



REFLECTION

Dusting off Australia's Cinderella city: reflections on the Stories of Our Town Project 2020-2022

Gionni Di Gravio, OAM

University of Newcastle Archives, (Special Collections) Newcastle, Australia

Abstract:

This reflection describes the highs and lows involved in the making of a set of films sharing the key historical stories of Newcastle (Australia) with the world. The Stories of Our Town Project aimed to tell Newcastle's key historic stories through Novocastrian eyes and points of view using interviews and archival information across a myriad of formats. It was funded in part through a NSW Government Community Grant and was a great example of partnership and cooperation among the filmmakers, the University of Newcastle, and Australia's major Cultural Institutions and local community organisations.

Keywords: *Community storytelling; archives; film making; GLAM; stories; personal narratives; Australian stories; Aboriginal people; Aboriginal stories.*

Who is Chit Chat von Loopin Stab?

I did not know Chit Chat von Loopin Stab (a.k.a. Glenn Dormand from Waratah) personally, or from a bar of soap, except seeing him as host on Foxtel's MaxTV interviewing rock stars on one of the seven TVs at the gym while I was peddling my heart out. He turned up at the University of Newcastle's GLAMx lab in September 2019 having made two films under the series title of *Stories of Our Town*¹: one on the Newcastle Broken Hill Proprietary Company (BHP) Steelworks and the other on our globally infamous Star Hotel Riot.

What did he need?

He was looking for someone at the University to back a grant application to the New South Wales Newcastle Port Community Contribution Fund to make further six films (of a projected twelve) as 'digital infrastructure'.

He and his film-making partner Tony Whittaker are both married to teachers and understood the difficulty of sourcing high quality and entertaining local history educational materials for teaching. So, they set about changing that, and we decided to come along for the ride.

*Correspondence: Gionni Di Gravio, Email: gionni.digravio@newcastle.edu.au

Why did we get involved?

We believed that such a project was crucial for local communities to be able to tell their own stories in their own words. And, along the way to make accessible hidden historical archives and little-known histories of local people who have helped shape the character of the Australian nation.

We had also recently set ourselves the monumental task of digitising the massive Newcastle Broadcasting New South Wales (NBN) Television Archive, estimated at over a million feet of footage dating back to 1962, as well as the audio-visual archives of Hunter families lucky enough to have owned 16mm cameras dating from at least the 1920s. All this archival material could be made available to Chit Chat and his team as part of our commitment to the project.

This historic footage provided such a rich visual treasure trove, a real window into all the highs, lows and everything in-between that our community had been through. It could help us understand what worked and what did not work and provide prudent pathways to our collective futures. If we do not know where we have been and who we were, then we do not know where we are going or who we could be. Nothing beats having your own filmmakers telling your own stories, especially if they are *good* at it.

Who are ‘we’?

We are the University of Newcastle’s Special Collections (i.e., the Archives) located on Level 2 in the Auchmuty Library. We were established in 1975 and hold arguably the largest and most diverse evidential archives of a regional university anywhere in the country. Our holdings safeguard records of Indigenous peoples dating back thousands of years along with those of the more recent European migrant and ethnic peoples who have since called Newcastle (Mulubinba) home.

What did we do?

Identified as Executive Producers by the filmmakers, both Dr Ann Hardy, Co-ordinator GLAMx Lab, and I (as University Archivist) worked closely with them to develop and pitch potential compelling story narratives. We identified interviewees from across local Indigenous communities, National GLAM and tertiary sectors as well as local cultural institutions. We organised meetings to introduce the film makers to academics and community participants through Hunter Living Histories networks. We assisted in creating backgrounder material with primary sources on Hunter Living Histories site for each of the stories and kept the production diaries up to date. We sourced in-house and external archival material in textual, audio, photographic and audio-visual formats for use in productions. Once the films were made, we quality control checked draft edits of film in the productions. Once completed, we promoted film premieres through community networks and undertook public presentations and media interviews. We also sought to coordinate student work integrated learning (WIL) participants through the GLAMx lab, which unfortunately was thwarted by multiple COVID-19 lockdowns.

What was the result?

Despite two major COVID-19 lockdowns, 15 films were finally produced using local artists, animators, academics and actors and received enthusiastic receptions from audiences. The films’ quality has exceeded all expectations. Local broadcaster, councillor and founder of the Lost Newcastle Facebook Group, Carol Duncan promoted the films to her 68,000 members.

The Stories of Our Town YouTube channel has received over 100,000 views (as of June 2022) with 988 subscribers. The Hunter Living Histories production diary posts documenting

the creation of the films and primary source backgrounders have had over 12,000 visits. Thousands of people have attended the 14 (COVID-19 safe) public screenings held across the Hunter Region as well as 'zoom' screenings held during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Once news got around town, further funding for more film productions came through community groups under the Fortress Newcastle Project. They prepared their own applications, with the help of the now Head of Knowledge at the Australian Maritime Museum, Dr Peter Hobbins, who took a personal interest in supporting them through the process for the Federal Government's *Saluting Their Service* grant.

The resultant Fortress Newcastle Exhibition screened films continuously over 15 days with 2,300 visitors. The Fortress Newcastle film itself is especially important due to the advanced ages of the interviewees, with the eldest being 100 years of age. Sadly, we have lost three of the interviewees since, serving to reinforce our great admiration and appreciation at the pace at which all the community partners, University and filmmakers acted to record their voices and experiences before they passed away. They completely met the *Saluting their Service* brief.

The City of Newcastle Council also invested in the *Architecture* and *Biraban and Threlkeld* films, with the latter also attracting funding from the Awabakal Descendants Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation. These films are also very important achievements, as it is the first time Indigenous voices have been brought together on such a scale to tell stories of great importance to their peoples.

Stories of Our Town has been brought to national attention through the decision of Australian pay TV providers Foxtel & Binge to screen two of the films for the next four years for their subscribers, as well as National Indigenous Television (NITV) screening two of the films.

The Stories of Our Town also received a 'Highly Commended' acknowledgment for their services to Education and Interpretation at 2022 National Trust Heritage Awards in Sydney.

What Did Not Go So Well?

Our original intention was to provide our next generation of local student film makers opportunities for collaboration. We had hoped that work integrated learning students from the University of Newcastle's Schools of Creative Industries and Humanities and Social Sciences would have the opportunity to work in the Auchmuty Libraries GLAM^x lab² to assist the film makers in locating historic content and understand the process of professional film production. Two COVID-19 lockdowns prevented us from involving students.

Conclusions - meeting a mystery in a grain of dust

We are very proud of the overall achievements of the Stories of Our Town Project. These films may be the first time that such stories, some of national importance, have been told and have received great enthusiasm by the community.

The quality has been exceptional, and we are immensely proud of the work of Glenn Dorman (Chit Chat) and Tony Whittaker as our contracted filmmakers.

Every place in our world has something special and extraordinary to it if you delve a little deeper. Archivists, working within the beautiful archives, get front row seats to such important things treasured by our communities. We get sucked up into the vortex of interesting people, the stories, connections and storytelling that characterise how human beings express their relatively brief lives across time. There is a mystery lying under every nook and cranny across this land, and the voices almost burst out wanting to be heard as living histories. We see 'not the dust, but a mystery, a marvel, right there in your hand.'³

We have always considered Newcastle a ‘Cinderella’ city of Australia, pushed to one side by her major sister capital cities that have long prospered on the raging rapids of the ‘river of black gold’ coal mines that have enabled Australia to become a prosperous nation. But whenever the city needed something, Newcastle, just like Cinderella, had to settle for fourth best, if at all, to the whims of her stepsisters, who always craved the greater attention, the lavish extravagant spends and, most notably, the starring character roles in the national story. Without Cinderella in the story, the tale just does not make any sense. Similarly, the story of Australia cannot be properly told, unless characters such as Newcastle and the Hunter Region, and their key stories, be included.

See all the Stories of Our Town films here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFr0o5nIRF46pnQOkLOo1mw/videos>

See the Stories of Our Town Production Diaries:

<https://hunterlivinghistories.com/category/stories-of-our-town/>

Notes on contributor

Gionni Di Gravio, is University Archivist at the University of Newcastle, Chair of the Hunter Living Histories and an Australian Society of Archivists Accredited Professional (ASAAP). His passion is to use emerging and evolving technologies to connect people, with historic records and archives, across time and space. Gionni is a strong advocate for supporting Aboriginal history. In 2020 he received an OAM as recognition for his dedication and many years of archival work towards preserving regional history.

ORCID

Gionni Di Gravio 

Notes

1. ‘Stories of Our Town’, 2020, accessed 24 June 2022, <https://storiesofourtown.com/>.
2. G Di Gravio and A Hardy, ‘GLAMx Lab Living Histories Digitisation Lab—engaging tertiary students with university archival collections’, *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 46(2), 2018, pp. 214–221. doi: 10.1080/01576895.2018.1467272.
3. P George (Producer) and B Charles (Screenplay). (1964) *The 7 Faces of Dr Lao* [Motion Picture] MGM Studios. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057812/characters/nm0709704>.