

Television Documentary

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TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY

Documentary is arguably the most continuous audio-visual tradition in Australia.

Since 1956, when Australian television first went to air just before the Melbourne Olympic Games, television has played an increasingly significant role in the genre. On opening night, the ABC screened the BBC documentary *War in the Air*; however, it would be two years before it broadcast Allan Ashbolt's locally produced *Report from South Africa* (1958), which implicitly questioned Australian race relations. A year earlier, on GTV9 Melbourne, William Grayden's *Manslaughter* (1957) had exposed the impact of the Maralinga atomic bomb tests on Aboriginal people and roused public agitation to change the legal status of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

Governments have played a key role in supporting Australian documentary: directly, through institutions such as the ABC, the SBS and the Commonwealth Film Unit (later Film Australia); and indirectly via taxation and Australian content regulation. This has led to ongoing questions about how to define documentary.

Before television, documentary was understood primarily in contrast to dramatic cinema features, as non-fiction. But with around half the television schedule consisting of non-fiction, questions of what was specific to documentary

became harder to answer. From 1961, commercial television licensees were required to screen a minimum quota of local content, with documentary part of a broader information category. The 'social documentary' was first defined by broadcasting regulation in 1989, but only in 1996, after industry lobbying, was a specific documentary quota of 10 hours of first-run material annually implemented. By 2005, this quota would be doubled to 20 hours.

Commercial television paid little attention to documentary in its first two decades, with the form making up only an estimated 2.5 per cent of the schedule in the early 1970s—mainly travelogues and light entertainment series. Filmmaker Tom Haydon remembered that in the 1960s, commercial television was 'remarkable for the almost total absence of documentary from its screens'. Stefan Sargent's *The Australian Londoners* (1965), screening on TCN9, was an exception, but in poet and journalist Elizabeth Riddell's view such anomalies gave proprietors a defence when meeting 'a vice chancellor or a bishop or a visiting British under-secretary'.

Meanwhile, at the ABC, broadcasters such as Robert Raymond and Tom Mancfield brought international models of documentary to Australia, often disguised as 'current affairs' and 'features'. Australian-born, Raymond worked in Britain and Africa, and gained experience with Ed Murrow and the *See it Now* team of the American CBS network before returning to Australia. He pioneered ABC live studio documentary and a location film production unit, worked with Michael Charlton to establish the *Four Corners* current affairs documentary program in 1961, then moved to TCN9 to set up its 'special projects division'.

With lightweight 16mm cameras and synchronised sound newly available, ABC 1960s broadcasters made increasing use of location filming techniques. Therese Denny's *A Changing Race* (1964) was the first Australian documentary to be entirely voiced by Aboriginal people. But in 1968 Kit Denton—respected author and broadcaster—asserted that 'We are still a good way short of documentary maturity', and that television documentary makers, 'like the women of old China ... have feet on which to stand ... but bones misshapen by the shoes they're forced to wear'.

In a sign of growing maturity, the Rural Department launched the *A Big Country* series that same year, bringing urban viewers profiles of life in the country. In 1969, the ABC set up a Features Department under Humphrey Fisher, who came direct from the BBC's Features Department. Alongside presenter-led factual series such as Peter Wherrett's *Torque* (1973–80) and Bill Peach's *Australia* (1975–76), the features slate included John Power's dramatised historical documentaries, such as *Billy and Percy* (1974) about William Hughes. Tom Mancfield returned from Britain to produce *Chequerboard*

(1969–75), a ground-breaking social documentary series inspired by the BBC's *Man Alive*. In keeping with the international *cinéma vérité* direct cinema movements, *Chequerboard* rarely had a presenter or a narrator, instead using interview and observational cinema techniques.

Many ABC Features personnel, including Aviva Ziegler, Robin Hughes, Tony Wilson and Bob Connolly, would move on to significant careers as independent filmmakers, a parallel stream of production that would impact on and eventually merge with the Australian television documentary. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a strong tradition of independent and often activist documentary developed, first in Sydney and then in other capital cities. Often formally experimental, this work was linked to the re-emergent Australian film industry, and its associated funding and institutions—especially the Australian Film Commission (AFC)—rather than to television. Frequently, this work related to feminist (Margot Nash and Robin Laurie's *We Aim to Please*, 1976), urban (Tom Zubrycki's *Waterloo*, 1981) and Indigenous (Alec Morgan and Gerry Bostock's *Lousy Little Sixpence*, 1983) politics, as well as to re-evaluating Australia's place in the world (Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson's *First Contact*, 1983). The audience for these documentaries was initially found in cinemas and filmmakers' cooperatives, and at festivals and community screenings, but for funders and filmmakers, television increasingly seemed the way to reach a wider public.

But the broadcasters needed convincing. Although the first program broadcast by SBS Television in 1980 was Peter Luck's *Who Are We?*—a documentary about the history of Australian immigration—the network mainly screened international documentaries, and in its early stages lacked funding for in-house production or the purchase of independent work. With commercial television largely uninterested, despite the success of landmark projects such as Chris Noonan's *Stepping Out* (1980) on the Seven Network on Boxing Day, 1981, the ABC became the focus of efforts to achieve the broadcast of independent documentary. Filmmakers concentrated on persuading the ABC to purchase completed films that had garnered international sales and success, such as *Frontline* (1979), David Bradbury's portrait of war cameraman Neil Davis.

Next, attention turned to securing a systematic pre-sale system. One step towards this was a documentary fellowship scheme jointly managed by the ABC and the AFC from 1984. Projects included films such as *Landslides* (Susan Lambert and Sarah Gibson, 1986) and *All That is Solid* (John Hughes, 1988), which pushed the limits of television documentary form. In 1987, the ABC set up a television documentary unit under Jonathan Holmes, with a brief to produce in-house documentaries and series such as

David Goldie's *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (1987), and to pre-purchase independent work.

With the establishment of SBS Independent (SBSi, 1994) and its remit to commission independent filmmakers, television became the decisive outlet for Australian documentary and the programs that resulted tended to become less cinematic and more televisual.

A set of interlocking institutions, schemes and programming arrangements, together with local content regulation, facilitated this shift. From 1987, the Australian National (later International) Documentary Conference (AIDC) brought together independent filmmakers and local and international broadcasters to trade in television documentaries. In 1988, the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) was set up and could only invest in documentaries with domestic broadcaster pre-sales—evidence of 'market interest'. Documentary 'accords', developed by the FFC in 1991–92 and offered to all broadcasters, but only ever fully functional with the public broadcasters, were a mechanism to ensure a regular number of Australian independent productions.

The Commonwealth government established the Audio Visual Copyright Society (known as Screenrights) to derive income for filmmakers from educational institutions recording television programs. Documentary is the largest single genre copied, comprising 28 per cent of copying in 2012–13. Ever-larger independent production companies and specialised documentary producers, such as Electric Pictures and Essential Media and Entertainment, sprang up to manage these institutions and schemes.

If the late 1980s found documentary on television being carefully distinguished from a wider features category, a stand-alone form for which broadcast was the means of meeting a wider audience, the 2000s saw documentary largely folded back into a broader 'factual' programming category. This was linked to the international growth of **pay television**, where documentary-themed channels and infotainment generally became drivers of broadcaster profit. The rise of **reality television** and the trade in documentary formats such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* (BBC 2004–ongoing and 11 international variants) and *The Family* (Channel 4 UK and SBS, 2008–) also raised questions about how exactly the genre should be defined. Industrially, series have overtaken one-offs as the staple of Australian documentary production. While the ABC and SBS still dominate annual hours tallies, commercial broadcasters are more than filling their documentary quotas, often with programs that owe much to reality television and docu-soap. The highest rating documentaries on Australian television continue to be locally produced (such as *Border Security*, Seven, 2004–), but the audience for individual programs is tending to fall amidst the proliferation of **digital television** channels.

The documentary sector as a whole was only 3 per cent of Australian audio-visual output in 2007, but television documentary has been central to creating in Australia what Benedict Anderson terms the 'imagined community'. Documentaries such as *Living on the Fringe* (Gian Carlo Manara, 1965), *The Last Tasmanian* (Tom Haydon, 1978), *For Love or Money* (Megan McMurchy, Margot Nash, Margot Oliver and Jeni Thornley, 1983) and *The First Australians* (Beck Cole and Rachel Perkins, 2008) have informed public debate, created mutual empathy and entertained the Australian community for almost six decades.

REFs: A. Moran, *Projecting Australia* (1988); T. FitzSimons, P. Laughren and D. Williamson, *Australian Documentary* (2011); R. Raymond, *Out of the Box* (1999).

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