

Ray Rogers: I am Ray Rogers.

Annie Evans: And I'm Annie Evans.

Ray Rogers: You are listening to Fix This, a podcast exploring tech ideas and solutions to some of today's largest challenges.

Annie Evans: Around the world, organizations are stepping up to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). For an organization like PBS, this means going beyond the camera and creating initiatives that put the creator and their individualism on center stage.

PBS is a public broadcasting service on a mission to serve the American public with trusted programming, with a diversity of perspectives and resources that educate, entertain, and inspire. By building on Amazon Web Services (AWS), PBS can optimize its user experience by spending more time creating new programming, like mentoring young filmmakers and creating content that resonates with a new generation of viewers, and less time dealing with its backend operations.

PBS goes beyond diverse content creation by using AWS to improve its availability and accessibility, so that any person virtually everywhere can learn and grow with PBS. To get a better idea of how PBS is using AWS to launch new DEI programs and continues to provide accessible programming to the public, I sat down with Sylvia Bugg, chief programming executive and general manager of general audience programming at PBS. Take a listen.

Sylvia Bugg: Our mission to educate, engage and inspire the American people has always been near and dear to me. Part of it was my own upbringing. I was born and raised in Southern Virginia, where having PBS was often the gateway to exploring more about the country and our world around us. That being from a small town, I didn't know if I would ever have an opportunity to explore on a global level. And so, for us here at PBS, we want to have the largest possible audience. And I think we also consider impact and how our content is resonating across the country. We really work hard to, through our content, encourage these conversations, inspiring people to engage with the world around them.

Annie Evans: So, tell me, how do you and your team directly support this mission?

Sylvia Bugg: One of the particular areas that I do spend a lot of time on is thinking about strategy related to our current pipeline, related to future programming, but how that programming speaks to the why and why now. And so, when we are looking at development and looking at show content, and material and how we think it will resonate with audiences, how it speaks to the PBS mission, that is a central question, why this piece of content and why now. And trying to create relevant content

across all of our platforms for audiences from a number of different backgrounds. We're so proud of all of the independent film work that we have to showcase across platforms.

And we work with a lot of amazing filmmakers and thinking about platforms and how we're engaging younger audiences. So, one of the units under the General Audience Programming Unit here at PBS, is PBS Digital Studios. And so that is a team that looks at content for 18 to 44 years old on YouTube specifically. So, we're building on that success as we're expanding our multi-platform strategy and really thinking about curating content for specific platforms. And so, I want to be able to have content that my aunts who are older can consume, but also my nephews who are still in their twenties and how they're looking at media on their different devices. And so, again, it's truly general audience.

Annie Evans: How does accessibility and distribution of your programs fit into your plans at PBS and how has AWS really helped you improve that access?

Sylvia Bugg: We strive to meet audiences where they are and to make sure that the content that they are viewing, whether it's on their phone, laptop, on a streaming service, is a smooth experience. And when we talk about accessibility, accessibility in all formats in terms of how our audiences consume the content, what their experience is like, and I think the ability to deliver that sort of stellar viewing experience and service is where AWS comes in. And it helps us to constantly improve the experience for our audiences. So, that is something that is core and essential in a multi-platform world. It's really important to remember that PBS is fundamentally different from other media entities. We refer to ourselves as bottom-up, not top-down, and it's really our PBS member stations that help provide our reach across this country, and help to fuel and propel all of the work and the services that we offer, particularly through our content.

And so, as many local media organizations continue to be challenged in particular business areas, we like to think of PBS in our stations as continuing to remain as the last locally owned and operated media entity in many markets. And I think with our universal reach of broadcast, how that continues to be critically an important part of serving those communities where broadband is not always readily available. So, I very much appreciate that, again, coming from a small southern town in Virginia where access to PBS was so important and still remained so to this day.

Annie Evans: I know earlier in the year at the Television Critics Association Winter Press Tour, PBS announced a bunch of new programs. I believe one of them was a mentorship for emerging filmmakers. Can you walk us

through these new programs you announced and who you're really trying to reach?

Sylvia Bugg:

Related to some of the work that PBS has always been invested in is finding new ways to support filmmakers from diverse backgrounds, those who are earlier in their careers or new to the PBS system, and those who are mid-career makers. And so, we announced some exciting plans in how we are growing our diverse voices initiatives. And these are opportunities, again, that are paid, that offer ways for makers and creators to not only build their network, but actually come into an active in production project for PBS to really provide those hands-on skills. We have had a few open calls where we've provided funding support for makers to tell their own stories or completion funding to get them over that finish line. And these programs are intended to have those projects be available across our PBS platforms.

And one of the other programs too, that has been underway is Homegrown, which is a project with Firelight Media, a company that is based in New York with Marsha Smith and Stanley Nelson, the award-winning filmmaker. And so, we've been a part of that initiative in helping to amplify the stories of diverse and regional makers, as well as something called the Griefs Fund. So, we've also been involved in that, in helping those mid-career makers with funding support to take their projects to the next level. So, on that mentorship professional development side, we are really excited to expand this work. And I think it really shows how PBS is helping to support creators who have their own unique ideas that really resonate, to your point, fostering those conversation and that dialogue, and how we're really looking at with large, bringing new engagement opportunities across the public media systems.

We have great partners such as ITVS, Independent Lens, the folks at POV also in Brooklyn from the American Documentary World Channel. They're all great partners. And I think when we look at that collective opportunity that we have across public media to really support these makers who have fabulous stories to tell, it just, again, that paying it forward opportunity and how I think about the work that I do in relation to my own career path and trajectory, being able to give back in some ways. And the public media system is all about the public and audiences and the filmmakers and creators are an important part of that process. So, how you bring people and their voices together around issues that matter and that are relevant, and we're super excited that we can be a part of all of that evolution with filmmakers.

Annie Evans:

With all these programs, how do you ensure you're meeting the needs of the people you're trying to reach? Is there any sort of built in mechanisms you have or how is that happening?

Sylvia Bugg: It's not an easy job, and that's why it's so important that we take a holistic look. And I borrow this phrase from a colleague of mine, Bill Gardner, and we talk about a spherical approach where you're looking at a piece of content, the program, if you will, the idea, the big idea in the center, but then across and throughout that centerpiece is your learning media. What are the digital opportunities? How do we think about partnerships in this space? And I think particularly for our climate focus, looking for those partners who have similar ideas, and thoughts and values that public media can bring into this conversation in a solutions-based storytelling way. And so, really looking at all of the tentacles, if you will, spherical ways that we can help elevate a project. So, it's not easy, but we absolutely strive to ensure that a filmmaker can actually see and actualize their vision for their project in working with PBS.

Annie Evans: Is there any advice you would offer other business leaders in a similar position as yours that are looking to improve access and diversity?

Sylvia Bugg: I think it is really opening ourselves up to learning more about what is right in front of us in terms of some of our daily interactions. And really spending that time, I think, building our bridges, our networks to truly understand why it is so meaningful for people to see themselves reflected, particularly on the programming front, to see themselves reflected. So, I really like to spend a lot of time just thinking about what those perspectives are and how we can really draw that out across our content.

Annie Evans: What keeps you excited? What's getting you jumping out of bed in the morning?

Sylvia Bugg: Oh, my goodness, there is so much. I think it is still the possibilities, the North Star, how we go into the future, really thinking about what's possible, where are the opportunities. And we know each day when we get up, there aren't challenges. Those are just inherent, I think, in all of the work that no matter where you sit within an organization we deal with. But I think in looking at the future and how we think about paying it forward to our audiences, to makers, to our stations, to our stakeholders, there is just excitement every day around a new idea, a new concept, a new way to work, a new way of how we distribute our content, how we think about the relevancy.

And so, I really do go in with that mindset every day. So, when people ask me, "What are you excited about in your work?" It is really all of it. And I think that is my North Star, and I'm just fortunate to be able to have this role to lead a terrific team and to be aligned with a mission-oriented organization like PBS. It's been terrific.

Annie Evans: If you liked today's episode, listen back to episode 73, using Amazon Alexa to improve accessibility with Guide Dogs UK, to learn how one nonprofit uses Amazon Alexa to improve accessibility for those affected by site loss. And remember to join the conversation on social media with #FixThisbyAWS. And as always, a huge thank you to our guest, Sylvia.

Ray Rogers: And thank you for tuning in. If you liked today's show, please remember to subscribe, rate, review, and share. We'll be here on the next one.