

Early Works

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To: Screen Australia
From: John Hughes, Early Works
Re: Feedback: Screen Australia's 'Documentary Funding: Stories that Matter' Discussion Paper (February 2014)
Date: April 3, 2014

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Discussion Paper on documentary funding, released at AIDC in February this year. The DP is quite comprehensive, subtle and thoughtful and deserves a far more detailed response than I've been able to provide here. This response is confined to addressing the questions set out in the Discussion Paper, adding some supplementary dot points.

The questions we are invited to respond to are reasonable questions and necessary ones. It is encouraging that Screen Australia is taking steps to consider issues that have been the subject of increasingly urgent concern among filmmakers (Connolly, S., 2013; Graham 2012; Connolly, B., 2012; Hughes 2011a, 2011b). A key aspect of these concerns is succinctly set out in the DP's introduction:

"Today's television schedules for documentary tend to include larger volumes of lighter factual programming and repeat series alongside proportionally lower levels of more intensively researched or authorial documentary forms..."

Screen Australia's remit provides it with the resources and authority to redress this and help reinvigorate excellence, innovation and creative ambition in Australian documentary, while also meeting its brief to support enterprise viability and support the provision of Australian content for broadcast audiences.

The concerns filmmakers have raised predate the establishment of Screen Australia (July 2008). AIDC session records, debates around DCITA's Review of Australian government film funding (August 2006) (Laughren 2006; Fitzsimons et. al. 2011: 239-240), debates around the worrisome Higgs Report of 2004-2006, and earlier commentary (Thomas, 2002) chronicle filmmakers' growing concerns about the

direction of policy and practice in documentary financing and its dependency on shifting television preferences.

The questions set out in the DP signal an opening to potentially substantial reorientation of programs, or restructuring of support mechanisms, in the light of these concerns.

A supplementary question the review might consider could be: *How might the structure, design and implementation of programs be altered to better address Screen Australia's remit in the documentary realm?* Industry practitioners would welcome the opportunity to engage with Screen Australia in a more comprehensive conversation of this kind. Indeed many people feel changing how things are done is well overdue. Clearly this will not be achieved with a Q&A; an inclusive, structured process of informed analysis and open dialogue is more likely to deliver legitimate, credible outcomes. The challenge is in achieving comprehensive and equitable delivery across the agency's remit.

1. *Are specific targeted programs... efficient and effective?*

If we take 'efficient and effective' to mean delivering 'quality, diversity and innovation' (SA's principal criteria) characterised by 'innovation depth and compelling storytelling' (enabling Bill), the simple answers would be: yes and no; there is room for improvement. Australian factual and documentary filmmakers deliver excellent work across a wide spectrum of genre and style. Those works that most often match all the markers specified in the principal criteria and the enabling Bill arguably arise – when they can access Screen Australia participation - most often from the low-budget, non-broadcast program, the Signature fund.

This is not exclusively the case; innovation, depth, quality and compelling storytelling are evident in works derived from a variety of funding strands, but the Signature fund stands out. The modest gradual increase in the Signature fund's allocation reflects Screen Australia's recognition of this. This gesture evokes a 'yes' in response to the first question. Screen Australia's value aspirations are arguably less effectively and efficiently met across the aggregate of targeted programs.

If we take 'efficient and affective' to refer more to the way in which Screen Australia programs themselves are structured and administered, there is again room for improvement. The design of the suite of programs has evolved through the inheritance of functions, minor adaptations to emerging media technologies

and negotiation with broadcasters and other industry interests. There is a tension for Screen Australia in meeting its cultural objectives while also pleasing powerful stakeholders; these interests do not necessarily coincide. Arguably the current structure and practice is targeted far more to the delivery of the latter (expectations of powerful stakeholders) than it is to the former (values articulated in the enabling Bill and criteria), inhibiting appropriate change in Screen Australia's policy and practice.

A distinction between factual television and documentary may enable Screen Australia to better design and target programs to deliver its objectives. This distinction is common in industry; ABC TV for example has a Head of Factual, and does not have a documentary department or commissioning editor, although it does occasionally commission or acquire documentary. If this distinction were recognised it would help enormously in deriving meaningful statistics from the data collected and published by Screen Australia. The failure to discern this difference obscures the real picture for documentary, and inhibits clear vision for change. The introductory remark cited above (DP introduction) neatly encapsulates this distinction.

An optimum achievement of the cultural brief is aspirational at this point; it may be better met with more focus on documentary and less focus on factual television, as it is the documentary edge of the spectrum where the work most often and most effectively meeting Screen Australia's remit is to be found. Factual programming made by Australian filmmakers is also often excellent; Screen Australia's programs are effectively targeted to deliver these.

A more general point in response to this question concerns 'red tape'. While clearly allocations of public money requires diligence and accountability, the scale of administrative embellishments required from applicants by Screen Australia in assessing proposals across its programs would benefit from review with a view to distilling elements that are essential to the process.

2. How can Screen Australia best support low budget documentary?

If supporting the low budget documentary was considered a high priority it could be achieved through either comprehensive restructuring of funding programs or by reallocation, reform and refinement of the current structure. Within the current structure low budget documentary could be better supported by significant enhancement to the Signature fund. Trevor Graham recommends a

new, well-resourced, low budget program supplementing the Signature fund; this is an excellent idea (submission to this Review).

Developing project based collaborations with other agencies, state bodies, arts agencies, and civil society groupings are outreach activities that could be considered. Innovative programs supporting documentary film culture (local festivals, outreach, educating journalists, supporting writing and publishing about Australian documentary, advocating on behalf of documentary in liaison the AFI for example, etc.) are needed. Screen Australia rightly recognises the value of this film culture work in a number of its activities. There is a fine line in this domain between agency support for projects initiated from within the community, and agency initiated and managed programs.

A much higher priority to documentary development would have enormous impact. Low budget documentary needs agile, time consuming development, and well-targeted development funding can help sustain the creative documentary sector. Enterprise programs often support other players on the spectrum.

3. *How can high-end documentaries reach the widest possible audience?*

As the DP acknowledges distribution is a complex field, it is rapidly evolving. Some forms of 'high-end' (expensive specialist factual) will find their widest possible audience through television distribution. However it will also likely find effective educational, non-theatrical distribution when its story territory has a focussed Australian orientation. The 'long tail' is less visible than the first splash, but continues to deliver impact in its own way. Indeed, new versions of the 'long tail' may challenge the primacy of the first (broadcast) splash, as emerging distribution platforms consolidate and proliferate.

Other kinds of 'high end' works, at other points on the spectrum (intellectually stimulating, substantive, politically complex and/or formally challenging) may find their audiences in festivals and galleries. Assessing the comparative impact of these encounters with audiences is a complex task of cultural analysis. On a pragmatic level Screen Australia's remit might require more attention to supporting contemporary modes of distribution and circulation perhaps with attention to forums beyond the established models.

Some of the most striking 'high-end' documentary work today is made for galleries, for example *The Calling*, Angelica Mesiti; *ACO Virtual*, Michela Ledwidge, Mish Sparks ('video-art' has finally caught up). Festivals are changing the way

they offer new work to audiences in response to these developments, just as galleries are altering their experiences for visitors as moving image works expand audiences in these environments.

Assessing the impact of works delivered into these sorts of venues – where a work will screen constantly over many weeks, and tour widely – and including on-line documentary, is a more subtle task than counting ticket butts or butts on seats.

4. *Separate theatrical funding or 'Premium' across delivery platforms?*

There are very few theatrical venues for feature documentary. Gil Scrine reports (submission to this review) that the Nova in Melbourne appears to be the exception – where theatrical documentaries do well. However there are other venues for theatrical event screenings, and the entry of MIFF and the Adelaide Film Festival as supplementary commissioners, and the work of Felix (Bridget Ikin and John Maynard), on those new borders of installation and documentary, suggests this territory could be productive in encouraging international, creatively ambitious works in documentary across emerging delivery platforms.

A pivot in Screen Australia's focus with this in mind would open the Australian documentary field to sorely needed new ideas and approaches, loosening some of the constraints that have hampered more imaginatively ambitious documentary projects.

5. *Marketplace commitment... other than TV?*

There may need to be more agile ways of thinking about audiences today; the metaphor 'market' continuing to drive policy is 'very '80s', and vulnerable to its failings.

Strategies alert to emerging models of distribution and exhibition, as well as attuned to more traditional forms of audience reach, such as television, continue to be crucial, and they continue to be extremely hard to predict and manage. *10 Conditions of Love* (Jeff Daniels, 2009), *A Nun's New Habit* (Robyn Hughan, 2009), *I Am Eleven*, (Gen Bailey 2012), and *Mary Meets Mohammad* (Helen Kirkpatrick 2013) are each instructive instances. In recent times there are many strikingly successful, diverse projects with high impact in a variety of contexts that have been made by dedicated creative teams wrangling their dexterous creative skills

around the monolithic factual TV 'market' (e.g. another example *Once My Mother* Sophia Turkiewicz, 2013).

6. What indicators of audience reach and engagement could Screen Australia reasonably expect filmmakers to provide for their projects?

Looking at the criteria Screen Australia prioritises for the work it supports, and that the Act has specified, suggests markers for these values need to be developed and perhaps given sharper focus. They are certainly not met by funding English format shows that police conformity; TV shows whose essential identity requires they prohibit both innovation and diversity (while being excellent factual TV, nothing wrong with that). When projects come with presales and 'markets' attached (as they are known quantities) – that 81% of the funding - one wonders what indicators of 'innovation, diversity, depth and compelling storytelling' are normally applied in assessing them for support?

Screen Australia may reasonably expect questions of audience reach and engagement will be the subject of thoughtful, informed consideration and planning by filmmakers seeking Screen Australia support. Conversely Screen Australia might consider how best it can engage creatively with contemporary media, and develop innovative support mechanisms in aiding audience reach and engagement in collaboration with the filmmakers whose work it supports.

7. What are the impacts (positive and negative) on the industry of the notional broadcaster funding allocations which currently apply to the NDP and GDP and broadcasting? Should these be revised?

The DP notes that of "funding available under the domestic funding program (the NDP and GDP) approximately 50 per cent is earmarked for content intended for the ABC, 40 per cent to the SBS and the remaining 10 per cent (for commercial or pay TV)" and on the same page notes that the Screen Australia Act requires it to "direct its funds to those projects characterised for their innovation, depth and compelling storytelling". The paper remarks that there are differences or tensions here and that these require 'negotiation' (DP: 12).

Questions around dividing up the cake into about two serves, with a little slice allocated to documentary on the side, is unlikely to address the broader issues raised by the review. This question begs another more fundamental question:

should the NDP¹ and the GDP be combined, or scrapped in favour of a newly designed structure better suited to delivering Screen Australia's core aspirations under contemporary conditions? Maybe, maybe not; there are strong arguments both ways, but the question has not been asked.

The GDP is a remnant of the Accords, and the NDP ('crown jewels' or is that 'crown duels') a remnant of Film Australia. It is a long time since the question: what do we mean by National Interest has been addressed by the program, and a long time since an 'accord' with television has been a necessary lever to open public broadcasting to independent filmmakers. Clearly, in both cases, the imperatives remain. Whether these mechanisms remain sufficiently autonomous instruments is another matter. There is an argument for a comprehensive restructure, but consideration of this has not been sought by the review.

8. In making decisions about whether to invest in projects, what considerations should be prioritised (e.g. cultural, innovation, audience reach)

Programs need to be developed that are more alert to the changes arising organically, spontaneously from the documentary community as it responds to the technological and cultural change of its environment. Screen Australia should collaborate in productive change. The question of opportunities for emerging filmmakers and projects (beyond the individual) should be thoughtfully addressed.

9. Rounds or not?

History suggests rounds are better. Probably because it allows the agency to better plan allocations of available funds over time. Predictable rounds allow applicants to plan, and if the schedules are carefully designed, it should allow other production partners to collaborate efficiently. Regular rounds also provide better opportunities within the agency to make considered judgements among a group of comparable projects.

Every decision making round should include non-agency 'peer' industry consultancy, involving different people with different backgrounds and

¹ The NDP is the last remaining original function of the 1946 Australian National Film Board. It is the linear descendent of a commissioning function that 'Nugget' Coombs insisted be included in the ANFB's remit, against the preference of the Department of Information. He had very good reasons for it they still hold (Hughes 2012: 111-118, 133-136).

experience. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it increases the likelihood that the agency can sustain its legitimacy in difficult decision making. Second, if handled fairly and well, it assists the agency in maintaining collegiate relations with industry. Thirdly, it educates those involved as consultants, and by extension industry networks, in the complexity of assessment and governance, and with regard to the integrity, conscientiousness and intellectual rigor of decision-making. It helps to sustain a more accountable and transparent culture benefiting the agency internally and nourishing industry-agency relations.

Dot points

- If the current structure of programs is to continue as it is (Domestic TV International TV, Signature Fund / on-line documentary) allocations need to be modified to account for the variety of ways in which contemporary documentary is working in civic culture that differ from those of the past. Allocating 30% of available funding to each category would be a good starting point. This could be achieved through reallocations and adjustment, or through more comprehensive restructuring.
- While FTA broadcasting remains the media form with the largest aggregated audiences on one measurable occasion, ratings are increasingly less pertinent to an assessment of Screen Australia's benchmark achievements of "quality, diversity and innovation".
- There are useful ways of looking at the extent to which technological change and new cultural dynamics of documentary need to be taken into account as Screen Australia seeks to match its practice with its language.
- To restate the obvious, with convergence comes divergence; audiences and markets (they are different things), engaging with documentary, do so in a variety of ways that cannot adequately be measured by the same metrics that deliver screen-time rates to advertisers. This is one of the ways that documentary as a creative industry and practice differs from television, which is better seen as one (desirable, even outstanding, but not essential) distribution medium for documentary.
- Increasingly documentary workers are challenging the hegemony of the television ratings criteria - a kind of vacuum sucking up 80% of documentary support - with the productivity of "impact".

- Around the world 'impact' - while more difficult to quantify than ratings -is increasingly considered a more appropriate discourse in pursuing and evaluating documentary projects. It's a concept that needs to be considered more comprehensively than simply a measure of effective social engagement; there is cultural impact that might be generated for example through aesthetic innovation. This is after all why innovation is valued among Screen Australia's priorities.
- The concept and actuality of 'impact' is a game changer; it acknowledges that 'the widest possible audience' is just one mode of influence that creative enterprise can have. Other modes of engagement with audiences, markets, users, spectators, participants can be just as important.
- The recent work of Alex Kelly; of the Documentary Foundation; Malinda Wink on the Good Pitch; Genevieve Bailey's *I Am Eleven*, are examples of the how workers in documentary are affirming a differentiation between television and documentary, and recreating a differentiated space for (lets use the international term, Hot Docs/ IDFA/) 'the creative documentary'. The relative critical success of works made with support from MIFF, Adelaide Film Festival and the Signature fund (before that the FFC's Special Documentary Fund) are further examples.
- It is difficult for Screen Australia to address the concerns it has acknowledged. Screen Australia's remit requires it support both factual television production and documentary. It inherits a governmental review (2006-8) that confused the two, considering the whole field television. Whereas documentary is not television; documentary has its own character and imperatives. Furthermore bi-partisan departmental policy at that time asserted a priority must be enterprise viability, confusing ends and means. Enterprise viability is a legitimate target of agency support; but it is counterproductive across the remit if it eclipses the first principles as set out for example in the enabling Bill.
- For these and other ideological reasons, Screen Australia maintains this failure to differentiate, calling everything "documentary". Consequently its analysis of the data it collects is corrupted by a lack of differentiation (e.g 'top rating documentaries': DP: 11). The data is less useful for policy than it might be if it were able to discern among categories that are commonplace in the

industry (Factual TV, Specialist Factual, Factual Entertainment, and genres, Natural History, Reality TV etc). In seeking meaningful insight to inform policy change, the documentary unit could benefit from more focussed research, alert to differentiated attributes of the field.

- Some questions raised by the DP's formulations could be clarified. The 'documentary funding allocations, 2012/13' (DP: 7) are useful figures, however their readability would be enhanced if they were presented also as a series of pie charts.
- 'Release platforms' shares of Screen Australia funding 2008/09-2012/13' (DP: 13) could helpfully be shown year by year, so we could see the rate and trajectory of change.
- 'Producers receiving Screen Australia funding' (DP: 13) would be more effective as a bar chart.
- When the DP talks about documentaries made "in-house by broadcasters" (DP: 19), what shows are these? Are the cost of these taken into account when the Paper argues the percentage of the costs of documentary contributed by broadcasters?

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