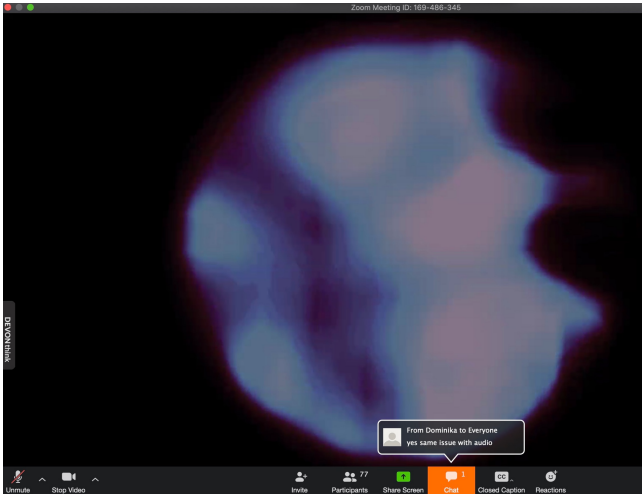




THOMAS REID

Interview Date: November 28, 2022

Image Description: Text reads "The Remote Access Archive" atop a screenshot of a Zoom shared screen, which shows a work of art by Yo-Yo Lin. The art is a white and grey blob on a black background.

The bottom shows a series of grey buttons, along with an orange chat button that is lit up. A speech bubble above it "From Dominika to everyone" says "yes same issue with audio."

KEYWORDS

2000s, 2014, 2018, 2020, audio, audio description, Black and disabled, Black Panther movie, COVID-19 pandemic era, blind, cross-disability, disability mentorship, Gatewave radio, podcasts, pre-COVID remote access, radio, remote socializing, remote work, video, video recording

IDENTITIES GIVEN

Black, male, he/him/his pronouns, disabled person, Blind person

LOCATION

United States

Introductions

Kelsie Acton:

So we'll start with a few questions about you and then I'll ask a few questions about podcasting. If you want to answer different questions at any point, or you think I'm asking the wrong question, just let me know. This is really about your experiences.

Thomas Reid:

Okay. Sure.

Kelsie Acton:

So can you tell us your name and where you currently call home?

Thomas Reid:

So my name is Thomas Reid and currently I call East Stroudsburg Pennsylvania home, but in all actuality I'm always saying that only 90 miles from here the Bronx New York is my true home. But I reside in Pennsylvania now, yes, the Poconos.

Kelsie Acton:

What words do you use to describe your race and gender?

Thomas Reid:

I am a brown-skinned Black man. And pronouns are he/him/his.

Kelsie Acton:

Thank you. Do you consider yourself a disabled person, and/or a person with a disability?

Thomas Reid:

I do. I do. I do identify as a disabled person or a blind person. But yes I am also a person with disabilities. Either/or. Either of those are fine.

Kelsie Acton:

Awesome. And do you consider yourself to be part of disability community or disability culture?

Thomas Reid:

Absolutely, both. Definitely.

Kelsie Acton:

Brilliant. I'd love to know – you said absolutely both – is there a difference for you between disability community and disability culture?

Thomas Reid:

Yeah, I think so. I think especially the way the terms can be used sometimes. If someone is describing the community of people who are Blind for example, some people who may not necessarily identify as Blind or may not be that comfortable with that, they are probably – they are – a part of that community, that collective, or that group I should say. But in terms of disability culture there's a certain philosophy behind that that has to do with, at least the way I look at it, that has to do with identifying as a disabled person. So I think there can be a difference, yeah.

Reid's Early Work in Audio & Podcasting

Kelsie Acton:

Awesome. And one of the reasons I was really excited to talk to you was because of your work in podcasting. Can you tell me about how you got started in podcasting?

Thomas Reid:

Okay, get ready Kelsie.

Kelsie Acton:

I'm so ready.

Thomas Reid:

So for me, podcasting and audio in general, it all sort of ties back to becoming Blind. When I lost my sight in basically 2004 I didn't have access to a computer. I didn't have access to any real way of taking notes yet. I didn't go through any of the skills training, the blindness skills, I didn't learn how to use my screen reader or any of that. And so the only thing that I could do was to use a – at the time it was like a little handheld cassette recorder and then I upgraded to a little digital recorder. And that was mainly to keep track of appointments, remind myself of things that I would normally

have jotted down. I used to always have a notebook with me. I wanted that just to remember stuff and just even to make notes and observations and stuff like that.

And then I started recording my daughters because I used to be the dad with the video camera, taking my daughter – at the time it was just my six year old – but then in 2004 I had a newborn. At the end of the 2003 my youngest was born. In 2004 I was just catching all the goo-goo-ga-ga's and all that stuff on digital recording and then getting my other daughter and just having conversations and just playing with her. And that really sparked something in me that was – it sparked the – in high school I was a bedroom DJ. It never got out of the bedroom. I was never that good. So that was like a hip-hop DJ, so I had the two turntables and the mixer and scratching and doing all that type of thing. I always loved music and music production. So I was like, oh wow, this feels like that, when I was recording my kids. Eventually when I got onto the computer later on that year or in 2005 when I was more proficient, I was able to get some accessible editing software. And that just really sparked it for me. So I was able to take those recordings and start playing with them and putting music on them. And just doing stuff. Just playing. And it felt really really good. So I started using audio a lot in my life. Not just that but then in terms of – I got involved with advocacy and so I would find ways to give me an excuse to make audio. Because it always felt like I needed a reason to be doing it, and that's sort of my problem. But I got over it. It was cool because it gave me an opportunity to really really practice with audio. And so I was doing that for years with this organization mainly in different capacities, disseminating information through this – it was the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind – disseminating information, doing like tutorials, and doing little stuff like that, even some marketing stuff for our conference. All of this stuff.

In 2014 I learned of the Association of Independents in Radio: New Voice Scholars. And what that was, or what that is, that organization is, obviously it's independent producers in radio and also podcasting, it's not in the name but it's definitely podcasting now. Part of what they did then was to really give you a scholarship to attend the Third Coast Festival. It's a pretty big audio, now podcast, thing. It's also a radio thing. They kind of market themselves as the "Grammys of radio". Part of the awards that they would have at this conference, there was a lot of trainings, just a lot of people in

the industry, and you got to go there. And so I won that year, I became a New Voice Scholar and I met a lot of people there.

And this one person sent me something after the conference about a radio reading service called Gatewave in New York City that was looking for producers to create original content for them. So Gatewave – the radio reading services are specifically for Blind folk, for people who are print-impaired. It's sort of an old technology now, but basically you would have your own radio, a specialized radio receiver that each person would have. On that you would be able to pick up the stations. And what they would do on that is have folks reading magazines and newspapers. What they wanted to do in Gatewave was to create original content. When I first got this invitation to apply and go ahead and do that I was really – I was annoyed. Because I was the only person they sent it to. And so I was like well, they're looking for people to create content, they're not just looking for blind people. And I got over my feelings, and I saw it as an opportunity to actually put some focus behind what I was doing. And to really just move forward and have a place to actually create something for. Because like I said, I seem to always need a reason to create, so Gatewave became my reason. And what I came to realize is that it definitely was an opportunity because the volunteers who worked at Gatewave were folks who work in the industry, so they were producers for CBS television, CBS radio, ABC, all of these different outlets. They were professional. One of the producers that I was working with, she works with CBS radio so she was giving me opportunities and different things to produce. And she liked it and they all liked it and they thought it was good, and they said, this is really good stuff. And so that increased my confidence.

And so what I decided to do, because it was Gatewave radio and no one can hear it, that I knew, because no one was using that service, I had a blog at the time, and so I decided to just take those audio clips. They were only like 7 minute, 10 minute pieces, or something like that. And I would share them on my blog. My blog's name was Reid My Mind and I decided to just call it Reid My Mind Radio. And there you go. And then eventually I turned that, just posting those audio clips into a podcast with a little more focus and longer episodes and diving into a little more stuff. There you go, that's a long story, right.

Reid My Mind Radio as Disability Mentorship

Kelsie Acton:

No, it's great, these are the kinds of stories we want. So when you started Reid My Mind Radio what was the focus? Who were the people you were talking to? What kind of stories were you looking for?

Thomas Reid:

Yeah, so there wasn't really any focus in the beginning when it was just Gatewave, it was just whatever they would give me. But it was always blindness related. It was always blindness related. And then what I started to realize is that when I was creating these things, I was focusing on people adjusting to blindness because that was my experience. And I was like, wow, this stuff is really interesting for folks who are new to blindness and it's useful. So that started to guide me. So when it became Reid My Mind Radio, that was my target audience: people adjusting to becoming Blind. And, I would say, adults, so I would really think of that as 18 and up because that's probably who – yeah, that was really the focus.

That all still remains, but what has changed is that I started to think about blindness and disability in general. And seeing this difference, especially within the advocacy world, that blindness is so separate. And I started to get more in touch with cross disability. And so now I say the tagline, for the podcast, is “compelling people impacted by all degrees of blindness and disability in general”. And so my target audience is anyone adjusting to becoming disabled as an adult. So I try to make – probably still because of the history and because of the people, and those that I come into contact with, it's probably a lot more – it's still probably skews heavy blindness-related. But it's definitely general disability, cross disability stuff.

Kelsie Acton:

It's a really beautiful way of thinking about disability mentorship in many ways, like the scale and how you come into disability. Do you know how people find you?

Thomas Reid:

Yeah, I think for the most part I did a terrible job branding, because if you look up – most podcasts that are blindness-related have the word blind in it. If you want to find ‘blind this, blind that’ you can just type that in and

something's gonna come up probably that's related. No one's typing in Reid My Mind. And it's not even read, r-e-a-d, right? My last name's r-e-i-d. So I think it's been a lot of word of mouth to be honest with you. It's not only until maybe the last 2 years that I probably – there's social media, definitely social media stuff that I try to push out and started to get a name, people sort of telling one another. And then there were some episodes that probably really attracted more people. And that goes into the whole story of how the podcast led to so many other things, and I think part of that is how new people have come to know the podcast and know me.

Kelsie Acton:

That's super interesting. Sorry, you're getting me at the nighttime here, so my aphasia starts to hit a little bit so that's why the weird pauses.

Thomas Reid:

Okay, no problem.

Black Panther and the Audio Description Industry

Kelsie Acton:

Can you tell me about the last two years? Obviously, there was a pandemic, but was the shift in who was hearing you related to the pandemic?

Thomas Reid:

It actually goes before the pandemic, but the pandemic definitely comes into play. So in 2018 I did an episode about the movie Black Panther and audio description. Audio description is the extra track that's created to enable those who can't see the film to be involved in the experience. So it narrates and describes what's happening when there's no dialogue and all of that type of thing. So I was really upset with some of the choices that were made in Black Panther. And then the episode talked about, in general, some things and some suggestions and yada yada yada for improving audio description in general. But the main focus was about Black Panther. The narrator for Black Panther – and we know that Black Panther is culturally – it's not a Black movie, it's not made by – it's made by Marvel. But the way that movie was marketed, right, it was definitely like a Black experience. And so for those who are Blind we did not get that because the

narrator was a British white man. And it felt wrong, and it felt disruptive. And one of the things that we say about audio description is that it should not disrupt the film experience. This absolutely did. And a lot of people, a lot of folks within the industry of audio description, really took to this episode. And it got talked about a fair amount. But then when everyone was starting to really think about equity and everything that happened in the beginning of 2020 with George Floyd and all that was going on, I think it took on more – it took on a little bit more.

Industry Shifts During Pandemic

Thomas Reid:

Plus during that time – well, in between that time – I was always doing a fair amount of work around audio description in terms of on the podcast, but I'd been also talking about why blind people need to be involved more in audio description. And so in 2020 someone who is a director of a post-production company who creates audio description – I didn't know he was listening to the podcast and it just so happened I was actually gonna get him on the podcast. And so we had a fantastic conversation and we were talking about this idea that, hey yeah more blind people should be involved in this and why aren't there? The reason that I was always given is that, oh you need to see in order to do that because we have to bring you into the studio, and then the time, you have to know the time codes of the film, and when to jump in, these are all cues that are on screen, blah, blah blah blah blah. And I was always like, well why can't we do a different process? I know how to make audio. I know how to do this, so I know that this is not the only way it can get done.

And so what happened during the pandemic, well, nobody could go to the studio, ha ha! And so everyone was looking to get folks set up remotely, and I was already set up remotely. And this gentleman was like, yeah, let's try it. So we tried it. Now again, I'm not the first Blind narrator, not at all, but that sparked a lot of conversation within an industry, and then today they're using probably close to 20 Blind narrators in their production company. And so that started with, that kind of goes back to that episode of Black Panther and all the conversation. And of course, unfortunately yes, but fortunately the pandemic. So it was all of that. A lot of conversations came out of that,

since the pandemic, so that's why I say it's probably mainly since 2020 that people really learned about the podcast.

Kelsie Acton:

That's super fascinating. So effectively you're saying that the shift to remote work, it wasn't just about remote work enabling access to this industry, the shift to remote work allowed people to essentially rethink how audio description was being done for video.

Thomas Reid:

Yes. Not everybody, but yes. And still there are those out there – and it's just like anything else, right, just like those who are really yelling the loudest about people getting back into the office space. There are folks who don't necessarily like that method, they would say, oh it costs more and blah, blah blah. But fortunately there are people who are listening and who are doing it. So where it was just one company, I would say that there's – I mean there's probably 2 that do the majority – but I do work, and I don't – because I don't think it's just about me doing the work, that doesn't change anything for the industry, it doesn't change anything for Blind people. It has to be most of the community that's doing the work now, but there are other companies that are more open to the idea of it, absolutely, because I do work with – I actually do narration for more than one company.

Podcast Brings Opportunities

Kelsie Acton:

That's incredible. Are there other connections or opportunities that have grown out of the podcast for you?

Thomas Reid:

Yeah, definitely. A lot of it is around audio description, so it's not just the narration, I think it's also the opportunity to talk about audio description. Because when I talk about audio description I'm obviously not just talking about that, I'm talking about all the things that it touches: the representation stuff, the empowerment things, all of these things. So having these conversations has been a fantastic thing. So whether it be opportunities to do presentations and panels, but it's also been – I co-facilitate workshops, because audio description is really powerful whether it be for learning,

whether it be for sparking creativity. So I do some workshops with someone, we get into all of this, to the creativity side. Also image descriptions, there's some parallels obviously between audio description and image descriptions. It's been that, I'm trying to think of some of the other things that have come out of it. Opportunities to consult, I've done consulting with film festivals, that's been a really cool thing. That was also not just audio description but also accessibility of the film festivals. I'm even working with a filmmaker right now on sort of directing the accessibility of their film specifically, so that includes the audio descriptions and the captions and all of that stuff. And just really thinking about description as they are finishing up the production of the film.

Disability History of Access: Visual Description, Cassette Tapes, and Conference Calls

Kelsie Acton:

Wow. Can I change tacks just slightly?

Thomas Reid:

Sure.

Kelsie Acton:

I know you've weighed in on the question of visual descriptions in Zoom meetings and more generally, both in your writing and on your podcast. How did you come into those conversations?

Thomas Reid:

Through audio description.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah! Sorry that's probably a very obvious –

Thomas Reid:

No, yeah, but it's all related. That's the thing that I find interesting because part of the audio description conversation, like I said with *Black Panther* or with other films, wasn't just about the narrator, it was about the writing and how often audio description would eliminate people of color from films, because they would not tell you that this person is a person of color, this

person is Black, this person is whatever. They would remove identity, so disability doesn't get covered. You would not know — there's been films and I had no knowledge that the person was a wheelchair user for example. The idea, the train of thought with audio description prior was always, oh it has to be related to the film. Everything's related, it's not just about the film. And it's not like everyone has – It's about access. And to me the simplest thing is that if a sighted person can see it, well why can't I have the opportunity to access that. So that goes into everything. So yes, in a meeting if a person is whatever their identity is, that could mean something to how I perceive what they're talking about. So to have access to that information – I didn't think it was a big deal, and what's so interesting is all the things that goes into. The fact that some folks have never had to even think of describing themselves, and then other people are like, oh I've always described myself now that I come to think about it.

It's really interesting. It was really a natural sort of progression to start talking about self description.

Kelsie Acton:

And was this attention that attracted in part because of the shift to remote work and Zoom calls?

Thomas Reid:

Yeah, it was definitely Zoom calls, but again for me that was going on way before the pandemic. I've always done everything, since I became blind – so after becoming blind I stayed working with my employer for a while but that was from home. And all the advocacy work, we've always done that remotely. A lot of people have been, and people with disabilities period, have been doing that so long. Prior to the Zoom it was a free conference call. So when Zoom came around, it was just a continuation. But yes, absolutely the fact that now everyone was working remotely since the pandemic, it really became popular. But folks were doing – in the disability community, folks were doing self descriptions prior to that.

Kelsie Acton:

You mentioned Blind people doing advocacy by conference call? Do you have any good stories about that?

Thomas Reid:

Wow. I was very fortunate that there was some really senior folks within that organization, the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind, that I got to talk to. And even had some things for me to read about how the two advocacy organizations were formed, the ACB [American Council of the Blind] and the NFB [National Federation of the Blind]. And reading some of that, what was really interesting is how – I was like, oh my goodness! When podcasting – I was like, Blind people have been podcasting way before anybody. But it wasn't a podcast right? So obviously, it wasn't – the whole RSS [Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication] and the subscription and all that type of thing. But the fact that when folks had access to cassette recorders they would make cassettes for one another, because not everybody read braille. And maybe it was more intimate way of communicating. So folks would make cassettes and then mail that to another person. I was like, wow that's really cool to me, I thought that was fantastic. So it's things like that.

In terms of the conference call, what's funny is when I got involved with the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind they were still – they were paying, it had to be a couple thousand dollars for conference services, telephone conference services. And I was like, wait I know there's a free conference line. And so I looked it up. And when I got involved I was like, hey guys, first thing, let's cut that, let's use free conference call. And at first it was an issue because I think the way they were doing it, the conference call that they were paying for also had like a 800 number, for folks who didn't have free long distance. But I was like – now again, I would refer to this a lot differently now – but I think this would fall into mutual aid because it was like, well hey guys, look so for those who don't have long distance, for those who do, two-way somebody into this meeting and then they don't have to pay. We can save the organization thousands of dollars off the bat by using free conference call. And so we did that and it worked. And it was just the way people would just work together, to pair up and do this work. Again, I look at it a lot differently now, but I think that's pretty cool. I think that's really cool.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, that's really amazing. That's actually the kind of stories we've been struggling to find because I feel like everyone wants to tell us about the pandemic and remote access, but in fact disabled people and Blind people have been doing this for a very very long time.

Thomas Reid:
Absolutely.

Kelsie Acton:
It's just about finding the stories.

Thomas Reid:
Yeah I think if you find folks who have been doing that work, doing work in organized movements, that has to be the case. That has to be the case. To be able to communicate. So many things that were done, it wasn't just done within with a local area, so that has to have been the case.

I still get a kick out of it. My kids make fun of me. But I remember the first time I interviewed this woman, and she was in Russia. And I got off the call, and I'm amazed. I'm like, she was in Russia. And this was on Skype so this was a few years back. And I'm just like, this was fantastic. They're like, daddy it's the internet. I'm like, no, y'all don't understand. That could not have happened before now. Even two – I mean the internet's been around since '96, '98, whatever, but we weren't able to do that. It's basically now that you can do that and I still get a kick out of it. I really do.

Connection Across Distance

Kelsie Acton:
That's amazing. Do you have other stories of remote connection or remote participation that you'd like to tell me?

Thomas Reid:
It would sort of be the same as that person, but I mean, just the people that I've been able to speak to. Oh, here's a remote connection that did come through the pandemic, because of the podcast. It was someone Canadian, she reached out. And her husband is Blind, she is not. I think she does have a disability, I don't remember. But they liked the podcast, they reached out and they wanted to talk about it, say something about it. And it was cool and that was nice. We ended up chatting back and forth via email for a while. And there was another person, what I found out is that this other person who also sent me an email was friends of theirs, and so we all

jumped on a Zoom. Since then we've been periodically having, you know, we just get on the Zoom and have a drink, and then we all talk about what we're drinking, and then we just chat. I would have never – and they're Canadian, they're all in Canada I believe, obviously that's what Canadian means. I would have never thought that that would be possible.

So I'll put it into perspective, when I became blind one of the first things – and especially living out here where I live, it's a suburban-rural area, right, so it's about 5 miles to a local bus. And that local bus runs on its own schedule alright. So public transportation is not happening out here. In 2004 there was no Uber, right. No Lyft, nothing like that. And so I had to really come to terms with the fact that I had just moved out there, built this home, and wanted to raise my kids out here, and so it was a real struggle for me to say that I'm gonna stay in this situation. Because my first instinct was, alright pack it up, we're going back to the city, because I know I'll be able to get around in the city. But the family did not want to do that. I didn't want to do that, in my heart, but I wanted to do that for my access. And so I came to the terms, okay I'm gonna do this for the family, I'm gonna make this work. And so, if you would've told me that I would've enjoyed sitting on the Zoom, having a drink with some friends, I would have said you're full of crap. But I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. It was really fulfilling, it was like, wow I would have never met these people.

The pandemic was when my friend group from New York, a bunch of guys, finally decided hey let's get on the Zoom. Like every time I want to hang out with them it would be a all-day trip for me. I would have to leave here early to get a ride with my brother-in-law, go into the city. Get to the city about 3 o'clock, they don't get out until 6, so I'm hanging around, then I'll meet up with them in a bar or something, hang out with them for a few hours. Then I come back and meet my brother-in-law to drive back in. So I left here at 12PM and I'm getting back at like 12 or 1AM for a hangout for 4 hours. But now during the pandemic, hey y'all – it wasn't me who said it – hey y'all why don't we jump on the Zoom and kick it. I'm like wow. That was nice for me. That was nice, and it wasn't just for me, I didn't feel separated. I wasn't like, oh they're just doing this because I can't go. No, nobody could. We were all working with the same thing. And that felt good.

Kelsie Acton:

You don't have to answer this, but has that stayed? Do you still get to jump on a Zoom with your friends?

Thomas Reid:

We jumped on something a while back, but no, I would say no. Because last year around this time, it wasn't a Zoom, but they did come out here. So maybe that was because of the Zoom, where they realize, oh yeah if we do it he's not gonna be able to get to the city too quickly, whatever yada yada yada. So I opened my house for them. My house has been open for them, but whatever it's all good. They came out here. And then we did jump on a Zoom but it was sort of an emergency Zoom about another friend. But it has the potential, I think it's just one of those things where it's back to where it's gonna have to be me to initiate that and to keep that in everybody's mind. And in 2020, it wasn't me.

Despair and Possibility

Kelsie Acton:

Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't? Or any story you think I or future disabled people should know that you haven't told yet?

Thomas Reid:

I guess the thing that I know today that I didn't know in 2004 is the power of adaptation – everything that I'm doing today – and it's a weird thing because – I think I'm proud of it, but I don't know if pride is the right word, I think it's more like I'm very happy, I'm very thankful for it. I'm still a little shocked, but the fact that everything that I'm doing today has been done based on remote access in some way is absolutely amazing to me. And it makes me feel like – When I get into my cynical phase, which happens a lot more now, but when I get there, and I don't like to be there, that's one of the things that I think about. And that keeps me optimistic, like no everything that you're doing is done remotely, so that means it can be done. There are lots of things that can be done, but it might mean changing your process, changing the way you do it, changing your perception, changing the way you think about it. And that to me is a lesson that I doubt I would have listened to in 2004. I doubt I would have believed it. But it would have been nice to be like, wow! That would still be in my head, like if I heard that. It might be in the back of my brain, to maybe hold onto, maybe

believe. Because I think, again like I said I'm always thinking about that person who's adjusting, that initial feeling, I never forget that initial feeling of ooof, just despair, like there's nothing, like everything was done, everything was closed. And to be holding on to something that lets you know that no, it's gonna open up again and when it opens up be ready, because you gonna be able to go wherever it is you wanna go. You're gonna have a lot more opportunity than you think you do. And I would want people to hold on to that. I would want people to really give that some thought, because I think it's true. I know it's true. It feels a lot better than despair, let me say it like that.

Kelsie Acton:

Yes. Yes. Thank you so, so much for your time.

Thomas Reid:

Thank you.

Kelsie Acton:

This has been really extraordinary to talk to you.