

AN INTERVIEW WITH ING WONG-WARD

Transcribed by Adrienne Smith & David Widmann - Humber College

INTERVIEWER: So, Ing, thank you so much for chatting with us, and I wanted to start just by asking you about your career trajectory in broadcast media.

ING: I started working for the CBC in 1993, pretty much out of journalism school. I had an internship and at that point, the market was pretty bad for journalists and I got a job as a clerk in the staffing unit with the hope that I could move around in the CBC. And so, within about eight months of my being hired, I landed a trainee position on a show called The Disability Network and I guess, in some ways, I've come full circle because the co-partner at the time was the Centre for Independent Living, in Toronto, where I now work as the Associate Director. So, I started off there, I was there for a couple of years, then moved to the main newsroom for what was then Newsworld and I was there for several years, actually, doing a number of different tasks as a researcher, an associate producer, mainly chasing stories for a wide range of programs and from there, I ended up going to radio because my history is such that I worked on a lot of shows that were cancelled, so, I was always moving on to the next job. And I was in radio for 15 years of my career and my last 13 years, I worked as a local radio producer for *Metro Morning, Here and Now, Fresh Air* and then came here to the Centre for Independent Living, in Toronto.

INTERVIEWER: And what's the work that you're doing here?

ING: So, as the Associate Director, I support our Executive Director in the strategic direction of our centre. We run several different programs. We don't offer services in the traditional sense but one of the programs we offer is known as Self-Directed Attendants Services and this enables people who are physically disabled to hire their own attendants with government funds. We administer the program, we set the budgets with them, in a negotiation, and they become the employer record. So, that is a big program for us. It's been very successful. We run a number of different programs that basically promote the idea of independent living, that people with disabilities are able to control their own lives and able to be in the driver's seat because historically, that has not been the case. We have been seen as patients, we have been seen as lesser and so, a lot of what we do is to support others to achieve their goals around independent living but also, to spread the word that even though in 2016, we're still a long way from fully recognizing the autonomy and rights that people with disabilities should have.

INTERVIEWER: How do media makers in broadcast choose language?

ING: I think the reality is that anybody who is in the media business, first of all, has to acknowledge their own bias, and I think one of the greatest challenges that we, as people with disabilities, face, despite our many efforts to be known, to be heard, to be seen in mainstream media, we're not well represented. And as a result of that, what ends up happening when we do see stories about people with disabilities, there's two tropes. One is the poor person who requires

some kind of charity or the person who is a complete superhero, so, you know, the elite-level Paralympian. I'm not going to say that those stories are not worthy, these stories are extremely worthy, but we very rarely see a middle ground when it comes to the portrayal of disability. So, the language choices that media makers take comes down to how do you perpetuate that trope, unfortunately. I don't think it's deliberate, I think it's subconscious and I think it's like any other trope in society that we deal with, whether we're talking about women's issues or Black Lives Matters or indigenous issues, that there are tropes that we need to be aware of.

So, when it comes down to the words that people use, if you're talking about a charity story, we're going to hear about how somebody's confined to a wheelchair, how their disability causes them suffering, how their, you know, how their life is without dignity, and we'll see terms like undignified or isn't able to go to the bathroom on their own, so that's an indignity. That may be that one person's experience but that's not the experience for thousands of other Canadians. When it comes to the superheroes, the whole myth that people with disabilities can overcome their disabilities, the language that's used is around, you know, all about achievement, they've overcome their disability, they don't look like a disabled person, you'd never guess that a disabled person lives in this home, and it becomes problematic because it only shows two strips of what it means to live with a disability and as a result of that, it further perpetuates the tropes that journalists find themselves in.

INTERVIEWER: It just reminds me of Stella Young, a quote that she had about overcoming obstacles, that no amount of smiling at a staircase is going to turn it into a ramp.

ING: You know, one of the great frustrations I have is whenever you hear people with disabilities say you can do anything if you just try hard enough or if you have a good attitude, you can overcome this, that and the other. The reality is it's not about us, it's about society and there are barriers that are put in place. I didn't build stairs, I'm not the one that's creating menus that don't have braille on them and yet, the onus is placed on

the person with the disability to not want to be disabled or to overcome their circumstances and you cannot overcome your disability. It's alarming to me when the media only speaks to people with disabilities who want to put that message out there, and I understand why people put that message out there. It's one that is socially acceptable, it's one that is rewarded in different ways but we're the only minority where we're constantly told you should not be in your minority group and we have to ask ourselves why that is.

INTERVIEWER: I'm glad you brought up Paralympics as well. You and I have discussed the Rio Paralympics, or the "Superhumans" trailer and also, its parody, "Yes, I Can... If" and I wondered if you could speak a little bit about your response to those?

ING: Well, I found the Superhumans video, I mean, it's an incredible-looking video and good on the BBC, as a public broadcaster, in having the funds to make something so slickly produced but at the end of it, you have to ask yourself, "What is the real message?" And the real message is one that you, as a disabled person, can overcome your disability and that's an inherent problem because the Paralympians are extraordinary athletes. They are an elite level of humanity that none of us can touch. And as I said during the Olympics, Penny Oleksiak is a 16-year-old world-class swimmer, what does she have in common with the 16-year-old down the street who's a moderately good swimmer or, you know, even a great swimmer but is not world-class, and yet, there is this kind of excitement when we see people with disabilities achieving these extraordinary things in a way that's somehow different than if they were not disabled. And I think, again, we have to ask ourselves why.

That's not about people with disabilities, that's about non-disabled people feeling good about themselves or feeling that, you know, disability may not be a big deal or that, you know, if that person can win a gold medal, what are you complaining about? Hasn't equality been achieved? And I think it's not, perhaps, as blunt as that but we don't have a great, we don't have a great deal of critical thinking in terms of how we look at disability and so, you know, it was interesting to see the parody of the "regular" guy who looks like any other fellow, who just wants to go to work, running up into barriers and getting the experience that all people with disabilities have. Oh, I'm sorry, I don't have a ramp. Oh, I'm sorry, there's a step there. Oh, yeah, we didn't notice that the counter is really high, and you can't reach it. That is the reality of what most people experience and yet, it is so normalized in our society that it's not seen to be newsworthy but a Paralympian winning a gold medal gets extraordinary attention. We don't look at the systemic issues that people with disabilities face, which range from access issues to not having access to the appropriate services that they need.

INTERVIEWER: And those representations, like in the Superhumans video, and narratives, do you find that that lens is present in Canada as well?

ING: Yes. I think that it's like everything else in Canada, things are way more subtle but I do think that, you know, we, as Canadians, want to believe that we are good people and most of us are but I think it's very difficult to talk about disability. For example, how many conversations do we hear about the fact that there's a 70% unemployment rate? Why is that when we have had decades and decades and decades of awareness campaigns and people saying, "Hey, I can hold down a job. Hey, hiring me is not going to be super expensive. I'm not going to take more sick days than others," and evidence that shows that people with disabilities make great employees, so, why is that, that we're still facing that? We don't talk about that. We don't talk about the lack of affordable accessible housing in our major centres, for people with a range of disabilities, whether they have psychiatric disabilities or physical disabilities. We don't talk about the fact that if you are a person of colour and a person with a disability, you're going to experience intersectionality of discrimination.

These are complex conversations. I think if you were to go and ask people on the street, do you think that buildings should be accessible, no one's going to say no. They wouldn't dare. That's the reality but if you were to ask: how much are you willing to bend to make this happen, how much are you willing to pay, I think you would get a different answer altogether. And I think that's, again, where we need to look at critical thinking around disability issues. Who are we including and who are we excluding? Is there an ideal disabled person? In many ways, we champion those who have jobs, who own homes, who have consumer goods, yet, you know, those who don't, who can't, are on the margins. So, why is that? And I don't think we ask those questions deeply enough, as a Canadian society.

INTERVIEWER: We were speaking earlier a little bit about language and it seems so basic and so simple, the difference between saying a person with disabilities or a disabled person, and yet, those conversations spur giant debate amongst different kinds of communities and I wondered, for you, because you have been in both the broadcast media world and the disability advocacy world, what the different perspectives are in language between the two of those groups?

ING: Well, there are some people who feel that person with a disability is a person first language and there are people who feel that disabled people refers to disability, that there's nothing to hide, that there's nothing to be ashamed. There are some people who want to be physically challenged or differently abled and, you know, as my boss has pointed out, she's been called any number of things over the years. When she was a

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child, she was a cripple and we find that word abhorrent. When she was older, she's handicapped and now, she's physically disabled, and there was a period where she was physically challenged and differently abled. The entire time, as she points out, her disability hasn't changed. So, I think language is both a reflection of our discomfort and our evolution and I think what it comes down to is we should have a debate around language. I'm not necessarily going to agree with someone who wants to refer to themselves as physically challenged, only because I think to myself, well, what's wrong with saying you're disabled? You know, there's nothing wrong with saying disability or disabled, and yet, we recognize saying crippled would be extremely offensive. So, I think around the debate, it comes down to, you know, if we agree that disability is a term that has a political and cultural identity, then that's the term that we should use.

Now, it gets tricky when you're in broadcasting or when you're in the media and there are language guides and there are lots of debates around how language should be used. I think the main this is that whenever anybody is speaking about a person with a disability, that they need to be mindful of what the individual wants as well, and sometimes you're not able to give the individual what they want because we don't really generally use the term differently abled, so, where's the compromise? What does it look like for that person?

I think the main thing is that people should not be afraid of addressing their own biases when it comes to disability, that many of us grew up with this notion that to look at a disabled person is to look at someone who is lesser than you, that a disability is something to be pitied because that person isn't able to do what you, as a non-disabled person, can do. I think we need to shed that, as a society. We all have a variety of limitations and we all bring different strengths to the table. And so, my own view is, if we look at disability from the perspective of someone who's living with a disability, who doesn't see themselves as lesser, who doesn't see themselves as a super human or a charity case, that we'll actually be able to have some of these difficult conversations about what accessibility and inclusion means for people with disabilities in this country, in the 21st century.

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