

Documentary Guidelines

Draft for comment

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The Draft guidelines and the multiple responses from many colleagues have canvassed a great many of the issues surrounding the Guidelines and their implementation so I will not reiterate points made by others where there is unison. The range of views is wide from Bob Conolly's paper to that of the ABC and everything in between

http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/about_us/new_directions/Documentary-funding/submissions-received.aspx

There are predictable views from vested interest groups who have benefitted from the status quo and from those who have not. The ABC wants to maintain its primacy without competition, for example. To adapt a famous saying "they would say that, wouldn't they." But in a world where viewers are screening documentary in many different ways, it seems appropriate to allow greater access to funds and projects to a wider range of channels to audience than just the conventional broadcasters. The ABC has been a great supporter of documentary, but that does not mean it should be entitled to maintain primacy over a changing market.

There is value in canvassing contrasting views and areas that are not adequately addressed to date.

The introduction to the Draft Guidelines provides an excellent summary as follows:

Documentary has a special place in the Australian screen industries. The best documentaries help us understand ourselves and others, inform our cultural identity, inspire us to think differently or think more deeply about issues, and form a vital legacy into the future.

Broadly the revised Guidelines successfully offer an innovative approach to the allocation of scarce resources. They fail to explore any are related to non-public funding which is, perhaps, an omission. (e.g. The Documentary Foundation, private equity etc.)

Initially it is important to review the underlying policy objectives that drive Screen Australia and its place in the documentary canvass of Australia.

I begin by re-examining how documentary might be defined, explore the underlying principles and policy objectives that drive funding decisions and seek to offer proposals that might enhance the documentary production community.

The Tax and Superannuation Laws Amendment (2013 Measures No. 2) Bill 2013 defined documentary following the controversial Lush House case as follows:

A film is a *documentary* if the film is a creative treatment of actuality, having regard to:

- (a) the extent and purpose of any contrived situation featured in the film; and
- (b) the extent to which the film explores an idea or a theme; and
- (c) the extent to which the film has an overall narrative structure; and
- (d) any other relevant matters.

Apart from the lazy catchall in (d), the definition is sound and offers certainty to producers and narrows the arena, separating documentary from the wider panorama of factual content.

So why is documentary important? Screen Australia's draft Guidelines note the need for longevity and the potential to last beyond initial screening. This should be regarded as being of significant importance. Legacy is a key element of documentary. Documentary or film making in general as primarily is not exclusively an "artform" with its concomitant overtones of intellectual indulgence. There is room for documentary as art, but it should be seen in the same context as painting, poetry and sculpture rather than being the only appropriate manifestation of screen storytelling. Documentary is storytelling in one of its grandest forms and the majority of documentary supported by Screen Australia should be designed to reach audiences rather than being solely the expression of personal stories that are designed more as the expression of the author's internal journey than the exploration of narrative relevant, to and engaging for, a wider screen audience.

Documentary in the context of the draft Guidelines should be seen as having a value in exploring and illuminating issues that reach beyond the personal journey of an author. This is not to say "auteur" works should not be made; just not with public funds **unless** the Personal extrapolates to the wider community. An individual can typify an issue and, by doing so, contribute to social debate, entertainment or the totality of knowledge for society. But simple emotional voyeurism is not appropriate for publicly funded documentary.

Above all, there must be a story for a production to be a documentary.

Taking Screen Australia's objectives as follows:

- **Quality** – premium Australian content that resonates with contemporary audiences and creates a legacy of quality audiovisual content
- **Diversity** – Australian content across a range of subjects, styles and approaches
- **Innovation** – risk-taking and creativity that grows and evolves content across different forms

These qualities are largely subjective which means that individuals or groups of individuals will have great influence over the selection of projects, but within them are elements that can be objectively assessed.

Content that "resonates" presupposes that this can be predicted prior to screening which is clearly not possible. The resonance of *Searching for Sugarman* might not have been predicted for a worldwide audience, yet it found global acclamation. *Mrs Carey's Concert* could be seen as a very local story relating to narrow upper socio economic audiences and yet it attracted a significant theatrical support as well as strong ratings on television.

The requirement for projects to “resonate” is really a goal that is immeasurable until after the event. Political speak but of little value.

Legacy, however, is assessable and is an important goal for documentary, not just in relation to National Interest documentary. It doesn't have to be dull to last; just be of sufficient audience appeal to be worth keeping. Factual productions that creep past the documentary definition, but have little or no legacy value, should not be regarded as documentary.

Diversity of itself is not necessarily valuable. There should be some qualification of the term. Projects that are merely different for the sake of being different should not be regarded as fulfilling this condition. Innovation is valuable but must be measured against established criteria which should always include the need to tell a story and reach an audience. One might think such a criterion is self-evident but it is worth stating to second-guess the bush lawyers.

Questions for discussion

- Are specific targeted programs such as the current suite of documentary programs efficient
 - They are sufficient if there is flexibility. Silos can be limiting and counterproductive.
- How can Screen Australia best support low-budget documentary making?
 - This questions assumes that Screen Australia should support low-budget documentary making. How low is perhaps an appropriate question. Given the availability of low cost camera and editing gear, the cost of gear can be reduced considerably. However, the film maker still needs to be paid a reasonable fee so there is a need for caution in order to avoid exploitation of desperate producers willing to cut costs to the bone in order to get a commission. It is important that, in supporting low-budget documentary, it is not available to broadcasters as a substitute for appropriately professional production. Scroz could provide budget support that is proportional to the budgets of the films. Encourage broadcasters to pay licence fees that are at similar percentage levels to other documentaries by reducing the requirement for minimum licence fees to trigger Scroz matched funding but with safeguards to avoid a proliferation of “garage television”.
- How can high-end documentaries reach the broadest possible audience?
 - By ensuring multi-platform reach with day and date for all films and limit the holdbacks that prevent the wider exploitation of the production.
- Should Screen Australia continue to offer separate theatrical funding for documentaries
 - Theatrical distribution is quite different to television; the business models, the people, the marketing is all different so there is a strong need for continuing to offer separate funding for theatrical documentary. But it is important to support this level of documentary as feature film or it will not get made. Scroz should be cautious about assuming that producers seeking feature film status are simply trying to elevate a television production to theatrical in order to get the 40% APO. That will be a temptation but professional producers should not do this.
 - Premium documentaries are not necessarily theatrical. Many wildlife documentaries are not suitable for theatrical release or designed as such. Others of a social or narrative

nature are better on television. So there should be strong support for premium documentary but a distinction should be maintained between theatrical and television.

- Could a requirement for marketplace commitment be met in ways other than a broadcaster
 - Clearly marketplace is much wider than television. VOD, DVD, Net broadcast etc. Netflix is a major play in the marketplace in other parts of the world and will be replicated here. Confining the definition of marketplace to “broadcaster only” is out of date.
- If so, what sort of indicators of audience reach and engagement could Screen Australia
 - A clear marketing plan with target audience demographics and number argued with strong supporting evidence from a third party (who might not necessarily be the distributor but has expertise in the market) endorsing the marketing plan. Just having a distributor or broadcaster attached is no indicator of success in reaching an audience. (The Drover is a case in point). Get rid of the theatrical distinction and understand that audiences can be reached in many different ways. Press the Producers to demonstrate how and why they can reach the audiences they propose.
- What are the impacts (positive and negative) on the industry of the notional broadcaster funding allocations that currently apply to the NDP and GDP? Should these be revised?
 - There is a need for more open contestability between the two funds but the allocation of funds for purposes that include the national legacy. The NDP has encouraged better licence fees for legacy projects but the reduction in history and science on ABC, for example, will reduce the opportunity for National Interest Projects. Both set a floor and ceiling price and could be said to reduce contestability but I believe the reality is that both the NDP and GDP provide a framework that force the broadcasters to pay at least a reasonable minimum fee.
- In making decisions about whether to invest in projects, what considerations should be prioritised (eg cultural, innovation, audience reach)?
 - The assessment of such criteria is very subjective and open to argument and interpretation. Who would set the priority and based on what criteria. It could be argued that any group interest might be culturally relevant from Graffiti Art to Sport. Innovation of itself is of no value. Only audience reach is a fair basis on which to invest taxpayer funds. That is not to say pure numbers are the key criterion. Rather, Scroz should seek clear assessment of target audiences for any particular project and assess its potential against its likely ability to reach a significant proportion of that audience. For example, a film about retirement might be targeted at the over 55s and would have little appeal to young viewers. But, if that film has a target audience of 1,000,000 and can make a case that it will reach 60% of that audience, then it might be said to be viable. So it is suggested that the relevant audience should be the key measure.
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of Screen Australia accepting applications in rounds versus at any time?

- There is value in having the predictability of rounds but the rigidity of the system means that producers face long delays that can mean losing an actor or a project altogether if they cannot be nimble. So the rounds system, on balance, is valuable but it would be important to have a more flexible ability to allow time critical responses more easily.

- **Producer Equity Program (PEP):** This is a good scheme for limited numbers of projects because it is flexible. But it requires producers to find the balance of the budget without any access to further Scroz funds making it very difficult to finance a film.
- **Vision and Voice:** Excellent scheme. Care needed in the selection process but not having the compulsion for broadcaster attachment is important.
- **Meaning and Market:** Who decides what stories “matter”. Minimum budget means the films are intended to be challenging and of quality. This works well.
- **Premium Documentary Program:** This should definitely not combine theatrical and television. They are different creatures and must be assessed differently.

Documentary development – fundamentally important especially for early development.
\$1million is not enough but better than nothing in tight financial environment.

And do stop putting Screen Australia on the front of every film. It makes film look like government propaganda.