



Telethons: Spectacle, Disability, and the Business of Charity

By Paul K. Longmore

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Movie stars, entertainers, game-show hosts, jugglers, plate-spinners, gospel choirs, corporate executives posing with over-sized checks, household name-brand products, smiling children in leg braces—all were fixtures of the phenomenon that defined American culture in the second half of the twentieth century: the telethon. Hundreds of millions watched these weekend-long variety shows that raised billions of dollars for disability-related charities. Drawing on over two decades of in-depth research, *Telethons* trenchantly explores the complexity underneath the campy spectacles. At its center are the disabled children, who, thanks to a particular kind of historical-cultural marginalization, turned out to be ideal tools for promoting corporate interests, privatized healthcare, and class status. Offering a public message about helping these unfortunate victims, telethons perpetuated a misleading image of people with disabilities as helpless, passive, apolitical members of American society. Paul K. Longmore's revelatory chronicle shows how these images in fact helped major corporations increase their bottom lines, while filling gaps in the strange public-private hybrid U.S. health insurance system. Only once disabled people pushed back in public protests did the broader implications for all Americans become clear.

Mining insights from great thinkers such as Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville, along with contemporary cultural figures like Jerry Lewis, Ralph Nader, and several disability rights activists, *Telethons* offers a provocative meditation on big business, American government, popular culture, Cold War values, and "activism" both narrowly and broadly defined. As highly popular entertainment, telethons schooled Americans about how to feel about their bodies, fitness, health, and appropriate ways to interact with people whose bodies did not fit norms determined by advertisers. The programs also taught them about when to weep and how to cure guilt through "conspicuous contribution." Longmore's astute observations about psychology, economics, and society reveal how writing off telethons as kitsch and irrelevant has enabled many individual attitudes, corporate practices, and government policies to go unquestioned. Ultimately, *Telethons* reveals the passion, humanity, resistance, and triumph that were not center-stage on these popular telecasts by offering

insights into the U.S. disability movement past and present.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Recommended."--*CHOICE*

"Longmore's book wears its intelligence in its incisive commentary and concepts. Students and scholars could learn a lot from this book, including how to write about complex ideas in clear, readable prose. The book manages to do all this in thirteen tightly written chapters, plus introduction and conclusion. While concise, the book takes no shortcuts, being heavily or even exhaustively evidenced. Longmore's book is powerful and persuasive. It's also a great pleasure to read, in the way that watching a master thinker is pleasurable. He thinks with material in impressive ways that seem effortless. Scholars with other interests would no doubt see much else in Longmore's book related to their interests, as there is a great deal in this fine book. We should all be grateful that Longmore wrote *Telethons* and that his colleagues did the work to make sure we could read it."--*Disability Studies Quarterly*

"Longmore explores a classic form of American kitch in a radically new way. *Telethons* shows us how the crass extravaganzas of pity and benevolence collided with new ideas about justice and dignity. The result is a fascinating tour of television, voluntarism, civil rights, and America itself."- James A. Morone, author of *Hellfire Nation and The Devils We Know*

"Just as Americans gathered around their televisions to watch the spectacle of telethons, so should all gather around *Telethons*. This long-awaited book smartly unravels the powerful but previously unexamined ties between public policy, business, popular culture, and ableist assumptions about disability. A pleasure to read, vibrating with Longmore's wit and intelligence, this book is marvelous."-Kim E. Nielsen, author of *A Disability History of the United States*

"*Telethons* brilliantly explores a multifaceted and uniquely American innovation, the 'television marathon,' a spectacle that simultaneously raised vast funds for good causes, contributed in surprising ways to the advent of the disability rights movement, and disseminated to a television-viewing nation an image of disabled people as pitiable, helpless, and perpetually childlike."-Douglas C. Baynton, author of *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language*

"*Telethons* is Paul Longmore's posthumous tour de force. His history of the telethon gives readers a wide and expansive lens that reveals how this particularly American spectacle advances a skewed national mythology and ideology. This book is a must-read not just for students of culture and society about disability, disease, and medicine, but for anyone interested in twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural and social American

history." - Ruth O'Brien, author of *Crippled Justice: The History of Modern Disability Policy in the Workplace*

About the Author

Paul K. Longmore was a respected disability rights activist and Professor of History at San Francisco State University until his unexpected death in 2010. His previous books include *The Invention of George Washington* and *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Longmore lived with significant mobility impairments as a result of childhood polio. He worked on *Telethons* for over two decades and believed it to be his crowning achievement. To learn more about the man and his legacy, visit longmoreinstitute.sfsu.edu.

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