



NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY REVIEW 2026

Documentary Australia Submission

21 May 2026

Documentary Australia submission regarding a renewed National Cultural Policy for Australia.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the review of Australia's National Cultural Policy and to highlight the need for stronger investment in the arts and cultural sector, alongside targeted support for the documentary sector in recognition of its unique cultural, social and democratic value.

About Documentary Australia

Documentary Australia is a unique not-for-profit that supports powerful stories for social change. Since 2008, we have supported hundreds of filmmakers to tell important stories through documentary across seven key areas: Women & Girls, Youth & Education, Indigenous, Human Rights & Social Justice, Health & Wellbeing, Environment, and The Arts.

By offering tax deductibility to donors to support films, Documentary Australia enables social impact documentaries to be made and seen. To date, we have facilitated over \$58 million in philanthropic funding to documentary.

Through our programs and professional development initiatives, we support film teams and partners to place documentaries at the heart of impact campaigns and engage audiences to act for positive social change. We continue to advocate for the documentary sector on issues relating to the recognition and support of documentary filmmaking in Australia.

Visit our [website](#) to read our [Annual Impact Reports](#) and the programs we deliver.

Our vision

At a time when trust has been eroded and the truth can't always be relied on in mainstream or social media, documentary storytelling is becoming more important than ever. Our vision is to see the depth and nuance that documentary offers as central to social change campaigns and accessible across many platforms to offer diverse and authentic perspectives on the most pressing social issues.

Who we are and what we do

Documentary Australia's purpose is to advance awareness and inspire action on critical social issues by empowering independent documentary filmmakers and organisations on the forefront of social change. In 2024-2025, Documentary Australia continued its unwavering commitment to leveraging the power of storytelling for social change. Through a combination of impactful documentaries, strategic partnerships and dedicated donor support, we have made significant strides in advancing our mission.



Our values are integrity, inclusiveness, innovation and inspiration. These inform our strategic focus on four key aims: Great Films, Great Partnerships, Great Impact and Leadership & Advocacy. We achieve these aims by building and supporting our community through:

- Filmmaker capacity building and support
- Fundraising and donor stewardship
- Communications, digital advice and marketing
- Events and screening programs
- Partner and industry engagement
- Innovative programs and partnerships
- Sector leadership and representation
- Evaluation and reporting
- Advocacy.

In 2024-2025, Documentary Australia:

- Supported a diverse slate of almost 500 documentaries addressing some of the most pressing issues of our time – with a 38% increase in applications this financial year
- Enabled up to 400 filmmakers to secure philanthropic funding, strengthen their campaigns, and connect with audiences and decision-makers, with \$4,053,159 donated to documentary films
- Strengthened values-aligned partnerships based on impact goals and evaluation
- Expanded sector capacity in our philanthropic fundraising, partnerships and impact model through four tailored industry capacity-building programs
- Helped films achieve real-world social outcomes through screenings, outreach and educational programs, reaching over 7,500 event participants
- Delivered four major sector programs including an [Impact Producer Program](#), [Environmental Accelerator](#), [DocAccess](#) and [SheDoc](#)
- Invested in long-term sector sustainability through advocacy and leadership
- Refreshed our 10-year strategic plan until 2030 focussing on elevating diverse voices, supporting documentaries to be seen and have an impact.

Why Documentary Australia matters

Documentary storytelling plays a critical role in Australia’s cultural landscape, contributing significantly to public discourse, civic engagement, and the preservation of national identity. Its value is distinct from other forms of screen content, in that it has a unique ability to platform the stories and lived experience of diverse, everyday Australians across demographics, and to document the narratives that together form our nation’s history and collective identity. However, despite this importance, the documentary sector remains under-resourced relative to its impact.

Of the approximately \$5.7 billion invested annually by the Australian Government in arts and culture, around \$1.8 billion is directed to the film, television and radio sector. Within this, only an estimated \$55–65 million—approximately 3–4%—is allocated specifically to documentary development and production. This limited investment stands in contrast to the demonstrable cultural, social and educational value delivered by documentary works.



Documentaries consistently form a substantial component of Australian screen output, comprising approximately 20–30% of domestic feature film releases. They generate a high level of engagement across educational institutions, film festivals, and community settings. While documentaries typically represent a smaller share of theatrical box office relative to drama and international content, their reach extends significantly through broadcast, streaming platforms, schools and community screenings—ensuring enduring and widespread audience impact.

Importantly, documentary films deliver significant public value. They capture and preserve Australia’s social, historical and political narratives, amplify underrepresented voices, and contribute to a more informed and engaged society. In this way, documentary is not only a creative output but also a public good.

Documentary Australia plays a vital role in strengthening this ecosystem. Since inception, we have facilitated over \$58 million in philanthropic funding to documentary. On average, the organisation facilitates over \$4 million annually for documentary projects—equivalent to approximately 25% additional funding on top of direct Federal Government investment via Screen Australia in the sector. This contribution demonstrates the critical role philanthropy plays in sustaining documentary production in Australia.

Philanthropic funding, channelled through Documentary Australia, co-funds a significant proportion of documentaries supported by Screen Australia. In addition, the organisation represents and supports a large cohort of documentary filmmakers who are unable to access government funding due to increasingly competitive funding rounds, limited available funding and stringent eligibility criteria – including emerging and diverse filmmakers.

Within the broader screen sector, Documentary Australia provides an essential advocacy function for a frequently overlooked part of the industry. It champions the cultural, artistic and social value of documentary storytelling and works to ensure the sector remains visible within policy and funding frameworks.

However, this role is itself precarious. Approximately 97% of the organisation’s operational funding is derived from philanthropy, with only 1% from government sources and 2% from earned income.

This imbalance highlights both the strength of philanthropic support and the vulnerability of a system that relies so heavily on non-government funding to sustain a sector of clear public value. Strengthening support for documentary—and for the organisations that underpin it—is therefore critical to ensuring the continued vitality, diversity and impact of Australian storytelling and our country’s screen sector, and must be central to an effective Australian cultural policy.

Our submission – An Overview

“Documentaries are the archives of the future.”

Australia’s documentary sector is a vital part of the nation’s cultural infrastructure, preserving history, amplifying the voices of diverse Australians, strengthening democracy and driving social understanding. Documentary films help Australians make sense of complex issues, foster empathy, social cohesion and connect communities. Yet despite their substantial public value, documentaries remain chronically underfunded and increasingly dependent on unpaid labour, philanthropy and the personal financial sacrifice of filmmakers.

The sector continues to produce world-class work but does so within an increasingly fragile and unsustainable system. Practitioners experience widespread unpaid development work, declining broadcaster licence fees, shrinking commissioning opportunities, and inadequate support for distribution and audience engagement. Without structural reform, Australia risks losing experienced practitioners, excluding emerging and under-represented voices, and weakening one of its most powerful storytelling forms.

Documentary is also uniquely effective in advancing national cultural priorities. It enables First Nations communities to tell stories grounded in Country, community and culture; supports women, multicultural, disabled and regional storytellers to share their lived experiences; and helps audiences engage deeply with the stories that represent them and issues shaping Australian society.

Overarching Priority Recommendations to Government

1. **Clearly distinguish documentary from factual entertainment** in policy, regulation and reporting.
2. **Increase public broadcaster funding** and require dedicated commissioning of single, independent Australian documentaries.
3. **Increase dedicated funding for documentary** across development, production, distribution, marketing and impact campaigns through Screen Australia and state agencies.
4. **Strengthen Australian content obligations for streaming platforms**, including documentary-specific investment and discoverability requirements.
5. **Establish a matched funding partnership with Documentary Australia** to leverage philanthropy and strengthen sector infrastructure.
6. **Support fair remuneration and sustainable careers**, including development funding and enterprise support.
7. **Expand investment in First Nations and under-represented storytellers**, with culturally safe pathways and leadership opportunities.
8. **Fund the full audience lifecycle**, including impact and educational distribution, community screenings and accessibility.



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9. **Simplify funding systems** to reduce administrative barriers and improve accessibility.
10. **Recognise documentary as essential cultural infrastructure** and engage regularly with the sector in policy development.

With stronger investment and policy support, documentary can continue to ensure that Australian stories are not only told, but seen, understood and used to strengthen the nation's cultural life and democratic future.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

Recognising and respecting the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia's arts and culture.

First Nations stories are foundational to Australia's cultural identity. Documentary plays a critical role in enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to tell stories grounded in Country, community, culture and lived experience. These works preserve knowledge, strengthen truth-telling, and foster greater understanding across the nation.

While important progress has been made, First Nations creators remain significantly under-represented in documentary production. Screen Australia data indicates that between 2014 and 2023 there were approximately 150 First Nations producers and 160 First Nations directors credited on Australian documentaries—an increase on the previous decade (103 producers and 109 directors 2010–2019), but still a relatively small cohort in the context of the broader screen industry.

Australia cannot place First Nations stories at the centre of its cultural life unless First Nations people have enduring authority and control over how those stories are told. This requires sustained investment in First Nations-led documentary development, production, distribution and career pathways, underpinned by culturally safe production practices.

Key Issues

Documentary Australia strongly recommends that the Australian Government commit to long-term, dedicated support for First Nations documentary practitioners and projects to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories are created, collaborated on and shared by the communities to whom they belong.

- **Persistent Under-Representation:** Despite growth in participation, the number of First Nations producers and directors remains too small to meet demand for first nations stories or ensure a robust and sustainable workforce. Opportunities are particularly limited for mid-career practitioners and for creatives living in regional and remote communities.



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- **Limited Access to Sustainable Career Pathways:** The sector lacks sufficient long-term investment in training, mentoring and professional development. Emerging practitioners often struggle to progress into senior creative and decision-making roles.
- **Inadequate Decision-Making Power:** First Nations stories are not always led by or collaborated on appropriately with First Nations creatives and communities. Without cultural authority, there is a risk of misrepresentation, extractive practices and erosion of story sovereignty.
- **Distribution and Audience Reach Challenges:** Many First Nations documentaries are successfully produced but do not receive adequate support to reach broad Australian and international audiences. Visibility and impact are constrained by underinvestment in marketing and distribution.
- **Cultural Safety and ICIP Risks:** As technology evolves, stronger safeguards are needed to protect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, including the use of artificial intelligence. Meaningful consultation and culturally appropriate governance must be embedded across the sector.
- **Structural and Administrative Barriers:** Funding systems can be complex, bureaucratic and inaccessible, particularly for community-based and emerging practitioners.

Consultation undertaken by Documentary Australia revealed strong consensus that First Nations stories must be First Nations-led and supported through greater funding, training and cultural protections.

- *“Ensure that First Nations filmmakers are decision-makers at every level.”*
- *“First Nations stories need to be told by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.”*
- *“Upskilling emerging and mid-career practitioners is critical to First Nations sovereignty.”*
- *“The issue is distribution and reaching wider audiences.”*
- *“Ensure the protections of ICIP in relation to the use of AI.”*

Documentary Australia’s Contribution

Documentary Australia currently supports **more than 75 documentary projects with a primary focus on Indigenous stories and voices, which has more than doubled over the last few years.** We have developed and delivered targeted initiatives to strengthen First Nations capacity, including:

- **Centralised Initiative (2019):** Delivered in partnership with Screen Territory, South Australian Film Corporation, NITV and AFTRS to provide development and production opportunities in South Australia and the Northern Territory.
- **Documentary Australia Indigenous Fellowship (2020–2023):** Supporting early to mid-career Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners with project development funding and professional training through Australian Film Television and Radio School.

These programs have demonstrated the value of targeted, long-term investment in building a stronger and more sustainable First Nations documentary sector.

Key Needs and Recommended Government Actions

1. **Expand Dedicated Funding for First Nations Documentary:** Increase targeted investment across development, production, impact campaigns and distribution to ensure more First Nations stories are created and widely seen.
2. **Invest in Long-Term Career Pathways:** Support structured training, fellowships, mentorships and on-Country professional development to build a sustainable workforce across all career stages.
3. **Embed First Nations Leadership and Story Sovereignty** (or the right of a community or group to control, shape, and define the stories, histories, and representations about themselves): Require that projects involving First Nations stories are led by First Nations creatives and/or communities, with genuine authority over creative and strategic decisions.
4. **Strengthen Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Protections:** Embed enforceable ICIP standards across all publicly funded screen activity, including safeguards relating to data and artificial intelligence.
5. **Increase Support for Distribution and Audience Development:** Provide dedicated funding to help First Nations documentaries reach mainstream audiences in Australia and internationally.
6. **Simplify Access to Funding:** Reduce administrative barriers and design more accessible application processes, particularly for regional and community-based practitioners.
7. **Support Sector Partnerships and Capacity Building:** Continue to fund intermediary organisations and partnerships that provide culturally informed support and tailored development opportunities.

Conclusion

Placing First Nations stories at the centre of Australia’s cultural policy requires more than recognition—it requires structural reform and sustained investment. First Nations peoples must have the resources, authority and protections needed to tell their own stories on their own terms.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Reflecting the breadth of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.

Documentary is one of Australia’s most powerful tools for ensuring that people from all backgrounds can tell their stories, challenge stereotypes and broaden public understanding. It enables under-represented communities to document lived experience, preserve cultural memory and contribute to a more accurate and inclusive picture of contemporary Australia. At



its best, documentary expands whose stories are heard, whose perspectives are valued and whose experiences are recognised as part of the national story.

However, there is strong consensus that documentary is structurally undervalued and diluted within Australia’s screen ecosystem. The sector faces growing pressure from commissioning trends, declining investment in documentary storytelling (as opposed to Factual content) and systemic inequities that limit who can participate in the industry and whose stories reach audiences.

There is strong consensus across the sector that documentary is increasingly being conflated with broader “factual” and “unscripted” or “non-scripted” entertainment formats. This has had significant consequences for funding, commissioning, regulation and cultural recognition. While factual entertainment formats may deliver commercial outcomes, documentary serves a distinct public interest function: contributing to informed citizenship, cultural reflection, civic participation and social understanding. Treating documentary and factual entertainment as equivalent collapses cultural value into market value and undermines the integrity of the form.

At the same time, structural inequities continue to prevent many Australians from accessing documentary careers and opportunities. Diverse, emerging and independent filmmakers face persistent barriers to funding, career progression, distribution and decision-making. These barriers disproportionately affect First Nations practitioners, culturally diverse communities, filmmakers with disability, regional practitioners, women and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Australia cannot genuinely claim to have “a place for every story” unless creators—regardless of geography, identity, cultural background or economic circumstance—have equitable access to the resources, relationships and institutional power required to tell their stories and reach audiences. The sector requires deliberate structural reform, sustained investment and policy settings that recognise documentary as a distinct and essential cultural form.

Protecting Documentary as a critical storytelling artform

Documentary can be difficult to define due to the breadth of interpretations encompassed within the term. As such, it is often most effectively understood not only by what it includes, but by clearly distinguishing it from adjacent and convergent program types and formats that may appear to fall within its scope.

As a public interest form of media with strong social and cultural value, it is increasingly critical that documentary is adequately defined and differentiated as distinct from excluded and convergent Factual programs. Documentary contributes to informed citizenship, cultural expression and social understanding and change, while convergent programs primarily serve information and commercial entertainment functions. Treating them as equivalent collapses public value into market value and leads to public funding being allocated in areas with less vulnerability.



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The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), the government body responsible for regulating Australian communications and media, is tasked with not just classifying content but supporting cultural policy objectives - *“to contribute to maximising the economic and social benefits of communications infrastructure, services and content for Australia”* (ACMA).

The ACMA Guidelines define documentary as deliberately narrower and more specific than ‘Factual’ and contain the conceptual tools to distinguish it from excluded and convergent programming. However, this distinction is inconsistently and inaccurately applied across industry reporting, commissioning, funding frameworks and public discourse.

Stronger and more explicit operational separation, application and enforcement is required to protect the boundary, and value, of the form. Maintaining the distinction is essential to:

- preserving the integrity of documentary as a cultural form
- ensuring accurate measurement and evidence-based policy
- protecting the intent of funding and regulatory frameworks to support culturally important, market-vulnerable genres
- sustaining a sector and vital form that contributes to public knowledge, civic engagement and democratic life.

Without clarity and enforcement of the definition of documentary, the category of documentary risks becoming functionally indistinct, defined not by its purpose or practice, but by the broad and imprecise label of “factual” content, or ‘unscripted’. This inflates perceptions of documentary production while obscuring the decline of authentic, narrative based analytical works that contribute to society.

With convergent programs being treated as documentary, we see:

- **Category inflation:** documentary appears abundant, which reduces the urgency for support
- **Resource displacement:** high-volume formats dominate funding and commissioning
- **Data corruption:** no accurate understanding of production trends, audience engagement, sector health
- **Policy failure:** Quotas and incentives fail to deliver intended outcomes
- **Cultural erosion:** Fewer works that interrogate power, explore complexity or contribute to public discourse.

Core Criteria for Identifying Documentary as a Distinct Form

A documentary is defined not simply by its use of real people or real-world subject matter, but by its creative, interpretive treatment of actuality. To qualify as a documentary, a program must be grounded in actuality while demonstrating authorship, analytical intent, and narrative construction. It should explore ideas, themes, or issues in depth, going beyond surface depiction to provide context, insight, and meaning.



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Central to this definition is purpose and intent: a documentary is driven by an intent to increase audience understanding. It achieves this through a coherent narrative or thesis, supported by analysis, multiple perspectives, or critical engagement. The form is authored rather than format-driven, with storytelling shaped to serve inquiry and interpretation, not just depiction. It also typically carries enduring relevance, extending beyond immediate events or short-term interest. In essence, documentary is a meaning-making form—it interprets reality rather than simply presenting it.

A program should be excluded from being classified as a documentary where its primary function is format-driven entertainment or surface-level factual presentation. The clearest exclusion test is if the treatment is subordinate to format, entertainment, or constructed scenarios—and does not provide meaningful analysis, interpretation, or thematic exploration—it is not a documentary. This includes content that:

- Is driven by competition, lifestyle, or repeatable formats
- Relies on contrived or engineered situations for narrative momentum
- Presents reality without contextualisation, critique, or deeper insight
- Lacks a unifying narrative, thesis, or authored point of view
- Prioritises audience engagement, commercial intent, or episodic structure over meaning.

As filmmakers consistently expressed through consultation:

- *“The failure to distinguish between factual programs, factual entertainment and reality has been disastrous for documentary.”*
- *“When documentary becomes diluted into a broader factual category, it risks losing the recognition and support it genuinely needs.”*
- *“Commissioning... is skewed towards light entertainment documentary and factual”*
- *“Broadcasters programming factual content and have abandoned longer form documentary storytelling completely.”*
- *“Content built around consumption models or commercial trends”*

Other Key Issues Preventing Diverse Stories

- **Limited Access to Funding and Financial Sustainability:** Independent documentary filmmaking often involves years of unpaid or underpaid labour. Emerging and under-represented filmmakers face particular challenges in securing development and production finance, resulting in significant financial precarity and talent attrition.
- **Structural and Accessibility Barriers:** Funding and industry systems are often complex, time-intensive and inaccessible. Administrative burden disproportionately affects filmmakers with disability, caring responsibilities, limited resources and those outside established networks.
- **Under-Representation in Decision-Making:** People from under-represented communities remain insufficiently represented in leadership, commissioning and key



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creative roles. As a result, stories are too often filtered through institutions that do not reflect the communities being portrayed.

- **Barriers to Entry and Career Progression:** Breaking into the industry frequently depends on existing networks, insider knowledge and informal relationships. Emerging filmmakers struggle to access the mentorship, credits and opportunities required to advance.
- **Distribution and Audience Reach Constraints:** Even when diverse documentaries are funded and produced, they often face barriers to distribution. Limited access to broadcasters, distributors and marketing support restricts audience reach and cultural impact.
- **Geographic Inequality:** The screen sector remains concentrated in metropolitan centres, creating additional barriers for regional and remote practitioners who face fewer local opportunities and support networks.
- **Under-Recognition of Diverse Experiences:** Many respondents highlighted the need for broader acceptance and investment in stories reflecting migrant, refugee, multicultural, disability and other under-represented perspectives.

Documentary Australia's consultation revealed widespread agreement that inequity in the screen sector is systemic and requires structural solutions.

- *"Independent documentary filmmaking often requires years of unpaid or underpaid labour."*
- *"There needs to be simpler, clearer and more accessible application processes."*
- *"Greater trust in lived experience storytellers."*
- *"It has become very difficult to finance social issue documentaries"*
- *"Anyone starting a new documentary has to be insane financially to commit to it."*
- *"Diverse stories from less represented folks need to be embraced and funded."*

Key Needs and Recommended Government Actions

- **Formally recognise and protect documentary as a distinct artform:** Strengthen the distinction between documentary and broader factual or entertainment programming across funding, regulation, quotas, reporting and commissioning. Ensure ACMA definitions are consistently applied and enforced.
- **Strengthen broadcaster and streaming obligations for documentary:** Improve documentary quotas, minimum commissioning requirements and dedicated documentary slots across broadcasters and streamers, with clear differentiation between documentary and factual formats.
- **Increase Funding for Under-Represented Storytellers:** Expand targeted investment to support diverse documentary creators across development, production, impact campaigns and distribution, with a focus on long-term sustainability rather than one-off initiatives.

- **Simplify and Improve Accessibility of Funding Systems:** Redesign application and reporting processes to be more streamlined, inclusive and accessible to filmmakers with disability, caring responsibilities and limited administrative capacity.
- **Strengthen Representation in Leadership and Decision-Making:** Increase diversity in commissioning, assessment panels, boards and executive roles to ensure funding decisions better reflect the breadth of Australian experience.
- **Invest in Career Pathways and Professional Development:** Support fellowships, mentorships, internships and bridge programs that help emerging practitioners progress into mid-career and senior creative roles.
- **Expand Distribution and Audience Development Support:** Provide dedicated funding and partnerships to ensure documentaries by under-represented creators are effectively marketed and reach broad audiences nationally and internationally.
- **Address Geographic Inequality:** Increase investment in regional and remote practitioners through place-based initiatives, on-location training and decentralised funding opportunities.
- **Support Lived Experience Storytelling:** Encourage funding frameworks that prioritise authentic representation and meaningful involvement of creators from the communities whose stories are being told.
- **Strengthen Private Investment Incentives:** Develop measures to attract greater private investment into diverse and women-led documentary projects, where significant funding disparities persist.

Conclusion

A truly inclusive cultural policy must ensure that diverse Australians have the opportunity to tell their stories and participate fully in the nation's cultural life. This requires more than symbolic recognition—it requires structural change to remove barriers, distribute opportunity and support a broader range of voices to create work of national significance.

Documentary is central to this task. It preserves cultural memory, strengthens democratic dialogue, expands public understanding and ensures that complex Australian experiences are visible within the national story.

However, without stronger protections, clearer policy settings and sustained investment, Australia risks losing a vital public interest storytelling form to commercial convergence, structural inequity and declining support for independent documentary practice.

Documentary Australia urges the Australian Government to recognise documentary as a distinct cultural asset essential to Australia's democratic, social and cultural life. This requires targeted investment, stronger regulatory protections and long-term structural reform to ensure documentary remains accessible, sustainable and representative of the full diversity of Australian experiences.

A place for every story can only exist when every community has a genuine opportunity not only to be represented, but to tell its own story, in its own voice, and be heard.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators.

“If we want a sustainable and genuinely inclusive documentary landscape, we need to properly value creative labour... and build structures that support people to remain in the sector long term”

Documentary filmmakers are central to Australia’s cultural life. They create work that preserves history, fosters public understanding, stimulates civic dialogue and contributes to national identity. Yet the artists and producers who make these works are operating under increasingly unsustainable conditions.

Documentary Australia’s experience demonstrates both the scale of demand and the importance of documentary as a cultural and economic sector. Since 2014, Documentary Australia has supported thousands of documentary practitioners and taken the lead on establishing the role of Impact Producer in Australia.

Despite this, sector-wide evidence shows that documentary production relies heavily on unpaid labour, personal financial sacrifice and declining returns from broadcasters and distributors. Filmmakers describe working for below minimum wage, investing their own money, drawing on superannuation and taking second jobs to remain in the industry. Broadcaster licence fees and development funding have declined dramatically, while administrative and application burdens have increased. Without structural reform, Australia risks losing experienced practitioners, excluding emerging voices and undermining one of the country’s most important storytelling forms.

Documentary filmmakers must be recognised and supported as professional cultural workers, not expected to subsidise public-interest storytelling through unpaid labour and personal financial hardship. A sustainable documentary sector requires fair remuneration, stronger funding structures, creative autonomy and long-term investment in artists and enterprises.

“Support should shift from short-term project funding toward building a sustainable ecosystem.”

Key Issues

- **Financial Unsustainability:** Documentary filmmaking is widely described as economically unviable. Many practitioners report earning below a liveable wage, relying on secondary employment, drawing on personal savings or leaving the sector altogether.
- **Systemic Reliance on Unpaid Labour:** Our survey data reveals that:
 - 92% of respondents reported unpaid development work.
 - 80% reported unpaid work throughout projects.
 - 68% reported working below industry rates.
 - 66% reported working below a liveable wage.



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- This model disproportionately excludes those without independent financial means.
- **High Personal Financial Risk:** Producers frequently self-fund projects, defer fees, reinvest earnings and absorb significant financial exposure, often without any certainty of recoupment.
- **Declining Licence Fees and Market Investment:** Broadcaster licence fees have declined significantly, while streamers commission little and distributors often provide insufficient financial benefit to support viable production models.
- **Structural Instability:** The documentary sector is highly fragmented and project-based, with limited enterprise funding and few mechanisms to support stable, long-term careers.
- **Barriers to New and Diverse Voices:** Financial precarity and risk-averse commissioning practices favour established practitioners and exclude emerging and under-represented storytellers.
- **Administrative and Bureaucratic Burden:** Complex application processes and reporting requirements divert time away from creative work and disproportionately affect small businesses and independent producers.
- **Creative Constraints and Risk Aversion:** Funding and commissioning systems increasingly favour safer, lower-cost factual formats, limiting innovation and reducing creative freedom.

The sector's message through our consultations is unequivocal: documentary filmmakers are carrying an unsustainable burden.

- *"It is financially impossible to be a documentary maker in Australia."*
- *"Unpaid work, development work and rate cutting is constant in the sector."*
- *"Being a producer of Australian documentaries is a financial disaster."*
- *"Support should recognise documentary filmmakers as long-term cultural workers, not just project-based applicants."*
- *"I think it is generally recognised in the documentary sector that it is impossible to make a living as an independent producer."*
- *"Many filmmakers are forced to supplement their income through other work or leave the industry entirely."*
- *"I gave up on earning a living wage two years ago. I would earn more working in a bar"*
- *"Documentary would be utterly impossible without... producers working for weeks or months below the minimum wage."*
- *"Unpaid work, development work and rate cutting is constant in the sector."*
- *"200 hours of work...paid around \$2,000, which equates to roughly \$10 an hour."*
- *"Impossible to make a doco without putting your own money in, that isn't ever returned."*
- *"I had to pull funds from my super to pay my rent, eat, and pay for shoots."*
- *"Broadcast license fees are appallingly low."*
- *"[REDACTED] only paid \$40,000...in 2020...[REDACTED] only paid \$6,000...less than 5% of what was paid...22 years ago."*



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- *“Screen Agency requirements are harder and harder... more time is spent on admin than on creative.”*
- *“There need to be investment in the development of projects rather than it being driven by creators' passion and unpaid time.”*
- *“If we can't pay for our rent and food we have to do other paid work, which means loss of creativity.”*
- *“Documentary often takes years to build... That time needs to be recognised and resourced.”*
- *“Seeing cultural production as valuable and crucial for Australian identity.”*

Documentary Australia's Contribution

Documentary Australia has developed innovative models that directly support filmmakers and expand employment opportunities, including:

- **Good Pitch Australia (2014–2016):** Raised \$14 million for documentary films and impact campaigns through partnerships with philanthropy, NGOs and corporate supporters.
- **SheDoc:** A fellowship program supporting women documentary filmmakers in partnership with Create NSW and RODE Microphones.
- **StoryWorks:** An eight-month professional development initiative delivered with Film Victoria.
- **Environmental Incubator, Environmental Accelerator and Climate Story Lab:** Supporting environmental documentary projects, philanthropic fundraising and capacity building.
- **Documentary Australia Award:** Presented annually at the Sydney Film Festival to recognise excellence in Australian documentary.
- From **2025** we are launching a **Women's Voices Program** and **Youth Voices Program** to uplift and support the voices and experiences of women, girls and gender-diverse people and feature the voices of the future.

Key Needs and Recommended Government Actions

“Support needs to recognise documentary filmmakers as long-term cultural workers, not just project-based applicants.”

- **Increase Dedicated Documentary Funding:** Expand and quarantine funding for documentary development, production, impact campaigns and distribution, with particular emphasis on early-stage work.
- **Support Filmmakers as Long-Term Cultural Workers:** Shift policy settings from purely project-based funding toward career development, fellowships, enterprise support and income stability.
- **Expand Development Funding:** Provide significantly greater investment in research and development to reduce dependence on unpaid labour.
- **Strengthen Enterprise Funding:** Support documentary companies to build sustainable businesses, retain staff and scale operations.



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- **Incentivise Private Investment and Philanthropy and consider matched funding models:** Introduce tax incentives and policy mechanisms that encourage philanthropic and private investment in documentary production.
- **Regulate Streamers and Broadcasters:** Strengthen Australian content obligations, improve transparency and encourage fair licence fees and data sharing.
- **Invest in Distribution and Audience Reach:** Provide dedicated support for marketing, distribution and audience engagement to maximise cultural and economic returns.
- **Simplify Funding Processes:** Streamline application, contracting and reporting requirements to reduce administrative burden.
- **Protect Creative Freedom and Encourage Innovation:** Support greater experimentation, risk-taking and artistic ambition within documentary funding and commissioning systems.

Conclusion

Documentary filmmakers are the foundation of Australia's documentary sector, yet they are increasingly expected to carry unsustainable financial and personal burdens to produce work of immense cultural value. Documentary filmmakers should be recognised as essential contributors to Australia's cultural, social and economic life and supported accordingly.

Documentary Australia strongly recommends that the Australian Government implement structural reforms that properly value creative labour, ensure fair remuneration and build a sustainable documentary ecosystem in which artists can thrive over the long term.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts, culture and heritage.

A strong documentary sector depends on robust cultural infrastructure: public institutions, screen agencies, broadcasters, streamers, festivals, philanthropic partnerships and specialist organisations that support filmmakers and connect stories with audiences. When this infrastructure is weak, the sustainability, diversity and impact of Australian documentary are placed at risk.

Documentary Australia is a key part of this national infrastructure. Since 2008, we have facilitated more than \$58 million from thousands of private donors and supported hundreds of films and impact campaigns. Approximately half of all documentaries released theatrically in Australia since 2016 have been fiscally sponsored by Documentary Australia, demonstrating both the scale of demand and our central role in the documentary ecosystem.

Yet survey responses show overwhelming concern that the broader documentary infrastructure is under-funded, structurally fragile and increasingly dependent on philanthropy to fill gaps left by declining public and market investment.

Australia's documentary sector requires stronger and more coordinated cultural infrastructure to remain viable. Government must invest in the institutions, policy

settings and audience pathways that enable documentary to be created, financed, distributed and experienced by audiences in Australia and around the world. Philanthropy should not be carrying the load; it can complement this system, but it cannot substitute for sustained public investment.

Key Issues

- **Structural Fragility Across the Documentary Ecosystem:** Respondents consistently describe the documentary sector as financially fragile, under-supported and lacking a coherent ecosystem spanning development, commissioning, distribution and export.
- **Increasing Reliance on Philanthropy:** Survey data shows that 92% of respondents agree there is an increasing reliance on philanthropy to fund documentary. While philanthropy is an important funding source, it should complement—not replace—government and broadcaster investment.
- **Declining Broadcaster Support:** There is a widespread belief that public broadcasters are not adequately fulfilling their role in commissioning one-off documentaries. Licence fees have declined significantly, reducing a critical source of market support – as well as access to stories in the public interest
- **Limited Contribution from Streaming Platforms:** Streaming services are widely perceived as making insufficient investment in Australian documentary and are not currently subject to meaningful documentary-specific obligations.
- **Inadequate Recognition of Contemporary Distribution Models:** Funding systems continue to prioritise traditional marketplace attachments despite the growth of substantial community screenings programs, educational distribution, digital campaigns and impact-led audience strategies.
- **Weak International Export Support:** Australian documentary is globally competitive, but many respondents reported insufficient support to market and distribute work internationally.
- **Policy and Regulatory Gaps:** The erosion of documentary quotas and lack of effective content obligations for streamers have reduced investment in one-off documentary production.
- **Sustainability of Key Sector Organisations:** Specialist intermediary organisations such as Documentary Australia play a critical role in financing films, building partnerships and supporting impact, but require stable core funding to continue delivering national benefit.



DOCUMENTARY AUSTRALIA

Documentary Australia's consultation revealed deep concern about the state of the supporting infrastructure.

- *"There is no ecosystem for documentary in Australia."*
- *"Public broadcasters are underfunded."*
- *"Streaming platforms do not currently contribute to a sustainable documentary ecosystem."*
- *"There is a clear need for stronger structural support across the entire documentary ecosystem."*
- *"There is very little consideration of documentary's cultural value."*
- *"Documentaries are routinely acquired for very low fees... [making] it difficult for filmmakers to sustain careers"*
- *"█████ paid \$2000 to re-license a documentary I had spent 4 years making"*
- *"Broadcasters are paying only 5%... of what they paid 22 years ago"*
- *"Feature documentary... definitely equates to filmmakers being paid \$0"*
- *"Clear need for stronger structural support across the entire documentary ecosystem"*
- *"Public broadcasters offer only a narrow window of commissioning content"*
- *"Public broadcasters are underfunded. Commercial broadcasters are funding slop."*
- *"Streamers... undervalues documentary work, contributes to low acquisition fees"*
- *"Streamers consider documentary bargain Basement"*

Documentary Australia's Contribution

Documentary Australia has pioneered new infrastructure, professional and project development initiatives, and funding models that strengthen the sector, including:

- Raising over \$58 million for documentary projects and their impact campaigns.
- Delivering sector initiatives such as Good Pitch Australia, StoryWorks, SheDoc, Indigenous Fellowship, Environmental Incubator and Environmental Accelerator, Impact Producer Program
- Providing training and resources to filmmakers to enable them to raise philanthropic funds, develop partnerships and design and implement impact campaigns and strategies.
- Presenting the Documentary Australia Award at the Sydney Film Festival
- From this year, we will be delivering **Advancing Impact Workshops, Masterclasses, DocAccess, Women's Voices and Youth Voices** programs and initiatives.

These initiatives leverage government investment, attract philanthropic support and create stronger pathways for documentaries to reach audiences and achieve measurable impact.

Key Needs and Recommended Government Actions

- **Increase Investment in Documentary Infrastructure:** Expand support for the institutions, intermediaries and partnerships that underpin the documentary ecosystem, including specialist organisations such as Documentary Australia.
- **Establish a Matched Funding Model with Documentary Australia:** Introduce an annual matched funding arrangement to leverage philanthropic contributions to the sector.
- **Quarantine Funding for Single Documentaries:** Increase funding to screen agencies and public broadcasters with dedicated allocations for one-off documentaries rather than factual entertainment formats.
- **Modernise Funding Criteria:** Recognise non-traditional distribution and impact pathways—including educational, community and digital models—as legitimate indicators of audience reach and success.
- **Strengthen Content Obligations for Streamers:** Introduce meaningful Australian content requirements that include specific commitments to documentary production and fair acquisition terms.
- **Restore and Protect Documentary Quotas:** Ensure that documentary obligations cannot be met through factual entertainment programming and that one-off documentaries remain explicitly supported.
- **Expand Export and International Market Support:** Increase investment in international sales, festival strategies and market development to improve global competitiveness.
- **Invest in Audience Access and Impact Distribution:** Support documentaries to reach audiences through schools, universities, museums, community organisations and digital platforms.
- **Recognise Documentary as Essential Cultural Infrastructure:** Embed documentary’s educational, civic and social value within cultural policy and funding frameworks.

Conclusion

Strong cultural infrastructure is essential to the survival and success of Australian documentary. Without robust institutions, modern policy settings and effective audience pathways, the nation risks losing a culturally significant artform that informs, educates and connects Australians.

Documentary Australia strongly recommends that the Australian Government make targeted investments in documentary infrastructure, strengthen regulatory settings and support innovative distribution models to ensure Australian documentaries continue to reach audiences and deliver cultural and social impact for generations to come.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Making sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad.

“Making the film is only one part of the work... Supporting documentaries to actually be seen, shared and engaged with is just as important.”

Making a documentary is only the first step. Its cultural and social value is realised when it reaches audiences, sparks conversation, deepens understanding and drives meaningful change. Yet too many Australian documentaries struggle to connect with audiences because marketing, distribution and audience engagement remain chronically underfunded and structurally unsupported.

Consultation with the documentary sector revealed a clear consensus: the principal challenge is not simply discoverability, but the absence of an integrated system that supports documentaries from development through to audience connection and long-term impact.

Australia’s cultural policy must move beyond a production-only focus and support the full lifecycle of documentary storytelling. Marketing, distribution, educational release, impact campaigns and audience engagement are essential components of documentary practice and should be funded and recognised accordingly.

Key Issues

- **Underinvestment in Marketing and Distribution:** Independent documentaries frequently receive little or no dedicated support for marketing and audience outreach. As a result, filmmakers are often forced to self-fund and manage promotional activities without specialist expertise.
- **Weak Distribution Infrastructure:** The documentary distribution ecosystem is narrow and risk-averse. Independent filmmakers face limited options for theatrical release, broadcaster acquisition and international sales.
- **Discoverability in a Crowded Media Environment:** Australian documentaries compete against a vast volume of global content and are often drowned out by algorithm-driven platforms and larger marketing budgets.
- **Fragmented Support Across the Lifecycle:** There is no coordinated system that links development, production, distribution and audience engagement. This fragmentation reduces visibility and weakens long-term impact.
- **Broadcaster and Platform Constraints:** Public broadcasters, commercial networks and streaming services commission fewer one-off documentaries and often offer acquisition fees that do not reflect the true value of the work.
- **Burden on Filmmakers:** Producers are increasingly expected to act as marketers, distributors, strategists and community organisers in addition to their creative roles, contributing to burnout and inefficiency.
- **Limited Exhibition Opportunities:** Independent documentaries face challenges securing cinema screenings and non-theatrical venues, even when they have strong audience potential.
- **Insufficient Support for International Reach:** Australian documentaries are globally competitive, but export success often depends on individual effort rather than structured government support.



- **Policy and Funding Settings Have Not Kept Pace:** Funding frameworks continue to prioritise traditional broadcast and theatrical models, despite major shifts in audience behaviour and digital consumption.

The documentary sector is increasingly reaching audiences through innovative and non-traditional channels, including:

- Digital-first platforms such as YouTube and social media
- Hybrid release strategies combining festivals, broadcast and online release
- Community and non-theatrical screenings
- Event cinema and cinema-on-demand
- Educational distribution to schools and universities
- Partnerships with museums, galleries, NGOs and businesses
- Impact campaigns and targeted audience engagement

These approaches reflect contemporary viewing behaviours and often generate deeper, longer-lasting audience engagement than traditional release models alone and should be acknowledged by government policy and support.



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Documentary Australia's consultation feedback emphasised that audience engagement is as important as production itself.

- *"The barrier isn't just one thing... it's the lack of an integrated system... Without that, a lot of important work risks not reaching the people it is made for."*
- *"There isn't any money for marketing."*
- *"Distribution and marketing are not funded properly, and the onus is on producers."*
- *"Discoverability is a major issue. There is so much content competing for attention."*
- *"You're often expected to somehow also become the distributor, marketer and audience strategist"*
- *"Documentaries need properly resourced support for marketing, impact campaigns, festival strategy, accessibility and long-term audience engagement."*
- *"Funding bodies could make distribution and exhibition as important... as supporting development and production."*
- *"Funding for impact and marketing is crucial."*
- *"International success often relies on individual effort... rather than structured industry support."*
- *"The broadcast pathways are almost totally dead for real documentary"*
- *"Combining festivals, broadcast... community screenings, impact campaigns, educational distribution and digital-first strategies"*
- *"Funding bodies love to see an impact campaign plan... but there are no funds available"*
- *"Unlock international co-production through broadcaster reform"*
- *"Restore proper funding to screen agencies and public broadcasters"*
- *"A national campaign to bring audiences back to Australian cinema"*

Documentary Australia's Contribution

To address the difficulty audiences are experiencing in accessing high-quality, independent Australian documentaries, Documentary Australia:

- Created [DocAccess](#) — a free national platform featuring more than 85 documentaries, including award-winning Australian films exploring urgent social and environmental issues. DocAccess helps communities, educators and organisations easily discover, book and host impactful documentary screening events. By improving access to Australian documentaries, DocAccess strengthens community engagement, supports public dialogue, and ensures important stories reach the audiences who most need to see them.
- Partnered with DocPlay, the dedicated home of quality documentaries in Australia and New Zealand, where we currently have 96 Documentary Australia-supported films. Discover them [here](#).

Key Needs and Recommended Government Actions

“Cultural policy needs to move towards recognising documentary audiences as distributed, diverse and ongoing, rather than tied to a single moment of release”

- **Fund the Full Documentary Lifecycle:** Expand public funding to support marketing, publicity, distribution, impact campaigns, accessibility and long-term audience engagement.
- **Establish Dedicated Distribution and Audience Engagement Funding:** Create specific funding streams for festival strategy, self-distribution, educational release and community screenings.
- **Strengthen Regulation of Streaming Platforms:** Introduce meaningful Australian content and documentary obligations, including investment, discoverability and fair payment requirements.
- **Support New Distribution Models:** Recognise digital-first, hybrid and direct-to-audience strategies as standard pathways eligible for public support.
- **Expand International Export Support:** Increase funding for international festivals, markets, sales and cultural export initiatives.
- **Invest in Educational and Community Distribution:** Support documentaries to reach schools, universities, libraries, museums and community organisations.
- **Embed Accessibility Requirements:** Fund captions, audio description and other accessibility measures to ensure documentaries are available to the widest possible audiences.
- **Build Capacity in Audience Engagement:** Support training and professional development in marketing, impact producing and audience strategy.
- **Improve Discoverability of Australian Content:** Require digital platforms to prominently feature Australian documentaries and improve audience access.
- **Recognise Impact Producing as Core Practice:** Formally acknowledge and support documentary impact producers as a critical professional role within the screen ecosystem.

Conclusion

Audience engagement is not an optional extra—it is central to documentary’s cultural, educational and social value. Without effective support for marketing, distribution and audience pathways, important Australian stories will continue to struggle to reach the people they are made to inform and inspire.

Documentary Australia strongly recommends that the Australian Government adopt a whole-of-ecosystem approach to audience engagement, ensuring documentaries are not only made, but seen, shared and used to strengthen public understanding and civic participation in Australia and internationally.

Summary

Drawing on our organisational perspective and sector consultations, Documentary Australia wants to impart a clear and urgent message: Australia’s documentary sector continues to produce work of exceptional cultural and social value, but it does so within a system that is increasingly fragile, underfunded and unsustainable.

Australia benefits from a foundation of public support, including the Producer Offset, Screen Australia, state agencies and public broadcasters such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Special Broadcasting Service. These mechanisms are essential to the sector’s survival, and this institutional scaffolding has enabled Australia to produce world class documentaries.

Yet the overwhelming view is that the sector is held together by the passion and resilience of filmmakers rather than by a robust and sustainable system. Documentary practitioners describe themselves as *“a committed and passionate industry,” “a community that is tough and resilient,”* and *“great committed filmmakers with good ideas.”* However, this dedication is masking deep structural weakness.

The most persistent concern is chronic underfunding. Documentary filmmakers are left with a *“lack of a stable, sustainable and fairly funded ecosystem”* and a *“drastic reduction in actual funding.”* Funding is increasingly difficult to secure, and documentary receives insufficient recognition within broader screen investment. This financial pressure translates directly into unsustainable working conditions. *“Running a business that produces documentaries is nearly impossible”*. Filmmakers regularly work long hours only to earn below minimum wage.

Over the past several years, there has been a sharp and catastrophic decline in commissioning opportunities and support from broadcasters and streaming services. There is a widespread understanding in the sector that opportunities to finance and exhibit independent documentary are increasingly diminishing. Even when films are completed, many struggle to reach audiences due to limited marketing, distribution and screening support. *“People aren’t seeing it — if you don’t see it, you don’t know you want it.”*

Underlying these concerns is a strong sense that documentary is undervalued as a cultural form. Documentaries are too often assessed through a commercial lens, despite their critical role in preserving history, strengthening social cohesion and informing public debate. *“Documentaries are the archives of the future,”* and government need to recognise their *“cultural, social, political, environmental impact — not only commercial impact.”*

In response to the current state of the sector, documentary practitioners are calling for a comprehensive policy and funding reset. The clearest demand is for increased and better-targeted investment in documentary development, production, distribution and marketing. Other key areas that require short-term reform include reforms to offsets and tax incentives, stronger regulation of streaming services, enhanced support for emerging filmmakers, and expanded opportunities for Australian documentaries to reach audiences domestically and internationally.

Above all, the consultation reveals a sector seeking recognition and partnership. Filmmakers want government to “*listen to filmmakers and act on their recommendations,*” to build “*a properly funded, accessible and sustainable documentary ecosystem,*” and to acknowledge documentary as an essential part of Australia’s cultural infrastructure.

The message from the documentary sector is clear: documentary is one of the nation’s most powerful artforms for telling Australian stories, preserving collective memory and driving social understanding, but without stronger policy support and investment, the sustainability of the sector and the public benefits it delivers are at risk.

The reforms required in order of urgency

Our consultation process included asking documentary practitioners to rank the reforms required by level of urgency, and the results are overwhelmingly concentrated in funding and structural support for documentary production.

These are the reforms the group collectively ranked as most urgent:

1. Increased screen agency funding for documentary
2. Increased public broadcaster funding for documentary
3. Clearer differentiation between ‘Documentary’ and ‘Factual’

These are important but not viewed as the top crisis points.

4. Fairer deal terms
5. Stronger regulation of streamers
6. Fairer pay, producer fees and labour standards
7. Intellectual property, equity and/or rights protections
8. Changes to tax incentives and offsets
9. Stronger regulation of broadcasters

These issues were ranked lower overall, though still relevant.

10. Discoverability measures
11. AI guardrails or regulation mechanisms
12. International treaties or co-production mechanisms.

Overarching Priority Recommendations to Government

1. **Clearly distinguish documentary from factual entertainment** in policy, regulation and reporting.
2. **Increase public broadcaster funding** and require dedicated commissioning of single Australian documentaries.
3. **Increase dedicated funding for documentary** across development, production, distribution, marketing and impact campaigns through Screen Australia and state agencies.



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4. **Introduce stronger Australian content obligations for streaming platforms**, including documentary-specific investment and discoverability requirements.
5. **Establish a matched funding partnership with Documentary Australia** to leverage philanthropy and strengthen sector infrastructure.
6. **Support fair remuneration and sustainable careers**, including development funding, enterprise support and labour standards.
7. **Expand investment in First Nations and under-represented storytellers**, with culturally safe pathways and leadership opportunities.
8. **Fund the full audience lifecycle**, including educational distribution, community screenings and accessibility.
9. **Simplify funding systems** to reduce administrative barriers and improve accessibility.
10. **Recognise documentary as essential cultural infrastructure** and engage regularly with the sector in policy development.

With stronger investment and policy support, documentary can continue to ensure that Australian stories are not only told, but seen, understood and used to strengthen the nation's cultural life and democratic future.

We look forward to an opportunity to discuss our submission and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Dr Mitzi Goldman
CEO, Documentary Australia
with the Documentary Australia board and team