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SEASON 2, EPISODE 7: "Now What?"

ACT 1

Grace Lee: Hi, everyone, it's Grace Lee. This episode closes Season 2 of Viewers Like Us. Thank you to all who've listened and shared your thoughts during this challenging moment for public media. Your stories inspired us to pick up the microphones again and document this difficult chapter in PBS history.

Season 1 was a deep dive into PBS's past and decades of organizing by independent filmmakers for a more equitable system. This season, though, we've worked with far fewer resources, squeezing in recording and editing whenever possible.

Still, we felt it was crucial to capture these experiences before they were erased. Our goal was to create space for candid reflection on the collapse and defunding of public media.

For this episode, my co-creators Joaquin Alvarado, Ken Ikeda, and I discuss where we stand after this summer's upheaval. Since 2020, we've asked what it would take to restore the *public* to public media. Now, with CPB defunded and even more resources at risk, the question remains: What's next? We began this podcast with a provocation So, it only feels appropriate to end with one—or a few. Take a listen.

ACT 2

Grace: Hi, everyone. It's Grace with Viewers Like Us. It's August 26th. I flew up to Oakland this morning, because I wanted to do this last episode with two people who have been instrumental in actually making this podcast happen, and that is Ken Ikeda and Joaquin Alvarado. Both Ken and Joaquin have a really rich and diverse history within public media, and they have largely been behind the scenes. Do you want to just start by introducing yourselves? We should also talk about how we know each other and how you came to this moment.

Joaquin: I'm from Oakland and have worked in and around public media, journalism, documentaries, and content for many years, since I was a

teenager. Grace and I, we met at UCLA film school in 1997. And then Ken and I met in 2001. I was helping out at San Francisco State. They had an Oakland digital media center. But yeah, I've always been interested in independent production that supports opportunities for people of color and outsiders to get resources to tell their stories.

Grace: And then tell us who you are, Ken.

Ken: I would say most of my professional career has been in support of storytelling and storytellers. I've been really fortunate to be part of a lot of really deeply community oriented organizations. So, I was on the board of CAAM, which is how I first heard of Grace. And as Joaquin said, we met through a youth media program. Then I worked at BVAC Media, Association of Independents in Radio, Public Media Company. I've just found myself in a number of different sort of roles and positions to see how the system has evolved and, very important to this conversation, how it hasn't.

Grace: I've asked many people over the course of this podcast: What is your connection to public media?

Joaquin: I have worked at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. I set up their diversity and innovation office. I ran digital for American Public Media. I was at the Center for Investigative Reporting and ran that for a while. But I went in there thinking we need a one hour investigative show in public broadcasting on the radio side to prove that public radio could deliver the goods, consistently, with that level of journalism. That turned into Reveal, which is still out there. I've coached a lot of newsrooms. I've been on a lot of boards. But my aspiration was never to run a station or run CPB, but it was more that I like seeing how these systems interact, and just to find opportunities for interventions with them.

Grace: Great. And Ken, what's your connection to public media?

Ken: I think it's the classic story of being an immigrant kid growing up watching *3-2-1 Contact*, *Sesame Street*. There's that skit, "One of these things is not like the other," that's always stuck with me. Professionally though, in the last 20-ish years, I think with the exception of when I was at Public Media Company I've always been operating from the edges—whether it's, fighting for better pay rates, greater transparency creating podcasts with young producers who haven't been given their chance but have been told to wait their turn. So, I've always been nipping at the heels and looking from the outside in.

We were part of what was then a circle of younger professionals in the network, when we were in our mid thirties. We get called in the room, and essentially we were there as a reference to younger people and we already

felt too old to be in the room. That was my entry into being part of the inside of the system But I still felt too removed to be an authentic voice giving feedback.

Grace: What year was this? And what were you called in to do?

Ken: This was in the mid-to-late two thousands and this was at the advent of YouTube and I think they were already losing traction in significant ways with younger people—meaning people in their teens and twenties, right? People who weren't in their mid thirties like we were. Because we're in the Bay Area, it was, you guys are close to Silicon Valley, what do you think?

Joaquin: There's a way where the system credentials outsiders to like sit at certain tables, but there's also like a random name I want to put out there. Charlie Firestone ran the Aspen Communications group, and he did a series of round tables that Ken and I were invited to—surprising like, oh, it was at the Ritz in San Francisco—And Charlie brought us to a lot of things. I owe a lot to Charlie, right? Because he saw the sort of things we were talking about was what was missing from other parts of the conversation.

Then Orlando Bagwell was running the Ford Media Arts group, and he invited me to be on his advisory board, and that really was what set me on a course to engage more directly with public broadcasting. I was never that interested in it for its own sake. But I was interested in designing a new internet that could leverage the policy framework of public broadcasting.

Orlando was all about it. He gave us grants to do that work. He brought us to things and he, at that time, this was like 2005, 2006, he was doing his roundtables on digital transformation in public broadcasting. So, when Orlando brought us into the room, he also had Pat [Harrison] and Paula [Kerger]—still there, Paula runs PBS. Pat still runs CPB, as long as it's around—and we were bringing new relationships in that conversation, but without Charlie first and then Orlando, they wouldn't have known how to invite us.

It's still a habit that the system has: Find interesting younger people, keep them around, maybe hire them. But again, it's like, the fact that there hasn't been more circulation at the very top of these organizations tells you what happens.

Grace: So, that is 20 years ago, when you first started entering these conversations about the future of public media. Season one of Viewers Like Us, we had that episode called "Endless Loop." And that's really what this has felt like. And now this current phase of just being extremely frustrated and lost and not knowing what to do. I'm just hoping that this conversation and many

others will help whatever is next to come to fruition. I don't even know what that is.

Joaquin: We were wrong. For the last 40 years, we've been wrong about what the possibilities are for diversity. We treated it like an access question. Can we get more access? This is why there's a National Minority Consortium or now it's Multicultural Alliance, like having side projects that try to address one of the fundamental issues in American society that expresses itself politically, socially, economically, legally at such a deep level is like having a nuisance lawsuit against a system that doesn't really have to respond, right?

People might be well intentioned, but I don't think the system outside of cyclical eruptions of protest advocacy might make some gains. And I don't think that we did enough hard work to really deal with the question of who has power and how that power derives specifically around public broadcasting.

Grace: So, who has power? Let's talk about that.

Ken: I used to think, going back to Joaquin's point about access, that the programmers had a lot of power. So, I would show up at conferences and I'd ask a somewhat obnoxious question, which is, can we get some hip hop programming on there? And the answer would always be, where do we put it in? I'd go well, respectfully, it's already bigger than you. It's already bigger than all the programming combined in terms of this listenership, its capital, impact in the world. In their minds it was, can we find a half hour or an hour in a week? Not can we find a regular slot or or carve out part of the day to reflect more of America?

But I didn't then interrogate who is this for? And what is keeping you from doing that? I think the simple way to look at it is: There's no change in leadership, not just within the system, but within the ecosystem itself. Those people who are resourcing it, those people who are studying it, those people who are producing content and green lighting that content, and the people actually running the organizations. Very little change.

Joaquin: PBS knows who's watching. NPR knows who's listening. It serves an older, whiter, more educated audience, period. And if it's television, it's much older, right? And it needs enough interaction at the Gen X layer to keep those things going. It needs enough people coming in on membership. It needs enough audience to keep underwriting. But I just don't see a mechanism that anyone's landed on to force station leadership and boards to be accountable for the whole community. They just maintain accountability for their core audience, which is why I think people really *are* surprised that they couldn't convince this Congress to go against the president when they haven't gone against him on any other issue, *this* would be the one that they're going

to somehow stand the line on? And if we're not going to resolve these core questions, then, at some point, we've got to take the medicine or do the surgery, so we're now forced with confronting, what can we build on our own? Since the thing that was here, it's leaving anyway, maybe sooner than we thought, but it never did the things that it was supposed to do anyway.

Grace: As observers of this system and part of the ecosystem for the last 20 years, what did you make of the rescission and also the closing of Corporation for Public Broadcasting—the defunding?

Ken: I think every system needs a defender, and you can't pre capitulate. You can't ignore what's in front of you and think you're an exception. But in that moment, the lack of fight made everything about the entire system vulnerable. Particularly when we're talking about a very base set of characters who are only responding to very visceral responses back to them.

You have to play the game that's being put in front of you. But it's as if we don't know how to play the games that the rest of the country plays because we're too elite or we haven't bothered to learn what the public knows. It was a sad moment, because I think what's often forgotten about is why people join the system, why they commit to the system. And yet leadership just capitulated, and so it's deflating.

Joaquin: And there was a lack of strategy. Like there's been a history, which we people love to go back to of Republicans threatening public broadcasting, but there's a more fundamental issue, where consistently, the Republican leadership and the White House has said, this is totally biased and is not meant to serve our half of the country, give or take.

Going back to 2015, this is 10 years, so we had 10 years to prepare for this possibility. I think we have to ask ourselves, how did we perform? Let's do the post game review and ask, how did CPB perform? How did NPR perform? How did the station perform? How did PBS perform?Again, rescission caught people off guard. But I don't think the results should be surprising.

So was it enough to say, *Oh, we serve every American.* Notice they focused on rural and emergency services. They didn't double down on like we have consistently at least provided *some* kind of space to get *some* diverse voices up here, Republicans, don't you wanna celebrate that? They're not maybe *your* diverse voices, but we had some diversity. So, not being able to answer that fundamental question of why a whole block of the country, which runs Congress and the White House right now, literally has this much open animosity, the only response was ..what? To end up here, we didn't even get on the board, in my opinion. We didn't even score a run in this game. So, I think we really have to do some hard self-reflection right now.

Grace: In your circles, is that happening? Do you see reflection happening? We're doing it right now, but…

Joaquin: I do think we have to give people time. Again, the system got its ass kicked. So, it's like you don't want to get right back in the ring. You want to go like *Rocky 2*, you gotta get your shit together here. So I feel like we need people in their twenties and maybe thirties to step in and say, *We'll take it from here guys. Here's how you back us up, get us ready for the fight.* Because I just think we haven't had that energy and we need it right now.

Ken: It's an existential moment. We have leadership that's in golden handcuffs and have been inactive largely in terms of innovating for future sustainability, anticipating things that might arise. This was hard to anticipate, but we have lots of friends in this system who are also at risk of losing their jobs or have already lost their jobs. I agree, they need to go back into training and come out strong. Now, if it comes back with something that's just a limited version of what exists, there's no hope, I think we're already at a point where we should not be investing to simply prop up what's there. We have to make hard decisions. If it is about the service, then the service needs to be reimagined. But I don't think the people currently in leadership have the capacity to do it. I don't think they've given ample thought to it. And if they have, then my point of critique is you haven't acted on it and I don't trust you have the courage to do it, despite it being a hard thing to do.

Joaquin: Is the response, *CPB got cut, The feds are attacking us. Support us now more than ever*? If you were running a station, you'd of course be doing that because you're probably doing better than you would do otherwise. That will run out,

Ken: And again, that's all we've seen is fundraising requests. That's it.

Joaquin: This is one of the traps. If it's just a fundraising problem, then you're still talking to the same group of people who are already invested. And so the next generation of audience, the next generation of supporters, the communities that you need to be serving, they're not your donors. So they might come into the fold, but having spent a lot of time in the save local journalism movement, the crisis is not a good recruitment tool. Can you get legacy, loyal people to support further? Absolutely. And you need that, too. But it's not a new market strategy.

Grace: I remember Joaquin calling me and saying, do you want to do a podcast based on this provocation you wrote about PBS? What were you hoping would come from it?

Joaquin: I do think that there have been, again, cyclical efforts to hold the system accountable and create access. Like, going back to the seventies, the fact that there's any people of color on this thing is partially progressive producers who put them on. But it's a lot of protest, and if you come outta that movement and you're Gen X, you just have that muscle, I think to know that you look for the fight.

But also Grace, as friends, I have been supporting producers and creative people, and I support journalists. I support newsrooms, but I'm not making the movies. And some people will resonate with what Ken and I are saying about what the structural issues are, but people really just relate to it through storytelling. So, it felt like an important way to—on behalf of storytellers—try to create some accountability through journalism, which I'm very proud of season one as having done.

Ken: Also to raise the question about Ken Burns was actually wild for the system. Like it really was a provocation, and when we heard back from Ford that was really one of the most responded-to pieces, for me it was immediately this seasoned storyteller in you, showing up as a voice. And that's what I think all of us are looking for: both the people within the system who are struggling to change and do things differently and for people who are constantly pushing new sets of practices and not necessarily getting traction, which is where I put myself. It really resonated emotionally. Now, fast forward five years, right? Where's Ken Burns? Where is he? What has he said?

Joaquin: There's an easy solution: Take some of your money and give it to independent producers who don't have the same deal that you have. Just give them some of your money. Like you don't even need to do anything with them.

There's a world where ITVS could fundraise as much as it needs to maintain its current operations. Maybe that's a plan. There is a world where POV could do that.

There's also a world where people like Ken Burns and other wealthier production companies that have lived off the system to just take part of their money and give it to independent producers. Create a new mechanism there. At least do it in solidarity for the next couple years while the dust settles. Again, if they did that, I'd give them props. Not expecting it. But that's a simple step that they could take.

Grace: I appreciate what you say, Ken, but I was just repeating something that I had been hearing for years and years amongst other filmmakers, just looking at what's right in front of my face.

Grace: I'd love for you guys to talk about Season One, which was a really researched, journalistic piece. We had a much bigger staff back then. This season has just been basically me and Joaquin recording on Zoom.

Ken: I think some of the lessons that immediately come to mind from season one were, we wanted to get the attention and response of Paula.

Grace: Paula Kerger, president of PBS.

Ken: We did, to a certain degree, and actually I think our work, humbly, I think is still being tracked by people in the system. That's our audience, right, is people who identify and who are actively part of public broadcasting. I think where we failed is, and I'll just hold myself accountable to this, if I had the courage and the ability to show up and picket in front of PBS's offices for a week straight, I think I would've done more to compel change, because of the embarrassment they would've felt.

Joaquin: And independent producers did use to do that. They would go picket at the stations, especially in LA, that's how Chicano filmmakers got some access that was on-the-street activism. That is another, I think, difference. Philanthropy has been so essential to both the birth and continuing evolution of public broadcasting, but also for independent producers. It's one of the few spaces where people who either want to invest in this or come from these communities and therefore understand the power of that investment have actually been able to move some resources.

So you get conditioned like you don't want to misbehave, because you can get punished in philanthropy also and not funded. So it's like, we're always creating these balances that are almost invisible. But *too* much discomfort is not good, you'll not be invited. Just enough, you might be the belle of the ball for a certain period of time. So long as we're just operating on philanthropy, we're constantly going to be triangulating both the pressures that are on philanthropy, but also their proclivities and preferences

It goes back further to when the decision was made in the United States to regulate radio or telegrams—the need for government regulation and oversight. That's the premise that public broadcasting is built on, right? And whether or not all the stations survive, and I hope they do, it doesn't answer the question of how communications is going to happen in the future, which, in a world where data centers drive all data, that's how media exists and is consumed. And then A.I. is this emergent layer that's going to wrap around everything. There's nothing about what the system's doing right now and that I can see that is actually pointing at that. So we need some immediate leadership around what is our right as the public to have some regulation

around what the future of communications is going to be, which is going to be A.I.

Grace: What is our right as a public?

Joaquin: I would argue that the legislative and regulatory history of the United States demonstrates there is a public interest to regulate communications. And if A.I. is a communications technology, there is a right to regulate it. And to provide some protections for consumers, and if that's true, then what does a modern day set-aside look like so that there's a non-commercial space, whether we have to pay for it and build it?

We're paying for everything anyway with our taxes, but do we pay for and build it? Is it some kind of compact with the industry? There's a lot of versions of this. None of it's going to be easy, but it is our responsibility, I think, to argue for that.

Ken: And that's not just a belief, but a vision and a responsibility you just described, because what we know is if we're forceful enough—nothing matters if you don't have that vision to drive it forward. I think we are playing by the rules, all the time, and it's an unambitious observance of the rules.

Grace: What's the rule that you think should be broken?

Ken: That we work for the outcome. That we work for service that is meaningful and reflective of and for the public. I don't think that's how the system works. The system has been geared towards stability. Don't rock the boat. This works. We all love it and we appreciate it, we know you enjoy getting into your car and being able to hear these same voices, right? This is why we couldn't let go of Lawrence Welk. It's because we painted this relationship with voices and stories that people grew up with and they felt close to. They don't think about sustainability. They don't think about their ability to compete with new things that emerge, like they never actually competed side by side with YouTube. In fact, they're just finding ways to distribute their content over that platform. I think the unambitious observance of the rules and playing nice are all about not rocking the boat. So, now they've been rocked, and they have no way to respond.

Joaquin: So if it goes, CPB is attempting to close itself. It's probably predictable what happens to independents who have depended upon this system, right? $500 million a year it's not philanthropy, but it's a lot of funding. I don't think you can take that much money out and not really severely impact negatively the independent community. And when that starts to happen, it's going to be hard for philanthropy to take care of everybody. Your critique of Ken Burns is really about opportunities for independents. And when we say

that, that also means people of color and women of course. But like, it's opportunities for independents. Now there needs to be a different strategy.

It's that simple. It's banging on the door for more CBB funding or some kind of reform at the national strands. It only going to get you so far. Now we need something new.

Grace: After we finished season one, we took a pause and we were struggling with what do we do next? I think it was 2021. It was four years ago, we thought we don't want to keep rehashing the same story about systemic inequality at PBS. Here's one more story about somebody who had a terrible experience, right? We didn't want to do that. At one point, we were frustrated by the lack of vision by leadership, and so we actually decided to have a world building session. I was hoping we could talk about the origins of that. What did we get from that gathering?

Ken: It wasn't just an exercise in a vacuum, even though in many ways it was meant to be imagined free of anything. It was not about stations. It was not about being centralized through PBS, it was more around a set of values and practices.

Grace: I should backtrack to say that what we did over two weekends Is we had Tony Patrick facilitate a conversation with a group of about 20 people from the PBS ecosystem, and that included filmmakers, people who had worked at stations, funders, Haydee Rodriguez, who we had interviewed for Viewers Like Us, who wrote the report on diversity—14, now 18, years ago that never got implemented. It was all on Zoom, and we had just amazing conversations about what is the public broadcasting system we would love to imagine

Ken: A.I. was not on any of our minds.

Grace: No.

Joaquin: But some of what came up were things that people could either see or were starting to develop. I think this idea of using the future strategically to fight for today is a really important one. But it also suggests, I think, an explicit generational need, which is: Find people born in the two thousands who give a shit about public media and get them into the room immediately, so that those of us in the Gen X generation don't replicate what I think Boomers and Silent Generation, some of whom are still running these organizations here, have done, which is like really bogart the space, it's like, we need to get more in the room now, otherwise they won't give a shit. Like, why would they spend time on this, when there's so many other things to worry about and so many other things to do? I think that's where world building is powerful.

Like Frieda Hennock was basically doing a one person worldbuilding when she's like, we're going to need all these non-commercial–

Grace: Who's Freida Hennock?

Joaquin: Freida Hennock was the first woman on the FCC who really was the most important advocate for the channel reservations that came out in 1952. This is what public television was built on. She was also an immigrant woman who went to night school at the Brooklyn Law College to become a lawyer at 19. So, you could have one or two like visionaries with some chutzpah. They get in the ring at the right moment and they can win a round on behalf of the public interest. We need to be seeding that right now. The incentives I think now for us and for listeners who are in the system is to radically accelerate how many new people we're getting into the conversation.

Grace: I wholeheartedly agree.

Joaquin: Also, can I just add one more thing? A lot of people are going to have this conversation who have never been inside a public broadcasting station, and I've been in probably over a hundred. And you find a lot of different kinds of people in there. You find people who are young, you find some diversity, it depends where you are. You find people who work in education. There is a hidden, amazing layer of people who just do really working class, straightforward education work, and there are a lot of former teachers who do these jobs in public television. Like I met a woman in Tallahassee once, maybe the most committed public servant I've ever met in public television who did the educational programming, andsShe found ways to take every single thing PBS could give her and turn it into classroom instruction resources for teachers in Tallahassee. Like, miraculous work.

This is where stations could really create a transformative moment here. Invite these people from your community in *right now* and say, if we're going to go down fighting, we need you at our side and here's what *we're* willing to fight for on *your* behalf.

Grace: Because I've had so many films on public media, there's always an educational guide and it's always been a pleasure, actually, to talk to the people who are creating the guides, because they are looking at what kind of impact will this film have in the real world? For the people who actually need to see it, not just us who want to get it to as many audiences as possible, but who are the ones that will actually benefit from this and learn from this?

Joaquin: WQED in Pittsburgh I think announced 35% of their staff laid off. So, in this market that was able to give birth to Fred Rogers,which has a thriving local media scene, I mean, how do you stop? It's not just triage, right?

Because obviously who's got money to say, here's the third of your budget back, hire everyone back. But what do you do with this talent? You might have been trying to get younger people, more diverse people into your stations. If they're the first ones to walk out the door, how do we keep them connected to the question in a way that feels meaningful. See, honestly, we need to be running the station strategy, too. Viewers Like Us season three is going to be stations.

Ken: This is the version of where we buy a deli, but it's a station and we try and run it.

[Laughter]

Grace: Ken, something you said earlier about stability rather than sustainability—that just completely skips over the mission. What was the mission, right?

Ken: The one thing that extraordinarily has never dipped is listener support. In the worst economy, even now, it's never been stronger, because of this moment. So that's partly why stations keep fundraising.

The return-on-the dollar investment for marketing communications, all these things that they do as engagement to be more public: It's to fundraise. It has monopolized the notion of listener support and community support, unlike any other kind of arts and cultural programming or public programming.

Now they're at a point where, in the loss of an ongoing, dependable subsidy that CPB distributes, which again, is tied to their fundraising success …those numbers are too big to recover from. That's too big a gap for local philanthropy to meet. I think KQED is losing $8 million? That's too big for a funder to fill locally, even nationally. And that's just one year.

That was about consistently building, building, building. Grow your empire, grow your footprint, and now let's stabilize that. We like where we are right now, let's stay there. It's never been about being dynamic—not *never*, but not to the point where they've reasonably considered a complete transformation of how they operate. It's being compelled now,

Joaquin: What if a station were to stand up in their community and say, *Hey, all communications is riding on data centers*. *It all requires you to pay for a device and a mobile plan, at a minimum, to get that content unless you go to the library or you have access at school. But to really interact in society at this point, you need a mobile phone and you need to have a data plan*. So, for anyone to reach our content, 12 year olds aren't going to watch *Eyes On the Prize* or your films, Grace. They're going to ask ChatGPT or Gemini, what

about Grace Lee Boggs? And they're going to get a summary that's based on your film.

In that world data centers aren't free to run, they suck up energy, there's new reporting that they could drive the costs up of your energy bill, because they take up space, they take up bandwidth like we operate in their economy. So, there's no non-commercial set aside for data centers. Effectively the market is not set up to support non-commercial activity in a data environment. What would it take to do that? If some station manager said, *I'm going to fight for this.* I would give them money right now for that fight. Even if I'm not in their area, because I'm like, yes, that's a good fight to have. $500 million to the tech sector is about 24 seconds of them not paying attention. So again, these dollars, as they have been, are not so much that we can't imagine a world where we can create some space for that kind of negotiation. I would love to see stations stand up and be the ones to take the lead in that fight.

Grace: You know a bunch of stations. Do you think that people are equipped and ready for that, to do that?

Joaquin: I think that there are a handful of leaders who could see their way to making that case. I can think of four or five mid-market station managers, all of them have a lot of credibility, but are very different in their markets and their temperaments and their styles and their histories, who could organize around that. PBS isn't going to do it. I don't think NPR is going to do it. The other support groups out there, and God bless 'em all, are not going to do it.

Grace: They're so underfunded, they can't do anything.

Joaquin: They're not used to being political. Like we paid for a lot of lobbying. Again, I think you also have to go back and just say, that strategy totally didn't work, so let's go somewhere else.

Grace: What strategy is that?

Joaquin: Just rewind the tape, for the last 10 years, strategy didn't work.

Ken: We've also tried actively on some strategies, which I don't think ultimately got very much traction. We talked about a National Public Lightpath. It's building national infrastructure of education networks in the U.S. that are also tied to public media stations, because the majority of them are on K-12 and university campuses and the license holders of those education institutions. There's an alternative network that already exists that they could switch over to, and there's also a network, that same network, they can try and bet their future on and build on. With the Spectrum auction, we were met with a lot of indecision, and I would say with very few exceptions, my favorite one

was WYBE. It's the fourth station in Philadelphia and now it's one of the largest funders of journalism in Philadelphia on an annual basis, because they sold that Spectrum. There was no loss of service to the community.

These were free assets that were given to them back in the day, and people flipped them for different purposes. But there was no unified effort. There's a lot of resistance even from philanthropy, frankly. *Oh, we don't want to get involved in that.* If you don't, it's just going to go somewhere else. There are schools that sold the Spectrum and they paid for parking lots for other schools. Didn't go back to media arts, didn't go back to journalism programs. It just paid debt.

We have to have an organized vision. We have to have multiple organized visions. And I do think there are people who can do it, I do. But it's almost as if the system has to give up or there has to be an undeniable indicator that it's not going to make it for them to jump, because, to be real, there's risk.

Joaquin: Maybe we do this exercise as a compendium. Let's take a hundred films made by independent documentary filmmakers that aired in PBS land and thread them together as an inspirational cipher for how to fight for the future, and it's everything from Grace Lee Boggs to *Eyes on the Prize* to Rustin.

Grace: Bayard Rustin?

Joaquin: Yeah. *How to Survive a Plague*. That was a PBS project, right? We actually have done a great job—the independent community has—of telling the stories of mavericks in American society who risked everything and made our society better, made it more interesting, enriched it, I actually think we should just say this isn't the hardest fucking thing we've ever had to do, guys. Again, it's it's not,

Grace: Look at the history that we documented and made films about.

Joaquin: This isn’t the hardest shit we'll ever have to do, okay? But it’s hard right now and we need to do it right now.

Grace: And the scary thing is when this goes away, who, *how* will you get to watch it?

Joaquin: Right, you'll get a summary from Chat GPT. As a goof, Grace and I were on the phone and in the five minutes we were on the phone I used one of the A.I. platforms to generate a script, A.I. voice tracks, sound effects, and

complete timestamp file that I could import into an audio mixing tool and make a 30-minute episode called, “Who is Grace Lee Boggs?”

Joaquin: That's already today.

Grace: Yes..

Joaquin: So yeah, time is of the essence.

Grace: So, what now? We're finishing up this season of the podcast. Where do we go from here? What are we doing? What are *you* doing?

Ken: We're in conversations with folks who are very publicly attempting to support and uphold the system, who are still thinking about ways to compel a different set of practices. I forget the actual name, but it's Public Media Company’s Bridge Fund.

Joaquin and I particularly have been having conversations with essentially like the plan B, C, D. How do we step in when there is that collapse that's imminent? It’s already anticipated in smaller markets or rural markets. There are stations who get 60, 70, even 80% of their funding from CPB. Again, gaps you can’t meet suddenly, or with local support only. But there will be casualties, without question. There’s going to be lost signals, there’s going to be lost service, and there's going to be loss of jobs. So the human capital is a big question and I think that's the most important one, frankly. Because I think people will find ways to get information otherwise, still. But I do think there’s tremendous value in fighting for and maybe re-architecting this national infrastructure that is for everyone. Because once that's lost, that is a finite resource.

Joaquin: Yeah. All of that. At some point, folks who are not well-versed or comfortable doing it, are going to have to negotiate with people in conservative communities about where is there common ground around some of these issues? This is just ground game that needs to be built, because we can't do any of this at the federal level without addressing the extraordinary gap between what one side thinks versus the other. Part of our failing, I think socially as a nation, is that we’ve allowed it to descend into this—polarized is the wrong term—it's like this balkanization serves certain interests but I think if you're 15 years old in rural America or in East Oakland, the last thing we need as a society is those folks having no opportunity to have any allegiances to each other. That's crazy. That's really, really bonkers, and we can't throw in the towel on that, and we also can't solve *this* problem without addressing that.

Ken: Grace, I know you're the interviewer, but can I ask you a question?

Grace: Sure.

Ken: What do you think the implication is here for doc filmmakers? You're talking about a complete dismantling of particularly early stage resourcing that has been very dependable for those who have gotten it. Where does that pathway get picked up? Where do those resources reappear?

Grace: Yeah, that's a really good question that I'm struggling with right now. I just finished a film that has nothing to do with public media. And now I am trying to make something back to my roots, very independent, very personal but also in the public interest, I think, in terms of a story. I'm really grappling with my producers, how are we going to do this? And where will it even show? What is the distribution, where's the funding coming from? Because it's the kind of film that would've been funded by public media.

Firelight Media just announced that they're going to do a kind of fund for filmmakers addressing this moment, and it's really heartening to see that an organization like Firelight is living their mission, living their values, and saying okay, we're going to focus on stories that are happening in the United States, to address this moment.

I feel like maybe people are figuring out what they're doing, which is also why I'm asking you and us, like, what are *we* doing? Because, it's too depressing just to sit around and watch it all collapse and die. So, I don't have an answer, unfortunately.

I'm just trying to think about…

Joaquin: But there is an answer in there. You're making another film.

Grace: Yeah, I'm going to do it. As soon as our voices and our ability to be creative get cut off, *then* it's over.

Joaquin: Yeah. And again, not to end on a hopeful note—

[Laughter]

Grace: Okay, don't, please.

Joaquin: —you've got to respect the incredible amount of hustle that independents bring that our communities bring that is defined inside of the history in public broadcasting. There's been a lot of hustle. That hustle's not going away. And also like you can just draw a line in the sand somewhere at some age group, I'm gonna say 32.. people younger than that, they're not

paying attention to this. If we can get them activated around a vision, then we don't have to answer every single question about what went wrong or what was amazing about the last shit. Like we can just start building the new shit.

Grace: Fresh start. It's just like, there's too many old people. We're also part of that generation. But can we somehow be a bridge? Because we still care about it and our kids are actually having to live through this, too. But we don't need to lead it.

Ken: This is an open call for a whole new generation to take it.

Grace: They should take it.

Ken: Yeah.

Joaquin: That's good. I think that's a good landing point.

Grace: Thanks for listening to Viewers Like Us Season 2.

I especially want to thank Joaquin and Ken for their support over the years. I've learned so much, both in making our show and just from casual conversations with the two of them. We hope to continue creating space for independent makers to gather, organize, and build community together. If that resonates with you, we hope you'll get in touch. We promise to do the same.

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.