

Submission on Screen Australia Program Guidelines Draft Response by Catherine Marciniak

As a documentary producer/director I would like to support the initiative of Screen Australia to streamline funding avenues and put more of tax payers dollars into production rather than in bureaucracy. Many of the initiatives proposed are of great merit and good for the business of the sector. However there are some problem areas currently encountered by the industry that have not yet been addressed.

Documentary and Factual Programming

Of all the sectors in the industry documentary and factual programming for television has to be one of the most successful, primarily through the creative business practice and editorial rigour of the sector, despite extremely limited financial resources. In addition a significant amount of Australian documentary product secures international investment and/or sells well internationally after production. Documentary and factual consistently and increasingly produces high quality bulk programming with a comparatively small price tag, with content that is popular, rates extremely well with audiences and is about Australians or their point of view, fulfilling the cultural argument. It is real value for the Australian tax payers dollar.

Yet funding decisions over the past couple of years are making it even harder for this incredibly cash strapped but entrepreneurial group of producers and directors to put the bulk of their budgets on screen.

Offset as part of budget

The producer offset of 20% for documentary is proving difficult for budgets and means that there are increasingly people on the budget payroll who have nothing to do with getting content on screen and everything to do with managing and cash flowing money. Producers are having to allocate limited time resources to find money to cash flow projects, pay interest to financiers, and pour more limited financial and time resources into managing the offset funding system. Any Australian content projects with international shooting requirements seem to be penalised by the offset if it is included as part of the budget as not all OS expenditure can be claimed. Producers have to watch every dollar spent in terms of whether it can be claimed against the offset. There is a danger that the offset itself will start to determine whether content is worthwhile rather than the documentary or factual story. Paying middle man and using limited resources to help manage a funding system is not an efficient use of tax payer and budget dollars. And this is definitely not what was hoped for in terms a new and viable business model that provided Producers with cash flow to develop their next slate rather than relying on government funding yet again for this.

So to see the offset it seems included as a matter of course as part of the budgets in SA production funding is tragic. In my view this is the single most

important issue for the documentary sector in this country. Ideally SA could help the sector successfully lobby government for the offset for documentary to be 40%. Whether part or any of the offset is used as part of the budget should be a decision made by the Producer of the project as the manager of their own business plan.

\$500,000 Enterprise Program

In concept the enterprise program sounds like a good idea for helping companies grow their business. The danger of the criteria is however I believe that it could become just about size of slate. Our current economic climate has shown us that growth in itself is not the sole measure of a healthy industry and I believe in documentary and factual sector if we just look at hours of production created as a measure it could be a recipe for mediocrity. I think the caution with this scheme is in the detail. As it seems that most small and large production companies in the factual sector fulfil the criteria outlined how will the cut-off for limited funds occur and on what criteria - size of company, slate, quality, etc.?

And a suggestion Can some of the concerns by emerging director and producers for opportunities in short form drama, documentary and factual programming be addressed by making it a requirement of this enterprise money (tax payers dollars) that a certain number of emerging screen professionals be given opportunities on productions developed and produced as a result of this initiative?

The National Interest Program and Indigenous Programming

I commend SA for quarantining the funding for The National Interest Program and Indigenous Programming areas. Over the past few years the initiatives of the NIP have proven themselves over and over again to be raising the quality bar in history, science and its multi-genre slate, creating well-resourced quality programming about who we are for Australian audiences. The quality has been proved in the ratings - Australians want this product. Similarly the Indigenous Unit of the AFC produced some of the most outstanding dramas of recent years and has continued to develop filmmakers who give Indigenous Australia their unique voice in quality programming.

However much of this development of Indigenous Programming has been in short form drama and doco which does support the concern made by emerging screen industry creatives across the board that there is a need to secure some significant support of short form production in both documentary and drama if we want to secure quality, longer form projects in the future. Perhaps this is something that SA could facilitate with state agencies and/or significantly fund and resource through screen umbrella groups supported by the SA Screen Culture Funding Department.

Children's Programming, New Media and Fellowships

These are all great initiatives that provide more avenues for practitioners, and

hopefully emerging practitioners, to develop their craft and markets.

Streamlining Funding Approval - all sectors

One of the strangleholds in the documentary and factual programming sector is the time it takes to secure funding approvals and cash flow. Often Producers are forced to cash flow projects that while they have commitment from funding bodies contracting is holding up the process, or producers think a project will be funded but at the 11th hour it isn't, or editorial decisions by funders are slowing the project from going into production as per schedule. This is not always a problem with funding agencies but also with broadcasters and co-production partners. So there may not be an easy answer to this. But one step would be to at least ensure there are streamlined processes at SA with maximum approval timeframes in the detail of the SA guidelines. Australian broadcasters could also be co-opted into streamlining this process and I would hope Screen Australia take a lead in facilitating this so Producers can meet the schedules they need to in operating a successful business.

I hope this feedback is useful,
Catherine Marciniak
Documentary Producer/Director/Writer