

STORIES THAT MATTER

Opening address to the Australian International Documentary Conference, 4 March 2014

Graeme Mason, CEO, Screen Australia

I'm very pleased to be here to address this AIDC Conference. Thank you Joost, for providing the platform, to South Australia for hosting us, and to all of you for coming along.

I have met many of you since arriving back in the country and into this role late last year, and those I haven't yet met, I look forward to doing so while I'm here in Adelaide or in the months to come.

I am concerned in my 12 weeks in the job about the level of negativity in our sector. Negative conversation is unhelpful in setting a way forward and this 'sky is falling' approach seems to me to be partly driven by errors and misunderstandings. Also by an understandable but impossible yearning for days passed and a failure to see clearly the state of play and changes, good and bad that have and are taking place for our industry generally and for documentary in particular.

We must look at the possibilities for the future. We have to look forward.

One thing I think we should bear in mind is that there is a lot of support for documentary in this country, and overall the documentary production sector is doing pretty well, whether you can feel it or not. In many ways, I'd prefer to be a documentary maker than a features producer or TV drama creator or children's producer in the current climate.

Documentary production is up. ABS data indicates a dramatic increase between the two most recent industry surveys in 2006/07 and 2011/12. The number of broadcast hours doubled to 566, and total production spend tripled to just under \$160 million. The number of non-TV documentaries (including those made for cinema release) also more than doubled to 168.

You know, I was surprised considering what I heard from the sector to find out that around a quarter of Screen Australia's on-screen funding, \$18-20 million each year, goes to documentary development and production, and

that helps leverage \$60 million worth of production. That's a lot of documentaries, especially when you combine it with the funds from broadcasters and state agencies.

And don't forget the Offset. Last year, an additional \$20 million went into documentary production through the Producer Offset, administered by Screen Australia. Since the inception of the Offset in 2008 until June 2013, 343 documentaries were issued with final certificates for the 20 per cent Offset, receiving some \$71 million.

We fund lots more documentary than any other form of content, and we know that it is because generally budgets are lower. There are also far more slots and funders for documentary than there are for feature films, drama or kids' television.

And we're working off screen too. There's enterprise funding, travel grants, promotional material for festivals, resources, production data, professional development, and sector support for events and conferences such as this one.

I have had people say "oh but you shouldn't look just at the last five years; it was very different 10 or 15 years ago". Well so was I. So was TV. So was theatrical distribution. And so was funding without the Offset.

Actually, like TV drama – and unlike kids and narrative features – documentaries are in a very good place right now, broadly speaking, with increased numbers and viewership – even if it doesn't feel like it to all.

The exciting thing for me in coming to this agency at this time, is that 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.

I do want you to hear from me today that we consider documentary vital at Screen Australia. It is enshrined in our legislation and our ethos. As you all will well know, documentary has a special place in the Australian screen industries in the past, now, and in the future.

It has a long and proud history, a highly committed and passionate field of practitioners and, as a broad form, it has the power to move us, to educate us and to inspire us – even to change us.

But we all need to change too, including in the ways we conceive of, fund, produce and distribute documentary content.

That's why we're reviewing our documentary funding programs, and we want, no need, your input. The documentary funding discussion paper we

sent you all last week, *Stories that Matter*, outlines some of the key issues we need to balance out in ensuring our programs serve Australian audiences and the documentary production industry now and into the future.

It is key that this input is forward looking and not just for today but for five years out.

As David Tiley recently wrote in Screen Hub:

Documentary is so much more than a craft, a living, a piece of factual entertainment. It is a set of tools by which we tell stories and construct metaphors about reality, all this stuff that is beyond our dreams and subjectivities. It is about reality. That stuff which crashes in and gives us our small, curious, inspired and frightened place in the universe. It is blindingly obvious that the new technologies of recording, visual transformation and distribution are creating an entirely new cultural form around documentary. Everything is in flux, everything is growing, everything is folding back and stumbling forward.

I'd like to take you through some of the key themes we think are important and that I will elaborate on today:

1. The need for a review
2. Audiences
3. Production trends & people
4. Diversity
5. International engagement

First, the need for this review. The times are a changin', and we have to adapt with them.

We need to find ways to produce and distribute – to connect with audiences – into the future, as well as where they are today.

The world of distribution is not changing; it has changed. We need to address these changes, and our place in the sector. Documentary, like newspapers, in-depth magazine pieces and serious news channels, has to realise it is a different world. The audience for this more serious minded content looks for it in different places and often in more places in smaller chunks. This change is, however, not all bad: the sky is not falling; there are real and significant opportunities.

Documentary has the potential to gain new energy and new audiences through new platforms that focus on audiences across time and geography, around issues, ideas and stories. It can use smaller, indeed niche, groups to its advantage – aggregating small groups of viewers in

cities, regions and countries to create a sizeable worldwide audience not existing in a normal usual broadcaster model.

These new platforms can benefit powerful documentary voices. An issue-based or beautifully executed authorial work may find a passionate following online beyond what may be delivered through more traditional channels. Similarly, interactive elements build on a high-impact broadcast piece and extend the conversation.

There are great opportunities for documentary emerging, with new forms, new ways to connect with and build audiences and, as ever, new stories to tell.

We are also, collectively as a sector, facing some very real challenges. Finding a way to ensure audiences continue to access unique Australian content and to maintain sustainable business models can be difficult amidst the noise of multi-platform, multi-device and multi-channel environments.

Screen Australia has a key role in the development of documentary in Australia, but we don't hold all the levers. We also cannot be all things to all people. We cannot provide incomes - especially to the huge number of people operating in this sector, again larger than any other area we deal with.

We recognise we operate in an ecosystem in which producers, directors, commissioners, schedulers and channel controllers, festivals, investors, and government (via the Offsets) all play crucial roles.

Screen Australia's direct funding underpins a large part of documentary production in Australia. 51% of projects made by the independent production sector receive Screen Australia funding. This is especially true at higher budget end – 43% of single documentaries and 51% of series financed by Screen Australia had budgets over \$500,000 per hour.

We want to support Australian documentary makers to innovate, to reach out, to aim high and to tell great stories that resonate, that travel and that endure across a range of styles and formats. At the end of all this ambition has to be the audience. The reason we have documentary funding in this country, indeed any kind of screen funding, is the cultural imperative to tell, hear and share our own stories.

We want to emphasise that Screen Australia is in the business of growing, supporting and promoting Australian storytelling – and that we are focused on what we have called '*stories that matter*'.

Cultural value in content is hard to define, and even harder to measure. But it is at the heart of what we do. We are not going to fund *Embarassing Bodies* series 47, but equally we cannot cut ourselves off from new forms of documentary.

We would not seek to be too prescriptive about approach, subject, or format in defining '*stories that matter*', but the key thread is stories that resonate with audiences; that have meaning that can endure beyond the moment of broadcast (or download or streaming) drawing on a depth of research or thinking about the subject matter; and that rely on craft and skills beyond the now ubiquitous ability to point and shoot.

Foremost, the whole point of this is audiences: and how we can support you to make stories that matter to people, beyond the filmmaker themselves and their circle.

Storytelling requires an audience, and our cultural products should be relevant and accessible to Australians today, and into the future. What does that mean? And what are audiences doing?

Everyone has heard about or knows a twenty-something who never watches television, at least not on that box in the corner we used to call the telly. He or she is the next generation, but for now they are still in the minority.

Audience trend data tells us that the 91% of viewers are still watching free-to-air television but they are increasingly pairing it with new platforms, online video, catch-up and mobile devices. The good news is that Australians are seeking out local content – 94 of the top 100 programs on free to air television last year were Australian - something we should all be celebrating.

The challenge for us here is that amongst the shiny floor-shows, formats, news juggernauts and sport – all backed by massive marketing spend – quality documentary can seem harder to promote. A documentary on free to air can now expect greatly reduced audience figures from those it received five years ago.

We will continue to partner with the public broadcasters, dedicated subscription channels and other networks, and we will work with them to maximize what we can deliver to audiences within the constraints we all face.

We appreciate that a large bulk of Australian documentary audiences are still gravitating to their traditional habitats on the ABC and SBS – who continue to offer compelling Australian content developed primarily in the public interest. We will work with them and other broadcasters as crucial parts of our ecosystem.

We must do this, however, with an eye to new opportunities, for when that cordless, twentysomething DIY scheduler reaches critical mass.

We need to future-proof documentary and its ability to find an audience, wherever they may be.

We need to consider whether continuing to require broadcaster presales to access funding programs that have currently been enveloped to specific broadcasters is the best, or only, guaranteed pathway to audiences in the rapidly emerging new media future.

Next I want to talk a bit about what ‘you’ are making, and who is making it, through a look at production trends.

The discussion paper outlines production trends and links to a depth of data on our website, as well as the ‘facts on factual’ industry overview in your satchels. I must say, our hard-working research team gets pretty exasperated when people suggest that data isn’t available for this sector when it’s been provided for over 16 years.

The issue of singles versus series documentary would be very familiar to many of you in this room and I’d now like to correct a few facts.

Certainly, there is a trend evident in the overall industry-wide production stats that series have increased in number, hours and spend and singles have been declining.

When you look at Screen Australia’s slate, however, it is evident that our support continues to strongly favour single documentaries and that the numbers of titles of single documentaries funded by Screen Australia have in fact increased in recent years, supporting a diversity of content that bucks the overall trend.

Over the past five years, Screen Australia has provided funding for twice as many single documentaries as series, with the numbers of titles funded remaining relatively stable.

The issue is not simply one of duration. Proponents of the single documentary tend to advocate for a certain kind of approach and a certain model of documentary filmmaking. One thing we have to consider is how much of this model the sector can support.

I am told that several years ago, at this forum, Brian Rosen asked all the documentary filmmakers to stand up and then suggested that if each wanted to stay in work, they’d better kill the person next to them.

Documentary makers in Australia outnumber any other form of screen businesses. In 2010, 52% of active narrative-content producing businesses made documentaries only, and another 11% made them alongside other forms of content. That’s just under 250 documentary businesses classed as ‘active’ – who had made something the previous three years.

As we all know, documentary makers, never really retire, and new exciting voices continue to emerge – filmmakers like Rebecca Barry and Genevieve Bailey, who are finding new ways to create and build their

content – as well as the graduates who, year on year, seek to join the ranks of Australian documentary filmmakers.

The role of Screen Australia cannot be, per se, to keep all these people in continuous work. The volume of people and companies quite simply precludes most from having funding from us let alone sustainable livings and businesses. Our role must focus on audience, quality and the sector overall. We support professional development, craft skills, projects and businesses – but we cannot develop policy or programs primarily based on supporting individuals livelihoods. In the context of finite funds Screen Australia will always have to make difficult choices.

Of course we need to consider diversity: The world don't move to the beat of just one drum, and nor do Australian documentary makers.

Screen Australia supports a great diversity of content, and of practitioners.

As I mentioned earlier, last financial year, Screen Australia direct support for documentary totalled around \$20 million. This included direct funding for 56 documentary projects, Producer Equity Program (PEP)–only support for 14 projects, and development support for 40 projects.

Since 2008, Screen Australia has funded 256 producers attached to 300 documentaries. These have ranged in approach, subject matter and format, platform, and duration. As you'll see on the 2014 Australian documentary mini-site and the printed materials in your satchels, we support and promote a great range of quality documentaries across a range of forms.

We have built up the Signature program to \$2 million per year, funding 12 projects last year, encouraging creative vision and cultural merit and supporting these projects at festivals in Australia and around the world. The new multi-platform documentary program supports innovation and risk-taking in approach with interactive docs.

We have also supported the development of production businesses with scope for growth that create documentary through the Enterprise program. This program has been a big success and has generated new capacities in the sector. It has also meant that enterprise companies are producing more projects without Screen Australia's direct funding assistance.

There have been some concerns expressed that this program, in building business sustainability for a range of medium-sized companies, has skewed the market by disadvantaging smaller players. The Enterprise program is currently under review and we encourage you all to participate in the next stage of consultation once draft guidelines are released, but again I expect positive and practical suggestions.

Finally, I want to say a few things about international engagement and why you should think global and act local.

It is no longer an option to simply focus on Australia in the global marketplace of screen content. Whilst recognising and celebrating our remit to work for Australia, if most of you want to continue, you will need to look broader to seek funding for your projects. If we are going to grow this sector, 90% of the growth in available finance is going to have to come from overseas.

Screen Australia funded projects have attracted an average of \$3 million each year in foreign finance for an average of 13 films per year. This has to grow.

The International Documentary program is intended to support and encourage genuine arm's length international relationships to bring in additional funds and 'grow the pie' available to Australian documentary.

Screen Australia supports companies in developing international partnerships and making international sales through travel grants and promotional support for a range of markets and festivals, from Sunny Side of the Doc at La Rochelle to MIP TV to the upcoming Asian Side of the Doc in Chengdu. The Enterprise Asia program supports businesses with projects to pitch and sell to develop a more sustained and meaningful engagement with Asian markets. The *Common Ground* report on the Australian screen industry's relationships in Asia we released last year held a simple message: know, go and grow.

The research identified the need to build sustained relationships and to deepen connections to get business happening in our region and the Enterprise Asia program supports businesses to do just that. Many of you here would have participated in delegations to markets and festivals across the region; we are supporting 35 industry practitioners to attend the Asian side of the doc in Chengdu this month, 15 of whom are being funded by Screen Australia.

We can do far more. We need to recognise that we are working in a global marketplace and that film and television is a global business albeit based on and arising from strong local work.

On our part, we are seeking to simplify guidelines for co-productions, to promote our screen incentive offsets and to facilitate new relationships beyond our borders. Onus is on you to own your careers and businesses. We will assist you to find partners and ways forward but you must be active and proactive.

So, finally, next steps: what will we do, and where might our discussions take us?

We have around \$20 million for documentary funding overall per year and that figure is unlikely to increase.

We could, however, consider new allocations of funds across programs, or start afresh with some new programs.

We could take a clean sheet of paper and devise new programs – around, say, innovation, ‘premium’ high-budget, and a new strand open to matching funds from any marketplace finance, including players along the lines of Netflix, or philanthropic funding such as that facilitated by the Documentary Australia Foundation.

Or we could simply look at current allocations and move money around, bolstering some programs and refining others.

We want to hear from you and get your views on these options. There are some key questions in the discussion paper we would like you to address. Written submissions are due four weeks after this conference. We will be developing new guidelines over the next couple of months to publish around the middle of the year, which will come into effect on 1 January 2015.

This requires some serious thinking. We know that we want to continue to encourage quality, encourage innovation and that we will always have to require a route to audience. We can’t allocate precious public funds to content that may languish on YouTube or iTunes without an effective marketing push.

Neither should we imagine that there is no way but the old ways or assume that audiences will passively receive linear broadcast schedules as they may have previously.

We will need to do this together. We need to have a constructive conversation on how we can develop the best policy settings and business models to support the craft you all seek to practice, with the ultimate aim of that magic moment when the storytelling is able to inform, inspire or amaze viewers.

Our team is here throughout the conference to discuss all this with you and hear your views. I’ll ask them all to stand up now so you know who to single out over drinks.

I look forward to hearing today’s discussions, and to the ongoing dialogue with this group. We know there will be passion, we know there will be engagement. We ask you to consider what we need to balance out in terms of accountable use of public money, incentives to grow the industry and need to deliver back to the viewers who have funded it.

Thank you for your time. I’m happy to take questions.