

NEW ZEALAND ON AIR DOCUMENTARY SYMPOSIUM

Firstly, I would like to thank Neil and New Zealand On Air for inviting me to this symposium, I think it's a great opportunity to share experiences and hopefully move forward in this strange, unpredictable and often insecure business we call documentary filmmaking. I hope that we can all take something away from this symposium that will assist us in our creative and commercial endeavours.

Before I go any further I should say that I am more than happy to be interrupted by questions or comments so please feel free to interject at any time.

By way of background, I was sent some briefing papers written by Neil and Dr Roger Horrocks, outlining some of the history of the documentary or factual production in New Zealand which I found absolutely fascinating, particularly coming from an Australian perspective. I have always had an interest in New Zealand filmmaking, given our shared cultural heritage and economic relationship, not to mention our passion for sport, travel and beer.

I think part of my interest in your filmmaking comes from the fact that I live and work in Perth on the West coast of Australia (probably further from Sydney than Auckland) and sometimes feel a bit disconnected from the centre of production activity in this region. But I note, that despite perhaps being somewhat isolated, as we are in Perth, New Zealand actually performs extremely well in the film and television industry and in many ways outperforms its neighbours. A Kiwi colleague informed me that your country is now known as Middle Earth and Peter Jackson is Prime Gandalf.

I have a theory about why New Zealand is successful which may or may not be true, and I would like to find out more while I'm here, and that is that New Zealanders are the most avid book readers in the world. I think any nation that has hungry readers devouring books and newspapers is bound to have a good pool of creative, innovative thinkers which is the driving force for our industry. I think I better stop there before I decide to migrate here permanently.

But coming back to the briefing papers, it seemed to me that in many ways in the sometimes cyclical nature of television, you are ahead of Australia and I believe we are about to enter a situation that you have already been in for some time. From what I gather it's probably a track we'd rather not go down. In that sense I feel we can learn as much if not more from you than vice versa.

Perhaps if I give you a brief background to my history you'll see where I'm coming from. People often ask me how or why I do what I do. My answer is that I'm actually doing the most suitable job I could... it combines my love of visual imagery, music, travel, creative collaboration and interacting with people as well as a chance to inform and maybe even influence some people. When I was at primary school, a bloody long time ago, I used to really enjoy

doing social studies projects where you had to do a bit of research (although it was called homework back then) on the subject, find some interesting pictures from magazines and present them in an attractive way. I'm still doing that, only the pictures move, the words are heard and it's a hundred thousand times more expensive.

So, cut to 40 years later, here I am, running a small production company called Artemis International with my business partner Celia Tait and two other staff, a production manager and a production secretary.

My role as Executive Producer is to source the projects, find the finance, do the contracting and market the final programmes.

Celia is both a director and a producer with strong writing and storytelling skills. We collaborate on all aspects of production while acknowledging our separate tasks.

Before forming Artemis 4 years ago we each had our own company where we were basically one man or one woman bands. Having to be a writer, director, camera operator, editor, voice over narrator and graphic artist as well as make the coffee and clean the office is interesting but in the end not as productive as you would like. I also think that having two heads leads to far more rigorous filmmaking as you are constantly required to test your ideas and thoughts. At the same time it provides a mutual strength when times are tough, so you're not crying into the coffee on your own. It is important though to pick the right partner when you are a small operation as it's a bit like a marriage.

Fortunately for me Celia is a very talented, intelligent and compassionate person so collaboration on projects is always a joy and very rewarding.

Speaking of small teams, I attended a seminar recently which one of your illustrious colleagues John Maynard addressed, although I think we claim him as an Australian, but we Australians do that all the time when it suits us don't we. While John was talking about feature film making I think his point was relevant for us as well. He said that it was almost impossible these days to be a single operator, a single producer. He advised us to get together with like minded people and form creative teams, putting all our energy into a few projects. I think he's right. It seems that these days you either have to be very big or very small. Mid sized companies seem to struggle with keeping up cashflow and turnover while attempting to grow into a bigger company. They are often forced to take on "sausage factory" work to keep the staff employed and the doors open.

While its never easy being a small company and many is the time when we've been staring at each other asking where is the next project going to come from, you do have the flexibility to change and adapt to market forces and pressures and you can do this much quicker than bigger companies. You also of course have the ability to select the best people for a particular job, subject to availability. More about that later when we talk about marketing.

When we formed Artemis we did spend some time discussing what sort of company we would be and what we wanted to produce, this was before we paid a consultant to help us with a business plan. I guess what we were doing was working out a simple philosophy. We had both successfully produced programmes for broadcast, Celia for the BBC and ITV as a UK producer and me for the ABC and SBS.

It probably sounds a bit grandiose and wanky but we decided that we wanted to make the best possible quality documentaries we could even if it meant some difficulty in finding the budgets and the broadcasters and distributors interested in them. In other words we were less interested in quantity for the sake of throughput, than strong ideas we could get totally involved in. This is not to say we were only interested in one-off, blue chip docs, far from it, we were just as interested in series and working with new directors on interesting lower budget projects. As a new company, albeit old owners, we thought we needed to establish a reputation for good quality, well crafted programmes in order to survive.

The second part of our philosophy was, wherever possible, to find local stories with the potential for international interest. There were two reasons for this, one it's easier to find stories in your own backyard and less costly to shoot them, and two, for the majority of our documentaries we need international pre-sales to finance them.

Perhaps we could look at an example of a project that was both local and international. Return To Eden is an environmental story which looked at an ambitious project to eradicate feral pests from the Peron Peninsular in the North West of Australia, and reintroduce the native species which were wiped out by foxes, rabbits, feral cats and goats. The local significance of the project was obvious but from an international perspective it was also of interest because the eradication of introduced species is a major problem for many countries. It also had the appeal of exotic animals not often seen on screens outside Australia.

RUN VIDEO: RETURN TO EDEN

I'd now like to explore from an Artemis perspective how we go about sourcing ideas, financing, producing and finally marketing our documentaries. I'm sure there's nothing magical or groundbreaking in how we do this, but given some of the differences between production in our two countries there may be some things we do which will spark off ideas and directions.

OK concepts and ideas, where do they come from, how are they discussed and assessed. We have an open door policy on ideas, meaning we generate our own ideas but we're also open to ideas from anywhere else and I mean anywhere else. They can come from friends, neighbours, other industry professionals working with us and from production companies overseas. Believe it or not occasionally broadcasters even approach us with good ideas. We're not precious about our own ideas and will often drop one of ours for a better one coming from outside the company. Sometimes this means having to collaborate or even co-produce with the originator of the idea but we are open to that as long as there is a strong sense that we can work together on the project without becoming bitter enemies by the end of it. In the past we have had ideas from cameramen, editors, directors and emerging producers.

Our own ideas can come from anywhere, conversations, books, magazines, newspapers, personal experience, spinoffs from previous programmes and even television itself. There is no shortage of ideas. I can usually find two or three interesting ideas for a doco in an inflight magazine travelling to an

overseas market or conference. In fact one of our more difficult tasks is to decide which ideas or concepts to develop from the scores that come in. How we do this is fairly instinctive but we do have a few yardsticks to go by.

Given that we are basically story tellers the first question we ask is “is there a strong compelling story linked to the idea, preferably one that hasn’t been told on television before”?. We also look for strong characters who will engage us whether they are involved in the story or are commenting on it as experts, depending on the type of documentary.

We then ask “is the story sustainable for half an hour or an hour”. Quite often we hear wonderful stories but they can be told as a 5 or 6 minute segment in a current affairs programme, they just don’t have enough meat to sustain a longer format.

We also ask questions about access and legal issues. The idea might be fine but do we actually have access to filming it? There’s no point in developing an idea about the private life of the Prime Minister if you can’t get access and permission to film it. Occasionally legal issues arise to do with possible libel or defamation potential which need to be resolved before going further.

Next, we test the idea against the slots that might be appropriate for it, both nationally and internationally. In Australia it’s a relatively easy task to match the idea against the available slots as there are so few to choose from. The commercial networks are buying almost nothing from the independent sector, Pay TV channels don’t offer sufficient dollars, so we are left with the ABC and SBS.

International placement is another story. I wouldn’t pretend to know the total global programming and scheduling requirements for documentaries across the hundreds of networks, however after years of travelling to the markets, I have some knowledge of the broadcasters and slots for the type of programmes we make, particularly the wildlife natural history area.

So, if we’ve convinced ourselves that we have a strong, sustainable idea that will suit an available slot, we then question whether it can be financed.

Sometimes the best ideas in the world are beyond our means to make so we have to concentrate on ones that at least have a good chance of finding their budgets.

The next stage is development or development hell as it is better known. In Australia we have quite a lot of support from film agencies and even lately the ABC for development funding, provided we have some interest from a broadcaster. We would normally expect to receive around \$15,000 to develop an hour doco. Once again we use writers or originators from outside Artemis, as well as ourselves, to research and write the treatment. Each programme demands its own type of development. I don’t think there is any one method or style of doing this. For example, for an observational doco where much of the content is unknown and can never be known until filming is taking place, it’s impossible to write a detailed treatment. One of our observational films was commissioned by Film Australia and the ABC on a four page outline. Belinda’s Baby followed a strong, wheelchair- bound Aussie battler with Muscular Dystrophy who defied medical advice to avoid pregnancy as she gives birth and attempts to care for her son. Most of the story which unfolded was completely unscripted.

RUN VIDEO: BELINDA’S BABY

On the other hand, with some programmes it is possible to write a comprehensive treatment which becomes a shooting script of sorts. We're particularly keen on getting the treatment in the best possible shape before production as it allows for more accurate budgeting and planning and delivers to the broadcaster what they have agreed to purchase.

Of course there will be changes made in the process of shooting and editing but it's reassuring to have a blueprint to work to. In the case of Eye Of The Tiger, I researched and wrote the treatment, which looked at the disappearance of the Indo- Chinese tiger in Thailand from 3 perspectives, the scientist attempting to determine how many tigers were in existence, the undercover wildlife agent tracking down the poachers and middle men, and the poachers themselves. The director was able to access far more intimate scenes with the poacher than I had written which I believe improved the final story.

RUN VIDEO: EYE OF THE TIGER

Having researched and written the treatment or outline for the programme, the next stage is to have it budgeted and financed. I believe over here most programmes are funded by the broadcaster and NZ On Air or another funding agency. While that is also true in Australia for some docos, the vast majority of our programmes require some form of international financing, particularly if the FFC is going to invest in them.

The first hurdle for us is to pre-sell the programme to our domestic broadcaster, which is usually the ABC or SBS. This will normally amount to about 20 -30% of the budget. With a domestic broadcaster in place which is essential before applying to the FFC we can then assume that the FFC will invest around 50% of the budget. So you can see there is always a deficit of around 20 -30% which we have to find from other sources, those sources usually being a combination of a distribution advance and an overseas pre-sale or pre-sales.

It's in this pre-marketing phase where I travel to the major international television markets and conferences to pitch the ideas. The major markets I attend on a regular basis are MIPTV and MIPCOM in Cannes, the Banff TV Festival in British Columbia, the Science and History Congresses which are held in different cities each year, the last being in Berlin, the next one in Paris, Wildscreen in Bristol, Jackson Hole in Wyoming, our annual SPAA conference and Small Screen Big Picture conference in Australia and the now annual Australian International Documentary Conference which travels the country and will be in Perth next year.

In addition there are several other markets and festivals which I haven't yet attended but will in the future...Hot Docs in Toronto, IDFA in Amsterdam, the Real Screen Conference in Washington and Sunny Side Of The Doc in Marseilles. I've worked out that you could spend the whole year attending international markets, festivals and conferences without going to the same one twice...nice work if you can get it and a big boost to the frequent flyer points but I don't know any doco makers who can afford to do it.

Fortunately we have a state funding agency which has seen the importance of assisting producers to attend international markets and festivals for many years and we in WA believe this is one of the main reasons we are a strong international documentary centre.

It's a huge reality check when you test your ideas in the global arena. It can be quite intimidating to begin with, when you're one of ten thousand delegates trying to get the attention and money of a harassed, cash strapped, hungover broadcaster from Poland or Spain, or worse still the BBC. Fortunately we have two things in our favour which we shouldn't underestimate and I believe it's the same for New Zealand... we have a reputation for delivering high quality programmes in drama and documentary, we often forget just how skilful we are compared to most countries, and we deliver them in the English language, although some would dispute this for Australia and New Zealand. Nevertheless, the experience of working the international markets is invaluable, not just in helping to finance the projects but also in identifying current trends, changing slots, changing personnel and the strength of your local ideas - do they resonate with buyers from Europe or the US? Are there similar ideas floating around? Has your idea already been made by a small company in Finland?

Once upon a time I used to fully develop a project with treatment and promo video before pitching it in the international marketplace. Now I'm quite happy to pitch a concept with a one page flyer to see if there is interest in it, although I still think the promo video is useful, especially if the story is character driven. So in a sense I'm often marketing projects at 2 different stages... one where it is a concept that we like but hasn't got a domestic broadcaster yet, and a second stage where we have a domestic broadcaster and a full treatment and we're looking for the final piece of the financing jigsaw. I have to say that it's a huge benefit to have a domestic broadcaster already on board, it signals to the other broadcasters that there must be something of value in it.

It's always a big relief when you reach the point of securing all the finance for a documentary, especially when this can take up to 2 years. I've always found the making of the documentary is the easiest part of the whole process and the most satisfying. I don't want to dwell on the production stage as I'm sure you all know the ins and outs of production. You may want to compare notes in terms of budgets and schedules and I'm happy to discuss this if anyone wants to follow it up in the Q & A. One point I did notice from the briefing papers is that generally your budgets are lower than ours, but I hasten to add that some of our broadcasters are keen to push budgets down and it is true that our budgets have remained static or declined over the last few years. I also think that while there is some relationship between quality and budget, in the final analysis it's the idea that counts and the way it's treated. A poor idea will still be a poor idea no matter how much money is thrown at it, I think feature films bear this fact out time and again.

Neil and I were discussing this point at the SPAA conference last year. In making a programme about prostitution, we could have approached the subject in a number of different ways, a studio forum with guest speakers arguing for or against legalised prostitution, an archival based history of prostitution, a story from the perspective of the users, an exploration from the legal/government point of view etc. There had been literally hundreds of documentaries made about brothels over the years, so it was a challenge to come up with something a little different. In the end our director decided that she wanted to make a more intimate, character driven documentary which had the brothel business as a backdrop, but was essentially structured around the interactions of the major characters, as the brothel owner, who incidentally is a Kiwi, attempts to set up a web based business to build her empire and

counteract the declining trade in brothel use. With this structure in mind, the production became a more observational piece. The director over time had enlisted the trust of the brothel madam and much of the documentary was filmed by the director with a hand held mini DV camera, capturing moments that a full crew would never have achieved. We as the producers thought the characters Melanie had chosen were strong and different enough to give an interesting overview of the business, the story was not going to be an expose of prostitution which has been done to death and perhaps most importantly she had access to a world which is secretive for most people. In terms of pitching the idea to broadcasters, we all know that sex sells so it wasn't difficult. Let's have a look at a few minutes of The Madam and Company.

RUN VIDEO: THE MADAM AND COMPANY

Post-production is an area which can often make or break a documentary given that most documentaries are really made in the editing. The selection of an editor for a programme, I believe, is as critical as the director and just as directors are not good at directing anything and everything and have their own specialised interest and skills, it's the same with editors. In this respect it's an advantage not having an editor on staff as it gives us the freedom to choose the most suitable editor for the job.

There appears to be a range of approaches to structure and storytelling at the moment but my experience with commissioning editors is that there is a marked preference for structured documentaries based around drama scriptwriting techniques. Everyone seems to have done the Robert McKee workshops on this and then wants to apply drama techniques to documentaries. In general I don't have a problem with this as a solid structure based on tried and tested storytelling methods is obviously going to be easily understood by an audience familiar with this approach. However I do think there is more than one way to tell a story and I don't think every doco should be squeezed into the same storytelling format. When they don't fit the normal pattern but still work they're called innovative and groundbreaking and broadcasters then say why can't we make more programmes like that. It's a bit like the effect Pulp Fiction had on feature films. Suddenly stories didn't have to have a beginning middle and end in that order and a whole raft of films came out emulating or attempting to emulate the Tarantino school of screenplay writing.

I think audiences are far more sophisticated and visually literate than many broadcasters give them credit for, after all they have been exposed to an extremely diverse range of storytelling techniques from film and television. Editing techniques have changed dramatically over the last 10 years. We only have to watch an old movie or documentary to realise the changes. So with a range of storytelling styles and techniques to choose from, I feel the most important point to keep in mind when editing, is keeping the audience with you. It's sometimes easy to get carried away with your own internal devices and subtleties. Once you try something in the edit process which disconnects the audience .. they just don't get it... you've lost them.

This is a very simplistic explanation but I guess what I'm saying is that we're making programmes for an audience so we have to be vigilant in ensuring the audience gets the story and not impressing each other with our own egocentric tastes.

For this reason at Artemis we test our programmes at rough cut and fine cut with a range of people, not just the commissioning editors and professional peers whose advice we respect, but also people who are not part of the industry, mums, dads, neighbours, friends, friends of friends etc. It can be a refreshing smack in the face when a non-industry audience guinea pig tells you they don't follow something, or they're finding a particular sequence that took 2 weeks to shoot boring.

In the hurly burly of meeting deadlines, delivery dates, trying to please our financial and critical masters and the pressures of budgets, it's understandable that we sometimes cut back or cut corners in the editing. My theory is that it is that extra week or two in the edit room that can transform a passable, acceptable doco into an excellent award winning contender.

I hope that we can all find the time and the money to produce documentaries we are proud of, because I think if we examine the motivation and drive that got us going in the first place we'll find it was ideas and quality that counted and it still counts today.

As the aim of this symposium is to be as interactive as possible I'd like to leave enough time for some questions, comments and general feedback. Thanks again to NZ On Air for the opportunity to be part of this symposium and thank you for listening to my ramblings.

Brian Beaton
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