourse of the shut-in became a form of disability policy, then, it is significant that, parallel to the absence of concern with social change to benefit persons with disabilities entering the public sphere, there was an absence of concern with technological change to benefit persons with disabilities remaining within the private sphere. One can reasonably blame technical limitations—radio manufacturers were certainly doing their best to simplify the technology—but the point is that this dimension of the relationship between the shut-in and radio was rarely talked about, and the bedrock conception of persons with disabilities as helpless, dependent, and lesser was rarely



**Figure 2.** “The Shut-in’s Sunday Service” from 1923. The image exemplifies the close connection between shut-ins and religious broadcasting in which the shut-in—passive, feminized, and confined to the domestic sphere—functioned as an “ideal abnormal” for the production of compulsory able-bodiedness. Note, too, the complexity of the radio apparatus, which required a certain degree of mobility and fine-motor coordination to be usable.

Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog, Reproduction Number LC-USZ62-134575.

questioned. From policy to content to set design, the entire conception of radio was premised on able-bodied systems of being and knowing, guaranteeing that radio would remain mostly of, by, and for the able-bodied.

Nonetheless, in this exploration of how the discourse of the shut-in produced effects of separation, segregation, and dependency, it is also crucial to note the construction of radio as a mode of cultural inclusion of persons with disabilities. Keeping in mind Osucha’s point about struggles to define which humans are legitimately “killable,” the discourse of the shut-in, in presenting radio as a repair to the “problem” of disability, did make “invalids” a little more socially “valid.” 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 toward greater inclusion for persons with disabilities within the social fabric. Radio therefore represents an important early site where the modern art of government was articulated to the amelioration of disability, an early technology through which the state moved to take responsibility for the social inclusion of more of its citizens. At a time when eugenics was enjoying its greatest vogue, this was no minor matter. I am not arguing that the trope of the shut-in was necessarily progressive, but it did play a role in incorporating disability—slightly but surely—into a vision of the modern



American nation. The deployment of a compulsory able-bodiedness, although clearly harmful in countless ways to the interests of people with disabilities, nonetheless contained within its articulation to radio the idea that even abnormal persons could be made substantially more “normal” through effective media policy. Radio policymaking thus participated in the work of discrediting eugenics policies and disentangling, in the realm of physical impairment, the health of the individual body from the health of the social body, a move with incalculably important consequences and, ultimately, a “blessed boon” for society as a whole.

### Conclusions: Governmentality, policy, and biopower

Interestingly, by the 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>7</sup> it was only in the 1920s that shut-ins were invoked with striking frequency. This suggests that, aside from the specific questions of media and disability policy already discussed, the shut-in was helping Americans think about radio in particular ways at a historical moment when its purposes and structures were still being shaped. That process occurred through official policy, of course, but also through culture, through a societal re-imagining of wireless technology. This medium that for two decades had been thought in one way—as a technology for speaking as well as listening, on which anyone potentially had a voice—had to be re-thought another way: as primarily a technology for listening, not for speaking except by the privileged few.

The emphasis on the shut-in in this process illustrates the ways that media policy coalesced around not only the project of managing bodies through normalization, but the discursive construction of an “ideal abnormal” body that could be subjected to management and justify the extension of state power into new realms. In this sense, the biopolitical significance of media policy deserves further scrutiny. Foucault (1988, p. 140) writes that “an explosion of . . . techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” marked the beginning of the era of biopower, but it is not self-evident how particular technologies like radio were refashioned through policy to accomplish these ends. In some ways, in fact, the conscription of radio for the conduct of conduct requires even more explanation, since it seems to defy many common definitions of governmentality. For example, the development of modern forms of governmentality is about “render[ing] the populace visible to power and, hence, to regulation” (Bennett, 2003b, p. 186), yet radio technology left the populace largely *invisible*. Modern forms of governmentality are about managing bodies, yet radio was 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—indeed, it allowed many of the most problematic bodies to remain shut away. Modern forms of governmentality frequently require “confession,” yet broadcasting allowed—even required—listeners to remain silent. Finally, as Ouellette and Hay (2008b, p. 9) discuss, instruments of

governmentality “[operate] as a network, distributed across various spheres of authority and expertise,” yet radio in the early 1920s had not yet been brought under the control of authorities and experts to become a technology of cultural citizenship.

I argue, then, that in radio’s absence of traditionally visible, confessing bodies, the imagined “ideal abnormal” body of the all-inclusive “shut-in” became a necessary mechanism of biopolitics, allowing a symbolics of able-bodiedness to guide the policymaking that transferred primary control of radio from unruly amateurs to disciplined delegates of the state. Ouellette and Hay are certainly correct that broadcasting “has become instrumental to the networks that now link the public, private, and personal programs and techniques for administering welfare,” but first it had to undergo the processes of policy formation that promised, among other things, to normalize the abnormal bodies that theretofore had troubled the governmental regulation of population.

Put another way, the trope of the shut-in helped resolve the tensions between the management of bodies and the management of consciousness that—although they certainly arose prior to the advent of broadcasting—were made particularly acute with its arrival. Through the act of social imagination by which the shut-in became a privileged stakeholder in radio, the speaking body of the broadcaster could be separated from the listening body of the population and thereby identified, regulated, and controlled. Both its speech and manner of speaking could be brought under the authority of the state, while the invisible listening body of the shut-in disciplined the manner of reception by its example. At the same time, however, institutions that still needed bodies to regulate—churches, schools, workplaces—could draw on the trope of the shut-in to help enforce the compulsory able-bodiedness upon which their logic depended.

The result was, within a few years, the refashioning of the dominant mode of radio from a speak/listen technology largely outside the surveillance of the state into a state-authorized listen-only instrument of governmentality managing both consciousness and bodies. A sense of higher cultural purpose for radio helped justify greater state involvement, but it also legitimized the gradual process of what Walter Damsch called “cleaning the air for better broadcasting,” i.e. reducing Americans’ capacity to originate and respond to speech, and shunting off those amateurs who remained into what were thought to be spaces of limited viability. By way of comparison—and to give this media history greater contemporary resonance—we are witnessing similar moves today in the desire of the state to restrict and control a wide range of online speech. In other words, the state’s current inability (as of this writing) to commit to policies of internet openness and neutrality appears to be one dimension of this latest refashioning of a technology into a more effective instrument of governmentality. The analogy of early radio policy and contemporary internet policy is obviously imperfect, but still we must ask: how is such a shift toward greater degrees of state control being made to make sense? Today, discourses such as national security, copyright, and child pornography justify the curtailment of media freedoms;

in the 1920s national security was also crucial, but among other justifications, disability was one of the most prominent and, I argue, one of the most effective.

The shut-in, then, helped the government claim modern communication technologies for biopolitics, and helped to construct the paradigmatic and privileged listener-in as somehow apart from radio and in need of the benefits it provides, yet passive, silent, and socially remote. As the perfect metaphor for the new audiences for broadcasting, persons with disabilities did not need to be concerned with broadcasting their own voices and ideas, nor was it imagined that they could or would want to; the shut-in's role was to sit there quietly, day in and day out, and listen. By the time the transitional period of the 1920s had ended and the discourse of the shut-in waned, the medium had been re-thought and re-shaped with such new audiences in mind, cleared to beam into every home the discourses of good citizenship and the proper and normal conduct of conduct. Except under highly controlled and limited conditions, the public had lost its access to the microphone, and by the 1930s—and for the next several decades—the primary role in broadcasting for *all* good citizens was to sit there quietly, day in and day out, and listen.

## Notes

- [1] This was the era during which the “poster child” was invented, with professional charities using the image of the “cripple” to raise funds for the medical rehabilitation of persons with disabilities (Longmore & Goldberger, 2000).
- [2] For example, an article titled “The Arctic listens” argued that “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” (Hastings, 1933).
- [3] One especially notorious Chicago law read: “No person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object or improper person to be allowed in or on the public ways or other public places in this city, shall therein or thereon expose himself to public view” (quoted in Longmore & Goldberger, 2000, p. 894; see also Schweik, 2009, pp. 1–2).
- [4] It is worth noting that this was the time of some of the most contentious debates in U.S. history over the power of religion in the face of science and technology, adding another layer to the use of the shut-in to help claim radio technology for religion.
- [5] As Goggin and Newell (2005) put it, “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” (2005, p. 263).
- [6] In this essay I do not have space to adequately explore the gender implications of these discourses, but the intersections of activity–publicity–masculinity and passivity–privacy–femininity in relation to the shut-in would certainly reward analysis. In this context, it is worth pointing out that the feminized and privatized body of the shut-in was not only often physically disqualified from mastering the technology, but culturally disqualified as well.
- [7] 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” (The National Broadcasting Company, 1938).

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