

Response to the Screen Australia's Discussion Paper: Stories That Matter.

From my experience documentary has gone through many significant changes over the last decade. A comparison between what the industry looked like 10 years ago versus what it looks like now is almost unrecognisable. Back then television was the major driver of documentary. Now this is no longer the case. The documentary eco-system has been irrevocably altered by the fragmentation of television audiences through multi-channel broadcasting, decline of international pre-sales, and new financing models based on crowd funding, philanthropic involvement and the offset.

In his submission John Hughes makes an important distinction between 'factual' and 'documentary'. The two are based on quite different models of production. While factual content is driven largely by TV commissioning requirements with strict delivery schedules etc, documentaries tend to be 'hand made' and essentially director-driven. They evolve and grow organically, regardless of style and approach. It's not surprising then that documentary filmmakers and broadcasters don't necessarily share the same objectives. Screen Australia funding programs need to appreciate and reflect this duality.

I aim to address some of the questions formulated in Screen Australia's Discussion Paper as follows:

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

I don't believe low-budget documentary is supported sufficiently. (See recommendation below re. expanding the Signature Fund).

The general and international programs seem to be effective in so far as they provide a guaranteed match to what the broadcaster puts up. However what defines a National Documentary Program project seems often quite arbitrary and an argument could be put that the NDP be dissolved into the General Documentary Program, or alternatively that it shouldn't necessarily be triggered by a pre-sale at all. Instead producers could submit projects for NDP funding to be assessed by a panel comprising SA staff together with filmmakers and respected figures outside the film industry. Projects would be selected on Screen Australia's principal criteria of 'innovation, depth and compelling story-telling'. Producers would then be given a 'letter of interest', which they could take to a broadcaster. This is reverse to what exists now.

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

My recommendation would be to expand the Signature Fund and introduce a sub-program within this Fund aimed at early-career filmmakers. (Makes a similar argument in his submission, as does .) This would be aimed at first-time directors who are aiming to complete projects which are either mostly completed or in the early stages of post-production. Many first-time filmmakers might shoot a documentary using their own personal resources, but then have no funds to employ an

experienced editor. I have seen many examples of work done this way. Strong and compelling subject matter ends up being compromised through poor editing. The importance of experienced editors and what they can bring to a first film is never given sufficient credit.

Documentary development should also be given a much higher priority. From my experience working with early career filmmakers, development funds are mostly used to kick-start production. This significantly assists low-budget projects which might come in later for rough-cut support or production through the Signature Fund.

Screen Australia should substantially increase the amount for documentary development. There should be more risk-taking. The eligibility rules need to be relaxed. Under the present system early career directors need to knock on doors of experienced producers who work outside the Enterprise system. There is a shortage of these producers. Under the present system, the team need to have at least three eligible documentary credits (half hour or longer). This is too restrictive. Eligibility should be sufficient on the basis of a mentoring producer who has at least one documentary credit.

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

Through a variety of means. Television, traditional theatrical which is still viable for certain documentaries (eg *Mrs Carey's Concert*, *Red Obsession*) Video streaming and downloads is an expanding area, as are festivals and regional theatrical screenings. Employing the services of a social impact producer is a vital way of making this possible. (And provision for such a person should be made in budgets.)

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

Rather than setting up "The Premium Fund", why not insist that the guidelines be relaxed for the existing Feature Production Fund which explicitly supports theatrical documentaries? My suggestion would be to remove the requirement of a distributor in order to access this fund. There are numerous examples of successful self-distribution models/hybrids (*I am a Girl*, *I am Eleven*, *Mary Meets Mohammad*) that have generated successful audiences. The traditional distribution model is changing and therefore the SA requirement should reflect this. All the producer would need to do is put up a viable self-distribution plan with social impact being the key criterion.

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?

Mainstream terrestrial broadcast (including delayed streaming) is still the most effective way of reaching mass audiences. However audiences for documentaries are rapidly fragmenting. Other marketplace attachments

include film festivals funds, crowd-funding campaigns (for funds raised over a certain minimal level), DAF (for funds raised over a certain minimal level), and VoD advances.

A social impact campaign could also be lucrative source of revenue for filmmakers. "Mary Meets Mohammad" has generated over \$150,000 in urban and regional theatrical screenings alone, and is still making money. The problem for Screen Australia is that these measurable indicators operate after a film has been made and goes into distribution. Producers would need to provide SA with a well-researched market appraisal, and experience in self-distribution would be also beneficial.

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?

Access to Screen Australia documentary funds should not be dominated by ABC and SBS to extent to which they presently are. Smaller marketplace attachments should also be able to trigger these funds. At the moment the attachments are \$135k minimum for one film for a domestic documentary. The bar should be brought down much lower (say to \$50k) in order to make it possible for smaller broadcasters like NITV to commission a slate of films of budgets around \$250K.

Additional recommendation:

On page 13 of SA's Discussion Paper there is a table indicating the number of producers funded over the last 5 years. Extrapolating from this table, 74% of documentary funding went to producers who had made no more than one project. Clearly documentary production is basically non-sustainable.

My belief is that it is Screen Australia's responsibility to nurture documentary micro-companies as much as they do the large integrated companies it funds through the Enterprise Scheme. One idea would be reinstating a slate development program similar to the General Development Investment Program that was offered by the Australian Film Commission approximately 10 years ago. This could enable these smaller companies the ability to finance the development of a variety of projects – especially those that are time-critical. One of the conditions for the slate program could be that a certain proportion of the funds would have to allocated to give opportunities to early-career filmmakers to advance their projects.

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