

# Representing Cultural Diversity or Serving Local Industry?

An Exploration of the Future Prospects of Subsidised Documentary on Television

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*Abstract: Positing documentary as a unique form for representing cultural diversity, developing cultural citizenship and contributing cultural rights, this paper reflects on how market pressures impact on television documentary production in the global era. A study of industry attitudes and outcomes in Australia and New Zealand suggested audience ratings and the quest for international marketability was having an homogenising influence on local television documentary. Cultural subsidy, which was once directed to nurturing national culture and identity, now tends to be directed towards protecting national culture as a product, thereby protecting local industry. This paper argues that local industry and the cause of cultural diversity are not in inevitable opposition and can both be served by cultural policy adopting an educative, developmental approach towards building audiences, rather than pragmatic, market-based audience strategies.*

Keywords: Cultural diversity, Television documentary, Cultural policy, National culture, Neo liberalism

## Introduction

**T**HE ARGUMENT PRESENTED here deals with a particular aspect of cultural policy, the allocation of government subsidy for documentary in Australasia, and is developed through three phases. The first, which draws on both historical precedent and theoretical discussion of genre definition, positions documentary as a social project and thus as a vehicle for the delivery of cultural rights. This offers a key legitimisation for state subsidy of documentary as a discrete form. Secondly, referencing empirical industry research on the rise of populist television documentary in Australasia, the impact of market-led cultural policy on the genre's ability to deliver cultural rights is analysed. This impact is evidenced via the emergence of a number of different trends in each country. These were identified from a qualitative study of fifty industry interviews and analysis of documentary outcomes undertaken in 1998. Thirdly, differences between the funding policies for television documentary in Australia and New Zealand, are compared in order to locate indicators as to how the social project might be reconciled with the needs of industry in the global era.

## The Social Project of Documentary

The concept of documentary as a social project is one of three definitions Peter Hughes identifies in seeking to rescue the genre from the morass of hybrid entertainment forms and postmodern pastiche. Hughes locates three common themes in attempts to define documentary: firstly ontological, relating to its particular genre status; secondly epistemological,

arising from documentary claims of being able to record, reveal and interpret anterior reality; and thirdly, the functional, which refers to the assumed social functions inherent in its epistemological and ontological status. Hughes argues that the "one stable element" in debate about documentary is this idea of special purpose, of influencing the audience for social good, and that addressing documentary as a "social project" positions it "as a process ... as dynamic and historically constituted, and as not media specific or dependent". Hughes furthermore argues that there are two elements in this social project: nation building and social justice or emancipation arising from the social movements of feminism, the labour movement, and "those developing post colonial and anti-racist analyses". Hughes furthermore observes that the project itself is neither "unified or stable" (Hughes 1998, 2-3).

The documentary form offers unique access to ordinary voices beyond media institutions - independent filmmakers and social actors - and its representation of reality, albeit a subjective one, can - through creative treatment - render complex issues and competing subjectivities accessible, and thereby engage viewers in deeper reflection on the wider ramifications of these in the contemporary social world. Broadcast television documentary, as a social project, offers unique potential as an interventionist strategy for delivering cultural rights and thereby serving both cultural diversity and pluralist democracy.

The 'documentary idea', which emerged through the work of the British documentary movement, under Grierson and his followers, emphasised documentary's potential for social reform. In Britain in the thirties and forties, that meant public education and



nation building. Through the 'socialist' enthusiasm of the Griersonians, documentary became a tool for socialisation and staked a claim for 'superior moral status' to fictional film (Hughes 1996, 48). Although Grierson's motives and the effectiveness of his work have since been questioned (Winston 1996; Nelson 1988), the idea of documentary that he conceived, through his writing and the films of the British documentary movement, established a legacy in commonwealth countries, positioning documentary in the public mindset as a genre with a serious social purpose (Hughes 1998, 2-3). Cosseted within government or corporate funded institutions for the first half of this century, documentary production has always involved a potentially 'Faustian contract' between funder, exhibitor and producer. In the 1960s and 70s mobile filmmaking technology, coinciding with social rights movements, fuelled the growth of the "independent documentary". Relatively free from institutional constraints, and offering greater diversity in viewpoints, the independent documentary marked a new emancipatory phase. Acknowledgement of cultural pluralism eroded the previously mono-cultural ethnocentric order and contributed to unsettling the earlier "propagandist" approach, giving documentary a new decentralised vision. So, the documentary project was no longer a socialising one but a site for contested viewpoints. Now, however, threats to public service television, the premier distribution medium for documentary bring new constraints. Furthermore, government television funding agencies across Australasia, now required to serve the twin needs of culture and industry, face new tensions in the global marketplace.

The needs of television, the predominant medium of distribution for documentary, dominate the genre's funding conundrum. These needs once presented no conflict because public service broadcasting's mantra, "to inform educate and entertain", matched the goals of the social project. Now, however, increased commercial competition and audience fragmentation make ratings critical for even non-commercial broadcasting. So social documentaries tend to be funded according to their perceived potential to attract prime time audiences. Now "tension between television as popular culture and as public knowledge" (Corner 2000) has resulted in various forms of factual entertainment programming, which do not necessarily advance documentary's social project, and which, in absorbing scarce public funding, could be seen as actively undermining it.

### **Cultural Rights**

In recent times normative theorists have addressed the concept of cultural rights as a necessary requirement of citizenship within multicultural society

(Murdock 1999; Bennett, 2001). This raises the question as to how such rights might be made available and accessible to all. Graham Murdock argues that the importance of their provision justifies state intervention. He elucidates the concept by identifying four kinds of cultural rights. The first are rights to information, and these include the full range of social and political information; the second set, rights to experience, require "access to the greatest possible diversity of representations of personal and social experience"; thirdly, rights to knowledge, Murdock argues, require access to explanatory analysis and the "key debates and arguments" of the "contemporary intellectual field". He distinguishes knowledge from rights to information, and from the common knowledge of everyday experience. He also differentiates knowledge that is "carefully wrapped by experts", from the knowledge that arises from debate and emphasises the importance of access to both. The last set, rights to participation, raises issues of representation, about who is entitled to represent whom and which cultural forms and genres are best suited to the purpose. Observing "that complex citizenship" is best served by "open programmes" that offer a diversity of positions and require "the engaged participation of viewers", Murdock argues for a continuing need for "investigation and advocacy that deconstructs the prevailing discourses of officialdom, asks awkward questions and offers counter-accounts" (Murdock 1999, 11-14). The argument offered here is that documentary as a social project provides an ideal interventionary mechanism for delivering these four kinds of cultural rights.

### **The Rise of Populist Documentary in Australasia**

As noted earlier the following discussion draws on empirical research - a study of industry attitudes in Australia and New Zealand. The two country comparison is offered here as evidence of the need for policy interventions to protect the social project of documentary. These countries share much historically and culturally as English language settler societies, and they face similar threats to local audio visual culture in the global era, with imported British and American television programs being considerably cheaper and often more popular than the local product. Both countries have allocated public money for the production of documentary as local audio-visual culture, but administer it in very different ways. The value of comparing these two countries lies in New Zealand's adoption of a "full broadcast market" (Bell 1995). Australia, in comparison, with two public service broadcasters and multiple government agencies would seem to offer considerable cultural protection. Yet, diversity is now threatened

in both countries. The objective of the comparison is to identify what worked and what didn't in these two different approaches, and in teasing out the discrepancies between policy intentions and practical interpretation to better understand the dynamics of cultural policy practice.

### **New Zealand Documentary in the “Full Broadcast Market”**

In 1989 in NZ, after the radical deregulation of broadcasting, the state owned broadcaster, TVNZ, was restructured as a state owned enterprise and directed to compete for commercial revenue against the newly licensed private broadcaster TV3, in order to return a dividend to government. There was no quota for local content, which was traditionally around 20 percent of the weekly schedule. However, state funding for local television production was delegated to a single agency, the Broadcasting Commission, later renamed New Zealand on Air (NZoA), which was given a broad public service remit. Operating in a wholly commercial environment, NZoA prioritised prime time viewing in order to reach the widest audience. This policy did increase the audience for local documentary, however, prime time invoked ratings criteria. So although one outcome was industry growth, the other was homogenous documentaries, which were dubbed “McDox” by one TVNZ executive.

NZoA negotiated two dedicated local documentary strands – *Inside New Zealand* on the private broadcaster, TV3 (INZ) and *Documentary New Zealand* on state owned broadcaster TVNZ (DNZ) In 1998 these drew much criticism from filmmakers for their limited ‘tabloid’ topic range and visceral style. A key contributing factor in this tabloid trend was the consistently low budgets allocated to documentary producers, which limited their choices as filmmakers. The low budget was the result of the decision by the funding agency, NZoAir, to prioritise quantity over quality. In 1998 the minimalist NZ\$130,000 budget virtually excluded any funds for research. Most of the documentaries that played in the two local strands, conformed to what Brian Winston defined as the *vérité* television documentary form - an expedient mix of interviews, reconstructions and observational footage (Winston 1995, 210-11). This *vérité* form enables relatively tight scripting prior to production in addition to accommodating the limitations of the low budget production schedule. The three week shooting schedule and three week edit, limits documentary to an expedient, formulaic magazine style (Debrett, 2004). The low budget thwarted the production of investigative documentaries, which require more time for research and shooting, historical documentaries, which also entail high research

and archival costs and documentaries observing the development of a story through time.

Filmmakers, broadcasters and funders working in the documentary sector in 1998 identified the following trends. Firstly a low risk approach - evident in broadcasters’ preferences for topics, treatments and forms which had had proven success elsewhere. This prompted the cloning of overseas documentaries and a preference for celebrity presenters. In New Zealand in 1998 there were 10 documentaries fronted by well-known personalities, eight of whom were comedians. Narration was replaced with repartee, the presenter as authority or witness replaced with the presenter as entertainer, and subject matter subsequently trivialised (Debrett, 2004). Another trend was a preference for “sexy” tabloid topics, evident in one commissioning editor’s comment that broadcasters wanted topics like “Rachel Hunter naked on ice”, reference to the statuesque New Zealand “supermodel”. Another low risk, cheap sub-genre favoured by broadcasters, was the “Reality” documentary, which presents selected participants in constructed situations, in the pretext of revealing something new about human behaviour. The “inside view” or “behind-the-scenes look”, is another sub-genre that fits Winston’s *vérité* recipe conforming to a chronological structure, expedient production schedule and low budget, while offering multitudinous possibilities in terms of setting. In 1998 in New Zealand these included a supermarket, a restaurant and a group of air-force recruits. The cost expedient magazine approach, emphasises the challenges for individuals at the expense of any wider social meaning.

Several producers also noted it was common knowledge that broadcasters regarded Maori faces as an audience turnoff, an awareness that served as a disincentive to filmmakers to explore Maori subjects, despite the rich content this offered. Popularisation of documentary as local content in New Zealand meant that “difference”, particularly racial difference, tended to be represented in a way that diluted or diminished it. For example when NZOA imposed a minimum Maori content requirement, Maori and Pacific Islanders tended to be represented as sports heroes, offered as role models for at-risk youth, or as criminals sharing regrets, in order to reinforce socially approved behaviour. This low-risk representation of “other” played to stereotype and endorsed mainstream values and compares poorly with past achievements for documentary in this area. The acclaimed 1970s series, *Tangata Whenua*, in which Maori participated on their own terms, represented racial difference as being of interest and of value in its own right (Debrett 2004, 829).

In the 1990s New Zealand’s contestable funding system and full broadcast market had increased the number of local documentaries in prime time from

10 to 60 a year. However, as the trends discussed indicate, filmmakers had many concerns about the constraints imposed by low budgets and broadcasters' preferences. By 1996 the public were also concerned about the commercial look of television and in 1999 elected the Clark Labour Government on a platform of reforming public broadcasting!

### **Australian Documentary and the Many Voices Funding System**

In Australia, the documentary funding system in 1998 retained more diversity across budgets, styles and topics, as a result of having five state and three federal government funding agencies serving different briefs, as well as having two public service broadcasters with different charters: the ABC, a mainstream public service broadcaster; and the SBS, a multicultural public broadcaster.

In Australia in 1998 the mid-week prime time strands on the ABC, and SBS, although frequently character-based usually involved "social inquiry", representing "core documentary" (Corner 1995, 77) as opposed to factual entertainment (Corner 2000). These strands of mixed international and local documentaries, offered considerably more diversity than New Zealand's two dedicated local documentary strands. The vast majority of documentaries that aired dealt with issues of social justice or multiculturalism - these included: euthanasia, HIV AIDS, gay rights, racial stereotyping, the trials of those awaiting transplant surgery, Aboriginal health, and the intersection of rights and ethics surrounding a disabled woman's decision to continue her pregnancy.

In Australia, documentary makers have access to development funding, and more variation in budgets. This is one of the benefits of having a number of funding agencies with different briefs. It provides better support for diversity. Development funding allows research and writing time, which is essential for making documentaries on complex, difficult and confronting topics, engaging for the viewer. Australian documentary makers are also advantaged by the federally funded National Interest Program (NIP), administered by Film Australia, which is dedicated to the representation of matters of cultural and national interest. The NIP provides a source of production funding that is relatively independent from the ratings considerations of broadcasters. Many historical documentaries are funded under this scheme, which offers bigger budgets for documentary than joint initiatives between public service broadcasters and other government agencies.

One of the disadvantages of the Australian system is that funding agencies are increasingly seeking a return on their investment. Thus filmmakers are urged to consider international audiences, which

drives a preference for general or historical perspectives, rather than critical analysis aimed at stimulating public debate. The constraints of the international market for non-fiction entertainment are evident in Elfriede Fürisch's discussion of the Discovery channel's highly successful commercial strategies to position itself as a global brand for quality reality programming (Fürische 2003, 132). When national broadcasters enter the global market as producers and distributors of documentary, they are competing with Discovery's high profile global reputation for "reliable product". This undermines investment in proposals that are innovative or ground breaking in their intent.

Another failing noted in the Australian system was broadcasters' reluctance to invest in or schedule feature length documentaries. This was largely a scheduling problem, arising from television's hourly and half hourly common junction points. What it meant, however, was that issues and stories that required that length of time could not be adequately covered.

By 2004, policy shifts had brought documentary outcomes much closer in both countries. In Australia, audience ratings are now more important for public service broadcasters, in order to demonstrate their public relevance. And potential international marketability is more important for funding agencies, now under more pressure to show a return on their investments. The influence of neoliberal ideology has seen funding agencies shift from being patrons to investors, changing their relationship with filmmakers from a collaborative to a contractual one, in which the domestic social value of the venture was de-emphasised. Australasian film and television funding agencies have had to resolve the competing pressures of serving the contested site of multicultural or bicultural national identities while also nurturing the local screen production sector as it faces the free market challenges of the global era.

Two new trends became evident in local television documentary in Australia: pursuit of the youth audience; and the commissioning of local half hour docu-soap series. Winning a younger audience is public service broadcasters' new priority. Youth are seen as the audience of the future and the fear is that if they don't acquire the habit of watching public service broadcasting, they may never tune in. Yet, commercial stations too prioritise the youth audience because advertisers seek the advantage of their relative freedom from established brand loyalty. If public service broadcasters compete for this demographic they risk becoming like commercial stations thereby losing their purpose as an alternative.

In recent years the ABC and SBS have also begun investing in half hour local docu-soap series (Roscoe 2004, 291), abandoning the open mixed strands of

the nineties, which offered an eclectic mix of local and imported one-off documentaries by filmmakers from diverse backgrounds. Examples of the new half hour series include *Moulin Rouge Girls* (2004) on the ABC, an inside look for the prurient, as a group of young Australian women train as can can dancers in Paris, and on SBS, *Desperately Seeking Sheila* (2004), a six part series in which four Australian men from country Western Australia choose a woman - from a pool of 25 - to accompany them back to their home to live with them for three weeks. These attempts by broadcasters to “sex-up” the documentary offerings, presumably in the quest for higher ratings to prove relevance, also signal pursuit of the youth audience.

So, although documentary remains a fundamental component of the schedule of public service broadcasting in both countries, neoliberal ideology has affected the kinds of documentaries produced and how they are promoted and scheduled. This ideology is manifest in the funding pressures on public service broadcasting which drive the quest for ratings (Moore, 2004), the redefining of cultural subsidy as investment and the emphasis on marketability. The subsequent change to the way documentary is now scheduled, has been described as “slot culture” (Debrett 2004, 822), with broadcasters more tightly defining the topic range and look for each timeslot. This new way of scheduling limits the possibilities for creative experimentation and social agency.

### Reinvigorating Documentary as a Social Project

Jon Dovey has written about populist documentary in Britain, which was very similar at this time. He identifies a consumerist and individualist focus noting that story-based factual entertainment documentaries draw on the popular discourse of emotion as knowledge (Dovey 2000, 133; 163) and situate participants as “others”, whose pleasure, pain and foibles provide viewing spectacle. Serving scopophilia, - visual pleasure - rather than epistophilia - the pleasure in knowing (Nichols 2000, 61), factual entertainment programming of this kind lacks the metonymic reference to wider social issues or shared world common to documentary texts and thus fails to cue reflection upon the wider ramifications of the story being told. Accordingly, characters and stories are selected largely for their entertainment value rather than for being representative of any particular social issue.

Nevertheless, the existence of a number of exceptions to these trends in documentaries screened in New Zealand in 1998 lend weight to the thesis that cultural policy can serve both humanist and market needs (Gibson 2001). The exceptions reflect both

happenstance and the ability of some New Zealand filmmakers to negotiate their way through the system and they prove that “difficult” topics can be made into engaging documentaries that rate well.

*The Cave Creek: A National tragedy Story*, a feature length investigative documentary, eventuated only because the production company put up its own money “to do justice to the story”. The documentary detailed the findings of a Commission of Enquiry into the collapse of a national park viewing platform, in which many young people were killed. The Commission’s finding of systemic failure had singular social resonance at the time because of widespread public sector cost cutting. Other exceptions illustrated the triumph of purpose over form. In *The Bay Boys*, television personality and comedian, Gary McCormick revisited the area where he grew up, and more as witness than entertainer engaged Maori school friends, whose lives had been less successful than his own, in intimate discussions, offering an “unsentimental and non-patronising reflection of the economic and social disadvantage that many Maori face” (Debrett 2004, 831).

In Australia, despite broadcasters’ preferences for documentaries of less than an hour’s duration, three award winning feature length documentaries, made without broadcaster investment but with AFC support, reflect the importance of funding that doesn’t require broadcaster approval and also the advantages of integrating film and television funding, which is more difficult in New Zealand’s single agency system.

Among other exceptions are two addressing the issue of “race”, which is commonly deemed “difficult” by television executives, because of its potential to alienate the mainstream audience. Challenging documentaries about race have succeeded when there has been sufficient funding and support for collaborative community involvement. Examples are the *New Zealand Wars* series, which dealt with the hostilities that broke out when British settlers claimed Maori land. The series had several distinctive features: a formal production style fronted by Professor James Belich; it explored race relations from an historical perspective that was less politically risky for the broadcaster; it proved extremely popular out-rating *Coronation Street*; it was the product of rigorous research drawing on Belich’s doctoral thesis; and lastly, with a budget of \$1.4 million the series was considerably better funded than most New Zealand television documentaries (Debrett 2004, 830). Academic audience research suggests the series served public need for cultural and social analysis that television had neglected, reinvigorating public debate on issues of nationhood and de-colonisation (Perrott 2001).

Similarly in Australia, the award winning feature length documentary, *Exile and the Kingdom* was an AFC funded documentary in which the Indigenous unit at the AFC liaised between the filmmakers and local Koori. Filmed in the Pilbara and Fortesque River region of Western Australia the documentary dealt with the appropriation of Aboriginal tribal territory for mining in the 1960s.

Both these films had funding and institutional support well above that regarded as the norm for documentary and subsequently were able to invest the time required - in research, production and post production - to produce highly engaging films. They proved that it is possible to make successful documentaries on "difficult" subjects without compromising the social project. Both challenged stereotypical ways of viewing and engaging with the social actors through a documentary aesthetic without recourse to tabloid or narrative techniques. Importantly, both films also entailed negotiation with the indigenous participants during the planning and production process.

### Audience Development versus Marketing

The dramatic neo-liberal reform of broadcasting in New Zealand impeded television documentary as social enquiry in a number of ways: the national branding of documentary as local content framed the genre as celebratory rather than critical; avoidance of controversy confirmed rather than challenged racial stereotyping, and the tabloidisation of content and style emphasised entertainment at the expense of information or insight. The healthier state of

Australian television documentary in 1998 signals ways to counter to these: provision of development funding independent of broadcaster influence; open, mixed documentary strands; variation in budget scale; the integration of film and television subsidy; and non-commercial public service broadcasters. Policy makers need to ensure that cultural subsidy serves diversity in all its manifestations, rather than simply accepting the market based audience response. Cultural subsidy needs to be delivered in a way that builds audiences for challenging documentaries – not boring or populist ones.

In *The Uses of Art*, Lisanne Gibson recounts how humanist and economic tensions have always been part of Australian cultural policy and are not necessarily in conflict. She argues that the new emphasis on "saturation marketing" rather than audience development, as a means of building audiences, has set the two in conflict. For Gibson, audience development, which takes an educative approach, is about identifying and building new audiences as the industry responds to different needs (Gibson 2000, 91). In documentary funding, the "slot culture" approach of branded local documentary strands, and the emphasis on ratings, the youth audience and overseas marketability, all reduce the possibilities for diversity and the delivery of cultural rights. On the other hand, more access to development funding free from broadcaster control, more production funding from non-television sources, more scope for feature length documentaries and more open, non-branded scheduling of documentary would facilitate greater innovation and risk taking and thus better reflect diversity.

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- Exile and the Kingdom* (1992) Director/Producer, Frank Rijavec; Co-director, Noelene Harrison; Script, Frank Rijavec
- Tangata Whenua* (1975) Director: Barry Barclay; Producer: John O'Shea

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