

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

SEASON 2, EPISODE 6: “No Surprises”

ACT 1

Grace Lee: Hi, it’s Grace Lee, back with another episode of Viewers Like Us. Let’s jump right in.

It’s been a little over a month since August 1st, 2025, when the Republican-led Congress voted to eliminate funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. CPB swiftly announced it would be shutting down and eliminating the majority of its staff positions by the close of the fiscal year on September 30th.

According to a statement made by CPB President and CEO Pat Harrison, this marks the first time in more than *five decades* that Congress failed to approve its funding. To put it bluntly, the impact on public television and radio—particularly smaller stations based in rural communities—will be devastating.

For anyone catching up, CPB is a private non-profit corporation authorized by Congress in 1967 to steward the federal government’s investment in public broadcasting. It’s helped to support the operations of more than 1,500 locally managed and operated public television and radio stations nationwide. Not to mention its role as the largest single source of funding for research, technology, and program development for public radio, television, and related online services.

To understand how this news has played out for some of my public media peers, I called up Leslie Fields-Cruz and Don Young. They both work for what’s now known as the National Multicultural Alliance. The NMCA is made up of five organizations: Center for Asian American Media, Black Public Media, Latino Public Broadcasting, Vision Maker Media, and Pacific Islanders in Communication. It’s supported hundreds of stories spanning decades on public media and its digital platforms. Here’s Leslie and Don.

ACT 2

Grace: It is August 8th, 2025, 12:33 p.m. If you guys could just start by introducing yourselves.

Leslie Fields-Cruz: Hi. I'm Leslie Fields-Cruz. I'm the Executive Director at Black Public Media. I've been with the organization for almost 25 years. I started out running their grant making program and moved into the distribution of the content, and then became the executive director in late 2014 where I have been serving ever since.

Don Young: Hi. Thanks for having us today. Don Young, executive director of CAAM. I've been executive director now, like, 12 weeks. But I've been a part of CAAM for almost 30 years. So, it's quite a moment.

Grace: I just wanna say, too, I have known you both for a while, I've also been supported by both Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), as well as Black Public Media. So, I'm hoping that we can just have a direct frank conversation about what's going on right now. We got the news that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is shutting down. Could you describe briefly how you learned the news and your gut reactions to hearing that?

Don: I think once the president gave the directive that there would be consequences for crossing him in terms of the vote, the rescission vote. At least for CAAM's perspective, we were pretty clear at that moment, this is done with. Although the formality happened last week, it was pretty clear that the Republican party, that this White House had, forcefully, aggressively determined that the elimination of CPB and what it stood for and what it means was a real high priority for him.

Leslie: I was actually on vacation when I got the word about CPB winding down, but not completely surprised, like Don said. The writing was on the wall in some respects as this administration, how they were dismantling pretty much everything. There was that one little bit of hope. I always try to be hopeful in dark times. Trying to find the light at the end of the tunnel. But I found out, actually I had a text from our colleague at PIC, *did you see that email from Pat Harrison?* And I was like, I'm on vacation, what email? So, of course I immediately read it and I said, okay, it's time to put in that plan that we have been talking about. There's a part of me that is sad and frustrated, but am I surprised? Not really.

Grace: When you say you got an email from Pat Harrison, is that the announcement that we *all* saw? Or did you get some heads up before it was like in the press?

Don: No. We didn't have any heads ups. I think this has given us all an opportunity to really deeply consider how we came about. We were CAAM,

then NATA, was specifically formed by Loni Ding at a conference really to pursue funds from CPB. So, it was like we were literally created to be who we initially became. Where CBB, the role in public media on behalf of a community was really like, fundamental to our origin. So it was, on the one hand, heartbreaking, I think. There was a lot of feelings. There was a lot of rage that like, had we failed? Was this a direct attack on the work that we stand for? I think all the feelings that each of us felt, like every feeling was appropriate, and I think it's gonna take all of us a little bit of time to process this. I think there was this very specific moment I recall of if CPB was to disappear. What does that mean for each of us? And are we actually still a collective and what is our role in public media?

Grace: Yeah, can I just rewind a little bit more? I was at a meeting, Don, that you were at in March 2024, where there were leaders from public media. And those leaders brought up the threat that was happening for public media. What was the communication with you guys and the National Multicultural Alliance? What kind of communications did you get with leaders of PBS and CPB about how to move forward in this difficult moment? This is even before executive orders and closing of the DEI office and rescission.

Leslie: It's important to know the threats to defund CPB have been going on since the mid-nineties. So it's almost like every time there was a Republican in office, or, a Republican-leaning Congress, there was always this effort to defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The communication from CPB was like these threats are consistent. They have somebody in government affairs who works diligently, incredibly hard to make sure that every member of Congress knows what's happening in their district, with their constituency, and how public media is impacting them. So that work was ongoing. I don't think the flags were waving red until he got into office. Even then, it was like the threats are *always* there. But then, when we started to see the dismantling of USAID and everything else, it was like, oh, okay, wait a minute. This is not the same. This is very different.

So, to CPB's credit, in terms of how they communicated with the NMCA, I would say, what, by December, January, Don? They were reaching out to us and giving us this is the worst-case scenario, and this is what we're trying for.

Don: That's right. Yeah. I think, Grace, you mentioned that meeting and it feels like an era ago. At the time, the fundamental questions were, about resources for independent makers, the challenges in the system, and I think also whether public media was really committed to the breadth of diversity and independent voices that the system was created for. I think, at least from the NMCA perspectives, our relationships with both PBS and CPB and senior executives is better in many ways than might have been in earlier eras. That

collegiality and openness and our ability to have hard conversations is better than ever before.

That being said, it was pretty clear once Trump was elected how little like folks actually looked at whether or not public media was attempting to achieve the founding principles of the Public Broadcasting Act. Fundamentally, that was never the question being posed of, are you actually fulfilling what you were created to do? It was really more from which political perspective are we viewed in this case as a threat to those in power? Yeah, we were viewed as a liability.

I'm curious, in the context of this discussion today, Leslie, if you knew it was going to land this way, should we all have articulated something differently, even knowing what the result is.

Grace: So when PBS preemptively shut down all of their diversity, equity, and inclusion officers and initiatives ...for you guys, Black Public Media center for Asian American media, how did that land?

Leslie: Their DEI office at PBS? It didn't impact us at all, because I think that office was more of an internal program within PBS. I feel bad for the people who had those positions, because they had just gotten there. They had just arrived. I actually had a former board member who was like, I didn't even know they had DEI. He only heard about it when it got shut down.

Don: We're not entirely sure what the vision of that office was in terms of how it would translate to, for example, creating program partnerships or accountability in regards to goals and strategies and priorities and learnings. That never got to us.

What was pretty clear was when the Supreme Court ruled on affirmative action. I think we all understood that, that actually existing became an existential threat. I think we're seeing it play out in a very strategic, ambitious, nefarious manner. In many ways, it was much more about suppressing, voices. That whole era of scrubbing sites and hiring lawyers... in the last half year, we've become more literate at how government runs and fails, and I think the defunding of CPB was a continuation of what started with the Supreme Court decision.

Grace: It just feels like you set up a DEI office when people called out the lack of actually fulfilling your mission, as reflecting the diversity of this country, and then it's like the first thing to go away. Was it ever a priority in the first place, you wonder, if it was so expendable?

Leslie: When people talk about DEI, they'll say, oh, the NMCA, we're DEI. We're not DEI—we're trying to make sure that public media fulfills its mandate, which is to make sure that there's content that represents the totality of the American public, right? We've been doing this work for well over 30 years. Vision Maker Media was founded before all of us, in 1975, I believe. So for the better part of all of our lives, these five organizations of the NMCA have been working to bring diverse content to public media.

Not that it has not had its challenges. There were times where I was very angry and upset, because it was very difficult to get our programming on or to get support for our makers through other streams other than just us. Especially after the George Floyd incident, everybody was putting up statements. I'll be honest with you, I knew in five years that shit was going to be gone, because why? I'm a Black woman in America. I can't trust them to keep their promises. I'm sorry. And as soon as the shit hits the fan, as soon as somebody starts saying, oh, this is this, or they're going to lose money. They're going to pull that down. So, on one hand, it's great that PBS put the office in. That's wonderful. Am I surprised that they pulled it down so quickly? No, I'm not. Do I think that it was the right thing to do? No, I don't. But I'm not surprised and I can't dwell on it. We've gotta just keep moving forward making sure that we are part of all of these institutions so that they cannot take our voices away.

Grace: Don, do you have anything to add?

Don: I think this is a bigger question about this system and this network and what it stands for. In the case of CAAM, we did have some curriculum that we're taking down specifically around anti-Asian hate, a project that we had funded. I think we would've liked to have understood earlier on and been informed that was going to happen.

We're all like processing live and hopefully we can all move beyond questioning what could have been done differently, because it's not going to help us beyond refining what the future looks like. The press attention around CPB was around the money and the money. The resources are irreplaceable. And I think it's even more incumbent with fewer resources that if this is going to work—it's almost like with less money, you have to be more committed.

Grace: CAAM, like you said, Don, and Black Public Media, were started from media activists, like ITVS. All of these independents were organizing at a moment where they had to fight for everything. You both knew Loni Ding. I wonder, what do you think she would make of this moment?

Don: I think she would be like, probably brainstorming as much as anybody could right now. At CAAM, every other Friday, I'm doing this executive training, because I'm new to this. I think for the short term, we've gotta manage this.

We got to take care of each other. Set a new foundation of the rules of like respect and sustainability and at CAAM, the young staff, making sure they understand this is going to be a safe place to experiment and march towards the future. Organizations have been hurt, but the field will be torn apart if we don't coalesce quickly.

My wife just reminded me, you were born just a few weeks after CPB and the Public Broadcasting Act was created. I didn't really think about that. I was literally part of that first generation that was the beneficiary of this. Let's grieve that. Let's do an assessment of what that stood for. The breadth of stories and the funding and the community that was built, let's celebrate that.

What would Loni do? She wants to know: What is the future of public media? Is it aligned with a system that existed, pre-existed? We all have that question. And we're not sure.

Grace: Is public media synonymous with PBS?

Leslie: That's a really good question, because I know when I came into this, back in 2001, I thought public access and public media were the same thing. I was swiftly taught that no they're not. But as we've moved on, here we are 25 years later, and the idea of public media with the internet and social media and all this other stuff. What is that now? What is that for us today? And what is it for the future, for the next generation?

We've got a lot of lessons that have been learned over the past 50 years with public media. But the technology is different. The distribution streams are different. Our public engages differently. So what is public media for tomorrow? It's an opportunity for us—specifically, our communities—to be part of those conversations in ways that we necessarily weren't back in 1967.

Don: Is public media synonymous with PBS? In the context of all of our filmmaking community, just for example, with Asian Americans, right, there is a bigger question moving forward of: What is a community's commitment to public good and public media?

I was in that multi-generation of associate producers who worked for Loni Ding on *Ancestors in America*. Loni at that time was a mecca. That ability to be near somebody in something who created and had this vision and wanted to give back—like Loni was in some ways more public media than public media's ever been.

Maybe that's in fact what we're trying to embrace. The reconsideration and the definition is going to have to change. Will PBS be a part of this? I think that's an open question that we all want and need to have with them. It's hard for me

to believe that PBS, given all that's happened, that there's going to be a greater appetite for the risk and the challenges on top of everything going on.

Don: I hope that's the case, but I think we all want to understand and give organizations and leaders and institutions an opportunity to weigh in on their future design. But I think the momentum and the breadth of this—I think we certainly know it won't be one institution that's going to pull it off.

Grace: Leslie, do you have anything to add to that?

Leslie: Yeah, I agree with Don. I grew up with PBS. It's always been in my life. It's always been there. But there are a lot of other things that I thought were going to be there, and they're not there anymore. There are programs that have been on for a very long time, and then, they're no longer there.

With PBS, right now the people that are within that institution, and I know for BPM, it has been more responsive in the past 10 years or so. Then I remember it being when I first got here in terms of, hey, we've got some ideas, we've got some project ideas and the willingness and the desire to work with the NMCA in a substantial way.

Even prior to their DEI, there was more diversity happening inside the organization. And that's the benefit. That they create the opportunities and doors open. Now were they open wide enough and long enough?

Don: No.

Leslie: No, they weren't. And if we look at where we are right now, if the doors were opened, I don't care what the administration says—none of us are going back. So how do we proceed collectively? How do we proceed forward into, what we want public media to be, what we want, a PBS—or several PBSs—or, whatever that is.

Grace: Can you both give us a window into some of the conversations you're having with your staff and your board and communities that give you some kind of hope or something to look forward to?

Don: There's no question that all of the creative communities we're a part of are going to outlast any of this. The storytellers and the kinds of stories. Our communities—maybe that's where the burden of responsibility and the fear, is being able to keep up with that and to serve that properly.

In terms of CAAM and really trying to channel a young staff and really note that public media has a certain way of approaching content and broadcast and

platforms, and now we're really trying to—for example, at CAAM Fest next year—make it be much more of a summit around community sustainability and taking care of each other versus a traditional film festival. Film festivals are in as difficult a situation as public media, if not worse.

We need to keep our eye on the future and really fortify ourselves with certain rules. It has to be for less money, it has to be with the right values, and it has to be with the right partners. But parallel those of us who are veterans, like I am, like learning new skill sets of like, how can I be a better fundraiser and how can I be a better community partner? And I'm enjoying this part of it. I'm trying to solve problems, and I'm trying to stay ahead of that. But also having to make hard decisions of what can I do anymore and what do you have to make your bets, and we heard this A-DOC survey where half of the members are like 25 to 35. That's incredible. We just have to make those bets as best we can as a modest organization and really take a moment to celebrate them. I think it's bottomed out and, it's going to be up from here and let's try to refresh and reset.

Leslie: It's pretty much very similar at Black Public Media. We're wrestling with the gap. The hole that the funding has created for us, but also, okay, so now maybe we can try some new things in a way that we couldn't before because of the tie right to public media, exploring, what does a public-private distribution model look like? Where you can engage or work in partnership with public media stations, but not necessarily just because of the broadcast or because of the stream. Younger makers are already doing some of this work, so how can we support and be part of that? The other thing for, especially for Black Public Media is we've had the benefit of the support from CPB for a long time. Although I will say for two years we didn't, we weren't funded. This was back in the eighties. I found this out from the founder of Mable Haddock, and I was like, what did you do? She was like, "We survived, we were fine." So I'm like, "Okay, we'll survive, we'll be fine. But we will change."

But also, I think that it's a push now, at least for me, in terms of leading this organization and working with our younger staffers, how do we engage with younger audiences and how do we engage them in a way that they become our grassroots supporters? Everybody runs around. We're trying to find the high worth donor, the high worth this. Yeah, we can do that. But public media was funded by the public. How do we engage with the public? For our organizations, for the NMCA, specifically. I think our challenge has been we've been behind the scenes.

We're working with the stations. They show the programs they receive the membership dollars. Okay, so how do we get to the people that viewed your film, our films, on your channel? They need to know what's at risk. They need

to know that if we're going to support the 25 to 35 year olds who are making content, they're still going to need money to produce these films.

Hello, public: If you value our stories, if you value the diversity of these stories, we need you to support us. And so we're focusing on a grassroots campaign, build enough so that we can sustain the organization while we transition.

I've been listening to what's happening with A.I. and a lot of concern from makers about A.I. taking their jobs and making films. But I also—and I think this is true for Black Public Media since, when my predecessor, Jacquie Jones, was there—let's embrace the technology, let's embrace the changes. What can we do to help makers create with the new technology, so that we can tell stories for a generation of audience members that aren't willing to watch a 50 or 60 minute documentary? We fund immersive media work today. We are going to continue to do that work. I think our challenge is we don't understand the distribution models, and maybe it's because they haven't really been created yet. There hasn't been anything that's sustainable. But we want to learn and we want to experiment.

Don: Up until now, we were obligated to this system and key content supporters and community supporters, and that's all been pulled away. So, from CAAM's perspective, we're certainly going to be spending a lot of time prototyping and listening and trying to understand how we can serve community.

We know we have to move beyond federal support, that philanthropy, federal and local philanthropy is not going to be a place for us to continue to thrive and do this work. I think there's a desire for this leadership and conscience position. But that's not a sustainable model. So, checking in with you a year, three years from now, will we be able to answer that question more fully, of what, what directions do we commit to and how successful were they?

Grace: For anyone who might be an independent filmmaker who has been supported or was looking to be supported in the future by Black Public Media, Center for Asian American media, what is your message to these folks?

Leslie: For BPM, we are putting our open call on hold as we retool and figure out how do we rebuild the production fund? Because that's the thing that's been most decimated, because most of our documentary funding came through the CPB dollars. But I think for future younger makers: Keep working, keep creating.

The worst thing that can happen is that you stop. And that's what they're trying to do. They're trying to scare folks into not creating, not sharing their voices, not telling our stories. And that's not acceptable. We're not going back.

And let us know. Invite us to screenings or let us know what you're working on because as we do the necessary work to rebuild or grow the foundation that we have, the doors will be back open fully at some point in time. I have to believe that as the leader of the organization. That is *my* mandate. That's what I've been hired to do. It's going to take a lot more to shut us down.

Don: We exist for the communities, right? Hold us accountable, engage us. I think we are trying to figure out how we create more regular public touch points to brainstorm and to prototype together. The NMCA and the other organizations, we will need to really think through how to just quite simply get more resources back to filmmakers. I think that is really urgent. In the Asian American community, we were a public media funder and distributor. Now we have to think through how to sustain community—that pivot has to happen quickly. How do we really think through what can we bring in terms of our experience, making sure sustainable models are replicated and shared and built upon.

Grace: Can I make a suggestion? Our careers have always intersected with public media. Yet there was always this question of why didn't PBS leaders engage with us to try to help defend the system that we helped build? Who else cares more about this? Who else has put our blood, sweat, and tears into our films, and try to get the message out, try to have an alternative message? But nobody was asking.

At the same time that nobody was asking, we're being disrespected by having our films be censored or our materials being erased from PBS Learning Media. So it seems like there needs to be some kind of conversation about that.

Don: I think we felt the same way. Given all the literally thousands of really significant works and filmmakers and community, how can we focus all of our energy toward a place we feel valued in and excited about? Hopefully PBS can be a part of that, but I don't think they can be that entirely. So, what can we work toward together where we could just harness that energy?

Leslie: I'm planning on hitting up all of our seasoned makers and the new makers just in terms of amplifying the work that we've done and the support that we've provided, but also: Help us strategize, help us figure out, okay, so what do we need to do to better help you? We've always felt like we're here to serve *you*. So, sometimes, when you do that, you forget, oh, you know what? I should ask for help. To hear you say, ask us, let us know what you need is really important, because we can be in those silos and talking to each other, but not realizing that we have a huge force out there that could, that can help us. So I'm open for that.

Grace: Do you have anything else you want to add

Leslie: I think, there's the dream, right? And then there's what can we accomplish in the next few years? I had a plan to quote unquote "retire" in a few years, but that's not going to happen. But I do wanna make sure that the next generation has something that they can continue to build on and to support our stories. That, to me, is tantamount. We cannot stop the pipeline from growing.

Don: CPB's been eliminated. It's really a horrific moment, but the community that I first started in back in the nineties—there wasn't this level of coordination and collaboration and care and experience. As scary as this time is, it's a significantly better climate than what I joined. I want to carry that forward.

Grace: It's really been great just to hear and connect with you again. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and vulnerabilities.

Leslie: Thanks, Grace. This has been great.

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.