

Production Note: Viewers Like Us was produced as an audio series. If possible, we encourage you to listen to Episode 3 on our website, or wherever you listen to podcasts. The following transcript is for reference only and may contain typos. Please confirm accuracy before quoting.

EPISODE 3: “MINORITY REPORT”

Previously on Viewers Like Us...

Geeta Gandbhir: [00:24:33] “They say the squeaky wheel gets greased, but when you're the squeaky wheel and you happen to also be a BIPOC woman, oftentimes you just get shoved out of the room.”

Bernardo Ruiz: [00:15:19] “It’s quite frankly a problem of leadership. I’ve had to participate in these conversations for at least two decades.”

Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez: “There are no Latinos because we were trying to tell a universal story. I just felt like time stood still.”

Grace Lee: Anyone who’s studied American history knows the phrases that define this country. Many of them are in the Declaration of Independence:

*With liberty and justice for all
We hold these truths to be self evident
That all men are created equal*

These are powerful words — but anyone who’s *really* studied American history knows that “all men are created equal” applied only to white male landowners — many of whom enslaved other people. And that the guarantee of “liberty and justice for all” remains a struggle for many today.

The words sound nice. But it takes incredibly hard work to fulfill their promise.

BEAT

In 1967, the United States Congress made another declaration: That it was in the *public's interest* to expand and develop a *diversity of perspectives* in public broadcasting.

Nice words, right? “A diversity of perspectives” *feels* like an evolution from “all men are created equal.”

Fast forward to 2021. With the world in turmoil, a new set of words has become shorthand for how to keep moving towards that goal.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

DEI for short.

BEAT

DEI officers seem to be everywhere these days: Fortune 500 companies. Schools. Government Agencies. And...public media.

In the last couple of years, public television's two largest stations – WNET in New York and Boston's WGBH — announced they had hired DEI officers.

When institutions announce these hires, it's a signal that they're *dealing* with their organization's racism and systemic issues — like, “don't worry, we've got *someone* getting to the bottom of it.”

But how do you “get to the bottom” of systemic racism when the public television system is designed to keep kicking *that* can down the road?

Grace: Welcome to Viewers Like Us, where we investigate the growing gap between PBS and its founding mission, and ask: what would it take to restore the public to public television? I'm your host, Grace Lee.

[Music Beat]

Archival audio: The exclusion of Latinos from the World War 2 series appears to be part of a pattern...

When I learned that way back in 2007, the Latinx community had protested its erasure from Ken Burns' World War Two documentary, only for PBS to promise *to do better*, I noticed a pattern.

PBS leaders made similar promises when Beyond Inclusion released its open letter 14 years later.

Paula Kerger: *"We're proud of the work that we do, but we certainly can do better."*

Jon Abbott: *"We've made some progress, but we know there's lots of progress ahead that we've got to achieve."*

Sylvia Bugg: *"We do recognize that there's more work that we all can do and we welcome that dialogue."*

Grace: Filmmaker Ken Burns also joined the "do better" chorus. Here's what he told the Hollywood Reporter:

Hollywood Reporter podcast Burns: *"I've been with public broadcasting because I've been so proud of their efforts from 40 years ago to now about diversity and inclusion. But can we do better, yes we can, PBS can do better, we can do better..."*

Grace: That all *sounds* great. But to say you're "doing better" without setting and sticking to specific goals is just a convenient way to disarm critics and avoid any real accountability.

Without that, doing *better* is not that different from doing *nothing*.

It's how embarrassing and damaging moments happen. Like this one. Let me set it up for you...

Archival clip: *"I'm Emily Rooney. Welcome to Beat the Press .. Our topics...PBS comes under fire for a lack of diversity and its exclusive relationship with filmmaker Ken Burns..."*

Grace: That's Emily Rooney. She's host of Beat the Press, a weekly local news and opinion show on Boston's WGBH, the largest and most influential public TV station in the country .

In April 2021, Beat the Press discussed the Beyond Inclusion letter. NPR had just interviewed me.

NPR clip (Grace): "I worked on this landmark groundbreaking series about Asian Americans. We got five hours to tell 150 years of American history. Ernest Hemingway, one man, gets six hours of documentary primetime so this kind of disparity...(clip continues under Grace)"

Grace: You can't see Emily Rooney's face. Trust me — she looks super annoyed at what I said.

Emily Rooney: *"The fact that a Burns documentary helped clear the names of the Central Park Five and that he gives voice to cultural and racial equity in all his films is apparently beside the point."*

Emily Rooney: *"They claim that this is not about Ken Burns. For the record, it's all about Ken Burns, regardless of what this group says."*

Grace: Rooney's four panelists seemed to grasp the full intent of our letter — a call for more equitable distribution of funding, resources and primetime hours. Beyond Inclusion didn't write it to bash Ken Burns and call it a day.

When veteran journalist Callie Crossley spoke up, she understood these systemic issues. She'd spent years making long-form documentaries for PBS.

Callie Crossley: "Ken Burns takes up a lot of space. Nobody's saying he's not good. But if you look at the people who signed the letter, two of

whom that I can just call right now, Sam Pollard and Stanley Nelson, get a fair amount of time on PBS. Why, then, did they sign this letter?"

Grace: Rooney wasn't having it.

Emily: "No, it's resentment that a white guy is getting all this much time."

Callie: 'It's about how much space he has...you know I'm telling you what it's about because I just told –

Emily: 'Yeah, I know it's about Ken Burns.'

Grace: It went on like this for a while.

Emily: "The only other thing I wanna say is, I didn't see Asian Americans, but there's a possibility it wasn't as good as some of Ken Burns' films."

Callie: "Well, that is not correct."

Emily: "You gotta throw that out there."

Callie: I (gets interrupted)

Grace: Hold up. Let's play that again.

SOUND EFFECT/voices rewinding back to Emily's quote

Emily: "The only other thing I wanna say is, I didn't see Asian Americans, but there's a possibility it wasn't as good as some of Ken Burns' films."

BEAT

Grace: There's a lot of talk about microaggressions these days, but that... was a *macro* Aggression.

Rooney hadn't even seen the Asian Americans series but she assumed that because of who made it and maybe even because of its subject matter, it was just...not as good.

Grace: Now, If someone feels comfortable saying this ON THE AIR, what are they saying when the cameras *aren't* rolling...

People have gotten canceled for far less. At the time, though, Rooney kept her job.

It wasn't until local filmmakers called on WGBH to demand her apology that she responded on the air. Several weeks later.

Emily Rooney: *"My comments crossed a line. I want to sincerely apologize for my offensive remarks."*

Grace: Way too often, people of color carry the burden of calling out *and* correcting racist behavior and systems. Callie Crossley said something in that Beat the Press segment that's stayed with me for months. She pointed out how Ken Burns...

Callie: *"...got in a whole heap of trouble — -about his film about World War Two leaving out Latinos...and the response from PBS is the same as the response is now: 'We're working hard on our diversity, we want to make space.'"*

Grace: So, Burns gets in a heap of "trouble," but *who exactly* at PBS is working hard on diversity?

While researching our previous episode, I came across the person PBS hired to deal with *that* mess. So I gave her a call. Our phone connection wasn't great, but she was eager to fill me in.

Haydee: "My name is Haydee Rodriguez. I was hired as the director of the diversity initiative at PBS in 2007."

Grace: Before Haydee Rodriguez began her study on diversity at PBS, she was the Hispanic Affairs Commissioner for the state of Maryland. She had followed the controversy with Burns and The War.. She took the job because...

Haydee: "It was a challenge to figure out what happened. For me it was an opportunity to help right a wrong."

Grace: Haydee signed a one-year contract with PBS.—She wrote an 89-page report that offered six pages of recommendations, including:

A national database of producers and subject matter experts who reflected diverse communities. She also suggested PBS create a website to highlight best practices for diversity and inclusion and to keep the public informed of their progress.

And here's what really caught my eye: Haydee called on PBS to fully track and measure diversity, in front of *and* behind the camera. That's the same data we at Beyond Inclusion asked for years later.

Haydee: "What I see is a *deja vu*. Getting the data was just impossible then. And I see the same thing now.-That's not to say that there wasn't a desire to do better, but that desire has to be accompanied by action."

Grace: Haydee's main message to me was that critiquing *PBS* was not enough.

Haydee: "That's a start, but you really have to have the conversations with the general managers of these major producing stations.

Grace: She's talking about WNET in New York, WETA in Washington DC, and of course, WGBH in Boston.

Haydee: "They're the ones that get quite a bit of funding to produce all these documentaries."

"And you have to go back and have a conversation with the Corporation For Public [00:29:00] Broadcasting-It's CPB and the stations.] You have to have those conversations with the heads of these stations."

ACT 2

OK, if you're starting to get lost about how public television works...I've had films on PBS for years and I'm not totally clear either.

That's why Akintunde Ahmad, my partner in this series whom you met in our first episode, has been looking into this. Hey, Tunde.

Tunde: Hey, Grace.

Grace: So this is a very complex system. Can you help us break it down?

Tunde: Sure I'll try. So one thing to keep in mind is...*federal* money makes the whole thing happen. Or at least, it plays an important role.

[Music plays underneath]

Tunde: Congress created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting – CPB – as a private nonprofit under the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967.

CPB is the organization that receives and distributes federal funds to public television stations. It also gives money for nationally distributed content — just under half a billion dollars a year.

Grace: So Where does PBS come in?

Tunde: PBS is the *biggest* national distributor. It includes more than 330 local stations across the country — from cities to rural communities. Those stations, especially the biggest ones, produce most of the shows on public television. All the stations pay dues to PBS, then decide which programs to run and when.

Grace: So that line that shows up on many programs — “With support from Viewers like You” —where does it come from?

Archival audio: “..is bankrolled by the Corporation of Public Broadcasting and viewers like you!”

Tunde: Stations do get money from individual viewers — through pledge drives and year-round fundraising.

Smaller stations, though, mostly depend on CPB. Even though that's only one funding source it's crucial. **To qualify for CPB funds — that's**

money from our taxes — stations have to meet certain requirements aimed at increasing diversity.

They **must set** diversity goals for their staff and boards and they must maintain a publicly available “diversity statement” on their website or at their office.

Grace: That *sounds* like federal funds depend on having that data publicly available.

Tunde: But CPB *doesn't check* to see if stations are complying before granting them federal money. It just makes station leaders sign statements “certifying” that they comply. That’s like a teacher grading your test, but rather than actually looking at your answers, they just let you tell them ‘I scored 100%’

Grace: Is anyone making sure stations comply with the rules?

Tunde: CPB does have an independent Inspector General but that office only audits a handful of stations each year.

We chose two dozen stations and checked to see if their diversity statements were readily available online. And Grace, many were not.

Many of the ones we could find were heavy on platitudes and light on details. Language like — I’m quoting here — “we strive for our workforce to reflect the communities we serve,” – without any metrics to show whether that’s happening.

Grace: This feels like another example of “doing better” that — despite good intentions — translates into doing nothing.-So then what’s the point of even requiring diversity goals?

Tunde: Good question. I asked for interviews with CPB’s Inspector General Kimberly Howell and CPB President Pat Harrison.

Their representatives pretty much said, look up our DEI efforts on our website. If anyone listening is interested, it's at [cpb.org/diverseaudiences](https://www.cpb.org/diverseaudiences)

ACT 3

Grace: If CPB and PBS leadership were going to avoid our interviews, I figured we'd start talking with the local stations.

Starting with WGBH, now rebranded as GBH. For many Americans, this station *is* Public Television. It produces shows like American Experience, Nova, Frontline, and Antiques Roadshow

For FY20 its operating revenue was around \$242 million dollars, with 4% of that coming from CPB.

When WGBH released *its* diversity numbers in August 2021 — a lot of us paid attention.

And, the numbers — they looked pretty dismal. 80 percent of its nearly 800 employees, and almost the entirety of the station's leadership, are white.

A few days later, WGBH announced that, after 22 years, it was not renewing its contract with Emily Rooney and Beat the Press. Until then, the show had been on hiatus after Rooney's inflammatory comments.

When GBH removed the show from its schedule, it announced the change merely as a programming adjustment.

So we had a lot of questions for this station's leader. After so many rejections from other PBS gatekeepers, he surprised us by responding right away.

Jon Abbott: "I'm Jon Abbott. I'm the president and CEO of WGBH."

Grace: Jon began by telling us he thought the Beyond Inclusion letter was...

Abbott: "...a powerful and thoughtful statement about-the work we're doing and the aspiration, we all have in the work we do in public media

both in the stories we tell and the people who lead the telling of those stories.”

Grace: He talked a lot about the DEI officer GBH hired a few months before our interview: Yemesi Oloroantola Coates, whom he described as his partner on the executive team.

Oloroantola Coates is a Black woman. Companies usually hire women of color for jobs like this. But *everyone* has to actively embrace this work.

Grace in interview: You are the leader of the most powerful station in public media. Aside from hiring DEI officers, which I think only happened last year, What has been your role in all of this?

Jon Abbott: “The progress and the tone for diversity and inclusion and equity has to be set at the top and that's my responsibility.”

Grace: Jon listed other DEI efforts underway at the station. Like...hiring a diversity and equity editor at NOVA, the science series, to make sure the content, production teams and interview subjects reflect this renewed commitment. He also talked about hiring more BIPOC staff at the station and its new policy to pay interns.

Because it happened at his shop, I had to ask about that Emily Rooney incident.

Jon Abbott: “It was terrifically wrong and unfortunate. And Emily apologized. We were very clear in a public statement that her comments on that program did not reflect GBH’s standards for opinion journalism, and frankly didn’t reflect our commitment to being the anti-racist organization that we aspire to be.”

Grace in interview: What does that mean to you personally? Like, how are you the leader of this station being anti-racist?

Jon Abbott: “So, to me being an anti-racist is being attentive to dismantling as actively as one can, all of the things that create race as a barrier to people's being able to be t their full selves, fully included, represented, empowered. It's constant self-examination of the things I

may not be aware of that I need to be more aware of and can address and can change.”

Grace: As Jon was talking, I thought back to Haydee Rodriguez’s work. She wrote six pages of specific recommendations that PBS could have followed 14 years before. What if PBS had used that roadmap? Where would we be now?

Jon Abbott, Paula Kerger, Ken Burns. They were all leaders *then*, too. Will *they* empower these new DEI executives enough?

Grace (in interview): I'm just curious in terms of accountability, how are these new efforts different? Because a lot of diversity statements have been made in the past by leaders in the system.

Abbott: “I think having the data and having the data published Openly and actively is part of sharing it broadly and being accountable for it.”

Grace: Because he was talking about accountability, I mentioned to Jon that in our research for the podcast, we heard from several people about their traumatizing experiences working at *his* station. I asked if he’d be willing to listen to some of those stories.

Abbott: “Yeah, of course I'd be happy to. We absolutely are eager to make sure we understand the stories that would help us understand more about GBH and our work.”

Grace: We’ll take him up on that offer.

But given the history of DEI in public media, I can’t help but wonder if this may just be another round of ‘promising to do better.’

Like Loni Ding’s task force calling for diversity data in the 1970s. And again in the 1980s.

Or Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez’s campaign to include Latinos in American history. The push that led PBS to hire Haydee Rodriguez in 2007.

PBS never publicly released Haydee’s diversity report. After more than a year and a half, and at least 70 interviews with people throughout the

PBS system, the leadership pretty much ignored her six pages of recommendations.

Haydee: “Did I make an impact? Clearly not — we're talking about this 14 years later. But I don't think it was because of my failure. It was because the process did not allow for it. Because there's this tremendous fear to talk about this.”

Grace: The people in power may feel afraid. But when somebody like Haydee presents her work, and those on the receiving end don't pay attention, what does that tell us?

Public television leaders, including the new DEI executive PBS hired in 2021, might benefit from re-reading Haydee's report.

Haydee: “Because the report is there and I don't think it's worthless. And at this point in time, it's unacceptable that the continues to be the same year after year after year.”

Grace: That report is part of the history of DEI at PBS. But because PBS never made it public, it's been hard to find — until now. We've got a link to it on our website, viewerslikeus.com.

Next time on Viewers Like Us:

Voice #1: “It was definitely a tokenist gesture, but nobody wanted to call it that and nobody was willing to call it that at the time. But that's what it was.”

Grace: We're starting to hear from listeners about their own stories working within the public television system, including someone WGBH hired as part of a mentorship program for Native Americans.