

Jaipreet Virdi, *Hearing Happiness: Deafness Cures in History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 328 pp.

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The typical narrative for the relationship between disability and technology is usually full of promises that technological development would eliminate disability forever. Since the traditional historiography does not escape it, almost every page of our history books on the topic has been written to praise benevolent male inventors, to which Alexander Graham Bell certainly belongs, and hero-like people who overcame their disabilities. As disability studies gains traction, however, new scholarships recently emerged in and out of the history of science, technology, and medicine, particularly in the Global North. Scholars based in history and STS begin to dismantle the “technological fix” formula and explore more nuanced relationships of disability, technology, and cure. For example, they examined the intimate relationships disabled people have with technologies while investigating the cultural pressure to try out cutting-edge cures.¹ Instead of embracing the promise of technological emancipation or rejecting technologies as a whole, scholars try to reveal how disabled people, past and present, employ technologies and design their lives to navigate and resist the world that fails disability.

Jaipreet Virdi is one of the leading scholars who has deeply explored the history of hearing loss and technology in the US and UK. As a hard-of-hearing person acquiring disability at the age of four, she spent years being “stuck in the limbo between two worlds: never quite deaf enough or quite hearing enough to perfectly fit in one side or another” (5). She was born to hearing parents. She did not sign. But she could not speak perfectly. This life-long liminality leads to her distinctive position that does not set the technological adaptation as anathema to deafness. Rather, she sees that deaf people could choose their ways of communication, whether it be to sign or to speak with assistive technologies, considering unique life aspects of their own.

Reflecting this position, her first book, *Hearing Happiness*, surveys a variety of deafness cures from the 1860s to the present in America, spanning from artificial

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¹For example, Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Beth Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design* (New York University Press, 2019); Laura Mauldin, *Made to Hear: Cochlear Implants and Raising Deaf Children* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016); and the articles written by Mara Mills and Ashely Shew.

eardrums to cochlear implants. It is notable that Virdi chooses examples that straddled the line between qualified medicine and quackery. She does not rely on the privilege of historical hindsight, but devotes equal pages to explain seemingly dubious ones. For instance, the history of deafness and technology is usually construed as the history of hearing aids, but in *Hearing Happiness*, Virdi traces the root of deafness cures to the 1860s when herbalism, ritualism, and domestic medicine flourished in the place of disparaged doctors. It was thirty years before the first electric hearing aid appeared in 1892 and sixty years before the audiometry test entered popular discourse in the US. This historiography is adopted to show the situation that American deaf people not only had “an abundance of options” but also experienced difficulty in determining “a treatment’s efficacy” (27). Having deaf people at the center of historical inquiry, she achieves the aim to uncover “patterns of consumption among deaf people that made them reliant on consumer goods as a way to pass as normal” (31). In other words, for deaf people, to whom “any cure is better than no cure” (24), consumerism was a way to resolve their deep-seated agony of identity and embody the ideal citizenship as self-improving Americans, however outrageous it looks to present eyes.

The technological adaptation, however, came with a price. A thread that runs throughout the book is the stigmatization of deafness and hearing prosthetics. “For deaf persons, being an ideal citizen required assimilation into the hearing world, rather than securing belonging with the confinements of the Deaf² community” (12). In a society valuing speech over sign language as a mode of communication, deaf people have been forced to undergo the (re)habilitation of hearing. Cure your deafness, or be an outsider, is the doctrine imposed upon deaf people. Still, no interventions could fully return hearing nor guarantee an instant rehabilitation. Since wearing hearing prosthetics exposes the otherwise invisible disability, ear trumpets and hearing aids have been a source of functional assistance and social discrimination. For this reason, the early promoters of acoustic aids endeavored to normalize the devices by drawing parallels to glasses. If eye spectacles could be adopted with little stigmatization, why not those “ear spectacles”? Although there were some users like Dorothy Brett who cherished her hearing aid—Toby—as an extension of the self, to the disappointment of promoters, “hearing loss tends to be more stigmatized than vision, due to the close associations between dumbness and deafness” (78).

The hearing aid industry in the twentieth century aggressively developed new devices and promoted them tickling the fierce aspiration to pass as normal. The cultural and technological landscape of electricity in America already began to soak the everyday life of contemporary deaf people with “a shock of electricity” (119). Not only electric hearing aids but also electrotherapy machines were on the market. Charla-

² “Deaf” with the capital D and “deaf” are different. While “deaf” points to aural afflictions, “Deaf” is used to describe a community of sign language and concomitant cultural backgrounds.

tans and quacks were active until federal regulations were enacted in 1938. Advertisements heavily focused on delivering messages that the one-piece-unit hearing aids would enable one to regain not only the hearing ability but also normal life. In the conservative postwar era, the messages became highly gendered: "Hearing aids could return women to the dinner and card tables; they gave men effective command of work and family situations" (214). Although there was always a risk of exposing disability, the invisibility of miniaturized aids was an important marketing factor. The market domination of transistor hearing aids over the vacuum tube aids in the 1950s shows that sometimes technical efficacy was relegated to a lower priority than invisibility.

Virdi reveals that when writing this book, she asked herself "what it would be like if such treatments were imposed upon me, or if I had pursued them myself" (6). As a trained historian, she knew the importance of having distance from historical actors and being objective on primary sources, but her deaf experiences kept resonating with past practices. Therefore, instead of forcing herself to keep a distance, she chose to blend her first-person accounts with rigorous historical analysis. This new historiographical adventure's result is wonderful. Trying out a historic tin ear trumpet of the early twentieth century, in chapter 2, she conjectures about how the former user positioned the trumpet to converse with others. And she uses the trying-out experience to evaluate the positionality of users and devices in contemporary advertised photographs. In other chapters, she narrates her past encounter with herbalism, spiritualism, and domestic medicine when she was young. Placing herself in the history comes to readers not as an obstacle in understanding disability, technology, and cure, but as an invaluable reminder that such methods have been employed for the last 150 years in the household eager to find any curative method. This narrative allows readers to understand the history of deafness cures as an ensemble of multiple technoscientific practices rather than as a linear trajectory of technological progress.

For those who are new to the field, *Hearing Happiness* would be an accessible book full of interesting examples and historical episodes. For those who try to do research on disability and technology, it could be a good historiographical reference on how to situate archival sources and objects in a way to reflect the author's positionality. I hope this book would be a ground on which to explore other cases, especially in Asia and Global South, on deafness, technology, and cure.