

BACKGROUND:

I am offering this response as a writer with a variety of roles in the screen sector - as documentary scriptwriter, as a journalist, as a script editor of documentary and drama, as a sometime director. I have worked for both the AFC and Film Victoria. I am currently the editor of Screen Hub, and active in various independent development roles as well.

The discussion about the role of Screen Australia seems to orbit around a notion that the federal agencies and the industry in general has failed.

We have to be careful of that idea. There is a huge amount of expertise in the sector, and a fantastic wealth of experience in the government support people and their historical files. As a result of cunning, dialogue and the movement of industry people in and out of the agencies, we may have the most intricate and clever relationship between agencies and the screen sector anywhere in the world.

We continually lose some of our best directing, production and acting talent overseas. Judging from their success, and their numbers, we have run one of the best national talent incubators anywhere in the world for a generation.

On a practical level, we produce a large number of films each year which are handsomely made, with terrific craft skills, excellent performances, and huge goodwill from their makers. We can demonstrate clearly that Australian audiences want Australian stories, perspectives and faces because they are overwhelmingly popular on television.

It is wise to remember that we have had one overwhelming problem - a pervasive lack of money. Agencies devise more and more tricky programs with less and less money. The independent sector slowly goes broke. The national broadcasters function on a tiny fraction of the money they need - one ninth of the BBC budget on a per capita basis. Our producers have access to one fifth of the Canadian support budget. Etc.

We can't just say that the political realities set the scale and we have to live with it. While this is true, and the sector loathes its mendicant relationship with government, we are now trying to recognise realities in order to plan the future. By far the biggest issue is the damage done by the lack of money and our desperate attempts to compensate.

We have an entire system that chisels. That picks away at budgets, at forcing people to make do, at removing power over creativity. It forces us to think small. It creates an infantile mindset. It prevents the construction of professions, and proper professional careers. And of course, it means we endlessly make low budget features and expect them to compete with the vast juggernaut of Hollywood.

At various times in our past, clever bureaucrats have analysed our success rates, using genuinely comparable benchmarks. By those comparisons, we have done pretty well. Our truly dark times reflect the cumulative effects of that lack of money.

What does this mean?

1. The industry is in better shape than we think. A few bowls of food left on the verandah will make an amazing difference to the energy of the dog.
2. The rebate, and enterprise support, will transform the sector. We have not seen anything yet.
3. A significant increase in money to the national broadcasters can solve many problems - more projects, more practice, and roles for emerging creators. The lower budget telefeatures that we judge against the theatrical marketplace may move to television, where they can secure a mass audience to justify funding.
4. The role of Screen Australia should change substantially. As it focuses more on renewal, on creativity and experiment, on smaller areas of creation, on marketing and audience development, it will come to resemble the old AFC rather than the FFC. (And the FFC over the last few years was looking more like the AFC anyway, as it moved to evaluation.)
5. This means that the programs, approaches, values and knowledge of the AFC are the most appropriate model for the future, and should be renewed and supported.
6. Screen Australia will need to be nimble, able to consult and track, and create new programs responsively and quickly. This is a very dynamic environment.

Why is this important?

1. It points to the culture of the organisation. A culture of artistic and creative support, and not the management of government funds on

broad programs against key performance indicators.

2. It tells us that we need to preserve and develop skills, and use the historical knowledge base.

3. It enables us to focus on areas which the current thinking defines as effective - documentary, television, children's programs.

4. Screen Australia is in a unique position to address the underlying problems of creativity, education and culture which bedevil our sector, and may cripple our attempts to improve.

5. Once we clear out the problems created by a culture of poverty, we can see that the programs were and are often very good. The problem has been the settings, not the structure. Good ideas, under-resourced. Good opportunities, wrong kind of applicant.. etc.

THE SHAPE OF SCREEN AUSTRALIA:

There are some issues about the apparent evolution of Screen Australia which are of concern.

1. The mindset of the agency.

Screen Australia does not have a control and oversight role - that belongs to the ministry. It is not a regulator, but a participant in a cultural process, which is also an industry. It is not involved in prevention and detection; it seeks to deploy resources between competing claims in a way which contributes most effectively to the health of the sector. They are very different attitudes.

2. The staffing arrangements.

Agencies are traditionally bedevilled by the relationship between film industry people and government people. Between contract and permanent staff. I believe strongly that Screen Australia needs to be staffed from the screen sector; it is not a career path for public servants.

Lawyers, accountants, IT staff, HR, line managers, program managers, admin support should be recruited from the sector and expected to return to it.

The screen industry contains a huge range of talent and knowledge, much of which has no claim to creativity, but understands the particular

environment of production organisation.

I, personally, never again want to encounter an official of an Australian screen agency at any level and think, "They don't actually care about film or television or new media. They think I am some kind of ratbag that will steal the furniture if I am not controlled." And it happens all the time.

3. Bureaucratic control.

As a partner in the process, Screen Australia has no right intruding into the business arrangements of screen industry members.

It should recognise that we need decisions and correspondence to be timely.

It should not hamper production with opportunity costs for work which only serves the needs of the agency.

Everything required in the decisionmaking process should contribute to production, or enterprise development.

4. Effective decisionmaking.

The use of rounds is problematic, and should be recognised as one solution to a decisionmaking problem. It enables projects to be directly compared, to manage the annual budget, to inspire the community with an opportunity. It is also clumsy, exhausting, and reduces decisionmaking to simple comparison. "Which is better?" rather than "This is good/bad, and what should we do?"

In the name of comparing like with like in an apparently accountable manner, agencies end up with ridiculously intricate systems, full of micro-schemes and weird sets of rules. They make little sense, and create classes of project which fall endlessly between stools.

The question of staff power is crucial. It is a toxic tendency in Australian screen bureaucracies in general to depower and mistrust front-line staff. Reduce the project manager to an administrator, and drag power back into the agency. Talent is ignored, committees are created, too many people read too much, no-one is responsible.

Feedback and transparency are crucial. Feedback is a right - applicants have always deployed work and taken risks to submit projects, and that labour deserves to be respected. (Often the amount of work is huge). But feedback is also empowering, indicates trust, points to

problems, and enables screen creators and the agency to understand each other.

As far as possible, screen creators need direct access to a project manager who is responsible for carriage of a decision. Who are committed to telling the truth.

5. Taking responsibility for its role.

Screen Australia is currently talking about ways of outsourcing its programs. This works where production companies have direct responsibility for outcomes - that is, where it fits their business plan.

Asking companies to take on emerging filmmaker programs, development slates or short film programs is not appropriate. It has almost never been tried in Australia, and for good reason.

On a practical level, our companies do not have sophisticated development sections, skilled at these forms - as they evolve, they should be fully committed to creating projects which are fundamental to the slate.

The producer's role is to finance, make and deliver projects to an audience. They are driven by this role. With few exceptions, they have no wider vision of the screen sector, interest in the evolution of our culture, or skills in supporting screen creators of the next generation.

That exists inside the agencies, and the matrix against which they recruit staff. Simple really. They exist to work with the sector as a national endeavour, and should not abandon responsibility.

At the same time, it is possible for Screen Australia to create partnerships with other organisations which do take the same level of responsibility. State agencies, and smaller community driven organisations from the screen culture sector.

6. The role of project managers.

Project managers are not creatively involved with projects. They are not script editors, casting consultants or director mentors. They are welcome in edits as a source of advice, and not of control.

At the same time, agencies do run set-and-forget programs, which can be dangerous for emerging creators. Agencies need to run an ethic and provide the resources that enables project managers to offer real

support.

7. The role of flexibility.

Generally speaking, larger, broader programs with more wiggle room work better. They enable the (empowered and trusted) staff to create possibilities, answer opportunities and balance expenditure against the overall objectives of the program.

At the same time, it is vital to recognise that any program must be resourced properly - or not at all. That includes analysis, advertising, feedback, and producer support. Broad programs properly, not narrow programs badly.

8. NIP and the History Initiative.

While the ownership of these programs by Film Australia and the control exerted by EPs created many problems, it is true that these programs are driven by objectives, and different from standard television documentaries, or independent films.

Whatever we do, we have to acknowledge that the projects work to those special criteria. Or we will lose the program.

I suspect Screen Australia must take responsibility for the underlying decisions, which cannot be devolved to broadcasters, production companies or advisory bodies.

I think we need to accept some kind of core secretariat, which will need to be properly staffed, and drain the resources of the programs. Projects probably need a project manager, as in the old AFC system. It needs the resources and opportunity to consult widely, and research continuously, to be alert to the culture it participates in. That is a more overarching and contemplative role.

I am concerned that NIP is seen so much in flagship terms, to serve the broadcasters' needs for the highest quality and best resourced blue chip documentaries. If we are making programs that people will care about in fifty years, they can be modest, observational, and very unflashy. Perhaps we are better off with a cloud of projects, rather than one Big Thing.

9. The Digital Domain

The role of multimedia is threaded through the current thinking, which is to be applauded. The synergies are obvious and compelling.

At the same time, interactive media need to be supported by a significant funding program for stand-alone creative works which are not related to a film or television program.

Digital media need to flourish in their own terms, and we should stop thinking of them as sidebars for film and television.

The natural home for these projects is the broadcasters, and they are likely to be partnerships. But they can extend much more widely - state libraries are an obvious example.

107. A note about education

The relationship between the agencies and the education sector has been vanishingly small for a generation. The gap between the federal agencies, VCA and AFTRS is astonishing.

Screen Australia is right to recognise that significant part of the development agenda belong in the education sector - which after all gets more money. It is in the business of creative growth and opportunity, but not training.

THE QUESTION OF SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT:

Each year, the AFI screenings demonstrate the one simple, recurrent fact of our sector: the quality of the scripts are generally inadequate.

There are many reasons for this, but we can define a screen sector in which great scripts are written. What would this be like?

Projects are inspired and managed by producers who can support development, and - overwhelmingly - recognise good ideas, and discard the rest.

They are written by scriptwriters who have continuous practice at the highest level in cinema writing, supported by vigorous discussion and curiosity about film and screenings. They may work in high end television, but they are not involved in routine television work.

They are supported by script editors or project development people who are suffused with film, understand the creative dynamics involved, live story, can find good projects and communicate between writer, director and producer.

They are developed in an environment which is strongly connected to film production. The director will be involved, the writing will be strongly oriented to performance, the visual possibilities of production and post will be an integral part of the initial inspiration.

They will probably be recruited from allied areas - actors, journalists, theatre writers, novelists. At the same time, the sector will be porous to create opportunities in which those people can prove themselves - initiatives etc.

They will not be invited in from overseas. We know our own culture, and our directors demonstrate that we are gifted cinematic mimics.

They will be properly paid; as everyone acknowledges, remuneration in the development process for all parties is ridiculously low. In return, they will be skilled, imaginative, cultured and knowledgeable.

Oh, and they will not be directors.

A GENERAL OBSERVATION:

At least since the mid 1990's, the agencies around Australia have faced a common lack of resources. It simply hasn't been possible for governments to even imagine the kind of money involved - just as it failed to see what we need for an effective education sector, a research and development culture, or decent health for indigenous communities.

Compromise by compromise, expedient by expedient, we have created an extraordinarily perverse system.

If you are inspired to make a project which is artistically challenging, which is gruelling and inspiring, you must obey a few simple rules.

1. You will be given a tiny amount of money - much less than you require, and much less than you would get for a conservative project.
2. You must not have done it before. (Innovation has been locked up in programs to support emerging filmmakers).
3. If you fail, you will not be allowed to try again.
4. When you finish, you will be so exhausted and depleted, it will be some time before you are equipped to move on.

Our system is completely upside down. It punishes creativity, and makes success as hard as possible. And we wonder why our screen culture lacks imagination, seems old fashioned. And why our best filmmakers claim they can't take a risk, and are excluded from important opportunities.

Of course there are many exceptions, but it is the underlying trend.

It can never be fixed, because the large, popular marketplaces are conservative by their nature - and that is inevitable. They simply have more money and deliver more rewards.

But Screen Australia should be the antidote to this arrangement, and not its perpetrator.

Think about it.

- David Tiley