

The Future is Now | Graeme Mason, AIDC Key note 29 February 2016

The cultural value of great storytelling cannot be underestimated; with possibilities to reach out and connect with new audiences and ideas, both endless and exciting. Screen Australia's CEO, Graeme Mason, will discuss the need to adapt to audience behaviour and embrace new ways to produce and distribute documentaries in the environment we are in today. Being strong players in a highly competitive industry requires flexibility, resilience, and a willingness to explore new methods of storytelling. The future is now, and we need to embrace it.

Firstly, I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Thank you to the AIDC committee for inviting me to speak at this year's conference and thanks to you all for coming along this morning. This conference is one of the most important opportunities on the calendar for the Australian screen sector as a whole and probably the most important for those involved in documentary so I'm very pleased to be here again. I am also delighted to see that the committee and organisers have done such great work on this year's programme and are clearly embracing the changes and opportunities for Documentary and its practitioners. On the issue of change I would like to acknowledge the great support AIDC had from Adelaide and South Australia, but it's great to be here in Melbourne with a whole new programme and feel to the conference and where the Victorian Government and the city has, and is, giving wonderful support to our sector and the arts in general.

We here today know that the cultural value great storytelling brings to the nation is endless. Everyone in this room is, I know, passionate about developing, creating, and showcasing strong content that adds to Australia's cultural life, and I hope we all share the desire and need to find ways to continue to engage and inspire our audiences.

Again, stating something that I know we all agree on: documentaries are an incredibly important way to connect audiences to stories that can be challenging, effecting, entertaining and enlightening. It treads a path that neither news & current affairs nor scripted content can.

When I last spoke at AIDC in 2014, I pointed out the need to shift our collective thinking, to look at the challenges the future might present documentary, in order to remain competitive, and relevant. In two years a lot if not most of that future has already played out on our screens and therefore for the people on all sides of creating and distributing content. I must therefore stress the urgency for those of you who may not have adjusted your sets yet - please ensure that your view and understanding of the environment we are all working in is up to date. Change is the only thing we can rely on and its cumulative effect makes it certain that the changes to the Australian documentary industry are exponential, constant and with us to stay. The old models of creating, funding, formats, broadcast are fundamentally different and we need to accept and embrace the changes to how you work and what you work on but also please look at the exciting opportunities that are also part of this changed world.

It hardly needs stating, but the need to adapt to audience behaviour and embrace new ways to produce, fund and distribute documentaries in 2016 is beyond urgent.

When I talk about new ways to adapt to audience behaviour, I'm talking about the need to find your audience and work out how to engage them - this is no longer how will a broadcaster promote a show for one specific slot. You need to think of your potential audience, are they watching the public broadcasters or the FTAs, Foxtel, YouTube, google, Netflix, Curiosity Stream, an art gallery or museum or at the local country hall. Who is going to the Cinema for festivals or regular sessions, and, what are they seeing. Or, What about second windows and the long tail?

What does it mean for us all that the average age of TV viewers on all regular channels is so staggeringly high and that a massive percentage of the Australian public now simply don't consume our content on TV or theatres and want different methods of storytelling and format. Even if you aren't concerned by this - and believe me you should be - Screen Australia must be, as our remit is to have Australian stories available for Australians not just a rapidly aging section of the population. Again, to ensure that we stay positive I need to say that a large proportion of our incredibly successful digital on line content is factual, it is reaching new audiences with exciting new content and if you are not staying up to date with it I urge you to do so as it is really inspiring.

We still see many if not most finance plans - I hate to say this but often from experienced applicants - that rely on a public broadcaster, a state agency and Screen Australia (times two for direct and producer offset or PEP investment), and I'm not talking about small budget projects only here. Sometimes very little thought is given to the life of the documentary beyond the first broadcast. You know on occasions we can live with this, especially when the content is important and intrinsically Australian so there's may be nowhere else to go. But over the next few years, when we know there will be less direct funding from Screen Australia through the Doc Unit, and the likely continued phenomenal rise in people and projects looking for finance to create their documentary, we will have some tough choices to make. We'll be looking to support great story telling in projects that find new and innovative ways to finance and get to their audiences in this modern distribution environment.

Staying on my much more positive and pleasant thoughts on why we are all still striving to make content in this changing world.

You only have to take look at what is happening globally, and right here in Australia, to see that people are struggling to understand poverty, climate change, politics, gender inequality and racial divisions. They are looking for ways to understand and shine a light on these and other often-complex issues, and connect with others to share their experiences. Also, as mentioned documentary often starts where current affairs ends allowing us a deeper more expansive look into otherwise unseen worlds.

Not all documentaries strive to create social change though - and nor should they -they also exist so we can be simply amazed at the beauty or bizarre nature of the world and its people or just distracted from daily life for an hour or two.

But you have to admit there is unmatched power in a well-made documentary and public demand for compelling storytelling is stronger than ever. This is why what you all do, is of such value that we need to conserve and nurture it. Yet despite this, and recent success

on TV and at the box office, even the most extraordinary documentary will encounter a crowded marketplace, and struggle to find and engage an audience.

None of this is new - in fact, for us in the screen industry, we've seen some major challenges over the last few years: the loss of revenue, audience fragmentation, evolving audience expectations, and piracy has become easy and ubiquitous.

What this means is that, at Screen Australia, we need to ensure we are targeting our investment in unique content that our audiences wouldn't otherwise have access to - particularly stories that matter to Australians - across ages, and our cultural identity.

Our remit is to engage compelling Australian storytelling. So what does this really mean?

- culture: we want distinctive Australian stories
- quality: we get excited about significant projects of scale and ambition, and
- innovation: in this new environment, we want to see more risk-taking content for all platforms.

From Screen Australia's perspective, we have to ensure that we are investing where we make the most difference and supporting where we can benefit the industry and crucially the audience the most.

This means the filters of quality, culture and innovation have never been more important and going forward will become a stronger part of any and all funding assessment process we undertake.

The good news is production levels are on the rise. 447 hours of Australian documentaries were made in the last financial year, with total production value of \$147 million. Documentary hours were up by about 4% on last year and the 5-year average, and total dollar value was up by about 2%.

You - the independent sector - made 75 single episode docs, the same number as last year. And 73 doco series, up from 62 last year.

As you know Screen Australia crunches these numbers every year, along with a whole range of other documentary information such as finance sources, TV ratings and numbers of filmmakers. Our latest infographic snapshot is devoted to documentary, which you can check out on our [website](#).

Budget constraints - new funding environment

So when I talk about a new environment, what does this really mean for the documentary sector I hear you asking? Well, we need to reimagine how we work as a sector.

Audiences are playing a more participatory role in shaping their own viewing experience, with collaborative authorship, interactive tools and multiple platforms all blurring the boundaries between producer and audience. While this of course presents us with many burning questions, challenges and frustrations, it can also be a huge opportunity. It is what we make of it.

In just over two years, we have seen a reduction in our budget that amounts to over \$50 million. We are not alone. Other government agencies have also faced cuts to their budgets of varying degrees - what this means for us, and for you, is that direct funding from Screen Australia will be even more highly contested and allocated through the filters I mentioned - of quality, culture and innovation. I know that most people in this room and in your part of the sector think we have already made cuts to Documentary and Factual. This is incorrect, to date we have protected documentary, but this is no longer sustainable or practicable. We can no longer absorb the cuts in our overhead or other "non core" areas so are seeing a downward trend in funding of projects across the agency - not I stress just in documentary. The funding/broadcasting model is rapidly changing. So the question is, how do we connect new money and opportunities with new audiences?

Screen Australia's role in supporting quality, culture and innovation will also, always be controversial and the cut and thrust with producers and platforms to work this out continues. While we have managed to keep funding for the documentary sector above \$17 million over the last few years, in spite of the cuts we have received, the reality is, that the next few years we will have to make changes. So, while we will be in less documentary or factual programming into the future, the Offset and the PEP will continue to contribute to help finance eligible projects and build businesses. Again as an aside I must implore you all to also realise that a large part of bleak outlook often expounded by those in documentary land comes from the simple fact that there are more of you than all the other parts of the industry combined so there will always be a huge number not working, not funded, not screened - this is reality which we cannot alter.

One thing is for certain, as the Australian media landscape rapidly evolves, so does the need for the finance plans on projects. Some of you are already adapting. In the last months we have seen some great entrepreneur-type thinking - some producers are getting creative with market support plans, and new distribution models. That's what we want, no more than that: this is what we all need. In an environment of increased demand in a crowded marketplace, with less government support available, we must get creative. We need to be smart. We need wherever possible, to mimic our counterparts in other countries who have not had significant advantages and find funding sources outside of government and from around the world - this of course is also the only way to have any career or business long term.

So let's take a look at some of the successful innovative investment opportunities that have been used over the past year.

2015 - successes

Over the past two years Good Pitch has created fertile ground for social issue docs. It's unlocked philanthropic investment, helped facilitate significant outreach and impact programs and created a space for producers to explore new audience and distribution opportunities. We have seen more than \$6 million in philanthropic funding committed; more than 60 powerful new partnerships forged to fund production; and unique audiences around each film to ensure the lasting impact of the 13 documentary films presented at the GOOD PITCH² AUSTRALIA events in 2014 and 2015. Let's reflect on some of these success stories from last year:

- *Gayby Baby* premiered at HotDocs 2015, followed with Sheffield, Sydney, MIFF, BFI. It has small theatrical releases in Australia and the UK. You may have seen the controversy over the banned screenings in a number of NSW high schools. The

screenings happened outside of school hours as a part of student discussions on inclusion. It also screened on SBS during Sydney's Mardi Gras.

- *Call Me Dad* has had 3 State and a Federal parliamentary screening. Used for domestic violence training by prisons, police services, sporting codes (NRL, AFL, ARU), National GP Association and Qld Attorney General's Department. Over 20 screenings scheduled by White Ribbon Australia in 2016. It was broadcast on the ABC during White Ribbon week.
- *That Sugar Film* is another project with different approaches to engaging with audiences. The well-received feature documentary, highlighted the harmful effects of excessive sugar consumption. The documentary grossed \$1.7 million to become the highest grossing non-Imax Australian documentary at the local box office. The producers combined traditional film marketing with outreach approaches. They collaborated with cinema on demand platform FanForce, which enables anyone to request a screening of a participating film at a cinema. The film's distributors also released a 'community screening kit' for individuals, community groups, health practitioners and not-for-profits to help them host their own screenings.

What this has shown us is that as an industry, we need to be taking more risks and investing in exciting and innovative ideas of how to work with and to an audience. 2015 really was a great year across the board for our industry - which is why it's important to reflect on some of the real success stories.

CJZ's *Go Back to Where You Came From* following up on winning an Emmy Award and has been produced locally in The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Belgium. The third series was reported in the media around the world, and Realscreen voted it one of the top 10 global documentaries of 2015.

Low-budget doc *Tyke: Elephant Outlaw* has followed 15 international festival screenings with 7 TV sales to date, including BBC *Storyville* (UK) and Nine Network Aus. Plus 5 VOD sales including Netflix (US and worldwide).

Super Predator (aka *Beasts of the Abyss*) was the most watched program on US cable channel Discovery during its *Shark Week* 2015.

Short documentary *The Face of the Ukraine: Casting Oksana Baiul* screened at 48 international festivals during 2015, including Berlinale, Sheffield Doc/Fest and Los Angeles Film Festival, and has won 5 awards to date, most notably - the Short Film Jury Award for Non-Fiction at Sundance.

SBS series, *Struggle Street* - as controversial as it was, helped drive the largest audience to SBS in its history. The 3 part documentary series averaged almost 1.5 million viewers (metro + regional), making it the highest rating documentary ever on SBS. Episode one was the highest-ever rating non-sports program on SBS.

So what does this mean for 2016, and how will it stack up against the success of 2015? Well, we're incredibly excited about the diversity of the slate and the great programs to come.

Moment in History

Screen Australia is very proud to announce that we are collaborating with NITV/SBS on a slate of compelling and powerful documentaries, titled "A Moment in History". This series

of bold, innovative, and compelling documentaries will explore the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia in the months leading up to the proposed 2017 Referendum on Indigenous Constitutional Recognition. It's important to note that 2017 also marks the 50th anniversary of the 1967 'Yes Vote' referendum and the 25th anniversary of the Mabo Native Title High Court decision.

This exciting series is an example of filming excellence and landmark storytelling from some of our most leading Indigenous filmmakers. It will help shape national discourse and we are proud to be able to support an ambitious project of this calibre that is not only culturally significant, but also inspiring and innovative.

In December, NITV & Screen Australia short listed 5 documentaries from across Australia. The following projects were issued with a Letter of Interest:

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| 1. Literacy for Life | Blackfella Films |
| 2. Constitutionally Confused | Brindle Films |
| 3. Connection to Country | Weerianna Street Media |
| 4. We Don't need a Map | Barefoot Films |
| 5. A Rightful Place | Bacon Factory |

The teams include Warwick Thornton, Erica Glynn, Trisha Morton Thomas, Darren Dale, Dean Gibson and Tyson Mowarin.

Given Screen Australia is primarily a cultural organisation - the benefits we offer to Australians fundamentally need to be cultural.

We need to ensure we are targeting our investment in unique content that our audiences wouldn't otherwise have access to - particularly stories that matter to Australians, and our cultural identity, and our national history.

Culture doesn't have to mean high-brow or worthy, but it does mean a uniquely Australian voice and an ability to resonate with audiences beyond their first viewing.

What excites me, and Screen Australia about *A Moment in History*, is that it is shaping conversations about our national identity - and is ground-breaking in its approach, with five vastly different stories on what constitutional recognition means to different communities throughout Australia. This is what Screen Australia, as the government agency for the sector is about. Our sector is phenomenally talented, and we want to showcase talent and great storytelling that inspires, educates, challenges, and moves the audience and this series, *A Moment in History*, really reinforces the power of documentary to capture this conversation for Australians now and in the future.

2016 and beyond

There are some other really exciting titles set for release in 2016 -including *Sherpa*, which I know is the subject of a couple of sessions here this week which we expect will do really well, and I congratulate Jennifer, John, Bridget and all the team of their awards both here, and abroad. It's had a sale to the Discovery Network for international distribution where it will be released to 220 countries late in late April this year. It is likely to be seen by millions. This type of sale gives real opportunity for all of us to pursue greater

distribution and investment openings. We also showcased this documentary as our first parliamentary screening in Canberra last week - and the audience loved it.

We're also looking forward to seeing *Motorkite Dreaming*, collaboration between SBS online and NITV, which utilises three different formats. The first window for television is a 4 x 24 mins series; the second broadcast window is Redbull TV an online/VOD platform, where the series will be slightly tweaked to suit their audience; and the final window will be a feature length version. What this tells us, is the creative team behind *Motorkite Dreaming* really know their audience, and how to capitalise these numbers on multiple platforms. Seeing innovative ways to tell the same story across a range of platforms is exciting for me, and exciting for Screen Australia.

It's also worth noting that the **Hot Docs Made In** program this year will highlight documentaries from Australia, and Screen Australia will host a delegation of Australian documentary makers to the Hot Docs Festival in Toronto - North America's largest, targeting producers with potential projects for the pitching events.

Past Made In programs have focused on films from India (2015), Poland (2013), Mexico (2008), Japan (2006), and South Africa (2004) to name a few, so we are really excited that the best of the best in Australia will not only have their documentaries showcased at this international festival, but most importantly have the opportunity to make invaluable contacts, and learn from the best.

As you can see, 2016 is already shaping up to be a cracking year for documentaries, with so many more that I haven't had time to mention, that really will push boundaries, challenge and excite you, and above all tell great stories.

We have seen a year of great transformation in our industry with new players, new platforms and new partnerships. We want to help develop the capacity of the local screen industry to connect with audiences through innovative online marketing campaigns.

We believe there is real opportunity for our sector to promote our stories more actively and creatively and to find new partners on traditional and non-traditional platforms.

We are about to launch a new website that will include click through to purchase options on our Australian titles. Our database of Australian titles is the most comprehensive and credible source available. Now, if your film is available on streaming or transactional services, we can help audiences find it. As the new website goes live in the next few weeks, we'd encourage you to look up your titles, and check that we have the most compelling images and trailers to promote them. We have feeds from iTunes, Stan, Netflix, Dendy direct, FetchTV and other major SVOD or TVOD services but if your films are only available on smaller sites like VHX, there is a form on our site to give us those details so we can help audiences find your great content.

We know that our support is not just about propping up an industry; it is about delivering important cultural dividends back to Australian taxpayers - through screen content that is vital to our cultural identity, our sense of selves and our place in the world. This needs to be understood across the industry and in Canberra. There is no time like the present to make your voice heard which is acutely important in an election year.

Being strong players in a highly competitive industry means that we need to be flexible, resilient and open to new stories and methods of storytelling. We will face more



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challenges into the future, but if we acknowledge and adapt to the world around us, we will only get stronger.

The future is now, and we need to embrace it.