



**DOCUMENTARY
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Documentary Australia submission regarding a renewed National Cultural Policy for Australia

Documentary Australia represents the interests of filmmakers and philanthropists in the documentary sector, supporting the production and visibility of socially conscious films across a broad range of subject areas. Since 2008, Documentary Australia has overseen close to \$30 million raised through philanthropy across 500+ documentary films, and supported hundreds of filmmakers around the country through training and capacity building initiatives, screenings and events, and industry engagement.

Documentary Australia has co-funded a significant number of Screen Australia supported documentaries, including over a third of the Screen Australia funded feature documentaries for cinematic release. We also represent the interests of a vast number of documentary filmmakers who have not received Screen Australia or state agency funding, due to failing to meet strict eligibility criteria, or as a result of increasingly competitive funding rounds for limited pools of money. Despite documentaries making roughly 30% of total Australian film revenue in Australia¹, they receive relatively little of the available screen agency funding nationally.

Within the screen sector, Documentary Australia strives to be a voice for the often-overlooked documentary sector, advocating for the cultural, artistic and social value of the medium. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the new National Cultural Policy for Australia, and draw the Government's attention to the need for increased support for the arts more broadly, and for the targeted investment in the documentary sector more specifically.

The value of documentary

A country without documentary films is like a family without a photo album.
—Patricio Guzmán, Chilean documentary filmmaker²

One-off documentary films provide a significant cultural and social benefit to Australia – capturing and preserving our social, historical and political narratives. They are distinct from the broader category of "factual" for television, often finding and telling singular Australian stories.

Australian documentaries reach wide and diverse audiences through film festivals and awards, cinema release, broadcast, streamers, media coverage, schools, universities, museums, galleries, social media, online platforms, businesses, non-profit organisations, community halls and other non-traditional avenues – which speaks to the important place documentaries occupy in our cinematic and cultural landscape. There is a clear appetite for our documentary stories, which generate roughly 30% of all Australian film revenue in Australia.

¹ Madman Entertainment

² Guzmán, P. cited in Zubrycki, T, 'The Changing Landscape of Australian Documentary,' *Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts*, Platform Paper No. 58, Currency House, 2018, p.1



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However, reach is a limited metric when it comes to assessing a film's quality and impact. Our recent report, *Impact – Our Story*, found that Australian documentaries are also punching above their weight to influence powerful change in society. Not only are documentaries a critical part of Australia's arts ecosystem, but they have been found to increase awareness and empathy in the general public, improve knowledge and understanding, and increase engagement around the critical social and environmental issues of our time³.

Their value should be judged accordingly.

Funding agencies that prioritise traditional marketplace commitment from a shrinking pool of distributors risk sidelining important, independent documentary films, while forcing others into often unfavourable terms with one of a small number of distributors now wielding inordinate power. Meanwhile, many independent documentaries considered ineligible for agency funding will go on to receive critical acclaim, play festivals around the world, and enjoy sustained releases on hundreds of screens through event, community, and educational screenings, while creating measurable social impact. The difference of screen agency funding to a film like this could mean the difference of whether or not the filmmaker gets paid for their work, usually undertaken over many years.

Broadcasters and streamers also play an important role in bringing documentaries to Australian audiences, both in facilitating free access to quality Australian storytelling, and providing crucial financial support through commissions. The move toward format, reality-style programming driven by ratings and perceived audience taste has meant that television commissions for one-off documentaries have become much more rare⁴. Again, if decision-makers prioritise traditional reach numbers over contemporary impact metrics, we risk losing important Australian stories, resulting in considerable cultural loss to the nation.

The new National Cultural Policy provides an opportunity to counter this by committing greater investment to the screen agencies and public broadcasters that is quarantined for single documentaries, and by reviewing funding guidelines' emphasis on traditional distribution and reach, rather than valuing proven non-traditional pathways to audiences.

Increasingly there are more and more opportunities for audiences to engage with documentary outside of broadcast or the cinema, and more opportunities for filmmakers to take social impact documentaries directly to their target audience. There should be greater government support for these films commensurate with contemporary viewing behaviours.

³ Documentary Australia, *Impact – Our Story*, Sydney, 2022, p.58-67

⁴ Zubrycki, T, 'The Changing Landscape of Australian Documentary,' *Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts*, Platform Paper No. 58, Currency House, 2018, p.2, 28



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Documentary as distinct from drama

As a co-funder in the documentary space, Documentary Australia has a unique oversight of the documentary sector – and in particular, the timeframe and budgets required to bring these stories to life. Feature documentaries are often made over many years, on much smaller budgets than their drama counterparts.

The stark difference in the average budget of documentary and drama reflects the different natures of these forms of filmmaking. Drama and documentary are distinct in the way they are made, how much they cost and the nature of the stories they tell.

In 2021, there was a new threat to documentary from an unexpected source - tax reform. Proposed reforms to the Australian Screen Production Incentives sought to harmonise these measures across the film industry, bringing everything from drama to documentary and reality under the same broad banner - a change that might have seemed simple and straight-forward, but that would have decimated Australian documentary filmmaking, in a manner unparalleled in adjacent screen sectors.

Documentary Australia led a year-long campaign to emphasise the intrinsic cultural and historical value of documentary to our national narrative, and highlight the differences between documentary and drama production, particularly in the scale of budgets and the need to bring Australian crews overseas to tell these true stories. After a year, the government accepted all our recommendations, protecting documentaries and ensuring the form continues to thrive locally and internationally.

This event highlighted multiple key learnings. The proposed reforms failed to reflect the diversity and difference of practice across different genres, likely through a lack of understanding – and in doing so, risked diminishing the breadth, quality and diversity of Australian stories being told by Australian filmmakers.

With the new National Cultural Policy, the government has an opportunity to commit to genuine consultation with documentary filmmakers and key organisations such as Documentary Australia, to ensure that policies designed for scripted production are not unfairly applied to documentary, given the unique demands of documentary finance, production and distribution.

Additionally, key organisations such as Documentary Australia should be supported by government to continue this important work as industry representatives and consultants sustainably into the future.

“Documentary Australia having a voice to government on behalf of documentary makers during the current legislative changes has been invaluable. Documentary makers are not strongly represented and Documentary Australia stepped into the breach to advocate for doco makers.” - Filmmaker⁵

⁵ Documentary Australia, *Impact – Our Story*, Sydney, 2022



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Recommendations

Documentary Australia asks that the new National Cultural Policy commit to the following measures to ensure that Australia's documentary sector can thrive into the future:

- Increased funding for Screen Australia to invest in single Australian documentaries, and commitment to review funding guidelines to give greater value to proven, non-traditional pathways to audiences, including self-distribution.
- Increased funding for public broadcasters to invest in commissioning single Australian documentaries, as distinct from the investment in light-factual series or reality-based observational formats, and commitment to review funding priorities to give greater value to social impact indicators in addition to reach.
- Deeper engagement with the unique demands of documentary through a commitment to genuine consultation with documentary filmmakers and key organisations such as Documentary Australia, to ensure policies designed for scripted production are not unfairly applied to documentary.
- Increased support for emerging and mid-career artists and sustainable screen careers, through alternate pathways to access to screen agency funding and increased investment in diverse funding streams and initiatives.
- Greater organizational support for small-to-medium arts and service organisations that underpin our cultural industries and nurture our early-career artists.
- Commitment to address the removal of "Australian stories" from the original 2013 National Cultural Policy goals, and to consult with industry groups to redefine this.

Documentary films tell the story of our nation – often on small budgets and over many years. They are also where so many of Australia's talented filmmakers emerge. They are distinct from nearly every other category of film content and need to be treated as such, to ensure these stories can continue to be told and seen by Australian audiences.

Documentary Australia asks that documentary be recognised and safeguarded with these measures for the social and cultural value it offers. Documentaries capture our history and stories as they are happening. They are an invaluable part of our national story and should be valued as such.

Sincerely,
The Documentary Australia team



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