

## RECENT AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CULTURES AND DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE

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There were two separate worlds. It was kind of like the Cold War. There were those that lived inside the ABC and then there were those that swarmed around the AFC and were in the Film Co-op and did all that stuff. You'd see them if you went along to the Film Festival, but what cannot be overstated is the level of separation between the two communities. It's a great tragedy but there it is. So I lived in that TV Features community. It was all in-house production. It basically made television series product. As far as I knew, TV Features didn't really have much to do with so-called independent documentary makers, whom I just didn't even think about. (Hamlyn 2000)

From the 1960s to the 1980s the documentary mode of production grew rapidly in Australia, within two distinct spheres: the institutional sphere represented principally by the ABC and the Commonwealth Film Unit (known as Film Australia from 1973); and the independent world that particularly revolved around film maker's cooperatives in Sydney and Melbourne. The quotation from Mark Hamlyn above attests to the collective distance, between the two separate film making communities in the early 80s.

But in the late eighties to the early nineties, much of the cultural and institutional framework for Australian documentary production shifted, largely erasing the distinctions between these two modes, and setting up a production context that pertained throughout the nineties and until the establishment of Screen Australia in 2008. Key developments that set up this system include a substantial diminution in the 10BA income tax deduction with a concomitant radical decline in documentaries

funded by this route<sup>1</sup>, and the establishment of the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1988 with the formalizing of 'market interest' rather than 'institutional evaluation' as the mechanism of production funding. For documentary demonstrated 'market interest' has generally required a broadcast presale. Alongside the downgrading of the centrality of the Australian Film Commission (AFC) in the post-FFC era, this made cinema and non-theatrical screenings of documentary less significant.

This was also an era of shift in the way that broadcasters related to this programming category, resulting overall in the televisual mode of documentary becoming dominant in Australia. For public broadcasting, key events are the ABC setting up its documentary unit in 1987 and SBS setting up its independent commissioning wing SBS Independent (SBS I) with funding from the Commonwealth government under the 1994 Creative Nation policy. For commercial free-to-air television, important developments are the regulatory framework for nominated 'Australian content' distinguishing documentary from a broader non-fiction category for the first time in 1988 and the formalizing of a first-run Australian documentary quota in 1996. Overall these changes resulted in a culture of documentary production in Australia where broadcasters, their staff as individuals and their corporate cultures have come to be *the* arbiters of which documentaries have been produced and reached audiences.

In the past two decades, the ABC has been the most important producer, commissioner and broadcaster of Australian documentary. Mike Rubbo describes the situation in the late 90's by saying: 'The ABC was the main game in town and as head of docs there I did feel more powerful...than was comfortable'. (Rubbo 2002) From its inception in 1994 SBS I was also vital as 'another door to knock on' and commissioned a distinctive body of work. Together, public service broadcasters account for around seventy percent of all first-run broadcast Australian documentary currently produced. In the realm of commercial free-to-air television, Channel 10 has tended to broadcast just the regulated minimum number of hours of first-run Australian documentary, whereas in recent years Channels 9 and 7 have consistently exceeded it. Case studies of the broadcasting cultures surrounding documentary production at the ABC,

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<sup>1</sup> ScreenAustralia (2009). 'Documentary Production in Australia 2009: A Collection of Key Data', from [www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/docos](http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/docos). Except as otherwise noted, all statistical references in this paper are from this source, available online at [www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/docos](http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/docos)

Channel 10 and SBS have much to teach us about how creative impulses, government policy, and commercial imperatives come together in Australia. First however it is useful to briefly place these case studies into an international context.

### **Broadcasting Cultures: An International Perspective**

Whilst the Australian example represents a particular pathway towards a fundamentally outsourced but broadcaster controlled model of documentary production (with Channel 10 an exception), similar processes have been at work in most European countries, in the UK, New Zealand and Canada. (Gomery and Hockley 2006; Austin 2007) And ironically, given that Australia was one of the last developed countries to develop a pay television sector, and has never required pay television licensees to broadcast any first-run local documentary, the international growth in pay television has been a key driver of international documentary production culture, with Australia being no exception.

Jan Rofekamp has identified a pattern applying from the mid nineties onwards, where pay television operators – hungry for ‘product’ to fill their expansive schedules, but operating on extremely low profit margins as they build their subscriber bases – have created a ‘second market’ for documentary. This contrasts with the ‘first market’ of cinema oriented and public broadcaster sponsored higher budget documentaries. The second market offers very low prices and typically seeks rights for the multiple territories into which the companies broadcast. The ‘second market’ is also much more interested in series than one-off documentary production. Competition between free-to-air and pay television for the best titles has tended to mean that broadcasters are purchasing fewer runs over less years from producers than was the case in the eighties and nineties, ultimately driving down the level of all presales, including in the first market. (Rofekamp 2000; Holtzberg and Rofekamp 2002)

Increasingly, putting together substantial budgets has required producers to work with multiple international broadcasters, many of them from the pay television sector. Internationally, with the Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) as the local example, the period since the mid 90’s has seen a growth in markets that facilitate broadcasters and filmmakers meeting together to broker deals. Trevor Graham, independent filmmaker and a commissioning editor at SBS (2005- 2008),

says as a result: 'It's a buyers market. The competition is stiff and the buying power limited... it's a feeding frenzy'. (Graham 2009 pp. 25-26)

If the late eighties found documentary on television being carefully distinguished from a broader features category, a stand-alone form for which television was the means of meeting a wider audience even as cinema, festivals and non-theatrical circuits provided other forms of address, the 2000s in Australia as elsewhere have found documentary tending to be folded back into a broader televisual programming category, now labelled 'factual programming' and 'factual entertainment'. Rofekamp links this phenomenon to the growth of documentary themed channels on pay television and to non-fiction generally as the driver of televisual profits. Taken together the above developments suggest that whilst each of the local broadcasters has a separate institutional culture and voice, collectively they are impacted upon by national and international media markets, cultures and regulations. But much can be learned from focusing on broadcasters individually and their cultures of production.

### **Australian Broadcasting Cultures – Three Case Studies**

#### ***The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)***

The ABC was home to much experimentation within the documentary tradition in the 1960s and 1970s. By the early eighties this work formed part of the broader features department that produced such programs as *Chequerboard*, *Four Corners* and *Quantum*. The rural department was also producing programming with documentary elements through *A Big Country*. But one-off documentary was not a strong element of the ABC's eighties line up. What was produced was mainly series, although Mark Hamlyn and others produced occasional one off programs that were documentaries broadly within John Corner's category of 'journalistic enquiry and exposition'. (1999) Meanwhile, independent documentary filmmaking was taking off, largely supported by the Australian Film Commission through the Creative Development Branch and the Women's Film Fund, but television broadcast was not generally available to this work. The independent film community was outraged when David Bradbury was able to sell his Academy Award nominated film *Frontline* (1980) to the BBC, but could raise no interest at the ABC in screening the film. As one of the program makers from inside

what he describes as the ABC's 'walled city state' mentality, Hamlyn recalls this furore as a 'wake up call but it didn't immediately lead to anything else'. (Hamlyn 2000, p. 8)

This incident was part of a bigger story of the revival of the Australian film industry initially having little impact on the schedules of the largest national public broadcaster. Australian content across all genres of its programming was so low that in 1984 Kim Williams and Phillip Adams as representatives of the Australian Film Commission addressed the ABC's board to declare that had they been governed by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's regulation, rather than their distinctive legislative charter, they would have lost their license for screening too little 'local content'. (Inglis 2006 p. 70)

But from the mid eighties the ABC showed greater interest in Australian content, including in the area of documentary. From 1983, Jonathan Holmes was executive producer of the *Four Corners* program, which started to broadcast episodes with a more investigative and documentary sensibility. Many key *Four Corners* personnel – Holmes, Bruce Belsham, Jenny Brockie amongst them – would in time be instrumental in setting up the ABC's first dedicated documentary department. Inaugurated in 1987 under Holmes' leadership, it was part of a bigger push by ABC management to build up Australian content, to pursue ratings more assiduously than before, and to try to widen their audience range beyond their largely over fifties demographic. Its inception was also linked to an agenda to make a greater distinction between television and radio, with television documentary part of this. At *Four Corners*, Holmes had emphasized the ABC reflecting a more overtly Australian voice rather than aping the BBC's programming style. He pursued the same end as head of the documentaries department. As well as retaining close links to *Four Corners*, the new unit brought in new blood from the rural department, from the BBC, from radio and from the independent sector.

This department both consolidated the position and increased the numbers of in-house filmmakers producing both series and one-off programs. It also codified and expanded the ABC's intersection with independent producers. Harry Bardwell as the Executive Producer for the independent wing of the documentary department became the prototype Australian model of the commissioning editor that has been a key feature of broadcasting culture since. As described in detail by FitzSimons (2002) Bardwell and Holmes were instrumental in setting up a streamlined system for working with

independent producers and interfacing with other relevant institutions, especially the nascent Film Finance Corporation.

Mark Hamlyn took over from Holmes as head of the documentaries department in 1989, with Bardwell continuing in the role of executive producer to independent production. By this time the milieu that Hamlyn had described as an early eighties 'mono culture' had shifted considerably. Arriving at the ABC in 1988 to work as a researcher and associate producer in the Documentary Department, Tony Moore's gained instead an impression of a 'university of film...where there were tangible, touchable things that encouraged us to innovate' (2009 p. 5). A department employing up to 60 in-house filmmakers and crew incorporated many different styles of work. One important style, that shared much in common with the reinvigorated *Four Corners*, but also benefited from much larger budgets and longer research and production times than was ever possible in the framework of current affairs, was that developed by David Goldie in *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (1987), *Nobody's Children* (1989) and *Somebody Now* (1996). These were highly researched long-form documentaries of a scope that would have been impossible to produce out of the independent documentary community of the 1980s. *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* was the top rating program in its time slot across all free-to-air channels, a rare distinction for public television. Its expose of inmate conditions is credited with contributing to the closure of the Jika Jika prison wing of Pentridge Jail in Melbourne. (Inglis 2006 p. 187)

For such projects, and unlike the largely cottage industry independent documentaries of the same era, a model of documentary production adapted from the BBC tradition was used, with substantial crews including researchers – often with specific academic credentials in the topic under discussion – production and camera assistants, as well as the standard producer/director, director of photography, sound recordist and editor. Tony Moore worked closely with Goldie on *Nobody's Children*, as researcher and script writer, and in his view such crewing combined with the department's collaborative work culture allowed for 'long haul series of national significance' to emerge. This in-house production culture resulted in a number of documentaries such as *Cop it Sweet* (Brockie 1991) documenting the working methods of the Redfern Police, which like such *Four Corners* programs as 'The Moonlight State' (Masters 1987), exposing corruption in the governance of Queensland, and *Labor in Power*

(Spencer 1993) became significant to national conversations on questions of government policy and practice.

In the years after the documentary department was first established, technical crew for internally produced ABC documentaries came from the broader pool of the network's employees. There tended to be permeable membranes too for producers and directors to move between the documentary, current affairs and features departments. This almost certainly had an impact on creating documentaries formally marked by a broader televisual aesthetic.

These in-house produced documentaries were notably aesthetically and formally different from the documentaries that the ABC had started to buy in greater numbers once Harry Bardwell was installed as Executive Producer of work bought in from the independent sector. Independent commissions of the late eighties and early nineties ranged from more cinematic documentaries such as *Hatred* (Goldman 1995) and *Eternity* (Johnston 1994) to those produced under the emerging accord system with the FFC, aimed more specifically at a television audience such as *Lord of the Bush*. (Zubrycki 1990) As with this latter film, documentary biographies that placed individuals or groups into social and political context were common independent commissions, for example *For All the World to See* (Fiske 1991) and *God's Girls: Stories from an Australian Convent*. (Nowlan 1992) In contrast to the 'cold war' atmosphere between independent and in-house filmmakers of the early eighties, Tony Moore recalls a department in which its independent and internal sections complemented each other so that we 'were flying with two wings'. Between 1987 and 1991 the output of these 'two wings' combined to quadruple the number of Australian documentaries screened in primetime on the ABC. (Inglis 2006 p. 187)

A merger between the ABC and SBS having been proposed and very nearly enacted by the Hawke government in 1986. Once this had been rejected by the Senate and dropped from the legislative agenda, the ABC tended to interpret its 1983 Charter's exhortation to 'reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community' in a manner that largely left to SBS the territory of exploration of multicultural identities and histories, although there are plenty of exceptions. Andrew Ogilive got an ABC presale for *Joy of the Women* (1993) after the West Australian lobby group 'Independent Documentary Association' (IDA) went to the ABC Board to complain that the national

broadcaster was ignoring documentary producers from the west. *Joys of the Women*, about a choir of Italian immigrant women in Perth, was purchased on the basis of a short synopsis and show reel when Bardwell (coincidentally of West Australian background) had visited Perth to discuss possible local documentary commissions. Ogilvie thought afterwards 'somewhat cynically that perhaps Harry had just been upstairs and the ABC had decided at a more senior level that they should do something with a more multicultural approach, a bit like what SBS was doing'. (Ogilvie 2001 p. 6) From 1987 the ABC had a separate 'Aboriginal programs unit' whose output consisted substantially of magazine-style programming strongly inflected by the documentary tradition. Documentaries were also produced from the natural history, arts and religious departments. Briefly there was also a multicultural unit, but its output never rivaled the growing impact of SBS television on Australian documentary production giving voice to diverse ethnic groups.

In the early years of the documentary department Mark Hamlyn recalls specific 'targets for timeslots' and David Hill regularly ringing to check how specific titles had performed against these benchmarks. In response to this ratings pressure the ABC television schedule became much more predictable week to week and began increasingly to synchronize with the schedules of commercial channels, making it easier for viewers to turn to the ABC for specific programs. This rigidity regarding length was a regular source of conflict between management and both in-house and independent filmmakers used to making programs whose length was an outgrowth of their intrinsic material. The result of these changes across the board at the ABC was that ratings for the primetime evening slots in which documentary was generally scheduled grew by some thirty percent between 1989 and 1991, as the proportion of Australian content on the ABC as a whole also grew very substantially. (Inglis 2006 p. 207 - 208)

But by early 1995, the incoming ABC management under the leadership of Brian Johns was in a mood for change. Mike Rubbo, an Australian documentary film maker who had spent most of his working life at the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada, was asked to return to Australia to take over from Hamlyn as head of the documentaries department, in charge of both in-house filmmakers and independent commissioning. Rubbo had garnered international renown for directing observational cinema (eg *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, (NFB 1970), *Waiting for Fidel*, (NFB1974),

*Solzhenitsyn's Children*. (NFB 1978)) He had been an outspoken advocate for observational cinema playing a bigger role in the Australian documentary tradition, running periodic workshops at AFTRS and in Bowral from the mid 1980's where he proselytized this style.

Although documentaries across a range of genres emitted from the ABC during Rubbo's tenure, the ABC's institutional voice of the time is especially associated with observational documentary. Indeed, Rubbo has said that:

The new digicams had just arrived and I wanted to explore making films in a much more free and flexible way. But I ran into fierce opposition from some local filmmakers who were accustomed to making a lot of essay type films and had no interest in the observational genre. They saw me as a real threat because ... I was touted as someone who would not commission anything that was scripted or of the essay type. (Rubbo in Burton and Caputo 1999 p. 204)

Coming at the same time as the AFC had instituted a low budget guerilla documentary strategy, and in response to severe budget cutbacks that led to extreme funding cuts for other categories of documentary, Rubbo's appointment was very much of its time. One of his early commissions, purchased by the ABC at rough cut stage, was Graham Chase's *Maverick with a Mobile* (1997), a portrait of the conservative politician Graeme Campbell, which the film maker wrote, produced, directed, shot and edited on a shoestring budget from the AFC's Guerilla Docs program. Rubbo had a particular passion for observational stories set in hard to access elite environments, that he called the 'misty mountain stories' (Rubbo 2002). Simon Target's two independently produced documentary series *Uni* (1997) and *The Kings School* (1998) fulfilled this brief. Consistent with this focus on an observational methodology, Rubbo's leadership of the documentary unit was also associated with a diminution in the paperwork that producers/directors were expected to provide before a project was greenlighted/pre-sold.

Rubbo's tenure at the ABC was also associated with a generational reinvigoration. Historically, the ABC cadetship system had fulfilled an important training function throughout the audio-visual media, including the documentary sector, but the late eighties move towards outsourcing largely brought this role to an end. By the mid 90s

the documentary production community had become a fairly stable group, most of whom had started producing work one or two decades earlier. In negotiating his contract with the ABC, Rubbo arranged to bring in an Australian version of a French Canadian television series called *Race around the World* (Fidler 1997 - 1998) in which young people armed with then-new tiny video cameras charted a course around the world, directing, shooting and planning the edit of short documentaries, each completed in a ten day timeframe. Their work was judged by eminent documentary film makers in front of a studio audience. Observational cinema was the predominant methodology and a number of the contestants – John Safran, Olivia Rousset and David Shankey amongst others – subsequently produced documentaries and/or documentary inflected current affairs and comedy on the ABC, SBS and elsewhere.

Within a couple of years Geoff Barnes replaced him as head of the documentaries department. Rubbo moved into a 'special projects' role that included oversight of *Race around the World*, before leaving the ABC to become an independent producer. The Howard government came to power in 1996, soon after Brian Johns' appointment by the Keating Labour government as Managing Director of the ABC. Its first budget slashed funding to the ABC and, in line with persistent lobbying from SPAA and the AIDC to privilege independent documentary commissions over in-house production, a process of diminishing the role of the in-house element of the documentary department began, that proceeded through a series of role changes and redundancies until all generalist in-house documentary production was completely phased out in the mid 2000s. Tony Moore is of the view that this was part of a shift in the ABC's institutional voice, in the direction of being more 'craven of authority', less likely to treat topics in a manner that might upset the government of the day or even to take on contentious issues as the subject of documentary.

Part of the changing balance of power between in-house and various categories of independent film makers from the mid 90's onwards, was the growth of the non-accord funding from the FFC. This category was for productions that 'had garnered foreign broadcaster commitment' and were typically auspiced by large production companies such as Hilton Cordell in Sydney and Electric Pictures in Perth, that were increasingly ready, willing and able to produce not only the 'one offs' but also the series that had been the exclusive preserve of internal broadcaster production. Greater integration with international broadcasters was a feature of ABC culture from the beginning of the

documentary department and oversight of international co-productions part of Harry Bardwell's role from the beginning. As the FFC increasingly favoured non-accords over accords from the mid 90s however, this tendency strengthened.

Non-accords imposed certain limits on the power of the ABC commissioning editors to determine what was supported. In Rubbo's memory with foreign broadcasters attached, 'the film maker was virtually assured of getting an ABC presale'. (Rubbo 2002) Because the recoupment structure of non-accords was better for the FFC the number of these slots grew whilst the number of slots for accords - that were totally funded within Australia and much more 'doable' for smaller independent producers, leading to intense competition – was stable. And with many non-accord documentaries having multiple presales from multi national pay television broadcasters, the distinctive public service voice of ABC documentary, or certainly its 'democratic civics' variant (Corner 1999), began to recede, along the lines detailed by Rofekamp earlier. Foreign language versions of documentaries for international broadcasters also tended to require works with a higher percentage of narration, and therefore a more expository mode of address than previously.

Relative to other broadcasters, nationally and internationally, the ABC was an early adopter of digital technology and culture, setting up ABC online in August 1995, just as the 'web' was taking off as a global phenomenon. In the years since, both online and digital multi-channeling have been crucial to the ABC's capacity to argue for maintaining and extending public funding and that they are delivering value for money. A part of this is the ABC has typically been in sync with Commonwealth government communications policy, using their programming to drive the adoption of various emerging forms of technology and hardware, including broadband media and digital television. In particular the ABC has been associated with developing content that is expressed across multiple media platforms.

The in-house produced series *Frontier* (Belsham 1997), which told the history of first contact of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians throughout Australia, was the first to provide the capacity for the public to chat online with crew and key cast from the series, as part of widening public debate around the issues raised by the programs. ABC Enterprises distributed an interactive adjunct to this series was also sold on CD Rom (1997) and later it was released on DVD (2007). Until 2001 the absence of

broadband infrastructure in Australia limited the exploration of audio-visual media online, and meant that it was ABC radio and in particular Radio National, that first explored the meaning of public broadcasting in a cross-media universe. In the lead-up to the national launch of a broadband communications network, in late 2000, ABC Television in conjunction with the Australian Film Commission called for submissions for 'Documentary online' proposals from independent producers. The four selected included *The Wrong Crowd* (Beattie 2003), that explored the political and personal consequences of opposition to the Bjelke Peterson led state government in Queensland in the 1980's and *Long Journey/Young Lives* (Goldie and Dahdal 2002) that explored life as a young refugee to Australia of that time. Goldie by this time was an independent, selling his work back to the ABC.

Although the ABC had launched two digital channels – Fly TV and ABC Kids – to coincide with the launch of digital television in Australia in 2001, there was not the funding to continue these initiatives beyond 2003. A better funding environment prevailed by 2005, when ABC 2 was launched as a fully digital channel at a time when the Howard government was focused on trying to build demand as part of driving the eternally delayed transfer to a fully digital television environment. In early 2006 the ABC launched 'triple j tv', an initiative building on the 'triple J' Youth (defined as under 35) brand and providing relatively low level full funding for one off documentaries with strong cross media elements to tie together an ABC Youth audience across the television/ radio/ online and mobile platforms. From 2006 until the present there has been an annual call to independents for triple j tv documentaries, not only produced by emerging filmmakers but also squarely targeted at the youth market, and largely focused on youth oriented arts. These included *Words from the City* (Gadd and Graham 2007) a documentary exploring Australian hip hop which was nominated for five AFI awards and won an audience award for feature documentary in the 2007 Melbourne Film Festival. *Triple j tv Docs* is an important initiative in institutional renewal given that the audience for documentaries in Australia is almost half composed of an over fifty five audience.

The ABC then has been a major force in deciding what Australian documentaries get made and reach an audience since seriously 'taking on' the form as part of a new focus on Australian content in the late 1980s. Indeed in 2007 almost forty percent of first-run documentaries on Australian television screened on the ABC. In the early

years of engagement with the independent community the ABC was a conduit for a number of important documentaries that in the first instance had been produced for a limited release cinema and festival clientele to reach a wider educated general audience. By the early 2000s funding for this kind of film was much scarcer due to shifts in FFC and AFC policy and the ABC was more focused on building large audiences for early evening, largely half hour, lighter and more televisual series under the slot heading of *Reality Bites*. This strategy was very successful in terms of building audiences for documentary and indeed in 2002 fourteen of the fifteen highest rating documentaries were screened on the ABC, many of them in this category of work, and most produced by independent companies now of a size to take on series production. But whilst individual standout programs such as *Who Killed Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler* (Butt 2006) continue to screen to a huge audience of more than two and a half million (ABC Annual Report 2007), it is now work on commercial channels, especially Channel 7, that is being embraced most widely by a general audience. This latter work is largely in hybrid genres of documentary, deeply inflected by the rise of reality television formats.

And meanwhile, since the mid 2000s the simultaneous screen audience for any single documentary is declining, as viewers across all genres are split between free-to-air/digital, subscription, gaming and online and portable formats. As the dominance of the main free-to-air channels decline, the ABC's embrace of content for digital multi-channeling seems prescient, including being the first Australian television channel to stream wide scale full screen content through its iView platform from July 2008. With strong support for the next triennium from the 2009 federal budget, the future of documentary on ABC television seems assured, but with a less idiosyncratic voice than previously. On the ABC, as at SBS and many other broadcasters nationally and internationally, documentary has since 2002 been located within a broader 'factual' category, not so different from the features rubric from whence it was delineated two decades ago. And with notable exceptions such as *The Oasis* (Ettinger-Epstein and Darling 2008), ABC documentary would appear to have ceded much of its hard won role as the conscience of the nation, at a time when the 'imagined community' of the national television audience is fracturing.

### ***The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)***

The very first program screened on the brand new SBS Television Channel in October 1980 was a documentary entitled *Who are We?*, made by Peter Luck about the history of Australian immigration (Ang, Hawkins et al. 2008 p. 135) This title could be considered emblematic, not just of the nation that SBS had been set up to serve, but also of the broadcaster itself. As Ang, Hawkins and Daboussy have detailed, from its inception SBS has had ongoing debates about balancing its mission to provide programming to meet the needs of Australia's diverse ethnic communities with programming that entices the wider Australian community to embrace multi-culturalism and ethnic diversity. Indeed by the late nineties SBS was associated with cultural diversity of all forms, ethnicity being just one version of this.

SBS shares with the ABC a legislative charter rather than broadcasting regulation as its 'guiding hand', but has only ever had a small fraction of the ABC's funding to achieve similar goals. SBS, like the UK's Channel 4 (another creature of the 80s), has always been a 'hybrid broadcaster', depending on private as well as public sources of funding (including funding from non-broadcasting public bodies). In recognition of this reality, the 1991 legislation that gave SBS permanency also enshrined the right to include advertising before and after programs and in 'natural program breaks'.

Documentary has been a vital part of SBS' long-term strategy of working within these constraints, whilst at the same time distinguishing itself from other Australian television channels. Documentary was a mainstay of the primetime schedule from early on and SBS had established regular early evening documentary slots from 1989 onwards. By the mid 90s SBS would describe itself as the 'documentary channel' although the bulk of documentary screened had been purchased internationally. In 2005/06 SBS screened almost twice as many hours of documentary as the ABC (1080 hours compared with 580 hours). However, first release Australian documentary was a very much smaller category, forming only some eighty hours of this total.

Whilst never challenging the ABC as the network producing and screening the most Australian documentary, SBS has been critical to the culture of local documentary production since its commissioning wing, known as SBS (Independent) - SBS I – received substantial funding from the Keating government's *Creative Nation* policy

(Australia. Dept. of Communications and the Arts. 1994). Unlike the ABC, SBS has had minimal in-house production, and almost none within the genre of documentary.

One part of what underpinned SBS' specific broadcasting culture was a closer relationship to the independent community than was generally the case at the ABC, for example employing commissioning editors who had been independent documentary producers and/or directors prior to working at SBS. Indeed in some cases SBS commissioning editors such as Pat Fiske and Nick Torrens worked part time whilst continuing to independently produce documentaries. Ned Lander, who managed SBS I from 2005 -07, has summed up the impact of these cross-over histories of staff:

That was one of the things about SBS I, it lent toward the independent film maker as well as to the broadcaster and there was seen to be a value in terms of supporting the industry and strengthening the industry. (Ned Lander, 2007 in Graham 2009 p. 45)

Whilst these inter-connections could give rise to something of an impression of a 'Bondi mafia' of film makers and commissioning editors working together to decide what was produced, SBS I was also marked in its early years by a greater openness to programming from beyond Sydney/Canberra/Melbourne than the ABC, regularly sending its commissioning editors on trips to the regions to meet film makers and hear about potential projects. Partly this was financial necessity. SBS has never been funded to a level where internal full-financing has been an option and had developed in the 1980's the habit of co-financing projects with other public bodies such as the Ethnic Affairs Commission. Throughout the 90s this trend continued with such series as *Unfinished Business* (2000) co-funded by the Centenary of Federation (Smaill 2001). But the state film agencies, whose remits were as much focused on state based employment as on cultural policy were obvious partners to programming strands that allowed new and regional entrants to enter the documentary production sphere. Indeed under Bridget Ikin's leadership SBS I made commissioning work from emerging film makers in every state an explicit goal. (Smaill 2003 p. 113)

Through the innovation of themed strands with projects sourced by an open public competition – *Australia by Numbers* (2000 – 03), *Podlove* (2007 – 08) for example – SBS I was instrumental in bringing a new generation to the documentary industry,

typically 'twinning' an emerging director with an established producer. The directors chosen for these initiatives were often given some film education as part of the production process. John Hughes, commissioning editor of SBS 1998-2001 ran such workshops, known as 'Space Days', for the *Space Stories* project that predated *Australia by Numbers*. His aim was that the directors 'would get a sense of themselves as a group...and organize together as filmmakers'. (in Smaill 2003 p. 9) This was a kind of reprise of the cooperative aims of 1980s Australian documentary culture, and quite distinct from the increasingly commercial tenor of many documentary production entities and institutions. Such projects both facilitated SBS working within the constraints of its limited budget and helped to build an institutional voice for documentary associated with innovation and idiosyncratic formal challenge, in an era when the documentaries screened on the ABC tended to embody a more standardized televisual aesthetic and institutional voice.

Yet Trevor Graham says of his time as SBS commissioning editor in the mid 2000s that 'most of my job entailed saying "No"!'. He personally assessed five hundred submissions, and asserts that of the six to seven hundred documentary proposals SBS I as a whole received each year they 'commissioned barely five percent of these' (Graham 2009 p. 25). Such numbers tended to militate against highly researched and scripted projects. With much smaller budgets than the ABC, documentary treatments dependent on archival sources have also been very much rarer in the SBS oeuvre, the landmark series *The First Australians* (Perkins 2008) notwithstanding. Instead, observational topics where the film maker can relatively quickly gather an initial impression of a character and scenario and test out the broadcaster's level of interest before proceeding too far, have predominated. Graham says that 'we often received similar proposals from different producers and of course only one is selected'. (Graham 2009 p. 25)

In the decade or so after its establishment SBS I built a strong culture of commissioning independent work. Having been responsible for all the nominees for AFI documentary awards in 1999 and in the following year the winner of Best Documentary and Best Documentary Direction – *The Diplomat* (Zubrycki and Browning 2000) – SBS I could no longer be regarded as marginal (FitzSimons 2002). Underlying this success was a focus on one-off, often shorter and typically highly idiosyncratic documentaries, broadcast within slots and strands that encouraged an

audience to expect variability of form and voice. But along with the rest of the network's oeuvre, SBS documentaries were relatively niche programming, that have never appeared in the 'top 15' highest rating Australian documentaries.

By the mid 2000s, pressures inside the broadcaster led to a shift in the SBS culture of documentary programming. Unlike the other free-to-air channels, that have tended to attract and program for a 'core demographic', the diversity that has been the hallmark of SBS has meant that audiences largely come to the network for particular programs, leading to a much greater rate of 'viewer churn' than other Australian broadcasters. As Jane Roscoe, SBS' network programmer since 2005 explains: 'SBS doesn't have regular view in the way that the ABC or commercial networks do, practically every slot has a different demographic profile, there is more 'appointment viewing'. In addition there was considerable tension within different parts of the institution. In Roscoe's view: 'the problem was that a lot of the industry and a lot of the commissioners as well saw that Independent as meaning independent of SBS' (Roscoe 2009). When combined with ratings hovering stubbornly around 5% of the primetime free-to-air audience, and the phenomenon of viewers switching off during SBS' extended inter-program breaks becoming obvious to management and advertisers, SBS by the early 2000s was in crisis.

Shaun Brown, appointed head of television at SBS in 2003 and head of the network since 2005 has been particularly associated with the response to this crisis. The most obvious change, from June 2006, was the introduction of advertising and station promotional breaks introduced *into* programs. This led to widespread criticism, with one media commentator writing an article headed 'Bogus public broadcaster with the hide of a pachyderm'. (Simper 2008) From 2007 SBS I was merged back into the main channel and the same restructure gave greater power to the network programmer, who since 2006 has sat on the editorial committee for SBS commissioning. This is linked in turn to a network and genre wide focus on 'block programming', aiming for a consistent audience and ratings for each night of the week. SBS' 'new broom' has had a considerable impact on the network's culture of documentary commissioning and production.

*Storyline Australia*, a documentary slot that exclusively screened one-off Australian documentaries from 2004, was scrapped in 2007. With ratings varying from 60,000

viewers to 470,000 viewers in its last year of programming (Graham, p. 203) it went against the philosophy of consistent block programming being championed by management as a counterpoint to 'appointment viewing'. This represented a shift in the type rather than the quantity of documentary programming. Indeed SBS has registered historically high levels of documentary programming from the mid 2000s onwards. This has been achieved through a move towards series programming, and towards hybrid programming with generic elements of reality TV, comedy and soap opera such as *The Colony* (McDonald and Hilton 2005) and *Dave in the Life*. (Zwolenski 2009)

SBS has also keenly embraced the tendency towards formatted content much in evidence in the reality TV content dominating commercial channel schedules. For example SBS has screened both the British version of *Who Do You Think You Are* (2008-09) and its Australian spin-off, which in focusing on well-known personalities such as Cathy Freeman and Jack Thompson averaged ratings for its 2008 series double that for *Storyline Australia*. (Graham 2009 p. 203) But from the perspective of 2009, as SBS' overall ratings are tending down rather than up, as financial turbulence leads to a reputed plummeting advertising revenue, and as SBS was largely rebuffed by the Federal government in the same triennial funding round that was widely regarded as a victory for the ABC, it may well be that the seeds of the next organizational and programming restructure have already been sewn.

The broadcasting culture of SBS with regard to documentary can be seen to have three distinct phases: up to the creation of SBS I in 1994; the work produced by SBS I until 2006; and works commissioned by SBS since. The first period, and in particular the second, is marked by a peculiarly and distinctively open ended institutional voice, where the broadcaster's commitment to diversity, and SBS' budgetary imperatives to collaborate with other public and private bodies, resulted in work embodying great diversity of form. In the final period a move to series, to established formats (ironically for a multiculturally-focused broadcaster, generally those derived from the UK) and to hybrid documentary/light entertainment programming, has resulted in work with a more consistent institutional voice and greater adherence to established generic conventions of televisual work.

### ***Channel 10 - A Case Study of commercial television broadcasting culture***

As the Australian free-to-air network that has consistently and markedly screened less documentary than any other, Channel 10 is an interesting counterpoint to the previous case studies, belying any inevitability in the move from in-house to outsourced independent production in the current economic and regulatory context. Its history instead embodies the creation of a documentary culture as a form practised largely by employed broadcasters.

Indeed, much of Channel 10's corporate history has been at odds with the other free-to-air broadcasters. Channel 10 was the last of the three commercial channels to come into being, broadcasting for the first time in 1965. Although part of the rationale for its introduction was to provide a platform for more local content in the face of the largely imported programs screening on Channels 9 and 7, Channel 10 was not noted in its early years for local programming, the huge success of the soap opera *Number 96* in the early 70s notwithstanding.

In 1987, when the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal ran a conference called 'The Price of Being Australian', as part of a broad-ranging enquiry into local content that would lead to further regulation of commercial free-to-air broadcasters, Nick Torrens – an independent documentary filmmaker representing SPAA at the conference – noted that documentary made up less than one percent (and falling) of programming on commercial television, with 'nature and adventure types of documentary rather than any of those which deal with or explore the human or social context'. In response to Torrens' push for a documentary quota to remedy this, Ian Gow – the then Managing Director of Channel 10 – asserted that 'documentaries aren't in vogue at the moment...I think most programmers are relatively lukewarm about documentaries in terms of ratings'. (Laughren, FitzSimons et al. 1997)

With the exception of the longstanding *Meet the Press* studio interview program Channel 10 has never to date developed serious current affairs that was a 'discourse of sobriety', to use Bill Nichols term, from which many versions of televisual documentary would emerge at other broadcasters. From its inception, Channel 10 targeted a young adult demographic, rather than aiming to maximize overall market share. As audience surveys consistently show viewing documentary to be a

predilection of those over 45, it is unsurprising that Channel 10 has not historically ranked the genre highly. In 1991, when SPAA surveyed the schedules of the commercial free-to-air broadcasters for four months in a ratings period, they found that each of Channels 7 and 9 had broadcast 14 hours of first-run Australian documentary, whilst Channel 10 had broadcast none, though the next year the network would report broadcasting twenty hours, a level that remained relatively consistent up until around 2006. (Laughren, FitzSimons et al. 1997)

Children's programming is another other key area where a free-to-air broadcaster's programming is regulated and Brisbane has been the centre of Channel 10's in-house production of 'C' class programming. In 2002, Channel 10 established a dedicated in-house documentary unit under the oversight of the same senior manager responsible for children's programming. Ian Bremner was the documentary unit's founding executive producer, supervising two further producers and using crew from the broader children's unit. The initial focus was wildlife documentaries, using the archive amassed by the *Totally Wild* children's program over the previous decade as its major resource:

That first year we make 3 or 4 documentaries and they succeed in terms of the company, they get ratings that perhaps they hadn't expected, they fulfill part of the quota that is required, they use under utilized archive, so it ticks every box for them. (Bremner 2009)

The unit was then expanded to incorporate four producers under Bremner and has produced sixteen hours of first-run Australian documentary in every year since 2003, thus meeting more than three quarters of Channel 10's regulated minimum.

With each producer responsible for four television hours/year, complex treatments and long term shooting schedules are not possible. Projects comprise one of three types: 'file' projects – very largely constructed from the network's archive; 'one-off' projects; and 'hybrid' projects – where the network archive is the base but there is substantial additional filming. Unlike the ABC and SBS, Channel 10 has not programmed documentary in a consistent slot. For a time a *Totally Australia* slot rubric was used, but as the topics undertaken have expanded to include international content, such as saving pandas in the People's Republic of China, and establishing women's rights in

East Timor, named documentary slots have been abandoned. Programs are usually screened on early weekend afternoons rather than the evening primetime favoured by public broadcasters. With an average audience of around half a million however, they attract significant interest. And with Channel 10 owning all rights, rather than the limited runs over a defined period of years usual in pre-sale licence agreements with independents, programs are routinely screened repeatedly. Repeat screenings do not count toward the quota, but they do cheaply and efficiently fill gaps in the television schedule.

Presenter led documentary is a common format, with producers developing projects that build on the personal 'brands' of network presenters such as Sandra Sully. An example of this is *Sheer Bloody Murder – The Sandakan Story* (Bremner 2009) that recalls the experience of Australian World War II POW's building a Japanese airfield and moving the Japanese war machine into inland Borneo under conditions of extreme brutality. For this project there was no relevant network file footage and little available archive, though as a flagship project for the unit, some footage was licensed from the Australian War Memorial. This project's treatment used the trek by a group of young Australians to retrace the 'death marches' that were part of this chapter of military history and a meeting with several of the handful of Australian diggers that had survived the camp as its basis. The presenter, Sandra Sully, accompanied the two camera crews to Borneo and recorded in situ the pieces to camera that Bremner wrote as the specific treatment of material emerged. (Bremner 2009)

In addition to the productions of this internal documentary unit, Channel 10, generally via its Sydney headquarters, has also in recent years commissioned a small amount of work from independent producers. An example of this is *Bom Bali* (Westh and Ogilvie 2006), a film that looked at the aftermath of the 2002 Bali bombings through the eyes of its survivors several years after the event. It was produced by Electric Pictures in Perth as a high definition dramatized documentary, and was a co-production with multiple international investors – Electric Pictures, Brooke Lapping (UK) an international producer and distributor of sports programming, TWI - and broadcasters including Sky (UK), Discovery Channel in the US and TV NZ, the government owned but largely commercially funded, New Zealand broadcaster. This kind of high budget independent documentary is screened as an occasional primetime special.

Also, since 2006 Channel 10 has broadcast *Bondi Rescue* (Cordell and Murray), a long-form docusoap series about the working days of thirteen life guards patrolling Sydney's Bondi Beach. This was independently commissioned from Cordell Jigsaw, a large production company specializing in documentary series. The program has been on-sold to ten international territories and to National Geographic. The ratings success of this series, had Channel 10 appearing in the 'Top rating Australian documentaries on TV' for the first time since 2002 and led briefly to a formatted spin off *Bondi Rescue: Bali* (Cordell and Murray 2008) that followed the same established characters in an unfamiliar location. It has also led to surf-themed documentary series on Channels 7 and 9 and since 2006 has pushed Channel 10's broadcast hours of first-run Australian documentary markedly above the regulated minimum for the first time.

In the world of scarce broadcasting spectrum that has underpinned free-to-air commercial television in Australia, federal government regulated minimums of first-run documentary programming have been vital to building a nascent culture of documentary production at Channel 10. By instituting a unit of staff documentary film makers, a production model that has largely disappeared elsewhere, Channel 10 has chosen to meet these minimum requirements in a manner that sets it apart from the other free-to-air broadcasters. Taken together the work of Channel 10's documentary unit shares a fairly coherent institutional voice, a recognizable 'house style'. To this base has been added long-form hybrid documentary work produced by companies that having once been associated exclusively with independent documentaries for public broadcasters, have grown into large factual television conglomerates.

## **Conclusion**

In a production system where 'market interest' is the bed rock of successful documentary financing, the 1990s and the 2000s have represented a high water mark for Australian free-to-air broadcasters' power over which documentaries get produced: a power disproportionate to their percentage input to budgets. This is by no means specific to Australia. Internationally, many commentators have identified television as the dominant means of documentary meeting audiences in the past two decades. (Creeber 2001; Holtzberg and Rofekamp 2002; Gomery and Hockley 2006; Austin 2007) Nick Fraser, a long standing commissioner of documentary content for the long running Storyville slot on the BBC in the UK recently stated that:

So much is talked about cinemas and documentaries but let's be real for a moment. Documentaries cannot survive without television. When television loses interest film makers starve or do something else. (in Austin 2007 p. 25)

But the Australian variant of this phenomenon has been inflected by requirements for 'Australian content', stipulated in government regulation for commercial channels and the charters of public broadcasters. Ironically, whilst the past twenty years has seen unprecedented audiences for Australian produced documentary, the demands of the global television industry and its markets for presales has tended to homogenize the voice of these documentaries, making them more like each other and more like other genres of television programming. At the same time, the preference of television channels for generally shorter and series driven forms of documentary, have in turn shifted the culture of the production companies producing the work.

In 2009 substantial companies, often designated as 'factual' rather than 'documentary', are the main production vehicles and have largely replaced the 'kitchen table industry' of independent documentary production that often provided 'radical alternative perspective' (Corner 1999) to television audiences. One marker of this is that Screen Australia's 'Enterprise Program', which is designed to build sustainable Australian production companies, recently awarded five of its twelve berths to 'factual' producers whose roots are in documentary but whose companies now have slates across a range of television programs broader than ACMA's definition of documentary. Since several of these companies produce material for both commercial and public broadcasters, the institutional voices of broadcasters have become less distinct. And with multiple international presales increasingly common, the predominant program style has tipped once again toward expository documentaries whose substantial narration can be readily re-voiced for foreign language territories. Documentary form has also been shaped by the rise of reality television.

Of course, individual broadcasters have also influenced the voice of documentary, and not just through the work of commissioning editors. For, if the major story about television and documentary has been about its outsourcing to independent production houses, this era has also been home to an unprecedented quantity and quality of work produced by in-house film makers at free to air broadcasters.

But a new paradigm is starting to emerge. Since 2008, the combined audience share for pay television has regularly exceeded any single free-to-air broadcaster's audience share and in time this must impact on advertising revenue and production funding from commercial free-to-air channels. Given the lack of regulatory support for first-run Australian documentary on pay television channels, the culture of documentary broadcasting is probably at the start of another realignment. In a period where free-to-air channels have dominated broadcasting, the requirements of regulation and public service charters have assured documentary's influence on the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) of the Australian nation and its ability to coalesce around particular issues. But the emergence of a multi-channelled digital television environment and online video-on-demand means that the 'imagined community' of documentary audiences is increasingly splintered. This is a reminder that the 'televisual' as the most common genre for Australian documentary is, like its 'cinematic' relative, historically contingent and subject to change.

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