

Yarra Bank Films Pty Ltd

**Response to the new documentary Guidelines
'Stories That Matter'**

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Trevor Graham

This submission is made by Yarra Bank Films Pty Ltd and producer-director Trevor Graham. It follows on from an earlier submission to the 'Stories That Matter' review process submitted 20/3/14.

I now wish to respond to the draft guidelines and very much appreciate the opportunity to provide further input into this process of refining the Screen Australia documentary funding guidelines.

I believe the review process, the consultations and the new draft guidelines address current short comings in the so called 'market place' for Australian documentary and are also visionary in the way they open up the funding arena to alternative definitions of 'market' and embrace new distribution and exhibition platforms.

I've been in the business of producing and directing documentary in Australia for over 30 years. I've worked for both public broadcasters and been a commissioning editor for documentary at SBS. I've assessed projects for Screen Australia, Film Victoria, Screen Tasmania and Screen NSW. I've created broadcaster led schemes with funding agencies to bring new players, young directors and producers across the country into the business. In this time I've seen plenty of commissioning editors and investment managers come and go. I've seen funding schemes leaning this way and that. I've been around long enough to know that many years ago we had to fight for a commissioning process for Australian documentaries on our public broadcasters. I was one who championed that great cause. So I bring this experience to this submission. I have some corporate memory to rely on for my assessment of the new proposed Screen Australia documentary funding guidelines, 'Stories That Matter'.

Why do I support and fully endorse these new guidelines – because to borrow a slogan from Gough Whitlam, IT'S TIME.

As I, Bob Connolly, the ADG and many others have argued over the past few years in various forums including Screen Hub & AIDC, the ratings driven agenda of both our public broadcasters has lead to a diminishing of documentary work in Australia.

It's also increasingly clear that both our public broadcasters are aping the commercial broadcasters with a strategy to attract younger viewers. We are told in submissions to the 'Stories That Matter' review by the ABC and Screen Producer's Association that the broadcasters best know Australian audiences and how best to reach them via the content they commission. Well if this is true then the overall strategy isn't a grand success. You don't need to be Einstein to conclude that the weekly ratings of both public broadcasters is in freefall. One can only imagine what will happen when Netflix, at 10 bucks a month, comes to Australia next year.

Screen Australia's own stats published as part of the 'Stories That Matter' review show that the one off Australian doc is an endangered species. The figures show there is a subsequent rise in favour of factual series. Screen Australia's new draft guidelines are aiming to address this decline in one of our most significant and proven media forms—the single authored documentary.

What's at stake for Australian audiences? Why does this matter? Well I answer this question as both producer and avid consumer. What matters is diversity. Not only do we have less diverse stories from fewer producers on our screens, but the breadth and depth of stories and storytelling is vastly reduced and often formulaic.

To be fair we do see some great examples of documentary on the ABC and documentary series. And we do see, culture, creativity and diversity particularly in programs commissioned by ABC TV Arts and funded in conjunction with Screen Australia like the fabulous *Art and Soul* 3 part series. Similarly a program like *The Redfern Story*, commissioned by ABC Indigenous. But these programs are too rare on the weekly TV schedule. And in my view, *and it is my opinion, others will argue differently*, these programs far outshine those commissioned by ABC TV Factual, which sometimes aren't factual, are usually formulaic and over blown with hype and presenters. There seems to be a current fad for ABC personalities fronting independently produced programs. I too have done this recently, co-producing a program for the ABC. Is this ABC Marketing wagging the dog ?

Why do I point the finger at ABC Factual? Because this is where the ABC puts the emphasis itself, for what it commissions and the way it spends its commissioning dollars. Most of the bucks are being spent on prime time, a narrow window of slots where the ABC puts its publicity effort. Why does this matter ? Because there is less diversity evident in these prime time slots and it is where the bulk of the Screen Australia documentary funding is spent. 50% of all Screen Australia documentary funding is currently allocated to the ABC.

To add insult to injury ABC Factual recently removed the Religion and Ethics program, *Compass*, from their commissioning slate. The reason? To prioritise the prime time spend. So at the same time as a review process is occurring, in which Screen Australia is raising issues about it's core functions and issues of screen diversity, we see the ABC actively, perhaps even arrogantly, shutting down yet another commissioning slot that's very function is to promote a diversity of views to do with religion and ethics in Australia.

So given the above which is an abbreviated version of what Ive written previously on many occasions, I fully endorse the draft guidelines as a step in the right direction especially as it shows that Screen Australia desires a return to its principal functions as stated in its charter,

'ensure 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; and (b) place an emphasis on: (i) documentaries'.

I also completely endorse the review opening statement by Graeme Mason, Screen Australia's CEO, (AIDC 2014) because it reflects the desire to place Screen Australia's new funding guidelines at the heart of new technologies rapidly affecting the distribution and exhibition of documentaries in Australia and globally. It's an acknowledgment that the definition of market is on the cusp of radical change.

This is a really key moment for documentary in this country, and perhaps globally. We are seeing significant changes in the way viewers interact with content – with new players, new platforms and technologies shifting habits – and we need to think carefully about how we can extend – not just preserve – documentary’s unique and important qualities in this new landscape. [Graeme Mason, February 2014]

I also wish to state that I fully support and endorse the final submission to the ‘Stories That Matter’ review made the ADG, the Australian Directors Guild.

I do however also have some comments on some of the proposed changes and hope that these will be seriously considered in the formulation of the final guidelines.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

- I fully endorse the aims of the Screen Australia review process to investigate:
the best ways to support Australian documentary into the future, in particular how to:
 - *remain responsive to a rapidly changing production and distribution environment;*
 - *reach and engage with audiences on all platforms;*
 - *improve the contestability of funds;*
 - *support-low budget documentary; and*
 - *streamline Screen Australia's administration of documentary funding.*
- I also strongly agree with the stated intention in the guidelines to fund, ‘*stories that should reflect the principles of quality, diversity and innovation..... They are likely to resonate with audiences; they will have meaning that can endure beyond the moment of broadcast (or download or streaming); should draw on a depth of research or thinking about the subject matter; and rely on documentary craft and skills.*’
This is welcomed and valued by Yarra Bank Films.
- Similarly the broadening of the definition of ‘market’, still very much inclusive of broadcast, is an important step forward in acknowledging the changing platforms on which Australians are accessing audio visual content and also that producers increasingly have alternative avenues for funding like film festivals: *the draft guidelines include funding programs which **broaden the accepted forms of marketplace commitment** to include online subscription service presale, film festival finance, and partnerships with foundations and institutions that extend audience reach.*
- Quotas – Yarra Bank Films supports the removal of the quotas for both the ABC and SBS. I believe these defined quotas have contributed to far less diversity on our screens and also the favouring of larger companies. Yes it removes certainty for broadcasters and the bigger producers. But the certainty argument also evokes ‘a sense of entitlement’. Uncertainty is and always has been part of the film & TV

business. One can also argue that the current quota system actually distorts any sense of real market. It's a strange market where a large chunk of public arts funding is automatically allocated to two players to mostly the exclusion of others and those two players are also publicly funded. What economic's rule book does this come from ? What market model is this ? If this were another industry, another trade employing government money would the current Screen Australia-broadcaster model of quotas stand the test of competition and fairness ?

If broadcasters want certainty then their argument to government should be to have increased funding so that they can fully fund the programs they want, when they want them. Or make a partial return to internal production, produce what they want when they want it.

Our current system is based on a partnership between commissioner/broadcaster and screen funding agencies, not just Screen Australia. What the broadcasters have failed to do is nurture this partnership—to recognise that the partner has its own cultural needs and objectives (a bit more personal space please) that is reflected by the Screen Australia charter.

- I fully endorse the desire by Screen Australia to support creative vision as a primary objective in funding documentary, *the draft guidelines aim to provide flexibility for projects from filmmakers with strong creative vision and innovative, authorial or experimental approaches.*
- **Vision & Voice**, this is an improvement on the Signature Fund and the proposed increased allocation of funding is both welcomed and an acknowledgement that this fund does fulfill its objectives and those of the Screen Australia charter. Big tick !
- **Meaning & Market**, the inclusion of a non broadcast definition of market is a leap forward whilst also acknowledging the importance of the current broadcast input. Another big tick !
- **Premium Documentary Program**: In conjunction with the ADG submission I believe that the minimum budget of \$1m is too high and does not represent the reality of Australian documentary production. It certainly would apply to international co-productions. I would therefore suggest that the threshold be dropped to \$750,000 per hour. I believe this is a more realistic level with the general reduction in documentary budgets across the world.
- **The Producer Equity Program (PEP)** My comments mirror the submission made by the ADG. PEP has been an outstanding success in supporting a range of documentary programs both for television broadcast and cinema release. It has enabled documentary producer-directors to fund projects outside of the traditional

funding models and like the Producers Offset, allowed for more finance to be injected into the system.

Removing PEP is I believe a mistake. I dont support it. This effectively takes out 20% of the lower end scale of documentary production. It also seems inconsistent with the way the producer offset is used. Producer Offset projects are able to attract support from other programs but the PEP can't. PEP has been instrumental on several low budget half hours docs I have done, one of which had a presale but had no SA input apart from PEP. They could not have been produced without PEP. I therefore suggest a cap on availability of PEP set at \$300K, budgets over that amount are ineligible. This allows for low budget, with or without broadcaster to access PEP.

In conclusion I think this process of review by Screen Australia has been an open and transparent one that has taken into consideration the broad range of views of the documentary sector. The proposed guidelines are being put forward in a time of overall cutbacks in the arts sector. The draft guidelines address the need for change in a rapidly changing media environment. But they also in my view well manage and juggle the various competing interests in the business. Well done Screen Australia. TG