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# doco 2012 dialogues

## DOCUMENTARY AND THE DIGITAL FUTURE

### IS DOCUMENTARY SAFE ON TV?

BY STEVE HEWLETT

Regular attendees at TV and documentary conferences around the world will know that the documentary is always “under threat” one way or another. Indeed the notion that documentary is poised on the very edge of the abyss has been so commonplace on conference agendas for so long that the words “wolf”, “cry” and “boy” spring readily to mind. In fact it's become pretty difficult to get anyone beyond the rather enclosed world of struggling documentary film-makers to take any such idea seriously. What's more there are plenty of indications suggesting that documentary is still there and still showing many signs of rude health.

Nevertheless there is now a genuine threat to documentary emerging from the world of the medium that has traditionally been the home (and the funder) of much if not most documentary filmmaking - Television. This is certainly the case in the UK where I've spent most of my creative career but also I would say in Australia - a market I have got to know at reasonably close quarters over the last 10 years. But this time - paradoxically perhaps - the threat to documentary is not about documentaries themselves rather it is a by-product of the very real threats and challenges that now beset the TV industry itself. And for Television these challenges could hardly be more profound.

It all started with the emergence of multichannel TV. More choice for viewers began to erode the traditional monopoly on public attention - and the revenues that followed - enjoyed by the main terrestrial TV channels - public and commercial. Then along comes the internet and online pursuits that don't just threaten traditional TV's revenue base - because online, broadcasters don't own or control the means by which their programmes might be distributed - but also TV's position as the entertainment medium of choice - especially amongst younger generations of potential viewers. There is no doubt that competition within TV and increasingly between TV and other new media is fiercer than it's ever been. And it is from here - or rather consequent to the way our broadcasters - even, or perhaps especially, the public ones - are responding to these challenges - that the principal threat to our rich documentary tradition emerges.

The key here lies in understanding the nature of the TV commissioning process and how it has changed over time in response to competitive pressures. Once upon a time producers had significant influence over which programmes got commissioned and made. Indeed at the BBC in the UK money used to be handed out to production departments before most specific commissioning decisions were actually made. This system - known as “baseline funding” at the BBC - generated many outstanding programmes but over time left some parts of the BBC out of touch with the tastes and interests of large parts of the audience - who after all paid their licence fees to fund the organisation in the first place. In short too many commissioning decisions were made without reference to audience needs and tended to focus instead on the interests of producers and worse, production departments. And as a result the corporation's TV channels were losing traction in the increasingly competitive marketplace. For an organisation that depended on public goodwill for its very survival the system was in urgent need of reform. The producer tail was wagging the public broadcasting dog. And so, under the much-maligned Director General John Birt, “baseline funding” was abandoned and henceforth departments (and producers) only got money when they secured commissions. The needs of the TV channels - in the name of the audiences they served - would now be paramount.

That move heralded the beginning of what might be looked on as the professionalization of TV commissioning, underpinned by increasingly intense scrutiny and analysis of audience interests and behaviour. It is an interesting twist of history that in the UK at least it was our national public broadcaster the BBC and not any of its commercially financed rivals that started the process. In any event it was an absolutely necessary change to the way TV had traditionally worked that can be credited with maintaining the widespread public appeal of the medium when many predicted it should be in decline. It made sense for public broadcasters to re-imagine themselves and their delivery of public purposes so as to make them chime with audience needs and lifestyles - after all what's the point of public service broadcasting if no-one's watching? And as night follows day Britain's commercial broadcasters followed suit, empowering channel controllers and commissioning editors with a mission to deliver audiences above all. I have written here about the UK but something similar has happened in every developed TV market that I know of.

At the same time the whole TV landscape has become progressively more competitive as broadcasters have sought to combat the effects of multichannel TV and latterly new media. In this context it is perhaps little surprise that the delivery of increasingly promiscuous audiences has taken centre stage for both commercial broadcasters in search of revenue and public broadcasters anxious to avoid irrelevance. But this obsession with audience delivery - understandable and even necessary as it might have been - has also led to widespread conservatism and risk aversion amongst those thoroughly empowered commissioning decision makers. The most important measure

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of a programme's success is its ratings and understandably ambitious commissioners see their career prospects framed in the same way. It is this that lies behind the preponderance of "me too" and copycat programming on so many of our TV networks. There will not be a producer in the land who hasn't met commissioning editors capable only of describing their requirements in terms of replicating things that have already worked – either on their own channels or elsewhere. Commissioning editors crave certainty. It is cool to be seen by industry colleagues as a "risk taker" but much less hazardous in career terms if they're risks anyone would have taken.

So in this environment, where the commissioner or channel controller's writ runs largely unopposed, the system seeks to avoid risk. Long running series of easy viewing half-hour doc soaps are preferred to single films because once launched successfully they need less marketing and deliver to audiences much the same week after week. Formatted Docs and reality shows are preferred to the less predictable single documentaries and short series. Known talent is pursued and embraced to fill the few opportunities that remain for more authored work. If all this sounds like a recipe for predictability that's because it is, and intentionally so. And generally speaking this is where television is at and these are the rules by which it feels compelled to play – less concerned about creativity and public purposes and more concerned with audience metrics and commercial survival.

Of course you can find high quality documentary on television still and when it rates TV executives genuinely love it too. But as in so many other areas of business and life, and this is especially true in creative industries, success is very hard to predict. I don't think documentary will disappear from television its just that corporately as it fights for its own survival it is increasingly clear that TV doesn't have the stomach for the risks involved in developing the new ideas and new talent that the future of documentary depend on. It is after all a percentage game. For the commercials this might just be an aspect of the business reality they face. For the publicly financed broadcasters it must ultimately be a matter of vision and will. For organisations like the BBC and the ABC they might begin to wonder whether their systems which once put producer's interests ahead of audiences aren't now putting the competitive position of their TV channels ahead of their broader public purposes.

So where does this leave documentary? There is no doubt that at its best documentary can make some of the most outstanding television. It can inform, engage, challenge, inspire, and it can entertain. There is also abundant evidence that documentary is cherished by audiences – even if they are not quite the audiences by dint of size or demographic that TV channels always seem to want. But for documentary a new future beckons including television – which remains uniquely powerful, as a mass popular medium – but beyond it too. The new media – that are so threatening to broadcasting – offer huge opportunities for documentary makers to find audiences that want to see and maybe even get involved in what they make. But to really make the most of these emerging opportunities documentary – and all those State and Federal bodies that support it – will need to re-imagine themselves for a digital world beyond just TV.



#### Steve Hewlett

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