

## Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 99: Online Activism

Guests: Andrew Pulrang and Gregg Beratan

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

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### Introduction

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

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

ALICE WONG: Greetings, Earthlings! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today I'm in conversation with my friends Andrew Pulrang and Gregg Beratan. The three of us are co-partners in #CripTheVote, an online movement encouraging the political participation of disabled people that we started in 2016. You'll hear us talk about the origins of #CripTheVote, the differences between the 2016 and 2020 election on disability policies and engagement, and looking ahead at the Biden/Harris administration. Please note that our conversation took place in December 2020, a few weeks after the presidential election. One other thing, I am super excited about the next episode of this podcast which will be number 100. Can you believe?! It's going to be a super-sized episode with a very important announcement. So, stay tuned!

Are you ready? Away. We. Go. ? [electronic beeping]

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

ALICE: Andrew and Gregg, thank you so much for being on my podcast today. I was wondering if you both could just introduce yourselves first.

ANDREW PULRANG: I'm Andrew Pulrang, and I'm a disability activist, mostly online. I used to work in independent living, and now I am a freelance writer on disability topics. And I also co-coordinate #CripTheVote.

GREGG BERATAN: Gregg Beratan. I'm also a disability activist online and elsewhere. I do work in independent living as a Director of Advocacy, and I am very proud to partner with both of you on #CripTheVote as well.

ALICE: I feel the same, Gregg. And I feel like there's just so much power that happens when people come together, and #CripTheVote has been one of the most fulfilling and fun things I've done in the last four years. And I'm just so thankful for the three of us.

### What has the pandemic revealed about ableism and accessibility?

Before we get started to talk about #CripTheVote and activism, I wanna say that we're in the ninth month in the pandemic in the United States. And I just wanted to check in and

ask how you two are faring so far. And what do you think this pandemic revealed, especially to non-disabled people, about ableism and accessibility?

GREGG: Sure. I mean, the pandemic's been a ride. I spent wanna say the first four months of it at home, which was nice and I can't say traumatic at all because I like being at home. And I am a bit of a homebody and an introvert. And so, while I feel for the people that struggle with social distancing, I found it quite easy to spend 90% of my time with my family.

I think it has revealed a lot about ableism in this country, and we've started to see some shifts that I think many of us worked for, for a long time. I mean, much of my work is around getting people out of nursing facilities and back in the community and advocating for the systemic change needed to make that happen. And I think we've started to see a lot more buy-in to the fact that congregate settings are just dangerous and that this model, which we in the disability community have long said is broken, we're starting to see buy-in on other levels from people recognizing the way this is broken and that the pandemic really just highlighted this instead of this being something that was horrible about pandemic.

And I mean, if there's a silver lining to this whole thing for me, that movement's been a big part of it. We've got groups talking about abolishing nursing facilities, and I love that. That's sort of where my head is at with much of this.

ALICE: I agree. I think the conversation on prison abolition is really broadening to really talk about all kinds of congregate settings. And I think that's really healthy and really encouraging. How about you, Andrew?

ANDREW: I would echo a lot of what Greg said. I mean, I'm also a homebody and have found on a personal level that the restrictions have not been that difficult for me. Some practical difficulties are piling up. I still haven't gotten my hair cut since March, why I'm wearing a cap right now. So, but that's kinda small potatoes. I don't have that mental anguish that I know a lotta people have, and I don't say that to brag. That's just the kinda person I happen to be. It's like a privilege. And I try to be more understanding of the folks that are struggling more and maybe don't always follow the rules because of that. So, I think that's something we can learn a little bit from too, some of us. My own area actually has not been hit as hard as most areas have or a lot of areas have, although I don't know what's gonna happen in the next couple of months. So, there's that.

As far as larger changes and people understanding ableism, I agree. I think at the very least, if we're not going to see congregate settings abolished, we're at least going to see, we're releasing a new set of reasons why they're not good. And that alone, if people just begin to have it in their minds, as a matter of course, and understanding that they are basically not good, not optimal. That alone is a big shift, right? You don't even to, though I'd like to see them abolished in some way, but even without that, when people stop thinking of them as some kind of semi-satisfying thing, if they now start to associate it with the possibility of infectious disease, and that's gonna drive some people away, and I think that's all to the good.

The thing I don't know about and the thing I'm most interested in is what the reaction to the pandemic is telling us about how people with disabilities are actually viewed and valued or not valued in society. I'm usually not so much of a pessimist, but I have to say it's reawakened the idea that on a fundamental, in some fundamental way, we are expendable. Because people do seem to be willing to say, if not outright, then underneath

the surface, you know what? Maybe we can't solve the pandemic, and maybe it's OK if some of us die. That's real dark. But I think that's underneath a lot of the kinda the resistance to the idea that the pandemic's even a problem. People just don't think it's that big a deal if older people and ill people and disabled people die in higher numbers, so.

GREGG: I agree. I think, I mean, just today, I saw a newspaper story where a major hospital administrator—I can't remember if it was Johns Hopkins or Harvard Medical School or something like this—said that if things continue to get worse, we're gonna have to ration care or go to a triage model, which means rationing care. And all of this sort of tells me repeatedly that the larger society still does not value our community, does not see us as adding value to the world. And that's, as offensive as that is, that is something I needed reminding of.

ANDREW: It's part of disability rights rhetoric to say we're not valued, we're expendable. But it's not just rhetoric; it's real!

[upbeat electronica music break]

### The origin of #CripTheVote

ALICE: Just to switch gears a little bit, this is the second presidential election that we experienced together as the co-partners of #CripTheVote. And for people who aren't familiar with this campaign, Gregg, I was wondering if you could tell people a little bit about our origin story. Because this really started from you, from your idea.

GREGG: I mean, we've talked about this many times, I think. But we were all actually talking about the lack of disability in the 2016 campaign. And I think I had spotted tweets from the three of us almost at the same moment that said the exact same thing, saying, "Where's our community in all this?" This was probably after one of the early primary debates. And I approached the two of you. We'd never work together on anything. We knew each other from Twitter, and we'd all interacted, I think, in various campaigns and over various issues on Twitter. And just said, "Can we start some sort of campaign around this?" Because our community needs to be a part of this. This is the American political system cannot ignore what, 25% of the population. And I mean, Alice, as always, came up with the amazing hashtag for us, and I think that helped us so much. Because, I mean, let's face it. The hashtag catches people's eye. It gets people's attention, and it's memorable. And I think, while we had an idea of what we wanted to do, I think coming up with that was central to making it work.

Well, once we announced and started, the disability community bought in, and the disability community took over the hashtag and made it work. People were tweeting 24 hours a day, having conversations, live tweeting events, asking questions of their politicians on a state, local, and national level. And that's what made it work. I mean, that's why four years later, we were having chats with presidential candidates. I mean, without that community, without the amazing people that come in chat after chat and are on that hashtag day after day, I don't think it would've worked. I don't think it would've been as powerful. I mean, we've talked about this, but I think, you know, as much as we may've done to organize things, the disability community is the real star of #CripTheVote.

ALICE: I totally agree. And it is pretty wild to think that at the very beginning of 2020, pre-pandemic, I thought this election was gonna be the main thing that I was gonna be focused on. We had two chats with Senator Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg, which was kind of a big deal! And who knew how things would unfold?

Andrew, how would you, I guess, explain what #CripTheVote is in a nutshell for somebody who's never heard of it before?

ANDREW: Well, it's a hashtag used Twitter to tie together sort of an ongoing conversation about disability and policy and politics. And the hashtag ties it together mechanically. It's the way, you add the hashtag, they can say, and everybody gets to read it if they follow the hashtag. Our goal has been to just foster discussion amongst ourselves and then to make that conversation noticeable by politicians, people running for office, people in office, and sometimes to reach out to them directly and give them an avenue to talk to us directly. Which is the thing that you were saying actually started to happen really, earlier this year finally, with those chats we had with the candidates. But yeah, that's it in a nutshell. It's an ongoing conversation.

ALICE: And the fact that this conversation has grown over the years, you know, I think this is a thing that I know for people who are just unfamiliar, we can't make something happen by magic, become a thing, unless people actually connect with it. So, you know, I do think that a lot of what we've done has been really intentional and just baby steps. Like the way that we started 2016, things grew, and it took time. And I think that's what's been so satisfying to see. Here we are four years later to see this incredibly vibrant community and movement.

[upbeat electronica music break]

### Shifts from candidates since 2016

ALICE: I wanna ask you both, since we started in 2016, what are some of the major shifts you've seen by candidates compared from then to now that you've noticed in terms of the way they engage and talk about disability?

GREGG: I think the way I would characterize it when we started, disability was a tick box for most politicians. It was something they had to acknowledge or cover to an extent, but not something they needed to go in depth for. It was not a community that they recognized in any way as a constituency. It was more something used to signal their own goodness in the way we see so often in inspiration porn.

ALICE: Mhmm.

GREGG: It was used to say, look, I'm so good a candidate, I care about the disabled.

You could start to see the shift in the 2018 midterms a little. But 2020 started to see, particularly with the presidential candidates, people taking the disability community very seriously, and the policies were well thought out. They weren't just, you know, a quick page slapped together on a website. It was detailed, well thought out, to the point where they're getting into the nitty gritty of policies like LEAD-K, which is Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids, which is a very small bill that's traveling across the country, but one that's very important to the community and growing in popularity. But I think the fact that we're seeing them get into that level of detail is something that's amazing. I don't know that we could've expected that four years ago, but I think it definitely was a gradual shift that we saw happening.

I think in the 2018 midterms, we saw people pressuring politicians on particular issues to get answers, to see where they stood. I mean, there are specific issues that politicians got

pressed on in those midterms in ways that they probably hadn't been before. And I think the thing we saw in 2020 was that people came out with these really well thought-out plans. And we talked about this when it came out, that the Biden team came out with their plan a bit later than everyone else. And it was sort of disappointing to the community, even though in 2016, that would've probably been the best plan we'd seen. And so, I like seeing how the Overton Window, the idea of what is needed has shifted in that time.

ALICE: Yeah, and I think one thing that's really notable, at least to me it's been, it's that there's more disabled people working on campaigns and having a really active role in the formation of these platforms and policies. I mean, we have Molly Doris-Pierce, who originally was on Senator Warren's campaign, who's now on the Biden campaign. We have Emily Voorde, who was on the Buttigieg campaign. We have a lotta other disabled people who've been really involved in giving input, sharing their expertise. And I also wanna emphasize that disabled people have been involved behind the scenes and front and center for decades. It's just now, it's a culmination of a lotta things that people have built over time. Andrew, what's your take on then and now?

ANDREW: Well, yeah, I agree with all of this. And I think, you know, it's hard to know for sure the effect that we had and the role that we played. And I agree, Alice, that I definitely believe that we weren't the cause of all the progress. I think that we maybe were an avenue that nobody had really planned for. There've been groups and people ready to jump in and really shape these great new policies to make them more substantial. And they went in, and they did that. And people to take over leadership roles and campaigns, and they did that too. I don't know that they had in mind anything like this particular thing, as another tool or another sort of opening. And I do think that to some extent they used that. Maybe it might've been useful at times for a more organized policy group, for instance, to be able to tell candidates, "By the way, have you looked at Twitter lately? People really do care about this stuff. It's not just us all over the country. There are grassroots people who care." And that probably helped here and there. It certainly got people involved who had the inclination to be involved in disability politics, but didn't really know how to get started. Because we heard that directly from people saying, "I wanted to get involved for a long time, but I didn't know how to get started. Then you were doing this." Yeah.

And one of the things I'll say about the better platforms and stuff put out by candidates is there was a lotta love going around about the policies from various candidates, but also criticism from the community and even within the community over what should and shouldn't have been in them, what bits were good, what bits were bad. Often, it was a mix. Candidates who put out policies and you could tell that they thought they were just gonna get nothing but praise because they put out a detailed platform were kinda like taken aback to get pushback on stuff. That's a good sign, too, because it means the fact that we have disagreements, you can't really have disagreements over empty policy. You can't have disagreements over, "I support the disabled."

[upbeat electronica music break]

### Issues of interest under the new Biden/Harris administration

ALICE: We're gonna be in a new administration. And I was wondering, what are some issues that you both are keenly interested in under this new administration? Andrew, I know that you wrote a piece in *Forbes* about the next steps in disability policy under the Biden-Harris administration. Do you wanna share just a few of your personal kind of interests and priorities?

ANDREW: Yeah, I have four main things. And their personnel, as in who do you hire to take care of disability issues in the administration? COVID: getting through that in a way that tries to cut back on some of the particular injustice on disabled people. Undoing bad policies: you know, it's specific things that've been done in the last four or so years that've been bad for the disability community. Where it's possible to undo them relatively easily, maybe, with executive orders and things. And then trying to get a start on some of the bigger, I call the bread and butter disability issues—I don't know if that's a perfect term—but the ones where if you do make a change, that the vast majority of people with disabilities will materially notice it.

And I think of things like Social Security and SSI and SSDI and its relationship to Medicare and Medicaid and working. Like if they could make it so that more of us could work while still collecting benefits, that's something that millions of disabled people have been complaining about forever and literally have never had hope of that ever changing, right? All we hope for is being able to tiptoe through the working incentive system with expert help, which is great when you can get it. But we never, people barely ever talk about changing it. And now, again, finally in candidate policies, we're talking about actually changing it: more benefits, you can have them for longer, you can earn more without losing them.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

ANDREW: And again, that may take a long time to do, 'cause messing with Social Security is really, really hard to do, even if it's done to a good way. But, yeah, that.

And, of course, these ongoing issues with access to Home and Community-Based Services so that people don't have to go into a congregate care because they need help every day just to live. That's another bread and butter issue that has had much more activity over the years, but still isn't finished.

So, yeah, I think there are a bunch of things that are probably on the immediate horizon and that even could be done with tweaks and emphasis differences that don't necessarily even depend on Congress. And those should be done, because there's no excuse not to. And then if you get through that, let's tackle, seriously tackle some of these bigger projects.

ALICE: Thank you, Andrew. How about you, Gregg?

GREGG: I mean, all of those things are probably on my list. I think the Home and Community-Based Services is near the top. I think we've seen in the past, and we talked from the beginning, the pandemic has highlighted the problems in congregate care. And the disability community's always known about this. We've always talked about this. And yet we still have to fight case by case to get people into the community. Olmstead is litigated literally one person at a time. We have not got a system for ensuring that anyone who wants community service, Home and Community-Based Services gets them. You have to litigate on a case-by-case basis. And this is problematic. I mean, people have a right to live in the community. There is no one that cannot be better served in the community than in a nursing facility. No one. And I'd love to see a politician recognize it.

I'd love to see the move on healthcare. I think I don't see it happening 'cause Biden's committed to mainly expanding Obamacare. But, for example, we've seen in New York, we've got a bill, New York Health, that has a chance of passing this year that I'd love to see passed. Because it builds in, it's a Medicare For All bill that builds in long-term care in

the most elegant of ways, and it will expand who gets access to Home and Community-Based Services. It will prioritize Home and Community-Based Services over institutional settings. I'd love to see more of that from politicians. I'd love to see it in this administration. I don't know.

I'm fairly skeptical about this administration moving on disability issues. I think, throughout the campaign, we weren't their priority. They put out a disability policy after we hounded them. They did a good job of it. I mean, it's a decent policy. I'm not trying to attack the policy. I just don't see the commitment from them on actually prioritizing the community. But an administration only gets so many priorities to carry out in its first term, but I don't see much of what's in their disability policy as something they're gonna prioritize. And I hope I'm wrong, and I hope we hold their feet to the fire and push them on these things.

ALICE: So, on that note, I wanna thank both of you for the last four years, but also just your friendship. Thank you, Gregg. Thank you, Andrew.

GREGG: Thank you, Alice, and it's been a pleasure.

ANDREW: It's been a highlight of my life too, I'll tell you that, certainly the last several years for sure. And one of these days, we need to actually meet in person.

ALICE: Yeah! If not 2021, 2022.

ANDREW: There you go.

## Wrap-up

[hip hop]

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](https://DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast).

You can also find out more about Gregg and Andrew on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Bye!!!

♪ ...you talk too much  
shut up, you walk too much.... ♪