

Peter Butt – comments on Screen Australia’s draft SOI

I would like to respond to a number of points suggested regarding documentaries:

‘Screen Australia is giving consideration to revising the management of the existing National Interest Program and History Initiative from an executive production to commissioning editor model with a higher level of responsibility being transferred to the production industry.’

Can we please hear a detailed argument for this? (These few lines above are not enough to evaluate.)

Please explain what is wrong with the EP system as it stands?

Isn’t the term ‘Commissioning Editor’ usually reserved for broadcasters?

What role and input would a Screen Australia Commissioning Editor have throughout the production?

Why is the national documentary production capability (formerly Film Australia) being totally abandoned?

GENERAL COMMENTS

1. It has been acknowledged that more rigorous development is essential for successful drama production. Documentary filmmakers already have this through the current NIP and Making History process!
2. The beauty of the Film Australia system was that every filmmaker was teamed with an executive producer who cared about the project. This relationship added value to every stage of production by way of a rigorous editorial process. The six Film Australia executive producers I worked with over the last 20 years genuinely helped improve my films.
3. The broadcasters’ executive producers also improved the films, but they have limited time to spend on each production. In my experience, the NIP EP viewed a film up to 7 times, whereas a broadcaster’s EP averaged between 1 and 3 viewings.
4. The National Interest Program has been incredibly successful. First run audience figures alone beat hands down all the other sectors of the Australian film industry in the bums-on-seats for dollars-spent equation.
5. The benefit of a curated National Interest Program is that it not only serves broadcasters but it is also a valuable cultural resource for current and future generations.

6. 'Film Australia' was also an effective brand that had widespread recognition and respect amongst the public.

'Consideration is also being given to the development of advisory editorial committees consisting of major stakeholders, and relevant cultural experts, complemented by input from Screen Australia, to identify relevant themes that could be reflected in the eventual program output.'

This has been attempted before with disastrous and embarrassing results. A few years back a History Conference was held where filmmakers and historians came together with local and international broadcasters to discuss future history projects. The historians generally only talked about their pet subjects. Most suggestions were more PhD than television often impossible to visualize. Meanwhile, the international broadcasters talked about their preference for mammoth 13 part presenter driven series and showed a complete disinterest in one-off documentaries, particularly those with an Australian theme. The filmmakers rarely opened their mouth for fear of having their ideas pirated. It was simply a waste of time. In short, my belief is that this sort of prescriptive documentary filmmaking does not work.

Moreover, documentary films shouldn't be merely illustrated textbooks. The best documentaries are groundbreaking in their own right. The filmmaker investigates a subject afresh and brings his or her own perspective to it. If it is a history film, a filmmaker will of course consult many historians and other experts, but one should not slavishly follow their take on history. We should always ask what have they missed?

'While Screen Australia would remain open to individual proposals from producers, it may also supplement the commissioning process by introducing tendering for relevant sections of the NIP and History collections.'

Does this mean that a few producers will take a large slice of the cake and leave nothing for the others? What is to be benefited by this? Will it improve content? Will it maintain the current strengths and diversity of the industry? Is Screen Australia going to do this with drama producers? The idea stinks.

'Screen Australia will be seeking industry input on this issue.'

What is being suggested constitutes the biggest change in the documentary sector since 10BA. On top of it, we also have the financial meltdown to deal with. (Are the banks really going to be lending money to documentary filmmakers in this climate?)

It is imperative that we have a dialogue before any changes are made. Unfortunately, without further detail, it sounds like 'change for change sake'.

Screen Australia must provide **full details** about what it would like to achieve to the documentary sector, so we the practitioners have a say via a democratic process. Then we will own the outcome. Equally, the new CEO must also own the outcome. We will look

forward to talking with Ruth Harley about this. I hope she is given time to learn about Film Australia's fantastic achievements in the last two decades before any decision is made to allow our precious and successful documentary sector to become an episode of "Yes, Minister".

Sincere apologies if I have offended anyone.

Peter Butt
Documentary Producer Director