

DOCUMENTARY FUNDING REVIEW

– STORIES THAT MATTER –

SUBMISSION FROM TREVOR GRAHAM & YARRA BANK FILMS

This submission to the Screen Australia Documentary Review ‘Stories that Matter’ acknowledges the significant contribution of public broadcasters and Screen Australia along with State Agencies and the Documentary Australia Foundation to the broader documentary production environment. It acknowledges that ratings are ‘one measure’ of audience reach and that the current broadcaster’s preference for factual series has value within the documentary landscape.

However given the above, I also argue in this submission that the current funding system and its dependence on the TV presale – the so called market place of public broadcasters presales – is contributing in large part to the decline of the one off ‘authored documentary’. More importantly the current presale led funding mechanism, together with the preference for factual series, or what the late Dennis O’Rourke tagged, ‘documentary lite’, is reducing the diversity of themes, stories, ideas and innovation that is produced and available to Australian audiences for documentary. As a corollary the current system also reduces Australian story content for international audiences. In my view both producers of documentary and Australian audiences are losing more and more, year by year, a vital ingredient from their cultural world.

Whilst this same decline in the ‘authored one off documentary’ appears to be happening in relationship to TV around the world, there remains however a potent market for documentary films internationally, one need only look to Hot Docs, IDFA, Sheffield, Sundance, Berlin and Australian festivals like the Sydney & Melbourne Film Festivals for evidence of that. And one can also turn to select international TV strands like Modern Times (BBC2) & Storyville (BBC 4).

So what are Australian audiences potentially losing with this decline? Well a top notch Australian ‘one off’ documentary will engage, entertain, inform and educate audiences, and even trigger water cooler discussions next day. They are an important arm of our ‘civic culture’. They bring Australian life, hopes, dreams, losses, heroes, and ordinary folk to our screens—and are part of our national ‘family album’. They help put the ‘public’ into ‘public broadcasting’ too, by holding up a mirror to our life as a nation.

But the move to factual series radically cuts across these values of diversity. Not only do we now have less diverse stories from fewer producers, but the breadth and depth of stories and storytelling is vastly reduced.

Furthermore, there is strong anecdotal evidence that the drive to factual series production above the ‘one off’ documentary is being driven not so much by programmers at our national

broadcasters, but by their marketing departments. They get more bang for their marketing buck with a series that lasts four to six weeks, than the resources or time they would otherwise need promoting the equivalent hours for individual programs. If this is true, then it's an example of 'spin doctoring' our national narrative – a case of the tail wagging the dog.

If the values and criteria that Screen Australia wishes to enshrine as its *raison d'être* for documentary funding namely – cultural relevance, diversity, innovation and audience reach, are to be achieved – then a re-examination of the current funding guidelines is both required and welcomed.

The Screen Australia figures attached to the discussion paper show that by title numbers alone there is still a significant number of one-offs supported within the current funding guidelines. The graphs show however a significant decline of one off documentary since 1997 and a corresponding rise in series. The graphs are useful. But so too are our viewing habits and patterns as consumers via an analysis of the week by week TV schedule. You will be hard pressed to find a one off Australian made documentary in any one month on either SBS or the ABC. Even more of a rare species is the fact that you will very seldom see a one off Australian documentary promoted on the ABC via their nightly promo marketing schedule. But more on that later.

I wish to state clearly that the ideas contained in this submission are not based on a sense of entitlement or negativity. In my view they are an attempt to address public arts policy issues and how best to utilise precious public arts dollars and to enshrine, creativity, diversity, innovation and audience reach as core values for Screen Australia.

The submission is written by someone who has 30 years experience in the business working as a documentary producer/director, who has also worked in a number of industry positions including commissioning both at the ABC and SBS and a former co-chair of AIDC. But it is also written, more importantly, from the point of view of a consumer of TV, festival films and increasingly online content. If I have a sense of entitlement at all – it is as a viewer – a consumer of documentary films and programs on big and small screens.

As I have written over numerous industry and media articles, the one off documentary is in terminal decline on our public broadcasters. They are increasingly obsessed with audience prime time reach and competing with the commercial broadcasters. This in my view, is at the expense of public broadcaster values, cultural diversity, innovation, program legacy and quality. Broadcasters are not particularly egalitarian in their view of content creation. They

have a hungry machine to feed and that's their objective. But films do have a life outside of broadcast, as educational programs, as festival and community screenings and sometimes as theatrical events. They can have a long useful life in these contexts. But in the current climate these roles are often overlooked in the here and now world of broadcast.

I don't wish to imply in this submission that the shows commissioned and funded via the current system, produced by my colleagues, do not have cultural value. The figures show that many of the big ABC series, like *Redesign My Brain* are popular and have vast audience reach. But I would argue that increasingly these types of series are formulaic in style and tone. They don't encourage innovation and they increasingly are presented by ABC personalities from other ABC mainstream entertainment shows. It's ABC cross promotion at work, content entwined in marketing.

I would have liked the Screen Australia discussion paper to have provided some figures about production budgets for one offs VRS factual series and where the bulk of the documentary production money is being spent in relationship to the broadcast schedule. Whilst the number of titles shows there is still a significant number of one offs produced, I'd like to know what percentage of combined Screen Australia funds and public broadcaster funds are being spent on prime time series as opposed to one offs in other parts of the TV schedule. This would be ONE indicator of diversity against dollar spend by Screen Australia.

The following is an example of the diversity argument applied to a production. I will try to encompass a well rounded view of funding through to marketing, because I believe that best illustrates my argument. I recently produced *The Holy Dip*, a half hour program with an ABC presale (Compass), Screen Australia PEP funds, SNSW and a significant financial input by the production company. We were only granted an ABC presale on the condition that we would not approach Screen Australia's GDP program. This was the "Lock Out" in action. My point is that ABC Factual management prioritises 'prime time' as their main interest where the bulk of their funds are to be spent in conjunction with Screen Australia investment. Programs such as Compass, 6.30 Sunday nights and Artscape 10pm Tuesday are regarded as 'off-broadway' and often have less access to the full array of production funds, yet they are the strands on the ABC where one sees the greatest diversity of content, a diversity of stories, characters, form, cultural value and innovation.

Then when it came time to marketing and promoting *The Holy Dip*, the ABC has done zilch. The priority for the ABC publicity marketing team is mostly promoting prime time. It is an enormous concern to me, that a program that is funded with public money should receive such

scant treatment by a public broadcaster when it comes to promoting their own commissioned shows. It has nothing to do with the quality of *The Holy Dip*. They love it at the ABC. But it has everything to do with ABC priorities. It's an example of how a diversity of programs and viewing experiences on offer to their audiences are not fully valued and are not a priority for ABC TV management.

Having said that *The Holy Dip* was made – thanks to the ABC and jointly Screen Australia & SNSW with their inputs. So this story isn't a whinge, I'd happily do it all again and on the same budget level. But the intention of the anecdote is to point out an inequity of funding and marketing across genres of documentary and how public (Screen Australia) money is spent. Should an ABC Arts, or, Religion and Ethics audience get less bang for their tax payer dollars than a prime time audience? As a public investor in cultural capital Screen Australia should be concerned about this question, as indeed I am.

Now to address the Discussion Paper questions.

Are specific targeted programs such as the current suite of documentary programs efficient and effective?

As outlined above under the current TV pre-sale led system I believe diversity, cultural value and innovation are suffering. By one measure of audience reach – ratings for prime time programs – the figures stated in the Screen Australia discussion paper show that certain programs have big ratings figures. So under this measure you can yes they are effective. But should that criteria be the only measure of audience reach?

I believe the Signature Fund should be expanded as it is efficient and effective and potentially delivers on diversity, cultural capital, innovation and audience reach. And I'd like to give a production example based on my experience of producing and directing *Make Hummus Not War* (MHNW). The example provides another way of measuring audience and therefore effectiveness.

To my mind MHNW has been a great success and an example of what the Signature Fund can achieve. The film was completed in 2012 at both feature and TV lengths with an expanded stand alone website. The total budget was \$506K. It was financed by the Signature Fund, SNSW, a private investor, the Telematic Trust via DAF and the Melbourne International Film Festival's – Premiere Fund. The project was passed over by commissioners at both the ABC and SBS at submission stage.

However I think the film is a model for audience reach beyond just that provided by 'prime time' in Australia, as important as that is. To date MHNW has screened at approximately 30 national and international film festivals. These include high profile 'A' list festivals like Berlin & San Sebastian and in Australia at MIFF. I estimate that national and international festival audiences amount to 15,000 or more, as most festivals run several (2 or 3) screenings. The feedback I have is that the screenings usually sell out. Interestingly, the film plays across Middle Eastern and Jewish audiences which it was always intended to do. I have discovered that there is also a large festival audience hungry for films about food. The film has played out on VOD, locally, by various providers, international airlines and has been purchased recently by SBS (the hour version) for a substantially higher than average acquisition price for prime time broadcast later this year. It has also been broadcast across the Middle East (Middle East Broadcast Networks) the ABC's Asia Pacific service and in Brazil. It remains in international distribution. DVD sales for MHNW include acquisitions by numerous North America Universities for Diplomacy, Middle East and History courses and units. Week by week festivals continue to express interest in screening it. All of this carries enormous cultural capital, as a recent review in the Seattle Globalist stated, "Someone was bound to make this movie – though you might not expect it would be an Australian". At an Australian Embassy function in Berlin 2013, for Australian filmmakers attending the festival, the Ambassador said to me, "You guys make our jobs easy because you shine such a good light on Australia and our cultural programs".

This experience of releasing MHNW sums up the enormous cultural value of the Signature Fund. Having been rejected by both local national broadcasters Screen Australia made a choice, took a punt, used their judgement & made an assessment that MHNW was worth backing. I imagine those responsible used cultural criteria, innovative content, the experience of the team and market potential as their criteria. I would argue that MHNW's audience reach across the numerous platforms national and international combined with the future SBS screenings will in the end be significant. OK. It's not ABC prime time, 1.4 mil viewers. But that surely isn't the sole measure in our diverse media landscape.

I offer the MHNW experience as an example of success for the Signature Fund. Similarly there are some other great examples of successful films backed by that program. It's an example of efficient and effective delivery of a funding program.

How can Screen Australia best support low-budget documentary making?

Create a Low Budget documentary fund with a cap of 100K per project that is applicable to projects both with and without a TV presale. The fund could support projects that have a TV half hour presale OR be chosen by Screen Australia project officers as worthy of support based on cultural or artistic merit, content, innovation and diversity. The fund could have a focus target on younger filmmakers, as part of the criteria, but not necessarily tied to that concept. In other words flexibility is important based on the quality of submissions.

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

Via the current system of TV led presales....BUT NOT exclusively. The High End notion should apply to the Signature Fund too. Screen Australia projects should be funded on the basis of merit, cultural value, innovation, diversity meeting the values of the NDP and the projected ability to reach audiences....audiences PLURAL, TV, online, educational & festival. These decisions should not be exclusively defined by broadcasters. So it should be a mixture with and without TV presale attachments. It could include festival release, VOD, theatrical where applicable, and non-theatrical.

This submission is not based on canning the current TV presale led system. But rather balancing it, by opening up the funding decisions to other cultural criteria and removing the current exclusive control of the duopoly of two public broadcasters. So Premium Documentary could be a mixture of projects that achieve a budget level 500K+ per hour and this could be determined by a broadcaster presale for a one off or a series. But Premium could also apply to projects that are more Signature Fund.

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

Theatrical is all but dead, although there are exceptions like, *I am Eleven* that radically disprove that. But it was made without any broadcast or funding support. I think there should be one funding program for premium docs regardless of platform.

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?

- The MIFF Premiere Fund puts up \$65K to \$85K for a documentary. Why can't that, or other festival investment support be considered market place? It's no

more or less 'market place', than an ABC presale. Both are govt supported.

Although with MIFF at least ticket purchases, are a real indicator of market and do contribute to the festival's funding. So when MIFF backs a film there is real risk. Will an audience chose to pay and view it at the festival?

- DAF philanthropic support for a project could be matched or used as a criteria by Screen Australia, although this pathway isn't yet capable of replacing the current level of a 1 hour TV presale. But perhaps a change in SA policy would help kick that along?
- Letters of commitment from distributors, national and international and assessments from them in dollar terms about the market potential for a project.
- Letters of intent/interest from VOD exhibitors to exhibit work online.
- International letters of interest from festivals.
- Screen Australia matches funding from a State agency. It's not 'market place'. But then again I question the description of the ABC as 'market'. It's not. It's an agency relying on public money with a cultural/social agenda.

With the exception of MIFF & DAF none of the above really replaces the current broadcaster commitment of cash. So I would come back to a cultural argument that Screen Australia backs more projects on cultural criteria that have proved some evidence of distributor/exhibitor intent on whatever platform. This was the scenario for MHNW which proved successful. However y removing the presale component of a budget the production budgets will be smaller as a consequence. I think we should however accept that proposition.

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

I believe that the NDP needs to be retained and continue to promote and underpin the aims and values attached to the program. However I also believe that the NDP should NOT be a program exclusively funding TV documentary projects. The door should be opened to projects that don't have presales and are deemed by Screen Australia to meet the NDP

guidelines. I don't think the values of the NDP are always best served by the broadcaster's focus on ratings. Some examples...

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the ABC is currently actively shying away from historical programming. One hears this from the ABC's commissioning team consistently. Yes there is a raft of WW1 and other related programming in the pipe line. But war stories seem to be the only Australian history that the ABC commissions. However I want to provide an interesting anecdote that contradicts that view, but shows why I think the NDP and the aims of our public broadcasters are not necessarily always great bedfellows.

In 2010 I was the executive producer of *Singapore 1942*. It was offered to both SBS and the ABC. Screen Australia to its credit, from the very start, identified it as a strong NDP project. The program was being pitched and produced for the 70th anniversary of the historic battle of 1942 and was the last opportunity television would have to involve Australian and other survivors of the conflict and its horrific aftermath for the allied troops. After numerous months of discussion with the ABC the then head of factual declined to offer a presale. The reason given was, and I quote, "Singapore was a massive defeat, a depressing story and it won't get us an audience". How ironic it then was that the BBC (Scotland) could see the merit of the project and Discovery Asia, they became our first confirmed partners. Fortunately SBS came to the party and the project was made. The two part series when broadcast on BBC Scotland was then picked up by BBC 2 because it was deemed dramatic and successful. For our own ABC national broadcast to offer their reason for declining a presale is extraordinary and I believe highlights an incompatibility between their current needs and those of the NDP on SOME projects.

I ask the question are these current intentions and aims of the NDP currently being met?

The National Documentary Program (NDP) aims to provide a comprehensive and strategic slate of projects across time, involving a diversity of styles and formats, and encompassing a broad range of themes of national and cultural significance with heritage value.

Where are the stories from regional and remote Australia on either of our public broadcasters that could utilise NDP funds? Yes there is the occasional indigenous story, but very rarely and even more rarely from remote communities. These stories were once part of the Film Australia remit under the National Interest Program, but under the current presale led system they have all but disappeared.

I therefore believe that Screen Australia should have the discretion to use NDP funds to back projects regardless of whether there is a TV presale, but that have a potential acquisition sale

on completion and other audience reach measures in place, such as strong educational potential.

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

All three are a priority. And I am not in favour of divorcing Screen Australia from the current TV presale system.

I am in favour of and have argued consistently for greater diversity and consideration of the cultural merit of the one off documentary. The pendulum has swung too far in terms of a limited definition of audience reach on prime time television and in favour of factual series. So Screen Australia needs to adopt the mantle of taking more punts in favour of diversity, cultural historical merit and innovation and funding projects based on those criteria and at their discretion. Along with these other measures for audience reach need consideration, along the lines of those I provided in the MHNW profile.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of Screen Australia accepting applications in rounds versus at any time?

I don't have a strong view on this. Ultimately either way is problematic. The production investment funds either run out too quickly or slowly. I probably favour staged rounds, it perhaps creates more certainty over the cycle of developing projects into financing and production.

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Trevor Graham is the writer and director of, *Make Hummus Not War*, which had its World Premiere at the Melbourne International Film Festival in August and was selected to screen at the Berlin and San Sebastina film Festivals in 2013. It was produced without a television presale and funded via Screen Australia's Signature Program, the Premier Fund of MIFF, Screen NSW, the Telematics Trust and Fine Cut Films. The film has a theatrical release in Melbourne commencing 15th of September. Graham is the former Co-Chair of the Australian International Documentary Conference and a

former commissioning editor at SBS TV and Series
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