

**Quote in the news: "PBS needs . . . to ready itself to explain how the 30-year-old British import Masterpiece Theatre is a more appropriate primetime series than the Latino Public Broadcasting series Voces," which gets lower priority in the PBS schedule even though it "addresses our actual populace and its needs."
-- From National Black Programming Consortium, Jacquie Jones, in April 14, 2009, Current article by Steve Behrens.**

PBS Diversity Efforts in the News

Current, the publication dedicated to developments in public broadcasting, carried a story in its April 14th issue, about PBS' diversity initiative. This comes in advance of PBS President Paula Kerger's appearance this Friday (April 17) at the National Association of Latino Independent Producers conference this Friday (NALIP).

See the entire story at: <http://www.current.org/diversity/diversity0907pbs.shtml>

or read it below:

**Diversity: More than good intentions?
Inside, PBS report is light on specifics;
outside, NALIP seeks data to pursue change**

Published in Current, April 14, 2009
By Steve Behrens

For public TV, the dialogue about its minority representation is going public again. It's about how Latinos, African Americans and other ethnic groups are represented on the screen - and the related matter of how well they're represented in decision-making.

On Friday, PBS President Paula Kerger will meet with leaders of the National Association of Latino Independent Producers and answer questions at their conference in Newport Beach, Calif.

In the next few weeks, public broadcasting's minority consortia will assess the situation in an open letter to the system, says Stephen Gong, chair of public TV's National Minority Consortia and executive director of the Center for Asian American Media.

At the PBS Showcase Conference in mid-May, the chiefs of PBS's major series will meet with minority producers to scout the way ahead.

With Ken Burns hitting the road to promote his fall PBS release The National Parks, he already has attracted a demonstration in San Antonio echoing complaints about the lack of Latino veterans in his series The War two years ago.

The turmoil that arose from that issue also prompted network leaders to undertake a yearlong study, the PBS Diversity Initiative on Content. PBS submitted the report in

November to the study's funder, the Ford Foundation, but didn't release it publicly. Several minority advocates who received the report said they appreciated PBS's effort, but they found it wanting.

NALIP's Diversity Committee wrote to Kerger March 4 [letter], saying the association was "happy to celebrate PBS's many successes" but repeating its 2005 request for data on the diversity of public TV's executives and program decision-makers.

Gong, from the Asian-American consortium, said the PBS report is "the result of well-intentioned people trying to get a handle on a complex issue. ... The best you can say about it is the intention is there."

His counterpart in the National Black Programming Consortium, Jacquie Jones, is feistier, hitting public TV below the teacup: "PBS needs . . . to ready itself to explain how the 30-year-old British import Masterpiece Theatre is a more appropriate primetime series than the Latino Public Broadcasting series *Voces*," which gets lower priority in the PBS schedule even though it "addresses our actual populace and its needs," she wrote in an e-mail to Current.

PBS's president doesn't fight the general point.

"I agree with the consortia that there is a long way to go," Kerger said in an interview last week. In the treatment of minority subjects, "public television in its early days was ahead of the curve," but later, Kerger says, "I think we became too comfortable that we were more proactive than we had been."

Now she's confident that a stream of new PBS programs about minority topics is more than a good intention. Kerger cites the Feb. 23 American Experience doc, *A Class Apart* by Carlos Sandoval and Peter Miller, about a landmark case in the Latino civil rights movement. She also points to this week's premiere of the five-part doc *We Shall Remain*, which covers momentous moments in Native American history. This fall brings a WGBH/BBC four-parter, *Latin Music U.S.A.*, and a new season of Latino Public Broadcasting's doc anthology *Voces*. CPB has put funds into *The Latino Americans*, an eight-hour history from WETA and LPB. And multiple sources say documentarian Hector Galán is developing plans for a history of Hispanic Americans in the military [*The War Within*].

Baseline for progress

NALIP makes clear that it doesn't want pubTV employment figures for strictly academic reasons. In its decade as an advocacy group, it has collected and used figures for assessing the performance of TV networks.

The data are essential for the association to measure progress and identify trouble areas, says Kathryn Galan, executive director. "We went in 10 years ago and created memorandums of understanding with each of the networks for free sharing of data." The networks assigned vice presidents to promote diversity and gave them budgets. The National Latino Media Council, including NALIP, joins other ethnic advocates in publishing an annual report card for minority hiring and contracting at the four big commercial networks. Last year, NBC got a B and the others B-plusses. [criteria] As for PBS, the group asked for data on hiring of writers, directors and producers by the major program strands and producing stations for at least the past nine years - data that the association has sought since 2005.

"In addition," the letter to PBS said, "NALIP would like to see Latino representation at the executive level on one or more of the primetime strands, as well as on the National Program Service's editorial board. We believe that these steps will help PBS diversify and to grow the audiences of the future."

Jones of NBPC doubts PBS will be able to overcome its major challenges if it can't "come up with basic numbers in terms of the diversity of its workforce, despite a grant of hundreds of thousands of dollars to do just that."

By observation, Jones already believes public TV has a "stunningly un-diverse workforce."

Kerger acknowledges that "we haven't fully wrestled with how to properly benchmark where we are," and she's wary that public TV can be misunderstood.

With NALIP's focus on Hollywood and the big networks, it may expect PBS to resemble them, Kerger says, but public TV is less centralized, and most of the jobs are outside of PBS. It would be more effective for diversity advocates to reach out directly to production units, she says.

Still, pubcasting has some figures to tout. Among PBS's new hires in the past year, a little more than 40 percent are people of color, Kerger says. In fiscal year 2008, minority employees filled 30 percent of PBS jobs, according to the diversity report.

As for employment in the broader realm of public TV beyond PBS, it's hard to quickly reshape its ethnic mix when the workforce is barely growing or even shrinking. Yet in 2007, public TV managed to increase slightly its minority employment, from 18.7 to 19.2 percent, though its total employment shrank by 2.7 percent, according to CPB figures.

Consensus analysis

The 88-page PBS report, recently obtained by Current, includes extensive appendices listing what major stations and producers have done, but it's not full of numbers, targets, campaign-like timetables or, understandably, big spending plans. The report says it couldn't go into quantitative analysis because pertinent data are fragmented among so many autonomous units. Also, the most recent broad content analysis of pubTV programming was a CPB study done in 2000.

The 20-page core of the report is based on 78 interviews, mostly with public TV professionals, minority and white. The interviews were conducted by the Haydee M. Rodriguez, the diversity initiative's executive director since its start in fall 2007. The report also draws on the initiative's July 2008 meeting of 40 system and minority leaders. From their analyses of public TV's situation, the report offers a series of general recommendations.

A brief summary:

Promote diversity among leadership and programming decision-makers. Identify individuals to promote, hire and assign to content decision-making teams; expand recruitment and nontraditional sourcing. Include diversity objectives in execs' performance evaluations.

Aid diversity across all media platforms, including online, where future audiences already gather. Start young producers on the online side. Build on PBS.org's strong minority usage. The proportion of Latinos using PBSKids.org is 74 percent higher than the proportion among users of other websites in general, according to QuantCast, the report said. For African-Americans, it's 14 percent higher; for Asian-Americans, it's more than double.

Compile baseline data on content diversity and start measuring progress. PubTV's national organizations, stations and producers must first agree on how to evaluate on-air diversity and collect data, the report says. PBS might also look at diversity more broadly, including gender, age, religion, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation, it adds.

Develop a national database of minority talent and subject-matter experts. It could be compiled in partnership with the Independent Television Service and minority consortia.

Offer fellowships to help minority professionals train for promotion into staff positions at major production units. Follow the model of the commercial networks' diversity efforts but add funding to pay salaries for a year or two after trainees join the staff.

Refine content plans by improving review and approval processes. Ask for diversity goals in production proposals.

Expand PBS's public stature among minorities. Reach out in new ways; demonstrate commitment through choice of subjects.

Share information on best practices. Start sites in PBS Connect and on the Web.

"What we've heard from PBS leadership is that it's their full intent to implement the recommendations in this report," says Rodriguez.

For decades, pubcasting has had various projects that train promising young minority employees by exposing them to intensive training and varied work experience. One of the latest is PBS's Leadership Development Program, now approaching its third year. The one-year program now involves about a dozen station employees with leadership potential, and it could be expanded if funding can be found, Kerger says.

"It raises the profile of certain individuals," comments Gong, from the Asian-American consortium, "but the size of the effort is very incremental," even for a small industry. "I don't mean to damn it or dismiss the sincere efforts," he adds.

Much of the talk in and around the PBS Diversity Initiative is about executive demographics. The report says a participant at the July meeting expressed a typical view: "Leadership diversity - at the stations, national affinity groups and board level - makes every other priority fall into place."

It also supports credibility. "You can say, 'We're committed to diversity,'" Rodriguez observed in an interview, "but if your leadership is all of one [ethnicity] ... many stakeholders who care about public broadcasting find that questionable."

So it was "a huge step" last fall for PBS to hire Michael D. Jones, an African-American attorney and former securities exec, as its chief operating officer last year, Rodriguez says.

In her 18 months at PBS, Rodriguez says she's met many wonderful people. She's particularly high on the chief content officer: "John Boland gets it. He was fully engaged in the process." She also admires the spunk of CPB President Patricia Harrison: "I'm impressed with Pat. She's not afraid to bring up the issues, not afraid to offend the system."

And she has hopes for Joaquin Alvarado, the young broadband evangelist and filmmaker from San Francisco given two portfolios by Harrison: He's CPB's senior v.p. for diversity and innovation.

Of color, on screen

Diversifying the faces on TV is a big objective of the whole exercise, an objective that Sesame Street producers adopted long ago.

Pubcasters, like activists, are tired of seeing people of color interviewed only about issues of race relations, Rodriguez told Current. "You want a Latino or an African-American talking about the economy. The tendency is that only the members of the dominant community have anything to say about the war or health care or the issue of the day."

In January she liked seeing Nature interview a black guy about his run-in with a skunk.

Ken Burns' National Parks series provides "a perfect example of incorporate diversity seamlessly," Rodriguez says. "He has this absolutely charming African-American ranger talking about how impactful it was, being at one of the national parks on a cold morning and watching a buffalo lying in the snow." Other preservationists of color appear, including an early Latino parks leader, she says.

Burns may have changed his ways since his oversights in The War ignited a political firestorm, but he'll probably have to endure more criticism. Numerous journal articles and masters' theses are in process, says Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, the University of Texas journalism professor who shaped the activist critique of the doc.

Rivas-Rodriguez sees failings not only in Burns' awareness but also in public TV's oversight-"No one at PBS raised the red flag about it"-and in the National Endowment for the Humanities' system of scholarly advisors who, she believes, sometimes sign off on projects without adequate involvement.

Stephen Gong extracts some hope from the "transformative" election victory of Barack Obama, which brought a new generation into civic life at the same time it raised hopes among people of color.

Gong also sees that potential in hiring younger people such as Alvarado. "If you can reach a younger generation, you can bring the diversity with it," he says. "The barriers are not as great within the younger generations."

The barriers to diversity also are down in online media, compared with a TV channel, which speaks to only one interest at a time, Gong adds. "If we can involve this generation and the new technologies, it promises to transform all of our work and make exciting things possible."

Comments, tips, questions? behrens@current.org
Posted April 13, 2009
Copyright 2009 Current LLC

Gus Chavez & Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, Co-Founders, Defend the Honor
Defend the Honor