

## DOCUMENTARY PROGRAMS:

Stories that matter.

Commentary on Draft Documentary Guidelines.

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First, I welcome the opportunity to add my views to these debates. I appreciate the focus on feedback the agency is allowing, and recognize the intent in these proposals is positive.

It is important to mention they come at a time of unprecedented financial stricture, for both the agency and public service broadcasters.

There are deeper political, ideological and cultural issues in these funding cuts, and I think it is important that the specific discussion of documentary funding does not divert focus from the important matter of bringing to the widest attention the poor funding and support for the sector in general.

These matters are important for the agency itself to take a leadership role on, given the direct connection to government.

Against this background, these proposals represent far reaching changes, the biggest I have seen in the decade I have been making films in Australia.

In recent years I have co-written, co-produced, co-directed and co-created several high profile series funded in part by the NDP.

These titles, among them **'The Art of Australia (2013). Dirty Business: How Mining Made Australia (2012), Inside the Firestorm (2010), and Immigration Nation (2011)** fit tightly into the creed expressed in the proposals at their most general level – namely to:

***help us understand ourselves and others, inform our***

***cultural identity, inspire us to think differently or think more deeply about***

***issues, and form a vital legacy into the future.***

In addition all of these titles drew on the proposed underlying principles in the new guidelines namely they:

***resonate with audiences;***

***have meaning that can endure***

***and draw on a depth of research or thinking about a subject.***

Therefore on the surface, these proposals look like they'd contain much for me to welcome as a documentary maker whose work is so congruent to the core values expressed by the agency.

My comments are broadly qualitative, because I am ultimately a storyteller, not a statistician, and because I suspect the language of these sorts of discourses, can become part of the issue.

The jargon can obscure the real purpose of what people are trying to achieve with documentary and factual programming, and how to achieve it. It can also make the ideologies which guide the debate and decisions less clear.

It is important these are considered and discussed because it is time to discuss the core purpose and function of the agency – is it cultural? is it about business?

Obviously the guidelines are an attempt to balance the needs of the multiple voices in factual/documentary content creation Screen Australia interact with in the factual/documentary eco system as a whole. And they each individually, no doubt, all make well constructed cases for support.

Which is why a more qualitative overview of some of these driving mechanisms behind the need for change are important to keep in the forefront of the discussion.

In essence these guidelines if adopted, would mark the end of the so called 'accord' between agency and public broadcaster, as a mechanism through which to support documentaries in their TV form.

The creation of new fund titles and the removal of the PSB quotas will bend factual content creation into new shapes and broadly have undesired and unexpected impacts in both creative, cultural, and business sustainability terms.

Among them will be a reduction in audience accessibility to factual content, a lessening in reach and impact of documentary programs. These ironically make the goal of supporting documentary programming because of the basic creed of their importance to identity, education, and cultural value not closer but further away.

It will likely also be more expensive or less cost effective for the agency to manage, another irony given the frame of cost cutting.

This is because the removal of the accord seems to require the locus of editorial decision making as part of commissioning back onto the agency. This is proposed at a time when it seems particularly under resourcing pressure regardless of the desirability of this from a political perspective.

It also contradicts the reports' own conclusion that broadcasters are best placed to assess the needs of audiences.

The quota system which has been in place since the early in the inception of Screen Australia, is not perfect, but it has meant that commissioning against set funding levels, outside totally open tenders is possible.

It would have to be explained more clearly to me how the removal of the quotas would mitigate the problem that projects producers have in development with the support of broadcasters, would face even greater uncertainty.

Nor is it clear whether the instinct of broadcasters in an open system might not be to overload the ask on the agency. Would the instinct be to push as many good projects at the agency as possible.

We have seen behavior like this happen in recent times even with the quota system. Either way, it would seem to be an onerous path to take on the resourcing of an already over stretched agency system.

There is a bigger issue. The notional end of the accord is motivated by the perception that newer delivery platforms are evolving the shape of content consumption in ways that make the traditional TV documentary less valid.

It is certainly true that all screen content is being consumed in new ways. And Screen Australia invest resources in research which backs this up.

However the case that this is eclipsing TV by default is not proven and could even be erroneous.

More importantly, these perceptions are having a profound impact on funding priorities and this comes back to the core creed.

As a documentary maker the reason I support the 'TV model', is for the following reasons.

TV is the best form of 'Broadcasting' we have and will remain so. Web content, and festivals are forms of 'narrow casting'.

It goes without saying that by TV I refer to public service TV. There is no evidence commercial TV has interest in documentary production of any kind which attempts to meet the core values which drive the case for public funding in the first place.

Given the proposal to open the quota to all comers, I cannot see channels 7,9, or 10 making a beeline for funds. However the nature of commercial TV, and responses to it, can create some of the noise in system when it comes to debates of the kind we are currently having.

It is important not to buy into the idea that TV in general is 'old media' that fights against innovation, controversy and direct social and political impact. Indeed I would argue public TV it does it better and more often than authored

'self-expression' documentaries, and that when it does so, provides deeper impact, more forthright social commentary, and in terms of the core goals of documentary, is more effective and culturally valuable precisely because it can deliver this to a wider audience.

Audience numbers for certain memes and clips online, may aggregate higher than TV globally (but not often). And the numbers and reach with audiences at film festivals and on-line are considerably less and have less impact for the overwhelming number of releases than TV.

It is also the case that the raw number of releases in these delivery contexts is much lower than the release of titles for TV.

Partly because of the impact it has, documentary delivered through the TV platform is much more carefully curated.. It requires journalistic and research integrity in a way that forms allowing greater self-expression do not.

This is not a criticism of self-expression. It has a unique and vital place in the eco system.

Yet there is a serious debate to have on this, because often those seeking greater support for self expressive films are frustrated by TV and accuse it of being editorially or creatively conservative.

Ultimately too, the mechanism of editorial peer review in TV, while perhaps less fashionable, makes for material that is more trustworthy for audiences. Which in turn adds to its impact.

There any number of titles that can affirm this, and indeed Australian public TV has been particularly energetic in this area. **'Go Back To Where You Came From'**, trended globally, **Dumb Drunk and Racist?** arguably opened up more debate on social issues and indigenous issues among younger audiences than John Pilger's **'Utopia'** – a filmmaker and a film too overtly political to have been able to achieve government funding through Screen Australia.

This leads to a bigger point about priorities in general. Given the reduction in funds across the board, if the aim is to continue to deliver the highest possible number of films which perform the job noted in the core criteria, what is the best mechanism?

This goes to the heart of the question.

Alongside the end of the accord proposed, a greater investment in 'premium' films is proposed with budgets up to \$1m an hour and requiring \$200k per hour in pre-sales.

This is an over emphasis on high-end production. There is no justification for budgets at this sort of level and it is dangerous that these tax dollars can be given to projects with very vague parameters on who ultimately will see them.

I do not think that other delivery platforms like cinema or the web will readily support films that fit with the premium editorial requirements – they are a different beast. The landmark TV documentary dealing with these sorts of subjects is however a well regarded and very popular trope of distribution, and overwhelming the most commercially and critically successful form of this sort of film.

I make this comment even though the work I produce would supposedly fit neatly into this category and it is very easy to get a budget up to \$1m an hour!

I think a figure near \$750 - \$800 is more realistic. This is not so far beyond current NDP levels. The level of pre-sale needs to be discussed and adjusted too. The size of the fund itself will reduce the overall numbers of high end films possible to make.

It is hard to see how PSB's can fund at these pre-sale levels per hour. In effect this proposal in terms of TV production is passing the resourcing problem on. It will create fewer not more programs of quality.

Therein lies the ultimate issue which goes beyond this particular set of proposals. The question of cultural value vs business sustainability and whether they can sit side by side?

Ultimately there is a functional and organisational conflation between support for cultural/art film and mainstream TV documentary production. I think this goes into the culture of the agency too.

Art film and TV production need to be kept separate and nurtured in their own spaces and the current funding system already does this to some extent with the GDP, NDP and signature funds. This seems to have been under pressure and is driving these new proposals along with the obvious need to fund films with lower actual resources.

The system isn't perfect, and the root problem is lack of general funding, however to conflate the two, will damage both.

Ultimately I'd like to see Screen Australia be entirely responsible for fiction films, and art film, while TV production is fully funded by PS broadcasters, who are well off enough to afford it.

This has been a heretical position historically, and one that the organizational and political culture will take time to change, but it offers the best way to enhance the culture aspects while addressing business sustainability.

It is a debate that needs to happen. The case can be made to government that a profitable industry in factual production, need not come at the expense of cultural expression. And that stimulating it, is actually enhanced if cultural expression is advanced through agencies whose sole function is to encourage it, without the burden of the impossible task of making Australian culture pay in a global content market.

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