



**Response to Screen Australia's paper**

**DOCUMENTARY FUNDING: STORIES THAT MATTER**  
**April 2014**

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This submission is made by the Australian Directors Guild (ADG), the industry association representing the interests of screen directors, writer/directors, documentary filmmakers, animators and documentary director/producers throughout Australia. Formed in 1980, the ADG has over 700 members nationally.

The ADG works to promote excellence in screen direction, to encourage communication and collaboration between directors and others in the industry, and to provide professional support for its members. It maintains a high profile and leading cultural and policy role through its efforts to address issues affecting the industry from a broad perspective.

The ADG is affiliated through the International Affiliation of English-Speaking Directors Organisations (IAESDO) with the Broadcasting, Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU), the Directors Guild of America (DGA), the Directors Guild of Canada (DGC), Directors UK, the Screen Directors Guild of Ireland (SDGI) and the Screen Directors Guild of New Zealand (SDGNZ).

The ADG is also a member of the Australian Copyright Council.

## **INTRODUCTION**

We welcome the chance to respond to the Screen Australia paper “Documentary Funding: Stories that Matter” which was published to coincide with the Australian International Documentary Conference held in Adelaide in February 2014.

This response was informed by our Documentary Working Group, which is made up of ADG members who are full-time documentary directors. We have also taken advice from the Indiedoco group that formed as a result of a session held in 2013 at the ADG Conference.

For the past few years the ADG has been calling for a review of Screen Australia’s documentary funding in relation to the national public broadcasters (ABC & SBS) and their role in commissioning documentary content. We have been tracking a shift through our member’s surveys and forums in the way documentaries are commissioned.

This has led to the ADG calling for more support towards single documentaries as their numbers have declined over the past ten years. The Screen Australia document shows a steep rise in the number of series and a decline in single documentaries over this period; resulting in an overall decline in the number of all titles (series and singles) despite an increase in the number of hours of documentary produced.<sup>1</sup>

This reduction in both series and singles represents diminishing diversity.

This decline in diversity is the key issue for the ADG as have a number of effects on the documentary production community including:

- Reducing the number of voices making documentaries;
- Reducing the number of documentary directors employed in the industry;
- Reducing the number of stories being told through the documentary form;
- Reducing Australian content.

Over the past two years the ADG has conducted surveys of its members to try and capture information on the activity of directors. As part of these surveys we have specifically targeted documentary. The results from these surveys reinforce the change that has occurred in the documentary world for directors, particularly in Australia. The results point out the changes that have taken place in the commissioning of documentary over the past few years with 69% of respondents reporting that the national broadcasters had become less responsive to filmmakers ideas and proposals and that 68% believed that the national broadcasters exercise more editorial control than they have in the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/mpdocosactivity.aspx>

past. Over 81% of respondents believed that there was not enough airtime given to standalone documentaries.<sup>2</sup>

We recognise the changing nature of feature documentary distribution within the Australian market and the world. There is less opportunity for documentaries to get Australian releases in cinemas for example. This reflects the issues that face all types of films that seek theatrical distribution in Australia. With less than 5% of the total film exhibition slate being Australian, the situation for Australian documentary is even worse. Some shining examples of self-distribution have bucked the trend with Rebecca Barry's I AM A GIRL, Bob Connolly's MRS CAREY'S CONCERT and Genevieve Bailey's I AM ELEVEN. And this is probably the future for theatrical documentaries in our cinemas. But this is an unrealistic and ad hoc approach to the distribution of quality Australia documentary.

Screen Australia's requirement for the tax offset of 40% for features only if they are able to obtain distribution within Australian cinemas does not reflect the reality of our situation. Distributors are not buying Australian documentaries for cinema release and the only ones to get into the cinemas are the self-distributed ones mentioned above. So a new response to this issue needs to be developed.

The shorter form under one hour documentaries are not faring any better. The large increase in the number of formats and series that the national and commercial broadcasters have purchased has been at the expense of single documentaries. The table in the report clearly shows this rise.<sup>3</sup> As I have stated above this has meant a reduction in titles that Screen Australia has funded over the past ten years.

This has also affected the way documentaries are being made. My colleague Bob Connolly puts it clearly in his submission:

*"With this increasing control, the TV networks began dictating content and style. Underwritten by Screen Australia, enterprise production companies proliferated, only too eager to give the TV networks what they wanted".*

Joost den Hartog has also identified that we are working in a system that values the industrial production of documentary over the artisan. Networks, secure in the knowledge that they will receive a portion of the Screen Australia documentary pie (80% as reported in the Screen Australia report) are pressured by their need to maintain their audiences share and reduce marketing costs.

Some of our members have expressed their concern that the priority of Screen Australia's policy has been economic. We understand the need to make the best decisions in regards to the money being spent by the government and would always support the most effective and efficient way to

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<sup>2</sup> Results of ADG survey of members in 2012 & 2013.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/mpdocosactivity.aspx>

recoup any money spent on documentary. However, we feel that the cultural remit has been lost and that the way documentary titles are declining is proof of this. We believe their needs to be a re-alignment in thinking towards the cultural benefit that documentary provides to the Australian people. There also needs to be more opportunities for them to view these documentaries.

Changes to the way Screen Australia funds documentary offers a solution to the declining number of titles and the opportunity for greater reach for these unique Australian stories. In brief we would propose the following:

1. Scrapping of the current allocations under the Signature, NDP, GDP, Digital and International and replacing this with a new structure to be developed in conjunction with the documentary industry;
2. Redefining market place attachment to include other forms of distribution such as film festivals, VOD, self-distribution and other internet based methods such as the YouTube Channel supported by Screen Australia;
3. Changing the guidelines for the allocation of funds that emphasizes “Stories the Matter” and not nominal allocations to broadcasters locking away large amounts of Screen Australia’ documentary funding;
4. A review of documentary development.

Also as part of our concern for the demise of the one-off documentary we were privy to a report commissioned by the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) that looked at the way documentary has been developed over the past ten years. Written by Sharon Connolly it is worth repeating some of the findings and ideas from that report.

It concurred with much of the data that Screen Australia has reported in the discussion paper including the following:

- *Since the establishment of Screen Australia and the introduction of the Producer Offset in 2007-08, average annual hours of documentary made by production companies have increased by 34% on the previous five-year period, to 311 hours. Documentary series hours comprise more than 76% of that annual average; single documentaries fewer than 24%.*
- *In 1997-98 71% of total documentary hours produced by production companies were single documentaries. A decade later the proportion had fallen to 30%. By 2011-12 fewer than 23% of total documentary hours were single documentaries.*
- *The trend for an increasing volume of documentary production to comprise greater numbers and hours of television series, and fewer one off documentaries was clear prior to 2007-08. Neither the Producer Offset nor funding programs designed by the newly created Screen Australia addressed the issue.*
- *Australian documentary producers have long operated in an area of market failure, due to the absence of any documentary expenditure requirements for*

*pay TV and minimal documentary content requirements for commercial free to air TV. Unlike Australian drama production which is supported by both regulatory and subsidy mechanisms, documentary is therefore much more reliant on subsidy.*

- The domestic market for documentary is largely the two public broadcasters, which between them screened an average of 66% of all first release Australian documentary hours broadcast on free to air networks between 1998 and 2012.*
- The ABC and the SBS make significant financial contributions to Australian documentary production. Their commissioning decisions also determine where most Screen Australia documentary production monies are invested.*
- Screen Australia's General Documentary, National Documentary and International Documentary programs deliver about 85% of direct Australian Government subsidy for production of documentaries and require all projects to have "a local presale for Australian free-to-air or subscription television rights."*
- Of TV documentary hours in which Screen Australia invested in 2012-13, 79% were series and 21% were single documentaries.*
- In 2012-13 Screen Australia's National, General and International programs invested in 62 hours of documentary for public broadcasters and 15 for other channels.*
- Both public broadcasters profess a preference for commissioning documentary series over single programs and both have significantly increased hours of "factual" programs screened.*
- Most Australian documentaries available "on demand" is offered by broadcaster catch up services. Thus the commissioning decisions of the ABC and SBS largely determine not only what is broadcast but also what is available on line.*
- The number of single documentaries accessing the 20% non feature (TV) producer offset fell from 40 in 2008-09 to 16 in 2011-12, a drop of 60%.*
- Documentaries for exhibition in Australian commercial cinemas can access a 40% producer offset for feature films. Only 10 projects did so between 2007-08 and 2011-12.*
- A handful of one-off documentaries are produced without broadcaster attachments, normally with Screen Australia grants or investments, contributions from film festivals and/or state film agencies and/or philanthropic monies. Their makers often invest considerable personal resources. This financing practice is not sustainable.*
- A serious shortage of finance and exhibition opportunities available for production of single documentaries has significant cultural implications and*

*consequences for Screen Australia's ability to meet its obligation to support development of a diverse range of Australian programs that deal with matters of national interest or importance to Australians, or that illustrate or interpret aspects of Australia or the life and activities of Australian people. (Screen Australia Act 2008,s.6[3])<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Stewth – Everything you always wanted to know about one-off documentary but were too afraid to ask by Sharon Connolly. AFTRS. 2014.

## **A NEW STRUCTURE**

In reviewing the current structure that Screen Australia employs to fund documentary we felt that the only way to really improve the situation and address the problem of less diversity was to overhaul the structure and develop a new one that is in keeping with changes to documentary production.

Some of the changes that we would like to see incorporated into this new structure are as follows:

1. Increase in support for a SIGNATURE FUND or equivalent. We believe the way to increase the number of documentary films being made is to significantly increase this fund or its equivalent to at least 30% of the current budget allocation for documentary production. The requirement for this fund allows the development and production of documentaries without marketplace attachments and is vital to increase the diversity of films being made;
2. We believe it is time that Screen Australia acknowledge that the expanded marketplace attachments need to be recognized as legitimate ways to finance documentaries. This reflects the changing nature of distribution and recognizes the shift away from traditional broadcasters. But we do not want to “throw out the baby with the bathwater” and recognize that broadcasters will continue to play a crucial role in documentary funding and distribution. We would therefore suggest the incorporation of other marketplace attachments such as VOD, Documentary Australian Foundation, Online (such as SMH-TV), Crowd Funding and Private Equity alongside the current broadcaster pre-sales and commissions;
3. The recognition of new distribution models such as self-distribution, online and impact producing that will allow for the widest possible audience reach. In some cases wider than national broadcasters.
4. Removal of the requirement of a traditional distributor for feature funding and allow the above self-distribution method or film festival distribution which would also allow for the use of the tax offset;
5. Develop a second tier for smaller TV presales that sits below a complete presale and an acquisition. This will make films more attractive to private funders/ philanthropists if they know that the film will have an automatic audience. Note that this is not intended to reduce TV presales as they stand - we keep those - but broaden the opportunity to access more funds for other projects;
6. Allow development funds for TV series without a broadcaster attached;

7. Allow for social impact marketing grants for documentary features. It is clear that if self-distribution is going to become more common it will need to be resourced. This category would become part of the standard budget template supplied by Screen Australia;
8. Develop slate development grants for independent documentary companies. This would enable small companies to apply for a slate of 3-5 documentaries for a development grant rather than applying separately for each round. This will reduce administrative costs for all and make the development process streamlined, productive and efficient.

We recommend that a working party made up of the relevant key stakeholders be brought together by Screen Australia to work on a new model for documentary funding. This review and the 1-2 hours provided at AIDC are clearly not enough time to overhaul and change the way documentary is funded by Screen Australia. We envisage this working group as a consultative body to work with Screen Australia staff to come up with this new structure.

## **MARKETPLACE AND DISTRIBUTION**

Here is a more detailed breakdown on the different marketplace and distribution models that should be adopted by Screen Australia in any new structure.

- a) **Film Festivals** – Apart from the Melbourne and Adelaide Festivals, no other Australian film festivals provide any finance for documentaries. We would hope that more would do this but recognize they have different models. However, we believe that the aim of Screen Australia funding is to maximize the access of Australian audiences to films that the government supports. We would therefore recommend that acceptance from a recognized film festival such as Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Melbourne should be accepted as part of a distribution plan that may be part of self-distribution.
- b) **Self-Distribution** – Films such as MRS CAREY'S CONCERT, I AM ELEVEN, THE RISE OF THE ECO WARRIORS and I AM A GIRL are examples of self-distributed films. They successfully marketed and distributed these films outside of the traditional distribution network and focused their attention on community-based screenings that is reflected in the rise of "impact producing". A formula, worked out with filmmakers to provide an acceptable self distributed route for their films should be included as legitimate distribution thus qualifying them for funds under the tax offset or any new structure. In any self-distribution proposal a specific amount of money from the budget should be allocated towards distribution. This would be approximately 15% of the entire production budget. This will ensure distribution will be effectively carried out. A distribution plan would include how this money is to be spent.
- c) **Multi-platform release** – Screen Australia has already invested considerable funds into the development of different platforms (such as Beama Films and You Tube). We believe it is time to provide a wider acceptance of these different platforms as legitimate distribution methods. To provide the widest possible distribution a range of platforms should be incorporated into a single distribution strategy.
- d) **Documentary Australia Foundation (DAF)** – The DAS has proved that it has the capacity to fund and successfully support documentary filmmakers and their films. We would propose the inclusion of their support of a project as marketplace attachment. But this support would not be for every project they endorsed. It would be limited to those projects that successfully gained the major proportion of their funding and support through DAF. This proportion would then trigger Screen Australia support.
- e) **Crowd Funding** – This has become a successful source of funds for documentary films. Screenwest has successfully partnered with a

crowd funding company to support local Western Australian films. The scheme developed by Screenwest should be investigated to see if it could be used by Screen Australia.

- f) **Impact Producing** - *“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 documentary projects. 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. Documentary is not television; documentary has its own character and imperatives. The recent work of Alex Kelly; of the Documentary Foundation; Malinda Wink on the Good Pitch; Genevieve Baileys’ 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 Special Documentary Fund) are further examples..” John Hughes February 2014.*

A good impact campaign as those mentioned above and promoted by events such as “Good Pitch” should be taken into consideration in all funding streams.

## ASSESSMENT

The question of assessment was also raised in the document.

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

We believe that the key to increasing the diversity of documentaries requires an emphasis on Culture, Innovation and Audience Reach when assessing the viability of a project.

Culture is primarily centered on the remit of Screen Australia which is the ***“development of a diverse range of Australian programs that deal with matters of national interest or importance to Australians, or that illustrate or interpret aspects of Australia or the life and activities of Australian people.”*** (Screen Australia Act 2008,s.6[3])<sup>5</sup>

We have briefly mentioned that a major factor taken into account when looking at projects should be “Stories that Matter”. This should provide the basis for the selection of projects funded under any program that Screen Australia develops. In our opinion and the opinion of many documentary filmmakers it is the primary assessment criteria.

A good example of this can be found with the recent feature documentary “Once My Mother” which when left to the vagaries of television commissioning alone failed to receive support for its development and funding. It did eventually secure support from the Adelaide Film Festival and Screen Australia but not until after many years of struggle to get this story told. Ironically, a broadcaster then programmed the film due to its success. Bob Connolly goes into detail about this film in his submission.

Innovation is another important marker of a project’s viability. This is not only in the way the film may be distributed but also in the whole approach to the filmmaking process from concept to distribution.

Finally the audience reach of a project is vital. Genevieve Bailey, who produced and directed “I AM ELEVEN” believes this is one of the most important factors when it comes to making a film.

*“I feel it is really important that films that are made with public money are ACCESSIBLE to the public, don't you think? I can think of some examples from Signature fund docs that had perhaps 1 or 2 or 5 screenings and that are not available on DVD, iTunes, on broadcast etc.*

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<sup>5</sup> Strewth – Everything you always wanted to know about one-off documentary but were too afraid to ask by Sharon Connolly. AFTRS. 2014.

*For us, that is a problem. In 2014 you want to be able to make your docs available to the public even if it is purely digital via streams or downloads. As they say, pirating occurs when the audience cannot buy your product legally anywhere.” Genevieve Bailey.*

We need to use the technology to make the work available to ensure Australian taxpayers are getting the maximum benefit from anything that is made with their money.

## **OTHER PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES**

**NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE** – This idea of a non-exclusive license in a project for the right to use original documentary footage and out takes, production stills and other materials for use as Library material for educational purposes and future productions by Australian filmmakers should be maintained for all documentary projects. This NFSA requirement is an important part of Australia’s cultural heritage.

**PRODUCER EQUITY PROGRAM** - The Producer Equity Program provides a direct payment of funds to producers of eligible low-budget Australian documentaries, equal to 20 per cent of the approved budget. This is an important program for low budget filmmakers and should be maintained under it current guidelines.

**DEVELOPMENT** – Screen Australia’s Documentary Development Program assists experienced documentary makers to achieve planned outcomes for the development of their projects. This could include further research, writing the next draft of a script or treatment, strategic shooting and/or editing to attract marketplace development or production finance, compiling a sizzle reel. The program is primarily focused on providing development support to one-off projects. We would propose increasing this fund substantially by at least 40%. Time critical funding would also be included in development and stay as an important part of catching stories and events that happen at short notice

**OPENING SHOT** – Another important development program for new filmmakers. This, along with J-docs and any other new initiatives should be maintained and new programs constantly developed and assessed.

## AND FROM THE FILMMAKERS

*“Over the last decade, let us say, we have witnessed another transformation of Australian documentary. An incomplete refiguring for sure, there is some financing at Commonwealth level still available for the agile documentary filmmaker. But the current tendency is now well established. It is driven by the imperatives of the television schedule, with a preference for series, across a spectrum from specialist factual through to factual entertainment formats. This has come into being through a convergence of shifting priorities of public broadcasters in concert with the economic interests of a determined faction of the production industry and a policy formation process favouring notions of enterprise and economic viability over cultural criteria.”*

**John Hughes**

*“We all know what factual means: it means television: it means, almost universally, what I call documentary lite. If we accept that what all these television broadcasters want is going to be the determinant of what constitutes our documentary culture in the future, then we are all hypocrites in demanding support.”*

**Dennis O'Rourke**

*“The current model in Australia encourages filmmakers to create documentary factories, with a slate of films that cover series, reality television and the odd single documentary. Whilst this works for some, it doesn't and shouldn't work for all....it would be a disaster if this rationalisation comes at the expense of the independent documentary filmmakers, who prefer to focus on one off social impact stories.*

**Ian Darling**