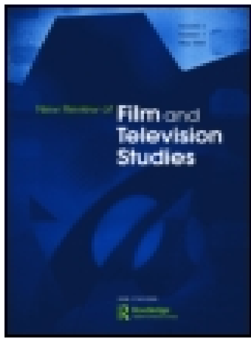

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Disability, cultural accessibility, and the radio archive

Bill Kirkpatrick

Department of Communication, Denison University, Granville, OH, USA

'Archiving as activism' is a beautifully paradoxical phrase: an archive is usually thought to be about preserving the past, while activism is about changing the future. But as a mission statement, 'archiving as activism' calls on us to find – or more accurately, produce – interfaces and conjunctions between historical preservation and forward-facing social change. It recasts the archival project as less of a *material* effort to collect stuff and more of a *temporal* effort to facilitate activist conversations across time.

Working at the intersection of media studies and disability studies, my own activist investments have forced me to rethink radio and its archive in light of changing ideas about disability, impairment, and especially 'access'. Access is a key term for both media and disability, though used differently in each area. For media studies, access has usually meant access to the means of media production (as in 'public access television') or, more broadly, access to the political public sphere. For disability studies, the concept of access has most commonly been used to challenge architectural and technological barriers or, more broadly, to call for the removal of cultural barriers to autonomy (e.g. 'access to jobs,' 'access to housing,' etc.) (Williamson 2015, 14–17). Elizabeth Ellcessor (2017) has reworked these differing usages into a larger idea of 'cultural accessibility' that resists an artificial separation between mediated communication and the disabling physical and cultural structures of a society. Ellcessor identifies three axes of cultural accessibility: 'The first entails access to and activity within organizations involved in producing media content. The second is explicitly about audiences' abilities to interact with media content through various forms of feedback. The third refers to ways in which producers and audiences may use media to intervene in society, inform themselves, or otherwise serve participatory (and even democratic) aims' (32). By expanding on disability definitions of access through a media lens, and media definitions through a disability lens, Ellcessor provides new ways to think about the relationships

CONTACT Bill Kirkpatrick kirkpatrickb@denison.edu
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among, on the one hand, media technologies, representations, economics, policies, and politics, and, on the other hand, bodies, sensoria, identities, experiences, cognitivities, and knowledges.

How might the concept of cultural accessibility help us think about archiving in general and the Radio Preservation Task Force project in particular? Most significantly, the RPTF offers an opportunity for adding a historical dimension to each of these three axes of access. Of the first – production – the project is facilitating conversations between past and future by creating an institutional space for uncovering and preserving the hidden histories of radio production by persons with disabilities, from the amateur radio station (founded 1921) at the Perkins School for the Blind to the untold number of disabled actors and producers in the long history of radio (such as the excellently named Minerva Pious, a player in Fred Allen's troupe). Recognizing and preserving such contributions to radio may reflect a limited understanding of the role of disability in media (as I'll discuss further below), but it is a starting point to begin writing people with disabilities back into media history and one that the RPTF is especially well positioned to support.

Of the second dimension of access – consumption – a disability lens opens up new ideas about the history of radio as encountered and used by persons with disabilities. Although many scholars have examined media consumption outside of domestic listening contexts (Loviglio 2005; Fuqua 2012; McCarthy 2001), more work remains to be done on listening in disability spaces such as hospitals, boarding schools, and asylums. Furthermore, we still need a good study of how the radio set – with its fiddly tuning knobs and often hard-to-read dials – could itself be a disabling technology for much of its history, even as it enabled new forms of cultural participation (Kirkpatrick 2017).[1] Although the RPTF is primarily concentrated on sound recordings, the project provides a framework within which new archives can be identified and alternative practices of listening to and engaging with radio can be understood. Even more directly pertinent to the RPTF, and with an eye toward future transformations emerging from its work, this dimension of cultural accessibility reminds us that archiving also poses new imperatives (including machine-readable transcripts and appropriate metadata for the radio we preserve) for continuing to make radio history accessible for future activists.

Finally, of the public/political dimension of access, the radio archive must engage with the historical record of disability identity and experiences to invoke the past as a tool for intervening in the future. That means preserving, to the extent possible, the voices, stories, representations, and erasures of persons with disabilities as a primary category – up there with race, class, gender, and sexuality – through which we think about and

prioritize the future value of collections. As Shawn Vancour (2016, 395) put it, the RPTF should enable 'the creation of alternative forms of cultural memory and production of new histories that can speak to issues and constituencies neglected in traditional histories of radio broadcasting'. This will require seeking out 'nonconventional archives that may not take radio or media as their focus' and 'forms of radio content beyond broadcast programming' (395). As Vancour acknowledges, this work will not be easy: 'These alternative radio archives may prove among the most valuable for future historical work but remain some of the most challenging to successfully locate and document' (399). Nonetheless, as awareness of 'disability media studies' as an important and exciting new area of scholarship continues to grow, it is expected that new participants, collections, and perspectives will enrich the work of the task force and broaden its usefulness.

The RPTF is an excellent candidate for taking the lead in foregrounding such issues around media and disability. After all, radio is famously the 'blind' medium, a technology forever defined in relation to disability and in contrast to the visuality it supposedly lacks. Discourses of impairment may seem a strange way of thinking about a medium, but it is also a deeply familiar one; as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (1997, 8) have argued, 'Disability underwrites the cultural study of technology writ large'.

Disability also characterizes the archive, but in contrast to radio's blindness, the problem of archives and archival preservation is thought to be one of muteness: gaps in the archival record are commonly understood in terms of the inability of history to speak to us. Under conditions of an incomplete and disappearing archive, radio, so loquacious for so many millions of hours, suddenly has shockingly little to say. Steven Mithen (2009, 4) rails eloquently against the 'infernal silence of the past', but of course, some of that silence was intentional, and we cannot but ascribe political motivations to these gaps. Closer inspection always reveals that inconvenient traces from the past – such as the lives and voices of people with disabilities – were not so much silent as silenced ('as a silencer silences a gun', in the indelible phrase from Michel-Rolph Trouillot [1995, 48]).

In this nexus of a blind medium, a mute archive, and the politics of erasure, we can see the literal and metaphorical disablement of radio history. Even as we have largely erased disability from broadcast history, we have configured radio and its past as a tangle of impairments, as if radio, the radio archive, and radio studies were naturally and inevitably 'handicapped' by the ontologies of the medium, preservation technologies, and disability itself. And as disability theorist Alison Kafer (2013, 128) writes, 'Our metaphors, our tropes, our analogies: all have histories, all have consequences'.

Two conditions of disablement especially haunt the radio archive in ways that the RPTF will need to come to terms with: the unspeakability of the disabled present and the unimaginability of the disabled future. In truth,

both of these conditions are well-known problems of archives in general: you cannot preserve what was not recorded, and you do not preserve what you do not think will have value in the future. In that sense, disability is not unique – any subaltern who has been barred from cultural access, or whose participation is not valued, has wrestled with these problems of the archive. Nonetheless, it is worth considering the particular inflections and distinctive meanings these issues take on in relation to disability and the particular forms of exclusion and eradication specific to persons with disabilities that shape the archive in different ways.

For example, much of the history of disability occurred under conditions of unspeakability and erasure. Children with disabilities were often a source of shame and hidden away (or murdered). Children with 'disturbing' disabilities could be barred from school, while adults with 'unsightly' disabilities were targeted by so-called 'ugly laws' that legally prohibited them from showing themselves in public (Schweik 2010). Mental and physical non-normativity led to various modes of exclusion and seclusion in asylums, hospitals, and homes. But one need not jump straight to infanticide and Victorian madhouses: even routine accessibility issues shaped the media archive in ways specific to disability. For example (diverting from radio to film for a moment), every film student watches the Lumieres' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, but few of them probably notice that there are no people in wheelchairs on the station platform. Such an absence is too normal, too unshocking to mention or even become aware of; yet such silences reflect the disabling structures of French society that in turn shaped our historical record. Furthermore, such erasures – from the train platform as from the film – are thoroughly political, which is partially why, 120 years later, the train station in the French town of La Ciotat is *still* not fully accessible to people with disabilities (SNCF 2018; Petit 2012).[2] To return to radio history, such routine exclusions were expressed, for instance, in ideas about vocal normativity and the 'good' radio voice, which led to precious few people with stammers, dysphonia, puberphonia, or arrhythmia being permitted to speak on radio in the first place, much less make it into the radio archive (Kirkpatrick 2013).

In calling for the RPTF to pay attention to radio and archives by, for, and about persons with disabilities, however, I am offering a practical starting point, not wishing to imply that disability is simply a box on a checklist of diversity categories that we need to work through. A more ambitious vision for the Task Force would be to take a leading role in incorporating disability into our understanding of media and society itself. A comparison with queer studies is illustrative here. The primary concern of queer studies is not the lives of queer people per se but rather the structures and systems of control that take sexualities, genders, desires, etc. as their object – it is an investigation of *power*. Similarly, the object of disability studies, disability

history, and what is emerging as 'crip theory' is not to find 'the cripple in the archive' but to analyze the systems of domination and normalization that have shaped our ideas of embodiment and, importantly, our understanding of the physical and cognitive capacities that attach (or that we think *should* attach, as in my 'good' radio voice example above) to those embodiments.[3] In that sense, only the most constrained vision of the role disability within the RPTF project would be to uncover and preserve the radio pasts of persons with disabilities, crucial as that is. A broader vision would be to understand media – and archives – as always to some degree about the regulation of bodies, behaviors, and social relationships through categories such as 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'able' and 'disabled', 'human' and 'subhuman', and so on. Such insights may help shape the ways in which we approach and make accessible radio's past for the purpose of interrogating such systems of regulation in the future: conservation as transformation, archives as activism.

Examples abound. Consider, for instance, a trove of letters to Rudy Vallée, written in Braille by blind fans of his radio program in the early 1930s (Long 1934).[4] It is a priceless collection, documenting in fewer than two dozen letters a surprisingly diverse range of blind persons' experiences in 1930s America. On the one hand, a Native American man on an Arizona reservation echoed a common trope voiced by persons with disabilities in this period, describing radio as his imaginative escape from idleness and boredom: 'In all my dreams of adventure, you [Vallée] play a big part. I suppose all of your listeners and followers make you a part of what they dream, especially those who do not do much else' (in Long 1934). On the other hand, a very different experience of disability – one enabled by class privilege – is suggested by the letter from a well-educated woman from Boston who, instead of buying the Braille version of Vallée's book, 'hired a person whose duty it is to read me everything you had written' (in Long 1934).

These letters also document how different persons with disabilities engaged with radio – how they encountered it, what they paid attention to – insights that are both important in their own right and for the broader understanding they provide into diverse practices of listening in. The experience of one writer who lost her sight later in life reveals how problematic it is to designate radio as the 'blind' medium; she asserted a special relationship to Vallée's voice that sighted audiences could never fully experience: 'I am luckier than most of the blind, in that I have really seen you. But I confess, I never listened to you as I do now, when I could see. When I did however I always closed my eyes, anyway, but it isn't the same. I feel closer to you, somehow, since I can't see' (in Long 1934). Another writer, both blind and deaf, problematizes the usually oversimplified concept of 'listening' itself: 'I have a radio designed for a deaf person, through which the sound never comes directly, but through an electrical device like

headphones. … [W]hen I first put my hand on it, for you – well, there's something about your voice that gets into the thick of one's soul; I can neither hear nor see you, but oh, it is such a happy feeling, a nearness to something, unexplainably beautiful' (in Long 1934).

These examples focus on persons with disabilities, yes, but more importantly they reveal the ways in which ability and 'normal' listening practices have shaped our idea of what radio even is. They reveal the intersectionality of disability with race and class, demonstrating how multiple systems of domination disable or enable certain forms of cultural accessibility. Importantly, they also remind us of the significance of access in archival projects: I was able to read these letters because they were translated from Braille in the first place, but of course accessibility rarely goes in the other direction, with very few archival documents in standard print ever made accessible in Braille. Radio, as a primarily aural medium, requires transcriptions and other archival processes to become accessible. Even machine-readable PDFs are not fully accessible documents – many people with vision issues need to be able to manipulate the size, color, and font of the text to read it.

A further example of the political importance of attending to disability in the study of radio history comes from my work on the role of radio in efforts to rehabilitate disabled veterans after World War I. Hospitals run by the US Public Health Service and the Veterans Bureau were among the first institutions anywhere to install radios, with health officials believing that broadcasting could speed recuperation by improving the soldiers' morale. Even into the 1930s, commercial stations defended their public-interest value to the Federal Radio Commission/Federal Communications Commission by invoking the many hospitalized veterans who enjoyed their programming.[5]

What this demonstrates is not simply that persons with disabilities were listening to radio in these institutional settings, although that is interesting enough. It also helps us think as activists about a range of social and political issues we continue to face. For example, the use of radio in early rehabilitation efforts illuminates the emergence of modern beliefs about the importance of positivity in the process of recovery, a theme that remains contested today (Ehrenreich 2009; Sulik 2012). And, borrowing insights from John Kinder (2015), this corner of radio history gives us insight into radio's role in the popular imagination of a 'war without consequences': if radio and other technological miracles can help repair our disabled veterans, then the human costs of military adventurism need not stand in the way of future US imperialism. Such archival insights from the past clearly intersect with urgent political questions in our future: we live in a society that is as thrilled with radio-controlled interfaces and prosthetics that promise to 'repair' Iraq War veterans as 1920s society was with early radio's ability to heal disabled doughboys. The radio archive thus alerts us to the militaristic implications of technological 'fixes' for non-normative minds

and bodies, which as Kinder argues 'fuel[s] impossible fantasies about Americans' capacity to avoid war's consequences' (18).

There are countless histories yet to be written on the ways that disability and radio (as well as film and other media) have intersected, and they are relevant to countless issues requiring our activism. To write those histories – to open up those conversations to the future – will require expanded notions of what radio is, expanded notions of where the archives might be found, and – above all – an expanded notion of disability and accessibility that begins to help us identify and redress the politics of embodiment and normalization at work in media, archiving, and historiography.

Notes

1. A much more provocative connection between disability and radio-set design is offered by Christina Cogdell (2004), who traces the ideological linkages between the popularity of 'streamlined' consumer goods in the 1930s and the ideals of the eugenics movement. Although Cogdell does not mention specific radio sets, she argues that we can think of radical designs like Emerson's famous 1939 'Patriot' radio, created by noted eugenics supporter Norman Bel Geddes, as the cultural expression of eugenic principles. The streamlined esthetic, she claims, shares with the eugenics movement an obsession with 'increasing efficiency and hygiene and the realization of the "ideal type" as the means to achieve an imminent "civilized" utopia' (4).
2. As an aside, the urban legend about the film, telling of terrified audiences supposedly jumping out of the way of the onscreen locomotive, leads me to wonder whether any viewers with mobility impairments were watching in 1896 and how they, perhaps unable to quickly jump to safety, might have experienced this particular intersection of media and disability.
3. I am indebted to Sony Coráñez Bolton, in personal conversation, for this particularly well-framed and well-expressed analogy.
4. Allison McCracken, historian of media and music, came across these letters while researching her brilliant *Real Men Don't Sing*. I am so grateful to her for bringing them to my attention, and to her and Jeanette Berard for helping me gain access to them.
5. See for example the testimony of Robert Jones, a disabled World War I veteran, in the case of KGFJ, Los Angeles (Federal Communications Commission 1935). Jones, who was frequently in and out of the Sawtelle Veterans Home in West Los Angeles, testified that the patients in Sawtelle really valued KGFJ as a 24-hour station, noting that 'there are lots of men down there that cannot sleep nights with asthma, and one thing and another, and in pain' (17–18). KGFJ's all-night broadcasts, he argued, served the public interest by giving these disabled veterans something to listen to and keeping their minds occupied when they couldn't sleep (17–20).

Disclosure statement

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