

RACE

# The Infinite Whiteness Of Public Radio Voices

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The hashtag #publicradiovoices, about the "whiteness" of public radio, trended on Twitter this week. NPR's Scott Simon speaks with Gene Demby of NPR's Code Switch team about the conversation.

SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

People on the radio have to pay attention to the way they speak so that they'll be understood. That's communication, but does that mean that suppressing who you are to be heard? Chenjerai Kumanyika is an aspiring reporter and an assistant professor at Clemson University. Professor Kumanyika is also African-American and wrote, first, for Transom.org and later for All Things Considered about what he perceives as the whiteness of public radio.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: Different hosts with different voices tell different kinds of stories, and vocal styles communicate important dimensions of human experience. What are we missing out on by not hearing the full range of those voices?

SIMON: His commentary struck a nerve inside NPR and also among our listeners. NPR's Code Switch team tapped into that conversation and led a Twitter chat about it using the hashtag #PubRadiovoice. Gene Demby is the lead blogger of Code Switch

and joins us in our studios. Gene, thanks so much for being with us.

GENE DEMBY, BYLINE: Thank you for having me, Scott.

SIMON: Tell us more about this discussion - who was in on it, what did they say?

DEMBY: This conversation had the potential to be really navel-gazy because, you know, it's journalists talking about journalists, but it really blew up. A few people, whose names might be familiar to NPR listeners, were in this conversation - Audie Cornish, who is the host of All Things Considered; Sam Sanders, who's a national reporter; as well as Celeste Headlee, who sometimes guest hosts here, and a few other people. What was funny - Audie said to me that one of the jokes she shared with me off-line was sort of that it's not that her voice that people respond to. It's when people google her and realize that she's black that people respond to. And so there was this really robust discussion about the assumptions of who the hosts are, which also inform who people assume the audience is as well. There's this idea that NPR's audience is really white and it is. We know statistically that it is, and I think that informs the way people hear people's voices as well.

SIMON: I assume nothing got settled.

DEMBY: (Laughter) A lot didn't get settled. I think - and I think it was good. I think - I don't think those conversations are meant to settle things. I think they're supposed to unsettle things. One of the things that was surprising was how many people had really strong opinions on this. We should note that Twitter is a much younger and much browner place than sort of NPR broadly. We probably hit right in the middle of a space where people feel some sort of anxiety around this, and who also love public radio. And who probably feel as if their voices, or voices that they're used to hearing, are not coming through their podcasts or coming out of their favorite radio shows.

SIMON: Have you ever felt you had to change who you are on the air - to be on the air?

DEMBY: (Laughter) It's really funny you ask that, Scott. The very first time I was on

the air was with David Greene on Morning Edition and we were actually having a conversation about Code Switching, which is this practice by which you sort of jump through different registers, right? The way you speak to your wife is different than the way you speak your boss which is different than the way you speak to your good friends. It's usually racially coded, so the way I speak sort of at work is not the way I necessarily speak in the barbershop. And I remember hearing myself in that conversation and listening to myself and thinking that I didn't sound like public radio. But then I also felt like I didn't sound as black as I would've liked to sound. I remember listening to it and feeling sort of embarrassed, but, I mean, obviously our voices take on all these different parts of ourselves, whatever our sort of baseline is. Whatever our baseline voices are is sort of informed by who we are in all these different spaces. And all those spaces are us, but I just remember sitting there and being very cognizant of just all of the sort of tics in my voice, you know? And I felt very much like I didn't belong.

SIMON: I mean, but you do.

DEMBY: I know, I know. I mean, it's - to sit in front of these beautiful microphones and have a conversation you are much more cognizant of the way you speak. I know I speed up when I get excited 'cause people write and tell me that, but I do think that this conversation sort of raises larger questions about the challenges that public radio faces and - in reaching audiences who don't see themselves reflected on the radio.

SIMON: Gene Demby, lead blogger for NPR's Code Switch team, and you can see those Twitter comments and offer your own by checking out the Code Switch page on NPR.org. Gene, thanks very much for being with us.

DEMBY: This was lovely. Thank you, Scott.

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