

Podcasting for Disability Justice

BRI M.

For as long as I can remember, my life has been lived on the margins of society. As a Black disabled, neuroexpansive, trans, and queer person, I have always recognized the uniqueness of my experiences when compared with those of my more normative peers. I may not have had the language or the knowledge to articulate the reasons why I was so different, but it was these qualities that brought me to lead a life guided by social justice.

When I started *POWER NOT PITY* in 2017 after I became physically disabled, I knew I was on to something meaningful. I wanted not only to put my voice out there but to give the people in my community, disabled people of color, safe spaces to see themselves reflected in podcasting. In the beginning, I wasn't quite sure how the show would be received, but I knew I wouldn't be able to rest if it didn't exist. It was wondrous to see what came back to me as a result of the radical vulnerability found in each episode. Because of this, I want to extend my unending gratitude to each person who came onto the show. Thank you.

This chapter was transcribed from a talk I gave about cultivating a more accessible podcasting culture at the 2019 Werk It! Podcast Festival. I hope you receive it with an open heart.

This is Podcasting for Disability Justice: how you can make your podcast more accessible. Before I begin, I'd like to call in the fact that we are on unceded land. Land that belonged to the Tongva people going back centuries. Land that we now know as California. I want to call in all of the disabled people throughout history who have helped shape a more accessible world.

I'm Bri M., I'm the executive producer-host of *POWER NOT PITY*. It's a show all about the lived experiences of disabled people of color. I want to give you a chance to invite the stories of the disability community into your mind and your heart because . . . we deserve it.

So who am I? Why am I here to talk about disability justice and podcasting? Uh, I'll tell you a little bit about me. I'm a Black Jamaican American disabled, queer, nonbinary alien prince from the Bronx. That's right. That's right. B-X all day! (*Laughs.*) I did three years of music radio in college. I went around interviewing tattoo artists and piercers about gender, class, and race. I worked in the music industry for a little while until I received a surprise in the spring of 2014.

I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and it actually happened only four days after my birthday. So I came to podcasting while I was living in bed. I started to ask myself all of these different questions about who I was and where I was in life. And I realized that I found a safe getaway space in podcasts. Like *How to Survive the End of the World* and *LeVar Burton Reads*. And LeVar, if you're listening, I love you! (*Laughs.*)

But yeah. Podcasts had the power to expand my worldview and changed how I thought about all the different subjects [I was interested in], but they weren't without their shortcomings. Unfortunately, I started to realize that my safe space wasn't so safe after all. I was gaining more friends. I was learning about the disability justice community and then I realized that the voices of disabled people of color were missing from podcasting altogether. So I wanted to do something about it.

I started to ask myself all these different questions. Some of the questions I started to ask about what was missing were: Where are the voices of the people of my community? Where were the stories of Black and Brown disabled people? Or the voices of people of queer, trans, and nonbinary experience, or the stories that reflected the amazing breadth of a multiply marginalized life?

Within such an intimate medium, I just think there's so much change that's possible in podcasting. So why not try changing things up a bit? That's pretty much what I did. I created *POWER NOT PITY* in 2017 in the back of a Greyhound bus going back from Philly to New York. And I remember when I made the logo, I felt like I was stepping into something bigger than me.

I believe that podcasting can actually, it actually tweaked my perception of disability from a first-person issue, meaning the person and their individual condition. It tweaked my perception from that [a person-first issue] to a greater societal issue, meaning the systems at play that cause oppression. I think it's time to start thinking about those things and start thinking about the stories that we turn our minds away from, and why we do this.

What can we do to tell more authentic and inclusive stories? What can we do as women and nonbinary people to foster a more equitable world? *I think it comes down to tangible and intangible ideas.* When I start to think about what makes an accessible podcast, it takes a radical reframing of your mind.

Intangible Ideas

Can I offer you a quote? It says, "Disability is more than the deficit of diagnosis. It is an aesthetic, a series of intersecting cultures and a creative force" (Sheppard, n.d.). This was spoken by Alice Sheppard, the founder of Kinetic Light, a dance troupe that is so amazing, like two wheelchair dancers they flip and they twirl and they, like, balance off of each other. Alice and her dance partner literally

hold each other up in the air while they are in wheelchairs. I saw them and it was absolutely amazing. So, if you get a chance to see Kinetic Light, please do.

Whenever I find a new podcast, I always assume that there won't be transcripts and I think that shouldn't be the norm. It should be the exception. Right? *So one thing I want to offer you is the idea of including every word in your transcripts that's said and edit for cultural competence.* That is something that is always missing from transcripts. It's always about like every standard language. So think about vernacular and different ways of, um, dialects, different ways of speaking. There are so many things that we could lose in translation.

I think, um, another tangible thing that you can do to make your podcast more accessible is to *include image descriptions*. Those of us who are unable to see deserve to visualize what's happening as well. So when you're doing image descriptions, make sure that every detail is described. I often find that creative image descriptions, like ones that really go deeply into what the image is portraying, it can really put me into a different state of mind.

All right. So can I drop some knowledge on you? All right. All right. I'm so glad you're ready. So one in four people in the US are disabled, so that means 25 percent of the population is overlooked and underserved, and made invisible. We fall victim to being invisibilized and we also fall victim to tropes of overcoming adversity and inspiration. Unfortunately, these stories are so common that people actually have a term for it. It's called inspiration trash. [This phrase is my reframing of "inspiration porn," defined by Alice Wong (2018) as "media coverage that finds ordinary activities by disabled people as extraordinary or inspirational to non-disabled audiences."]

Yeah. So I would challenge you to make more dynamic and authentic stories about disabled people, especially disabled people of color. *We're not inspiration trash made to make you feel better about your life.*

Another thing that you could do in terms of making your podcasts more accessible is to have an accessible workplace. Meaning not only your episodes, but where you work and where you basically produce your content. I want to challenge you to be an advocate of an accessible space to work. Disabled people are entitled to accommodations so that they can create the best content that they can.

This means advocating for good benefits. This means advocating for good health care. This means advocating for spaces where people are receiving adequate accommodations. I want to see the end of drug testing and background checks. It's too often that background checks and drug testing are part of the cycle that keeps disabled people, especially Black disabled people, underemployed. I was almost denied a job because I tested positive for marijuana. Even though I had a medical marijuana card and it's illegal to discriminate against a person from New York State, I had to go back and forth with HR and I had to really try to prove my case about why I deserved to be there. It was ridiculous.

Now that we've talked about that, I want to offer you an effective way of telling a story that centers a disabled person in your story.

Haben Girma is the first deafblind woman to graduate from Harvard Law School. You could say she's impactful. You could say she's inventive, you could say she's intersectional, but just don't call her an inspiration.

I want to offer you a couple of ways to tell an effective story about Haben, but let's talk about the wrong way first. Haben is often portrayed as a millennial Helen Keller, and this is just completely wrong because we're not monoliths. We're actually multiplicitous and a myriad of voices. Another way to think of creating a correct and more authentic version of an effective story is to try to use words that are more reflective of a genuine experience. You know, I want to dare you to not use the word *inspiration*. *I want to dare you to use words that are not one-dimensional to describe a [disabled] person. This is the best way to center a disabled person in your story.*

Uh, so like I said, the word *inspiration* has lost its impact because it's been so overused. I think when you want to talk about impact versus intent, when you're talking about your stories, I know that there are good intentions and well-intentioned people. But the words that you use, the ways that you portray disabled people, they actually have an impact. And good intentions don't always lead to positive impact, right?

So Haben also offers quotes and techniques on her website. One of the things that she says is, "We respect and admire disabled leaders just as we respect and admire our nondisabled leaders" (Girma 2016). It's just something to think about, you know?

So remember my show *POWER NOT PITY*? All right! So the last thing I usually ask people on the show is, "What's your disabled power? What is the thing that gives you the most power and agency in your disability?" And usually nine times out of ten people talk about adaptation. My [interviewees] and I, we want to see the end of injustice and systemic inequality.

Tangible Ideas

I'd like to offer you four tangible ways that you can, um, you can make your podcast more accessible. So here it goes, this is the acronym. It goes R-E-A-P. What does that spell? That's right. REAP. *R* is for Recognize, *E* is for Educate, *A* is for Amplify, and *P* is for Politicize.

R → *RECOGNIZE*

So let's start with *R*. Recognize.

I'll tell you that ableism is a systemic discrimination that keeps disabled people on the margins of society. It's time that we recognize that discrimination

that happens. So I'd like to challenge you to begin to locate ableism and all its forms. Begin to recognize how ableism causes harm to disabled people of color.

E → EDUCATE

Here we go with *E*: educate to find ways to learn about the disability community. You know, there's articles and op-eds and like all these different ways [to connect]. It was Twitter and Instagram and you know, all the other platforms that exist. TikTok, I dunno, Snapchat, who knows (*chuckles*). Disabled people of color also organize for other social justice issues. So I would suggest becoming familiar with those as well and take time to get to know disabled people. It would actually really cause you to make fewer assumptions, I think.

A → AMPLIFY

A is for Amplify. Get out there and floss that knowledge that you have cultivated! Reach out to organizations and get involved with all the social media platforms that exist. Give disabled people more chances to reflect, to create reflections of themselves in mass media. Amplifying is all about passing the mic.

P → POLITICIZE

P for Politicize is my favorite. Organize and conquer, y'all. Get involved with organizations and groups that are doing the work. Find creative ways to financially support disabled people of color. That's really important. Feature disabled activists on your podcasts.

So now that I've talked about tangible things and intangible things that you can do to make your podcast more accessible, um, let's talk about, uh, what it means to actually do this and create culture. You know? Because we don't do this in a vacuum. And I think that all of our work, all of our content is so important that we can shape culture. So what's more possible in an accessible podcasting culture? I think one thing that I like to say is representation matters.

Say it with me. *Representation matters.*

Oh, you sound so good! So this, this means stories that show the community in a more authentic light, giving people the chance to feel seen and heard. Another thing that would be possible is intersectionality. We would cultivate a politic of realizing that all of our stories are tied up in one another. We don't live this life alone. So give everyone a chance to be liberated. Another thing that's possible is more listeners. We all love that, right? We would be catering to the 25 percent of the population that's looking for reflections of themselves in mass media. Disabled people are hungry for more media.

So I've talked about accessibility, right? This presentation is called Podcasting for Disability Justice. How to make your podcast more accessible, right? I've talked about the accessibility part, but what's disability justice? I would like to offer you another quote. This was written by Patty Berne: "Disability justice is a vision and practice of a yet to be. A map that we create with our ancestors and our great grandchildren onward in the width and depth of our multiplicities and histories. A movement towards a world in which every body and mind is known as beautiful" (Sins Invalid 2019, 26–27). Isn't that amazing? She's an amazing writer and she's a cofounder of Sins Invalid. It's a dance troupe of disabled people of color and it's also a creative collective and it's all about advocacy as well. She's an amazing person. Look her up, Patty Berne. So finally, I want to offer you my last thought. (*Shouts determinedly.*) Hire more disabled people of color! Thanks for listening!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This chapter is adapted from the transcript for "Podcasting for Disability Justice," *Werk It: The Podcast*, WNYC Studios, December 17, 2019, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/werkit/articles/podcasting-disability-justice>.

Girma, Haben. 2016. "Producing Positive Disability Stories: A Brief Guide." Haben Girma's website, October 12, 2016. <https://habengirma.com/2016/10/12/producing-positive-disability-stories-a-brief-guide/>.

Sheppard, Alice. n.d. "Intersectional Disability Arts Manifesto by Alice Sheppard." Alice Sheppard's website. Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://alicesheppard.com/intersectional-disability-arts-manifesto/>.

Sins Invalid. 2019. *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement Is Our People*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: Sins Invalid.

Wong, Alice (@SFdirewolf). 2018. "Inspiration porn: media coverage that finds ordinary activities by disabled people as extraordinary or inspirational to non-disabled audiences. It's tiresome, people." Twitter post, May 20, 2018. <https://mobile.twitter.com/SFdirewolf/status/998383781995139072>.