Pigeonhole Episode 19

[bright ambient music]

Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

[ambient electronica plays through Cheryl's parts of this intro]

CHERYL GREEN: This episode is a rebroadcast from 2017. I interviewed Alice Wong before she started her iconic *Disability Visibility Podcast*. In fact, when I talked to her for this episode about needing more disabled voices on the air two years ago, I had no idea she was about to put her own out there as the host of her own show! At the time of this re-airing, she's released over 50 episodes on her podcast, and I hope you'll check it out if you don't already.

This story started for me a few years ago. I was talking to a disabled friend who had an accent from having a severe traumatic brain injury as a child. He wanted to be a performer, but he assured me no one with a voice like that could ever be acceptable in music. I introduced him to Krip-Hop Nation, and specifically Leroy Moore's voice, and my friend was pretty floored. Here's Leroy on the air from May, 2005.

LEROY MOORE: What you about to hear is not corporate media or a reality show. No! What's up everybody? My name is Leroy Moore. This is Pushing Limits on KPFA 94.1 FM, Berkeley.

CHERYL: I did a show for a community radio station for a bit, and I started to observe more and more conversations about who should and should not be allowed on the air. It usually came down to how beautiful someone's voice is. Beauty, pleasantness, goodness, these are subjective. But when it comes to gatekeeping who gets to present in the media, these qualities seem to be treated like they're objective truths that will, or at least should, ring true for everyone.

What makes a good radio voice?

I asked some of my friends a couple of questions. The first was what they thought makes a good radio voice. Some of them actually do work in broadcasting, but most don't.

PERSON 1: To me, a good radio voice is about timing, probably more than tone. I really like to listen to someone who has a sense that they're someone who's fun to listen to.

PERSON 2: A good radio voice is someone that's easy to understand and is articulate, doesn't talk too fast or go too slow or too softly.

PERSON 3: Sounds interested, connected, feels a bit intimate, as if it's talking to me.

PERSON 4: I think a good radio voice is one that is easy to understand for me and clear.

PERSON 5: A good voice is one that is true to the person. If you ever watch a lot of TED Talks or listen to NPR a lot, you'll notice a lot of the presenters tend to have the same kind of cadence when they speak, or they go for the specific kind of radio voice. It's a very artificial kind of a sound, and I'm not sure that that works necessarily well for everyone.

CHERYL: This is not scientific research! In fact, all these voice memos came to me from a request on my personal Facebook. And that means that, though you maybe can't tell, most of the people who responded are disabled. Why's that matter? Even though I'm super interested in what any podcast and radio consumers think, actually disabled people are rarely asked their opinions about media representation, even if the representation is about disability. So, I prioritized disabled people's responses here because I can.

ALICE WONG: "Like all cultural institutions, **radio enforces normalcy**."

CHERYL: From Alice Wong's article, "Diversifying Radio With Disabled Voices" on Transom.

ALICE: "This normalcy is centered on the ability to hear and speak 'well.' With the exception of a few radio shows by disabled people such as Pushing Limits on KPFA, *Disability Matters* on VoiceAmerica, and podcasts, you don't hear a lot of people that sound different due to disability on public radio aside from Diane Rehm."

PERSON 4: I remember Diane Rehm had a *Diane Rehm Show*.

PERSON 6: I do know of two people who I've heard on the radio: Diane Rehm with NPR and then Robert Kennedy, Jr.

ALICE: Meow, meow, meow, meow, meow!

CHERYL: Brrrrrr-ow [laughs]!

ALICE: Oh, I can't do that sound.

CHERYL: [laughs]

ALICE: You're very talented.

CHERYL: Alice and I have corresponded online for a couple years, but this interview was the first time to actually talk to each other. Clearly, we have an intense interest in common, and she wanted to make sure that got acknowledged right away before we got to the other topic I called her about, which is "good" radio voices.

Alice Wong on diversifying voices in radio to include disability

ALICE WONG: My name is Alice Wong. I'm the founder of the Disability Visibility Project. It's a community partnership with StoryCorps, which is a national oral history storytelling project. And we collect the stories of people with disabilities. The DVP is also an online community that creates, shares, and amplifies disability stories and culture.

CHERYL: To me, Alice's voice, her very presence on the airwaves, is the model of what radio can be.

After the meowing, I asked her if she feels like radio excludes people who have disabilities that affect their voices.

ALICE: Radio is still very insulated. Especially in public media, the idea of storytelling and structure and sound. Maybe it's intentional, but if it's not intentional, then they do exclude all kinds of voices. There's this weird sense of radio, that it should be easy for listeners. But my thought is let's have listeners challenged, right? I mean, I think that's kind of way to push the medium forward.

It's very classist and ableist in terms of language and lack of access. I wrote a manifesto about this. I really wanted to publish in a mainstream publication that people in radio read. And I was really motivated by another manifesto in Transom by Al Letson on diversity of people of color in radio. And I thought there should be a similar one about disabled people. So, his manifesto kinda inspired my manifesto.

I think it's a great thing about podcasting is it's do-it-yourself. I think that there is nobody stopping you, and it's relatively easy for most people to do it. Again, being mindful of privilege, and the fact that the digital divide does still exist. But I do think radio, I think they just...I think disabled voices are excluded. You and I cannot name five people that have distinctly disabled voices, however we wanna define that.

I think, just like any other person, disabled people have hearing privilege and voice privilege, right? I mean, for people with speech disabilities, I would be really curious what their thoughts are on radio.

PERSON 7: What I would think would make a good voice for a radio talk show host, it would be somebody who actually cares about the subject that they are talking about and will focus on the same subject. Don't go off on a tangent of some other kind of subject.

PERSON 8: Deep and sonorous strikes my inner ear. Also resonant voices are also very high for credibility as well. But voice goes much deeper to the character of the voice and the intonation.

CHERYL: So, you said you've been a guest on several podcasts. Have you ever been on a podcast or a radio show run by another disabled person?

ALICE: Oh yes, once. There was a radio station in New York City that was created by disabled people.

CHERYL: Was it the *Largest Minority*?

ALICE: Yes, yes, yes! So, that was great.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah. Does it feel different to be interviewed by them?

ALICE: You know what was interesting? They asked me to take off my mask during my interview, and I took it off, actually. Because I think they wanted a clearer recording. It's interesting.

CHERYL: Do you ever hear voices that sound at all like yours, aside from yours, on the radio?

ALICE: Well, definitely not on public media. I mean, other than maybe Diane Rehm with her show, but you know, she's retired now. I remember her voice was very distinctive, and she used to get, I think, complaints about her voice because of a neurological condition.

DIANE REHM: I have Adductor Spasmodic Dysphonia. The last time I had the injection in September, I had waited for a full nine months, and my voice sounded terrible. So, this time, I'm going after four and a half months, which is gonna be just fine. It's already beginning to go, and I can feel it beginning to go. It gets breaks in the words. That's how I know it's starting to go.

Shortly after the injection when it finally comes back, the voice is very smooth and doesn't have those cracks in it. But right now, I'm beginning to feel that strain.

[sassy ambient music through this paragraph]

CHERYL: Diane Rehm is not the only one who gets attacked for having that particular voice. Spasmodic Dysphonia is so misunderstood that a lot of people with it don't get diagnosed for a really long time. While they're in the process, everyone around them, including doctors sometimes, is telling them to just relax, just calm down, just take some allergy medications, just do some vocal warm ups, just just just just. This is the daily reality of people whose bodies, minds, or voices aren't compliant with these expectations that people have decided are actually rules.

ALICE: I think there's an episode of *Radio Lab* where they featured some disabled people, or *This American Life*. But in terms of consistent, regular voices on radio? I don't think I've heard people like myself rather than just seeing disabled people on a "very special episode," right? I wanna hear hosts. I wanna hear regulars. And that's a risk, right, by the radio stations, in terms of listeners. But I guess that's why independent media is so important.

CHERYL: It's interesting that you call it a risk because I think yeah, financially it's a risk. But is it? Is it that people don't wanna work too hard, or is it that people are ableist?

ALICE: It's probably a combination.

PERSON 9: Part of it's probably just all the same reasons that people with disabilities have a hard time getting hired places. Or I guess they think that that's not something people wanna hear. Which is depressing.

PERSON 10: I have heard people on a podcast with a disability, but it was a disability-specific podcast.

PERSON 11: I think there's a cultural bias in favor of people who don't sound like they have a disability when they speak, and that bias leads people to not seek out hosts who have disabilities when they speak. I imagine some people have been disempowered from pursuing a career in voice acting because of a disability when they speak.

Being disabled challenges society's norms

ALICE: I think we all want information to flow easily. We live in a era where there's expectations that everything comes easily to us. This is where, on a larger theme, that disabled people have been resisting in society, right? Because we're outside of the norm. So, we're constantly jabbing and pushing the edges. And I think that's where, in terms of media, we're kind of challenging the norms, just by existing with our own lives.

CHERYL: Yes! At the UCLA Disability Studies conference, Karen Nakamura did a keynote. And they just kept saying the word "non-compliant" over and over. And everyone was cheering. And it's one thing to be called "non-compliant" in terms of you didn't do your rehab. But just instead of it being this disciplining thing that's coming from non-disabled people, to be like, "I'm owning it. My body, my mind, my voice, what I say is non-compliant." What do you think about that? What do you think about just kind of reveling in non-compliance?

ALICE: Mmhmm. Yeah, it's taken me a while. I mean, when I first started wearing this mask long-term and in public, you know, I was embarrassed. There were people who don't understand me, and I have to repeat myself again and again. And there's a little internalized ableism working there, and it's taken me a while to retrain this part of myself.

I used to take pride in my voice, before I wore this mask, and my voice privilege. And now I just love this other dimension to my disability as a part of this long evolution of where I am, and it's been pretty cool. It's very illuminating on how I feel about myself and my interactions with other people. So, it's taught me a lot.

I do think that "good" is such a loaded term. When we talk about "good," what do we really mean? I think that, to me, is exciting.

CHERYL: Yeah.

ALICE: That's what I love about disability culture or what you and I call "crip culture." We're constantly kinda redefining and pulling at the edges.

CHERYL: Well, and you're asked to be. This example you gave about switching to wearing the mask in public. You're the one…you’re the one who had to do the work to get used to the mask and to get over a sense of shame and, "Oh, goodness. I'm the one in the mask. I'm the one in the mask." And if you can come to this place where you're like, "I'm the one in the mask!!"

ALICE: Yeah, yeah!

CHERYL: We can expect that other people can too. I hear you talk about it in these positive terms of this evolution and growing your curiosity around it. And that that's what disabled people do.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: And we're out here doing it, but media, mainstream media and even independent media, is still not willing to go there for the most part.

ALICE: Exactly.

CHERYL: And then they blame us. "Well, but you don't have a good radio voice. But here you are, doing all this work to find the wonderfulness in your voice, and they're not joining you for the ride.

ALICE: So, I do take every opportunity when I do get these interview requests by non-disabled people and journalists. It's all like 101 stuff. And sometimes, I see it as an investment. I say I'm planting a seed, that these are all seeds of disability culture all over the place. But I constantly have to remind myself this is still really new to so many people. Burn out is a real issue.

[pensive music plays through next few turns]

Sometimes I wonder, "Why should I educate people all the time?" Especially when it feels like folks like you and me and Leroy have been at this for so long. I really feel that there's so many amazing people in our community that deserve much more recognition, and we're not getting it.

It’s like I definitely toot my own horn. Because if we don't toot our own horn, nobody's gonna do it for us. And we're still at that place in our community in terms of disabled media makers, and we have to fight these bigger groups like *The Mighty* that somehow purports to speak for us or represent us.

CHERYL: Ugh, *The Mighty*.

ALICE: Yeah. Things like that where most non-disabled people think that's the source. That and *Disability Scoop*. But it doesn't really highlight work by disabled people.

CHERYL: Yeah, and it passively reinforces the idea that your voice isn't needed. We've got it. We don't need you.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Yeah.

CHERYL: We expect ease of information flow, and everything has to be fast and smooth. And not only does your work have to be done fast and smooth, but your voice has to, and your video has to. And everything just has to be efficient and perfect.

And I find that so many people just accept it. And then the second you put something that is so clearly celebrating disability out there, the response is, "That's nice! I mean, nobody's perfect." And so, you do get out there, but there's this caveat around you that isn't that nice, and that was good enough.

ALICE: I think we're still under this thundercloud of inspiration porn, and we gotta dodge it. I think that's where when we post stuff, and it falls outside the realm of inspiration porn, people just aren't used to it, these narratives. And this is the work. This. Is. The. Work.

[trippy ambient music break]

Making Contact radio show

CHERYL: You produced and were featured in this radio documentary piece on Making Contact.

ALICE: Yeah, that was really fun. It was something I did just to push myself and to learn new skills. They had a storytelling fellowship, and each fellow created their own radio story. I very much wanted to use this opportunity to feature disabled people and getting really first-person perspectives and narratives, being really intersectional, a lot of people of color, and all disabled people. And that, to me, was kind of my goal as a documentarian of sorts, and I wrote the *Transom* manifesto about my experiences doing that fellowship.

CHERYL: Was anybody weird with you about your voice?

ALICE: Not really. Yeah, not really. I think that's what I really appreciated. I was nervous though, because my producer was non-disabled, and she was paired with me. And I wasn't sure. And even the recording process when we were in the field, I needed assistance, and she was great about that.

You know, I really hope that as people listen to it, that somehow it might lead to other opportunities to create more radio stories, but I haven't heard from anybody, not even my local radio station. So, it's just like, oh, I guess maybe I had too many high hopes. But I really thought it was a really great example of what I could do.

CHERYL: When you say high hopes, are you referring to that your hopes were too high for your work, or your hopes were too high that you thought non-disabled people would be like, "We embrace this!"

ALICE: The latter. The latter in terms of even getting a response. You know, yeah, supposedly in the Bay Area, there's so many public media people. And I did wish that piece in *Transom* was one way to really for me be in their space and hopefully spark

something. But it never really materialized. But I'm happy it's out there, and it's a thing I'll always have, that I can always share. But yeah. Keep on moving.

CHERYL: Going back to *Making Contact* for a minute, the first storytelling fellow they had was Lateef McLeod who uses a speech generating device. He types in a message, and his iPad speaks it out. You can hear Lateef and his friend, April Bryant, using speech generating devices in a Making Contact episode from October, 2014 called "Voice Recognition."

Remember those comments at the beginning about opinions of what makes a good radio voice? Several of them focused on the attitude, vibe, or style of the radio voice, not the voice itself.

After everyone sent me their first response, I sent them this question: Do you think someone with a disability that affects their voice could have a good radio voice?

PERSON 8: I have a disability affecting my voice. Yes, it's been more difficult. I believe that people with vocal cord dysfunction as a disability or other disability affecting speech could be a good radio person.

PERSON 4: If they wanna be a radio host, then they should be a radio host. So, yeah. I certainly think they can.

PERSON 12: I think that people with disabilities that affect their voice should be on the radio. I think that we have an idea of what is a default "good" voice, and that is an able-bodied one that's pleasant and articulate. And if we only have certain voices on the radio, we're basically not allowing the voice of disabled people to be heard. And that is an othering that I don't think that we should do. So, I say absolutely!

CHERYL: And of course, a very interesting twist came in.

PERSON 2: I think to have folks that uh on the radio that their voice is…impaired is very difficult. Um such as— I have a brain injury. So, my thought process is already skewed and gets confused easily. And if I have to listen to someone who is stumbling and stammering uh [chuckling] like I do with aphasia, um it's very difficult for me to stay on track. I I I hate denying somebody what they want to do, but it's it's something that I just can't do. I don't like my answer, but that's my answer.

Accessibility and being granted access to content

CHERYL: This is something that comes up constantly in disability community—and it should—that one person's access might pose a barrier for someone else. But this last person's comment is precisely why I transcribe every episode of my podcast.

ALICE: When I started the Disability Visibility Project, because it's an oral history project, I did get a few emails saying, "Why did you choose this medium?" Yes, this is an audist form, but I'm gonna do everything I can to make it as accessible as possible. And I think that's a challenge of radio and podcasting.

With me and other disabled podcasters out there, we should really set the tone. I've been a guest on various podcasts. Afterwards, they were like, "Oh, I never thought about" x, y, z in terms of whatever I say.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

ALICE: And then I say, "Hey, I'm so glad that you had me on here. But something to think about start transcribing your podcasts because I won't share your podcast to my community unless I see a transcript."

CHERYL: I do the same thing.

ALICE: Yes!

CHERYL: If we can't even get people to commit to basic things like access, it's no surprise we can't get people to commit to things like having people with voices that reflect disability or like a Deaf accent or anything like that, to cherish those in audio or visual mediums.

ALICE: And to have them on regularly. You know, not just as guests, but as the actual reporters and producers and editors behind and in front of the microphone.

Disabled voices are the medium and the message

CHERYL: The Disability Visibility Project, I know one of the many reasons it exists is to get narratives from disability community and disability culture out there to enrich all of society. If disabled voices are passively left out or intentionally excluded, what are we missing? What are we denied?

ALICE: I think we're denied the rich variation, in not only our bodies, our voices, but the way we express ourselves and see the world. That is a huge loss in terms of just valuing our point of view. You know, there's that famous quote, "The medium is the message." And I feel like disabled voices are mediums themselves in addition to our messages. It's critical to get both out there, and we don't just separate them.

CHERYL: Yeah, or clean them up so to speak.

ALICE: Exactly. Or not to make it palatable.

CHERYL: No, no. Because you can expand your definition of what's palatable rather than just, “That's wrong, and therefore, everything they say is not worth listening to."

ALICE: Yeah. People with the power to edit, there are so many internal biases. That's why having disabled people as actual creators feels so important.

CHERYL: [pause] Yeah.

ALICE: Culture change is really hard. Culture change is sometimes at a glacial pace, especially in our society that’s still deeply entrenched in ableism, but I think we're at a point now where there's a huge critical mass of disabled people doing great work who

can be visible in a way that it's never been before thanks to social media, and in terms of identity and pride. So, to me, you know, I do look forward to the future. And I think we're gonna get there.

[super mellow ambient music plays through to the end]

PERSON 6: We are not tolerant of anything that deviates from the norm, and I think that that is particularly true for girls and women. I think it's particularly true for minorities, people of color, and certainly people with disabilities are marginalized and kept out of the mainstream. We have got to start normalizing humanity.

PERSON 13: I think people that have disabilities should be doing radio broadcasting, definitely. I think it would be different. And people wanna hear different kinda people's voices, I guess, 'cause everyone doesn't want the same thing. People with disabilities have cool stuff to say as well, and might even be cooler.

PERSON 14: It makes me feel good all over to hear them.

ALICE: We're gonna get there. We will absolutely get there.

Wrap-up

[upbeat theme music]

CHERYL: Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at www.whoamitostopit.com, my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and…

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.

Music in the episode

"Sepia" by Podington Bear. (Source: Licensed under a Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 International License.

"Snow Wave" by alright lover. (Source: Freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under a Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.0 UK: England License.)

"walking in depreston (promo)" by Ai Yamamoto. (Source: Freemusicarchive.org. licensed under a Attribution-NonCommercial License.