Professionalising Documentary Production

Third Way Cultural Policy Conundrums in Australasia

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Abstract: Since the 1990s the challenges of the global marketplace and fragmentation of the audience have prompted changes in how the public subsidy for documentary is implemented in Australasia, transforming what once an artisanal field, reorientating documentary subsidy towards the needs of industry to the detriment of both art and social purpose. This trend is undermining the validity of the authorial viewpoint and creative treatment that traditionally distinguished documentary from television journalism and current affairs on the one hand, while also blurring boundaries between documentary and factual entertainment on the other. Third Way cultural policy in Australasia has prompted the favouring of populist documentary in a quest to justify public funding, increase sales and recoup public investment. Yet profitability challenges traditional justifications for a discrete subsidy for the genre, threatening research and development funding and the high risk, high concept documentary, ultimately threatening diversity across factual programming.

Keywords: Documentary, Cultural Policy, Third Way

Introduction

The development of the digital multichannel environment along with the spread of neoliberal economics has prompted changes in how the public subsidy for social documentary is implemented. Government subsidy for documentary production - once an artisanal field - is being re-oriented towards the needs of industry, rather than cultural/civic purpose. In New Zealand and Australia, in order to secure funding social documentary producers are increasingly driven to tailor their projects to the ratings needs of television broadcasters or to adopt elements that might secure international sales and generate returns to government funding agencies. The primacy now given these considerations diminishes opportunities for authorial experimentation with producers adopting proven approaches to appease broadcasters and investors (Debrett 2004). This industrialising trend is not just homogenising but also ultimately threatens the sustainability of the genre by undermining the basis for government subsidy. Much has been written about the phenomenal popularity of reality television and docusoaps in Britain in the mid 1990s (Dovey 2000; Bruzzi 2000; Corner 2000a; Bonner 2003). For the New Zealand funding agency, New Zealand on Air (NZoA), a similar trend in 1998 was initially seen as a victory for state intervention because the popularity it brought the genre enabled dramatic increases in the amount of local programming on prime time television. Since then the agency has re-evaluated the trend in terms of lost diversity. While this development in television documentary took longer to occur in Australia, where a wider range of funding mechanisms served the cause of diversity better, a similar trend has surfaced recently. Apparently seeking quantifiable evidence of its performance for government through the delivery of bigger audiences for funded content, the leading Federal Government film and television funding agency, the Film Finance Corporation, has revised its documentary funding guidelines to facilitate increased collaboration with commercial television broadcasters.

At the Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) in Brisbane in 1997, Tim Read, Director of Development with the Australian Film Commission (AFC) in Sydney, delivered a paper titled, “Cottages in an Industry”:

It is a picture of a cottage industry supported by piece workers competing among themselves for scarce domestic resources – program slots and investment – also on a one off basis – and remaining vulnerable to an international buyers’ market (Read 1997).

Read argued that in order to secure the viability of documentary making the documentary community had to move from being “an industry in cottages to cottages in an industry”. The premise of Read’s paper was that given the problems of productivity under the existing system - 67 per cent of independent documentary makers for the years 1988/9 to 1995/6 only ever produced one documentary – this insecure “cottage industry” could miss out on the new opportunities of “pay television programming and the emerging potentials of digital media” (Read 1997,
3). What Read went on to say now seems a remarkably prescient blueprint for reinventing the documentary sector as an industry, albeit one “in cottages” or umbrella production companies, managing diverse “slates”.1

Fear of “missing out” on the anticipated “digital boom” is the spectre that increasingly haunts Australian audiovisual policy. It is the other side of that first fear of being overwhelmed by foreign programming, of cultural imperialism, that originally generated local content quotas and production industry subsidies. This shift from cultural to economic priorities creates particular problems for the documentary sector given its dependence on government subsidy.

The following discussion of how these developments are impacting on the future of documentary on television in Australasia references a series of industry interviews undertaken in Australia and New Zealand in 1998, when populist local documentaries were winning big prime time audiences on New Zealand television. The findings of this qualitative research provide the basis for discussion about recent changes to the funding systems in each country with a view to identifying some guidelines for sustainable funding policy for documentary in Australasia.

**Documentary Production: From Artisanal Community to Industry**

The term “industry” is now widely applied to the independent documentary production sector, even though it is actually just a small and shifting part of the much larger audiovisual production industry. Tim Read’s use of the term “cottage industry”, highlighting the precarious nature of the craft, came as the first generation of independent documentary makers were nearing retirement age. Many who had trained originally with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), having spent much of their working lives as independent producer/directors funded on a piecemeal basis, now faced retirement without the benefits of the superannuation enjoyed by their institutionalised peers. Such precariousness is a consequence of democratic access and some might argue a requirement for art. Describing the change Trish FitzSimons observes:

In this artisanal model of documentary production, filmmakers generally worked on only one project at a time for up to five years in extreme instances. The period since the early 1990s, however, has seen the emergence of the specialist documentary producer, alongside the development of increasingly complex “deals” with their associated legal and financial accoutrements. This model of production is in turn closely related to the growing range of international documentary markets. (FitzSimons 2002, 176)

Regardless of their different approaches to documentary commissioning/funding and scheduling, the same development occurred in Australia and New Zealand but for different reasons. FitzSimons observes, “a corollary to the specialist producer on any project has been the emergence of the larger production company, with a slate of projects on the go at any one time” (FitzSimons 2000, 176), a development nurtured by the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) to increase overseas sales. By way of contrast, in New Zealand the umbrella production company was driven by the need for increased volume in local content and the broadcasters’ preference for “reliable product” (Finalyson 1998). Yet there was also a good deal of lobbying by the documentary production sector itself to professionalise the “cottage industry” in order to make it more secure as an occupation, something Read was encouraging in his 1997 paper. Elsewhere Corner has observed that this shift ultimately indicates, “the widespread dispersal (and in part, perhaps dissipation) of documentarist energies and appeals across a much larger area of audiovisual culture” (Corner 2000b, 688), signalling a need for interventionary measures for the preservation of documentary’s distinctive role as an authorial form for social enquiry.

Newfound populist forms of documentary have destabilised the claim to art that distinguished it from journalism - through the creative freedom and critical outsider’s stance once thought integral to the definition of the genre. Independent documentary makers are now positioned as either entrepreneurs or professionals rather than as artists, craftspeople or auteurs. In the process documentary filmmakers’ relationships with broadcasters and funding agencies (their investors) have become contractual rather than collaborative as in the past, with the social aspects of the venture becoming de-emphasised. To secure broadcaster funding documentary proposals must accommodate a channel’s specific strand criteria. By offering producers financial incentives to identify and target international markets (FFC 2004), funding agencies prioritise industry growth. Such pressing financial relationships now overshadow filmmakers’ other relationships - with the participants, with the subject matter and with the audience.

Moves to popularise documentary in order to make its production commercially viable reflect a Third Way approach to cultural subsidy, a public private partnership, ostensibly in the interests of the public through its investment in local production. The Third Way approach is also evident in the shift in cultural

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1 “Slate” is the term applied to the collective current productions of a production company or broadcaster.
policy rhetoric and the inclusion of documentary production within the “knowledge economy” and “creative industries” which places marketability to the fore. Peter Thompson describes the concept of the Third Way as “a combination of social democratic rhetoric with neoliberal macro-economic policies” and observes of its anomalies: “This is not a smooth synthesis of left and right-wing agendas. In practice, the Third Way promotes the pursuit of social/cultural/democratic goals in whatever political-economic space remains after market imperatives have been accommodated” (Thompson 2003, 19).

The industrialisation of the documentary sector has ramifications for the training and careers paths of those involved, as well as for the kinds of documentaries made. In New Zealand the change in focus for television documentary, from serving national culture to delivering popular factual entertainment can be linked to the move away from in-house production with deregulation in 1989, although this was also a democratising move at the time. Comments from interviewees who had worked both in-house and independently suggested that a mix of institutionalised and independent documentary offered on-screen diversity and a more healthy documentary ecology. Many of the most accomplished documentary makers served a public service broadcasting apprenticeship under the guidance of experienced craftspeople and were nurtured by an institutional corps d’esprit. The new generation of filmmakers is being raised in a do-it-yourself culture, with low-cost, user-friendly digital technology and easy access to training through a multitude of courses at secondary and tertiary level, which can only ever offer short-term support. These different training backgrounds now lead down different career paths. The first, the professional, involves the pursuit of high budget, internationally saleable, often history-based series, which have to accommodate the cultural and political values of international co-producers and involve complex and costly legal negotiations over rights. Anecdotal evidence from interviewees in 1998 noted a tendency for co-productions of this type to take a definitive approach, presenting consensus rather than controversy, thus silencing rather than stirring debate, in order to ensure that programs cross borders easily. The second, alternative career path is the entrepreneurial, generally involved in the pursuit of low budget and populist projects. Temed “new documentary” by Stella Bruzzi (2000), these are predominantly personal and observational, often taking the form of half-hour docusoap series, which although parochial in content are likely to be clones of proven overseas projects. Thus both these career directions tend to de-emphasise cultural or civic purpose as the primary focus of topic choice.

The two paths cross when the specialist umbrella producer with a slate of projects sells an idea for a series to the broadcaster and draws on the collective talents of a number of emergent directors to realise it. Potentially offering mentored training this production model can nevertheless mean that those who actually make the film and have direct contact with the social actors are left with little creative or negotiating power. This was reported as a not uncommon experience by those interviewed in New Zealand in 1998. As an apprenticeship it lacks the ongoing peer and infrastructure support once available in public service broadcast institutions and weakens the agency of the filmmaker and documentary participants.

The model, however, operates differently in Australia. FitzSimons (2002) observes the specialist producer model facilitates mentoring, with experienced producers taking on the projects of new documentary making talent. Success stories of this kind of mentoring include Curtis Levy’s collaboration with Bentley Dean on The President and David Hicks (2004), which explored the detainment of Australian citizen, David Hicks, at the Guantanamo Bay detention centre through the eyes of his father, Terry; Tom Zubrycki’s collaboration with Tahir Cambis and Alma Sahbaz on Exile in Sarajevo (1997) which related the filmmakers’ experiences in trying to trace relatives in war torn Sarajevo; and also Tom Zubrycki with Darlene Johnson on Gulpilil: one red blood (2002) which profiled the charismatic, Australian aboriginal film actor, David Gulpilil, whose life straddles two dramatically contrasting cultures. These are all films that took risks, dealing with topics that broadcasters normally regard as controversial. While this development is associated with the shift towards production companies the outcomes are decidedly different.

High Concept Documentary

In both countries documentary makers interviewed expressed concern that economic trends left little scope for the production of ground breaking documentaries of the kind that have lasting relevance and impact, high concept documentaries. These are generally research intensive and/or highly crafted documentaries. Lack of funding free from broadcaster constraints, low budget caps and the absence of any cross-generational transfer of craft skills underlined this concern. Examples of high concept documentaries produced in the past are the award winning Australian film, Black harvest (1992), an observational documentary about the impact of colonialism in New Guinea from the husband and wife team, Bob Connolly and Robyn Anderson, and Tangata whenua (1974), Barry Barclay and Michael King’s revealing series on Maori culture, “the closest New Zealand
documentary had ever come to a discourse originating from within the Maori community" (Campbell 1992, 107). Frequently feature length, high concept documentaries represent the qualities FitzSimons attributes to a passing mode of independent documentary production in the following observations on how the sector is changing.

The moves towards producers with slates of projects is part of a much broader trend away from the independent documentary primarily conceived of as a kind of consuming cinematic experience, passion or vocation, towards the televisial form of the genre, where the works are products, created for the market and where the business plans of production companies are key documents. The final works of this latter model represent a kind of negotiated outcome between the producer, director, commissioning editor and executive producer. (FitzSimons 2002, 177)

For many filmmakers high concept documentaries represent the pinnacle of the craft and provide the incentive to continue in an occupation that has been generally poorly paid. The program for the 2006 AIDC held in Melbourne included a session on “What makes a documentary classic?” signalling the continuing importance of this notion to the industry. At the Documentary Symposium held by New Zealand on Air (NZoA) in 2003 - an assembly of documentary producers, directors and broadcasters - the call for a “three strand approach” (one of the reported outcomes), identified the need for “a ‘blue chip’ strand” in addition to first hand and mainstream strands. The call was made in the context of criticism of the limited topic and treatment range and the absence of documentaries offering socio/political content (Cairns 2003a, 1). With documentary subsidy being directed towards more economic ends, scope for producing high concept documentaries has diminished in both career pathways - professional and entrepreneurial. The conservation of creative and budgetary freedom for these kinds of documentary, that meld art and critical enquiry, is the key to sustaining the distinctiveness of documentary as a genre in the hybridising environment of factual entertainment programming.

**Survival Strategies**

In New Zealand following the deregulation of broadcasting in 1989, New Zealand on Air, the sole government agency for funding television production oversaw the origination of two nationally branded local documentary strands, which, in the wholly commercial environment where ratings took primacy, tended to take a celebratory rather than critical stance. Filmmakers interviewed reported that documentaries dealing with racial issues tended to confirm rather than challenge stereotypes, and that content and style tended to follow what one referred to as “a cheap and cheerful approach” (Debrett 2004, 827). The healthier state of Australian television documentary in 1998 signals ways to counter these trends: two state funded public service broadcasters with remits to be innovative and multicultural; open, mixed documentary strands, which included international and local programs; variation of budget scale; and most importantly, the provision for development funding independent of broadcaster influence available in Australia through the Australian Film Commission (AFC).

A federal structure and greater scale bequeathed Australia a more complex array of film and television funding agencies than New Zealand. Such funding, as a form of cultural subsidy, has always invoked an element of cultural obligation, which in the film and television sector took on various shapes over the years. First among these has been the reflection of national culture and identity or cultural nationalism (Dermody and Jacka 1987, 37-47). The nurturing of talented individuals has also been an acknowledged objective, along with oversight of the development of projects, fostering innovation and the filtering of eligibility for production funding. More recently the identification of marketable concepts likely to serve industry growth, has risen in importance. This reflects the influence of neoliberal economic philosophy and the endorsement of the market rather than government as the best way to manage civil affairs.

With the launch of the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) as a film bank in 1988, film funding in Australia entered a new era in which subsidy was to be partnered as co-investment, with filmmakers encouraged to develop marketing plans and identify additional sources of finance to accompany project proposals. The Creative Nation statement, launched as the rapid popularisation of the Internet was raising awareness of the economic potential of new media industries, embraced twin goals which included protecting national culture from spreading global culture, and exploiting the opportunities of interactive multi-media as “an important new form of cultural expression and a major product to sell to the world”. Economic opportunities underlay the various initiatives outlined with an emphasis on job creation, and the importance of culture in adding value to Australian industry and trade (Commonwealth of Australia 1994, 1; 55; 7). The FFC’s mission connects cultural identity with a professional industry, the representation of diversity with global distribution, and foregrounds the last in the goal of “showcasing Australia’s screen production industry to the world” (FFC 2004). This last challenge, which necessarily sets
the context for the others, reflects fears about industry survival in the free trade era, yet simultaneously weakens the traditional justification for local subsidy. This conflict was noted in comments on the Australian and the United States free trade agreement (AUSfta). Under the terms of the AUSfta, government funding as “investment” may well place such transactions into the commercial sphere where definitions of “Australianness” are at risk of being deemed obstacles to free trade (AWG 2004, 3).

A Sustainable Model

Australia and New Zealand have dealt differently with the culture/industry tension. In Australia, the Film Finance Corporation’s (FFC) co-investment policy with broadcasters, justified as democratising in spreading available monies further, increased the importance of ratings and of marketability and overseas sales as a means of recoupment and of making the local industry self-sustaining. Such emphases threaten to skew the system towards global rather than purely local interests. While parochial documentaries do sometimes also work as universal stories, development of these requires skilled storytelling and the requisite expertise and budgets. Despite general obeisance to broadcasters as co-investors and the best guarantors of audience, some independence from the ratings agenda continues because the primary investors have been public service broadcasters. However, under the changed conditions evidenced in the FFC guidelines in 2006, and the current interest shown by commercial broadcasters - as the blurring boundaries of factual programming broaden the scope for more populist hybrid proposals - this looks likely to change (FFC 2006). This is an ironic reversal of events across the Tasman. In the 1990s, as noted earlier, New Zealand’s sole television funding agency, New Zealand on Air (NZoA), oversaw the redefining of indigenous television culture in minimalist terms as local content. In a compromise solution that met the survival needs of all parties, cultural subsidy was redirected to maximising the hours of local production in prime time, a quantity over quality approach that saw the numbers of local documentary dramatically increase (Debrett 2004, 820). Having been elected in 1999, on a platform of reconstituting public service broadcasting, the Clark Labour Government sought to address the perceived inadequacies of television by launching a Charter for TVNZ, specifying the importance of addressing minority issues in prime time (TVNZ 2003).

While the growth fostered by populist programming serves the industry in the short term, in the long term such pursuit of commercial viability for documentary threatens the basis for its dedicated public subsidy, which has been particularly important for research and development. Funding support not linked to market needs is necessary for nurturing talent and innovative ideas of the kind that lead to challenging high concept (creative, authored) documentaries. These are central to differentiating documentary from other factual genres on television and in turn provide the justification for its dedicated funding as an endangered genre. The very success of populist hybrid forms of documentary in winning audiences, a reflection of the sector’s industrialisation thus threatens the sector’s sustainability.

In 2005 a strategic plan commissioned by the Australian documentary community (the Higgs report) identified “significant barriers to growth” in the documentary sector. These included: the precarious nature of documentary making as a livelihood, evident through the predominance of fee-for-service funding, which precludes margins for infrastructure or expansion; the fact that a diverse range of documentaries costs more than the domestic market is prepared to pay; and the disjuncture between what broadcasters want for their themed strands (safe projects) and the risky and edgy projects that bring success in the more lucrative international cinema market, the high concept documentaries. High concept documentaries are identified as being particularly important in establishing a “quality” Australian brand. The need to nurture these makes the dedicated cultural subsidy for documentary particularly precious to the sector and assigns particular importance to the role of funding agencies as the guardians of development funding in their three-way relationship with broadcasters and documentary makers.

Differentiating documentary from other factual content will always be problematic but in the interests of preserving diversity remains a necessary task for those distributing the documentary subsidy. That interpretation is likely to remain a controversial

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2 Discussing the Discovery Channel’s remarkably successful global brand of “quality” factual television Fursich (2003), observes that profitability in the global market lies with programming “international enough to generate wide sales but also neutral enough (not reflecting or upsetting specific national interests, tastes or themes) to appeal to a global audience” (137-8).

3 The reconstruction of public service television has been complicated by NZoA’s decision to continue contestable funding of both the privately owned TV3 and state owned TVNZ - in the absence of any content quota - continuing the inherent conflict between ratings primacy and documentary as an authorial and creative/experimental form. The government’s requirement for TVNZ to continue to return a dividend to government under its revised Crown Owned Corporation structure has also arguably hindered the production of local programming.

4 Having recognised the shortcomings of the definition applied under the Australian Content Standard, “A program that is a creative treatment of actuality other than news, current affairs, sports coverage, magazine, infotainment or light entertainment program”, the Australian Communications and Media Authority has published draft guidelines and sought submissions regarding the interpretation of documentary
topic is reflected in the FFC’s 2005 commitment of documentary funding to the high rating Missing persons unit, a reality series about the work of the New South Wales police unit that screened on the commercial television network, Channel Nine, during 2005 and 2006.5 In 2006, the FFC funding guidelines replaced the Accord system, which had dedicated a fixed proportion of its documentary funding to public service broadcasters, with a relatively unstructured system. This change signals a new interest in documentary from commercial television broadcasters and government pressure for bigger audiences for subsidised local content.6 While such developments bode well for industry growth in the short term, diversity and long term sustainability is not so well served. The New Zealand experience is salutary here. The tremendous growth of documentary production in the 1990s, estimated at 500 percent (Horrocks 1998), did not produce a stronger industry. This was evident in public disenchantment in 1999 and in the criticism levelled by documentary makers in the 2003 when NZoA ran a seminar to appraise the health of the sector (Cairns 2003).

The economic potential of the audiovisual sector in the era of booming digital information technologies and trade liberalisation initiatives has brought a new economic emphasis to cultural policy. O’Regan observes that “cultural planning” now connects “arts, media, heritage, sports, leisure and environment policy making” (O’Regan 2002, 16). The newly coined “creative industries” have displaced the culture industries as a focus for government support, conflating cultural expression with a broad field of creative productivity linked to the “knowledge economy” (Film Victoria 2004; NZoA 5 Year Plan 2004). According to Jim McGuigan, the application of the “creative industries” concept to cultural policy which originates from Tony Blair’s British New Labour Government, signals a transition from “cultural policy proper” to “cultural policy as display” (McGuigan 1998, 68).

While current industry initiatives in both Australia and New Zealand reflect growing awareness of the complexity of the relationship between the three partners in the funding system – filmmakers, broadcasters and funding agencies – John Corner’s notion of a post documentary era (2000) remains a potent evocation of the potentially reductive effects of market imperatives. The latter in turn suggest a critical role for government agencies in nurturing creativity and diversity along with growth as representatives of both the public and the industry in the global era.

References


by broadcasters and funding agencies (ACMA 2006). Highlighting the ambiguities of definition the draft guidelines note changing fashions, various genres and hybrid forms concluding that “documentary is a term of art rather than a precise definition”. In identifying “creative treatment” as a key component of the definition, the guidelines observe that “it will be interpretive, explaining or construing the idea in a particular way” and “it is likely to have some enduring appeal and ongoing relevance” (ACMA 2004, 3; 4). The AFC on the other hand have opted for a more direct solution, integrating into the current definition the exclusion of any form of competition (AFC 2004).


6 This was the explanation offered by FFC representatives at a seminar at the AIDC - a conference held in Melbourne in February 2006 - when feedback was sought from the documentary industry on the proposed changes.


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**About the Author**

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I teach Media Industries on the Bachelor of Media Studies and am also the coordinator for the video production stream within this degree. Prior to my current position I worked in broadcasting in New Zealand for a decade before moving into the educational sector, initially to produce educational documentaries. Following completion of a Masters thesis on public service broadcasting at the University of Auckland, which involved four case studies of "alternative" television broadcasters, I enrolled in a PhD at Latrobe University. My recently completed PhD thesis, titled "Documentary subsidy in Australia and New Zealand: The future of the social project" involved a study of industry attitudes to changes in the funding systems of each country.