Sure, being in my twenties was a significant factor at the time, but later on, there was more to it. I invested time into developing my self-authored documentaries. Making these films wasn’t just work; they were my babies. From conception to birth, I nurtured these projects.

Like me, many other documentary makers have primarily produced one-off documentaries, and having a sense of ownership over our projects has been fundamental. But what was particularly heartening was the fact that, unlike most other countries, in Australia we had consistent support from the public broadcasters: SBS and the ABC. This support wasn’t just financial but moral and editorial as well. Consequently, Australian-made one-off documentaries have had a great run internationally, winning accolades at many prestigious festivals and screening on television stations around the world. However, since the mid 2000s, the Australian public broadcasters – in response to a decline in audience patronage for certain programming – have begun withdrawing their support for one-off documentaries. As former Film...
Australia CEO Sharon Connolly states in her unpublished research paper on the genre: ‘In 1997–98 71% of total documentary hours produced by production companies were single documentaries. A decade later the proportion had fallen to 30%.’ Similar sentiments are expressed by veteran documentary filmmaker and former SBS commissioning editor Trevor Graham: ‘The current climate for producing documentary in Australia [...] is the worst I’ve seen it.’

It seems a new world order is forming in the Australian documentary industry. The new commissioning policies of both Australian public broadcasters can be characterised by a shift away from one-off documentaries and towards factual series. Furthermore, the statistics on the funding decisions by Screen Australia from 2009/10 to 2012/13 also show that there has been a gradual decrease in single-episode documentaries but, at the same time, an increase in both hours produced and overall spend on documentary series.

The questions I raise in this essay carry significant weight for me, as I am now what you might call a ‘mid-career documentary filmmaker’. I am soon turning thirty-eight and have a small family, a mortgage and a very small super fund. In the past two years, I have been working with broadcasters less and have increasingly been making shorter documentaries for non-profit organisations – and I’ve enjoyed the experience. These films pay reasonably well, and I derive great satisfaction from the end product. The online exposure also allows these short documentaries to reach a relatively large number of viewers. My worries in relation to the changes surrounding the one-off documentary go beyond myself, however; they concern my fellow filmmakers as well as the future of our screen culture. In light of the current state of our industry, how can we as documentary filmmakers negotiate a way forward that enables us to continue telling our stories?

The problem

In his book Why Documentaries Matter, BBC commissioning editor Nick Fraser offers a somewhat bleak overview of the future of documentaries in the hands of broadcasters, which ‘have appeared to tire of documentaries’ and turned instead to factual series. Screen Australia’s Enterprise program, in place since 2009, has supported growing production companies that ‘have identified opportunities to develop and expand’, such as Electric Pictures (responsible for the 2013 factual series Murdoch) and Wild Fury (now called WildBear after its merger with Bearcage, which produced the 2012 factual series Dancing Down Under). But broadcasters prefer that content be produced by large production companies. Consequently, individual documentary filmmakers running small production companies are ‘encouraged’ to team up with larger companies – which, in many cases, means that the filmmakers must hand over control of their projects to the larger companies. How do those of us who are producers/directors with our own independent companies reconcile our work with such a critical transition?

So far, most – if not all – of the publications circulated about the plight of
the Australian one-off documentary have come from veteran filmmakers such as Bob Connolly, David Bradbury and Trevor Graham, who are now well into their sixties and can rightly boast about long and lively careers. They fearlessly attack the institutions that are at the centre of the dramatic changes crippling the one-off documentary in Australia. They also lead the fight under the umbrella of Indiedoco, a campaign established in November 2013 by a group of passionate filmmakers, including Jennifer Crone, Tom Zubrycki and Gillian Armstrong, to challenge the current system of documentary funding in order to create more support for the artform. As Crone explains:

"Documentary filmmakers have been aware for some time that public funds allocated by federal legislation specifically to support the production of high quality documentaries in Australia, managed by Screen Australia, are no longer reaching documentary filmmakers."  

Screen Australia invests approximately A$20 million into documentary production each year, but 80 per cent of this funding ‘require[s] projects to have a domestic broadcaster attached’. Unfortunately, as Screen Australia CEO Graeme Mason pointed out in his keynote speech at the Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) in March this year, documentaries ‘on free to air can now expect greatly reduced audience figures from those it received five years ago’. A documentary maker may have the support and interest of any or all of the federal- and state-funding agencies, but without the commitment of a broadcaster, the film cannot be funded.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, broadcasters would offer to develop a documentary idea hand-in-hand with the filmmaker if they felt the idea exhibited some potential. The broadcaster had strong editorial contribution without seizing control of the entire project. It must be said that, even though there was significantly more support for one-off documentaries in the past, funding was not handed over to the filmmaker on a silver platter. My own experience attests to this: SBS rejected Inheritance three times before granting it a presale. During this twelve-month period, however, I received invaluable feedback from the SBS commissioning editor, which strengthened the film. In contrast, several filmmakers have informed me that, in many cases, documentary concepts with potential are killed off today even before they can be developed because the idea does not sound ‘big enough’. The great irony is that at their conception – and by their nature – most one-off documentaries are riddled with uncertainty. A survey conducted in 2012 by the Australian Directors Guild (ADG) likewise reveals that the majority of filmmakers believe that national broadcasters now exert a greater degree of editorial control over their work. Yet, as Trish FitzSimons, Pat Laughren and Dugald Williamson contend in their 2011 book Australian Documentary: ‘It is imperative that no single institution, such as broadcast television, wields a de facto veto over the form or content of the bulk of documentary projects, budgets and approaches.’

A look abroad

In late 2012, I interviewed Soeren Schumann, the head of ARTE at German network RBB, which funded one of my previous documentaries; he assured me that documentary films are thriving in mainland Europe: ‘In Europe, more than ever, good creative documentaries are asked for. More than ever, there is money around to finance them. I am absolutely optimistic’. ARTE broadcasts factual entertainment, reality shows, and investigative as well as creative documentaries, and Schumann explains that the network has a well-functioning system comprising many small departments that have to agree on every program.

At the end of the day, it’s not one person or one committee that takes responsibility for what we broadcast […] so it’s a very democratic system here in Germany."
A documentary maker may have the support and interest of any or all of the federal- and state-funding agencies, but without the commitment of a broadcaster, the film cannot be funded.

Rosy. As three-time Academy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Mark Harris puts it:

There is LITTLE public support for independent creative documentaries in the US. What there is comes from ITVS, but also PBS. Some of the money for these series comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Federal agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) also fund documentaries.19

To award-winning US documentary filmmaker Daniel G Karslake, who has just completed his next feature documentary, Every Three Seconds, the Australian funding system – even with its current complications – sounds like a dream. But he is quick to point out that

[w]hen the US system works, it works because a driven filmmaker has both found a passion project and she is able to communicate that passion to others who can help her realize that dream […] there are non-profit organizations [that] can act as fiscal sponsors of film projects.20

Based on the success of many US documentaries,21 privatised funding – which also includes philanthropy – rather than government funding seems to produce a more conducive environment for filmmakers wanting to make their independent documentaries. But unlike Australia, the US is a country of over 300 million consumers with a multitude of needs, concerns and dreams, along with the financial clout to back them up. Finding fiscal sponsors and philanthropic organisations to support various causes seems more realistic in the US, but in Australia, a country of 20 million, it may prove to be a challenge.

The audience and survival

Crone warns against viewing ratings as the ultimate arbiter of a show’s success, arguing:

It is simplistic to stack a ratings game against diversity, quality, individuality and public purposes. The reality of viewer behaviour shows a different story. Australian audiences want complexity. They want quality, they want diversity and, when they are offered it, they come to it.22

In fact, Jennifer Crone’s research for Indiedoco demonstrates that, contrary to what might be expected, one-off documentaries such as Divorce: Aussie Islamic Way (Jennifer Crone, 2012) or The Surgery Ship (Madeleine Hetherton, 2013) perform significantly better than factual series such as Shitsville Express or Who’s Been Sleeping in My House.23

It must be acknowledged that Screen Australia does continue to take steps towards supporting one-off documentaries. Mason explains 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”.24 As of late 2013, Screen Australia had invested A$1 million in five one-off documentaries and one multi-platform documentary.25 Furthermore, creative documentaries under the Signature Documentary fund do not require broadcaster interest;26 however, because the fund receives an enormous number of submissions, only a few films can be funded each year.

There are signs that the US’s privatised funding model for documentaries can indeed be replicated in Australia. The Documentary Australia Foundation (DAF), for instance, “aims to inspire and nurture partnerships between philanthropic individuals, private foundations, charities and documentary filmmakers”.27 Mitzi Goldman, the CEO of the foundation, tells me that DAF has received a total of A$4,429,647 to date, which will be used to fund 148 films:

For the energetic and creative filmmakers who are keen to take on the challenge and utilise social media to engage broad audiences, the DAF model can really work well.28

At the time of publication, 611 films have been included on DAF’s approved list of titles seeking support, and some twenty-five of those funded were actually broadcast on television. One work, Rebecca Barry’s I Am a Girl (2013), was even wholly financed by philanthropic funds.
Nonetheless, Goldman argues:

I don’t think DAF will replace the broadcaster model. The broadcaster knows well that it, and its online presence, is an efficient and broad avenue to a national audience. So they have a lot of power and have been able to call the shots in terms of what is funded and screened.29

Another noteworthy body in Australia is Screenrights, which coordinates licences and collects royalty revenue from educational institutions that utilise documentaries. It has not only provided a significant income for filmmakers over the years, but also provides critical content for Australian students. As the authors of Australian Documentary describe it:

Screenrights figures show that documentaries continue to make up a substantial proportion of the programs copied and communicated to more than 4 million students in Australian classrooms.30

Nevertheless, it is concerning that access to one-off documentaries by such a dedicated audience may likewise be in jeopardy, given the decline of broadcasters’ support for these types of documentaries in the first place.31

To survive in such a volatile landscape, some mid-career documentary filmmakers like Jennifer Peedom and Madeleine Hetherton have, over the years, successfully carved themselves an effective model. They work for larger production companies and at times go between making their own creative documentaries and being ‘guns for hire’, directing factual series and reality shows. Hetherton in particular has embraced this option, having produced a total of seventy episodes of top-rating factual series Bondi Rescue, Bondi Rescue Bali and The Poker Star, and most recently worked on the one-hour observational documentary The Surgery Ship for SBS. She believes that, while it is getting harder, there are ways to survive in this changed documentary industry:

I think there are some opportunities and we have had one in the last 12 months with The Surgery Ship. However, we have used this to also firmly establish our company Media Stockade.32

In my case, I’ve had the opportunity to direct and co-produce two very different documentaries – The Trouble with St Mary’s (2011), commissioned by the ABC, and My America (2011) for SBS – under the current documentary climate. While working on the former, I developed a great relationship with the ABC and with the larger production company, Wild Fury, assigned to produce the film. While I did have to hand over editorial control to Wild Fury, my strong relationship with the producer, Veronica Fury, and our shared vision for the film ensured that this arrangement was not an issue at all. However, on the other film, my relationship with SBS gradually became unworkable. I was told that, if I didn’t allow my film to be recut (without my involvement), then it may not be broadcast in Australia at all. In the end, I did not allow the executive to recut My America – with or without my presence – as there were no legal grounds, given my company, Soul Vision Films, was a co-producer of the film. Had I been just a gun for hire, I would have been replaced immediately.

Conclusion

During my negotiations with SBS regarding the re-editing of My America, I was fortunate enough to have had the support of the ADG. They did their best to alleviate the conflict and helped find a solution acceptable to both parties while looking after my rights as a director. Today, the ADG continues to fight for the rights of directors in Australia. ADG president Ray Argall recognises that there are some serious flaws with the current documentary-funding and -production regime, as he impetus is on ‘making larger business more sustainable at the expense of smaller businesses […] which don’t get a chance to move into a model to develop their own work’.33

In late 2013, Screen Australia issued a review into its Enterprise Program, which found that ‘[o]f the companies that received Enterprise funding, 88 per cent reported a profit in at least one of the last two years’.34 One of these companies, Cordell Jigsaw Zapruder, is churning out an astonishing amount of factual programming per year,35 while WildBear will produce over fifty hours of television and film programming in 2014.36 It fills me with concern that some of these companies – which, to varying degrees, have come to thrive at the expense of smaller production companies producing one-off documentaries – can continue to boast of such productivity while independent filmmakers struggle to survive, let alone develop their work.

I am cautiously reassured by Screen Australia’s Graeme Mason when he says:

we have around A$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.37

In light of the Abbott government’s recently announced arts-funding cuts, I am no longer sure how realistic this figure is.

I truly hope that, in my attempt to argue the case for the individual
documentary filmmaker, I have not under-
minded the value that reality shows, documen-
tary series or factual entertainment can bring to
enrich our screen culture. In fact, I believe
there are real opportunities to be creative and
socially conscious through such programs—
perhaps, as documentary filmmakers, we can
use our skills to push the boundaries of these
media and leave our mark in this ‘new
world order’. Furthermore, I also hope that it
has become clear that there is indeed a place
for larger production companies to produce
content that smaller production companies
have not been able to. Essentially, this is
about recognising the need for diversity in the
way decisions are made at the funding
level. While larger production companies
producing factual series or reality shows
may be able to adapt to the more centralised
system of decision-making currently in place,
the creators of one-off documentaries are
better suited to a more decentralised model
not unlike that described by ARTE’s Soeren
Schumann.

Perhaps there is an opportunity for Screen
Australia and the public broadcasters to work
together and foster an environment that is
conducive to the creation of one-off docu-
termaries that think outside the box, that
challenge and inspire viewers, and that are
not driven entirely by ratings.

Author note

I would like to express gratitude to all those
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This article has been refereed.

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Endnotes

1. These documentaries are referred to by
various names, but for convenience I will
stick with the term one-off documentary, as
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