

## SNAPSHOT

### A Compilation of Submissions to NZ On Air on Documentary Funding

#### Background

This paper is intended as a companion piece to the discussion paper, commissioned by NZ On Air, from Dr Roger Horrocks of the Auckland University School of Film and Television and former Deputy Chair of NZ On Air from 1989 until 2000. As Doctor Horrocks notes, and to go a little further, no genre funded by NZ On Air has been the subject of so much discussion, criticism and debate as documentary over the last three years or so. Dr Horrocks' paper presents a point of view of a long-serving and passionate member of the NZ On Air Board and academic in the field. It tracks where we have come from in terms of documentary, where we are now and offers some suggestions for the future.

This paper is a collation of views of industry professionals involved in the making of documentaries. It contains the views of producers, directors and broadcasters. Although the number of people who responded to the call for submissions on documentary funding was low, NZ On Air believes that the views expressed in this paper are an accurate and useful summary of the views that have been suggested to the agency, both formally and informally, over the last three to four years.

This paper deliberately does not propose recommendations. Nor does it comment on the views expressed. It is intended as a snapshot of the current debate so that changes (if deemed necessary) can be approached collectively, using this starting point.

#### Discussion

##### *Where are we now?*

As part of his university course, Dr Roger Horrocks prepared the following checklist of priorities for a populist (commercial) programme (not necessarily documentary) and the priorities for public service or non-commercial programmes.

<b>Populist (commercial) Priorities</b>	<b>Public Service (non-commercial) priorities</b>
Selling audiences to advertisers	Providing a service for citizens (for New Zealand society as a whole)
High ratings are crucial (dominated by ratings)	High ratings not crucial (ratings are only one consideration)
Must move briskly (never risk boredom)	Can have "time to breathe" (time to think, time to explore)
Personalise it (build it around individuals, anecdotes, personal stories)	Can be built around a theme or idea
Strong narrative drive (or "throughline") is	Non-narrative forms are possible (eg

desirable	exploring a theme or idea)
Conflict is good (go for drama)	Avoid simplified sets of opposites (some issues aren't as clear-cut as that)
Should never get too complex & never over-tax the viewer	You don't have to avoid complex topics – you try to do justice to them
Never rely on viewers having much "cultural capital"	You can (now and then) make a programme that assumes "cultural capital"
Cover things lightly (don't get too heavy)	"In-depth" is good. Thorough knowledge or research is good
Stars or celebrities make good presenters, guests, etc. Experts are only OK if they provide "sound-bites"	Experts are good & some long speeches are OK.
Go for the "emotional"	"The intellectual" has some value too
Avoid "the turnoff factor" (never alienate or overload "Mr & Mrs Smith", never challenge their "common sense")	Can challenge the viewer
"Universal" stories (stories which "every Mr & Mrs Smith" can relate to)	Specialised or culture-specific stories can also get made. (Diversity is important)
The arts are only possible through a current affairs approach. Keep it brisk and breezy, and focus on conflict & controversy	The arts are a key area of innovation and excellence – and there are important artists who don't necessarily appeal to "Mr & Mrs Smith"
Not too demanding (does most of the work for you by voice-overs, etc)	Extends the viewer (doesn't "dumb down")
Publicity potential ("easy to promo")	Not every topic lends itself to a racy or sensational promo
Suits current trends ("what's hot, what's sexy" – some novelty is good but too much is bad	May be original, unprecedented

In broad summary the view expressed by the following producers, directors and broadcasters is that, overall, we have moved too far into the left column. TVNZ Chief Executive, Ian Fraser, is one who shares this view. This quote from an interview in the NZ Listener:

*"There is a view TVNZ has shown too many documentaries and the resources have been spread too thin – that TVNZ would be better making fewer with more resources.*

**Ian Fraser** *Then I get in the fierce argument that quality is contingent on raising the amount of dough per doco, but that it bullshit. I think we have become overbalanced toward the tabloid end and a bit too bland in terms of*

*quality or storytelling. The really good thing is that at the same time as TVNZ is looking to change the balance so is NZ On Air."*

Most who made comment, accept and echo this view. One producer is particularly eloquent and goes further :

*"In recent years, I think we have seen the corruption of the word "documentary" to cover factual programmes which, in my view, are not documentary. I have been trying to think of a suitable neutral name for them – the nearest I can get is "voyeurmentary". These are programmes which, no matter what the brief may promise, do little more than pander to our natural curiosity and nose y parkerism.*

*I'm not saying that we shouldn't fund such programmes. Clearly "Neighbours from Hell" programmes rate very well but they are not, in my submission, documentaries. OK neighbours argue – sometimes its entertaining to watch, but so what. It's rubbernecking on life from the safety of your couch."*

This producer goes on to argue that the "litmus test" for a documentary is whether it has a shelf life. Will we be able to view it in 5 years time and discover something about the human condition, the human journey, or the way the social or natural world works?

*"In other words, I think we should take the "document" part of documentary seriously. So I expect structure in a documentary. I want to be taken on a journey in the story so that I know things at the end of it that I didn't know or quite understand before. A programme which ends in a "so what" is, in my view, not a documentary."*

This view is echoed by another producer:

*"I think that by putting a pile of people together to simply give random thoughts about a single subject is a lazy and frustrating way to put together a programme. Good docos have a beginning, middle and end. They take a journey that leads somewhere. The style of shows that we are doing at the moment are little more than extended vox-pops. They could just be news. I do take Sue's (Sue Woodfield, documentary commissioner TV3) point that no-one would watch anything about cervical cancer, so if you can sneak that into the "Naked Vagina", well and good."*

### **Research**

As to how we might move the balance back more to the right hand column of Dr Horrocks' priorities one point is common to almost all respondents – the importance of research.

*"Pay for research and be prepared to pay properly. The insignificant role research, development, pre-production play in the doco budget is a principal reason why the dominant "documentary" here is unresearched, off the top of the head and lightweight. Docos should be prepared to spend umpty (99.9999) per cent of their budgets on research. Once the knowledge has*

*been gained and you have something to say, it's only a matter of finding a way to say it."*

This view is shared by renowned German Filmmaker Wim Wenders. He was asked how to avoid formulaic film making at the recent Australian Documentary conference.

*"keep the script loose and be ready to follow the truth that you can only find after you have started shooting".*

### **Development**

NZ On Air has almost a nil failure rate for documentary funding. Some see this as a down side pointing out that a greater emphasis on research-driven quality documentaries means that in the research phase there will be documentaries that fall over.

*"Part of the reason that vox pop docos are made is that they appear cheaper on the surface and they are controllable – producers can make money on them. We're in a very risk-averse environment. No-one is prepared to start making a programme and just see what happens. "Roger and Me" could never have been made here, because the process and the outcome is uncertain.*

*In order to get more adventurous ideas and docos, it almost means that a small failure rate ... should be acceptable/underwritten."*

Other producers propose a solution.

*"Fund development of docos as a matter of course. And fund further development if necessary. This might mean that, from time to time an idea falls over and you don't get a return from your dollars – but the dollars would be minimal and it would make for a doco environment that was more profound and more exciting than we have now. The current regime where NZ On Air has a product from every dollar spent is unreal in the film/TV world. It just doesn't happen like that in the normal market where quality matters. If such a system were well-controlled the wastage would, or should, be minimal anyway."*

*"Because we all have our mortgages at risk if a project doesn't work out or doesn't take us quite where we promised to go, we tend to stick to more formulaic and "tried and true" stories and treatments, especially as budgets decrease every year. If someone has a really good hunch and can justify how they will spend a little bit of money developing a project, a small sum ought to be available, in particular to producers and directors with a good track record. In most cases it will pay off and lead to a better doco, funded in the usual way. The present system allows very little of the process of discovery and inquiry which will, in the end, produce the most original and enduring documentaries."*

### **Less is More**

The inevitable result of a focus on more research-driven product is an increase in budgets.

*"Budgets. Raise them. Either make less for more, or make more for more."*

One director points out that Documentary New Zealand and Inside New Zealand budgets are only achievable as a result of director sacrifice.

*"The turnaround for a director, at least for me, has been ten paid weeks. That is supposed to involve about five days prep, 12 days filming, 10-13 days shot listing and paper editing (way too little) and 20 days editing. Quite honestly, that is a ridiculous assessment of how long it takes to make a good documentary and it requires weeks of unpaid work to produce the goods. It's just not me – I've been to get-togethers with other really-seasoned directors and they say exactly the same thing. Producers always say they sympathise but can't do anything about it."*

As pointed out above an increase in budgets has a downside. Bigger budgets fewer docos. For some time there has been acceptance that, in order to achieve higher budgets, perhaps this is an acceptable outcome. However one producer proposes a solution to this dilemma by suggesting a strand of low budget "first hand" type documentaries be run in tandem with the other strands.

### **Bulk Funding**

Others see the "bulk-funding" model itself, as provided by the two major strands, as a concern.

*"Abolish or contain the bulk funding of docos. This attracts the "business" doco and excludes the committed one-off – the doco-maker who has committed to and researched a specific subject. It also confines the doco stream to the views and taste and style and culture of just one person – or just two if the bulk funding continues to be applied to TV1 and TV3. Making docos has been devalued in NZ for some time, perhaps because we make so many of them but largely because they are generally just business items. The bulk-funding process is all but responsible for this."*

Another respondent suggests that the problem is that in fact there are actually not enough strands or, more accurately, times within the schedule to provide for a range of documentaries.

*"The INZ and DNZ's that do get made, some of them are a really good bit of tele for the money that is put into them, but the place should exist for slightly 'higher concept' shows. And that is about programming space as much as funding. As programme makers, we would welcome the chance to get back into a defined series along the lines of "A Work of Art" – a bit more money, a bit more time, a bit more structure and filmic approach."*

*Whether that would work for a social series – some parameters would need to be set. But I would say that the last 'doco' initiative really bore great fruit with*

*2050 and Captain's Log, so there is a successful precedent for NZ On Air doing a bit of pushing to get something through."*

### **Topics and Subject Matter**

Another major concern with the current strands is that of subject matter – that we are missing too many great stories.

*"While we're shooting breasts and penises there are wonderful New Zealanders dying. Thankfully, there was an Allan Curnow doco, but where was the David Lewis one? Why are we so focussed on the 'young and spunky' or f---d up, when the Korean war veterans are dying – with a story that has never been told – And we know that WAR rates.*

So, the Answers:

*A more thoughtful commissioning process. This doesn't necessarily mean we have to make stuff that doesn't rate. Look at "The NZ Wars", the Hillary series, etc. I think a non-primetime doco slot could be interesting, but there's so much more we can do in prime time without losing the audience.*

*A lot of this is in the Direction ... "The Receivers" doco, for example, was a bloody hard topic, but was really gripping. Whereas – vox pop-style docos, (the Truth About ..., Chinks, Coconuts ...etc) or at the other end of the spectrum – shoot action wildly and hope the editor can find a story, can be interesting topics, but because they are treated with a total lack of interest in the documentary craft – story telling, camera work, editing, an interest in finding greater truths – really offer little, either to viewers or to documentary making as a discipline ..."*

### **Lack of Diversity in Documentary Forms**

All of the factors mentioned above are seen to be the impediments to a diversity of documentary forms, styles and topics.

*I think the main criticism I have is that there is a real sameness about what is on both channels for 'doco' at the moment. It worries me a little that ONE or 3 brand 'specials' (eg 2050) with Inside NZ/DNZ logos, because I think the currency of the brands themselves is diminishing and it would be better if the bigger productions were promoted separately as 'specials'. It works for TV2!*

*Ill Maggiore, 1951. These are well-structured, journey docos we should be emulating and not treating at the exception. Which they are.*

*So we need to incentivise the networks to buy into programmes that show creativity and risk, and don't simply have sex in the title (at least not every time!)*

*Otherwise all we ever do is 'slice of life' and no-one learns anything from it. Because we live in society as it stands, and we know that kids on the North Shore are materialistic and the role of dads has changed."*

This feeling of “sameness” also encompasses the view that the range of different documentaries available to us is not being explored.

1. *The Biography – we don't do a lot of these and people are leaving us every day whose life experiences are gold.*
2. *Reflective – these are documentaries which perform a valuable service simply hold a mirror up to some aspect of our society. Look – at this ... it's happening right here in New Zealand ...are you happy with that ....is this how you want it?*
3. *The personal essay or journey – this is my first person experience dealing with leukaemia or whatever.*
4. *The recording of characters who played a part, or better still ARE playing a part in watershed moments in our society. I remember arguing in the days when I was part of the documentary unit at TVNZ, that we should be making an observation style documentary on the move into a free market economy. We didn't and we (a) missed the chance of helping New Zealanders understand what was going on at the time (b) missed the opportunity to 'document' one of the greatest periods of social change this country has ever gone through.*
5. *Observational – fly on the wall docos are fine, but there needs to be an underlying purpose to why we are watching these people at this time doing this thing otherwise its just nosey parkerism. The viewer needs to be led to a serious question or a moment of revelation in the story.*
6. *Big issue documentaries – broadcasters seem to be frightened of these or think that issues-based documentaries are somehow the province of current affairs. It's a fine line between the documentary and in-depth current affairs sometimes but I think the documentary maker can bring a perspective the current affairs maker cannot...the perspective of TIME. Released from the need to meet next week's programme deadline, the documentary maker can watch a whole issue unfold, see both sides, and give a depth of vision the current affairs is often denied simply because of the time constraints.”*

### ***The Director/Producer***

Several people suggested that one of the ways to move away from the “sameness” and explore a range of documentary types is to encourage the director/producer.

*“This is where the new and exciting and profound ideas and attitudes and talents will emerge – not from a comfortable stable of production houses where the documentary is merely a business item that provides sustenance while the next feature or drama series is in development. Docos and their stories should have a right to a life of their own, and the people making them the time, resources and right to treat them with respect. I suggest trying a system where "less experienced" directors who want to retain control of their ideas and have access to better budgets (because the producer won't take 25% of it) are*

*supported by advisory or consultant producers drawn from the ranks of the experienced doco producer/directors or of producers who have shown their commitment to the one-off rather than to the "product". An outlay of \$5,000 or so would allow another \$20,000-\$25,000 to make the film by excluding the producer's budgetary grab whereby he takes a large fee and also claims multiple payments against different doco budgets for full rent of the same office and overheads."*

### **The Business of Documentary**

This theme that production houses specialising in documentary are part of "the problem" is often echoed. Some from the directing community get quite exercised on this, demanding more accountability.

*"Production companies often offer bonuses to producers for coming in under budget. Docos are made with public money and we have a moral obligation to give the public the greatest value for that money. Budgets should be regularly audited by funding bodies. If producers are pocketing more than the 10% maybe budgets for those docos are too high".*

*"Is there a section in the Broadcasting Act which obliges the Broadcasting Commission to develop the industry's infrastructure? If not, shouldn't those producers who defend the quality of their product on the grounds that this is all it is, namely product, and that that they are just trying to run a business – shouldn't they confine themselves to the business side of things and operate solely on commercial grounds and on entirely commercial product? In this case, Commission funds would not be available to them, eh?"*

Again speaking at the Australian documentary conference, Wim Wenders seems to agree that the "business" of documentary making is also a problem.

*Wenders expressed the view that the only really interesting films were "specific" films, dealing with stories or tastes pertaining to a specific place or people. The documentary form was especially suited to this kind of film making... The greatest threat to this kind of film making was the ongoing process of trade.*

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Some production companies on the other hand, make no apology for making populist/commercial programmes that will "rate with Madge of Taihape". However they concede that it would be nice to have other strands that provided the opportunity to explore some topics in more in-depth.

*"We don't want to make this stuff either but we all have mortgages and staff to pay."*

### **Commissioning**

One of the main concerns expressed time and again is the current commissioning process, more specifically the role and power of the commissioning editors.

*"I suppose this will seem absurd, but – find a way to rein in the network executive, the 'executive producer'. This is where the programme sameness and safeness reside. Isn't it possible to keep the network executive at arm's length in a charter situation? In the old days of state-controlled production in all the genres programme makers enjoyed a freedom from executive oversight that allowed more for individual genius than has been so for the last fifteen years. Why not again? These execs see the funds NZ On Air grants them as their funds. But they're not their funds. Why not put the money somewhere else if channels don't want to spend it where and how NZ On Air wants them to? This should go for all broadcasting recipients of public funds, shouldn't it?"*

Almost opposite to this perception is the view that, in fact, commissioners no longer have the power they used to.

*"It is my impression over the last two or three years that Commissioning Editors, certainly at TVNZ, have had steadily diminishing decision-making power. Basically, programmers choose the proposals that will be funded after Commissioning Editors have done a rough weeding out. This has two negative effects on us as independent producers and on our programmes;*

*(1) We do not get to pitch ideas to the people who will actually decide on them – we have to rely on a written proposal and on Commissioning Editors to pitch our ideas. This can be frustrating as we are the ones with the passion for the ideas.*

*(2) While, of course, programmers know what is needed in the schedule and must continue to play a major role in choosing ideas from a marketing point of view, the fact still remains that they are not programme makers and not necessarily the best at envisioning from a written proposal how a story will be as a television programme. It is my impression that some props sneak through that, although at first glance "sexy" and easy to market, do not fill an hour, do not show any development or change and do not fulfill the basic requirements of a story – i.e. have no beginning, middle and end. "Topic" is taking precedence over "story" and "treatment" in the funding stage, to the cost of the finished product.*

*Programmers should concentrate on branding a slot and selling it to viewers, with less role on individual stories that make up that slot. It used to be like this within Documentary New Zealand and I thought we had a better mix of programmes back then."*

### **On Screen Quality**

One concern that was universally shared, related to all of the above, but also an issue in its own right is that there is just simply a lack of quality of much of the work being produced. This goes beyond the previous arguments about sameness and topic selection and is more concerned with the notion that there has been a diminution of the on-screen craft of documentary making. One director/producer was very frank.

*"Too many docos are shit. Unimaginative, badly shot, shonkily edited, not thought out, poorly researched, rushed."*

*"... people seem to deliver, and commissioners seem to accept substandard work. Directors can be sent out under-resourced and poorly prepared. The problem is that producers hand the buck onto directors for bad work, and often the buck really has to stop with the producer. I don't think it's really NZ On Air's responsibility, but producers should be more aware of where directors are at with projects. Even going so far as discussing shooting plans, and story outlines. Otherwise, why have producers – why not give the money to directors and let them hire a good production manger, or line producer (bloody good idea that).*

*This really comes back to resources, which falls on the producers' shoulders. Doco producers should be into the craft/dialogue/genre of documentaries. They should not be looking at them as petty entrepreneurs, waiting to pocket their 10% plus fee."*

### **Training**

Others believe that this lower on-screen craft is a function of the lack of experience and no training opportunities.

*"There is little thought given to developing a highly trained and competent workforce. All is ad hoc and chaotic. SPADA do organise some things at conference but for documentary makers these conferences are prohibitively expensive and documentaries often take a back seat to other genre. TVNZ do not see their role as trainers or employers. They concentrate on a programme by programme delivery. Far too many people with potential move into other areas where there are better rewards etc.*

*Solution : A (small) sum of money set aside each year by NZOA for free workshops run by and for programme makers for on-going professional development. Also funding for struggling independents to help them attend events such as short courses at Australian Film Schools, documentary festivals and conferences etc. The small budgets we get do not allow us to save any money towards our own training or development.*

*TVNZ could also organise a 1-2 day workshop for successful producers and directors where they look at successful docos that have been aired and get the producers etc. to talk about them and where we can hear from programmers about what they are looking for and what they like.*

*There needs to be a more organised system for paying more experienced directors to oversee projects by first-time directors and this system needs to be transparent.*

*Imagine if we could even have an "apprenticeship" scheme where Producers could get slightly more money in their budget to allow a trainee, acting as an assistant to the director but learning about the process."*

Another interesting alternative was proposed by one respondent.

*"An alternative to all this, is to look at the Film Commission's POD schemes. Give producers a block of documentaries to produce each year – demanding a high budgetary accountability – for several years in a row. With strict delivery criteria they would have to deliver or not have their block of docos rolled over. How this work with the network relationship – I'm not totally sure."*

## **Audience**

From the audience perspective, New Zealand documentaries continue to rate well. NZ On Air's recent audience research also found strong support for the genre with respondents believing that local documentaries are of high quality and offer a wide range of topics. The research found that respondents wanted a mix of sensational, light and in-depth documentaries. However, they also felt that the focus at the moment was more towards the light and sensational end of the scale. The resounding comment was "*keep funding them.*"

## **Conclusion**

Some consistent themes have clearly emerged from the submissions received. Future discussions, including those that will take place at the NZ On Air Documentary Symposium on 2 May 2003, will allow these themes to be considered in more detail prior to any changes being implemented.