

Regional creative screen industries: An examination of SMEs, creative practitioners and screen organisations in Australia's Hunter region

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Abstract

In the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales, Australia, there are a number of film and television production companies that deliver screen content daily into the region, as news and advertising, as well as working on national and international feature films, documentaries, television programs, and corporate and training films. These small to medium enterprises (SMEs) are owned and operated by individuals who have established screen industry careers with awards and international credits in television and cinema. Sustaining these businesses in a regional area requires strategic business skills, a deep knowledge of filmmaking and a diversified offering of creative film and media services. Utilising that knowledge and a strong sense of agency, these SMEs and the creative practitioners who are subcontracted to and collaborate with them have created entrepreneurial enterprises that produce peer-recognised, award-winning films. An ethnographic examination of these SMEs, and the creative practitioners who engage with them, illustrates how regional creative industry practitioners are contributing to a set of conditions that actually helps to sustain these regional businesses in the screen production sector. This research has identified five factors that contribute to creativity, which are teased out through personal narratives and lived experiences of owning businesses, collaborating with competitors, exploiting local infrastructure and services, developing a regional network of highly skilled film-makers and enjoying the lifestyle balance offered by regional living.

Keywords: creative industries; filmmaking; Hunter Valley; screen production

Introduction

Experienced filmmakers who run successful businesses understand the delicate relationship between creativity and commerce, and appreciate this relationship as 'a crucial enabler in the field of creative screen industries' (McIntyre & Kerrigan, 2014, p. 15). The owners of screen production businesses know that an equal amount of skill, talent and expertise is required to secure clients and finances to fund all forms of filmmaking, and those skills are equally as important as the skills necessary to make those films. The research presented here investigates and examines the experiences of

regional creative screen industry businesses and practitioners, and will identify a set of conditions that have helped to sustain these regional businesses.

Screen production is seen as a 'highly capital-intensive' activity (Flew, 2012, p. 13), which is why the creative industries are defined as 'a combination of individual creativity and the mass-production of symbolic cultural goods' (Davies & Sigthorsson, 2013, p. 4). Small to medium enterprises (SMEs), like those found in Hollywood, characterise the global creative industries as well as the regional creative industries. Even in Los Angeles – seen everywhere as the bastion of large corporate filmmaking – '80 per cent of the Hollywood film industry is made up of companies with [fewer] than four employees' (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 174). In Australia, a 2013 report from the Creative Industries Innovation Centre at the University of Technology Sydney described the creative industries as comprising 98 per cent of small-scale businesses with a turnover of less than A\$200,000 a year (CIIC, 2013, p. 44). In the film, television and radio sector, 39 per cent of SMEs had an annual turnover of less than \$50,000 per annum, with 34 per cent of these enterprises employing between ten and nineteen full-time workers. Surprisingly, 61 per cent of these screen industry SMEs were classified as 'non-employing', being operated primarily by sole practitioners who subcontract to other businesses. While these are not big businesses, compared with the corporate sector, they do appear to be holding the creative industries together as an economically viable sector. In Australia, the creative sector 'annually contributes \$90.19 billion turnover to the national economy. It adds \$45.89 billion in GDP, and generates annual exports of \$3.2 billion' (CIIC, 2013, p. 12).

The creative system at play in this sector (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) both constrains and enables creative action (McIntyre, 2012, pp. 43–60), with creative industries SMEs forming part of a system of screen production that draws on the accumulated experience, knowledge and skills of its operatives. It is interconnected socially and organisationally, and relies on individuals and groups who make creative choices within the collaborative frameworks they have available to them (Kerrigan, 2013). Previous research into regional creative screen industries from the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (Henkel, 2010) provides insights into the development and sustainability of the national creative industries. Cathy Henkel's (2010) doctoral study, 'From Margins to Mainstream: How Screen and Creative Industries Developed in the Northern Rivers Region of NSW: 2000–2010', produced a series of key findings that are significant for this research. Henkel found that regional growth and development were possible when 'certain conditions and attributes are present. The most important of these is a strong base of experienced, creative producers operating from within the region' (2010, p. 193). Other significant findings around regional development and sustainability included

the engagement by the local industry in ground up development of their sector and the formation of industry-driven associations and networks [as well as] physical attributes of the region, lifestyle factors and a large and connected community of creative practitioners. (2010, p. 193)

Henkel's findings provide a suitable backdrop to the presentation of recent research on the screen production sector, gathered here through a three-year regional study of the

creative industries in the Hunter region of New South Wales. This research was centred on understanding how practitioners operate in the regions and it also used an ethnographic approach, through which field observations were made. A total of 115 in-depth practitioner interviews were conducted across all creative sectors. Of these, eleven interviews focused on screen production – that is, the film and television sector – and those personal narratives illustrate the interconnected relationships of these practitioners' networks, both with regard to filmmaking and in terms of the strategies they have employed in their businesses.

Screen production research in the Hunter

A range of practitioners were interviewed for this project, including Annette Hubber, the manager of the regional screen agency Screen Hunter. This agency brings upwards of \$8 million to the region annually. The largest sector employer for the region is the television station NBN, employing more than 60 people across six regional offices including the Newcastle hub. NBN realises that regional news production has a high employee attrition rate and because of this has developed embedded processes to train employees quickly, in order to maintain the production of news for the 24-hour news cycle. There are three other SMEs participating in the study who employ between ten and nineteen film and television technicians and producers. One of these businesses, Bar TV, is focused primarily on sports production with the other business, One80, focused on sport, advertising and other forms of commercial production. The third business, employing eighteen people, is Out of the Square (OOTS), a Newcastle-based advertising agency. There are a few smaller SMEs that participated in the research and that produce quality independent and commercial films. One of these is Limelight Creative Media, which employs six full-time staff, including the owners of the business. Two other SMEs, Good Eye Deer and Storyhaus, can be described as non-employing businesses, meaning they primarily find work for their sole operators through subcontracts and securing client-based work. There were also three interviews with freelancers who seek film or television work through other production companies or who have created their own work on low-budget independent film productions. Many of the practitioners interviewed were also graduates from the University of Newcastle's Bachelor of Arts and Communication programs. Some had left the region for work and later returned while others never left.

This research focuses on key aspects of these in-depth interviews, particularly the interconnectedness of the freelancers, one of whom produced a low-budget feature film called *Mikey's Extreme Romance* (2011), and two SMEs called Good Eye Deer and Limelight Creative Media.

Limelight Creative Media have been operating out of a studio in Newcastle for more than a decade. They have six employees and a reputation for quality work that extends beyond the Hunter region. What is significant about Limelight is that it wins national tenders to film educational and health, corporate and training videos as well as producing broadcast documentary projects. Ian Hamilton is the Creative Director at Limelight. He and his partner, Anna Kelly, have owned and worked in the company for fifteen years. Both are graduates from the University of Newcastle, with Anna holding a

medical degree. She has maintained her GP licence while building a career as a filmmaker. In Limelight, Anna is a producer, writer and presenter. Ian is a producer, director and cinematographer and he holds a Bachelor of Arts (Communication Studies) degree. Ian previously worked as a freelance filmmaker in Sydney. He stresses that:

Our competitors really are in Sydney and the capital cities; Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Canberra. That is where a lot of the major work that we're interested in is funded. (Hamilton interview, 4 May 2015)

Limelight's past television work includes making four broadcast documentaries for the ABC Series *Australian Story* and an extreme adventure documentary, *Honeymoon in Kabul* (Hamilton, 2008), which was broadcast nationally on the ABC. This feature-length documentary won the People's Choice Award at the Zero Film Festival in both New York and Los Angeles. In terms of health and education, they undertake groundbreaking work. Their Pain Management Network films won a national ATOM award in 2014 for Best Instructions/Training Resource using a mixture of instructional graphic design and specialist interviews to reach the audience and to provide a better understanding of chronic pain for consumers and health professionals. As Anna Kelly explains, 'a lot of our commercial work is about making a difference to people's lives so we really enjoy doing that type of work' (Hamilton interview, 4 September 2015). Limelight's corporate/training work showcases a similar aesthetic quality to its award-winning independent filmmaking. The company's clients include NSW Health, the Australian Psychological Society, Sydney Children's Hospital, NSW Department of Education and National Parks and Wildlife Service, Hunter Water, NSW Road and Maritime Service and the University of Newcastle (Limelight, 2015). Limelight specialises in creating large national initiatives, delivering a complete strategy and campaign for its clients. As Ian explains, 'The work that we like to do is integrated. So, you're not just making a film, you're actually just creating a whole experience for the audience, which is what we have come to do' (Hamilton interview, 4 May 2015).

To create the company's award-winning work, Limelight's employees work as an ensemble team, with each member undertaking multiple crew and editorial roles, making them highly skilled and extremely versatile. As Kelly states, 'We know we can have three separate crews out on the same day filming three different jobs and we have the people that can do it' (Hamilton interview, 4 September 2015). Limelight has made a conscious decision to stay the size it is now. As Kelly explains:

As you become commercially more successful that can leave less time to spend on independent projects and obviously as a business you need to have an income, and when you've got a family you need to think about how you live. But the things that we are very aware of is making sure that we keep doing the types of activities that we really enjoy doing. We enjoy making films that make a difference. (Hamilton interview, 4 September 2015)

So from time to time they employ freelancers from within the city, across the state and interstate on projects on an 'as needs' basis. Ian likes to film with two cameras, particularly because he uses a cinema verité style, although he keeps everything very

low key, preferring to be 'low on the ground, not to be drawing too much attention to yourself' (Kelly interview, 16 September 2015). For him, filmmaking is about efficiency and immediacy in order to capture the moment:

Every time you get a new freelancer you have to make a new relationship and you have to develop a working relationship, and one of the reasons why we've got our ensemble team is because we don't have to think about it ... we don't even have to talk when we go on set and that is a real advantage when you're doing fly on the wall, which is a lot of the work we do. (Hamilton interview, 16 September 2015)

Hamilton believes his team of multi-skilled filmmakers operates as both technicians and storytellers. As he stresses, 'We're all collaborating together because I know, in the best of worlds, that happens with specialists as well' (Kelly interview, 16 September 2015).

For Limelight Creative Media, collaboration is an essential part of making films. As Hamilton asserts:

It's impossible, I would have thought, to work in the film industry, particularly in the film industry, and to not be collaborative. I collaborate with research academics with participants in the films I make. There is a collaboration between you and the audience. Just at every level. I couldn't see how I could do what I do without collaboration. (Kelly interview, 16 September 2015)

Limelight's positive attitude to collaborative practice is something that has influenced others working in Newcastle, and illustrates the interlinked and interconnected nature of the screen industries in Newcastle.

Another filmmaker, and a graduate from the University of Newcastle's Communication program, is Jamie Lewis, who travelled with Ian to Afghanistan to help film the independent documentary *Honeymoon in Kabul* (2008). That documentary 'follows newlyweds, Maggie Haertsch and clown doctor Jean Paul Bell, on their whirlwind mission to take medical aid and humour to the children of Kabul' (Limelight 2015). Remembering the experience of the shoot in Afghanistan Jamie says that 'working with Ian Hamilton was the first time that I have probably met someone where collaboration was very intense, but I saw the benefit of that' (Lewis interview, 5 May 2015).

While Jamie Lewis has a background himself as an independent filmmaker, and he enjoys each opportunity the industry bestows on him to extend his craft, his main income is derived from his work as a creative director with the advertising and design firm Out Of The Square Media (OOTS). OOTS is a Newcastle-based agency owned by Martin Adnum, himself a former cameraman with NBN News, which employs eighteen people (McIntyre & Kerrigan, 2014, p. 12). Jamie Lewis describes what it means to be a creative director at OOTS. He wears 'many hats':

I also do a lot of copyrighting and I also direct commercials, corporate videos and different forms of content as well as presenting and that sort of stuff. That is kind of my role in a nut shell as a creative director, but as a

creative practitioner I just call myself a writer and director and I just love creating fantasy stories. Anything that has a twist on reality I love so I take something that is quite normal and like to put a spin on it in some way. (Lewis interview, 5 May 2015).

Jamie Lewis's independent feature film *Mikey's Extreme Romance* (2011) exhibits these traits. The film is a black comedy and its logline reads; 'Mikey is madly in love with Bekky. He cleans, he protects and he sorts her washing. The only problem is, she doesn't know he's in her house. The laws might call it stalking, but he calls it Extreme Romance.' Lewis wrote, directed, financed, starred in and distributed *Mikey's Extreme Romance* (2011), and he describes how motivated he was to create his own films after working on *Honeymoon in Kabul* (2008) with Ian Hamilton:

I went to Afghanistan with Ian and it was there I thought, you know, you've gotta go and do something. Don't come back from this and do nothing. So that was when it really kicked up and we put it into a pitching comp and it won the local Newcastle one and it got David Jowsey, who was one of the judges there, he got on board to help make it. Then we put an investor prospectus together and then it just started snowballing and we ended up just filming it. (Lewis interview, 5 May 2015)

While this description might make it sound like a simple undertaking, Lewis relied heavily on his executive producer, David Jowsey, to provide structured deadlines so that the production could get underway:

He was really into digital cinema and I think what appealed to him was that, as he said, 'We can make it on \$2, \$20,000, \$200,000 or \$2 million. Where do you want to play?' and he kind of said do you want to go down the government funding route or ... and we kind of agreed that it was just this raw indie thing that we would do ourselves. So we thought let's just try and raise this certain amount of money and go for it. (Lewis interview, 5 May 2015)

Lewis quickly wrote a first draft of the script and gathered a small cast together for a script reading at Limelight Creative Media's studio. After that, Lewis and Jowsey began cold calling investors and they used a teaser that had been filmed of the character 'Mikey' to sell the pitch to investors. Lewis describes this as a peculiar experience:

Because that was like sitting in front of people we didn't know and some very serious business people from Sydney (chuckles) and from Newcastle and trying to convince them why this thing might never make any money but it would be a good idea to be part of. (Lewis interview, 5 May 2015)

Through this process, Lewis realised quite quickly that these investors were actually investing in him as an individual:

No businessman would do it for a smart business move. They would do it because they liked what you were as an individual. They were backing you basically, so that is how we had to approach it, you know. And to show

them three minutes of creepy guy, sneaking into a lady's house ... and that opened up a lot of debate then and there which was good because that was what the film should do. (Lewis interview, 5 May 2015)

Mikey's Extreme Romance (2011) was eventually financed and made as an independent low-budget feature, shot at night and on weekends, and edited over the following months. At its premiere at the Event Cinemas in Newcastle, Lewis organised a 'cultural market' similar in effect to farmers' markets, but one where local cultural producers were invited to sell their wares such as novels, CDs and so on in the foyer. This proved to be a great success. The film itself was distributed internationally by Lewis, and he is particularly pleased that it was a winner at the Los Angeles Comedy Festival in 2011 and was an official selection at the Chicago Comedy Film Festival in the same year. Lewis wishes that the film had made 'a little money' for the investors, particularly because it was financed during the global financial crisis. Nonetheless, feedback from investors indicates that they were not disappointed with the quality of the film:

One of the investors, a lovely lady, she came to the screening, gave me the biggest hug afterwards and said, 'This is so wrong, it is just wonderful. You've done such a beautiful job I don't care what happens with it.' And another similar gent, he came afterwards and he said, 'I'd forgotten you were acting in it. You did a really bloody good job!', he was quite a knockabout sort of guy. He said 'Oh, let us know when you want to do another one, we'll help you out.' (Lewis interview, 5 May 2015)

The feedback that the filmmaker received from the investors demonstrates Richard Peterson's (1985, p. 45) claim that creative goods are being made in an increasingly complex network of influence and that 'the nature and content of symbolic products are shaped by the social, legal and economic milieu in which they are created, edited, manufactured, marketed, purchased and evaluated' (1985, p. 46). While not achieving serious financial return on investment, *Mikey's Extreme Romance* (2011) is an example of a culturally successful low-budget feature motivated by Lewis's collaboration with Ian Hamilton.

Hamilton's own *Honeymoon in Kabul* (2008) was by necessity independently funded by Limelight Creative Media. It was broadcast on the ABC and screened at international festivals, but neither Screen Australia nor Screen NSW invested money in the documentary. Anna Kelly explains the process of trying to find funding:

We tried to get funding at various times. But you know there are ten boxes to tick and we'd tick nine of them but the tenth one we couldn't tick, so they'd say, 'Sorry we can't help you'. (Kelly interview, 4 May 2015)

Generally, an unticked box on a screen funding application may mean that the applicant hasn't had a short film selected into a competitive film festival. This, ironically, means that high-quality short-form work made on commercial budgets, which reaches its target audience and is successful in the commercial world, is not considered to be equivalent to a festival entry in assessing a filmmaker's ability to

create and manage the production of a longer-form film. These criteria are biased toward short film selection into film festivals, and they overlook the filmmaking achievements and emerging practitioners who work in the corporate sector, who are regularly working with a factual short film form. From this perspective, it appears problematic to continue to argue that a short film accepted into a film festival is of better quality than a short commercial or educational film. It is possible that the funding bodies' strategies are underpinned by an anachronistic art-versus-commerce dichotomy, which is essentially romantic in basis. As Margaret Boden (2004, p. 14) states, these ideas have rarely been critically examined. John Passmore (1991, p. 21) states, 'Why not say, more simply, that there is a kind of excellence peculiar to the arts and that any form of activity which can achieve this kind of excellence is an art?' Despite the broader arguments in play, the dichotomy is tenacious.

Anna Kelly asserts that commercial work is simply not counted on these agency funding applications. 'They make it quite clear that it's not recognised, and it should be. Because if you look at the number of films we've made over the last few years, it's a large number' (Kelly interview, 4 May 2015). Furthermore, many of those commercial works have been highly successful, praised by the clients and have been acknowledged through peer-recognised awards.

Another documentary example that was independently funded faced a different set of challenges. *The Face of Birth* (2013) saw Kate Foreman directing and co-producing and Gavin Banks co-producing and taking on the role of cinematographer. The documentary is about pregnancy, childbirth and the power of choice. Gavin, also a graduate from the University of Newcastle's Communication program, considered the documentary to be 'a love job' (Banks, 2015). It was produced just before crowdfunding emerged as an alternative funding source, and the project was pitched through the Australian International Documentary Conference in the early 2000s. This pitch was rejected:

I think almost without exception at that point, the decision makers were male and didn't see the relevance of the story. I think it was just way too loaded a topic. People just didn't want to touch it because everyone has a big opinion about childbirth. (Banks interview, 18 May 2015)

Foreman and Banks were committed to making the documentary because at that time home birth was about to become illegal in Australia. The teaser was self-funded and it was filmed in five days and released through social media. 'Within a week we had six thousand views which at the time was really big, and big interest from all over the world, "how outrageous that Australia's going to make home birth illegal"' (Banks interview, 18 May 2014). This teaser helped to clearly identify the market as the natural-birth childbirth movement, and a portion of the film was funded by an investor. This funding paid for a trip to the United Kingdom to film additional interviews. The rest of the film was funded through DVD pre-sales (Banks interview, 18 May 2015). The DVD was packaged with additional material including four additional birth stories that were not in the finished film along with extended expert interviews. Gavin explains that those DVDs sold well at screenings but not so well when the screenings were over. However:

Ultimately in that year we turned over about a quarter of a million dollars (\$250,000). Obviously, we'd done deals with people. So the way we rolled out the screening was ... you can have the film for free and you can take 50 per cent at the door and you arrange and pay for the venue. Also, you agree to sell the DVDs, of which you'll take 20 per cent of the price ... So, we gave away a lot. (Banks interview, 18 May 2015)

The whole project failed to break even. However, Banks explains what he gained from that financial failure: 'I started to realise the importance of [the] business side of filmmaking' (Banks interview, 18 May 2015).

With these hard lessons in his armoury of expertise, Banks refocused on running his production company, Good Eye Deer, which has grown from a single employee business working from a home office to the company sharing office space, first at The Roost and later at The Production Hub, which is run by Good Eye Deer.

Co-working and shared office spaces have become quite viable in Newcastle, and The Roost was initially set up through Renew Newcastle, an entity designed to stimulate bespoke businesses in the neglected post-industrial city of Newcastle. Renew had provided many opportunities for creative industry businesses particularly in the arts, design, fashion and digital media sectors to grow out of bedrooms and home offices into commercially viable ventures (Westbury, 2015). Initially there were about 130 empty commercial premises in the main street that were occupied by 'artists' on short term 30 day hires. Good Eye Deer was one of those home businesses who occupied a desk at The Roost and that positive experience influenced Gavin Banks and his business partner Olivia Olley, to create and manage their own commercially viable co-working space, The Production Hub. Echoing Michael Porter's (1998) work on clusters and the economics of competition, it can be seen that co-working spaces and the opportunities afforded to small businesses by being surrounded by other small businesses are extremely beneficial and negate most of the negative and competitive aspects that might be seen to emerge when too many similar businesses are competing for the same clients. The business and lifestyle opportunities in Newcastle have made ventures like The Production Hub venture possible, as Banks explains:

What Newcastle affords us is a place where there is a lifestyle, where we can control a massive office in the middle of the city at very affordable prices. There is a local culture and community that we have discovered is full of 'creatives' doing amazing things. And we decided that instead of bitching about what wasn't here, it was time to build what we thought it [Newcastle] needed. And we've seen lots of people around town do that: Shane Burrell and Luke Burrell building INNXS. Us [Good Eye Deer] with The Production Hub. (Banks interview, 18 May 2015)

Established in 2013, The Production Hub provides professional and modern work spaces for small digital agencies and digital creatives. Gavin Banks and Olivia Olley are the co-owners, and sole operators can rent desk space in an office with competitive internet speeds. The Production Hub has fifteen desk spaces for rent, and in May 2015 it housed twelve digital workers including a property developer, two web developers

working for a national education training company, freelancers and designers. One designer works for a not-for-profit in Adelaide, South Australia, while another works part time as a designer for a Sydney digital agency. Interestingly, most of the creative workers are not working on projects emanating from Newcastle. They are working on content for business and clients based in Sydney but they live in Newcastle.

Olivia Olley manages The Production Hub, and is also Good Eye Deer's Creative Producer. Together, Banks and Olley have produced the award-winning *Traffic Educational Driver Series* for the Police Citizens Youth Club; it was the 2015 winner of the Gold Award from the Australian Cinematographers Society. It isn't just the awards that Good Eye Deer have won that are significant in giving them a certain level of symbolic capital: it is the feedback from clients that has demonstrated the success of the business. As Gavin explains, feedback from a policeman at this time was important:

A traffic cop said that in 25 years of delivering lectures to traffic offenders, he had never seen something that was as powerful. So for us emotional engagement is the angle that we're pushing and the reasons that the films will work. As people open up to the message it becomes something that moves them. (Banks interview, 18 May 2015)

Good Eye Deer has been operating as a non-employing business, and hires freelancers on a project-by-project basis, as Gavin explains:

So, our business has grown and we've doubled or maybe tripled our turnover in the last three years ... It's about us getting the word out about what we're doing so the people know what we're doing. It's not just about us doing good work but people hear about it and having more of a strategic approach and applying for awards to benchmark ourselves. (Banks interview, 18 May 2015)

Good Eye Deer is also investing in the future of the regional screen industry in Newcastle by running The Writers Room, a monthly initiative where five local screen writers present their script ideas to a panel of local filmmakers. The practitioners in The Writers Room are committed to building skills in the region that should enable long-term sustainable benefits for the local industry. They are dedicated to creating content that could perhaps be made in Newcastle. All of this enables Good Eye Deer to move toward its goal of emulating HBO in the United States:

The Writers Room is developing local screenwriters and bringing in the expertise from outside. Peter Jackson could make *The Lord of the Rings* because Americans made TV [programs] like *Xena* and *Hercules* in New Zealand and [these productions] had developed local skills. Those locals then started to take over all the key creative roles. In time they had the team to create *The Lord of the Rings*. We'll do the same here. We'll start off with who is good, we'll use those people and bring in expertise to supplement all that. Maybe it means that all the key creatives are all imports but come series two, series three the locals start to take those roles and start to sing in their own right. (Banks interview, 18 May 2015)

One of the key players in The Writers Room is Vanessa Alexander, an American-born New Zealander who came to live in Newcastle five years ago. Vanessa is a screenwriter/director who has extensive film credits in her homeland. Gavin Banks saw her as making a valuable contribution to The Writers Room:

Vanessa came along and answered a lot of the questions that we'd had and provided solutions to a lot of roadblocks we had faced. Again, coming back and looking at models that have worked internationally, we saw that success was based on good development. (Banks interview, 18 May 2015)

Vanessa is an experienced filmmaker who has worked internationally, and made feature films and a teenage TV series for Nickelodeon. On IMDb she has seven writing and producer credits and nine director credits. Vanessa's level of symbolic capital in the international film world is confirmed by her International Emmy Award nomination for the TV show she created, *Being Eve*. Her extensive work has received thirteen international distinctions including recognition from the New York Festival, the New Zealand Screen Awards and the Qantas Awards. Since moving to Newcastle, Vanessa has found that having an agent really helps her networking, allowing her to be involved in what is going on further south in the state capital, Sydney:

You don't have to cold call people. You kind of hear what's going on. I mean it's not a guarantee that you're going to get work but that support structure enables it and enables me to live in Newcastle. I think it would be quite hard for me to be here and not have an agent. (Alexander interview, 22 August 2015)

The benefits these structural factors provide have enabled Vanessa to keep working in television. As a storyliner, she has now worked with the Bondi Hipsters and a number of other television writers from Channel 7's *Offspring* and Foxtel's 2010 series *Spirited*. Similarly, the support structures provided by Screen Hunter, the regional screen agency that brings approximately \$8 million to the region each year by attracting productions to film in the Hunter, demonstrates the long-term benefit and the sustainable activities that are occurring in the region.

Screen Hunter is the longest running regional film commission in New South Wales. It has been operational for fourteen years and is partly funded by Hunter Councils, a body that represents the eleven local government areas in the Hunter and provides 'specialist and economic services' (Hunter Councils, 2015). Annette Hubber has been managing Screen Hunter for a decade. She is responsible for the region being used as a location in a number of big-budget feature films and US television series. Screen Hunter approved 360 filming permits in 2014, one of them for an ongoing television series, *Air Rescue* (2015), that films daily on the Westpac Rescue Helicopter and flies in and out of the largest medical facility in the region, the John Hunter Hospital. The region affords a diverse range of geographical aesthetics, from the largest sand dunes in the southern hemisphere to cityscapes, beachscapes and rural locations, all within a 20-minute drive from the CBD. Examples of productions that have shot in the Hunter are *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, filmed on Blacksmiths Beach in 2009, and *Modern Family*, the US sit-com, which was filmed in 2014 in the bushland of the

region. Screen Hunter also partners with Newcastle's cinema complexes and hosts a number of touring film festivals, such as the Sydney Travelling Film Festival and Flickerfest (McIntyre & Kerrigan 2014). Screen Hunter's primary festival initiative is the Real Film Festival, which has been running since 2013. As well as bringing external productions to the region, it connects local freelancers with these productions and provides networking and professional development opportunities for local screen businesses. Screen Hunter was responsible for the pitching competition that put Jamie Lewis in touch with executive producer David Jowsey, enabling *Mikey's Extreme Romance* (2011) to be created.

Limelight Creative Media owner Ian Hamilton states that Screen Hunter's manager, Annette Hubber, offers professional development opportunities. His partner Anna Kelly states that 'the workshops that she has done with the Real Film Festival and those sorts of things, I think have been really, really useful as far as being inspirational' (Kelly interview, 4 May 2015). Gavin Banks has similar feelings of appreciation for the networking opportunities that Screen Hunter creates:

Screen Hunter, I think is vital, more in creating space (or opportunity) for people to come together. There have been other initiatives like Film Republic which have largely been patronised by students. We're trying to do something similar with Industry Drinks. We're trying to get away from it being just about kids and about it being about real practitioners who actually are doing things and getting them to talk and share and know what others are doing. (Banks interview, 18 May 2015)

As well as the important structural support provided by entities such as Screen Hunter, the creative practitioners interviewed for this research found that they all chose Newcastle or the Hunter to live and work from for a diverse set of reasons. These ranged from family commitments to lifestyle and affordability, all of which were key factors. They all agreed that Newcastle is a geographically accessible city, its proximity to Sydney makes doing business there possible and the airport easily connects Hunter businesses with national clients and vice versa. Hamilton asserts:

One thing is the environment – we actually have some really highly skilled and interesting collaborators in Newcastle and we have our relationships still that exist in Sydney. We're talking about independent projects. If it's commercial projects we've got enough IP here to actually deal with that. If it's independent film, and I want to speak to a distributor or someone who I respect in terms of documentary broadcast filmmakers, I'll speak to them here and I'll speak to people in Sydney. The fact that Sydney is two hours away, it's not very far. We go to sign contracts in Sydney and Melbourne but most of the films that we make are all over. We spend half our time in rural and remote Australia. (Hamilton interview, 4 May 2015)

The material infrastructure opportunities that exist in Newcastle enabled Good Eye Deer to create The Production Hub and Limelight Creative Media was able to buy a vacant warehouse/studio space to allow its business to grow. Ian Hamilton asserts that Limelight has done 'more independent filmmaking here in Newcastle' (Hamilton

interview, 4 May 2015) than it would have done if it were still in Sydney. Indeed, the expanding digital infrastructure was also cited as a primary enabling feature that made it easier to operate out of Newcastle.

Enabling regional creative screen industries

These personal narratives stress each practitioner's lived experiences and the choices they make to succeed in their businesses. Each story has slightly different complexities, dualities and intricacies that illustrate the components of the creative systems in action. Many of these Hunter region examples echo Henkel's research findings from the Northern Rivers, particularly that regional filmmaking benefits from 'an ongoing program of strategic professional development, mentoring and skill sharing between experienced and emerging practitioners; access to production and project investment; and access to high speed broadband' (2010, p. 193). In addition, the Hunter's CI practitioners recognised the region's infrastructure – its highways, expressways, train, airport and digital services – as enabling these SMEs to access clients outside of the region.

There are a number of enabling factors that have helped sustain SME businesses in the region. First, there is access to adequate professional working spaces – owned, leased or shared. Second, it is relatively easy to find skilled filmmaking specialists who have aesthetic and editorial expertise. This can be a key constraint for regional businesses, with most choosing to invest long term in upskilling their employees. The third significant factor is that Newcastle's geographical location makes it easy to work around the nation and its proximity to capital cities via the airport affords the possibility of doing business there on a daily basis. Fourth, there is a local industry that is willing to share expertise and equipment, which means competitors become collaborators and interconnected networks develop. This is essential for future growth. The fifth and perhaps most important factor is that all these creative industry workers have chosen to live and work in Newcastle. This gives them autonomy over their personal lifestyle choices, and that autonomy inevitably shapes the type of career they enjoy. In this regard, all the interviewees were cognisant of the benefits that come from regional living, particularly in regards to raising families and remaining connected to extended families. These five factors are seen as contributing to creative industry growth in the region because they offer each practitioner creative agency through a series of choices that are affirming and enabling. As Kaufman and Sternberg (2010, p. 481) claim, 'constraints do not necessarily harm creative potential – indeed, they are built into the construct of creativity itself'. In this case, Newcastle and the Hunter provide a productive environment for screen industry workers because the region is *not* a capital city and yet offers many of the attributes of one.

Conclusion

As ethnographic research, this study provides details and insights about how these regional screen industry practitioners operate holistically. The five factors identified above suggest that there are certain conditions and attributes necessary for creative activities to flourish, and they can be seen as being simultaneously constraining and/or

enabling of that creative activity. This regional creative screen industries research demonstrates the affordances presented by infrastructure developments, business and financial challenges, access to a skilled workforce and geographical locations, with these affordances turning into real opportunities when practitioners activate them. Finally, these factors simultaneously constrain and enable this highly collaborative and supportive screen production system, allowing those filmmakers to function successfully and confirm that the Hunter, like the Northern Rivers, is home to an innovative regional creative screen industry.

Acknowledgement

This research has been enabled by an ARC Linkage Project grant LP130100348 entitled 'Creativity and Cultural Production in the Hunter: An Applied Ethnographic Study of New Entrepreneurial Systems in the Creative Industries'.

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