Down to the Struts

Season 7, Episode 2: Exploring Disability News from Around the World with Peter Torres Fremlin

Guest: Peter Torres Fremlin

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

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“I really want to embrace, what I'm calling a disability lens, where we take the way that disability disrupts our lives, and we let that disrupt the way we talk about news and understand the world.”

**Introduction**

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui—creator and host of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability, design, and intersectionality. The next stop on our tour of disabled organizing, activism, and media-making around the world brings us to my conversation with Peter Torres Fremlin. Based in the UK, Peter is the author of Disability Debrief, **a project that brings together disability news and resources from over 125 countries around the world. Peter recounted his travels as an international disability rights expert, his own personal journey into disability identity, and gives us a behind the scenes look into Disability Debrief. I myself am a dedicated Debriefer, and I can’t wait to share Peter’s gift of bringing together research, policy, and storytelling to lift up disabled experiences in all their forms. Ok, let’s get down to it!**

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Peter, thank you so much for joining me today. I'm so happy we were able to make this happen.

Peter Torres Fremlin:

Thanks, Qudsiya, for having beautiful conversations on this podcast. It’s a real honor to be here.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

I wanted to start off by asking you to briefly introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about what led you to, you know, your your work over the last many years, advancing access across the world.

Peter Torres Fremlin:

Thanks, Qudsiya. I'm British, if that doesn't come across I was born. Born in the UK, I was born with a disability. A type of muscular dystrophy. But for the first half of my life, until I was at university that was not a big part of my identity, I would sort of tell people, I'm disabled, if I needed something from them, like I'm disabled, can you help me write onto this bus or whatever it is. And then through various curiosities and accidents, I got connected with the disability movement in Bangladesh, of all places where I was traveling, and I got invited to a group of people that were gathering in terms of their disability, and that really set me off on a path of first studying to do this, really in Brazil. And then I was like, I'd like to sort of work on this in international development, that sort of sort of charities working in poorer countries, and the UN as well, to improve conditions. And that's where I, that's where I started work. And then I got into that, I got into that system got sort of deeper into various parts of the UN, working on disability rights. And that's a sector it's been really growing over the past few years, it took me it's taken me to many different places. And that, for me, was always accompanied by real passion to, to travel to get to know different cultures to learn different languages. So it's kind of combining those two. And then it's, those those forces brought me into what I do today, which is creating Disability Debrief, which is an online newsletter, and it gives the disability lens on World News. And it curates resources from over 125 countries

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

your work clearly has taken you all over the world, from Brazil to Bangladesh to Egypt. And I'm curious, in your observation from all of these travels, what are some of the different ways that we frame disability across cultures?

Peter Torres Fremlin:

that question is still something that's challenging to me to really reflect on those differences. The first, the first way that really comes across is that my disability is different in each of those places. I'll give you an example when I went to, to Bangladesh for the second time, but I was going to study to study Bengali language and spent a longer time there, and I realized that my second week, are there like steps everywhere. Like, I can't get anywhere independently. And I was like, What have I done, right? Like, why am I why am I here? And then I realized very soon afterwards, like, wherever the steps is, also, there's also probably someone that will help you up them. And so it's a very different, like, it's a very different physical environment and way people are relating around that physical environment. Another example like that. I used to kind of walk around and like fall over in public as a lot of way to add drama to life. And in Brazil, like people come running to help you stand up I'm, and in the UK people will help you but they're a bit, they might be a bit awkward about it and you might sort of have to kind of like ease them into it serves a very different form like that my body was getting treated by people, my physicality was getting treated by people. And then through the disabled people I met, I saw very different experiences, like I saw people that had had to leave school because of the disability in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, one of my close friends was really like, hidden in a room, in his, in his family home for several, several years, because his parents were ashamed and was scared of what the community might say, like to the extent that his friends had thought he might be dead. And so this is just a very different, like, set of reactions to different disabilities. And you can see that within, within countries as well, you might get parts of society where they just say, well, people are a bit more out and about, and then parts of society where, where people might get hidden away. And it's like, it can actually be a bit like counterintuitive, sometimes, like richer families have more resources they can afford to hide too like not integrate their children in some ways. And in other families, you just sort of you you have to get on with things, whatever your whatever your situation is. So it's really different reactions to to different two different disabilities really different conditions that disabled people live in, Qudsiya, obviously, like as well, disability isn't like a stable category everywhere, right? People understand very different things from it. They often it's quite a quite stigmatized, stigmatized term so much as people connecting with our disability movement are present in all countries over the world. And it's one of the real pleasures of working in the movement. Right, when you meet sort of regular people, they may or may not be on that, on that identity as like, also within the US and the UK, a lot of disabled people, a lot of disabled people aren't.

**Qudsiya Naqui** 07:39

have you seen similarities in cultural attitudes towards disability?

Peter Torres Fremlin:

Unfortunately, the similarities around stigma and exclusion, and the way disability limits opportunities, and you kind of sort of Yes, see, see really unfortunate patterns, I was just discussing with some friends yesterday, this unfortunate pattern, and a lot of places that when there's a disabled kid, the burden falls on the mother to sort things out and to let go, like a kind of million miles to kind of fix things and that is that I see that in like moms in Egypt and I see that like here in the here in the UK with with mothers. There are then similarities and differences in the approaches that we use to tackle these things. I think one similarity I see is that disabled people connecting with each other is really liberatory and transformative. And I think that's been the case for both of us. But you also see that like, you don't have to sort of sign up to this kind of political movement, just having like a little sports club you go to and you meet other people who've got similar and different disabilities, can really change your life, right, because you see things, things see things are possible. Going back to a difference, I would, I would sort of also say that then there's, there's, there's differences in some of the ways, ways we tackle this, I think, in both the US and UK, we're a bit focused on, like solving things through legislation and solving things through like, investment or financial resources. Um, and obviously there are there are countries where the like, the the legal environment doesn't so take take the relate to day to day life, like, maybe she's got a shop, you're not that worried about the building code, and no one's gonna see you about it, like, for instance. And maybe you don't have a lot of money, but then you can do really, like extraordinary things for inclusion in those contexts as well. And that's kind of that's the kind of lesson I take and come back to somewhat like the UK and we're looking for very well, resources, resources are in some ways, we're a bit stuck compared to, right, so some of the some of the innovation you might see in different places.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

And do you think that some of that relates to different attitudes around dependence, interdependence, and independence, for instance. interdependence is one of the principles of disability justice, and it's something that we, as a community really hold up, and this idea that, we all depend on each other, and, care goes in every direction. But in the West, particularly in the US, and maybe even the UK. There's such an emphasis on how do we create laws, funding policies to make disabled people as independent as possible, but perhaps in other cultures, because there's more of a conception of cultural conceptions of interdependence already exists, that there's more of that ingenuity, you were describing, you know, being able to do a lot when it comes to inclusion with little resources.

Peter Torres Fremlin:

I think that is a really important factor, I can refer to some of that in public spaces. But you're absolutely right, those differences, like in family and community life, and just sort of, like how many people are involved? It can, I think it leads to sort of, I mean, I think when kind of a more connected and community or family based setting, decides to include you, they can really include you because then they've got a lot of different resources. And, and it doesn't necessarily matter if you can't do XY and Z, because, like, there's always people to pitch in. But it means that when they decide to exclude you, it can be it can be particularly particularly brutal. I'd really like yeah, I really think, like think about, think about that. Again, another example from where I've moved back to in Colchester during the, during the pandemic as they tried to connect with disabled folk, like do we have a sort of a folk with a place where disabled people like and convenient talk route, shared access is not really, like we've got to have sort of separate groups that are maybe meeting around, like there's an MS Society, or there's sort of evenings for people with intellectual disabilities, or whatnot. But we don't have that space of coming together that that you're right, that in certain parts of the US the Disability Justice Community has, has made and is really an example of how that care can be put together.

**[Gentle strumming guitars]**

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

how has, how have these experiences traveling around the world and meeting all kinds of people working and living in all kinds of communities? How have they shaped your own personal relationship with your own disability?

Peter Torres Fremlin:

it was through people I met in Bangladesh that I got entered into the disability movement. I was going up some stairs, which I do sort of I did then by leaning on a banister quite quite heavily and someone walked past me as they are, you're disabled. I'm disabled, like I've got a group of disabled people do you want to come and meet them? And I was kind of at a stage in my life where I would say yes to things like that. And so I did and sort of went to stay in a week and a half and stayed for a month and that little, I mentioned you have a little sort of plaque Come behind me from a group of friends in Bangladesh. And it's from that group of friends when I went back to visit them a few a few years ago. So it really, it really changed, it really changed. It really changed my life meeting, meeting disabled people around the world. And it is real, really powerful reference as well. Qudsiya, I think I've been in the past few years, upgrading my disability through kind of progressive condition. And as a, like, you got to finesse it by having sort of serious accidents, that setback your mobility, that's, that's not a recommendation. That's just sort of, like I mean, shared practice, I'm definitely not the only person doing that. And, like, knowing people around the world, in very different situations, is a real, like, it's a reference that kind of saves my life. Because I see that even though I feel bad about a particular change. I know that on the other side of it, like, my mate, Pedro in Brazil is like having a great life like this, or my, my colleague, travels, travels with a power wheelchair, and that's travel that I'm going to get into myself. So it's, it's something that definitely definitely shapes me. And it really, like Yeah, it gives it a really gives the motivation to continue the, to continue the work as well through those through those connections, and really seeing how a lot of our discrimination and exclusion that we face isn't, isn't isn't inevitable at all, and is often like sort of unnecessary or, or based on oversight, or the result of kind of stigma and inflexibility. And there's so much, there's so much more that can be done within within the world as it is even even without talking about how we want to change, change the world more profoundly as well.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

I completely agree I came to DC and met so many more disabled people, particularly blind folks whoare similarly situated to myself and to see other people's disabled genius and their ingenuity and their ability to adapt. And change was really a catalyst for my knee, it sort of unstuck me in a lot of ways exactly in the way you were saying, where, okay, that person is completely blind and can order an Uber, I can do that, too, it's just so empowering,

Peter Torres Fremlin:

you've mentioned that thing about like finding finding people in the DC community, is there a different transition? Then when say you're doing like this this podcast? Because then you're kind of using that as a, like a launchpad to connect with disabled people far beyond that community in DC.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Absolutely, I think that's, that's really true as you it's a it's a web, right? And that you describe this as you're traveling around the world, you meet one person, that person connects you to another person. And that's something I guess you'll see that in all communities. And perhaps I'm biased because I love my community, but it's very particular in the disability community. There's a there's a generosity. I think that that has really helped me with this podcast, especially and I'm sure as we'll talk about in a minute with with disability debrief. You know, people when they hear what you're doing, and they you know, they want to share they want to connect you and that generosity has really held true for me, both in terms of the podcast and just other aspects of my life as well, whether that's recreation, whether that's professional.

Peter Torres Fremlin:

Yeah, that says that, that shared mission and vocation is really good, really transformative.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

It's and it's very strong in our community, I think because there's such a commitment to it because it's, it's necessary for our survival, our very survival as you've often written about in the newsletter, and that leads me to Disability Debrief, which you mentioned earlier as well. I like many other many other thousands of people, you know, read your read the newsletter regularly and I in order to satisfy my own personal curiosity and having you on the podcast and And for our listeners, I'd love to hear more about how that was conceived and kind of what your mission was when you started it.

Peter Torres Fremlin:

No, thank you, thank you, because that's that's, that's touching, really appreciate you your readership and how that connects to this as well. Um, so the way it started, and what it is now is a bit different. It started a few years ago, and I took it very much from this work perspective, I was freelancing and disability with with international organizations, and there was increased focus on insurance on disability from these organizations. So lots of resources coming out. And I felt a bit stressed and behind. And I was just seeing a lot of stuff on social media. And so I'd put the links together and share them with colleagues. So that that on an informal basis, and then it turned into the newsletter. And I was quite insecure about the audience, I thought, this is for colleagues, it's going to be quite boring. It's a lot of long reports that have come out and guidelines and whatnot. And then friends started reading it that weren't working on disability, as I know, what are you doing here, like, if you were here, if I knew you'd be here, I'd be doing it differently. and whatnot, because I internalized the idea that, like, other people aren't interested in disability, right. And that to talk to other people about disability, we've got to, like, make it really simple. And my audience showed me that that was not the case. So that was a big change for me, realizing that I could write to, like both specialists that are kind of, like, people like yourselves, that are really working to, to like on disability a lot of the time, and really working to shift things, both people like that, and people just interested and curious about social change. And so that's where it started to shift into something a bit more journalistic. And something I've very tentatively started bringing my own experience into it. And I sort of defended myself by doing it through bullet points and like, oh, yeah, I went to hospital, but my, my reflections about inclusive health care are this, right. And that that really changed to today where I really want to embrace, what I'm calling a disability lens, where we take the way that disability disrupts our lives, and we let that disrupt the way we talk about news and understand the world and sort of my, my lived experience, I've always found a sort of little bit in, in contrast to some of the ways we talk about disability through official ways. I'm aware that the policy and the activism Don't, don't totally speak to my daily life. So I'm trying to sort of bring those back together. And it's now something that, together with the community that supported it is. I like really big resources created news from over 125 countries around the world. So that's really unique. I have contributors. Aine Kelly Costello is writing about climate change and disability, Tan Kuan Aw is doing a beautiful, reflective illustrations from Malaysia. And I'm looking to steadily increased with the people that I work with and the people that I that are involved as I think that their disability gives us a new view on to the world and how it's changing. It gives us a view on whatever issues are changing our societies. This is this is our chance to explore that and to explore it together with the people making those changes.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

I love that. And I love the piece about it's not just about the disability identity, but it's disability as a frame for understanding our world writ large. I am increasingly convinced that when we look at the world through this lens, that we find solutions we wouldn't otherwise find we find a perspective we wouldn't otherwise find. I wanted to go back to something you said earlier, though, that I think is really interesting, and something that I have grappled with, with my podcast., one thing that I didn't want to do was have a podcast, and create a community that's pandering if you will, to a non disabled audience. So that is solely focused on sort of, quote, educating people about disability, and wanted to create a source of community for disabled folks themselves. And but, I have a lot of non disabled listeners, and to some degree, I am writing for both audiences. And, I'm curious about how you grapple with that, in your work on Disability Debrief . I was just reading today's issue, and you were talking a little bit about how inclusion also has to include non disabled voices and perspectives. And so I'm interested to hear from you how you've grappled with that in your work.

Peter Torres Fremlin:

I really share something that a lot of your audience, I think will share that, through a lot of our history, and still very present today is that non disabled, people are taking too many decisions over disabled people's lives. Right. And that might be that might be a family member, that might be a professional, that might be a government minister, right. And too often, like, decisions that limit our opportunities come from, people that aren't us. And I really, share that concern. And I'm really interested, that we find ways of speaking that closely relate to disability experience, in terms of that kind of audience of people that don't identify, , as part of the disability movement, or as disabled people themselves. And I think we need to make a bit of an effort to not just preach to the choir, right? In the sense that, we have a lot of where we've we've built up sort of structures and languages of ways to talk about things and certain sets of values that like when you're outside of our community, you then see like or know, even the basics of that are shared. Right. So think there's a challenge to communicate across that. And again, I don't see that as a distinction between disabled and non disabled, right, because there's, there's lots of people not in the disability community that are disabled people they might not like, or we might see them as disabled people. They might not use that term about themselves. They might say, look, I've got health condition or look yeah, I'm getting I'm getting older. I'm not disabled is like, I mean, I'm sure I sure we've, we've heard many versions of oh I have x, y, and z I'm not disabled there's there's many there's many versions of that. And we how do we how do we speak across that? And Qudsiya, how do we change like this idea of that people have in disability of disability as a niche separate subject, right like that will go to, like when we're feeling like charitable and benevolent, or want to know like, how the like how are these weirdos living, but we wouldn't go to you know, in that in that more creative and formative way that you and I see this is that it's a frame that gives you a different outlook on to onto the world. It shows you how how different people are interacting with things differently, shows you some barriers, it shows you some adaptation, it shows you a lot of creativity, and guts. And I think, Qudsiya, the the the benefit we have of making niche disability media is that we don't have to try and get it to a mass audience, where you might have to make more compromises we can someone Someone gave me really good advice. He's like, Look, you can't get out of the silo. And that was liberating. Like I was like, okay, don't get out of it. Let's just make it good. And if people are interested, they'll come. And that has, to some extent been the journey, the journey of my, my newsletter, because now if I was starting now, with this broader audience in mind, I might have even questioned Should I put disability in the title? Right? Or is that gonna Is that gonna sort of put people off and send people down the wrong direction? Because it I've been I don't know, if you've had this experience, I've been. I've worked as the disability like specialist, quote, unquote, and I go into a room with people when they hear they're having a meeting with disability specialist, and they just cannot get their mind out of that narrow idea they've come in with. And when I want to talk about broader issues, like it can be really challenging like just to kind of persuade them that I'm not asking questions about disability right now. I'll tie it back later. But it can be that can be really, really challenging to make that bridge. So that's, again, why I think we have this, this advantage with the media that we're making that we can just, let's just make what we're doing good and interesting. And it's not. It's not debatable. anymore.

**[Gentle strumming guitars]**

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

you cover disability news from 125 countries. And I as a reader, I can attest, it's quite incredible, the broad reach of what you cover and what you talk about in the voices you uplift. And so I'm curious if you wouldn't mind giving us a little bit of an insider view into how you narrow that down? How do you curate the stories you want to tell given the scope of your newsletter?

Peter Torres Fremlin:

one is just spreading, spreading the net really wide. Like I'm on a lot of mailing lists. I'm on a lot of Google Alerts, and quite a lot on social media. and then working around the world and has been a great source of different connections and different sources of news. then there's sort of different aspects to bring out one is like I kind of really want to bring out sort of things that show people's individuality. So a lot of like the bigger eighth the bigger report showing evidence and data as some of my readers want to know about that. But if there's kind of someone's got on video, a little sort of sort of an activist in Kyrgyzstan talking about how they approached disability activism like that are kind of zeroed in on as it's then like, nicer for us all to relate to. Right. And it gets us outside of some of the stereotypes. I think this thing about when we take disability as a frame to see the world or like the way that you put it, we have to then like, sort of spend a little bit of time to understand borders, social forces, and how our community like relates to other communities, another example, just sort of very pragmatically, sort of, like lost in all this data. And then I phoned up some mates in Egypt, right, just to catch up. And they're facing like a currency that has devalued 50%. And, like, serious economic shocks, and then COVID, and then the war in Ukraine, and like a pretty dictatorial government, that was sort of just pushing economic management into industry controlled things, and they're facing these, these aren't necessarily disabled people that I'm speaking to, but they show me like an insight about, like, what life is what life is like for people, they remind me that the 1010, or 15%, inflation that we faced in the UK is like, it's a bit difficult for us. But people in Egypt have faced like, it's estimated 85% in a year, right, and different countries around the world are going through this economic strain. This isn't news that I'm seeing from the disability sector in those countries, right, that there were kind of, we can get to easily taken up on the subjects that we're always talking about. And not take a like, not be able to kind of relate what the to, to the the issue that is then probably the primary issue. And people's day to day lives in a lot of countries of these shifting economic conditions. So I'm, like having those wide set of different sources. And like following those provocations, of like a mate has told me about something like then gives me like a focus that I can then like approach. And I can ask people I know in different places I did a little write up just of solving Bangladesh. Now the healthy economic situation was putting, putting the progress we've made on disability, Disability Rights at risk, right, because people are losing ducing opportunities for livelihoods. And there's no longer the same supports available. So it's like, I really try and stretch that that multiplicity that goes into it. And I really try and sort of where I can bring in different voices I interview people I try to get by, I really encourage readers to kind of send me little comments because then I can share them in the mailbag. And they just show sort of our like, this is a route about healthcare and someone from Ethiopia was like God, like you haven't sorted out either guys like without we thought you would have fixed it. We'd learn from you like that we realize we're all learning together. And say perspectives like that really helped to widen it out as well.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

aside from the obvious, which is, obviously to subscribe to Disability Debrief, which I would highly recommend to my listeners, what are other ways if you if you know, for our listeners who are interested in really connecting more deeply and engaging with disability community around the world, what would your advice be to them?

Peter Torres Fremlin:

I'd really love people signed up for the newsletter. It's a resource that's made absolutely for free for everyone. Because I want people to have access to that information. It’s the kind of pay as you can situation. So if people can pay as they can, that's also really appreciated, and to share it largely and widely. In terms of how to connect with the community around the world. I think, Qudsiya, that's a really great question. Because I think that's what I did. I think I don't quite know the answer, because I found that sort of connection through through work and travel, but it would be really great if we could be more more creative about sort of disability movements in different countries learning from each other, it would be really great if we could kind of find spaces to do share and corporate there are there sort of policy spaces, there are people to connect with, there's quite a lot on on social media. And say, I think, if you, like, I set up a new handle DisDebrief. And if you look at the people that's following, then you can sort of see, some of those might be interested and they're from US and UK is like, two to two predominant, but you will also see lots of voices from from other places. So that's a good, that's a good route into it. I appreciate things like that you're doing here, Qudsiya, because then a podcast like this helps, helps people get to know like, what different people are doing and where they're at. Something that you wouldn't necessarily, like know, in this depth unless you knew the person directly. So think that's really important to to get those things. Get those things out. There's also like, it depends a little bit if you're interested in like policy and advocacy, then that's, that's a bit easier. And you can find, you can find organizations in nearly every country doing policy advocacy work on on disability, if you if you're more interested in the kind of cultural representation side well, I'm also like, struggling to to widen my net on that. So let, let I'd love it, if listeners can let let us know where they where they broaden that view, as well. And I'd love it if you had any. Any any suggestions of other routes that I've overlooked or routes that we could try to, like encourage a bit more?

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Yeah, I think those are those are really good examples. Social media is something I discovered is such a has such primacy when it comes to organizing in our community in the disability community. And it's really a rich source of connection for people and podcasts, newsletters along with your newsletter. I'm also a big fan of Disability Thinking by Andrew Pulrang, who is a disabled journalist here in the United States and Crip News from Kevin Gotkin. Those are also newsletters that I read. So I think those are really great places in addition to Disability Debrief where we can come together as a community and share information and resources. And I'm so grateful to all of you who have these fabulous newsletters that you're doing what you're doing and creating such community with it. So I think I think you covered a lot and and that perfectly leads me to my final question for you, which is, where can our listeners find you?

Peter Torres Fremlin

Thank you, the main place to find me is disabilitydebrief.org. I'm on Twitter and LinkedIn under the same name. On Twitter I'm under Desibility, which is a long South Asian story, how we got the buzz on Twitter. And yet I really love for people to I really love people to get in touch so so please, sort of drop a line say hello.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Thank you so much, Peter. And we'll link to all of those in our show notes so that our listeners have access to all of those modes of reaching out to you. And I'd love to wrap up by thanking you again, Peter for joining me from across the pond. I'm so happy we were able to make this happen.

Peter Torres Fremlin:

Thank you so much, Qudsiya. It’s an honor to be part of your conversation series.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Down to the Struts was produced by Ilana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol. With special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and to Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music. Remember to subscribe, rate, and review the podcast on your favorite podcast platform, And follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. You can also get the latest updates by joining our Facebook group, Down to the Struts Podcast, and by subscribing to our newsletter, Getting Down to It on SubStack. We also love hearing from you directly! You can always drop us a line at downtothestruts@gmail.com. All of these ways of connecting with us are linked directly from our website, downtothestruts.com. And of course, stay tuned for our next episode, so we can get back down to it!