Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 10: Deaf and Disabled Women on YouTube

Guests: Rikki Poynter and Annie Segarra

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Heyyyy! Welcome to the disability visibility podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your audio co-pilot, Alice Wong.

YouTube is basically our online encyclopedia. You can find anything and everything. Today's episode is on Deaf and disabled media makers on YouTube Rikki Poynter and Annie Segarra.

Rikki and Annie are two women I follow on Twitter who are prolific YouTubers. We talk about the creative process and work behind creating accessible videos, finding community on YouTube, and specific campaigns they each created such as Rikki's No More Craptions, and Annie's The Future Is Accessible.

And by the way, you'll hear two terms during this episode: Vlogging and VidCon. Vlogging is similar to blogging but in video form. VidCon is a huge annual event where creators on YouTube come together and celebrate and learn from each other.

Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

Rikki Poynter, Deaf YouTuber

ALICE: So, Rikki, thank you so much for joining me today. I'm really delighted to get a chance to talk to you and learn more about your work on accessibility and your media on YouTube. So, tell me a little bit about yourself.

RIKKI POYNTER: My name is Rikki. I'm 26. I live in Charlotte, North Carolina, and I'm a Deaf YouTuber who talks about Deaf awareness, Closed Captioning awareness, accessibility, disability in general, but also stuff like mental health, feminism, basically social issues in general. But then, you know, sometimes I like to liven it up a little bit, make it not so serious, talk about some Pokémon stuff. Outside of that, I'm also a writer for a website called Wisdo, and I spend other time doing activist stuff online like writing letters to people about captions and police, about accessibility, and that kind of stuff. And I love cats and Pomeranians very, very much.

ALICE: I really enjoy your presence on social media and learn a lot from you. I think I first saw you on Twitter, which then drew me to your videos. For those who don't know much about vlogging or the power of YouTube, can you tell me what attracted to you about this particular medium and what you love about YouTube?

RIKKI: It was different from TV. It was nice to see other people, "normal, regular" people like us. There weren't like big, fancy celebrities just doing big TV jobs. There's just teenagers and young adults that would sit down and talk about stuff, and it was kind of like having a friend online. And I think that's what really just kept me on there. It was just relatable, you know?

Challenges of having a YouTube channel and getting subscribers

ALICE: YouTube is a place where people can develop a huge following, and actually, some people make a living through views and ads. What are the challenges of having a channel on YouTube and getting folks to watch and subscribe?

RIKKI: Well, now YouTube is getting so popular, and it's getting over-saturated. Now, everybody wants to be a YouTuber. OK, maybe not everybody. But so many people wanna be a YouTuber because they think that it's so easy and that it's going to make them so much money. People look at Tyler Oakely, Pewdiepie, Michelle Phan (if that's how you pronounce her last name; I'm so sorry), Lilly Singh, and you know, really big YouTubers like that, even Jenna Marbles, and people look at them and think, "Oh my gosh. They make so much money doing this that I could be able to do that." And it's really, really hard because that's not the case. It's not really easy, especially with so many YouTubers coming in. It's really hard to be original and stuff like that. It's difficult. And not only that, but then you have to make content that is interesting enough and really attention-grabbing so that people want to continue to watch your stuff.

ALICE: Mmhmm. It's a lot of hard work, right? I mean, tell me about the work behind the scenes that happens.

RIKKI: It is a lot of work. I mean, if you do really, really simple stuff, then it's probably not going to be. You know, way back when, when YouTube was just starting, most people just sat in front of their laptops, their computer webcams and stuff, and they just talked, and then they uploaded the video. That was very simple, but now, you see a lot more higher production. Now, I'm somebody who has higher production, but it's not as high as say, somebody like Lilly Singh, if you watch her most recent videos. She would dress up in like 10 different characters, so many different angles and stuff like that. So, I can't imagine that amount of work.

But for me, you know, still getting the lights up in a very confined space, I film in a corner [chuckles]. So, getting the lights up and making sure that the lighting is right, because I don't have-- I have to put my stuff away, and thus, it can change the light instantly, and it's so annoying. So, you're making sure that's right. And then making sure your camera's working, the mic is working. There are lots of people that will have filmed videos, and the audio just didn't work. And it's so frustrating. Editing takes time. If you caption yourself, that takes time. When I was doing my own captioning, that took a while. It was very, very difficult because, you know, lack of hearing. And now, my hearing's a lot more worse, so I can't do it myself. So, that's a little bit easier. But yeah, my videos are more simple than someone like Lilly's, but it still takes time.

Who Rikki follows on YouTube

ALICE: Who do you follow on YouTube that are influential to you as a YouTuber?

RIKKI: Lilly Singh is probably one of my number one people. I talk about her all the time. Megan Tonjes, my other fellow Deaf friend. Riley J. Dennis, Marina Watanabe, my fellow activist friend. Those are some of the people that I really look up to.

[mellow music]

Captioning videos, VidCon, and the No More Craptions campaign

ALICE: So, I'm a big proponent of captioning videos. It's really not hard to do if you plan for it ahead of time. At least that's how I do it. You've been on a campaign to make YouTube accessible for Deaf people so that we don't have to rely on automated captioning anymore. These automated captions are also called "craptions" because they're often inaccurate and a poor substitute for actual captions. How are your efforts going? And when you were at VidCon this year, what were some responses to your call for captioning by creators on YouTube?

RIKKI: OK, so, when I was at VidCon, I'll be honest: There wasn't a whole lot of talk about captions at the panels that I was on: Accessibility on YouTube and Disabilities on YouTube. Yes, as for efforts, I'll be honest: It kind of went on the back burner for a little bit. But no more craptions. The one-year anniversary is coming back up, and I just launched a t-shirt for that that's going on for about 19 more days. And then I'm going to try to get another actual email campaign going. And video-wise, I'm not quite sure what we're gonna do there yet, but I plan to do another round of sending letters and stuff. Playlist is coming, but it's probably too soon to send out letters. It's going. I don't know, honestly. I don't know what the result has been, to be honest, because I haven't really watched a whole lot of YouTube besides the people that I stick with. But I'm hoping. I'm hoping that it's continued to improve.

ALICE: I feel strongly about accessibility of all forms of media, especially radio and podcasts. And also, so many people don't realize how much media is inaccessible to Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing people. What are some shows or programs you want to enjoy but can't? And why don't more people care about making their media as accessible as possible? Especially larger organizations and corporations who can definitely afford it.

RIKKI: OK, so, I'll break this up by question. As for shows and programs I want to enjoy, Philip DeFranco's political news show is something that I wish would be 100% accessible. He has community contributions on, and some people, actually, very few people have written them correctly. And it's something that I personally talked with him about, actually, two years in a row at VidCon, and I guess it still doesn't seem to stick in a way that I would prefer it. So, that's one YouTube show. Grace Helbig, I actually got her to caption a few years ago, and it was going really well. And then she kinda fell off on that, but then she started opening a community contribution. I'm not sure how well that is.... Oh, very few videos have been captioned. So, Grace Helbig is another one. Ideally, I'd like for all of them to be captioned, but I think really big YouTubers, oh, like Jenna Marbles even. We talked to her last year, and my boyfriend talked to her year before that, and she was always, every time we would come up to her about it, she would be like, "Oh my gosh! I need to do that." And so far, nothing has. Literally, actually, nothing has happened. So, definitely people like Jenna Marbles and Grace and Phil.

Why don't more people care about making their media as accessible as possible? That is a great question [laughs]. Actually, I wish I had the answer. I wish I really did.

ALICE: Just for fun, can you speculate?

RIKKI: Ugh, I guess it's just...it's just something that isn't important to them, I guess. They've gone their entire lives without subtitles and captioning. So, it's just something that they don't think about and I guess, continue to not really think about even if you do mention it to them. Because time or money and stuff like that, even though there's multiple ways of doing it. And even if they have community contribution on, then they don't really care to actually proofread to make sure that everything looks nice. I guess it's like a case of, "Well, it doesn't really affect me. So, oh well."

How does it feel to be excluded from accessing a lot of media?

ALICE: So, how's it feel to be a person who's excluded from media that most non-disabled folks have access to when they don't even realize their privilege?

RIKKI: Crappy. I think that that's the perfect word. Ha! You know, you have people that are like, "Ooh! Watch this great video!" Like, I'm in a, what's it called? It's like a Facebook group, and for example, right after VidCon, some guy had a panel, and it was filmed, and it was uploaded on YouTube. And I think it was about the adpocalypse on YouTube. People were like, "Oh, watch this video, 'cause this is a great video about figuring out the algorithm." And I'm like, "Well, I can't figure out the secret to the algorithm because this video isn't captioned. Which is really sucky."

What Rikki's working on next

ALICE: What are you working on next? Are there projects you're excited about that you can share with us?

RIKKI: I just launched the No More Craptions t-shirt. So, that's something. I'm currently working on redesigning or rebooting DeafPoynters.com, which is kind of like an article website. Or I guess to be more accurate, a friend of mine who has a non-profit designer thing is working on that [laughs]. And also trying to get my public speaking website rebooted. So, hopefully that rank goes up in the future. Playlist is coming up in two weeks, although it'll be over by the time this episode airs. And I'm going to be on a mental health panel. Other than that, it's still just making more videos and working on other types of activism stuff. And then hopefully, hopefully more public speaking gigs.

Actually, now that I think about it, I do have a project for Awesome Video planned, which is a charity thing that Hank and John Green do every year. And there's another type of campaign, like an accessibility campaign, where I'm trying to see if I can get something put together so that myself and other people can drop a bunch of letters or emails to hospitals, police stations, and stuff like that to get proper accessibility and accommodation going.

Online safety and self-care

ALICE: Great. So, as with other social media platforms, there are always trolls and people who harass and bully people, especially women in particular. Have you ever had to deal with situations that made you feel unsafe? And how did you respond to harassment, and how do you practice self-care and protect yourself?

RIKKI: I've had some trolling comments but nothing to the point where I really feel unsafe. I mean, I do have depression. So, little comments will set me off. So, mentally, it's unsafe, but physically, for my life, stuff like that, thankfully, that has not occurred and hopefully never does. However, I have close friends that have had dealt with it and are currently dealing with that, and it's really a problem. When I do respond to it, it's like people need to stop doing this and stuff like that. And as far as practicing self-care, I try to at least step away from that kind of stuff and just block people and be done with it.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

RIKKI: Please caption your work, whether it be Open Captioned or Closed Captions. There's lots of resources there and many different options. You can always come to me. In fact, I'm planning to make some sort of little pamphlet soon as a guide. Hopefully, that's a new project that will happen. And yeah, it sounds like it's gonna be a lot of work and sounds like it's going to be intimidating, but at the end of the day, it's going to be worth it. And it helps you get more views and subscribers, you know! If anything at all, if anything sticks out, hopefully that [chuckles]. Because I know. I know the feeling. You want more views and subscribers. I understand [chuckles]. And thank you for inviting me to do this.

[bluesy music]

Annie Segarra, Disabled YouTuber

ALICE: And now, here's my interview with Annie Segarra. Let's take a listen.

So, Annie, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

ANNIE: Yeah, thank you!

ALICE: Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself.

ANNIE SEGARRA: Sure. My name is Annie Segarra, aka, Annie Elainey. I run a YouTube channel by the same name. I identify as a queer Latinx disabled woman, person, and she and they pronouns are good with me. So, I won't have a negative response to any pronoun [chuckles]. I have Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, which is a connective tissue disorder which impacts my health and disabilities in a lot of ways. And I am ambulatory wheelchair user, meaning for days of injury, higher pain levels, and in order to be mobile for long periods, I need my wheelchair. But I'm able to walk in very short bursts with my cane or without aid.

ALICE: I'm gonna ask you a little bit about, what do you love about YouTube, and what's your thinking about vlogging and being part of the YouTube community?

ANNIE: That question almost makes me emotional in the sense that it's powerful for me to be reminded of the infinite limits of possibility when it comes to creating content online. That's what I love about it. You can do anything on there. You can be like me and do first-person vlogs. On YouTube, you can create series, films, short films, music videos. YouTube can be your classroom if you want it to be. It can be your stage, your rehearsal space. It's incredible. And for me, I use it as a public journal kind of. It's partly a cathartic experience for me in regards to creative self-expression. But there is also a part that is the burning desire to be heard and to be understood, to provide that understanding to people, and to participate in a dialogue where both I and my viewers leave the experience being more enlightened.

Getting started and doing all the work solo

ALICE: And how did you get started? Can you tell me a little bit about what drew you to it and when you first started?

ANNIE: Well, I actually started with YouTube when I was probably 15 in high school. Not the same content, of course. Once upon a time, it used to be about things that I don't worry about too much anymore like crushes and how to deal with heartbreak, things like that. So, as I was coming out in my family and to my friends, I started opening up about LGBT issues on my channel. As I started my recovery process for body dysmorphic disorder and eating disorder, I started talking about body image online, specifically I found a very euphoric place in my recovery. I found myself to be incredibly happy and at peace with myself, finding a very peaceful place with my mental illness and my recovery, and just wanting to share that with people, just wanting to share my recovery process and hoping that this could help other people find their peace as well. Because you can kind of see this development; there's kind of chapters in my content creation online. And I think after a long time very hyper-focused on body image, my focus has transitioned to stability because then that got on my plate.

As I started gradually losing abilities due to my illness, and finding the disabled identity and disability culture, disability community--I think we discussed this before--and a new world for me that I feel comfortable in, but at the same time not always too sure of myself. I'm always kind of cautious with what I think and what I say because of how new I feel to the club [laughs]. But at the same time, whenever I feel that I have learned something, I do want to share it with literally everyone around me: My family in my house and my family online. Because in the same process that I'm learning, as someone that is coming into the community, I also wanna share this knowledge with people who are outside of it. And also to people who are just like me and are either gradually becoming disabled or just became disabled too, that there is a community out there waiting for them to support them and be there for them, and that it's not all bad, like the ableds told them [laughs]. Yeah.

ALICE: Do you do everything yourself?

ANNIE: Yes.

ALICE: Do you shoot yourself, and do you do all your own transcripts?

ANNIE: Yes. All my vlogs are shot on my own, on my tripod in my room. And I do everything on my own, which is physical labor too. I have to set up the tripod, set up my lights in my room, make sure that the room is kind of remotely presentable. So, all that physical labor goes into it, set dressing-ish. And then I edit everything myself on the Adobe Premiere Pro. Then after that, upload it to YouTube, and then yeah, I have to, if it's not scripted, then yeah, I have to transcribe everything on my own and caption everything on my own until I can afford to pay someone else to do captions for me.

Becoming disabled and the importance of accessible media

ALICE: Yeah, and that's one thing I do appreciate about a lot of your work, is that not only on Facebook and on other social media platforms, is that you do provide captioning for your videos and image descriptions of when you do post images. And for so many people who are both disabled and non-disabled, they create a lot of media that is not accessible. So, why is accessibility important to you

ANNIE: I think I became really passionate about it at the intersection of a couple of events, which is of course, when I started losing abilities and started relying more on mobility aids and on my wheelchair. So, first was this awakening of so, these spaces that I used to love to be in, my favorite spaces in the city, all the sudden were no longer accessible to me because they were not wheelchair accessible. The example always at the forefront of my thought process is my favorite gay bar--so, this is at the intersection of being disabled and gay [laughs]--my favorite gay bar in the city that I love, love, love, they have an amazing dance floor on the second floor, but they don't have an elevator. So, when I go, my options are essentially just to stay stuck on the first floor, which is not as exciting to me as the second floor, or you know, risk my health, risk injury, risk fainting by trying to climb up the mountain of stairs to the second floor, which I've done maybe twice. I've made that hike up the mountain, metaphorical mountain, upstairs. And so, in that moment, I was awakened to something that I think a lot of non-disabled people assume. They assume that ADA regulations are there, so everything has to be accessible. And because they don't have really any reason to pay attention to that, they just don't know. They just don't notice that in fact, a lot of spaces are just not accessible.

So then, in the midst of experiencing that, I also met Rikki online, who's a good friend of mine now, Rikki Poynter, and she was campaigning for YouTubers to caption their videos. So, when she was doing that, I wasn't captioning my videos at the time. Again, you know, my privilege as a hearing person: I didn't think that that was really an issue. I wasn't aware of the problem of inaccessibility. And when she brought it up, immediately what that did was kind of flash me back to how I felt when something was inaccessible to me. So, I fully empathize with it and immediately decided from this point on out, I'm going to be captioning my videos, 'cause I would never wanna make someone else feel like that.

So, for me, it's a passionate place for me just out of intra-community accessibility. For me, visually I see disability as a huge umbrella, with so many sub-communities underneath and so many diverse experiences underneath it. It's not OK by me to just focus on my accessibility as a wheelchair user. So, once I realized that accessibility was an issue at all, I'm aware now of the plethora of ways that people need to be accessible.

[acoustic guitar music]

ALICE: So, Annie, is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your activism and why this work is so urgent and important to you right now?

ANNIE: Like everything that's happened to me in my life has led to where I am today and how I think and how I handle things and how I handle these new circumstances, something that completely changed my life, which was disability. But in this happening to me at the quarter point of my life, and having it been so recent, the point that I've been trying to get to [chuckles] is that I'm just in disbelief that it's taken the world this long to get something that I got so quickly [laughs].

Once I became disabled, I was like, oh! Click. This is where everything falls into place. But it's 2017, and non-disabled people and even disabled people--just, I feel so outnumbered--are incredibly, incredibly ableist, and they do not care. And if you challenge them on it, they will fight you right back with eugenics and awful, cruel things regarding disability. Just now, we were in the past couple months, fighting the Obamacare repeal. It was terrifying for a lot of reasons. But for me, on a social level, in respects to what we're talking about in this conversation, I felt like I failed. I felt like I became disabled, and I hit the ground running with the things that I've learned. And as I said, as I learn things, I try to share them with people. And I felt like it's 2017, the United States is about to go into an absolute systemic genocide, and non-disabled people won't even look up. They won't pay attention. They don't care. And I just felt this awful pressure, like I didn't have enough time to make them care! I didn't make the finish line [laughs]! I didn't make the deadline of getting people to care.

Right now, it's kind of my feat. It's kind of the reason I wake up every day: To try and change that. Just to try and leave the world better for disabled people than it was when I came in it.

ALICE: Well, I think with your videos, you're definitely making a difference. Thank you so much for talking with me today.

ANNIE: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed it.

Wrap-up

[hip-hop music]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture.

All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find various links about Rikki and Annie on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Sarika D. Mehta. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets. Bye!!

♪ don’t stop get it get it

while i sit and spitted

the game was coming up short till the little fitted

they wanna give a girl hell well omitted hidden

the world smelled just fine till I shitted in it

in a minute i'll be on the next gimmick

pooping on the flexed cynic   goofing off with sex image

ass to the max ya

disconnect your booty ♪