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SEASON 2, EPISODE 5: "Feet to the Fire"

ACT 1

Grace Lee: Hi, everyone. Welcome back to Season 2 of Viewers Like Us, a podcast exploring public broadcasting's deeply precarious present and what might be next for PBS—especially for independent makers.

I recorded this conversation with Erika Dilday—executive director of POV, the independent documentary series—about a week after the Republican-led United States Congress, at President Trump's urging, voted to defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, CPB. I was eager to hear Erika's thoughts on potential ways forward from her corner of the public broadcasting world.

In our final two episodes of this season, I'll also speak with a couple more of my colleagues and friends, starting with Leslie Fields-Cruz, executive director of Black Public Media, and Don Young, executive director of CAAM, along with Joaquin Alvarado and Ken Ikeda, co-creators of Viewers Like Us. We'll use the second half of this season to reflect on this summer's bleak developments and begin to figure out where we go from here.

If you've been listening to our episodes this summer, we'd love to hear what's on your mind, too.

ACT 2

Grace: For people who may not know you, just introduce yourself and give us a little bit about your background, and how you came to POV.

Erika: My name is Erika Dilday. I have been in the documentary on the edge of journalism space for about 20 years now. Most recently, before I came to American Documentary slash POV, I was running a place called Futuro Media, which was largely radio documentaries for and about people of color and other marginalized communities.

Erika: Then before that, I ran a place called Maysles Documentary Center, which is based in Harlem and was started by Albert Maysles, and actually, my first producing project for film was Albert's last film called *In Transit*. And I've been at American Documentary POV for about five years now.

Grace: Great. So, let's just get right into it. Something happened last week, the rescission of funds for public media. I'm sure you had lots of different kinds of reactions and feelings, but can you just break it down for us, like what happened?

Erika: To do the short take version, President Trump presented an executive order to clawback funding for public media. There was a lawsuit against it. So he went through Congress to do it. The way public media funding is set up, even though it's forward funded for two years, through an act of Congress, that funding can be pulled back.

There were several votes on it. The first was with the House who, a number of representatives said they were not going to vote for it, but they *did* vote to pull back that funding.

Then it went to the Senate, who, a number of senators said they were not going to vote for it, but they did end up voting to pull back that funding.

Come October, there will be no federal funding for public media. What that means is that roughly 1 billion that funds public TV and radio stations—that funds to a very small point the actual national PBS and NPR organizations—they only get, like roughly 10% of their funding from it. That will not exist anymore. But the thing that people are mostly concerned about is that smaller stations, rural areas, places where there is not a lot of support for media or airwaves or emergency programming, they will lose, many of them, 50% or more of their funding and nobody's sure what will happen to those stations.

Grace: With your POV hat on, can you talk about, what's the plan? Is there a post-rescission strategy?

Erika: While this was incredibly devastating and disappointing, it wasn't *completely* unexpected. I wouldn't say there is "a" plan, there are a number of plans. Bottom line is independent documentary film is here to stay, and most independent documentary filmmakers make their films because they want them to be disseminated widely. It's more about social justice and righting wrongs and sharing truths than it is just about making as many dollars as possible.

I am so in awe of the projects we get and the films that we get, because people just wouldn't know these things if independent filmmakers didn't put

their heart and soul over years and years into letting us know what's going on, whether it's in our communities or in our country, or with different individuals or people of different abilities. So, that sort of determination is what's going to keep the industry alive, and I think our job as people who distribute and support and curate independent film is to make sure that continues to happen as honestly and authentically as possible.

Grace: POV has always been a kind of hub for so many of us independent filmmakers, but there's so many layoffs happening, at so many different kinds of strands—how does that even continue without CPB funding? How does that happen when jobs are getting cut?

Erika I am devastated by the cuts that have been made and also by I think some of the creative and talented people who are no longer working within the framework of this industry.

I also know—and I refer to this ad nauseum—growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, with my father and his friends who were very active in the Civil Rights movement, you expect bad, unfair stuff to happen. So, you have to be ready just to build back, because you know the inconceivable can happen at any time.

I think PBS will continue to be an outlet for distribution, and I think it is going to be the most important outlet for independent film distribution. I think our problem is that we've looked at it as the only outlet, and I think that we have to start creating new ones. One of the reasons why I was so grateful to GBH, to giving American Documentary World's YouTube—and, by the way, anybody who can, should subscribe to World's YouTube, because what we are going to do is use that as an outlet for documentary film that won't necessarily be broadcast immediately on linear outlets, but will be available and supported with the same impact and engagement work that we do for our linear films.

We want to create a home, a hub for independent documentary that, while it won't be the same as being immediately on public television, will have a component where at least for a certain period of time, people will be able to view these films for free. Then the backend that we're looking at building is a way to also monetize that content at a fair, and not onerous, level so that filmmakers can also continue to see some sort of return from the films that they have out there. There's not enough room on PBS for everything and not everything belongs on PBS, but there is room for good, curated, bold, innovative content. I think we just have to look at how we do that through YouTube, how we do that streaming, how we create the outlets for films to be shown and for people to be able to engage with them.

Grace: Okay. I want to back up, just because I think this is news for a lot of people: WGBH's World programming YouTube channel has now been acquired or given to POV in order for these World documentary strands such as Local USA, America Reframed and…

Erika: Yep, and Doc World.

Grace: …yes, Doc World will continue on the YouTube Channel of American Documentary or POV. Is that right?

Erika: That is correct. Yeah. It will be branded American Documentary, but the idea is to curate these three series and find space for other independent documentaries, as well. I don't want us to be held hostage by the idea that if they don't fit into one of those series, then it wouldn't be something that we can find a way to build an audience for. Again, so much of this is new, but basically, when GBH made, honestly what I think was, a pretty boss move to let us have this, it created an outlet that already has a lot of viewers and subscribers, where we can now look at the next generation of delivering independent documentary.

Grace: So is it still part of PBS?

Erika: No, it's not gonna be part of PBS. It will be public media, and the programming will be available for public stations to purchase. But it's not going to be a PBS property. It's going to be an American documentary property.

Grace: That's very interesting. I was thinking about what are the things already in the pipeline, like filmmakers who might have had films that were going to be on World or Amdoc, what do they need to know? Or is this just an archive of previous projects? Or are you actually gonna commission new projects? How is that gonna work?

Erika: Yes. Again, exactly how we're going to be commissioning the new projects. I don't know yet, because this is so new that we're going to be able to take it over. As for projects that were in the pipeline that were going to come on to either America Reframed or Doc World or Local USA, we're looking to show all of those films as we take it over. There's a little bump in the road as we get everything worked out. One of the things that I think is important is to get this done pretty quickly. The purpose of doing this is to continue to curate and distribute new documentary content to make sure that these streams still are the resource that they were before.

As for what's in the pipeline right now, I know we had some films green lit, but it's also hard to say, because it's a different contract. It was a different setup and I am not a lawyer, so I don't know exactly how that all works, but our hope

is to take the content that was going to be broadcast and continue to broadcast the content that is in archive. But again, there's a lot of rights issues and things that have to be figured out. Then to continue to either commission or acquire documentary content as we go forward.

Grace: Okay, so that's World. What about just the POV operating plan going forward, like in terms of funding, convenings, ed com? Does that all of that still continue?

Erika: It's still going. I was even in conversation with PBS today. We're looking at how we can use YouTube more for some of the rights that we already have in our current season films. We're pulling together our editorial committee to look at Season 39. It's all still going. These are funny times and we don't know everything that's going to happen, but as of now, our Season 38 continues and our Season 39 is being prepped.

Grace: What about the relationships with the stations, the public TV stations? We heard a lot over this period how these rural-stations are the ones that will suffer the most or not even exist anymore. Are you talking to them and how will the relationship with POV evolve from here?

Erika: One of the things that we're looking to do is work with some of the bigger concerns who are trying to create funding to help stations that are going to lose a lot of their federal funding.

Public Media Company I know is starting a fund to help stations. It's hard to know which way any of this is going, as happens with a lot of things that we've seen lately in changes in laws and changes to the Constitution.

I think there's a tendency, especially with filmmakers and people in independent film, you see a problem and you run out and you want to solve it, which is why you got into it in the first place. I think part of what we need to do is make sure that we're taking all of that energy and all of that brain power and all of that chutzpah and working together to try and craft an ecosystem that really supports the whole community, because we need to put our resources toward the weaker spots and have the stronger spots hold on while we fix them.

Grace: You mentioned independent filmmakers—we're impatient, we want to go out and do something. But if you were CPB or PBS—not just POV—like now that there's no federal funding, should the posture be different? What would you do?

Erika: I don't think that federal funding is going to come back the way it has, but one of the things that I think that works is the pressure that individuals can

put on their senators and their congressional representatives to say, we know what you did, we don't like what you did, and we're not going to stop holding your feet to the fire over it until you do something else.

I really think that a lot of lawmakers are going, whew, I'm glad that's over with. I think we have to make sure no, it's not. It's not over with. You still represent us and we still wanna see you do the right thing. And if you're not, then you'll pay with votes.

Grace: Even in this season of Viewers Like Us, we've talked about–what people refer to as "obeying in advance." The censorship that happened with American Masters, even the learning media thing, what about all of that? It doesn't seem like that strategy worked to save public media

Erika: No, it didn't. I think we're seeing it with universities, too, no matter what they do, no matter how they try and make it seem like they are trying to comply with what this administration wants, it's not really ever going to be enough and we don't wanna lose ourselves in the process.

We've got leadership who are assessing risk and mission in a historic time of political pressure. I think that we're all fighting for the same thing, but I don't think anybody has found the secret sauce of what to do. I think we've more seen what we can do that *doesn't* work so well.

Grace: It's very telling that the turning over of World to Amdoc YouTube channel is not part of PBS. The kinds of stories that are being told on those strands, really have nothing to do with PBS anymore.

Erika: They're still public media, but I also have thought for a long time that we have relied on PBS to be everything. We want to show everything through PBS. I think sometimes we have to realize that everything can't go through PBS, and sometimes, we'll have films that I think this is a great film. It's not one that really is for a large, public American audience. I'd like to show it, but it's also not one that I feel that I want a bunch of people in their La-Z-Boys tuning in to see, because it's not the film for that audience. That's one reason why I'm really focused on the idea of creating opportunities for really good, strong, independent documentary film that isn't necessarily what needs to be broadcast into living rooms across America at 10 o'clock, but needs to be out there for the audiences that wanna see it.

Grace: Yes, but that to me sounds like giving up on the mission of what public broadcasting service was supposed to be. That's why people like me wanted to have my films on PBS, because it was reaching audiences in rural communities, in prisons, in places where it was just there.

Erika: But why do we have to do that just through PBS? If you look at what was deemed acceptable to be on network TV versus what was done on when they were the new cool services like, HBO and Showtime, a lot of the programming there was, arguably, better because it didn't have the same restrictions. I don't think we have enough outlets to do that right now. I don't really know of any.

One of the reasons why PBS loves to talk about Elmo is because Elmo is so important. In independent documentary, I'm not really that interested in being able to have Elmo, I'm more interested in being able to have honest conversations about topics that might not always necessarily fit the mainstream, but are still important and well told and artful and accurately done. One of the things I also think, too, and I was talking with Dawn Porter about the *Eyes on the Prize* series III: They're telling stories, and these stories are from the point of view of the people that lived them. It's not about trying to figure out what people on the other side were necessarily thinking. It's telling the story of the people that you have there, what they experience, what they live.

Facts are still facts, but one of the things that I think we need to be able to do and we need to be able to share with the public is the fact that when you have somebody's story—when you have some point of view—you are learning who they are, what they think, how they felt about it. To act as if that is not important is, to me, just an incredibly grave error, because you're not gonna understand anybody or what they're thinking or how they're feeling if the way their information is presented has to be middle of the road or inoffensive or shows both sides. I just don't think you get to understanding that way.

Grace: Aside from POV and the other PBS projects in the wings, there's an attack happening right now on knowledge and history. I was just curious about your project that you did with Ken Burns, *Emancipation to Exodus*. What's happening to that? Is that going to air?

Erika: We're gonna finish it. I don't know if it's going to air. It's about the period starting with Reconstruction, through the Great Migration. One of the main reasons that I wanted to work on it was because I felt it was really important knowing how much misinformation there was about the Reconstruction period, how it was a failure, as opposed to something that was systematically dismantled by the dominant population at the time in the South, because they could not accept the fact that the South had lost the war, and that's the story we're telling. What I think actually was the biggest problem was that facts were just suppressed. Lies were just told. I think if we don't understand that history, I mean we're repeating a lot of it right now, and it has been really interesting to work on this project and see how many parallels

there are, but also how I feel there's starting to be a little bit of a fear of, should this story be told right now, will this story be told?

Our team is doubling down on it. As a matter of fact, I think it has made us dig even further into it. One of the things that was important to me was that we tell some of the stories of ordinary Black women, because that is the group that tends to have been shut out in this story a lot. We had one woman who had five children, all with white men, five different white men. They listed her as a prostitute. She wasn't a prostitute. She was raped by all of these men. She didn't have a choice. And she didn't have any protection. It was only digging through a lot of stuff about her ancestors and finding things. Because one of her sons became a very prominent educator just to find a little bit about what her life was really like and to be able to change this idea that she was just a prostitute who had children with all of these men. So, even smaller things like that—it's so depressing to me to see how hard it is to change the narrative, because a lot of it was erased.

Grace: Have you had conversations with Ken Burns about these issues relating to the film and how it's gonna play?

Erika: He's incredibly militant about how we tell these stories, and to his credit, he sought out me to work on this film. I even took a little while to sign on to do it. I worked for a few months, because I wanted to see that I really would be able to have the type of influence that would make it a project I wanted to be attached to. And that has been the case. A lot of people within our community think of him as more to the center. He is the boogeyman to a lot of the right with the commencement speeches that he's made and the things that he's done to stand up for public media and the things that he's done to stand against this administration. In their mind, it's pretty much the same thing, which is often amusing for me to see.

I know he's working hard to try and protect public media. What he'd like to do is make sure that the system had enough money independently to program what it wants and not have to deal with these pressures.

What I want to do, too, is to get a lot of the people who are within our orbit focused on how do we plan and how we make what comes next. It can't just be showing outrage on social media—though that's good—but we've gotta have a holistic solution. We've gotta work together on how do we save this? Some of it's money. Some of it's influence with congressional representatives, some of it's innovation in creating the next thing. I just hope that as an ecosystem, we can work on all of those things, because I don't think it's one here or one there.

Grace: I know the POV was trying to restore the learning materials that had disappeared from PBS about certain documentaries, independent documentaries. Do you have any updates?

Erika: I don't really have any updates with PBS Learning media. I can tell you that our infrastructure couldn't handle all of the resources as it was. We have designed a new infrastructure for learning resources. We have everything that was taken down from the films that have been POV films. I think it's gonna be probably the fall before we have everything up there. So, we are both giving materials to filmmakers of resources that were pulled down and putting all of the materials for films that we worked with on the American Documentary site.

Grace: And then the situation with Jane Wagner's film. Do you have any reflections on that *Break the Game*?

Erika: Yeah, a couple of reflections. Number one, as I said, not every programming choice is an act of suppression. Sometimes it's timing, it's legal concerns, it's resource bandwidth. I really wish we wouldn't conflate bureaucracy with betrayal.

For anybody who doesn't know, we postponed that film. It was supposed to go on right around the time of the NPR and PBS congressional hearings, and I still remain good with it. My greatest concern was the safety of the protagonist. Unless she said to me in very clear words, I want to be a trans warrior in this fight and I am okay with the fact that this could become very public and very ugly and I'm ready to do that. I would not do that to anyone. I just, I don't feel that you can put people in that position unless they have affirmatively said that that's what they want and never was able to find out if that's what she wanted. So, I would not have done it.

Yeah, I feel that there was something of a trust that was broken there. I understand the sentiment of the filmmaker and her frustration. I didn't really agree with a lot of her actions, but I also know that it was a difficult time.

Grace: I just respect people who were able to speak out about what was happening to them, like, no reason not to be courageous. I think we already lost what everyone was biting their tongue to protect. For me, I respect the people who were speaking out about things that were difficult for them, at the core, as people who believe in freedom of expression, who believe in transparency and accountability, it just feels like we're in a completely different boat right now.

Erika: Absolutely. I agree with that, as well. I also hope, as people are doing it, that the motivation is for the collective good as opposed to for the individual.

Grace: Yeah. I hear what you're saying. Is there anything you wanted to bring up?

Erika: I'm a little surprised that we're here right now, but I'm not shocked. I feel like a lot of the lessons we can take from this are in history, particularly in civil rights history, and one of the things that you know, kind of motivates me is, if you're beating on the door and your fists are getting bloody, you know, don't keep beating on the door, walk around the house and see if there's a window open. I feel like we have to be creative about how we approach the issues of being able to share with the public what they deserve through public media.

One of the things that bothered me the most when I was listening to the hearings. At one point, Marjorie Taylor Green said, *You can do this on your own dime*, And I'm thinking, but it's not your dime, either. This is the dime of the people. The question is: How is public media serving the people? What do people want? So this idea that it can be co-opted or decided by a few individuals I think is what frustrates me the most, when the majority of individuals are saying that this is not what they want.

Grace: What I'm getting from it is there's a distinction between the idea of public media versus PBS, because I think that's what was under attack, right?

Erika: Public media, as far as I'm concerned, is media for the public.The mountaintop of public media is NPR and PBS, and I don't think there's any way to get around it, and it is always, or should always be, where we look for, news shows and children's programming and, the kind of documentary that helps to engage and enlighten people. The one thing I just wanna make sure of is that we're not requiring on this part of public media to be absolutely everything.

Grace: What message did you get from PBS leadership after the recission happened?

Erika: Not a lot. We are, unlike any of the other shows, the only one that is an independent 501c3. We are not part of a station group or part of PBS. We are our own thing, which in some ways is very helpful and in other ways is very difficult. But, really what I got was Sylvia Bugg telling me we are committed to independent documentary film and nobody knows exactly how all of this is going to shake out in the coming weeks, months, year. But we are committed to independent documentary film. Nobody has told me to do anything in particular or not do anything in particular. I don't think they have too much time to talk to me at the moment.

Grace: Yeah. I appreciate that Sylvia said something to you, but for us as the public viewers who are also makers, I saw the CEO of NPR say something, but I have not seen anything from Paula Kerger or anyone running PBS addressing what just happened? It's devastating, right? I've seen memes, I've seen social media accounts, but the leaders are quiet. [Editor's note: On July 17, 2025, Paula Kerger published this statement on the Senate Approval of the rescissions package.]

Erika: I think that there was something that was shared with public stations from Paula Kerger, and I can go back and check on that, but, yeah, I don't think there was a larger public discussion on this.

Grace: The whole campaign, Protect My Public Media, I just noticed like within the last two or three days, that's when I got all the requests to say something, talk about how public media is important to you, talk about your films, and I did it when somebody asked me directly. It just felt like so much, like, at the very end.

Erika: I think a lot of it came at the very end because what I was hearing was that it seemed like at those very last moments, the tide might be turning our way. So, I think that's why all of a sudden there was this flurry of activity, when people hadn't thought that was going to happen. So yeah, I think it was more than too little, too late.

Grace: Now that we're here, what do you think could be done differently with these kinds of campaigns?

Erika: I really wish that we had created more of a coalition earlier of different organizations and even just had a couple of planning meetings that anybody who was interested could have attended and said, this is what we think will work, what objections are there, what questions are there? That we could have moved more together. But I also think that it's hard to do in the moment. I don't know that anybody was really prepared first for the executive order, which got a flurry of people working on the legal support of it. Then all of a sudden, that changed and it was the actual rescission vote.

Grace: What's your advice for independent filmmakers in this moment?

Erika: I actually believe that continuing to let lawmakers know how important this is and that it could cost them votes, how important public media and federal funding of public media is what's really going to drive it. I mean, I'm looking toward the midterms right now, and I think that if we don't start moving toward looking at how we are going to affect change within important races and with lawmakers who know better, there are a lot of people who said they were going to vote. To keep funding who then turned around at the last minute

and didn’t, and I firmly believe that they know that they shouldn't have, but either were scared or were, I don't know, made some last minute deal. But I do believe that the majority of lawmakers who voted against keeping the funding for public media don't really believe that is the right thing to do.

Grace: You guys have an internal list of who they are that you can share?

Erika: I don’t, but actually that's what Protect my Public Media might come in and be very helpful. Because I remember for a while there was something going around that was saying, find people in these states and have them call their representatives.

Grace: I think that would be helpful. Speaking from the filmmaker point of view, I think you have a lot of really savvy, organized, articulate people, and they were, never, activated. I don’t know if people feel—it’s up to them to decide, but feeling a little bit defeated, like, well, you didn’t really care what we had to say.

Erika: I could understand that, and I will be the first to say we should have done a much better job of activating the filmmaking community in all of this.

Grace: We’re all tired.

Erika: Boy, are we tired.

Grace: Yeah, I know. We’re all tired. oh, that just sounds like such a dreary note to end on. Maybe to sum up Erica, we’ve covered a lot of ground, there's so many moving parts right now. What are you talking to your staff about? What are some things we should be keeping in mind or you're keeping in mind that you can share with us?

Erika: What I’m telling my staff is keep doing what you're doing. Share and curate independent film and do impact and engagement around it until they pry it out of our cold dead hands. It’s not giving up on what we have, and it's looking to create options so that we are not in the same situation where someone can just pull the rug out from under us. We’re gonna keep holding, our editorial committee meetings, we're gonna keep acquiring films until someone really pulls it out of our hands. Yeah, it sucks and yeah, it’s sad. Sit, cry for a moment, but then, get the heck up and just, start moving forward again, because otherwise what are you gonna do?

Grace: Thank you so much, Erica. I know it’s been rough the last few weeks.

Erika: Of course. I impressed myself by managing to do this with only telling a couple of civil rights stories, because usually, I am just a font of them, which gets really annoying to a lot of people.

Grace: We have to preserve those stories, too. Thank you so much.

Grace: Thanks for listening to Viewers Like Us. This podcast is executive produced by Joaquin Alvarado, Ken Ikeda, and me, Grace Lee.

Our editorial producer is Olivia Aylmer. Our audio editor is Chloe Behrens, and our sound designer mixer is Alec Cowan.

Claudia Meza created our theme music, and our historian is Susie Pak.

You can find show notes, links, and a transcript of this episode at viewerslikeus.com, and you can always get in touch with us through the website.