

Submission to Screen Australia Review – “Stories That Matter”

I have been a documentary filmmaker and distributor of (mainly) long form, authored documentaries. I am returning to production with a few projects in development and so have a vital interest in the future of my chosen form. My time as a distributor of (mainly) documentaries over 21 years has taught me a thing or two about selling them and I say with confidence that the business of distributing documentaries has changed irrevocably.

I will make a number of points to demonstrate these changes, why I think it has changed and how it is trending. These observations background my answers to those questions pertaining to (domestic) documentary market and audience.

When it comes to funding the long form authored documentary producers and funding bodies need to address these changes and trends and consider new ideas to accommodate what the future of distribution looks like.

The four main channels for taking any film to its audiences are covered below with emphasis on my experience with the long form documentary:

- **Cinemas, Festivals, & Airlines** : mainstream art house **cinemas** have all but turned their backs on documentaries. In fact there are hardly any cinemas left that could fit the description: art house. When I began there were independent art house cinemas in every Australian & NZ city and lots of regional screens as well. I needed only Sydney & Melbourne to agree on a film and the rest would follow. They did good business and led to my establishing myself as a distributor. Today I have turned a loss (with a few exceptions) on every theatrical documentary I have attempted over the last 5 years. Cinemas don't answer calls or emails about documentaries on offer and are utterly preoccupied with content from their big distributors who are sometimes also their owners. The few independent cinemas still trying to compete in this landscape of giants are struggling and risk averse and most are independent in name only. The exceptions are few and far between, the Nova Carlton being the standout. Apart from filmmakers self-distributing and occasionally making an impact, city-based art house cinema is out of the question now. This begs the question as to why Screen Australia still requires a city-bound theatrical release to attract a 40% rebate on long form documentaries. A better measure would be **Festival exposure**, as already suggested. Festivals have taken up the slack from commercial cinemas and celebrate long form documentaries for what they are: true stories that entertain and provoke. Festivals offer around 25-30% of box office at no cost to the distributor – a much more attractive proposition. **Airlines sales** also stand in this first row of distribution and today airlines are turning to inflight intranet apps that allow passengers to use their own iPad or laptop to view a plethora of movies, including documentaries. Airlines have a captive audience and offer better prices than TV for first run content. They are now buying back-catalogue. From an income POV and until the cinema release can be re-

imagined, a first release airline sale is streets ahead of the risky business of theatrical release. Airlines however can't (yet) offer us much in terms of impact, arguably the holy grail of documentary distribution.

- **DVD** remains the mainstay of my business but is declining month by month. Not that long form docs sell in great volumes in Video stores and retailers: we have had to find the shops one by one and persuade the rental market to even look at our content. Sustaining the more discerning DVD market is the gift culture, the excitement of having just seen the film on TV or cinema - both less likely now - and a reluctance to view online because of slow broadband, viewing habits and an aversion (to online viewing) by older audiences. This can't last. DVD may become the new vinyl but the DVD market is now smaller and likely to stay that way.
- **TV:** as Trevor Graham concludes, "You will be hard pressed to find a one off Australian made documentary in any one month on either SBS or the ABC." Of all the feature length docs I have offered to public broadcasters over the last 5 years, they have bought exactly 3. One, Trevor's MAKE HUMMUS NOT WAR fetched a reasonable price. The other two were abysmal. The films are played in late night slots with very little effort at marketing. If TV remains the way most of us consume documentary, the authored long-form will wither and die in Australia. The just-announced SBS initiative to commission "up to 5 x 1hr" docs entitled "Untold Stories" is to be applauded although with ads the TV hour comes down to about 52 mins - hardly the feature doc the world outside Australia is making. Are our stories somehow too feeble? Are Aussies losing their attention span? Or is it shrewder to throw the documentary community a bone while continuing business as usual?
- **VoD:** I created beamafilm with Louise van Rooyen, as a way of addressing the slow death of documentary long form on TV. Screen Australia's Innovative Distribution grant helped us build the site and we were then, 3 years ago, well ahead of the curve. At the time I understood our content (all long form documentaries) would earn money for rights holders not only from exposure on beamafilm but on other platforms: iTunes, Big Pond, Quickflix etc. Of the dozen or so platforms offered our content, only a handful even knew what it was, let alone took it on. I believe this shows a poverty in our culture brought about by the decline in long form documentary exposure in cinemas and on TV, as described. If VoD had been around 20years ago when long form docs were playing to full cinemas, there might have been a chance of recognition by the (mostly) young executives who are the VoD (and DVD) gate-keepers.

Three things inhibit the long form doc on Australian VoD platforms: the poor state of broadband access, our relatively small population and the habit of watching only clips and trailers online. Ricky Sutton, creator of smh.tv, estimates the average viewing time for long form documentary is about 18 mins in Sydney and 22 mins in Melbourne. The 8 min ad-breaks inhibit this but audiences are used to ad breaks on TV. Perhaps Youtube is to blame. Perhaps it's the irritation of buffering. These irritants cause a lack of

recognition as to what the form is and can do online and will change over time, especially as the NBN gains traction and Smart TV's begin to sell in serious numbers. Only then will online viewing change from the "leaning forward" viewing experience - where new content is always just a click away - to the "leaning back" mode of traditional TV viewing.

Whenever new audiences discover the long form documentary there is instant growth. At beamafilm our Municipal Library Licenses allow any member of a participating library to view the whole collection for free. Member Views are growing at 30% per quarter. The instant take up of documentaries on .tv was and remains encouraging despite the ad breaks. But these opportunities to see long form docs online are but two in a proliferation of VoD dedicated to movies and TV series. Online is well and truly on the march and unless the long form documentary can be recognized for what it is, the genre will get lost in a race to the bottom, in the dress of contrived series masquerading as documentary and already populating the lists at iTunes, Big Pond etc. Prices will come down even further so that only the very large and the very niche players will survive.

Geo-blocking, the Berlin Wall of VoD, is fast being dismantled as anti-blocking software becomes ubiquitous. Netflix, Snag, Lovefilm, Mubi and the other large collection, cheap subscription players will all soon be here by default and viewers will find a plethora of very cheap viewing. Finding what they want will not be so easy. Fox will hate it but even Fox can't stop it.

The internet has created a free for all culture that makes piracy the new normal. Yet audiences have demonstrated they will pay, if the price is right, to see legal, high quality content on demand. This will only grow for long form documentaries provided they continue to be funded based on recognition of the genre for what it is: the serious cultural work of one author, over some years, with the intention of provocation, change, education and entertainment. The long form documentary isn't like a Kleenex, or like "Factual series" - trivial and dispensable.

- **Relationship between these markets:** Today no city cinemas, if they do concede to offer a commercial season on a documentary, will allow the conventional windows system to collapse. DVDs cannot be sold in the foyer afterwards and VoD launched day and date is anathema to them. Yet Cinema and DVD sales have a direct and strong relationship that could grow if cinemas allowed the practice. Event screenings and regional cinemas are beginning accept DVD sales. Day & Date VoD launches will follow as the best way of maximizing publicity surrounding cinema screenings but the practice will take a long time to pervade mainstream cinema release which is writing itself out of the documentary distribution journey anyway. The conversation around cinema and its relationship to DVD & VoD ought to focus on emerging alternatives that successfully combine these channels into a model that looks

more like today's world: convenient, on demand, audience friendly and impatient for experience.

To answer Screen Australia's questions relating to distribution, I'd like to combine the 2 questions below, with the one answer:

Could a requirement for marketplace commitment be met in ways other than a broadcaster presale? If so, what sort of indicators of audience reach and engagement could Screen Australia reasonably expect filmmakers to provide for their projects?

How can high-end documentaries reach the broadest possible audience?

- Trevor and other producers rightly point to the fact that broadcaster commissions are now so rare as to warrant casting around for alternatives to the TV license as a trigger for public funding. I have to conclude it is worse than this: not only is it unlikely broadcasters will come back to habitually commissioning one-off long form documentaries but producers are unlikely to find a domestic Australian distributor to demonstrate their project's "marketplace commitment". This leads to the conclusion some filmmakers have already made: self-distribution has become a serious (and often the only) option. Screen Australia needs to recognize self-distribution within their "marketplace commitment" criteria. This will be difficult as filmmakers, with no experience in distribution, will have to demonstrate the markets awaiting their project. Trevor's list, a MIFF commitment, a DAF contribution, letters of interest from VoD and or theatrical distributors are a mixture of realistic and far-fetched. Until alternatives exist to cinema releasing, commitment to theatrical release by a distributor is unlikely. Producer anxiety around the 40% offset makes it an even less attractive distribution prospect as Screen Australia's version of a theatrical release is unrealistic in today's world and yet there it is: still in the guidelines, since 2006

Once the windows conventions are defenestrated and alternative cinema releasing models made secure, opportunities for day & date documentary releasing are bright and could be managed by self-distribution with some new tools and the right advice.

When all Australians have fast broadband and the culture of online viewing changes from being a novelty to the norm, VoD markets, especially worldwide, could become the most viable demonstration of marketplace commitment.

To use the example of Trevor's MAKE HUMMUS NOT WAR in this context is helpful. While Trevor is able to describe his film's release as a successful distribution outcome internationally, this is contradicted by my experience as his film's domestic distributor. Following a short but disastrous theatrical season, Antidote Films was left carrying a substantial debt until the DVD/VoD

release 6 months later helped recoup some of it but we were still in the red until a TV sale saved us. The same thing happened with TRIANGLE WARS and the large debt we still carry on that film will likely never be recovered. This roller-coaster ride is common in distribution but for documentaries – all but abandoned by cinema and TV – domestic distribution is no longer viable. A better way needs to be found.

A shift in thinking is required and it goes like this: An emphasis on audience over commercial is what the HUMMUS example outlines and it's true: the world's festivals are hungry for long form docs; communities love them in their cinemas (if they're lucky enough to have a true community cinema nearby); educators want them; airlines still buy them; public library members want them; Newspapers want them. DVDs sell modestly but always after cinema screenings. Sometimes even TV still shows them. But distributors rarely get all these together and you really need them all to make a reasonable return. Self-distribution makes sense because of this but it won't work until the distribution landscape can change to accommodate the confluence of markets demanded by today's audiences and filmmakers take up the challenges distribution of their work demands.

In the future documentary filmmakers will self-distribute, planning their day and date release with consultation, new tools, long lead times, a revived cinema circuit, and fast broadband. Evaluation will become the new currency with audience reach given priority over commercial outcomes, which isn't to say that some films – a far greater proportion than in today's world – will, over time, break even. A few may even turn a profit.

In making decisions about whether to invest in projects, what considerations should be prioritised (eg cultural, innovation, audience reach)?

- The shift from commercial distribution to an audience-focused evaluation model demands that authored long form documentaries be understood as cultural content. Again, to take the HUMMUS example, this film cannot have earned more than a hundred thousand dollars, more or less, after distribution costs and fees, from its world wide exposure, so this film has cost the Australian tax payer around \$300K. I argue, as does Trevor, that this is money well spent, as the Australian Ambassador's comment attests (see Trevor's submission). Given the worldwide commercial market for the authored long form documentary is tiny compared to budget, (and certainly compared to features) and given that free to air TV (now with free Catch-up) has been the place most people have seen the form, it is clear we are discussing cultural product with a history of free viewing. So why does Screen Australia continue to place commercial market paradigms around the long form docs they fund? Especially as their own stated reasons for funding them are transparently cultural. This is the elephant in the bathtub.

How can high-end documentaries reach the broadest possible audience?

- The most salient and constructive approach to documentary distribution is staring us in the face: Streaming and downloads. The future of MAKE HUMMUS NOT WAR is in its potential worldwide VoD audience. Opportunities exist for a curated collection of such a body of work to find audiences everywhere. Sadly, nothing is being done to ensure an Australian Accent is heard in the galaxy of platforms around the world. The Film Australia collection lies dormant. Nothing is in place to pay for encoding of the large body of work – the FA collection included – that exists. Such a collection, if cleverly branded and available to the world via VoD aggregators, would better represent us than some of the less honest attempts to show off brand Australia. The marketing and diplomatic largesse that would assist and be rewarded by showing off such a collection to the world is worth considering. By our documentaries let us be known. At least we are less likely to be seen as xenophobic, sport obsessed, eating disordered materialists. To not take this opportunity now would be a dereliction of duty towards all the tax-payer money tied up in these un-encoded hidden gems currently gathering dust and disappointment. Producers would be amazed at the returns. The rights issues are not insurmountable and the start up costs could be met for the budget of one high-end long form documentary.

Should Screen Australia continue to offer separate theatrical funding for documentaries or should it create one funding program for 'premium' documentaries, regardless of platform?

- It is no accident that AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH was seen by so many Australians in cinemas that it spawned a movement. Nor is it an accident that other docs like MRS CAREY'S CONCERT and MARY MEETS MOHAMMED made an impact theatrically. Self-distribution, concerted effort and 'the knowledge' were all required in these examples. Impact Distribution is the engine of further production and the cinema remains the place where the magic happens. But Australia's cinema culture is broken, if you measure cinema culture by the percentage of Australian films screened. 5% and below is common. The documentary share of this 5% would be miniscule. Yet there is potential for an alternative cinema circuit delivering a much higher percentage of Australian content than the city exhibitors who show no conviction toward any film, other than income. Obsessed with session policy and terms, city exhibitors are all about performance. Anything underperforming is immediately cut off from the best sessions. Documentary doesn't stand a chance in this snake pit.

But publicize a single screening in Ballarat and see 200 people eager to watch, discuss and buy a DVD. Repeat this around a circuit of potentially hundreds of venues and you have a fresh cinema culture forming behind theatrical documentary. The idea has been tried enough by me and trail-blazing filmmakers already (eg THE RIDE by Sandra Cook and Jim Cairns – see Sandra's submission to this review). It's time to fund self-distribution around an alternative cinema circuit, day and date releasing, all in concert with initiatives that celebrate the long form documentary for what it can do.

To make self-distribution easier for filmmakers stepping into it, a resourceful website embodying every potential cinema venue and the meta data around each venue and each film is needed. A system that rewards convenience and audience sophistication would help exhibitors, films and audiences find each other. Booking a film becomes a Wotif experience for the exhibitor while audiences have their say in choosing films, buying tickets and DVDs while a screening room for exhibitors to preview could all be part of the package. VoD sites carrying the film are also built in because not everybody can access the film in a cinema and marketing dollars should never be wasted. Build this and they will come. Audiences love to participate, exhibitors love a full house and a rising tide lifts all boats.

Summary:

- We need the sustainable funding of documentary film festivals to promote recognition of the differences between the contrived documentary ("Factual") and the authored long form.
- We need to build new systems encompassing cinema day & date releasing.
- We need a publically funded initiative to encode the best long form documentaries from the past with funding to take them to the world online.
- We need an overall recognition and a new way of evaluating the cultural product that is the long form documentary.

Television may or may not take notice but success in these initiatives would place television where it appears to want to be: somewhere down the food chain, just part of the mix. If these initiatives encourage them to step back up to the place they used to occupy, well and good.

These four initiatives would mean not having to re-invent the wheel for every funding proposal and effectively guarantee the revival of long form documentary.

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