Renewal in the Ranks
A Proposal for Australian Documentary

With the ageing of a generation of Australian documentary makers, a dearth of young filmmakers are emerging to replace them. Surveying the changing scene, Trish FitzSimons outlines a plan to nurture new talent.

In recent years it has become impossible to ignore the greying of Australia’s professional filmmakers. A 2010 Screen Content Producer Survey offered a portrait of an aging industry. This point was confirmed by Monica Davidson’s decade-by-decade analysis of AFI Award–winning Australian screen producers, which revealed that in the 1970s winners were on average aged in their mid thirties (with the youngest, Haydn Keenan, in his early twenties); and that in the 1980s and 1990s, the average was mid forties. By the 2000s, the average age of the award-winning filmmakers was the early fifties, with none under forty.

Robert Connolly argues that with only 5 per cent of respondents to the Screen Content Producer Survey being under thirty, and less than one third under forty, there is a ‘forgotten generation’ in the Australian screen industries, a generation who have never had the opportunity to tell their stories. Meanwhile, Mark Ryan and Greg Hearn contend that as the generation that ‘invented’ the current incarnation of the Australian screen industries prepare to clock off, structural changes in the media landscape call for new business models for screen industry practitioners.

This article looks at these issues in relation to Australian documentary makers and proposes one strategy that could help to effect generational change. If implemented, it would help some of the best documentary work currently being produced in universities to find a substantial, if targeted, broadcast audience. The strategy responds to the disappearance of many of the mechanisms that allowed previous generations of documentary filmmakers to get their first broadcast credit as a producer or director. It comes at a time when, as in other sectors of the screen industries, almost certainly the largest generation of Australian documentary filmmakers – Pat Fiske, Nick Torrens, Martha Ansara, Curtis Levy, Bob Connolly, Tom Zubrycki and Dennis O’Rourke among them – come to a point when making films is likely to be sporadic. There is currently the need, as well as the opportunity, for a scheme designed to ‘bring on’ a new generation.

Can public policy make a difference?

As one of three authors of a recent book that details the history of the documentary impulse in Australia since the development of cinema, I would argue that documentary has grown up alongside the nation of Australia, has been arguably the most continuous of all its audio-visual traditions, and has shown a capacity for constant reinvention. This same historical perspective convinces me that public policy does matter: the documentary field in Australia would simply not be as rich without such governmental initiatives as the Australian Film Commission’s Creative Development Branch, Women’s Film Fund and Indigenous Branch; the Creative Nation cultural policy and its funding of SBS Independent; or Film Australia’s National Interest Program, to name some obvious examples.

This article is a call to public policy action by a degree convenor, screen education teacher and occasional documentary practitioner who wants to see the form continuously revitalised by youthful energy. This begs a question as to where previous generations of documentary filmmakers have come from.

Cadetships with large public entities such as the ABC and Film Australia

An on-the-job cadetship at the ABC was the training ground for many of the generation of documentary filmmakers now reaching the latter stages of their careers, including Bob Connolly, David Bradbury and John Hughes. Between the late 1950s and 1977, the ABC had ‘specialist traineeships’ – a kind of ‘professional apprenticeship’ – combining a low but living wage and structured and rotating education in various aspects of broadcasting. Typically, successful applicants for these cadetships were school leavers, though there were also graduate positions, often for those who had done a generalist degree first. This scheme nurtured a generation of documentary and current affairs program makers, including many that subsequently moved to commercial television and a number who eventually became independent producers and directors. In this model, learning to make documentary at first involved being assigned stories by ABC supervisors, rather than initiating them. Film Australia was another vital public institution, training and employing documentary filmmakers on a long-term basis. Such possibilities largely disappeared in the 1980s, as corporatisation of these institutions made the immediate bottom line more important than educating a new generation of voices for the public sphere. Meanwhile, though, other avenues for new documentary filmmakers had opened up.

The independent grants and/or investment model

Another group of the current ‘older generation’ of documentary filmmakers got started with small production grants from the federal government. Once the Experimental Film and Television Fund had been established...
in 1969, and especially after it grew into the Australian Film Commission with a Creative Development Fund and Women’s Film Fund, many filmmakers were supported to make their early short and ‘long short’ films by either direct grants or investments. While these schemes did not explicitly fund by genre, documentaries were key among the films produced. These were important pathways in the development of filmmakers such as Tom Zubrycki, Pat Fiske, and Susan Lambert and Sarah Gibson. While not labelled ‘emerging filmmaker’ schemes per se, the size of the budgets, and the modest expectations of outcomes in terms of finding an audience made them effectively so. Indeed, at least arguably, the AFC and its schemes ‘grew up’ with this generation of filmmakers, with the possible budgets and scope of funded films expanding as the filmmaking community was ready to handle them.7

After the establishment of the Film Finance Corporation in the late 1980s, and the formalising of links between filmmakers, film funders and broadcasters through such mechanisms as the Documentary Accords,8 the focus of federal support tended to move towards projects of a scale more fitted to those with a substantial track record. The exception to this was the AFC’s Indigenous Unit, which from its inception in 1993 had a brief to fund the professional development of individuals across genres and continued to support new filmmakers.9 But to understand the wider ecology for new entrants to the industry at this time, it’s important also to appreciate changes to the educational backgrounds of those focused on documentary.

Tertiary education in screen production

As entry to broadcasting via on-the-job training schemes dried up, there was a rapid proliferation of tertiary screen education, typically via undergraduate degrees in which documentary production was a key subject. In 1998 Annabelle Sheehan was commissioned by the AFC to undertake a survey of AFI Award winners (across all genres, including documentary), to see what educational and training pathways may have accounted for their success. Of those who had been in the industry for more than fifteen years, just over 40 per cent had tertiary qualifications in film or television production. But of those who had been in the industry for less than a decade, 80 per cent had this educational background.10

Ryan and Hearn assert that ‘By the late 1990s, tertiary-level screen production courses replaced real world learning as the gatekeeper for industry entry.’11 The gap in this analysis is discussion of a clear path from tertiary courses to the screen industries, in documentary and in other sectors. Indeed, Sheehan noted of the change from on-the-job to formal education in film and television that ‘The paradox has been the industry’s often equally enthusiastic dismissal of such courses, suggesting that they are of no real relevance to a career in film and television.’12 But even without formal articulation, the late 1990s provided many opportunities for new entrants to the documentary production sector.

Emerging filmmaker schemes

In the 1990s the language and schemes of the ‘emerging filmmaker’ developed, in documentary as well as in drama, bringing opportunities to a new generation. From its inception in 1980, SBS television had responded to its budgetary constraints (described by long-term employee Barbara Mariotti as the ‘tions’ – starvation, amalgamation, annihilation) by partnering with other institutions to make programs. A decade later SBS really began to develop mechanisms to work with independent filmmakers, often pairing an established producer with a first-time director. Alongside documentary slots, usually earmarked for established filmmakers, the ‘tions’ came to be signature programming for SBS, scheduling together diverse one-off programs commissioned under an overarching rubric. Australian Mosaic (1989) was one of the first, a series of twenty-six half-hour programs developed in conjunction with the Australia Council and the Office for Multicultural Affairs. Producers and crew were all internal to SBS, but directors were freelancers who were paid wages for six to eight weeks to shoot and in some cases edit their material in SBS facilities under the supervision of a producer.

Themed-strand programming further developed in the period after 1995, when the Commonwealth Government funding allocated under the Creative Nation policy began to flow to the newly established SBS Independent. SBS became the bastion of emerging filmmaker schemes, which regularly included special training workshops to help to bring the directors up to speed. Under headings such as Unfinished Business (2000), Australia by Numbers (2000–2003) and Podlove (2007), these schemes were a great opportunity for filmmakers, and provided generally cheap television for a (by necessity)
frugal broadcaster. Often, these series were developed in conjunction with the state agencies, for which employment for their residents was higher on their list of priorities than for federal bureaucracies. This was no doubt an important factor in the quintupling of state agency investment in documentary in the decade from 2000 to 2010, albeit off a low base.\(^{13}\)

From the mid 1990s the ABC also had schemes to bring new players into the documentary field. Mike Rubbo, as head of the documentary department, imported the Race Around the World (1997–1998) format from French Canada (where he had previously worked) – a structure that gave great freedom but also structured support to the successful contestants of a national competition. The young contestants would write, shoot and direct short documentaries in a ten-day timeframe. Stories were then edited and judged back at the Sydney base. Several of these contestants, most visibly John Safran, went on to establish careers in documentary and long-form current affairs, based on the experience and profile gained in the series.

Although never as enamoured of themed programming as SBS, the ABC also developed some half-hour strands with such titles as Loud (1997) and Hard Choices (2004), similarly employing first-time directors. Once ABC2 was established, it became the home of jtv docs (2006–2010), funded and commissioned in conjunction with the AFC/Screan Australia. Documentaries focusing on youth culture were commissioned on limited budgets and typically screened on the digital channel. A version of this scheme still exists, entitled Opening Shot (ongoing since 2011). With slots earmarked for filmmakers under thirty-five, and five new successful projects just announced, it is a vital part of the current media ecology. Hungry Beast (2009–2011, originally entitled ‘Project NEXT’) was a recent program produced for ABC2 by independent company Zapruder’s Other Films, that focused on current affairs and comedy but also had some documentary elements.

So if there are still schemes focusing on fostering new documentary filmmakers, what’s the problem?

The current situation for new entrants to the documentary tradition in Australia

As previously discussed, the average age of producers in Australia has been rising for several decades. In the Screen Content Producer Survey, television documentary producers were far and away the largest cohort whose views were canvassed.\(^{14}\) Separate statistics for directors are not available, but there is little reason to expect they would be substantially different. Opening Shot notwithstanding (and it has only five or six slots annually, compared for instance with the Australian Mosaic series of twenty-six in the late eighties), emerging filmmaker schemes do not exist in the same way that they did even a decade ago.

SBS has been strapped for cash and wanting more consistent audiences than either documentary slots or themed strands can provide. On SBS, but also on the ABC, factual and reality series have been much more in evidence than the one-off authored films that have typically formed the first work of those currently established in Australia’s documentary sector. The broadcasters have not had the same interest in partnering with state agencies to create themed strands, and through both the Producer Offset and direct funding, Screen Australia has tended to support the slates of larger production companies through initiatives such as the Enterprise Program. The measure in the 2011 federal budget to lower the threshold for the producer’s offset to $250,000 is positive for new filmmakers, but still at a budget level unlikely to assist first-time filmmakers graduating from university or for some years thereafter. In summary, demand for the kind of product typically made as a first project by younger filmmakers responding to the documentary impulse is less in evidence. It may be that young people are getting work in larger production companies – anecdotally this is the case at entities supported by the Enterprise Program, such as WildFury and Matchbox Pictures. Such employment, however, is less likely to bring forward a ‘diversity of voices’, always a potential source of renewal for documentary.

As one way of bringing forward new voices in documentary, I offer a suggestion.

A proposal to assist the rejuvenation of the Australian documentary sector

Using ASPERA (the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association) as the coordinating body representing university screen educators, and working together with either ABC2 or SBS or both, the Commonwealth Government could fund the production costs (crew, supervising producers, travel and accommodation where necessary, preparatory script, research, and skill development workshops) of a ten-part television half-hour documentary series each year for the next four years. A very rough estimate of the funds required to put this proposal into action would be $1.5 million annually ($10 x $150,000 each year), or $6 million in total. Using university production and post-production resources, most likely outside main semester times, would drive budgets further and make best use of spare capacity in tertiary facilities.

Each year a theme would be announced to which students would respond with a standard industry two-page synopsis and budget summary. The successful applicants, a maximum of one from each university per year, would then participate in a collective workshop to hone their skills and develop their projects. Production would proceed according to a strict schedule to meet the needs of broadcast programming, but a short window in which producers would be able to explore the potential to find festival audiences would be built in. The funding and training provided would also facilitate online components to the projects, which in turn could encourage broader community engagement. The many experienced documentary filmmakers working in universities, working to the briefs of commissioning editors, would supervise the selected projects. Once broadcast, the completed documentaries would be streamed on the ABC’s iView and/or the SBS equivalent. The completed documentaries could participate in the Screenrights and EnhanceTV schemes to maximise the
chance of a life beyond broadcast, in education and elsewhere.

There could be different versions of this scheme, including simply offering a guaranteed number of post-production sales to the often excellent documentary stories already being produced, but having difficulty finding an audience. Another permutation might involve the state-based Screen Culture resource centres such as QPix and Open Channel.

**Television vs. online**

Some might argue that television is a ‘heritage medium’ that is no longer relevant (to younger audiences in particular) and that any emerging filmmaker scheme should be addressed to the online space instead. In a 2011 address, Kim Dalton, the ABC’s Director of Television, began by stating that ‘connections between the broadcasting industry and academia are few’. He went on to attest that the overall Australian television audience is in fact still growing, albeit divided into smaller and smaller segments, because of the proliferation of digital and pay TV channels. The youth audience (18- to 29-year-olds) is definitely watching television less than other demographics, but only marginally so. Dalton further argued that ABC2 ought to be funded but only marginally so. The youth audience consume a huge amount of media on the net, but in the absence of specific emerging filmmaker schemes, and with the aging of the documentary sector as a whole, this gap has become more obvious. The proposal above could form one part of a wider strategy of rejuvenation. I would welcome debate and involvement from others interested in refining and implementing this proposal.17

And the online arena as an alternative focus for this scheme? Certainly the youth audience consume a huge amount of media on the net, but in the absence of local content regulation (it will be very interesting to see the proposals of the final report of the Convergence Review in this regard), simply providing a website with the thumbnail sketches of how previous generations got started in making documentaries show that governments taking measured risks with public funds and facilities can lead to good outcomes, and that the sustainability of Australia’s screen industries is about more than the bottom lines of its largest players.

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**Conclusion**

This proposal is underpinned by a belief that Australia currently needs more youthful documentary voices. And by a view that the evolution of screen education from on-the-job to university-based training has been incomplete, because the pathways from academy to industry have never been clear. In the absence of specific emerging filmmaker schemes, and with the aging of the documentary sector as a whole, this gap has become more obvious. The proposal above could form one part of a wider strategy of rejuvenation. I would welcome debate and involvement from others interested in refining and implementing this proposal.

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**Endnotes**


8. ibid., pp. 95–97.


13. FitzSimons et al., op. cit., p. 74.


17. A version of this proposal was submitted to the federal government’s emerging National Cultural Policy and its late 2011 public call for submissions. It was developed in conjunction with ASPERA, discussed at last year’s ATOM conference, and has been sent to the ABC, SBS and Screen Queensland.