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Effects of the Americans with Disabilities Act on Disability Representation in Mid-Century American Media Discourse

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Abstract : The development of American radio and print media since World War II has allowed people with disabilities to engage more directly with the public, gradually changing the perception that disabled people constitute a kind of social impairment or burden. People with disabilities have rarely been portrayed as equal to the non-disabled. In the postwar period, a dramatic shift from eugenicist conceptualizations of disability and widespread institutionalization gradually evolved into conditions of greater openness in public discourse. This discourse was marked at mid-century by telethons and news media (both print and television) which sought to commodify people with disabilities for commercial gain through stories that promoted alienating forms of empowerment alternating with paternalistic pity. By comparing studies of the history of American disability advocacy in the twentieth century and the evolution of the image of disability characteristic of mid-century media discourse, this paper will examine the relationship between the passage of the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the expanded media representation of people with disabilities. This paper will argue that the legal mandate of the ADA ultimately transformed the image of people with disabilities from those who are weak and in need of support to viable consumers, encouraging traditional American print, film, and television media outlets to solicit the agency of people with disabilities in the authentic portrayal of themselves and their disabilities.

Keywords : ADA, disability representation, media portrayal, postwar United States
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