A Scene in Sequence: Australian Comics Production as a Creative Industry 1975-2017

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Abstract

From 1975 until the present Australian comics production has existed as a creative industry which is comprised of various clusters and social networks. These social networks consist of creative practitioners (stakeholders), cultural intermediaries, and public institutions, and are sustained through reciprocal social capital, knowledge, and innovation. Within this thesis I will be presenting the argument that the Australian comics industry is a case study into how a creative industry which relies on collective labour within scenes can contribute to creative economies on a global scale.

This thesis is modelled after a chain narrative, with chapters focused on funding, production, distribution, retail, and marketing. I adapted the chain narrative framework from Cunningham and Higgs’ (2008) ‘Creative Chain’, this framework providing a comprehensive analysis of all agents involved in production and circulation. Throughout this narrative there is primary data in the form of ethnographic field notes and interviews, and my methodologies include Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field and critical discourse analysis.

My research has found that stakeholders and cultural intermediaries in the Australian comics industry are strategic in how they form clusters and networks to continue their practices and strengthen their markets. These strategies include knowledge brokering, as individuals and collectives, with state institutions and the corporate sector. Stakeholders and cultural intermediaries are also connected to other creative and comics industries through contractual labour, cultural tourism, and media convergence. This individual and collective agency is the key to the Australian comics industry’s resilience and growth, as stakeholders and cultural intermediaries increasingly occupy different physical, cultural and virtual spaces.

Through entrepreneurialism and adaptation, stakeholders and cultural intermediaries convert social capital into cultural and economic capital. These practices are at once unique to the Australian comics industry, but are also reflected in various creative industry models. This thesis is the first case study which presents the theory that comics production could be considered a creative industry through shared economic structures.
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Pat Grant (2015)
Chapter One: Setting the Scene

Modern Australian Comics Production as a Creative Industry

Comics production in Australia has existed as a creative industry since 1975. Defining comics production as a creative industry provides context for the cultural practices, social networks, and economic rationales of stakeholders involved in the construction and circulation of comics. The creative industry of Australian comics production contributes to national and international creative economies through collective labour generating wealth through social network markets. In the context of industry research this thesis is designed to provide a broader understanding of the structures of scene-based creative economies.

The first Australian comics that were produced within a scene-based creative industry were in Melbourne in 1975 (Bentley, 2013: 25). Modern comics production in Australia is characterised by clusters (scenes) comprised of stakeholders (creative practitioners), cultural intermediaries, institutions, and consumers. Within the clusters social networks are formed, these networks connect the Australian comics industry with national and international creative and comics industries.

There had previously been an attempt at establishing a sustained period of Australian comics production from 1939-1959, however socio-economic circumstances meant that the industry was operating under policies which prevented the importation of foreign publications. Production stalled when these protections were removed. In the interim period a culture developed around DIY (do it yourself) artistry, and comics fans created social spaces. Australian comics production post-1975 has relied on entrepreneurial activity and the identification of social network markets. Within each chapter of this thesis these themes of strategy and adaptation will be explored through an in-depth analysis of stakeholder practice on an individual and collective level.

My chapter framework has been designed to create an overarching socio-economic narrative about a creative industry (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 10-11). Included within this narrative of stakeholder practice is an analysis of cultural intermediaries (retailers, the media, independent artistic organisations) and supporting institutions (public funding bodies,
industry advocacy bodies) which assist in the production and circulation of Australian comics.

This framework is based on the ‘Creative Chain’, created by the 2001 Culture Statistics Program, of the Canadian Framework for Culture Statistics (Cunningham and Higgs, 2008: 10). The Creative Chain encompasses Creation, Production, Manufacturing, Distribution, Culture Goods and Services, and Support Activities (Cunningham and Higgs, 2008: 10). My own chain narrative includes funding, production, distribution, retail, and marketing. The chain narrative framework consistently gives attention to both direct stakeholders and cultural intermediaries. It also acknowledges stakeholders who don’t work within the primary activity, but contribute to the industry’s function (cultural intermediaries and institutions) (Higgs and Cunningham, 2008: 10).

A ‘stakeholder’ in this thesis describes any person who is directly involved in the production or circulation of comics – an agent who is ‘involved in, affected by, or has a stake in its [the field’s] outcomes’ (Woo, 2012: 87). To keep stakeholders distinct from cultural intermediaries and institutions, a stakeholder within this research refers to anyone directly involved in the direct physical creation of comics: a writer, editor, illustrator, colourist, inker, publisher, creator, etc. A ‘creator’ is the term used in comics industries to describe someone who is involved in the construction of comics (such as a writer) or someone who specifically undertakes all the labour necessary to create a comic (Booker, 2010: 172). The latter definition is used in this thesis.

Stakeholders are referred to as ‘sole creators’ when they do not divide their labour between a partnership or a collective. Some stakeholders may hold dual roles as cultural intermediaries, and so when necessary individual occupational titles (creator, editor, retailer, conventioneer, etc.) will be used in context.

Australian comics stakeholders’ individual and collective labours exist specifically within an industrialised context. An industry is a ‘more or less coherent and coordinated mobilisation of various physical and human resources and the creation and distribution of economic value therein’ (O’Connor, Cunningham and Jaaniste, 2011: 42). The creative industries were first defined as ‘those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill, and talent, and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation of intellectual

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1 ‘Production’ includes all methods of creating a comic.
property’ (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1998: 3). Comics production as a creative industry places emphasis on social networks which create concentrated target markets (McRobbie, 1996: 36; O’Connor, Cunningham and Jaaniste, 2011: 42; Berg and Hassink, 2014: 654). Social networks and clusters (scenes) of production and consumption are created through reciprocal social capital, knowledge, innovation, and individual and collective action (Besley, 2010: 16-17; Hartley, Potts, Cunningham, Flew, Keane, Banks, 2013: 128; O’Connor, 2004: 4).

Creative industries which are comprised of scenes are defined as participatory cultures as fans are constantly encouraged or inspired to be producers and cultural intermediaries (Woo, 2015; Duncombe, 1997: 53; Woo, 2012: 667-668; Jenkins, 2006: 555-559). A cultural intermediary provides both concrete and symbolic goods and services, and acts as a mediator between a producer and an audience (Woo, 2012: 667-671; Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 226).

Cultural intermediaries are gatekeepers within the Australian comics scene. They engage in the ‘withholding, transmission, shaping, display, repetition, and timing of information as it goes from sender to receiver’ (Shoemaker and Riccio, 1991: 5). The ability to be a gatekeeper within a scene is related to the power gained through knowledge. Knowledge and accumulated social capital within a specific subculture can give a stakeholder or the cultural intermediary the status of a knowledge broker (Boari and Riboldazzi, 2014: 684). A stakeholder who acts as a knowledge broker in the scene can create professional opportunities for other stakeholders through their bonding and/or bridging capital. Bonding capital refers to influence within a specific community, whilst bridging capital refers to influence spreading through networks (Putnam, 2000: 21). Both of these capitals assist knowledge brokers in connecting other stakeholders to cultural intermediaries and institutions.

A gatekeeper in the fields of class and power which can influence stakeholders both within and outside the subculture may be a cultural intermediary (such as the media) but can also be an institution (Woo, 2012: 136; Bourdieu, 1985: 23-24; Bourdieu, 1983: 330-332). An institution can be defined as ‘formal regulations, legislation, and economic systems, as well as informal society norms that regulate the behaviour of economic actors: firms, managers, investors, workers’ (Gertler, 2004: 7). In the Australian comics industry, institutions which act as gatekeepers include council, state and federal arts funding bodies, and arts and advocacy services funded by those bodies. These institutions raise the cultural capital of
comics through engaging in acts of public patronage (Bourdieu, 1985: 27; McCloud, 2000: 12, 52, 92).

This public patronage has only been a very recent phenomenon. Comics are still not included in Australian cultural or creative industry data or policy. Comics could be classified as ‘writing, publishing and print media’ in Australia’s definition of the creative industries (O’Connor, Cunningham and Jaaniste, 2011: 4). Hard copy comics are printed and distributed through individuals or publishers to bookstores, zine distros or comics stores. Some stakeholders also undertake contractual or freelance work. This freelance work involves creating strips or comics for publications (online or printed) outside of their independent projects.

Comics could also be considered a form of visual art. This is due to the medium relying primarily on images as a form of communication, and the form (the canvas) of comics influencing how they communicate. The influences of visual mediums – painting, film, photography – can be found in the aesthetic choices that comics artists make (Beaty, 2007: 11, 26, 52, 54, 55; Hill, 2003: 104; McCloud, 2000: 52). Singular and sequential comics images have been exhibited at galleries, and comics construction has been featured in art installations (Beaty, 2007: 42-43; 55, 83, 126-127; Hale, 1998: 101; Woo, 2015; Johnston, 2015; Cuthbertson, 2011; McCloud, 2000: 52). Online, comics which are not constrained by file formats (such as pdf) have been referred to by McCloud (2000: 222) as existing on an ‘infinite canvas’.

Within Anglophone comics research, comics production has previously been referred to as being associated with the creative industries or cultural industries, but not a cultural or creative industry itself (O’Brien, 2014; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242-244; Pratt, 1997: 5; Urrichio, 2004: 85). Similarly, European comics industries have been associated with artistic and cultural policies by national governments, but have not been analysed within the context of the cultural or creative industries (Beaty, 2007: 120-122; Heikennen, 2008: 79-83). Manga is one of Japan’s largest exports and is part of the cultural tourism industry of Japan, however the industry’s cultural fields are largely absent of institutional influence by the state (Gibson, Khoo, Kong, and Semple, 2006: 182, 184; Kinsella, 1998: 295-296).

The scope of this research primarily concerns the Anglophonic comics industries, due to Australia’s linguistic and socio-economic connections with these comics industries
(specifically the U.S. and Britain). The Anglophonic comics industries have been classified as the United States, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa (Woo, 2015; Sabin, 1993: 28).

Whilst Australians have few connections to the European comics industries, European comics are referred to in this thesis in relation to public patronage. There are similarities between Europe and Australia regarding various government initiatives to culturally and financially support comics, particularly fostering agglomeration economies within cities through comics events (Beaty, 2007: 121-128; Heikennen, 2008: 80-88).

To map the scope of the Australian comics industry I conducted interviews and an ethnography from June 2012 to May 2015. My other methodologies were critical discourse analysis informed by Bourdieu’s theories of field and capital. Through this analysis I found that agency, identity, knowledge and autonomy characterise the beliefs and practices of stakeholders. Stakeholders have different professional goals and personal interests, and this is reflected in the types of comics they choose to create or lend their skills to. These different types of comics include graphic novels, serial comics, small press comics, anthology comics, digital comics, and webcomics.

I have chosen to exclude from this thesis creative practitioners who solely work as strip artists or editorial cartoonists in hard copy newspapers because they have different production practices and social networks to Australian comics stakeholders. I have also excluded the Australian manga scene, as this scene very rarely includes comics creators within their social networks.²

Australian stakeholders who work contractually or as freelancers with international comics industries are included in this thesis because they still base their labour in Australia. These stakeholders participate in local or national events (such as conventions) or they may balance their international work with Australian projects (Bentley, 2007: 7-9; Carroll, 1996).³

² The only stakeholder who works in both manga and comics in Australia is Queenie Chan. Chan is also the creator of an online distribution site called BentoNet, which sells comics, manga, and general fantasy/sci-fi books.
³ There are some Australian stakeholders who have worked in the European comics industries, such as Colin Wilson in Belgium and Thomas Campi in Italy. Others have had their books translated for the European market, such as Simon Hanselmann for Fantagraphics and the Gestalt line of graphic novels. But the majority of Australia’s products and practices are associated more closely with the American industry.
Australians are most likely to work as contractual or freelance labour within the United States comics industry. American comics culture and practice has a continuous direct influence on comics production and circulation in Australia. This is due to the direct importation of many American serial comics into Australian stores and America having the most economically and culturally powerful Anglophone comics industry (Ryan, 1979: 150; Gordon, 1998: 1-3; Foster, 1998: 19; Herbertson, 2006: 65; Sabin, 1993: 28, 42, 110). Australian comics stakeholders constantly adapt their practices to be compatible with other Australian creative industries, and international comics industries.

The title of this thesis, ‘A Scene in Sequence’, has a double meaning. A comic cannot function without sequential text and images, and an industry cannot survive without continuous change in the service of growth.

The Chain Narrative

Chapters Two through to Four place this research in historical, geographical, and methodological context. Chapters Five and Six focus primarily on production practices within the industry, and Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine on circulation.

Chapter Two is a condensed but comprehensive chronological history of the Australian comics industry, which I have divided into two periods (1939-1959) and (1975- ). It is designed to provide essential information about the industry’s practices to those unfamiliar with Australian comics, or the medium more generally. The key ideas which shaped these two periods can be distilled into stakeholders’ motivations for their creative labour.

The first period of production began due to a shortage of international comics in the domestic market. Comics were a popular mass medium from the 1930s to the 1950s and Australian comics production began as a response to audience demand. This demand was created through the cessation of American comics imported due pre-WWII tariff restrictions, with Australian comics being produced as substitutes.

In contrast the second period of production began with stakeholders trying to change the Australian perception of comics, this perception centring on the medium being cheap ‘pulp’ publications. Post-1950s comics developed a stigma due to a moral panic. This stigma resulted in comic markets becoming smaller and adopting subcultural aspects. Communities
and scenes were built up around the medium, with consumers encouraged to become producers through a participatory culture.

Comics production in the second period started on stakeholder’s terms, and this resulted in the industry becoming innovative and resilient. Stakeholders set out to prove to national audiences that comics were a medium worthy of critical appreciation and that their work could compete in international markets.

Chapter Three begins with an analysis of how Bourdieu’s theories of the cultural field and class distinctions can be used to provide a methodological framework for studying Australian comics production. Stakeholders create distinct practices and discourses based around their position in the cultural field. Critical discourse analysis is used to study how power and knowledge is circulated within this field.

The structure of the cultural field creates social networks based on entrepreneurial activity. This entrepreneurial activity is supported by the conversion of social capital into economic capital, which leads to products being circulated within various markets.

I don’t create comics myself so I decided to use ethnography and interviews as my methods to understand what motivates stakeholders and cultural intermediaries to engage in their creative labour. I could also observe relationships being formed through online and offline social networks. These relationships between individuals and collectives are essential to understanding the formation of the habitus and the cultural field, and so the methods and methodologies complement each other throughout this research.

Chapter Four extends my argument that Australian comics production could be classified as a creative industry by presenting an overview of research conducted on identity and labour in the field of comics studies. The key ideas in my literature review include analyses of the various positions stakeholders and cultural intermediaries actively take or are given within the comics industries. These positions concern ideologies around creative practice, internal and external artistic labour hierarchies, and the economic structures of the global comics industries.

Beginning with the ideologies related to the creative identity in comics industries, stakeholders within the comics industries are motivated by self-actualisation and ideas around what constitutes ‘authentic’ practice. But stakeholders’ identities can be compromised
through external evaluations of their practice. These evaluations include auteur theory, which scholars in the comics field have come to see as problematic due to its marginalisation of numerous other stakeholders and cultural intermediaries involved in production.

To provide a more comprehensive analysis of labour in the comics industries many scholars choose to utilise Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field. Through the theory of the cultural field there is more context given for internal and external value systems placed on the labour of stakeholders and cultural intermediaries. These value systems are determined by the concepts of autonomy and heteronomy within the habitus, and through cultural perceptions of the medium within the fields of class and power.

Cultural perceptions of Australian comics specifically have been explored through the work of Patrick (2010, 2011) and Possamai (2003) and this thesis builds upon their socio-economic analyses of Australian comics in a cultural hierarchy of arts. This hierarchy has resulted from Australia being influenced by Anglophonic cultures regarding comics. There are also analyses which compare the first period and second period, and how practices in these different periods have corresponded with practices in global comics industries.

Australia’s relationship with the global comics industries is analysed further in regards to contractual labour in the comics industries. The rise in outsourced contractual labour in the comics industries is due to globalisation and media convergence.  

In Chapter Five I discuss the various ways in which stakeholders fund their creative labour. The three primary methods of funding are public capital (funding from government bodies), private capital (a stakeholders’ own finances), and crowdfunded capital. This is a key chapter in my thesis because it explores the working conditions of stakeholders involved in comics production and the creative industries.

These conditions include national cultural funding policies which favour ‘prestige’ art forms over emerging creative arts and individual artists. The Australian comics industry has never received sustained public funding, with most stakeholders funding their creative labour through their own private capital. But stakeholders still benefit from grants for projects and initiatives which encourage collective action and the growth of social network markets. Many

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4 The shop system is explained in detail in Chapter Two.
of these projects and initiatives, such as events, also benefit the creative economy through cultural tourism.

Comics production primarily exists in an ‘informal’ economy, where there is emphasis on the individual creating their own opportunities through multitasking and acquired business skills. This economy benefits stakeholders in that it can lead to more creative autonomy, flexible working hours, the development of important personal and professional skills, and new markets found through innovation. But its lack of formal institutional structures and regulations can be cause for concern regarding the financial welfare of stakeholders. As well as an absence of cultural policy and funding initiatives which could encourage more collective projects, the informal economy has resulted in varying levels of advocacy in the creative industries and the comics industries against exploitative labour.

The erosion of unions and advocacy bodies is problematic for stakeholders who work as contractual or freelance labour within the publishing industries or comics industries specifically. Like other creatives, comics stakeholders are fighting to be fairly compensated for their work.

Media convergence has changed the economic structures of the creative industries through online publications and crowdfunding. Media convergence allows stakeholders to bypass the gatekeepers of ‘traditional’ media such as hard copy newspapers and magazines to circulate their product through international social network markets. Crowdfunding is similar in that stakeholders can create concentrated social network markets through consumers contributing directly to the creation of products and projects. Whilst there are risks associated with crowdfunding stakeholders have repeatedly converted their social capital into financial revenue through strategies involving collective social capital and choice under novelty.

Chapter Six concerns stakeholder practice. ‘Practice’ within this thesis is defined as assembling and publishing a comic (production), and also stakeholders’ cultural practices. This definition of practice is based on Schatzki’s (2001: 52) definition, which proposes that ‘practice’ is both an account of physical interconnected human practices and an analysis of knowledge, meaning, power, language, science, social institutions, and historical transformation.

The different methods of creating a comic depend on what a stakeholder works on and with whom they work. The most common production methods are a stakeholder working as a sole
creator, in a partnership, or as part of a collective. I have defined collectives as anthologies and publishing houses because these projects involve multiple stakeholders. Each of these methods have different ideologies regarding practice and circulation.

A stakeholder will not only assess their own practice but also that of their peers. Stakeholders assert their own creative identities through social networks based on similar personal and professional goals. These social networks are the source of concentrated market growth.

Chapter Seven shifts the focus from production to circulation as this chapter analyses distribution practices which are utilised by comics industries. These distribution practices include navigating ‘the direct market’ (a US-centric monopoly of the comics retailers’ market), the processes publishers go through to get their product to bookstores, and stakeholders selling their books through online cultural intermediaries.

The direct market encouraged fandom and consequently production, but through its monopoly has also restricted Australian comics’ ability to be stocked in stores. A retailer will only stock Australian comics if they can economically and culturally benefit from being a cultural intermediary. To encourage customers to visit their store and sell Australian comics, retailers encourage participatory events on site such as signings, mini markets, or commissioned sketches.

The monopoly of the direct market is also a reason why publishers of graphic novels will often stock their product in bookstores. Publishers circulating graphic novels to bookstores is also a marketing strategy, with the form and content of graphic novels being marketed to appeal to consumers outside of comics stores’ primary audience.

Stakeholders also use online distribution to circulate both digital and hardcopy product. Online distribution is only slowly growing in popularity in the Australian comics industry. This may be due to many online retail sites having issues with categorisation and algorithms which make it difficult to find Australian comics on international sites. High international shipping costs can also deter stakeholders from shipping offshore.

Risk management is a major factor stakeholders take into consideration when deciding to release their comics online. Online spaces have given stakeholders the ability to sell their comics nationally and internationally, and digital comics cost less to create than printed material. But most stakeholders will release digital comics as supplementary material to their
hard copy products. This is because comics industries still experience high growth in social network markets through events and other social activities in the offline public sphere.

Chapter Eight continues this focus on retail and discusses how spaces function as sites of circulation and cultural tourism. As social networks in the comics industry increasingly intersect with those in other creative industries, more physical spaces are being used for events.

Events have become an integral part of the Australian comics industry. They encourage productivity through socialisation, and most require low levels of equipment and infrastructure. Stakeholders advertise their skills and products directly to consumers through conventions, festivals, workshops, launches, exhibitions, and markets.

Events vary in product, audience, and purpose. A popular culture convention will feature consumers who are usually interested in mainstream comics, whilst a zine fair will have attendees seeking small press comics. Workshops, writers’ festivals and exhibitions can raise the cultural capital of comics as they are often held in institutions such as libraries and galleries. The inclusion of comics in these institutions is due to stakeholders continuing to advocate for comics being a medium which has literary and artistic merit.

These events contribute to a city’s economy and culture through cultural tourism. Comic creators take advantage of various city spaces to engage with local, interstate and international consumers. Comics studios have also become popular as consumers actively participate in the artistic practice rather than just purchase goods. This form of participatory cultural tourism is now frequently adopted by policymakers as it advertises their city as creative.

Chapter Nine discusses how comics are perceived by the public through the mainstream media, and how stakeholders create their own narrative about their medium and practice through scene media and social media.⁵

Comics in the media are sometimes discussed through overused tropes, but journalists have become more invested and knowledgeable about the medium over the past 20 years. This has occurred through the cultural consecration of graphic novels and media adapted from comics

⁵ Scene media is similar to fan media. It can also be classified as ‘amateur’ media (Lobato and Fletcher, 2013: 111-112).
becoming mainstream. American culture is highly influential on Australian media tastes, and so Australian stakeholders who have found success in America are more likely to receive attention. Attention from the media can be positive for creative industries which have minimal marketing budgets such as Australian comics, as it can advertise products to consumers outside of the immediate subculture.

Scene media is a hobby for creators and is produced on low-budget media platforms such as podcasts and blogs. Scene media exists as a way for stakeholders to share knowledge and opinions within the subculture, and is created to provide discourses around a subculture that are alternatives to what may be provided through the mainstream media.

Social media is used by creatives to advertise their intellectual property and personas. The marketing strategies that stakeholders use can increase professional opportunities for stakeholders, as social media allows stakeholders to publicly create their own narratives and engage with consumers and cultural intermediaries on a frequent basis. These narratives may be textual, or they may be visual, as stakeholders can instantly share images and comics to audiences which in turn share (or re-appropriate) them. Social media platforms are another example of stakeholders extending their social networks through virtual spaces on a global scale.

It is argued in the conclusion that the comics industry in Australia has evolved into a creative industry through two different types of economy. The first type of economy is agglomerate, with the clusters formed by stakeholders creating frequent opportunities to produce and circulate product via physical spaces. Stakeholders, cultural intermediaries, institutions and consumers contribute to these economies through events and other kinds of gatherings where there are social and financial transactions. These events not only increase comics’ physical presence but also their cultural presence within the public sphere. Comics receive recognition through their integration with other creative industries, and as an art form in their own right.

The social network markets of the Australian comics industry are also formed through a decentralised digital economy. Stakeholders’ labour is more frequently outsourced to international industries, or Australians work with international talent. Crowdfunding has created new ways for Australians to finance their comics and distribute them through individualised mail orders. Online mail orders, digital file distribution and social media comics/webcomics are changing comics consumption habits. This consumption is both
cultural and economic. It could be argued that comics are again becoming a ‘mass’ medium through their online presence, however like practitioners in other creative industries it is unclear how much financial return practitioners can receive from cheap digitised content.

Both economies are sustained through stakeholders creating strong social networks in scenes. The practice of the individual is inseparable from the changes and adaptations of the industry. Even without high quantities of institutional capital, stakeholders consistently create new markets through physical, cultural, and virtual spaces.
Chapter Two: Sequential Narratives

Introduction

The purpose of this chronology is to provide a broad history of Australian comics production and circulation. Australian comics production is a relatively niche area of research, as will be discussed further in Chapter Four. The information presented in this chapter is designed to familiarise the reader with the subject matter before the rest of the thesis becomes more theoretical and detailed. This chapter is also relevant to the hypothesis in that it shows how Australian comics production has continually contributed to the creative economy, even as it has changed its production methods and diversified its social network markets.

The Australian comics industry is defined by two distinct periods of production rather than a consistent linear history. The decision to use periods to trace Australian comics rather than ‘ages’ as in the American comics industry is because classification through ages can be problematic. The timelines of ages are often the result of fan scholarship, the primary aim of this scholarship being the categorisation of serial comics (usually in the superhero genre) for subcultural and monetary purposes. Categorising comics by precious metals also implies a hierarchy based on nostalgia, i.e. the ‘Golden Age’. An alternative way to consider comics industries is as periods defined by their own unique set of social relations and production and consumption patterns (Woo, 2008: 269-276).

Production and consumption patterns in the Australian comics industry are affected by economic, socio-political and technological changes. Stakeholders adapt to these changes as creative practitioners who work in Australia, and practitioners who are directly involved in the global comics industries.

The First Period of Production

Australia’s earliest editorial cartoons and sequential comics were modelled on British and American content. As of 1890 *The Bulletin* was the first newspaper to have cartoons which satirised Australian rather than British socio-political issues (Lindesay, 1970: 3-5). These early cartoons and comics would set a precedent for Australian comics stakeholders modelling their practices on other Anglophone comics industries.
The first comic strip created by an Australian (Stan Cross) was *You and Me* (1920). Other successful comics strips such as *Fatty Finn* (1923-1977) and *Ginger Meggs* (formerly *Us Fellas*) (1921-present) were localised versions of the ‘mischievous child/child gang’ trope, which had become popular in America due to *The Yellow Kid* (1895-1898) and *The Katzenjammer Kids* (1912-1949) (Ryan, 1979: 150; Gordon, 1998: 3). Australian comic strip artists were primarily men who worked in Melbourne and Sydney newspaper offices (Lindesay, 1970: 25; Gordon, 1998: 3; Unger, 1998: 72). These demographics are worth noting as throughout this thesis a recurring theme is how spaces in the Australian comics industry are becoming more gender diverse.

Outside of the newspaper industry the first Australian comic publications were created in June 1915. Australian soldiers fighting in World War 1 would circulate among themselves self-published ‘troop publications’. These publications resembled zines in that they were designed to be ephemeral and self-expression was valued higher than aesthetics (Ellin and Chapman, 2012: 2). These troop publications were examples of proto citizen/comics journalism, and some of the earliest comics made for an adult audience (Ellin and Chapman, 2012: 2, 19). Troop publications contained personal accounts of life at war and could be considered a precursor to Australian underground magazines and alternative comics due to their autobiographical/satirical content (Ellin and Chapman, 2012: 19). Unlike professionally published strips it is unclear whether these troop publications were inspired by Americans/Britons or if they were a wholly original Australian concept (Ellin and Chapman, 2012: 19).

*The Kookaburra* (1931) was the first fictional Australian comic book based on original material rather than an anthology of reprinted newspaper strips (Gordon, 1998: 7). There is minimal information available about the content of *The Kookaburra* except that it was pitched to consumers as ‘an all-Australian comic’. This is significant as *The Kookaburra* came at a time when American strips and comics were becoming more ubiquitous in Australia. American strips and comics were cheap to import in bulk because the strips were out of date and the comics were back issues. American comics characters such as Brick Bradford, Dick Tracy and Superman became very popular with Australian audiences (Ryan, 1979: 150).

Some Australian stakeholders and cultural intermediaries opposed these imported products for economic protectionist reasons. Syd Nicholls (*Fatty Finn*) wrote an editorial in his *Middy*
Malone Magazine (1935) which urged consumers to buy Australian comics to keep creators employed (Ryan, 1979: 150). The Black and White Artists Club, an advocacy group for editorial and strip cartoonists, petitioned the Federal Government in 1939 to ban imported comics and strips and instead invest in an Australian comics industry, to offer illustrators, writers and printers more employment opportunities (Ryan, 1979: 154).  

Comics were popular with general audiences and production costs were relatively low but the petition from The Black and White Artists Club was ignored due to comics being considered a ‘pulp’ medium. Imported publications were banned for a different reason in 1939 when the Federal Government implemented import licensing restrictions to preserve currency in the lead up to World War II (Ryan, 1979: 154-158; Patrick, 2011: 97).  

This sudden halt of importing American comics ushered in the first period of production. Comics had previously been created sporadically and so Australian stakeholders weren’t used to suddenly having to cater for a mass market.  

In the U.S. where comics regularly needed to be made quickly and efficiently to keep up with demand, the ‘shop’ or ‘bullpen’ system was designed to have creative teams who were assigned specific tasks. A typical shop comprised editors, writers, pencillers, letterers, inkers, and colourists (Ryan, 1979: 158; McAllister, 1990: 59; Hatfield, 2005: 10; Howe, 2012: 11-12; Lopes, 2009: 38-42). These shop systems were based in cities, New York having the highest concentration (Woo, 2015; Howe, 2012: 10-12).  

In Australia, stakeholders within the national comics industry were also based in cities, such as Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. These cities had high population levels and strong publishing industries (Ryan, 1979: 150-151). Gordon and Gotch, a distributor which handled most comics distribution in the first age, was based in Sydney. Comics were distributed to newsstands, the precursors to newsagencies (Ryan, 1979: 206). Gordon and Gotch is one of the few cultural intermediaries to be involved in both periods of Australian comics production.  

The practice of forming comics production clusters in cities continued in the second period. Cities and the surrounding suburbs provide physical and financial resources for creative industries, even those with relatively low levels of infrastructure (Felton, Gibson, Flew,  

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6 The Black and White Club is now known as the Australian Cartoonists Association and still continues its advocacy work on behalf of illustrators, cartoonists, and comic book creators.

Instead of working within the shop system, Australian comics in the first period were created by an individual or by an artist paired with a writer. Australia simply didn’t have the population levels or expertise to compete with America’s production systems. Many stakeholders were used to working autonomously as either editorial or strip cartoonists. Others had no prior experience in making comics and had been recruited through word of mouth (Ryan, 1979: 156, 158). This method of recruitment benefited women as they had previously been kept out of the ‘boys club’ of newspaper offices (Foster, 1998: 34; Unger, 1998: 69-71).

The different creative practices in the American and Australian comics industries can be understood as ‘industrial’ and ‘artisanal’ modes of production. By separating comics through their modes of production this provides more context for the working lives of stakeholders on an individual level, and the labour processes which define an industry (Woo, 2015; Rogers, 2006: 509). ‘Industrial’ production ‘is organised in a quasi-Taylorist fashion’, with stakeholders contracted by an editorial team/publishing house to perform a discreet function (writer, penciller, etc.) (Woo, 2015; Rogers, 2006: 510-511).

Stakeholders who are contracted with international publishers worked in the ‘industrial’ mode. The industrial mode of production has been popular with serial comics creators because it is an efficient way to make comics by a deadline (Rogers, 2006: 514). These deadlines are essential to the direct market, which requires serial product to be shipped to comics stores by a certain date (weekly, fortnightly, monthly) so retailers can get them to consumers. If consumers get their comics on time then this keeps retailers in business and stakeholders paid for their work (Rogers, 2006: 514-515; McAllister, 1990: 65; James, 2014; McCloud, 2000: 70-71, 191). This system relies on having a large market share (Sutcliffe, 2016; McCloud, 2000: 115-118, 120-122).

‘Artisanal’ production is often done by a single creator who self-publishes their work in hard copy (or in the present, digitally). Those who work with a publisher but keep creative
ownership of their work are considered to work in an artisanal mode of production with industrial elements (Woo, 2015). Industrial production methods and artisanal production methods exist upon a continuum (Rogers, 2006: 513). In both periods of production in Australia, stakeholders who work domestically generally practice (or have practiced) the artisanal mode of production. Artisanal producers are more likely to produce original work on an inconsistent basis due to a lack of staff or funds. Artisanal comics may receive critical acclaim and be adapted into other mediums, but because of their inconsistent schedule or one-off publishing basis they are more likely to be popular with casual readers rather than collectors (Rogers, 2006: 514-515).

Regardless of the mode of production in the first period the cultural stigmas around comics would have a ripple effect on stakeholders’ financial compensation. Whilst most stakeholders in the first period of Australian production were happy to be publicly acknowledged as a comics writer, illustrator, or creator there were some who wished to stay anonymous or used pseudonyms. This was because even though comics were a decade away from being involved in a moral panic they were still seen as a lowbrow art form (Foster, 1998: 30).

A similar pattern emerged in the U.S. during the early years of comics production, with stakeholders who worked in the ‘shop system’ often being anonymous either through circumstance or choice. The anonymity of these stakeholders would cause legal problems later as stakeholders such as Martin Burges and Joe Simon fought for acknowledgement and financial recompense by publishers and industry bodies for profiting from the use of their ideas and characters (Lopes, 2009: x, 38-42; Howe, 2012: 11-12, 75-77, 191; Woo, 2015; McAllister, 1990: 59-60; McCloud, 2012: 12, 57-65). This issue is important because even though Australian comics stakeholders in the first period were not financially affected by anonymity (due to fair pay systems, isolation from other industries, and a temporary period of mass production), this issue affects stakeholders in the second period who work for Americans. In Chapters Four and Five there will be an analysis of how industry practices can still potentially exploit work-for-hire employees.

The first period of production was the only period of time where publishing houses were able to pay stakeholders on a consistent basis for their comics work, through page rates and contractual flat fees (Ryan, 1979: 158-161). This period is considered to be a positive time for the industry by other Australian comics scholars due to stakeholders being able to work full time by catering to a mass market (Mason, 2013; Mutard, 2014; Possamai, 2003: 109-
110, 120). Even though Australian comics were usually made with cheap paper and there were issues with title continuity without imported comics available audiences regularly bought the local product from newsstands (Ryan, 1979: 158-161).  

But there were still significant industrial and cultural problems within this era of production which lead to its eventual collapse. To get a comic to audiences a producer would need to work with a publishing house. Printers and distributors at the time would only work with publishing houses, to print then sell product in bulk (Ryan, 1979: 158). Unlike in the second period of production, stakeholders in the first period of production had restricted choices in regards to cultural intermediaries. If a publishing house folded, as many in the first period eventually did due to socio-political and financial pressures, stakeholders were left with very few options for producing and circulating their comics.

Culturally, many Australian comics in the first period were imitations of American comics. Stakeholders theorised that because American comics sold well and were what audiences were used to reading prior to the licensing restrictions then that popularity would continue even though the comics were now faux-American. (Ryan, 1979: 165; Gordon, 1998: 13; Foster, 1998: 16). Only comics in the genres of war or humour were likely to contain Australian settings and themes. Humour comics were predominantly based on popular strips and war comics were thinly disguised propaganda.

Monty Wedd, who created *Captain Justice* (1950), changed the character from a bushranger to a cowboy to lift flagging sales. He would later accuse Australian audiences of being ‘brainwashed’ by American content (Foster, 1998: 19). Imitating American comics would eventually have broad political and economic repercussions for the Australian comics industry.

These repercussions were part of a moral panic that broke out over comics in the 1950s. The moral panic was not only a clear example of how the U.S. comics industry ideologically and economically influences the Australian comics industry but it could also be considered a case study for Australia’s developing sense of ‘cultural cringe’. Cultural cringe is a term created

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7 In order to preserve newsprint comics publishers could only print one-shots, not serial comics in the early 1940s. (One-shot comics are comics with a self-contained story). To get around this problem publishers would release comics with the same characters and a similar title. Audiences were able to recognise comics were part of a series through their images. This is one of the earliest examples of stakeholders within the Australian comics industry navigating imposed external restrictions through innovation (Ryan, 1979: 158).
by Arthur Phillip in 1950 and describes Australians measuring their cultural products and practices against international versions (usually American, sometimes British) and judging them to be inferior. It’s been suggested that cultural cringe is largely psychological – it has less to do with the intrinsic quality of the product or project, and more to do with Australians believing that we are overshadowed by Americans and Britons (Phillip, 1950: 299-302). Cultural cringe is a recurring theme within this thesis because it is related to how stakeholders view their work in comparison to the American comics industry and how retailers and consumers view Australian comics.

As a Commonwealth country with a shared monarch Australia has close historical ties with Britain. This began to change in the 1950s, as Britain became weaker after World War II and the United States emerged as an economic and hegemonic superpower (Herbertson, 2006: 41-69). As referenced earlier, even before the 1950s, American comics had dominated the Australian market. Although American comics were banned for most the decade, American popular culture was still prevalent in Australian life (Herbertson, 2006: 49-60, 68-69; Patrick, 2011: 166, 170-171).

The backlash against comics had been growing since the late 1940s due to parents and teachers taking issue with the violent and sexual content that was present in some comics (Finnane, 1998: 50-52). In 1954 the controversy around comics in Australia hit its peak with the release of *The Seduction of the Innocent* by Dr Frederic Wertham which contained claims that the content of comics could lead to juvenile delinquency, sexual deviancy and illiteracy (Finnane, 1998: 49-50).

In the debate around comics in Australia both sides of the political spectrum were against comics for different reasons. The political left was concerned about comics’ alleged capitalist and warmongering propaganda. The political right considered comics to be immoral and took issue with the mature content present in some comics genres (Herbertson, 2006: 65, 69-68; Finnane, 1998: 52).

Within arguments from both sides there were threads of xenophobia. The political left placed blame on America for pushing imperialism, and the political right claimed comics were obscene material which did not ‘reflect our [Australia’s] way of life’ (Finnane, 1998: 52). There were no American comics to ban, but there were Australian comics which were heavily

These events coincided with Australian comics publishers stalling and halting most of their operations due to other reasons such as rising paper prices and competition from television (Ryan, 1979: 208-209). And although American comics were still prohibited, a black market for American tracing prints had flourished (Ryan, 1979: 208-209). By 1959 when import licensing restrictions were officially lifted, most Australian comics publishers had gone out of business. Creative teams returned to focus full time on editorial comics or newspaper strips, or seek other forms of employment (Ryan, 1979: 210; Patrick, 2011: 98).

The decision to make Australian comics that imitated American material was directly due to the Australian comics industry not receiving political and cultural support. Stakeholders did not have confidence that Australian comics could sell because American comics dominated the domestic market prior to the import licensing restrictions. The reason why there were so many American comics was because businesses considered it cheaper to import American comics than to encourage Australian comics production, and the Federal Government did not intervene on the industry’s behalf. When there was an Australian comics industry many of the products were ersatz American comics which were popular with the public, but a source of cultural anxiety for politicians and lobbyists.

It is difficult to determine whether Australian audiences liked comics because they were American imitations or whether they would have liked comics which were more distinctly Australian or if they bought any comic which was on a newsstand because there was nothing else available. There are no audience studies from the first period. The only evidence of Australians preferring American content comes from a single anecdote by a producer (Monty Wedd) and an increase in illegal imports as restrictions began to waver.

The 1960s/1970s (Period Interlude)

In the 1960s the United States continued its influence on Australia with both nations producing illustrated material which embraced the countercultural or ‘underground’ movement. The States produced comics and Australia produced magazines, but these publications shared similar production practices.
American underground comics and Australian underground magazines were both low cost, made for an adult audience, and contained socio-political, satirical and/or explicit content. Stakeholders developed a subcultural social network around production and circulation (Hatfield, 2005: 8; Pinder, 1983: 2-3; McCloud, 2000: 59). Stakeholders distributed their comics to printers and retailers (usually head shops) within the subculture (Pinder, 1983: 2-3; Sabin, 1993: 45).8

Australian stakeholders again adapted international practices to produce content specifically for an Australian audience. But whilst the underground comics movement eventually evolved into the alternative comics movement in the U.S., the underground magazine movement in Australia didn’t last long beyond the 1960s (McAllister, 1990: 64-65; Hatfield, 2005, 18-19; Pinder, 1983: 5, 28). Stakeholders had strong social networks but sustainability depended on stakeholders’ desire to make a political statement and the balance of creative passion with organisation. When the counterculture movement faded, so did the magazines (Pinder, 1983: 28).

The legacy of the Australian underground magazine movement continued to influence Australian comics movement post-1960s. The subcultural social network was replicated in the 1970s Melbourne comics scene (Bentley, 2013: 17). The other kind of publication which influenced the second period of production was the superhero genre.

After the moral panic of the 1950s the American comics industry largely self-regulated itself by establishing the Comics Code Authority. With the establishment of the Code many comics genres such as horror and pulp detective titles were deemed too violent and stopped being produced (Patrick, 2011: 133-156; Howe, 2012: 29-32; Hatfield, 2005: 11; McAllister, 1990: 61). The superhero genre was an exception and experienced a resurgence in the 1960s due to the popularity of Marvel Comics and the Batman TV show (Howe, 2012: 38-44; Hatfield, 2005: 11; McAllister, 1990: 63-64).

Because superhero comics had dense mythologies and were serial in nature they encouraged collectors. The mass market was replaced with the direct market. The direct market operates on the principle that publishers send their comics to specialist distributors. Comics shops order in stock from these distributors with any unsold stock becoming part of the ‘back issue’

8 ‘Head shops’ refer to retail outlets which sell counterculture media and drug paraphernalia (Sabin, 1993: 45).

In Australia as in other Anglophone countries this collecting culture lead to unique subcultural spaces and practices such as fan clubs, fanzines, and swap meets (Bentley, 2013: 16-23, 48-53; Sabin, 1993: 62; Woo, 2012: 183, 186-192; Woo, 2012: 667; Brown, 1997: 23-24). A fanzine was a small publication that contained information relevant to a specific medium or piece of media. Comics fanzines in Australia in the 1960s contained news and buyers guides for the American comics industry, and after the second period of production began there was an increase in fanzines which focused on news about Australian comics (Bentley, 2013: 16-24). Fanzines are the precursor to the scene media i.e. fan media which focuses on Australian comics in the present (blogs, podcasts, etc.).

The direct market initially had a positive effect on both alternative and mainstream comics because it encouraged subcultural spaces, fan-creator communication, and entrepreneurship. Retail stores worked with a diverse range of distributors, and stakeholders created their own mail order companies, publishing companies, buyers’ guides, and convention stalls (Hatfield, 2005: 25; McAllister, 1990: 63-65). Many comics fans found work in retail stores and conventions, becoming important cultural intermediaries due to their knowledge of products, and different comics publics (Miller, 2013; Woo, 2012: 666-674; Woo, 2011: 128-130). This intersection between underground comics production and serial comics collection eventually lead to the second period of production.

The Second Period of Production

Since 1975 a recurring pattern which characterises stakeholders who produce and circulate comics in the second period of production is that they start as fans then become producers. Combining a personal interest with a professional occupation is common in the comics industries. Comics are relatively cheap and easy to produce by an individual compared to other forms of media, and comics producers encourage interaction with fans through letter pages (now social media) and events such as conventions (Woo, 2015; Mason, 2013).

One of the few sources on the 1970s Australian comics culture is the memoir by Philip Bentley (2013), a writer/editor/publisher based in Melbourne. An interest in collecting superhero comics in the 1960s eventually lead Bentley to a sci-fi/comics store called Space
Age Books, which he began frequenting in 1972 along with other collectors. Afterhours at Space Age Books there were monthly meetings of comics fans. Some of these meetings featured guest talks by Australian underground magazine creators Keith Glass and Jon Puckridge, and Paul Stevens, a retailer who specialised in countercultural material. These guest speakers left a lasting impression on Bentley as they spoke about the creative freedoms and communal practices of self-publishing (Bentley, 2013: 19-23).9

In 1975 Bentley and fellow comics fans and creatives Greg Gates (illustrator) and Colin Paraskevas (writer) decided to create the anthology comic *Inkspots* (1980-1984). *Inkspots* was inspired by American underground/alternative comics and fantastical *bande desinee* comics such as *Metal Hurlant*.10 Even though the first issue of *Inkspots* wouldn’t be published until 1980 I have marked 1975 as the beginning of the second period, as consumers became producers and began initiating scene-based production practices.

The cultural stigmas that had been associated with comics during the first period of production - lowbrow, juvenile, for children - were still present at the beginning of the second period of production (Bentley, 2013: 25). There was also a fixation on superhero comics among fans, and their primary concerns were related to narratives and formats (Bentley, 2013: 25). Challenging these stereotypes was a key inspiration for the creation of *Inkspots*:

> Thanks to Space Age, myself and others had had an exposure to wider aspects of the comics of the medium and an affiliation with those creators seeking to experiment with deeper stories or more adventurous art. For those of us in this mindset, here and abroad, ‘the future of comics’ meant seeking to move beyond the four colour superhero adventures into works that had more literary and artistic merit. Not because we thought that comics shouldn’t be popular entertainment, but because we felt that the medium was encompassing this as well as something more artistic (Bentley, 2013: 25).

In this new age of production stakeholders were not only inspired by international comics, but directly wanted to compete with them. In Bentley’s quote there are also references to

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9 At that time Bentley (2013: 24) wasn’t aware of the first period of production – Australian comics had not received any media or scholarly attention at that time, and they were no longer part of the cultural landscape (Possamai, 2003: 109-111, 121). Information about the first period of production was published by John Ryan in his comic fanzine *Comics Down Under* (1964), however Bentley may not have read it (Pinder, 1983).

10 *Bande desinee* is the most commonly used term to describe Franco-Belgian comics.
what was and still is a pertinent issue in relation to stakeholders’ interests and identities: what could be considered ‘authentic’ practice. The dichotomies at the centre of these debates are explored further in Chapters Three and Six.

As an anthology comic *Inkspots* not only featured material from the three editors but also featured submissions from other creatives. Work on the first issue was done on a voluntary basis because any money the editors had went into formatting, printing, and distribution (Bentley, 2013: 27).

Working on the comic whilst juggling paid employment and general inexperience in comics creation was responsible for the five year production period. Whilst working on the comic stakeholders would engage in ‘comic jams’, a workshopping activity wherein everyone in attendance contributes a panel to a story. This activity was adopted from the alternative American comics movement (Bentley, 2013: 27; Hatfield, 2005: 18).

Whilst the Melbourne scene developed ideologies and practices that were modelled on the underground/alternative comics movement, in Sydney in the 1980s a scene developed that was inspired by the superhero and fantasy genres. Instead of anthologies these stakeholders chose to work on their own titles, or do crossovers. In comics a crossover is when characters appear in titles other than their own. This was inspired by the world-building in Marvel and DC serial comics (Carroll, 1989; Carroll, 1996; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview).11

Even without a shop system and corporate publishers, from 1983-1992 the Sydney scene still managed to produce serial comics on a semi-regular basis by holding frequent meets in pubs. At these meets stakeholders would ask each other for advice, talent scout, and swap favours. A ‘meet’ is what stakeholders in the Australian comics industry refer to as a frequent routine gathering. It is primarily populated by creatives (writers, artists, creators, publishers) however scene media and other Australian comics enthusiasts are also welcome.

The 1980s also saw the proliferation of comics stores and comic conventions in Australia. One of the first comics stores was Minotaur Comics (based in Melbourne) which had started as a mail order company in 1977 before becoming a store in 1981. Other stores such as Kings Comics in Sydney soon followed (Bentley, 2013: 46, 49, 54).

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11 World-building in this context refers to characters and settings being used across multiple titles, to indicate to readers that all of the stories take place within one fictional universe.
Conventions assisted in breaking down the barriers between producers and consumers as well as national and international stakeholders. The first comics convention Comicon I was held in 1979 at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University in Melbourne, organised by fanzine author Joe Italiano. It was primarily an opportunity for comics fans to come together to swap comics and meet Australian strip cartoonists. Comicon II in 1980 featured Peter Ledger, who had worked with Marvel comics. The Ledger Awards, which recognise excellence in Australian comics, are named after him. 12 Throughout the 1980s and 1990s comics conventions grew in size and popularity, with overseas guests including Will Eisner (DC) and Jim Steranko (Marvel) (Bentley, 2013: 23).

Popular culture conventions and comics events and festivals have become the key way comics contribute directly to the creative economy. Events have evolved in size, scope, purpose and audience. This evolution has come about through changing creative practices within the industry, diversification within clusters, and the Australian comics industry becoming more integrated within Australian arts culture.

Gordon and Gotch were still used for distribution purposes nationally in the 1980s and 1990s, but to be carried by them stakeholders needed large print runs. It was hard for stakeholders to recoup sales from these runs because of comics’ niche appeal and Gordon and Gotch stocking comics in newsagencies rather than specialist stores (Bentley, 2013: 35; Bentley, 2007: 6). Rather than continuing with this system, since the end of the 1990s most Australian comics have been stocked in comics stores or are sold at conventions and other events. Distributing through comics stores and events gives stakeholders more control over the costs of print runs.

The first issue of Inkspots was the first Australian comic to be distributed internationally in the second period. It was distributed in the United States via the mail order companies Bud Plant and Seagate, and in Britain by Titan. Mail ordering in the 1980s and 1990s allowed stakeholders to negotiate print run numbers with distributors, but shipping overseas was (and still is) expensive. Communication was limited to letters (slow) and phone calls (also expensive) (Bentley, 2013: 30-31, 39, 58).

Stakeholders were also beginning to travel and network in the American comics industry. The first Australians to work for Marvel were Dave DeVries and Glen Lumsden, who were talent

12 The Ledgers are the Australian equivalent of the Eisners. The Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards (‘Eisners’) recognise creative achievement in the field of comics and are comparable to the Academy Awards.
scouted due to their skills in writing and illustrating for the superhero genre (Carroll, 2010; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview). From the 1980s until the present Australians who work as outsourced labour have predominantly worked within the American comics industry. These stakeholders frequently as contractual labour in an industrialised context (Bentley, 2007: 14-15; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview). This connection with America has positioned Australian comics production as an industry which contributes to a global creative economy.

In the 1990s comic scenes began appearing in Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, and Perth (Hale, 1998: 99; Bentley, 2007: 5-6). Most stakeholders in these scenes produced genre comics but a social network of stakeholders interested in black and white small press comics had also developed in Australia. The small print runs of these comics would be distributed by the stakeholders themselves to comics stores, zine distros, and stores which specialised in alternative media (Hill, 2007: 417-425; Hill, 2003: 92; Hale, 1998: 103; Patrick, 1999: 40).  

During this time there were attempts by stakeholders to create a distribution company that would specialise in stocking Australian comics in comics stores nationally. These plans did not come to fruition due to creatives and retailers having different views on the marketability of Australian comics. According to producers, retailers showed ‘disinterest’ in Australian comics (Mutard, 2014; Bentley, 2013: 35).

Through interviews with other stakeholders, secondary data, and interviews with Australian retailers themselves, it has been indicated that whilst some retailers are disinterested, others are just conscious of available shelf space (McCloud, 2000: 76, 115, 121). The audiences for Australian comics remains an unknown variable; there is no substantial qualitative or quantitative data about who buys Australian comics and why. Since the 1990s, Australian retailers have had no other choice but to deal with Diamond Distributors (established 1982) who created a monopoly through buying out their competition and brokering deals with the publishers of mass produced serialised American comics (McCloud, 2000: 71-76; Miller, 2011; Sutcliffe, 2016). Like producers, cultural intermediaries need to constantly be aware of and adapt to the various social and economic forces within the cultural field. To quote Woo: ‘Although local intermediaries have done much to stabilise the field by consolidating consummative practices into a visible market, they remain vulnerable to the effects of

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13 A ‘distro’ is a term used by zine creators - ‘zinesters’ - to describe a production/printing/retail hub (Duncombe, 1997: 12, 14).
decisions made by large, corporate producers that may or may not include them in their calculations of enlightened self-interest’ (Woo, 2012: 119).

Since 2000 onwards there have been three significant changes to the Australian comics industry. First, during the period 2007-2012 there was a spate of graphic novels released, predominantly by the book publisher Allen and Unwin and the independent comics publishing house Gestalt (Bentley, 2011: 3-11, 12-16). Many stakeholders who had refined their artistry in the alternative comics movement became graphic novelists, releasing books which were autobiographical (Rooftops, Mandy Ord), political (The Sacrifice, Bruce Mutard) or a combination of both (The Arrival, Shaun Tan) (Hill, 2003: 104-107).

The popularity of graphic novels at this time was not only due to their novelty factor, but also because the ‘literary graphic novel’ movement had reached a zenith in the U.S. (Beaty, 2010: 206). Graphic novels in Australia are stocked in bookstores, featured in writing festivals, and receive media coverage from the mainstream press.

There are still graphic novels produced by independent comics publishing houses and sole creators but except for Allen and Unwin, the Australian book industry has not capitalised on the popularity of graphic novels. Book publishers only release the occasional graphic novel for children such as Captain Congo (Ruth Starke and Greg Holfeld) or Evermore (Isabelle Carmody and Daniel Reed). Theories as to why Australian book publishers have been slow to engage with graphic novels have centred around retailers being unfamiliar with the form, cultural cringe, and high shipping costs (Bentley, 2011: 9-10; Patrick, 2010; Patrick, 2011: 51-54). 14 This is despite graphic novels having healthy sales overseas and Australian graphic novelists such as Simon Hanselmann receiving international acclaim (Collins, 2013; Maloney, 2014; Butcher, 2015).

Australian comics have always been subject to processes of cultural consecration, the internal and external assessment of what art is considered ‘legitimate’ by cultural institutions (Bourdieu, 1985: 23). Graphic novels and comics can share physical spaces as literature however they are not afforded the same cultural legitimacy. There is no funding grant or scheme specifically for comics and comics are not addressed in cultural policy.

14 Beaty (2010: 206) writes that the recession had a negative effect on graphic novel publishing in the U.S. at that time, but there’s no data on whether the recession affected Australian graphic novels.
But rather than being an industry which has stalled due to these setbacks the Australian comics industry has become resilient and diverse. In the Australian comics industry if an opportunity isn’t given, then an opportunity is made.

The second issue is that the growth of graphic design software, online publishing platforms, and social media post-2000 have prompted a fundamental change to Australian comics production. Through these technologies it became easier to fund, produce, distribute, retail, and market comics.

An example of technology changing publishing practices is Blue (2012) by sole creator Pat Grant. Blue was initially published as an online graphic novel uploaded onto Grant’s personal site, created with the assistance of Photoshop. As a fully formed online graphic novel, Blue went viral and was praised by American comics tastemakers such as Scott McCloud (2012) and Andy Khouri (2012). Blue was released in hard copy through Top Shelf, became a cult hit overseas, and won the Aurealis Award in Australia.15

Thirdly, media convergence has enabled stakeholders to work more efficiently and consequently provided them with more agency. Instead of relying on private capital for a project, crowdfunding has become an alternative source of finance, with the added benefit of having audiences contribute directly to the production process (Johnston, 2015: 7; Mollick, 2014: 1-3; Belleflame, Lambert, and Schwienbacker, 2014: 585-6; Skageby, 2009: 66-69; Woo, 2012: 83). Graphic design software has made it easier to draw, ink, and colour comics, when before this was time-consuming hand-drawn work (Mason, 2013; Rackleyft, 2015: 13). Whereas at the beginning of the second period shipping comics overseas required negotiating with third parties via letters and phone calls, a comic can now be uploaded onto a website or a social media platform instantly and receive millions of views from international audiences (MacDonald, 2015; Mason, 2013; McCloud, 2000: 192). Editors talent scout on social media sites such as Tumblr, and a stakeholder can Tweet at a publishing house representative at any hour of the day (MacDonald, 2015; Collins, 2013; Bentley, 2006: 4; Bentley, 2009: 8-9). Stakeholders’ sites advertise hard copy or digital comics for sale along with assorted merchandise, and online distributors such as Amazon and Comixology have made millions of comics accessible to consumers with just a mouse click (Carreiro, 2010: 226-227; Woo, 2012: 83; Steirer, 2014: 457-463; Johnson, 2015). There are scenes which traverse state lines

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15 The Aurealis Awards recognise the best speculative, sci-fi and fantasy fiction in Australia.
and national borders due to stakeholders building supportive peer networks through a Like, a Retweet, or a hashtag (Hale, 1998: 110; Steirer, 2014: 458-463).

There are still different opinions as to whether digital comics sales act as a support or suppressant to hard copy sales (McCloud, 2000: 180-189; Terror, 2016; Woo, 2011: 133; Steirer, 2014: 468-469). What has been established is that digital comics files are cheap to make, but also cheap to sell (McCloud, 2000: 134-135, 180-189; Johnston, 2015; Steirer, 2014: 459). Like other publishing industries the Australian comics industry is constantly learning to adapt to the challenges posed by digital technologies (Mason, 2013).

The facilitation and growth of online-offline social networks is due to a stakeholder’s agency. In the second period there are stakeholders who work on small press comics, webcomics, digital comics, graphic novels, serial comics, and anthologies. Some stakeholders work on their own titles and others seek opportunities to work freelance or contract. There are scenes in almost all capital cities and comics practitioners reside in larger cities such as Newcastle and Broome. The choices stakeholders make in regards to their products and practice are shaped by how they assess themselves in relation to others with the cultural field.

The diversity of comics has contributed to what could be considered the third primary change in the industry post-2000: rather than confining themselves to subcultural spaces such as comics stores or popular culture conventions, comics have become a vibrant part of a city’s culture. As well as writers’ festivals, comics are featured in zine fairs and independent comics festivals. These festivals are held in public spaces, such as town halls, market squares, or parks.

Galleries host exhibitions of comics art, libraries are used for workshops and award shows, and there are studios where audiences can participate in creating comics. These events are small but consistent, attracting local, interstate, and international stakeholders. They are part of a growing creative tourism movement which focuses on audience and producer interaction (Wynn, 2016; Richards, 2010: 14; Richards and Wilson, 2006: 13-14; Quinn, 2010: 269).

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16 Brick ‘n mortar is a colloquial term for comics stores (Miller, 2013).
17 The only capital city where I have no data on whether there is or has been a comics scene is Darwin, in the Northern Territory. It should be noted that graphic novelists participated in the Wordstorm Writers Festival in Darwin in 2014, and so there is the possibility that there is a burgeoning comics culture in the city.
As well as urban economies, comics are also becoming more integrated with regional and rural economies. Sugar City-Con in Mackay offers regional comics fans the opportunity to meet artists and writers, and stakeholders also undertake artist retreats in the rural areas, such as Maria Island in Tasmania (Kesteven and Battley, 2015).

Spaces are continually becoming demographically as well as physically diverse. Many subcultural spaces within the Australian comics scene such as pubs, conventions, and comics stores have been traditionally associated with white masculine cultures through publishing and comics industries (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 153; Lopes, 2009: 104; Brown, 1997: 23-24; Woo, 2012: 662-663, 671; Woo, 2012: 246; McCloud, 2000: 100, 104). To expand out of this demographic retailers and studios have hosted women’s comics reading group and sketch nights, and there are anthologies created by all-women creative teams. Many of these initiatives have been for women by women, who are increasingly claiming agency within these masculine spaces.

This cultural field of the second period has its roots in the collapse of the first period of production. By design the first period of production operated within a ‘bubble’ as its sales in a small populace were bolstered by a lack of competition. But stakeholders in the first period were not completely devoid of agency. They lobbied government bodies for cultural legitimacy, established production hubs and social networks, and used innovation to get around obstacles related to a lack of resources.

The times between the periods also offer patterns of practice. Whilst troop publications and underground magazines are not technically comic books their existences came about through circumstances which allowed total creative freedom and low production costs, much like the second period of production. In the case of underground magazines they directly inspired the practices of the Melbourne scene. The impetus to create first and find an audience second has its roots in DIY cultures (Duncombe, 1997: 95, 117).

Stakeholders within a cultural field exist within a ‘space of possibles’ (Bourdieu, 1983: 313). This state is achieved through the formation of an arts world featuring producers, cultural intermediaries and consumers. It is also shaped through the political and economic forces (the fields of power and class relations) which surround the cultural field (Bourdieu, 1983: 317-319). There is a constant reflexivity between the ideologies of the national culture in relation to the cultural field’s internal logics as will be explored further in the next chapter.
Conclusion

This chapter provides historical and geographical context for my research and acts as a foundation for the methodologies which are described in the next chapter. The Australian comics industry has slowly adopted a creative industries framework because of practices changing in the broader Anglophone/American comics industries. My research explores how Australian stakeholders and cultural intermediaries adapt international practices but also how they have developed their own distinctive production and circulation practices through utilising city spaces and online/offline social networks.
Chapter Three: Field, Scene and Industry

Common usage so strongly suggests that there will, at any time, be only one art world, that it is necessary to insist on the most circular element in the definition: that a world consists of those whose activity is essential to produce whatever they produce. In other words, we do not start by defining art and then looking for the people who produce the objects we have thus isolated. Instead, we look for groups of people who cooperate to produce things that they, at least, call art; having found them, we look for all the other people who are also necessary to that production, gradually building up as complete a picture as we can of the entire cooperating network that radiates out from the works in question.

Howard Becker, 1976: 703.

Introduction

This chapter considers how to theoretically frame Australian comics production. It exists as a cultural field, as a myriad of scenes and social networks, and as a creative industry. Through these definitions an overview of the motivations, discourses and practices of stakeholders emerge – the internal logics of the arts world (Bourdieu, 1983: 312, 317; Becker, 1976: 703-704). Every stakeholder and/or cultural intermediary in the Australian comics industry assigns symbolic value to their practice. These values are determined by the cultural field which exists in relation to a wider field of power and class relations.

After conducting an ethnography and multiple interviews, it was confirmed that the majority of stakeholders refer to their creative practice as being part of a scene. Scenes are created through both ideological and physical spaces, with these spaces creating social networks of production and consumption.

Australian comics production, with its small but entrepreneurial clusters of stakeholders, microeconomics, and social network markets, fits better within the country’s definitions of a creative industry rather than a cultural industry. This argument is what sets my research apart from other studies which have been done on comics’ industries production processes. It is
also key to my hypothesis that the Australian comics industry is a case study in how scenes generate and sustain economic activity on a national and international scale.

The Field of Practice

The Cultural Field of Australian Comics

The theory of the cultural field is used in this research to complement the chain narrative framework. The theory of the cultural field was developed by Bourdieu (1983, 1984, 1985, 1993), and influenced by the work of Becker (1974, 1976), as an argument against the idea that artistic work was done in isolation. Both the theory of the cultural field and the chain narrative focus on agents who have specific roles in the production and circulation of a cultural artefact (Cunningham and Higgs, 2008: 10; Bourdieu, 1985: 13; Bourdieu, 1983: 311-312). In the Australian comics industry these agents include stakeholders, cultural intermediaries, institutions, and consumers. But where the chain narrative acknowledges that all of these agents are necessary for a creative or cultural industry to function, the theory of the cultural field focuses on the various capitals associated with agents’ practice. It does this firstly through dividing the field into scales of production.

The cultural field encompasses both fields of large scale production and restricted production (Bourdieu, 1985: 13, 17). Large scale production produces goods designed to have mass appeal and values function as highly as aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1983: 13). In contrast the field of restricted production is fairly autonomous, with producers creating their own internal hierarchies (or logics) of evaluation and criticism. But even the autonomous agent defines themselves in relation to the ‘public meaning’ of their work. This meaning may be imposed within the cultural field, or through the fields of class and power (Bourdieu, 1985: 13, 17-18).

The fields of large scale and fields of restricted production are not entirely separate fields but part of a larger unified field. Producers are ‘lead by the logic of competition with other producers and by specific interests linked to their position in the field of production’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 231). These positions are formed through the habitus, which in turn is subject to and modified by external fields of power and class (Bourdieu, 1983: 313-314; 316, 317; 319-325; 344-345; Bourdieu, 1985: 23-26; Becker, 1976: 703-704; Bourdieu, 1993: 44-42, 51-53).
A habitus is not site-specific: shared histories within a field affects the physical and social boundaries within which it exists (Bourdieu, 1993: 32-35; Bourdieu, 1989: 19-20). The habitus is a ‘system of schemes of classification’, where stakeholders will define themselves by their peers and publics (Bourdieu, 1989: 19). Positions are taken, created and changed through the conscious decisions stakeholders make and the conditions of supply and demand (Bourdieu, 1983: 163, 313; Bourdieu, 1985: 316-317; Bourdieu, 1993: 34-35). In the context of the Australian comics industry, a stakeholders’ position within the field influences which publishers an artist will work with, which stores will stock this publisher’s book, etc. (Bourdieu, 1985: 16, 21; Bourdieu, 1985: 322-323).

Figure 1: Bourdieu’s Diagram of the Cultural Field (1983)

Stakeholders within the first period of the Australian comics industry operated predominantly within the field of large scale production as their art was created for a mass market (Ryan, 1979: 154-158). The exception was troop publications which could be considered to be within the field of restricted production, as they were made for producers by producers and had high degrees of creative and economic autonomy (Ellin and Chapman, 2012: 2; Bourdieu, 1985: 17-18).
Stakeholders within the second period are also positioned within a field of restricted production. This period of production is defined by comics going from a mass medium to cultural artefacts circulated through various social network markets. In a field of restricted production, producers will often assign symbolic capital to each other’s work, and define the field’s internal logics through this capital (Bourdieu, 1985: 16). The production processes and subsequent power relations between stakeholders due to this symbolic capital is determined not only through the field’s unique history, but also the economic and cultural conditions in which a field operates (Bourdieu, 1985: 16).

The cultural field has a reflexive history, with ‘circular relations of reciprocal recognition among peers’ (Bourdieu, 1985: 19). New practitioners will align themselves with contemporary practitioners by acknowledging the histories and traditions of the practice (Bourdieu, 1985: 19-21; Woo, 2012: 79-80; Bourdieu, 1983: 341). The theory of the cultural field can explain the formation of scenes, and the cultural and economic significance of scenes within creative industries.

Capital, Consecration, and Clusters

The institutions within the field of class and power have the ability to assign different capitals (predominantly cultural and symbolic) to products in the cultural field through consecration. This creates a hierarchy which has socio-economic effects for stakeholders (Bourdieu, 1984: 2, 228-231; Bourdieu, 1993: 40-52).

The cultural consecration of any medium, including comics, depends on the medium’s levels of heteronomy and autonomy. It also depends on which stakeholders approach institutions and/or modify their practices in order to try achieve a higher degree of consecration (Bourdieu, 1983: 331-332; Bourdieu, 1985: 21, 34-35).

Different forms and genres are subject to different levels of consecration at varying times. The perceptions of goods are also dependent on ‘the state of the system of goods on offer’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 1-6, 228-231). Consumer tastes change, and practices within the cultural field are constantly being re-evaluated or reinvented (Bourdieu, 1983: 340; Bourdieu, 1985: 19-21, 40).

An example of this which is specific to the comics industries are long-form bound comics – graphic novels. The term ‘graphic novel’ was first used in 1964 to describe comics in this
format, but the term only gained popularity after graphic novels were marketed heavily in the 1980s. Their discursive association with literature and bound content allowed them to be stocked in bookstores. This ideological and physical repositioning means that graphic novels are considered by some cultural intermediaries (particularly the media and book publishers) to have more cultural legitimacy than comics. This is despite graphic novels and comics being the same medium (Patrick, 2011: 52-54; Hatfield, 2005: xxii, 16-18, 20-21; Murray, 2013: 337; Beaty, 2010: 206).

The positions stakeholders take within the cultural field are dependent on the amount of institutional or economic support that they receive from the fields of class and power. The cultural perceptions of comics are slowly changing, but only through stakeholders actively trying to position comics as an art form worthy of public funding. Comics in Anglophone (and subsequently Australian) cultures are still an art form which has been affected by stigmas related to their ‘juvenile’, ‘lowbrow’ status (Patrick, 2011; Lopes, 2006: 399-412; Hatfield, 2005: 6, 18-21; Brown, 1997: 17-21; McCloud, 2000: 81-84, 88-89). The cultural capital of the medium is rising through their associations with other creative industries, most commonly publishing and literature and visual art (Hatfield, 2005: 16; Beaty, 2007: 11; Sweeney, 2014; Roeder, 2008: 2-9). The argument that comics should be considered a medium worthy of critical respect and public patronage in their own right has also gained traction amongst international and national academics (Sweeney, 2014; Patrick, 2012: 52-54; Mutard, 2014; McCloud, 2000: 92-94).

The practices of large scale production and restricted production correlate with each other because the decisions that cultural intermediaries and institutions make about supporting Australian comics affects the state of possibilities as a whole (Bourdieu, 1983: 322-323; Bourdieu, 1985: 13-14; Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 216-217, 223). The space of possibilities is defined by Bourdieu (1983: 344) as ‘the relationship between the structure of average chances of access to the different positions (measured by the ‘difficulty’ of attaining them and, more precisely, by the relationship between the number of positions and the number of competitors) and the dispositions of each agent, the subjective basis of the perception and appreciation of the objective chances’. In the creative industry of Australian comics production, stakeholders seek out strategic alliances that assist in collective and individual economic goals, creating what Potts (2008a: 169) refers to as ‘distinctive production and consumption dynamics’.
The internal logics and shifting positions of stakeholders within the habitus can be mapped through their various discourses (Bourdieu, 1983: 317; Bourdieu, 1985: 21). Critical discourse analysis was the second primary methodology used in this thesis, as it is a theory which works well with the cultural field, and my research methods of interviews and ethnography.

Critical discourse analysis identifies sites of knowledge and power contained within institutions, cultural intermediaries, collectives, or individuals. For this research, these sites of knowledge and power were established through an understanding of the socio-historical background of Australian comics production (Foucault, (1970) 2002: 48; Fairclough, 2002: 122). I could also reflect on my own discourses and better understand how my words were interpreted by stakeholders, their creative identities contrasted against my academic background (Williams, 2011: 130, 141; Fairclough, Graham, Lemke and Wodak, 2004: 1). The most prominent example of discursive difference in my research concerned my use of the term ‘creative industry’ to describe practice, whilst stakeholders preferred ‘scene’.

Stakeholders consider Australian comics production to be a scene for economic and social reasons. Because Australian comics production is small scale and doesn’t result in high levels of profit for stakeholders and intermediaries, they consider themselves to be in a ‘scene’ rather than an ‘industry’. To quote Bernard Caleo, a comics creator and publisher from Melbourne:

There’s no industry here, whilst I would say in America, Europe, Japan, there are ‘industries’. But I think we’re in a very, very fortunate place in Australia, we’re pre-industry here, and that is a very precious… I think there may be an industry one day, but I think the word [scene] around it at the moment is better than that. Because there isn’t any money (laugh). So it’s friendlier, it’s free-er, and it’s more interest driven, it can only be driven by people (Caleo, 8/6/14, interview).

The concept of scenes came from music studies, and it has since been used to describe pockets of creative activity, which are inhabited by a populace that have knowledges, institutions, and cultural beliefs in common (Woo, 2012: 89-90; Hesmondhalgh, 2005: 21-23; Straw, 2001: 249; Duncombe, 1997: 57). Unlike the term ‘subculture’, which can have political or class-based subtexts, the term scene ‘seems able to evoke both the cosy intimacy

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18 More specific stakeholder discourses about creative labour and industries will be covered in Chapter Five.
of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life’ (Straw, 2001: 248). Scenes are formed and sustained through stakeholders’ repeating creative and social activities (Straw, 2004: 254-255).

The boundaries of scenes have been described as ‘fluid’. A scene can describe activities within a specific location, and/or a national or international ‘scene’ which is interconnected through networks (Straw, 2004: 412-413). These networks have increased exponentially since the advent of the internet (Straw, 2004: 412-413; Straw, 2001: 252-253; Berg and Hassink, 2014: 657). An example is the small press comics scene. Small press comics practitioners in Australia are part of international and national scenes which concentrate on a specific comics form, with similar beliefs and rituals (Hill, 2007: 412-413; Hatfield, 2005: 14; Beaty, 2007: 50). But they also exist within an Australian city’s comics ‘scene’ (physical cluster), and may share resources and social spaces with stakeholders who work on serial comics, graphic novels, etc.

Scenes are referred to as ‘clusters’ in creative industries literature. Clusters encompass consumption (bars, boutiques, galleries) and production and practice (start-up companies, studios) (Hartley et al, 2012: 18; O’Connor, 2004: 133; Evans, 2011: 33-35). Clusters have recently come to the attention of policy makers due to their contribution to the creative economy, with art and tech cultures showing innovation in how they utilise space and encourage regional, state and local tourism (Hartley et al, 2012: 18-19; O’Connor, 2004: 132-133; Evans, 2011: 35; O’Connor et al, 2011: 69; Comunian, 2010: 14-16; Straw, 2004: 416; McRobbie, 2015: 7, 123; O’Brien, 2014).

Whilst repeated activity sustains scenes, it is a combination of economic, cultural and subcultural capital which allows them to grow. Stakeholders in creative scenes are reliant on cultural intermediaries which allow them to produce and circulate product on a small scale – in music scenes this has included bars and record stores (Straw, 2004: 413). In comics industries, these spaces are pubs (where stakeholders network), studios (where they work together) or comics stores (where stakeholders can socialise, create at sketch nights, or sell comics at events). But scenes also flourish with the support of institutions, such as art schools, galleries, and theatres (Straw, 2004: 255; Straw, 2001: 413-414). These institutions can provide creatives with formal knowledge, and they attract educated and mobile consumers to city spaces (Straw, 2004: 414). Stakeholders in the Australian comics industry have produced and circulated their work through cultural institutions such as libraries, galleries, and writing centres, with these physical spaces providing more spaces for comics in Australian arts culture (cultural spaces).

An increase in comics’ visibility in the cultural life of a city occurring via circulation through an institution was evident in 2014 at an exhibition called Lowered Brows in Adelaide’s Light Square Gallery. The exhibition featured visual art, visual media and sculptures inspired by comics, cartoons, and video games.

Comics being featured in art galleries as an ironic statement due to the contrast between ‘high’ culture (visual art) and ‘low’ culture (comics) began during the Pop Art movement and has persisted in some capacities (Johnston, 2015; Woo, 2015). Lowered Brows instead featured comics metaphorically and literally front and centre. As well as comic art being framed on the walls, Adelaianic comics creators were given a space on the gallery floor where they could work on and sell their comics. Specifically stakeholders worked on ‘jam comics’, with gallery guests invited to become involved in the act of creation. Afterwards guests could take the jam comic, and were given the option of purchasing a comic from a creator that they worked with.

The Lowered Brows exhibition was representative of the recurring themes in this thesis: the cultural field of comics expanding its boundaries through the fields of class and power, and the socio-economic results which come through that expansion.
Comics: A Creative Industry

Can Creativity Be Industrialised?

A defining feature of the creative industries framework is that it recognises the individual artist as an entrepreneur. This entrepreneurial activity is supported by freelancing, outsourcing, niche markets, and small networks of stakeholders rather than large industrial or institutional bodies (O’Connor et al, 2011: 66-70; McRobbie, 2015: 19-22). These industries, which include digital and popular arts, are focused on cultivating markets focused on ‘the new’ (O’Connor et al, 2011: 66-70; Hartley et al, 2012: 59-61). To quote O’Connor et al (2011):

These networks do not have simple economic and technical functions; these complex collectives facilitate the creation of economic and cultural value. And they do so in non-linear ways – they take us beyond the simple value-chain. Their concern is not with neo-classical price-use mechanism, but with the creation of unknown values, of things people do not yet know they want; that is, of new markets. These collectives developed ways in which to acquire, manage and profit from their insiders’ knowledge of the cultural dynamics of these as yet unknown markets. In this sense they intersect with funded artists who also try to get in touch with audiences and to present them with something of unknown value. In many respects artists and ‘creatives’ are working in that same space of unknown value. “What will audiences/market respond to?” is a question answered by an immersion in a ‘creative field’, knowledge acquired not just at the rational analytical level but through an intuitive grasp of possibilities which Bourdieu described as learning to inhabit a subjective position (habitus) from the inside (O’Connor et al, 2011: 68).

As a case study, theorising that Australian comics production is a creative industry may offer a new perspective into how comics industries contribute to national and international creative economies. It is also a continuation of research which seeks to analyse the demarcation between ‘creative’ and ‘cultural’ industries in Australia.

The cultural industries are often grouped with ‘the arts’ in Australia and these industries are often supported by government funding rather than relying on the free market (O’Connor et al, 2011: 64; Johnston, 2006: 299-300). Cultural industries considered to be institutions
within the ‘high arts’, such as opera companies, ballet companies, museums etc. are also considered ‘market failure’ goods – without financial assistance, they would be insolvent (O’Connor et al, 2011: 65-66; Johnson, 2006: 300).

Theory and policy concerning the cultural industries and the creative industries originated from art worlds increasingly becoming commodified (O’Connor et al, 2011: 37; McRobbie, 2015: 4, 12). Since the invention of the printing press books and other published material have become objects of display, communication, control, prestige and property. This growing market during the Renaissance period affected production with hierarchies established in guilds and the creation of the privileged artist (artisan). The artisan was relatively autonomous even whilst receiving economic assistance in the form of patronage (O’Connor et al, 2011: 37). After the Industrial Revolution, art forms became subject to different rates of autonomy and heteronomy due to mass production and wealth and education becoming more common for the lower classes. This resulted in a blurring of boundaries between the daily press and literature as seen with the popularity of serialised stories (Bourdieu, 1985: 15). Comics, which have their roots in newspaper cartoons and strips, came from this field (Sabin, 1993: 133-140; Gordon, 1998: 1-2; Woo, 2015).

In some studies, comics have been classified as existing within a cultural industry framework because they are considered as popular artistic goods that also contribute to local and global creative economies (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 241-250; Pratt, 1997: 5). Norcliffe and Rendace (2003: 241-263) also argue that comics could be considered part of the cultural industries due to stakeholders producing and circulating products within clusters and social networks. These definitions from Pratt (1997) and Norcliffe and Rendace (2003) align more with what I would consider to be the creative industries, however there are still fluid boundaries between the creative and cultural industries, with ongoing debates as to how to classify creative occupations as they vary from country to country (Berg and Hassink, 2014: 659; Hartley et al, 2012: 59, 83).

The malleability of the creative industries theoretical framework is due to the diversity of researchers’ fields, their methods, and the differing socio-political environments in which they work (Hartley et al, 2012: x-xi). I am approaching comics production from the perspective of an ethnographer and cultural theorist by combining fieldwork with theory in order to analyse the creative practices of stakeholders. By mapping artistic activity this can
provide data on how this labour contributes to the economy (Hartley et al, 2012: x-xi; Cunningham and Higgs, 2008: 10, 14-16).

As the Australian comics industry is comprised of scenes with high levels of social capital I have decided to utilise the theory of social network markets when linking production with consumption. Social network markets are defined by economic choice theory. Economic choice theory examines how the goods and services provided by producers have their value assessed by consumers who are often part of the same peer networks. Value determination of products at an individual and collective level is based on knowledge circulation and status determination within these networks (Potts, Cunningham, Hartley and Ormerod, 2008: 171-173; Hartley et al, 2012: 3, 8, 13). Whilst there are strong and weak ties in these social networks, all the markets created in the networks are the result of innovation and coordination. If a market is identified then there is the coordination of economic resources, and stakeholders will undertake a risk assessment based on their knowledge of clusters, gatekeepers, and consumers (Potts, et al. 2008: 171-173; Hartley et al, 2012: 3, 8-9, 13; Potts, 2008a: 169). ‘The result’, writes Potts (2008a: 169), ‘is that other people’s preferences have commodity status over a social network, because novelty, by definition, carries uncertainty and other people’s choices, therefore, carry information.’

The theory of social network markets fits into the framework of the creative industries in that they signalled ‘an opening up of cultural participation (reception and production), [and] a widening of focus beyond the big public and private organisation, towards the dispersed and fragmented ecosystems of producers, consumers and citizens’ (O’Connor et al, 2011: 85). Modern Australian comics production and circulation is not done in isolation but in a participatory culture. Like other creative industries which encompass ‘popular’ cultures these were largely created through amateurs and enthusiasts who created emergent socio-economic markets through turning their hobbies into entrepreneurial activity (Potts et al, 2008: 179; Jenkins, 2006: 3). These clusters and networks produce comics for a diverse range of audiences, but collectively contribute to a creative economy. Whilst this work has its inherent risk, stakeholders still choose to undertake this labour to achieve both personal and professional goals.
Creative Identity, Creative Labour

Creative labour is something which gives artists a sense of identity and this labour is considered to be authentic expression of the self (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 30-41; Heazlewood, 2014: 16-22; Taylor and Littleton, 2008: 277; Fine, 2003: 155). This creative labour is still subject to the artistic hierarchies of the fields (cultural, power, class) and these hierarchies shape the markets for the artist’s work (Bourdieu, 1985: 13-17, 27, 34-35, 41; Bourdieu, 1984: 231; O’Connor et al, 2011: 37-40).

When using the framework of the creative industries to describe the practice of stakeholders it has been argued that instead of focusing solely on quantitative data and/or romanticising the creative economy, academics need to take into account the financial realities of stakeholders (McRobbie, 2015: 61, 377; O’Connor et al, 2011: 10-15, 75-80; McRobbie, 2002: 521; O’Connor, 2016).

To quote Julian Meyrick (in Bolland, 2016):

It’s so important that cultural policy develops with full input from practitioners on the ground. Culture is simultaneously the art we make but it is also the life that makes us. When a model like creative industries comes along, it can tidy that up a little bit too much and it can slant it in one direction, particularly the economic.

Creatives do not always consider their artistic work to be part of an ‘industry’ due to the term’s association with monetary values instead of authentic self-actualisation through art (O’Connor et al, 2011: 11-15). The term ‘industry’ is also associated with the union protection, human resources, and steady work which can be found in the primary and manufacturing industries. Those who work in the creative industries are more likely to experience individualised ‘self-invented’ work (McRobbie, 2015: 19-20). Being an entrepreneur is a necessity, with skills in self-management and promotion becoming as integral as artistic skills. Creatives may work on multiple projects, short-term projects, part-time projects, or experience periods of unemployment (McRobbie, 2015: 19-26; Dore, 2015; Heazlewood, 2014: 139-143, 221; Throsby and Zednick, 2010: 53-57).

The positives of this work are that it gives stakeholders the ability to do what they love, the ability to make assorted peer and business connections, and a high degree of autonomy and control over their working habits. There exists the desire to build communities with other
creators and to connect with consumers. This commitment to a community and a craft is the catalyst for creatives engaging in entrepreneurial work (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 140-141; Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 10-14; McRobbie, 1996: 336-337; McRobbie, 2002: 519-521, 525; Kuhn, 2015; Woo, 2015). This entrepreneurship is the link between economics and creativity. Creativity is about emotion but it is also about collective meaning. It is about finding a community where the intrinsic value of an art is appreciated by both producers and consumers for both social and economic gain (O’Connor et al, 2011: 79-80; Johnston, 2013).

The negative aspects of this work are that it can be financially, mentally and emotionally stressful (McRobbie, 1996: 336-342; McRobbie, 2002: 516-531; Dore, 2015; Heazlewood, 2014: 139-143, 221; Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 140-147; Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 116-158, 183-192, 220-230; Elefante and Deuze, 2012: 10). Much of this stress is caused by exploitation by both the system and the self. A primary cause for the theory of the creative industries coming into being was to evaluate art (and by extension artists) within a neoliberal economic framework. An emphasis is placed on art being connected to the free market rather than relying on the public patronage of government institutions. This has given the creative industries more room for innovation than state-patronised cultural industries, but it has also meant that creatives are now responsible for their own social and economic capital. If a stakeholder faces discrimination, fails to land a project, experiences a difficult client who doesn’t pay their invoice on time etc. then they are largely responsible for resolving these issues themselves. This leads to feelings within creatives that it is their fault things are going wrong – they’re not working harder, not working smarter, not talented enough, and so on. A scene therefore is not only a source of economic support (through peer and intermediary assistance) but also a source of emotional support as individuals can relate to a collective through circumstance (McRobbie, 2015: 19-26, 29, 60-62, 79-80; McRobbie, 1996: 336-342; McRobbie, 2002: 516-520; Heazlewood, 2014: 221).

Like most other artists or media workers in the core creative industries the majority of stakeholders in the Australian comics industry cannot afford to work full-time on their labour (Throsby and Zednick, 2010: 53, 57, 67; Heazlewood, 2014: 45, Dore, 2015: 147; Elefante ad Deuze, 2012: 12-15, 17-18). This is due to many stakeholders working on independent short-term projects whilst balancing ‘day jobs’ which pay day-to-day living expenses. Even stakeholders who work on comics ‘full time’ are undertaking contract work with different
companies and will either be working on different projects at once or needing to regularly negotiate their contracts (Dore, 2015; McRobbie, 2015: 19-20; Harper, 2015).

Interviews and ethnographic fieldwork have revealed that stakeholders do not romanticise their creative labour. They are open about their difficulties, both financial and emotional. There are also concerns over the low levels of public funding comics receive and the art form’s low levels of cultural capital nationally (Bullock, 20/11/13, interview; Read, 5/6/13, interview).\(^{19}\) Comics stakeholders engage in high levels of reflexivity, perhaps because of the stigmas which have historically been attached to the medium (Patrick, 2011; Possamai, 2003: 109-112). They are realistic about the risks of being an artist and yet also actively try to negate these risks by engaging with institutions and cultural intermediaries. A major theme within this thesis is how stakeholders create more awareness of their medium within Australian public life by creating cultural spaces for their practice (McRobbie, 2015: 19, 79-80).

Whilst all stakeholders will combine business management skills with their comics creation there are variations as to what degree. Some stakeholders are content to only work on their creative labour part-time and selling to familiar markets. Others will frequently network with cultural intermediaries to maximise business opportunities and find new markets. What makes these business decisions entrepreneurial are stakeholders engaging in economic self-determination (Kuhn, 2015). Creatives as entrepreneurs frequently adapt to change and create economic value through new ideas (Hartley et al, 2012: 8-9, 94-95; Kuhn, 2015).

Stakeholders are trying to do what O’Connor (2004: 136) calls ‘rationalising the irrational’ – there is never a guarantee of demand when something is produced but risk can be minimised through stakeholders studying and then adapting to their environment. There is still risk and stress associated with this type of creative labour, but sustainability and growth can be managed through social networks expanding into national as well as international markets.

What drives and shapes production is stakeholders bonding through their positions in the cultural field, their passion for their artistic work, and their ability to identify opportunities and markets which help sustain their creative labour. If comics were to be classified as a creative industry in official Australian cultural policies then the creative economy would

\(^{19}\) Much of this primary data is featured in Chapters Five and Six which focus on funding and production respectively.
benefit from products and projects created through existing social networks. The Australian comics industry is resilient and adaptable. With targeted funding, it has potential for even faster growth.

Collecting Primary Data

Interviews

Interviews with stakeholders were used to understand the practice and culture of Australian comics production on an individual and collective level. On an individual level these interviews revealed how stakeholders personally and professionally navigated the cultural field. On a collective level, these combined experiences reveal the structure and scope of the creative industry.

The interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2014. I interviewed 20 creative practitioners, 2 retailers and 2 scene media practitioners. My interviewees came from each of the capital cities with the exceptions of Perth and Darwin, as I couldn’t find any volunteers from those cities. My interviews were with 21 men and 4 women. I would have preferred a more even ratio of genders but these numbers reflect information about the structures of the field.

Firstly, there are more men than women. Through my observations at most venues and multiple online platforms, I would estimate that for every one woman there were two men. Secondly, men were not only more likely to volunteer, but were also more likely to give out the contact details of other men. Thirdly, accessing women was difficult at first; they were less likely to be found at conventions or at the Adelaide meet. It was only towards the end of my research that I discovered that women are more likely to be found at small press fairs and comics or writing festivals. They were also at reading groups or sketch nights, some of which were specifically designed for women. Adelaide has no independent comics festivals, and I don’t create comics, so I initially missed this.20

The interviews were written as structured, but when I interviewed stakeholders face to face or via Skype they would become semi-structured as I pursued tangents that were of interest. I

20 Adelaide has a reading group for women, but I only went once. The reading group was populated with more consumers than producers, and my knowledge of comics outside of Australian material is quite minimal. As I will be explaining within my ethnography notes, I was not a comics ‘fan’ before I started this project.
conducted 8 semi-structured interviews face to face or via Skype, compared to 18 structured through email. All stakeholders were given the choice of writing their answers or whether they would prefer to meet in person or Skype.

I created two versions of my interview. The first was more focused on production practices rather than culture and I used the word ‘industry’ repeatedly without realising that it was a term that was not widely used by participants. After being made (politely) aware by my interviewees that I had made a social faux-pas I created a second interview. This second interview more accurately reflected their interests and discourses whilst being relevant to my hypothesis.

I needed to know not only how stakeholders make comics, but also the ‘why’. I wanted to know more about creative identity, the cultural perception of comics in Australia, and how stakeholders navigated their position within the cultural field. I found answers in both interview versions to be of value, as often a stakeholder would reflexively refer to the culture of comics production when describing their practice. There was always the acknowledgement from stakeholders that their work was connected to the practices of others.

Producers are also already very aware of their audiences. This awareness informs many if not all of their business strategies in targeting specific markets. A stakeholder who is a fan of a certain kind of comic is likely to produce that kind of comic, and so there is already that close understanding of audience.

Fieldwork

The scope of my research required ethnographic fieldwork in addition to interviews to form a comprehensive hypothesis. My ethnography began in January 2013 and concluded in May 2015. It was conducted online and offline so I could observe and contrast discourses and behaviours in both environments. As a method an ethnography is designed to find structures which at once both contribute to a culture yet are open to interpretation. These structures are based on interactions between individuals and groups, these interactions being patterned rather than isolated behaviour (Geertz, 1973: 113-115, 151). An industry study utilising this ethnographic approach can identify how status is asserted within the field through stakeholder discourse and other forms of qualitative data. Sustained observation of stakeholders can reveal how ‘mundane’ daily interactions are in fact critical to identifying socio-economic industry structures (Ganti, 2014: 17-18).
My physical ethnographic sites were in Adelaide and Melbourne. I reside in the former and met many stakeholders from the latter through events. In both cities I would also socialise at meets and comics stores. Melbourne is close to Adelaide and has a high concentration of creatives and publishers who frequent conventions and writing festivals. My role as a judge in the 2015 Ledger Awards also gave me more opportunities to travel to Melbourne. With people inside the city scene as contacts, it made it easier to observe stakeholders at work and arrange interviews at the field site. Whilst I would have liked to have visited more scenes I managed to meet stakeholders from other city clusters at my Adelaide and Melbourne field sites.

I wrote some comics reviews for sites (*The Australian Comics Journal, Writes Bloc*) which increased my communication with stakeholders across Australia and provided me with a personalised perspective of being involved in scene media. On social media I connected with stakeholders and cultural intermediaries through Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. The benefits of conducting an online ethnography are the ability to gain a better understanding of scene discourses by collecting and archiving screenshots. These screenshots reveal the malleability and intensity of relations as they transformed and changed over time (Postill and Pink, 2012: 128-130).

In this thesis I will be critically analysing online information however I have chosen not to name stakeholders. Even though this information is public and searchable I did not believe that naming stakeholders was necessary. The information stakeholders provided about their practice was more important than specific identifiable data. Even if a Tweet is public information I personally don’t feel comfortable printing names if I do not have to, particularly if stakeholders are unaware that I have used their Tweets as field notes.

I don’t create comics myself, and so it is accurate to state that I could not participate fully in the cultures of production. But I considered this distance to be useful because I could be more objective. I learnt to remain mentally attentive but emotionally detached from the events around me. This is because I found ethnographic research difficult to write at first because it was an emotionally draining experience. In later drafts I intellectualised the actions of agents within the industry and kept their discourses and practices the focus of this thesis. I based my ethnographic practice on Michael Hill’s (2003; 2007) fieldwork in the Australian comics industry.
Hill’s (2003: 92) ethnographic work observing and analysing the small press scene of Australian comics was written from the perspective of a scholar who did not start out as a specific ‘fan’ of Australian comics. He was a casual reader. This is in contrast to some scholars such as Woo (2012: 8-10, 69-37, 127) who also utilises ethnography in his study of fan and comics cultures. Woo (2012: 1, 20, 52) self-identifies as a fan and so as well as immersing himself in the culture, he frequently creates a self-reflexive narrative as he considers what it means to identify as a ‘fan’ and how boundaries around fandom are created.

Like Hill (2003: 92) my own interests in comics only extends to casual reading. Whilst both Hill (2003: 92) and I eventually developed a habit of purchasing, reading, (and in my case critiquing) Australian comics, this interest initially developed for research rather than recreational purposes. Undertaking an ethnography as a non-producer necessitates an active interest in consumption in order to be able to have social capital in scenes. Until 2011 I had no knowledge of Australian comics, and approached this study from the perspective of a researcher who was interested in production processes rather than the content of the cultural artefact.

Another key difference between Hill (2003; 2007) and Woo (2012) is the focus on individual actions versus industry practices. As Woo’s (2012: 120, 143, 224) research is focused on the specific behaviours of people, he observes and records specific moments of human emotion – anger, jubilation, reflection. In his interviews he openly asked his interviewees to describe what they did or didn’t like about their fellow fans (Woo, 2012: 52).

Hill’s (2003: 92-95; 2007: 411-415) ethnographic fieldwork is characterised by frequent descriptions of practices, with the personalities of the researcher and participants not seen as necessary to report. Whilst Hill (2003: 93; 2007: 414, 432) is never ‘present’ within the narrative, it is indicated to the reader throughout his writing that he is constantly observing as he includes knowledge only someone in the field would know (i.e. what producers did at a certain period of time, details of an event, the specific artistic methods stakeholders used when crafting their comics).

I have decided to utilise this method of being ‘present’ but not actively involved in or referred to within the text, in order to keep the focus on a cultural/economic case study. My research is not an emotional exploration of a subculture. Being in the background also meant that I could bring my interviewees’ experiences to the forefront. The emotion present in this text
comes through my interviewees’ descriptions of their labour. These labour descriptions reveal personal information about a stakeholders’ specific history with the medium, and how their practice is part of their identity. Understanding stakeholder discourses, their representation of the self, is connected back to the hypothesis of this thesis; that the economic structures of the creative industries rely on social connections through practice (Ganti, 2014: 18).

I refer to my research practices in the next chapter, my literature review. From Chapter Five onwards I remove any direct references to myself from the narrative.

Conclusion

Australian comics production exists in a cultural field and an analysis of this field contributes to an understanding of comics as a creative industry. This methodological framework, as well as critical discourse analysis, have been paired with interviews and an ethnography to create a comprehensive study of the industry. The key points within this chapter are that various capitals associated with comics production (cultural, economic, and social) influence stakeholders’ positions and practices within the field. These points recur throughout the body of this thesis to present an overall argument about how comics production gives stakeholders distinct creative identities, and how this production contributes to various creative economies.
Chapter Four: An Analysis of Industry Studies in the Comics Field

Introduction

This thesis is part of a growing area of research in comics studies which focuses on industrial labour practices and the socio-political conditions which influence comics production. This chapter focuses on key ideas about identity, practice, the cultural field, and creative economies on a global scale.

This chapter begins with an identification of creative labour, and discusses the varying degrees of creative autonomy in the fields of restricted and large scale production. The critical and commercial successes of some stakeholders can result in comics being studied through auteur theory. But this focus also highlights the inequalities within the industry, with labour being hierarchised. Working full-time in the American comics industry for many is considered a cultural and financial goal, even though this industry has questionable working conditions. Working full-time on creative labour is also not considered a norm for the majority of stakeholders within the creative industries. It is theorised that the emotional connections stakeholders form with their work, and comics’ highly social (participatory) culture, create distinct ideologies and discourses within the industry.

The participatory culture of comics, specifically the role of cultural intermediaries, is explored further in studies which have incorporated the methodological framework of the cultural field. One of the most effective ways for comics to achieve more cultural, social, and economic capital is through cultural intermediaries providing social spaces for producers and consumers to interact with each other.

This research is building on previously established studies concerned with production and circulation practices in comics industries. Where my research is distinctive is that it has a methodological framework which places comics production within a specific economic context (the creative industries) through primary data. To have a comprehensive understanding of industrial practices there needs to be an understanding of the individual,
with this primary data being used to understand how social connections strengthen economic capital.

Studies of the comics industries which incorporate primary data are rare for three reasons. Comics are a relatively new field of study; most comics studies are preoccupied with textual analysis rather than an industrial analysis; and ethnographic research can be both expensive and time-consuming.

Academic research into Australian comics industries is also rare, the argument being that it’s due to the medium being perceived to have low cultural capital. This thesis is the first Australian industry study conducted in almost a decade, and the perceptions of Australian comics are changing. Economically, the Australian comics industry has always been connected to the international comics industries, but these connections have rapidly increased through media convergence.

In the global comics industries, the American industry has the highest rate of outsourced labour. The decentralisation of labour has been assisted through technology, but like other creative industries, the American comics industry decentralised its labour force primarily because it had the economic resources to do so. A more international workforce results in new ideas and more synergy between global markets. Media convergence and decentralisation has made it possible for Australian stakeholders to more actively and consistently contribute to the global creative economy.

The Cultural Worlds of Comics

Comics Labour and Creative Practice

This research into comics and creative labour frames the practice of the individual within the wider context of the creative industries, following on from previous studies done on self-actualisation and exploitation in stakeholders’ work conditions. ‘Self-actualisation’ refers to a practitioner, media worker, or artist achieving what they would consider to be pleasurable or ‘authentic’ process. Whilst true ‘authenticity’ can never be achievable due to the constraints of the cultural field, self-actualisation also operates within social constraints (such as a workplace) (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 43). Many comics creators work independently on their physical labour (writing, lettering, illustrating, etc.). But this labour is never truly autonomous, as stakeholders work as contractual employees, freelance workers, or they make
arrangements with cultural intermediaries to assist them with the production or circulation of their goods.

The key ideas within specific studies into creative labour and the comics industries have been the framing of the author as auteur at the expense of other industrialised labour (Murray, 2013; Woo, 2013); how a stakeholders’ nationality affects their working conditions (Brienza, 2013; Woo, 2015); and how independent artists balance self-actualisation and exploitation in their creative labour (Johnston, 2013; Johnston, 2015).

The author as auteur theory began in literary studies and was adopted by comics studies after the rising popularity of graphic novels in the 1980s and 1990s. Comics studies specifically adopted author theory in ‘nervous bids for legitimacy’ (Murray, 2013: 337-338), and the rise of the graphic novel coincided with the ‘valorisation of the comic book as collectible item’ (ibid.). This valorisation occurred through collectors assigning higher levels of symbolic and economic capitals to comics authors ahead of comics titles, and is explored in the work of Brown (1997: 24-25), Hatfield (2005: xxi, 5-6, 18-20), Murray (2013: 337-338) and Woo (2013).

Hatfield (2005: 16) approaches the author as auteur theory from the perspective of underground and alternative comics, addressing underground comics’ history of rebelling against the shop system. Stakeholders who work outside of the serial comics system have more financial and creative control, argues Hatfield (2005: 16, 18-21). Whilst alternative comics creators did eventually become part of the direct market, or at least sold in comics stores, their comics had more distinctive authorship (Hatfield, 2005: 18-21).

Brown (1997: 23-25, 27) takes a different angle by arguing that the stakeholders who work with serial comics still have high degrees of creative agency. This is demonstrated through the critical appreciation of certain authors by fans of serial comics. Serial comics fans have developed what Brown (1997: 21-27) terms a ‘shadow economy’ wherein consumers of comics mimic ‘high’ art practices by imbuing certain authors and titles with cultural capital. A consumers’ collection reflects their taste through quality instead of quantity. This discretion by consumers was only possible through the artistry of serial comics authors, which these stakeholders then used as leverage with publishers for more financial incentives (Brown, 1997: 18, 21, 23-25, 27).
Whether working in the artisanal or the industrial method, the issue that comics scholars such as Woo (2013) and Murray (2013) have with the auteur theory is that it privileges the voice of a sole author at the expense of other stakeholders involved in the labour process. A graphic novel may be illustrated and written by a sole creator, but an editor is still involved in its artistic direction (Murray, 2013: 338). In serial comics, there are numerous other stakeholders involved in production who are rarely acknowledged in fan or academic discourses, usually colourists and inkers. But even illustrators’ work is rarely valued as highly as a writers’ work in consumer practices (Woo, 2013; Murray, 2013: 337-341).

Author as auteur also draws distinctions between creative practitioners who are critically and/or commercially successful, and those who either have not reached that level of acclaim (Woo, 2013). This leads to a hierarchy which influences the discourses within comics studies and the comics industries, with divisions drawn between stakeholders who could be considered ‘amateurs’ and ‘professionals’, ‘hacks’ and ‘auteurs’ (Woo, 2013; Brown, 1997: 25). As well as financial discrepancies between different forms of labour stakeholders who are not considered ‘auteurs’, ‘artists’, ‘professional’ etc. can be more likely to experience self-doubt about their practice and legitimacy in the industry (Woo, 2013; Murray, 2013: 339, 341).

The discourses of who could be considered ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ are relevant to my studies of the creative identity, the cultural field, and the economic structures of comics production as a creative industry. The demarcations that scholars such as Hatfield (2005) and Brown (1997) make between various stakeholders’ creative agency due to their working practices is related back to ideas about what could be considered ‘authentic’ practice within the cultural field, specifically due to the space of possibles within the fields of large scale and restricted production.21

The discourses around ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ in comics industries can also be connected to the amount of time a stakeholder has to devote to their creative labour. This time is not only dependent on their personal circumstances and position in the cultural field, but is also influenced by wider structural inequalities in different nations. In the next chapter there is an analysis of the economic conditions stakeholders in the Australian comic industry work in, with those who work within the domestic market undertaking creative labour on a

21 The theory of the cultural field and how it relates to comics studies will be described in more detail in the next section.
part-time basis. Working part-time on comics has caused many Australian stakeholders to not consider their work to be part of an industry, compared to America. The stakeholders who work in America have ‘made it’ due to reasons stated in previous chapters (being able to work full-time, cultural cringe).

But whilst the United States has the biggest Anglophone comics industry it is also a country where stakeholders are not eligible for healthcare if they work full-time as contractual labour in comics (Brienza, 2013; Woo, 2015). Australian stakeholders’ rights as workers when they’re outsourced labour are also minimal (Woo, 2015; McCloud, 2000: 64, 79).

In the creative industries working full-time (particularly as a creative practitioner) is considered the exception, rather than the norm. Most creative practitioners work on their independent projects only when they have the time and finances. Otherwise they work in the creative industries in educational/freelance/administrative roles or in a day job unconnected to the creative industries (Heazlewood, 2014: 45; Deuze and Elefante, 2012: 13; Throsby and Zednick, 2010: 48-52, 55-56; Dore, 2015; Higgs and Cunningham, 2009: 193). The reasons why stakeholders place so much value on working within the American comics industry are explored further through Woo’s study Erasing the Line between Leisure and Labour: Creative Work and the Comics World (2015).

The survey sampled 570 creatives who work in the United States comics industry, the purpose of the survey being to collect qualitative and quantitative data on the practices and perspectives of these creatives. The majority of the respondents were based in the U.S. (71.5%), there were also respondents based in other countries, with Australians placed in a category with New Zealanders and South Africans. Collectively this category, (which could be considered Non-British or Irish Anglophone comics industries), made up 1.4% of survey respondents (Woo, 2015).

The survey revealed that there are few boundaries between the personal and the professional in the comics industry, because many producers start off as comics fans. The emotional response that stakeholders can feel from working in the comics industry may provide them with mental justifications for undertaking work which could be considered exploitative (Woo, 2015).

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22 More information about the role of unions and other advocacy bodies in national and international comics industries can be found in Chapter Five.
Woo’s (2015) survey is ‘the first systematic study of labour in English-language comics production’. As a case study into artists’ identification with their craft at the expense of possible exploitation it is similar to the work which has been done by Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2013) and McRobbie (2015) in creative industry studies. Particularly within the work of McRobbie (2015: 66) there is a connection made between an artist’s love for their craft, and how this love has been co-opted by the political class and corporations to sell neoliberal individualisation.

The balance between exploitation (by structural conditions and the self), and healthy artistic passion/entrepreneurialism, is further explored in studies by Paddy Johnston (2013; 2015). There is the caveat that Johnston’s (2013; 2015) studies only feature sole creators who work in the artisanal method, but these case studies are still valuable as they examine how stakeholders see themselves as both artists and entrepreneurs.

In Johnston’s (2013) first case study he analysed the discourses between two creators (James Kolchaka and Jeffrey Brown) who create independent alternative comics in America. Even though these stakeholders found satisfaction in their creative labour, with Kolchaka even classifying the need to create comics as a passion or a compulsion, these stakeholders still experienced insecurities related to time and money. There were rhetorical questions posed around whether one had to work on their art full-time to be a ‘true’ artist, (Kolchaka works full time on comics, Brown has a ‘day job’), and whether an artist ‘sold out’ if they concentrated on making money from their art as well as the art itself.

Johnston’s essay (2013) explores how artists pressure themselves through imagined ideas of authenticity and self-actualisation, challenging the idea that harder work makes a better artist. But these stakeholders are also aware of the numerous economic risks associated with their labour, and that stakeholders need to balance their expectations of their labour with the financial realities.

Stakeholders critically thinking about the economic risks of their labour is also present Johnston’s (2015) case study of John Allison, a webcomics artist. Citing Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2013: 25-27), Johnston (2015) writes that whilst a webcomics stakeholder such as Allison has great creative freedoms, there are still anxieties around money, which keep Allison from doing truly ‘good’ work. Baker and Hesmondhalgh’s (2013: 20-34, 49)

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23 Jeffrey Brown the creator is different to Jeffrey Brown the comics scholar, cited within this thesis.
concepts of good work and bad work are connected to a practitioner’s physical and emotional welfare as well as the quality of the product.\textsuperscript{24}

To counteract these anxieties around money, Johnston (2015) describes how Allison consistently works hard as an entrepreneur, producing and marketing regular content, and constantly seeking new markets and forms of revenue (including crowdfunding). In his practice and discourse, Allison is challenging the idea that the artist must be separate from the entrepreneur in regards to practicing emotionally satisfying and economically sustainable work.

The entrepreneurial agency and self-reflexive rationalisations of stakeholders in comics industries are explored in my thesis in relation to agglomeration economies, globalisation, and self-actualisation through creative labour. I argue that whether a stakeholder works on their own projects or undertakes contractual/freelance labour, they are constantly adapting their practice to be able to fund their products and sustain their social network markets. What assists the sustainability and growth of social networks is stakeholders’ wellbeing. My research, and the research of others within comics studies and creative industry studies, is concerned with the possibility of stakeholders’ autonomy and self-actualisation being exploited. These exploitations may be structural (publishing practices), or they may be cultural (ideas around artistic ‘authenticity’ and ‘selling out’ for money).

Cultural Intermediaries within the Cultural Field

Comics culture is participatory, with many producers in Australia and America beginning as fans (Woo, 2015; Bentley, 2013: 16-24). The second period of production in Australia grew directly out of fandom, specifically two distinct fandoms which placed value on certain kinds of comics - alternative comics (restricted production), and serial comics (large scale production) (Bentley, 2013: 24-25; Carroll, 1996; Hale, 1998: 103). These values have shaped social networks and scenes, and have also influenced the ways in which comics are circulated.

The notion that creator autonomy is essential to creative practice and creative identity is prevalent across the cultural field of Australian comics (Hill, 2003: 93; Hill, 2007: 412, 420;  

\textsuperscript{24} Like McRobbie (2015), Baker and Hesmondhalgh’s (2013) creative industries research is frequently consulted within this thesis.
Rackleyft, 2015: 32, 40). These ideologies are found not only within the comics industry, but have also been analysed in the contexts of the advertising industry (Hackley and Kover, 2007: 75-76), zines (Duncombe, 1997: 142-143, 154-155, 168) and product design (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks and Lee, 2008: 1178). These studies indicate that these ideas are circulated through social networks, and that these social networks are created and maintained through tacit knowledges about practice.

For social networks which focus on the production, circulation and consumption of commodities, there can be shifting boundaries in relation to how to maintain an ‘authentic’ culture, and yet also expand this culture so that it doesn’t become too insular or obscure (Duncombe, 1997: 168; Woo, 2012: 667-674). Woo (2012), like Brown (1997) uses Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field and capitals when analysing the social networks which comprise cultures of production and consumption. Both Brown (1997: 21-24) and Woo (2012: 661-662; 2012: 75-87) utilise Bourdieu’s (1984: 25) work in relation to autodidactism (specialist ‘tacit’ knowledge), and how this autodidactism contributes to a cultural and economic capitals in the cultural field of comics.

Whilst Brown’s (1997: 21-32) essay focuses on the conversion of cultural (or subcultural) capital to economic capital through consumption, Woo’s (2012: 81-87) research is concerned with the conversion of social and subcultural capital into economic capital through a habitus which is formed through stakeholders frequently interacting with cultural intermediaries. Woo (2012: 67-93, 120-127; 2011: 125-136) directly connects the theory of the cultural field with autodidactism, communities of practice, subcultural theory and scenes. Stakeholders, cultural intermediaries and institutions come together through the conversion of tacit knowledge to economic capital, and Woo’s (2012: 75-84, 127: 2011: 126-133) research encompasses scenes that could be considered subcultural due to the agents within the field both rejecting, and being rejected by, what could be considered ‘mainstream’.

Whilst there are high degrees of subcultural knowledges between stakeholders and cultural intermediaries, as a creative industry based around scenes, the Australian comics industry has agents within the field actively seeking out a diverse range of audiences through cultural consecration and social network markets, rather than concentrating their practices inwards (Straw, 2001: 248). Where my work has more commonalities with Woo’s (2012: 87-93; 2011: 127-130) research is that the cultural field is only possible through stakeholders undergoing practices which have strategic meaning. These practices are central to a ‘field',
and through scenes there are stakeholders, cultural intermediaries and institutions which frequently intersect each other. Whilst a field exists as an invisible, theoretical concept, the social networks of scenes can be traced through ethnographic observance (Woo, 2011; Woo, 2011: 125-128; Woo, 2012: 88-90).

Cultural intermediaries are essential to the function of these scenes due to their services in the curation, evaluation and circulation of goods (Woo, 2012: 126-127). In his ethnographic study of ‘geek’ scenes in Canada, including scenes focused around serial comics, Woo observed that cultural intermediaries practiced gatekeeping in the form of ‘introversion’ and ‘extroversion’ (Woo, 2012: 661-662, 672-673; Woo, 2012: 145). These cultural intermediaries take the form of retailers, conventioneers, and other event organisers (Woo, 2012: 661-662; Woo, 2012: 145). Introversion refers to stakeholders keeping their clusters contained, with gatekeepers attempting to preserve a status quo. This status quo may be relevant to a specific physical space, and it can be more applicable to a culture. Extroversion is the opposite, with cultural intermediaries expanding and diversifying their networks. Cultural intermediaries may practice extroversion for economic reasons, because they see it as a moral good, or both (Woo, 2012: 661-662, 672-673; Woo, 2012: 145; Woo, 2011: 127-132).

The theory of introversion and extroversion, as well as Putnam’s theories of bonding and bridging capital (Putnam, 2000: 20-21) and knowledge brokering (Boari and Riboldazzi, 2014: 683-695) is used in this thesis to examine how the gatekeeping practices of cultural intermediaries in the Australian comics scene have a profound effect on the physical, cultural, and virtual spaces. Physical spaces which have cultural intermediaries in the Australian comics scene, which are also studied within Woo’s (2011; 2011; 2012; 2012) ethnographies include comics stores and conventions. Both cultural intermediaries can have significant socio-economic effects on the production and circulation of comics. These spaces are often the first places stakeholders will experience the consumption of comics, and meet producers (Woo, 2012: 121, 127, 131-145, 199-212, 225-242; Woo, 2012: 659-676; Woo, 2011; Woo, 2011: 125-136; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242, 247-248).

In Woo’s 2011 study which focuses specifically on comics stores, there was not only a description of the comics stores’ purpose in the comics industries, but also specific ethnographic descriptions of comics stores as social spaces. The placement of product was not accidental but a specific socio-economic strategy, to give different spaces to casual
readers and collectors, and new customers versus those that were more familiar with the store (Woo, 2011: 127-131). Participant observation of how spaces serve a specific function within the cultural field but also a cluster’s agglomeration economy is a significant part of my own study.

The social networks of comics industry stakeholders have extended into the public sphere, and this integration into physical spaces is explored through Beaty’s (2007) research into the European comics industries. This research focuses on how the values and practices of the European comics industries are changing, as the cultural perceptions of comics are changing within the broader public sphere. These changes have occurred through stakeholders seeking more cultural legitimacy through experimenting artistically with the form. Throughout the 1990s the European comics industry, particularly the small press movement involved with the L’Association collective, resisted heteronomous principles and yet also had to consider whether they were ‘avant-garde’ after their audiences expanded, and their stakeholder began being co-opted through cultural intermediaries and institutions (Beaty, 2007: 6-9, 30-32, 48-49, 178-181, 239). These themes of stakeholders’ positions within the habitus changing through personal autonomy but also being influenced by the fields of class and power are explored through this thesis.

Beaty’s (2007: 120-128) research into how comics production achieves higher levels of cultural legitimacy through events such as festivals is also relevant to this work. To quote:

The European festival model, with its focus on art exhibitions, has transformed the field in a way the American conventions have not. Specifically, the exhibition model calls for a celebration of artists whose work can be presented in a visually dynamic fashion to large crowds. This has had the effect of elevating small-press and avant-garde cartoonists, whose works are most akin to the traditions of painting, sculpture, and other consecrated visual arts, to a status that is accorded them by the market. The desire of festival organisers to produce a visually engaging exhibition experience goes hand in hand with the turn towards visual arts in the small press comics movement of the 1990s (Beaty, 2007: 122).

Festivals represent a time and place where all agents in the cultural field – stakeholders, cultural intermediaries, institutions, consumers – are involved in the circulation of comics. They demonstrate that whilst the work of a comic artist is done in isolation, the culture of
comics production itself is highly social (Beaty, 2007: 120). In a creative industries framework, festivals and other events where comics are in 'the public sphere’ i.e. are more visible to stakeholders outside of the scene, are economically essential to the industry’s agglomeration economies and social network markets.\(^{25}\)

The relationship between cultural intermediaries and other creative industries is also explored through the work of Brienza (2009; 2010), who focuses on how the theory of the cultural field is applied to manga’s integration into markets within the United States. The manga that is exported to the U.S. is indicated within the texts to be within the heteronomous side of the field through the high volumes of profitable product (Brienza, 2009: 110; Brienza, 2010: 107-109). But Brienza (2009: 106, 110-115) rejects Bourdieu’s theory of autonomous fields, instead placing manga and cultural intermediaries such as comics stores, conventions, and bookstores within a sole (heteronomous) field. Brienza (2009: 104-107) describes cultural intermediaries in the comics field as being intrinsically part of the social fabric of the industries, as they are major commercial hubs. Brienza (2010: 109) questions whether Bourdieu’s theory of an autonomous cultural field would be applicable to a field such as comics and manga, due to their high levels of off-set printing.

In her research Brienza (2009: 104-107, 110) analyses how commercial cultural intermediaries are central to comics industries due to their ability to circulate knowledge and product, but they are also characterised as gatekeepers which close off the comics industry to new forms (manga) and new audiences (Brienza, 2009: 104-107, 110). Brienza (2009: 106-107) also provides valuable data about why women may prefer to buy manga at bookstores because of the male-centric gatekeeping practices of comics stores (questioning whether female fans’ knowledge or interest of comics is ‘legitimate’). It is a problem which has also been identified within the ethnographic work of Woo (2011: 131; 2012: 661-662; 2012: 137-145).

Both Woo (2012: 137-139) and Brienza (2009: 106-107) question (and observe in Woo’s case) how this issue being actively addressed by cultural intermediaries. Cultural intermediaries are not monolithic gatekeepers but individuals and collectives with agency who are actively shaping their field (Bourdieu, 1984: 583; 1985: 322-325).

\(^{25}\) The role of state funding in regards to comics and events has also been explored through O’Brien (2014), Akhtar (2014) and Heikennen (2008). These authors are referenced throughout but Beaty (2007) is the focus of this literature review due to his application of Bourdieu when critically analysing cultural policy.
In my own research, as well as examining the socio-economic effects which cultural intermediaries have on the circulation of comics, to fully understand the scope of the cultural field there is consideration of the role of cultural intermediaries in production. To use the example of off-set printing identified in Brienza (2010: 109) I would consider the printer to be a cultural intermediary. The printer may be a human agent or a printing business within the field who negotiates with stakeholders on their volume of product. Bourdieu (1983: 319-327, 331-333, 335) even writes about the role of cultural intermediaries influencing the production of cultural artefacts:

The existence of an expanding market, which allows the development of the press and the novel, also allows the number of producers to grow. The relative opening up of the field of cultural production due to the increased number of positions offering basic resources to producers without a private income had the effect of increasing the relative autonomy of the field and therefore its capacity to reinterpret external demands in terms of its own logic (denunciation of ‘industrial literature’ obscures the fact that, while the field is a source of constraints, it is also liberating, in as much as it enables new categories of producers to subsist without constraints other than those of the market) (Bourdieu, 1983: 335).

The Australian comics industry needs to be examined within both the fields of restricted and large scale production. Unlike the Japanese manga industry or American serial comics, which have high levels of corporate infrastructure, the Australian comics industry has small production hubs, and stakeholders only negotiate with intermediaries within the corporate sector (Brienza, 2009: 104-110; Brienza, 2010: 109-114; Gibson, Khoo, Kong, and Semple, 2006: 182; Bentley, 2013: 30-31; Carroll, 2003; Possamai, 2003: 110). Australian stakeholders will work as contractual labour nationally and internationally for corporate cultural intermediaries – usually publishers – in comics industries and other creative industries.

There are publishers in the Australian comics industry which are registered small businesses, such as Gestalt or Milk Shadow Books. But it’s debatable as to whether they could be considered ‘corporate’ publishers considering that they have small staff sizes and no sponsorship affiliations. Within this text they are referred to as independent publishers to denote this difference and in creative industries discourses they could be considered SMEs.

Paul Lopes’ (2009) application of cultural field theory in his study of the history of the American comics industry defines his narrative structure. Lopes (2009: xvii-xix, 6-8, 20-22, 54-60, 180-184) examines the field of American comics production with the beginning premise that the comics medium began as one with low levels of cultural capital. American comics only existed within the field of large-scale production (‘The Industrial Age’) and then the cultural field began to expand when comics went from a mass medium to a more niche cultural artefact. Their economic decline coincided with more creative freedom, and with this creative freedom came more attempts by stakeholders and cultural intermediaries to have cultural legitimacy (Lopes, 2009: 97, 120-131, 145).

Lopes’ (2009: xvii-xix, 19-20, 29, 180-181) critical analysis of the formation of the cultural field has some commonalities with Beaty (2007: 48-49; 178-179) in that there is an analysis of which comics are seen to have more cultural legitimacy than others depending on their production and circulation practices and assessments by institutional bodies. There are also commonalities with Brown (1997: 23) as certain authors and titles in the serial comics market are given more critical and commercial respect through audience assessment (Lopes, 2009: 95-98).

But there is also the argument that the creative risks of serial comics would not have been possible without the underground and alternative comics movements repositioning comics as a medium for adults. The more heteronomous side of the field ‘borrows’ artistic ideas (and artists themselves) from the underground and alternative comics movement (Lopes, 2009: 121-134, 149). Whilst the two sides of the field have ‘competing interpretive communities over the dominant discourses’ around practice, Lopes (2009: 180) continuously presents a narrative wherein practitioners and consumers across the field are concerned with lessening the stigmas that were attached to comics since their beginning.

From a structural perspective by dividing the book into ages (Industrial Age, Late Industrial Age, Heroic Age) there is what could be considered ‘misplaced nostalgia’ that Woo (2008: 269-276) has been critical of in comics’ historiographies. The research is also comprised of secondary data, and ‘the field’ is considered to primarily be comprised of only practitioners and consumers (Lopes, 2009: xvii, 10, 16, 95-100). The role of cultural intermediaries and
institutions in the comics industry, or industries which have comics producers integrated within their socio-economic structures, is largely absent except for Diamond Distributors (Lopes, 2009: 96-98, 140).

What should be considered in regards to the above industry studies is that the field of comics studies is considered relatively ‘new’ compared to studies of other industries such as film (Smith, 2011: 110-112; Beaty, 2011:107-110). Much of the analysis of the medium has been focused on comics’ content, as comics studies becomes integrated with literary studies and visual art criticism (Smith, 2011: 110-112; Murray, 2013: 336-338). Research into the production processes of comics is not as widespread in comics studies (Brienza, 2010: 107; Smith et al, 2011: 137, 142). If there is research into production processes, it is framed in a way to understand how practices influence the content of comics, or how comics’ content influences other media (McAllister, 1990: 56; Brienza, 2010: 107).

If an industry study is undertaken, secondary data is usually used to map the scope and history of said industry. This is due to the expensive and time consuming process of gathering primary data (Brienza, 2010: 107). Ethnographic studies into comics production and distribution are usually restricted to a sole location and historical period (Beaty, 2007; Hill, 2003; Hill, 2007; Woo, 2011; Woo, 2012; Woo, 2012), and it may be due to the reasons Brienza (2010) outlined.

My research also wouldn’t have been possible if not for the industry studies undertaken by Patrick (2011; 2012) and Possamai (2003), which place the Australian comics industry’s production practices and cultural reception within broader socio-economic contexts. These contexts specifically place Australian comics within a hierarchy of arts nationally and internationally. Like McAllister (1990) and Sabin (1993), Patrick (2010; 2011) and Possamai (2003) don’t present their research findings with a methodology other than a historical analysis. Within the next section there is also an overview of the field of Australian comics studies generally, with a discussion on the role of fan scholarship in recording the history of the medium.

**Australian Cultural Perceptions of Comics**

Academic studies into the Australian comics industry are a recent phenomenon and very niche field. From 1978-2009 there were only 49 academic sources which referenced Australian comics within their texts (Patrick, 2010). Without collectors and fan scholars,
much of the Australian comics industry’s history would have been lost to academics (Patrick, 2010).

One of these collectors, John Ryan, began creating fanzines about the history of Australian comics in the 1960s before recording the history of the first period in the historical reference book *Panel by Panel* (1979). Since then there have been other fan scholars publishing research in the form of historiographies (Pinder, 1983; Carroll, 2003; Bentley, 2013; Patrick, 1999; Mason, 2013; Hale, 1998) and interviews (Bentley, 2006; Bentley, 2007; Bentley, 2008; Bentley, 2009; Bentley, 2010; Bentley, 2011; Carroll, 2011; Bentley, 2012).26

The abundance of fan scholarship is demonstrative of the low levels of cultural capital which were once afforded to Australian comics as they were ignored by academic and media institutions (Patrick, 2010: 1-11). Unlike newspaper strips, editorial cartoonists and children’s magazines, the production practices of comics were never given consideration until the late 1970s and 1980s. There have never been audience studies done on Australian comics (Patrick, 2010: 2-3).

This is in contrast to multiple studies done on American and British comics (Patrick, 2010: 3). The argument put forward by Patrick (2010: 3-4), based on the work of Possamai (2003: 115) is that unlike the American and British comics industries, the Australian comics industry was never part of ‘the national consciousness’.

Patrick’s (2011) theories into the shifting cultural spaces of comics extend into an analysis of the media’s recognition of Australian graphic novels. After describing graphic novels occupying a more privileged space than comics in Australian culture due to media discourse comparing them to literature and their presence at writing festivals, Patrick (2011) traces the history of the graphic novel in America and Australia. The hypothesis is that Australians have had a delayed appreciation for graphic novels compared to the Americans, as evidenced by the media only focusing on the form in the mid-2000s (Patrick, 2011: 52-55). Although there is a counter-argument to be made to this theory, due to Australian comics production in the 1980s only beginning to show signs of economic growth compared to the American industry which at the time was at its economic peak. Americans started the ‘graphic novel’

26 Before becoming an academic Kevin Patrick was a fan scholar, and Paul Mason has written about Australian comics outside of his official academic work.
phenomenon because they had the production and distribution systems in place to do so (Sabin, 1993: 87-90).

The Australian graphic novel phenomenon occurring in the mid-2000s wasn’t coincidental, but was the result of Australian comics stakeholders and cultural intermediaries having the knowledge and resources to properly adapt an Anglophone trend. Stakeholders in the small press scene had begun to experiment with the form, the book publisher Allen and Unwin became interested in pursuing a graphic novel line, and technological advances in graphic design meant that it was easier for graphic novels to be created (Beaty, 2010: 206; Bentley, 2009: 9; Mutard, 2014; Hill, 2003: 107-108; Bentley, 2011: 3-11, 12-16).

An analysis of the connections between Australian comics industry practices and international industries, as well as the role of the state in Australian comics production, is also explored through the work of Possamai (2003). Possamai’s (2003: 112, 118) central hypothesis is that there are three elements which have restricted the presence of Australian comics within the public sphere, or what is termed ‘the practical consciousness’ are the market, the state, and the national culture. Through his analysis of these elements Possamai (2003: 113-118) compares the Australian comics industry with international industries.

The cultural hegemony of the American industry is studied through the effects of the direct market on the Australian comics industry. There is the acknowledgement that the Australian industry was always going to be economically weaker than America due to its smaller size and the absence of the shop system, but Possamai (2003: 112-114) also makes the argument that Australia didn’t have a defining ‘genre’ post World War II like the American superhero.

Regarding the U.S. comparison, the Australian comics’ industry would not have been able to compete with America’s economic scale, even with the shop system or a genre which found commercial success with audiences. As well as high international shipping costs, a creative product which appeals to 5 per cent of the population will appeal to at least 15 million people in the U.S. but only 1.1 million people in Australia (Heazlewood, 2014: 235). And it’s estimated that as of 2000, less than 500,000 people read comics regularly in the United States (McCloud, 2000: 97).

Possamai’s comparison between European and Australian comics industries is more accurate, even though Possamai (2003: 116-118) states that Europe has traditionally had more respect for comics (placing them in galleries and museums) than Australia has. Whilst \textit{bande desinee}
has been critically and commercially popular in the Franco-Belgian comics industries, in
Nordic countries such as Finland and Norway, comics had low cultural capital for decades
(Heikennen, 2008: 82-83).

More broadly, many Western European and Nordic comics industries have similar timelines
to Australia’s. Comics aimed at an adult (rather than children or all ages) audience only
began being produced in the mid-1970s in Europe. This was due to Europe being affected by
the moral panic around comics which stemmed from Anglophone industries, with imported
American comics influencing cultural perceptions around the medium in the 1950s (Beaty,
2007: 21, 24; Heikennen, 2008: 81-83). Whilst *bande desinee* was always popular, small
press and avant-garde comics began achieving cultural consecration in Western Europe and
Nordic countries in the 1990s (Beaty, 2007: 6-9, 43, 45, 48-49; Heikennen, 2008: 86). Like
Australian comics, comics achieved this consecration through small collectives of comics
creators taking it upon themselves to give comics cultural legitimacy through artistic
innovation and negotiating spaces within the cultural sphere (Heikennen, 2008: 84-88; Beaty,
2007: 9-10, 30-44).

Presently government grants for comics in Europe primarily finance festivals and publishing
houses (Heikennen, 2008: 86-88; Beaty, 2007: 120-126). This is similar to present Australian
funding practices, where grants are sometimes given to individual projects but are more often
to collective endeavours which can contribute more to the creative economy. most popular
comics in Europe are still *bande desinee* albums, and these albums are produced for a
mainstream audience with little government support (Beaty, 2007: 1-6, 20-22).

It should be noted that this thesis research was written approximately 10-15 years after
Possamai’s. Cultural perceptions around comics have changed, and creative industries
policies change with successive state and federal governments. The Australian comics
industry has grown through media convergence, with social media, crowdfunding, and online
cultural intermediaries opening up global social network markets. In each of the texts
analysed within this section – Patrick (2011), Patrick (2012) and Possamai (2003) - the
Australian industry is positioned as one which is influenced by the production practices of
international industries, but isolated from those industries. A central argument within this
thesis is that this is not the case, with Australian stakeholders and cultural intermediaries
actively involved in contributing to global creative economies.
Global Networks

Australians have been working in the American comics industry since early in the second period of production as freelance and contractual workers. (Woo, 2015; Bentley, 2013: 2). The phenomenon of international stakeholders being contracted to work in the American comics industry can be attributed to several factors: the shadow economy, high levels of social capital in clusters, and the growth of online networks (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242-244, 248, 259-260; Murray, 2013: 339; Murray, 2012: 129-134).

As referenced previously the ‘shadow economy’ of collectors assigns status to certain authors (or illustrators) who primarily work on serial comics (Brown, 1997: 21-27; Sabin, 1993: 66-68). These authors used to be primarily from the United States, working within the ‘bullpen’, physically located within publishing houses. Since the 1980s, the United States industry has become more decentralised. This decentralisation has occurred through the rise of the direct market system leading to a high quantity of sales, and the concurrent proliferation of comics stores and conventions (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242, 245, 247-255; Sabin, 1993: 66-72, 110).

The economic success of the American industry meant that their practices were replicated in other Anglophone comics industries. American publishers found that some British authors had developed a cult following, such as Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Garth Ennis, Brian Bolland etc. These practitioners were soon hired to work at DC/Vertigo in what was termed ‘The Brit Invasion’ (Sabin, 1993: 66-68, 110; Lopes, 2009: 110). The critical and commercial success of these authors in the shadow economy (and among new readers) resulted in North American publishers regularly talent-scouting other international practitioners (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242, 247-248; Sabin, 1993: 66-68).

This talent scouting used to primarily occur through conventions and other events, where publishers could approach practitioners and vice versa to physically see their work (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 247-248; Sabin, 1993: 70-72; Bentley, 2013: 58, 65). These practices still exist, however it has become easier for publishers and practitioners to take advantage of the immediacy of email and digital portfolios for pitching and talent scouting (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242-244, 259-260). Social media has also become key to global comics communication. Whilst Norcliffe and Rendace (2003: 244) considered the internet to be
competition for the leisure time of comics readers, the internet has emerged as a virtual production and circulation hub for webcomics (Johnston, 2015; McCloud, 2000: 180-188).

The comics industries no longer have a ‘singular geography’, but ‘a set of geographies’ (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 260). These geographies ‘reflect the complex and disorderly interactions among technology, local institutions, cultural practices, the state, and the workings of a set of local principles’ (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 260). The decentralisation of labour is not unique to the comics industries, but follows a pattern which has occurred in other cultural industries such as film and fashion.

These industries often begin with a cluster or clusters which have an environment which assists their accumulation of resources, cultural capital, and economic capital. After building a strong agglomeration economy, these industries extend bridging capital to other clusters nationally and internationally, looking for specialised labour or new ideas to energise their practices (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 243-245, 248; Melo et al, 2008: 332-336; Duranton, 2004: 2064; Porter, 1996: 87; Berg and Hassink, 2014: 659). In the comics industries, comics practitioners may never meet each other if they are working in different countries, communicating primarily through email. Or, they work alone but continue to accumulate social capital with peers, cultural intermediaries and consumers through physical spaces which contribute to scene cultures (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 247-248).

Norcliffe and Rendace’s (2003) study into social networks in the comics industries contains valuable data about contractual labour practices within the comics industries and has influenced theories within this thesis regarding spaces. Physical spaces are relatively self-explanatory, being social spaces where stakeholders, cultural intermediaries and consumers can congregate to produce or circulate cultural artefacts, knowledge, and/or practices. Virtual spaces serve the same purposes of physical spaces only via the internet. These spaces co-exist with what I have termed ‘cultural spaces’. Comics inhabit cultural spaces through their physical presence, but also through knowledge and discourses about the medium. This awareness of the medium within the public sphere as well as production and circulation hubs lead to the expansion of social network markets.

But an increasingly globalised workforce in the comics industry does have some causes for concern. The economic power of the American comics industry via the direct market and corporate intellectual properties has created what Murray (2013: 340) calls a ‘cultural
homogeneity’. The majority of Australian media discourses focus on American rather than Australian comics. The media also uses discourses and tropes which have their roots in American stigmas around the medium to describe comics (Lopes, 2006: 387-390; McCloud, 2000: 80-83). In Chapter Nine I will be arguing that these discourses may affect consumers’ cultural perceptions of comics and consequently the formation of social network markets.

The exploitative practices of contractual labour, in Australia and America, are explored in the next chapter. There is also an analysis of how media convergence is changing the structures of the comics industry, and the publishing industries more broadly.

Conclusion

This thesis is part of an emerging area of research into the field of comics studies which focuses production, circulation, and consumption as activities which are enacted through social networks. These social networks are formed through a stakeholder first self-identifying as a creative and undertaking creative labour. This creative labour is located within a cultural field, with cultural intermediaries facilitating industrial growth. This research is placed within the context of Australian comics production history, but my research differentiates itself from past studies by connecting Australian social networks to global creative economies.
Chapter Five: Financing and Labour

Introduction

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the economic scale of Australian comics production. This analysis encompasses the economic circumstances of the individual, as well as how comics production contributes to state, national and international economies. There is an analysis of how and why comics are funded, whether through public art grants, a stakeholder’s ‘day job’, or crowdfunding. There is also a discussion on how the contractual labour conditions stakeholders experience in both comics and creative industries not only allow creative freedom but also possible wage exploitation.

The cultural field of the Australian comics industry co-exists with other creative industries through publications and spaces. Changes to federal arts funding schemes since 2015 have affected the cultural intermediaries and institutions Australian comics stakeholders are connected to by depleting their resources. The withdrawal of institutional support for the creative industries by the government is believed by art activists to be ideologically-based, with the Australian government increasingly placing value on ‘heritage’ cultural industries over individual artists and organisations within the creative industries.

The influence of the fields of class and powers’ on the cultural field of comics manifests itself in different ways. Stakeholders frequently engage in entrepreneurial activity and rely on the social networks of their scenes for economic sustainability. The absence of sustained and structured public funding for their industry can be a source of stress for stakeholders because it indicates that the state considers their labour to be of low economic and cultural value.

But this still does not deter stakeholders from applying for public funding (from council/city, state or national sources). The resilience of stakeholders and the high levels of social capital associated with scene activity assist stakeholders when they can attain funding, because they will often use this financial capital on collective projects (publishing houses, festivals) which have lasting effects on the creative economy.

The entrepreneurialism and collective activity practiced by stakeholders is a pattern shared by practitioners in other creative industries. The majority of stakeholders in the creative
industries fund their own creative labour through other forms of employment. Whilst stakeholders will identify as an artist or a creative regardless of how many hours they can work on their creative labour, the part-time labour undertaken by stakeholders in the Australian comics industry can result in discourses which question as to whether they are working in an ‘industry’.

The working practices of stakeholders who work as contractual labour in the creative industries could be considered exploitative, because some employers are asking stakeholders to work for low wages or even for free. In Australia, stakeholders in the comics industry are supported through grassroots anti-exploitation movements, advocacy bodies and a national arts union. In America there is no union which looks after the interests of contractual labour in the comics industry, which is concerning due to the American comics industry’s history of exploitation and many contractual/freelance workers’ involvement in what is known as the ‘informal economy’.

Whilst stakeholders can feel emotional validation from their labour, the economy they work in stresses individualism and isolation. Advocacy and union bodies recognise contractual comics workers as creative industry practitioners, and stakeholders who work in the domestic industry can devote the time to forging connections with other creative industries.

As well as gradually occupying more spaces in the public sphere through physical and cultural spaces, stakeholders are also connecting with national and international social network markets through online publications. This shift in industry structure means that cartoonists now work more as casualised, freelance labour, but it has also meant that there are less gatekeepers of ‘traditional’ media. Many of the stakeholders who have been critically successful in online comics journalism have been outside of the white/straight/male/middle aged demographic which are continuously employed by hard copy newspapers.

The strength and concentration of these social network markets is also demonstrated through stakeholders having high success rates using crowdfunding to raise financial capital for their projects. Crowdfunded projects are another way for stakeholders, whose work may be marginalised within mainstream publishing, to circumvent cultural gatekeepers through online intermediaries.

The primary argument in this chapter is that comics production is connected to the broader creative industries through specific economic structures. Declining institutional support and
media convergence has changed the practices of both corporate and independent publishing industries. Stakeholders have adapted to these changes by extending their social network markets nationally and internationally.

Public Funding and Comics

Australian Arts Policy

From the first federal government report into national arts industries, *Government Aid to the Arts* (1968), to *Arts Nation: An Overview of Australian Arts* (2015), there has never been a formal acknowledgement of comics production as a cultural or creative industry. The comics industry exists as one integrated with the publishing industries due to comics originating from newspaper strips and pulp literature. The cultural field of comics includes cultural intermediaries associated with publishing industries such as printers, bookstores, zine fairs, libraries and writing festivals. Most Australian literary magazines also feature comics in their hard copy or digital issues.

Australian comics additionally share cultural and physical spaces with the visual arts. Comics are created in studios which are specifically equipped and designed for illustration and have been featured in independent or public gallery exhibitions.

Whilst regional and state art funding schemes vary, there has been little support for literature and independent artists in Australia from the current federal government. It has been estimated that the government’s cuts to individual artists and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and bolstering of economic support for ‘heritage’ performing arts companies are for ideological rather than economic reasons (Eltham, 2015; Westwood, 2015).

Stakeholders in Australian comics production negotiate with cultural intermediaries and institutions in the publishing and visual art industries to reach different social network markets. The depletion of resources from these cultural intermediaries and institutions has the potential to affect the comics industry’s economic viability.

Funding for arts industries in Australia has been present since the formation of Federation in 1900.27 Prior to the formation of The Australia Council (the national arts funding body) public patronage came from private donors or state governments. One of the first arts

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27 Federation refers to the states of Australia coming together under one sovereign government.
industries to receive public patronage was literature. The Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF) was established in 1908 for writers who needed financial assistance for their work, or families of writers who died in destitution (Throsby, 2001).

The Australia Council of the Arts, ‘The Australia Council’, was created in 1967, and exists as Australia’s primary national arts funding body. The Australia Council gives out grants to artists and arts companies and organisations, and is comprised of seven boards, each board representing an art form: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts, Dance, Literature, Major Performing Arts, Music, Theatre, Visual Art (Throsby, 2001). Artists and creative practitioners may be granted funds from the council, a specific board, or they can apply for a specific grant.

Australian comics stakeholders have received grants from the Australia Council and the Literature Board and cultural intermediaries within the publishing industries which support Australian comics production have also been allocated funds. It should be noted that stakeholders have taken it upon themselves to enquire about their eligibility for grants, because it is not made clear whether comics creators can apply in the guidelines (Mutard, 2014; Smith, 13/4/13, interview).

Comics being considered for and awarded public grants is a recent phenomenon. Bentley (10/6/14, interview) recalled that in the 1980s he briefly considered applying for a grant for *Inkspots*, but then wasn’t confident that it would be awarded to a comic book. In the 1990s, one of the first government grants handed out for a comic was for the horror comic *Phantastique*. This grant was for a small business venture, rather than an artistic endeavour, but it was still significant institutional recognition of comics (Hale, 1998: 96; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview).

Unfortunately the publishers of *Phantastique* decided to distribute a horror comic for adults via newsagencies, where they were accessible to children. This caused a second moral panic around comics. The title was banned in several states (South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia), and small business grants were altered to expressly prohibited comics publishers from applying (Hale, 1998: 96; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview).

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28 Where there can be some confusion is that The Australia Council of the Arts was given its full name and became a statutory body in 1975. However colloquially, it is still known as The Australia Council. Throughout this thesis I will be referring to the organisation by its original title, The Australia Council.
Shane W. Smith (13/4/13, interview) states that he once had a grant explicitly rejected because he was creating a graphic novel. Smith applied for the Arts Council Book2 grant in 2011, but was notified that his proposal was rejected because it was a comic:

Even though they [comics] were not specifically excluded in the criteria, they [comics] were obviously deemed unsuitable as literature by the Australian Government. I lodged an official protest when my application was disqualified, but the protest was overruled. They amended their policies for the next year’s grant to specifically exclude graphic novels. Net result was me losing 20-30 hours that could be used working on my comics. (Smith, 13/4/13, interview).

Grant writing is not only a long process, but can also be an intimidating process (Baccini, 13/5/14, interview). Other creators are wary of cultural institutions’ perceptions of comics. To quote Patrick Purcell:

In Australia I see it in particular, a lot of grants, they go towards things that are highbrow, intellectual, very small market and niche. They’re staying in the same zone. They could see better returns if they would inject some money into some more mainstream stuff. The conversation has to go from ‘I’m a creator and I’ve got problems’ to ‘I’m a creator, I’ve got ideas, I want to entertain.’ (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview).


There is a pattern to these grants. The first kind of recipient collectively contributes to creative economies. Silent Army contributes to urban regeneration by being part of Blender Studios, where artists can work on projects and then sell products through events and the Blender Studios shop. The Comic Art Workshop is an artist retreat on Maria Island, Tasmania. It hosts creatives from mainland Australia and the U.S., and contributes to the local economy through cultural tourism. The Australian comics industry’s concentrated social networks and stakeholders’ ability to adapt quickly means that with strategic funding, stakeholders could contribute even further to creative economies.
The second kind of recipient is a graphic novelist author or publisher. Within the Australian publishing industries, comics are associated primarily with literary magazines and writing festivals. Magazines which publish comics material and have been funded by the Australia Council include *The Lifted Brow* and *Voiceworks*. In 2016 *Voiceworks* lost their federal funding, as the organisation which publishes *Voiceworks*, Express Media, did not receive a grant in the 2016 funding round.

The defunding of Express Media received the strongest criticism from comics creators as well as writers, because it is an organisation which fosters and promotes the skills of young writers (authors under 25) (Dow, 2016; Lenton, 2016). It provided stakeholders who were new to the industry with an outlet to present their work to a national audience.

The National Young Writers Festival and Tonerpalooza (a zine fair) have also lost their federal funding. These events gave stakeholders from the Australian comics industry opportunities to network with their peers and stakeholders from other creative industries (Blumenstein, 2015). From a cultural tourism perspective, these events were associated with specific cities (Newcastle for The National Young Writers Festival and Melbourne for Tonerpalooza). These events advertised these cities as being associated with youth cultures and creativity, and their agglomeration economies were raised through festival attendees utilising city spaces and services.

The Australia Council was significantly defunded and restructured in the 2015 Federal Budget, with $104.7 million to be taken from the organisation over a period of four years. Whilst individual artists and SMEs saw their funding allocations depleted, performing arts companies such as Opera Australia and Australian Ballet had their funding increased. Arts journalists and activists consider these funding decisions to be ideological warfare disguised as economic policy (Eltham, 2015; Westwood, 2015).

Funds were also diverted from the Australia Council to a scheme called the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA), which also privileged performing arts companies. This resulted in 2,179 letters of protest lodged by artists into a Senate Inquiry (Westwood, 2015).

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29 Other literary magazines which feature comics strips and comics art include *The Suburban Review*, *Cordite*, *Spook*, and *Meanjin*. It’s unknown when comics began appearing in these literary magazines, however *Spook*, *The Lifted Brow* and *The Suburban Review* have been running for under five years. Comics have been appearing in *Voiceworks* since the 1990s (Blumenstein, 2015).
Whilst there was some funding returned to the Australia Council after a change of political (but not party) leadership, it is estimated that there will still be increased competition amongst artists and organisations due to fewer grants being awarded. A six-year funding plan for artists and organisations was scrapped (Eltham, 2015; Stone, 2015).

According to McRobbie (2015: 57, 61), policy within the creative industries is at once designed to count the numbers of creative practitioners – ‘everyone can be a creative’ – and yet often it doesn’t take into account various factors which influence a creative practitioner’s life. These factors may be demographic (age, class background, gender or family limitations), or they may be training grounds or resources. Instead of focusing on ways in which to support the individual, there is instead an over-reliance on the individual to conduct their business without ‘interference’ from the state (McRobbie, 2015: 61). The creative arts are increasingly being assessed in the neoliberal capitalism model, which can cause concern from stakeholders and academics over the erasure of the individual experience (the balance of stress and satisfaction) and emotion (creating art out of a sense of purpose first and a product for the marketplace second) (O’Connor et al, 2011: 10-15, 75-80; McRobbie, 2002: 521). In mid-2016, vocational arts training was cut from trade school programs, after being deemed a ‘lifestyle choice’ by the government (Faruqi, 2016).

Practitioners are angry that politicians now dictate which arts are more worthy of economic support, rather than these decisions being made by boards that have transparent processes and members with relevant experience, particularly as arts such as opera operate at a market loss, with dwindling audiences and programs (Eltham, 2015). To quote Ben Eltham (2015):

The debate about the arts in this country remains fixated on the idea that only certain sorts of things can really be ‘high art’… these are, almost completely, the traditional forms of Western Europe – classical music, ballet, opera and theatre, as well as certain types of visual art (portrait and landscape painting) and, just maybe, the odd novel or film.

Artistic subsidies, as well as benefitting individual artists through grants, also provide more opportunities through the establishment of ‘training grounds’ – festivals, organisations, publications. The arts category ‘Literature’ has steadily had its Australia Council funding decreased since 2012. Projects and persons which rely on this funding include publishing
houses, writing centres, events and festivals, libraries, bookshops, journals/magazines, and individual writers (Glover, 2015).

The comics industry is connected to all these cultural intermediaries. Although artists have continuously found ways to keep their practices economically sustainable through collective action, there is still the feeling (particularly in industries such as comics) that arts funding is ‘not for the likes of us’ (O’Brien, 2014; see also: O’Connor et al, 2011: 21-23).

Stakeholders are invested in the changes which occur in the broader publishing industries. They apply for public assistance in the form of grants, and create spaces for production and distribution with help from cultural intermediaries such as book publishers and literary magazine editors. But in the next section I will be exploring in more detail that stakeholders don’t necessarily consider their work to be ‘industrial’.

The Artist as Entrepreneur: Comics Production within the Framework of the Creative Economy

Interviews conducted with stakeholders within the Australian comics industry have revealed that they associate an ‘industry’ with mass produced product, and Australian practices are often differentiated from American production practices. This is because Australian comics creators work on their creative labour on a part-time basis, unless they can find substantial contractual work with American companies:

This is a scene, theirs [Americans] is an industry. I’d see an industry as being commercial, and having actual profits from the output. We’ve got a large number of people self-publishing, a small publisher comes along, has a burst of enthusiasm and then stops, and they [Americans] have a mainstream industry (Bentley, 10/6/14, interview).

The low-barriers of entry to Australia’s comics scene, and America’s licensing practices, was used as specific comparison points:

You decide for instance that you want to do a comic book, an Australian comic book, there’s nothing stopping you. You get a table at Artist’s Alley, you put a book together, and suddenly you’re in the industry, for lack of a better term. It’s… I don’t know how you’d define it in terms of what an industry is or isn’t. I guess from my
perspective in terms of thinking about it in a comparison to what the Americans have and what we have, the Americans are run by multinational corporations, licensing characters that keep the machine going. It’s a massive monopoly in terms of distribution both nationally and internationally, and we just don’t have that infrastructure here to sustain it [production] (Mason, 12/10/13, interview).

The ‘corporate’ idea of America was also explored in relation to creator motivation:

I think obviously it’s not as big as the American comic book industry, on one hand, you’ve still got an enormous amount of creators who are passionate about what they do. I mean, even though you know I’m generalising here – there are some creators who want to do the superhero stuff, and you know some people would accuse them of being sell outs, but the truth is they’re not doing it because they want to cash in, they’re doing it because they generally love that medium. So, I think just that passion people have is appealing to me, and it makes the Australian comics scene interesting. Not that it isn’t in America, but for the most part it feels like ‘an industry’, it feels on some level like it’s a machine churning out stuff, whereas we don’t have that in Australia (Candiloro, 13/5/14, interview).

Australian practitioners’ discourses around ‘scene’ were related back to not only motivation, but also the size of the scene’s population:

Scene is apt. Comic ‘scene’. Community. Nobody’s making that much stuff off it. I think an industry would be if we all stopped doing it, then the economy would collapse, it’s not going to happen, is it? I mean, nobody’s making that much money off it, that’s the point. Some people do, but I couldn’t call it an industry (Hutchings, 9/6/14, interview).

There are stakeholders who consider part-time working practices to be convenient. A day job provides financial security and business/creative skills which can then be applied to their comics work:

Going back three years, I woke up and decided that I’m going to do this for real, why has it taken me thirty years to figure out that this [publishing and creating comics] is what I’m supposed to be doing? Now I thought, ‘this is a good time – I’ve got a pretty well established career. Maybe with this security I should take a risk and position
myself into a career and business that would – I would be more passionate about.’ The
lessons I’ve got in life through running my own business as a web developer and
software developer, and managing people and outsourcing overseas, all this stuff that
I’ve experienced through my day job, translates quite well to just about any other
creative project that I might want to do anyway. In the Australian comic book scene it
appears that out brand and our books just came out of nowhere a year ago, there’s
been a lot of thought put into the launch of our product and out brand (Purcell,
19/10/13, interview).

I’ve got a full time job which is paying the bills, so basically it’s going through that
and obviously printing comics costs a lot of money and there’s not much chance to
recuperate it, the costs, [and so] I print really low amounts of my books. With my first
book it was only about 40 copies, like the next book it was 50, the next 60, and now
it’s 80-100 copies for each book. Y’know I make just enough so I don’t break the
bank and also have money to print out more books, that’s how I fund them, how I
create them would be y’know, I try to get a book out every 2-3 months, about 4 per
year, that’s all I got! [Laughs] (Candiloro, 13/5/14, interview).

But there are also stakeholders who can feel stress from trying to juggle their day jobs and
comics work at the same time:

It can be a drag when you’re trying to be a one man PR machine. It makes it hard for
example, for one Soldier book, I have to write, draw, colour, assemble the friggin’
book, and then all of a sudden you have to be the promotional machine for the book,
and you don’t know if people are listening (Mason, 12/10/14, interview).

This stress around time can be exacerbated if a comics stakeholder is working in a collective.
Bernard Caleo, the sole publisher, editor and financier of the Tango anthology, stated in an
interview:

I wish I didn’t do Tango. But it’s a necessary thing. I don’t do it because I enjoy it,
although I do enjoy aspects, of it, but it is putting white hairs on my head. It’s a
voracious time swallower, but somebody’s got to do it. I wish someone else would do
it; a Stan Lee of the small press in Australia, ‘cause [sic] I’m not him (Bentley, 2009:
11-12).
For Christian Read, there will never be an Australian ‘industry’ until there is consistent cultural and economic support for comics from government bodies:

Aside from the occasional minor cash injection from grants, it [an industry] essentially does not exist. Without sustained private investment of government funds, very little will change for us. We’re unlikely to see a sustained body of high level work or long-standing artistic partnerships. There is no significant funding to have an opinion about (Read, 5/6/13, interview).

Benzin Bullock offers a similar opinion. ‘What I find Australia lacks, and what I find that stops Australia from being an industry, with our comics, is the fact that we have no specific funding bodies which work towards comics [sic]’ (Bullock, 20/11/13, interview).

Stakeholders are realistic about the fact that they may never be able to give up their day job to work on comics - to quote Patrick Purcell, ‘nobody goes into comics expecting to buy a Lamborghini’ (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview). Having a day job can not only be a source of stress relief by providing economic support, but can also offer stakeholders the opportunity to extricate themselves from the emotional intensity of creative labour and subcultural scenes (Dore, 2015; Heazlewood, 2014: 55-58; Mason, 12/10/13, interview).

The pattern of stakeholders in the creative industries working part-time, or with a flexible schedule extends to the comics industries, including Australia’s (Dore, 2015; Elefante and Deuze, 2012: 13; Woo, 2015). This is not only because of the constant evolution of industrial practices and the fragmentation of markets but it is also due to creative industries having their own unique production processes, encompassing individuals, SMEs, and institutional or corporate bodies (Hartley et al, 2012: 64-65; Cunningham, 2006: 31; O’Connor, 2011: 10-15).

Even before the theory of the creative industries, artists (particularly writers) needed to supplement their income with other work outside of their creative profession (Dore, 2015). It’s estimated that the average Australian artist will work 20-40 hours per week on their creative labour on top of a day job, with only 12% of independent artists in Australians working full time on their creative labour (Heazlewood, 2014: 45; Throsby and Zednick, 2010: 48-52).
Creative industries are judged by political bodies based on their economic, aesthetic and cultural value. The comics industry survives through stakeholders using their free time to be not only artists, but entrepreneurs, creating audiences through social networks and targeted markets (O’Connor et al, 2011: 30). Even though it is understandable that stakeholders consider themselves artists first and foremost, creatives in the Australian comics industry are consciously or unconsciously acting as entrepreneurs, whether they are making an estimation about how many comics they can print without losing money, or they are pitching to publishers or editors. Alice James, who runs the small publishing house Storyteller Press, constantly keeps track of her book sales:

I’m personally a bit obsessive with keeping track [of sales], how many are sold monthly, how many I sold at the event I was at, I have it all there. Like everything set up in my account, constantly compared to see if they’re matching and all that. The issue with publishing is that printing costs are so high, it’s really hard to set a wholesale price at the moment. Print runs can’t be big, because that’s exorbitantly big, but units can be cheaper. So it’s working out – whether it’s worth having 3000 copies printed as opposed to 150, and where they can be sold, and so it’s a constant battle between being able to have enough and also keep afloat, it’s the business-y [sic] side of it, it’s a constant battle in your head (James, 12/6/13, interview).

Cultural intermediaries are also entrepreneurial. Small publishers will often need to have business skills to manage contributors and create a financial plan for their product. Retailers and event organisers, who are also integral to the Australian comics industry, will place emphasis on economic return and reading the market, as well as creativity (Briggs, 1/4/13, interview; Davies, 14/5/13, interview). Retailers need to have acute business skills as stock from their primary distributor, Diamond, is non-returnable and non-refundable (Terror, 2016; Davies, 14/5/13, interview).

Creatives often work on their labour and building community ties for years (Woo, 2012: 133; McRobbie, 2015: 80; Johnston, 2013; Heazlewood, 2014: 25-27). In my interviews, the first question I would ask stakeholders was, ‘How, when and why did you get involved in Australian comics?’ Many of my interviewees would trace their passion for creating comics either back to their childhood, or years prior to the interview (Emery, 15/07/13, interview; 30 More information about sales and strategy is included in Chapter Seven, which concerns distribution.
James, 12/6/13, interview; Bentley, 10/6/14, interview; Ord, 8/6/14, interview). To quote Benzin Bullock (20/11/13, interview):

I got into comics when I was very young, basically because I lived in Port Lincoln and shit was really goddamn boring. And so I would go to the newsagency, and I would go and get *X-Men* comics whilst my Mum got *Woman’s Day*. Whilst I think they’re both unbelievable, *X-Men* at least had some people with laser beam eyes (Bullock, 20/11/13, interview).

Through labour in scenes, stakeholders engage in collective acts of symbolic meaning around what it means to be creative. As well as practices, stakeholders will create shared histories, discourses, and ideologies. These organic manifestations of scene practice are another reason why stakeholders do not consider their practice to be industrialised (Woo, 2012: 68-72; Duncombe, 1997: 18, 36; O’Connor et al, 2011: 10-11). In a study of independent and amateur fashion designers, McRobbie (1996: 339) found that they were making less than what they would in administrative temp work. But financial return mattered less to the designers than the identities and communities they had formed through creative labour. Based on my interview and ethnographic data, the same is true of Australian comics stakeholders.

The description of a ‘scene’ evokes subtexts of community and artistry that the term ‘industry’ does not for stakeholders (O’Connor et al, 2011: 11-15; Kuhn, 2015; Candiloro, 13/5/14, interview; Hutchings, 9/6/14, interview; Caleo, 8/6/14, interview). But as described in Chapter Three, creative industry clusters take on aspects of scenes; physical spaces are used for production and consumption, and social network markets are formed through these spaces (Straw, 2001: 414-415; Straw, 2004: 255; McRobbie, 2015: 123; Berg and Hassink, 2014: 457; Hartley et al, 2012: 18). Stakeholders in the comics industry are aware that for a scene to survive, particularly in the absence of high levels of public patronage, they need to stay visible within the public sphere.31

Comics are also a low-infrastructure creative industry; the only things that comics creators ‘need’ to create a comic is a pen and some paper (Mason, 2013; McCloud, 2000: 20-21, 56; Lobarto and Fletcher, 2013: 118). Whilst the absence of multiple pieces of equipment to create a comic could be considered an equaliser to anyone who wanted to be a practitioner,

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31 Interview data about peer networks is in Chapter Six (which is about production and practice) and more information about clusters, cultural tourism and the creative economy is in Chapter Eight (retail).
previous studies of comics industries (and this thesis) endeavour to provide a more detailed overview of labour. Comics industries have their own internal hierarchies of ‘quality’ and labour practices which correspond to a cultural field (Woo, 2013; Murray, 2013: 337-341; Lopes, 2009: 19-22; Beaty, 2007: 30-32). Even though Australian stakeholders practice artisanal production, there are stakeholders who will have different skills (digital literacy and/or graphic design), working habits (contractual labour versus an independent worker), and different personal and professional goals. A stakeholder who works in small press and attends zine fairs is different to a stakeholder who works in a partnership to produce volumes of genre comics to sell at a convention. Like other creative industries, comics production encompasses practitioners with different financial needs and distribution strategies. What these stakeholders (and cultural intermediaries) have in common is the ability to adapt their practices to find new markets in clusters and networks (Berg and Hassink, 2014: 656-659; Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 10-11). As a low-infrastructure industry, comics are suited to agglomeration economies as their practice can be incorporated into a variety of physical spaces (O’Brien, 2014; Akhtar, 2014; McRobbie, 2015: 122-123; Felton, et al. 2010: 621-623, 626).

The key issue for Hutchings, as well as Bullock, is the Australian comics industry recognising that stakeholders continue to reach new audiences and stay innovative. ‘The trick is not to get complacent, with how ‘vibrant’ the scene is, but to keep striving, keep making,’ (Hutchings, 9/6/14, interview). For Bullock, it’s about ‘getting out of our [stakeholders’] own backyard’, and exploring cultural funding options (Bullock, 20/11/13, interview).

Even though funding for comics has decreased at the federal level, there are still opportunities for comics production and circulation to be funded at a state and council level. South Australia, Queensland, and Victoria have taken an active interest in the creative industries and market their capitals (Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne) on their contributions to the creative economy (Creative Victoria, 2015; Inside South Australia, 2015; Queensland Academy for the Creative Industries, 2016).

Melbourne specifically has taken an active interest in funding comics production: The City of Melbourne’s Young Writer’s Award openly advertises comics creation as a category, Tango: Love and Melbourne was awarded a city grant, and Darebin Council has assisted funding the Homecooked Comics Festival (Bentley, 2009: 9).
Comics industries contributing to creative economies through events and integration into other creative industries is not a new phenomenon. Research from Britain and Europe shows that comics are becoming more visible within city cultures, and achieving more cultural consecration in the process (O’Brien, 2014; Sweeney, 2014; Beaty, 2007: 127-129, Akhtar, 2014).

Policy makers might be wary of including comics in creative industry policy not because of stigma, but because there is little quantitative data on comics’ economic return and expenditure. But as a creative industry which also encompasses elements of cultural tourism through participatory events, and qualitative data already available about stakeholder practices, then it’s conceivable that there could eventually be a financial analysis on how comics production and circulation contributes to the creative economy (O’Brien, 2014).

As a scene-based creative industry comics production is culturally and economically significant when we consider how perseverant and strategic stakeholders can be. Creative workers who work within scenes and subcultures have ‘the motivation, know-how, and connections to pursue jobs’ (Woo, 2015). They also actively shape the marketplace through negotiation with cultural intermediaries (Potts, 2009: 142; Kuhn, 2015; Woo, 2012: 72, 80-83; 114-129).32

With targeted government funding added to this scene activity, and more quantitative research into comics production and the economy, there doesn’t seem to be any reason as to why comics production couldn’t be included in cultural policy documents and public funding initiatives.

Contractual Labour in Comics Industries

Freelance work can supplement a stakeholder’s general income and provide a stakeholder with financial capital for their own projects. For stakeholders working for international publishing companies, contractual work may be their primary source of income outside of commissioned sketches or fan art/merchandise.

But stakeholders are at the risk of exploitation when engaging in this work. Issues include being asked to volunteer their time and labour, low wage rates or not receiving royalties from

32 The specifics of the Australian comics event economy will be explored in Chapter Eight.
their work. This freelance work may be with an organisation or publication within a comics industry or another creative industry. This exploitation is systematic in the comics industries and the creative industries as a whole.

**Contractual Comics Work in Australian Industries**

Comics writers and illustrators have been working for Australian newspapers and magazines since the first period. In the second period, stakeholders who are illustrators or creators still work for newspapers and magazines except they are now working for online publications as well as hard copy publications. These publications may be Australian or international. Stakeholders who work as freelancers or contractual labour in Australia have grassroots workers’ rights movements, arts advocacy bodies and unions working to protect their interests.

*Pay the Writers* is a grassroots movement fighting for writers, including comics creators, to make informed decisions based on how much publications pay for freelance work. Pay the Writers was started in 2014 by former *Overland* editor Jennifer Mills. Mills’ aim for the grassroots movement is to address and then debunk the ideological narrative that writers’ low pay is an individual rather than a systematic problem (Woodhead, 2014).

*Pay the Writers*’ first action was creating an online survey in August 2014 which was distributed among Australian creatives. Although there wasn’t a specific option for comics creators, stakeholders were among the 11.5% identifying themselves as illustrators, 52.6% identifying themselves as freelancers, and 76% identifying as ‘other’. There were 9 examples of paid comics work. Fairfax (corporate news organisation) had the highest rates ($500 per strip) and *The Lifted Brow* (a publicly funded literary magazine) had the lowest ($100 per strip).

Whilst all comics work was reported as paid, 85% of all survey respondents reported that they hadn’t been paid for their work. 67% had voluntarily done or donated their work for free, and 45% had been asked to work for free.

*Pay the Writers*’ manifesto of highlighting systematic inequalities is part of the pushback against the ‘work for exposure’ narrative. The ‘work for exposure’ narrative subverts the ‘work for love first and for money second’ ideology by emphasising art as purely privilege. The payment for this ‘privilege’ is free publicity (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 114-115).
This ignores the fact that creative labour is still ‘plain old labour’ and so workers should be financially compensated accordingly (Woo, 2013). It also misconstrues the principles of the attention economy as economic capital does not come automatically through ‘exposure’ but reading the market and social cues (Goldharber, 1997; Hartley et al, 2012: 115).

When stakeholders work with Australian publishers, methods of payment include page rates (Gestalt, DeeVee), or flat contractual fees with royalties (Allen and Unwin, Milk Shadow Books, Gestalt, Winter City) (Bentley, 2007: 14, 16; Bentley 2011: 5, 13; Purcell, 19/10/13, interview; Rackleyft, 2015: 40). Most Australian publishers are relatively open about their payment methods in interviews, with only some publishing endeavours relying on volunteer labour due to lack of funds (Inkspots, Tango). In these cases the editors and publishers have expressed regret that they could not afford to pay for contributions (Bentley, 2009: 11; Bentley, 2013: 27, 43).

Stakeholders also undertake volunteer labour for each other. This labour is considered pro gratis and may involve lettering, inking, etc. Volunteer work takes time away from stakeholders concentrating on their own comics and therefore a choice must be made about what matters more: a stakeholder’s own creative labour or a commitment to collective action.

To quote Scarlette Baccini:

In general, we [the scene] are pretty autonomous (writing, drawing, lettering, editing, and formatting our own work), and people swap favours. Everyone in the scene is hugely generous and dedicated to supporting local work, and people will offer their services cheap/free when they can, or else you need to learn to be totally self-sufficient (and often the product suffers – most of us are shitty letterers, editors, etc.). As a writer and illustrator, I don’t collaborate much, but I assume lots of people are writing and illustrating for each other for free too. It’s all lovely, but it would be ace to see people being paid properly to get the job done well, and I wonder how much this affects sales/industry growth (Baccini, 13/5/13, interview).

In these circumstances there is the understanding that in lieu of economic payment which cannot be provided pro gratis work is conducted in order to strengthen social relations and generate more product with the expectation that this product that can generate sales. The

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33 The specific practices of publishers and their relationships with stakeholders as cultural intermediaries will be covered more in Chapter Six.
financial capital from these sales will be used to pay the volunteer/s back. This creative labour combines the needs of the individual with collective action (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 76).

The lines may begin to blur between ‘good’ work (combining pleasure and work, and feeling pride and achievement in art) and ‘bad’ work (stress, frustration, and blame regarding practices and product output). ‘Bad’ work occurs when a) the product does not make enough money for a stakeholder to pay and altruism soon becomes regarded as exploitation, and b) if the stakeholder profits from their product and still does not pay (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 20-34). There is the expectation in the creative industries that if you can pay for services, then you should pay for services. To quote graphic novelist Mandy Ord, ‘I don’t think I have the energy any more to do work purely for good will’ (Bentley, 2011: 9).

Scenes also rely heavily on social capital to economic capital conversion – if a stakeholder refuses to help others in the network, or if negotiations end poorly with another creative in the scene, then that stakeholder may experience insecurities or intimidation related to losing respect and authority. Conversely, if a stakeholder is believed to be exploiting their peers, they may also be shunned for that action. It’s a difficult balance which is different for each individual, and can only be learned through tacit knowledge which takes time to build (Williams, 2011: 41-42; O’Connor, 2004: 34).

In Australia, if an artist is struggling financially they can apply for support from Centrelink (a social security service), and are entitled to subsided healthcare under the Medicare scheme (Heazlewood, 2014: 80). But even with a relatively strong social security system, there can be a lot of economic uncertainty for comics creators who work full-time as contractors or freelancers. In a survey of stakeholders within Australian creative industries, Throsby and Zednick (2010: 53-54) found that full-time freelance/contractual workers did not have sick leave, maternity leave, employer’s superannuation contributions, or holiday pay. Around a quarter of creatives had no superannuation and ‘no arrangements whatsoever for their future financial security’ (Throsby and Zednick, 2010: 53).

Advocacy bodies such as the Australian Cartoonist’s Association (ACA) and Australian Society of Authors (ASA) can assist stakeholders. The ACA and the ASA advertise what they consider standard rates for comics work to give freelancers a guide. The ASA has a Comics and Graphic Novels Portfolio which offers mentorship programs specifically for
comics stakeholders. Comics practitioners are also invited to do workshops at the ASA. The largest Australian arts union for the arts, the Media, Entertainment, and Arts Alliance (MEAA) provides legal advice and representation for freelancers and contractual workers (Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2015).

These protections aren’t extended to Australians who work in the American comics industry. The American comics industry has no union representation for stakeholders. Attempts at forming a union have allegedly ceased due to stakeholders fearing being blacklisted. Publishers have different rates of payment, and there is minimal transparency as to why this is the case. A key issue in creative workers being unsure of or not contesting their rights is because without strong union representation there is nothing left but a nebulous network which characterizes ‘the informal economy’. This network-based economy has very few institutional support systems as there is effectively no ‘workplace’ – stakeholders may have social connections, but their physical and creative labour is primarily done in isolation (McRobbie, 2015: 23-27; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 243).

Contractual Comics Work in the American Comics Industry

American stakeholders who are under contract in the United States serial comics industry have revealed that they work anywhere from 5-14 hours a day in order to make deadlines, with most only taking one day off a week. On top of this work, many will work on commissions and prints to supplement their income. One stakeholder, an illustrator, considered himself lucky that he did not have to work on weekends (Harper, 2014). The industrial method of comics work, stemming from the ‘shop system’, has been problematic in that there have historically been low wages and long hours for contractual workers. Many stakeholders in America or elsewhere cannot afford health insurance (Lopes, 2009: 180; Brown, 1997: 22-25; Brienza, 2013; Harper, 2014).

Australian stakeholders who work for the U.S. industry experience similar conditions. In 2013, Paul Abstruse, an Australian who works in the American comics industry worked from 9am to 8pm, 6 days a week. His primary work was comics illustration and he also found time to work on tattoo designs, commissions, or prints. If there was a particularly tight deadline for a comic Abstruse worked from 6am to 9pm (Abstruse, 19/10/13, interview). When I interviewed Paul Mason that same year as we spoke over Skype he was sketching at the same
time to meet a deadline. As well as being a comics artist, he worked two other jobs (Mason, 12/10/13, interview).

There have recently been two anonymous surveys that focused on the wages and working habits of comics creators working in the American industry. The first was organised by stakeholders within the comics industry by an anonymous coalition called *Fair Page Rates* (2016). Like *Pay the Writers, Fair Page Rates* is designed to offer freelancers a space where they can publish their pay rates anonymously to highlight the systematic industry inequities.\(^{34}\)

*Fair Page Rates* shows that stakeholders who work for Marvel, DC and Dark Horse are paid the most and are paid via page rate. Pencil art ranges from (USD) $100-250 per page. A page of script is (USD) $100, but there’s no recorded data for colourists and letterers. Designing covers is the most lucrative role a creative can have, potentially earning between (USD) $600-800 per cover (*Fair Page Rates*, 2016). Stakeholders allegedly earn a higher wage depending on their ability to sell comics based on their popularity. Stakeholders may also receive additional royalties if their comic sells past a designated sales target, but details about these deals remain classified (Lafler, 2011).

The publisher which received the most complaints for their rates and business practices was Boom! where a script is $25 a page. Art is $25, lettering is $10 and cover art between $100-300. Stakeholders who have worked with Boom! also wrote that their editing staff had unprofessional and ‘callous’ business practices, such as being late with payments, having unrealistic deadlines, and replacing staff who complained once their contracts ended (*Fair Page Rates*, 2016).

As well as long hours there are still issues with licensing and royalties between creators and publishing houses. In the comics industries there have been multiple high profile cases of stakeholders or stakeholders’ families fighting for royalties and public recognition of their work (Brown, 1997: 25; Murray, 2013: 339; Howe, 2012: 207-209, 318, 351; McCloud, 2000: 57-65). New stakeholders are advised by their industry peers to always seek legal advice about their contracts (Means-Shannon, 2015). As of 2015 83% of creators ‘own at

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\(^{34}\) There is a caveat in that The Fair Page Rates survey is ongoing, and so there may be data corrected or added to the survey before the final results are published. The quantitative data from these surveys should be considered an approximate, rather than a definitive rate.
least some share of the rights to some of the work that they have done in comics’, less than half (45%) had ever received any royalties for their work (Woo, 2015).

These percentages were recorded in the second survey, Erasing the Lines Between Leisure and Labour (2015) which utilised qualitative and quantitative data to analyse practice. The survey is part of a larger research project being undertaken by Dr Benjamin Woo and is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Erasing the Line between Leisure and Labour: Creative Work and the Comics World (2015) canvassed stakeholders who were involved in work-for-hire conditions with a publisher (31.1%), creator-owned but published by a third party (18.8%), self-published (hard copy) (25.3%) and self-published (online) (22.8%). There is a caveat to this information in that it’s unknown which stakeholders did not receive royalties under these conditions, or even if their work arrangement had limited creative rights/royalties. The critical issue is creators retaining the rights to their intellectual property (IP) within the comics industry and other creative industries.

Comics are a medium which contribute millions to a global creative economy through the products themselves or through media and merchandise. Without a creator’s rights to their work this could deny them ongoing royalties from their comics and also revenue generated from adaptations of their work in other media (Howe, 2012: 416). Regardless of whether a stakeholder works on a creator-owned comic or is hired to work on licensed properties, the onus is placed on the individual to get legal assistance or advice when negotiating their contacts (Means-Shannon, 2015).

The potential for exploitation of labour and creator’s rights in the American comics industry is not only systematic but structurally specific. These industry specifics include the production costs of comics and low union representation.

The American comics industry has only had one union body, the Comic Book Creators Guild (1978-1979) which advertised recommended payment rates, much like the ASA and the ACA (Howe, 2012: 207-209; McCloud, 2000: 59).\(^\text{35}\) The 1978 rates were $300 for a page of art, $100 for a page of script, $40 per page for lettering, and $70 per page for colouring. Adjusted

\(^{35}\) There is the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, however this organisation acts more as a fundraising organisation and legal advocate for cases related to ‘the First Amendment right to read, create, publish, sell, and distribute comics and graphic novels’ (CBLDF, 2016).
for inflation, those prices would now mean $1080 per page for artists, $360 for writers, $144 for letterers and $252 for colourists (Asselin, 2015). Although these rates would mean that many comics stakeholders would be relieved of some stress associated with their creative labour, they’re not considered feasible, because comics sales would not be enough to cover costs (Asselin, 2015).

Comics sales have also stayed the same for nearly twenty years, despite the proliferation of media based on comics, which leads to the occasional spike in sales (film) or renewed interest (television) (Johnston, 2015; Beaty, 2010: 206).\textsuperscript{36} This is due to comics, particularly serial comics which rely on contractual labour, still being a niche medium due to the direct market: they have their own distribution systems, specialised retailers, and rely heavily on the patronage of collectors (Cox, 2012; McAllister, 1990: 56-69; Terror, 2016; Johnston, 2015; Miller, 2011; Sutcliffe, 2016; Arrant, 2016; Sabin, 1993: 67-69; Hatfield, 2005: 22-23; Woo, 2012: 185-191, 193; Brown, 1997: 23-26; Lopes, 2009: 104; McCloud, 2000: 66-79).

The rising popularity of the trade paperback (TPB) has been influenced by the direct market’s ‘back issue’ trade, because previously-printed single issues are sold in a bulk package at a discounted price, for casual readers and collectors who miss issues (Cox, 2012; Woo, 2012: 193). But the back issue and TPB market is under threat from online retailers. Back issues and ‘bundles’ of old comics are sold online for a cheap price via sites such as Comixology (Terror, 2016; Steirer, 2014: 459-460).

Stakeholders who work as contractual labour for graphic novels in the U.S. (with comics publishers such as Fantagraphics and Top Shelf Productions), and are paid a percentage of the book’s cover price. This arrangement is negotiated through a contract. An advance against royalties is paid upon the artist signing the contract (Lafler, 2011).

It could be argued that the ‘sales won’t cover production costs’ discourse is undermined by the different page rates set out by different publishers. There is no transparency into why they choose to set certain rates. There is no published data on American publishers’ production budgets, average unit sales, or profits, which would put their contractual rates into context.

\textsuperscript{36} Speaking with an anonymous accountant who works at DC, Johnston (2015) was informed that films ‘spike’ whilst television series create sustained interest. This is because a film based on a graphic novel will usually tell the same story (i.e. \textit{Watchmen}). The world building and interlocked narratives of superhero serial comics can be intimidating for a filmgoer. Television series are usually based on serial comics which have a singular narrative, i.e. \textit{The Walking Dead} and so audiences become invested for longer.
There is just anecdotal evidence from their creative staff. It is also concerning that even if the production costs of comics are unable rise above a certain rate due to sales, some stakeholders’ may not be entering contractual arrangements where they receive royalties for their work. There are currently no industry advocacy bodies or unions in the American comics industries to protect worker rights or offer advice.

The Comic Book Creators Guild only lasted for a year due to concerns from stakeholders about possible blacklisting by publishers, and internal grievances about some artistic skills being more financially privileged than others (Howe, 2012: 207-209; Asselin, 2015). This attempt at unionisation was organised by creatives and not by corporate stakeholders, hence the fear of blacklisting (Howe, 2012: 207-209; Asselin, 2015).

Freelancers being vulnerable to blacklisting (which has varying degrees of illegality) is not limited to the comics industry, but within the comics industry specifically there have been concerns over publishing houses’ treatment of their staff (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 212-214; Howe, 2012: 207-208, 231, 277, 351). In addition to repeated worker exploitation there have been allegations of publishing houses protecting abusive editors and professional and sexual discrimination against women (Hanover, 2015; Asselin, 2015; Howe, 2012: 207-209, 277, 293; Woo, 2015). In the informal networked economy a successful stakeholder cultivates social capital from influential knowledge brokers. As well as being talented, a creative must be respected/liked by the ‘right’ people (McRobbie, 2015: 26; Gill, 2002: 70-89).

Stakeholders are aware that they work undertake in the comics industry is stressful, yet it is also something which gives them emotional fulfilment. It has been simultaneously described as a ‘dream job’ and a ‘grind’ (Woo, 2013; Woo, 2015). Despite these problematic issues, many stakeholders aspire to work in the American comics industry. In Woo’s (2015) survey, stakeholders identify strongly with their labour as both a creative and a comics fan. 9 out of 10 respondents identified as comics fans, 75% percent associate their work with personal goals, and 70% considered their work to be a blurring of leisure and labour. To quote Harper (2014), the journalist who interviewed American contractual workers: ‘I think if you asked any comic artist, not just the ones I talked to – you would find that they work in comics not for any perceived fame, fortune or glamour (if those things exist in comics), but because it’s what they want to do and feel compelled to do’ (Harper, 2014).
Australian comics stakeholders who work in the American industry are more vulnerable to exploitation than a stakeholder who works domestically on independent projects, but they receive more attention at popular culture conventions and the media. They are seen to have ‘made it’ (Mason, 2013). These cultural privileges are based around positions within the field – a popular culture convention is more likely to place value on serial comics – but they may also be based around cultural cringe. An Australian creative who has been recognised by American arbiters of taste is given a more positive reception in media coverage (Mason, 2013; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview; Heazlewood, 2014: 233-234).37

When considering the self-actualisation that stakeholders achieve from their work, this adds to the argument that work which is individualised and flexible isn’t always a negative. For many stakeholders in the creative industries, having unregulated, constant contractual work can give them freedom to pursue projects based on their passion (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 38-43; Hartley et al, 2012: 23, 78-79; Elefante and Deuze, 2012: 14). In an interview on Australian TV program The Feed, Nicola Scott (Wonder Woman) stated:

*Black Magick* [Scott’s independent series] wouldn’t have happened without *Wonder Woman*. That series [*Wonder Woman*] gave me the confidence, and contacts necessary to be able to work on my own stuff. I learnt so much working on superheroes. *(The Feed, 2015)*

Stakeholders’ values on creative freedom are also central to how to form an effective union to protect worker rights and intellectual property (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 222-224):

Few workers can actually make a living from the rights they have a stake in, but of course such rights provide an important supplement to other incomes for many creative workers. It is understandable therefore that unions and other associations of workers serve to increase such income for their members by campaigning for stricter enforcement of intellectual property. Yet this can have the effect of stifling public spheres, and making content creation more expensive for workers who do not have the protection of a big company behind them (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 224).

Effective unions work alongside and complement the network system which has come to characterise modern cultural and creative industries. Creatives often work on short-term

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37 Cultural cringe is discussed more thoroughly in Chapters Seven and Nine.
projects and their creative practice is multi-sited (McRobbie, 2015: 23) The negative elements of networks are that they can emphasise individualisation, competitiveness, and isolation (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 224). What networks and unions have in common is an emphasis on using collective action for positive ends and equity.

In America, corporate comics publisher structures means that stakeholders are more isolated. They work from contract to contract, or with the same company. It is a competitive environment due to stakeholders being sourced globally. American publishers, particularly serial comics publishers which dominate the direct market (Marvel, DC, Dark Horse) are selective in who they hire (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 250, 261). An environment of competitiveness and isolation can lead creative practitioners to normalise an ideology which places emphasis on self-determination and individualism (McRobbie, 2015: 25-27).

The creative identity provides comics industries with sustainability. There will always be stakeholders with a passion for the craft either willing to work or currently working. What is concerning is that that the cost of this sustainability comes with stresses related to financial strain and time pressures.

Digital Publications

Digital publications have changed the economic and social structures of the Australian comics industry and the creative industries. Hard copy newspapers and magazines are increasingly competing with digitised media, or becoming digitised themselves. This has resulted in less full-time work in hard copy newspapers, so creatives are now seeking out work as freelancers with various national and international online publications. As cultural intermediaries, many of these publications allow more diverse voices to experiment with comics journalism. This raises the cultural capital of Australian stakeholders and exposes their work to international markets.

In this section the focus is on how stakeholders who create comics as well as work freelance for publications. Cartoonists and strip artists who used to work full-time for these publications have found their work quotas cut down or cancelled (Edwards, 2015). This is due to the increasing consolidation of media corporations. Auspac Media, one of Australia’s largest suppliers of comics strips and puzzles, cut 40% of its staff as more of its content moved online (Edwards, 2015).
Comics inhabiting virtual spaces is the result of media convergence – the nexus point between old media and new media – affecting the publishing industries (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008: 5-6; Cunningham, 2006: 4; Hartley et al, 2012: 38; Jenkins, 2006: 259-260). Online news sites have significantly reduced the economic and ideological power of newspapers, but they have also democratised journalism. News media is fragmented, but more concentrated (Schachar and Ball, 2016; Anderson, 2004).

Freelance work or contractual employment with digital publications is increasingly becoming a source of revenue for comics stakeholders. Digital publications which pay for both longform and shortform comics include SBS (Special Broadcasting Service), The Guardian and The Daily Review. The Nib is an international publication which has an Australian, Eleri Mai Harris, in an editorial role. Harris has recently being nominated for an Eisner. Harris, acting as a cultural intermediary with considerable cultural capital, has published Australian creators such as Ben Hutchings and Ele Jenkins.

Australian comics creators are also receiving critical acclaim for their diverse range of freelance work outside of the comics industry. Safdar Ahmed, a small press creator and freelance cartoonist, won a Walkley Award in 2015, the highest honour in Australian journalism, for Villawood: Notes from an Immigration Detention Centre, published on the international news and op-ed site Medium. Sam Wallman was nominated for a Walkley in 2016 for his comic Winding up the Window: The End of the Australian Auto Industry, about factory closures in Geelong, published via SBS Online.

The integration of comics into digital publications is also a sign that they are becoming a less marginalised medium. International sites which incorporate comics into their content include Buzzfeed, Everyday Feminism, AV Club, and College Humour. The types of cartoons that these publications usually publish are short form – singular cartoons beneath a block of text, or gag strips with 3-5 panels.\(^\text{39}\)

The production and circulation of comics within virtual spaces will be explored more thoroughly within Chapters Seven and Nine, through sections focused on webcomics, digital

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\(^{38}\) An Eisner award, or an ‘Eisner’, is an international comics award named after Will Eisner (1917-2005). An Eisner award is one of the highest honours a comics creator can achieve, it is comparable to an Oscar.

\(^{39}\) Currently these sites feature no Australian comics stakeholders. As will be discussed further in Chapter Nine, the increasing visibility of comics stakeholders (Australian or otherwise) in virtual spaces affects the production and circulation practices in the global comics industries.
comics, and comics circulated via social media. Comics within online publications are examples of the comics industry, as well as other media industries, using innovation to stay culturally and financially relevant. Innovation in the creative industries is done through a process of is origination, adaptation, and retention of an idea or practice. It is the result of networks constantly circulating ideas, and individual agents working together as collectives (Hartley et al, 2012: 112; Potts, 2009: 141). The comic strip has increasingly become absent from hard copy publications, it has proliferated instead online through digital publications and social media.

Crowdfunding: A Concentrated Market

Crowdfunding has emerged as a way for stakeholders in the Australian comics industry to finance individual and collective projects whilst targeting concentrated social network markets. This method of funding breaks down the barriers between producers and consumers by letting consumers decide how much they will donate to a project to see it completed and have access to exclusive rewards. A producer may rely on crowdfunding for full or partial funding of projects.

The practice of crowdfunding began in 2003 with the creation of ArtistShare. ArtistShare began as a site where fans could donate to musicians registered on the site, their donations going towards digital recordings (Freedman and Nutting, 2014: 1). Crowdfunding has evolved to fund multiple kinds of projects, the most popular being the creative projects, small business start-ups, social justice fundraisers, and private investment projects (Freedman and Nutting, 2014: 1-2).

Crowdfunding sites utilised in the Australian comics industry include those designed for one-off projects (Kickstarter, Indiegogo, Pozible) and subscription support services (Patreon). These sites utilise a reward model where goods and services are exchanged for donations, these donations existing on a price scale from low to high (Mollick, 2014: 1-2; Belleflamme, Lambert and Schweinbacker, 2014: 585). Popular rewards for Australian comics industry projects include ‘bundles’ of comics (online or hardcopy), signed merchandise and personalised sketches by stakeholders involved in the project or festival guests, table costs covered at festivals, and festival tee shirts.
Added incentives for donors are making the rewards exclusive depending on their donation tier or offering merchandise below the RRP (recommended retail price). A successful pitch makes the donor feel valued by the fundraiser emphasising the donor’s status as a privileged investor rather than just a consumer (Belleflamme et al, 2014: 585).

Crowdfunding is a concentrated form of a social network market, with the consumer directly influencing supply and demand (Belleflamme et al, 2014: 602; Mollick, 2014: 2, 14; Banks and Humphreys, 2008: 406). By deciding to donate to a crowdfunding campaign the consumer is making ‘a choice under novelty’. There is not only the willingness to engage in a new venture but this choice is influenced by the behaviour of others (Potts, 2010: 136; Hartley et al, 2012: 9).

When analysing the methods of project creators, Belleflamme et al (2014: 586) and Mollick (2014: 3-6) found that the success rate of an entrepreneur’s project was dependent on how it was advertised to a community (united through interest or geography). Australian comics stakeholders will often support and advertise the projects of their friends and professional acquaintances (Baccini, 13/5/14, interview; Jade, 13/3/13, interview). This is known as word-of-mouth, or WOM.

WOM is related to what has been termed ‘the attention economy’ in creative industry studies. The attention economy is where a stakeholder who wishes to sell goods, a project, a persona, or an ideology needs to consider ‘business as performance’. If the product receives positive or enduring attention, then the stakeholder increases their chances of converting this attention into monetary and/or cultural value (Goldharber, 1997; Hartley et al, 2012: 9, 61).

The risks associated with crowdfunding are shared by the project creator and the donor – a project may not meet its funding goal, or a creator may not deliver to the consumer what is promised (Belleflamme, 2014: 601). Many consumers/investors then depend on social cues from reliable sources and this is where WOM is a factor. In communities of interest and subcultures WOM is strengthened by the perceived authenticity and authority of whoever is providing social cues, recommendations, and information (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007: 3-7; Goldharber, 1997). This authenticity/authority may come from the project creator and/or donors who make their support for the project public.

Most of the projects which are crowdfunded in Australian comics production involve collective action, such as anthologies (Starrytellers (2015), If We All Spat at Once They’d
Drown (2016), and festivals (Homecooked Comics Festival (2014-2016), Zine and Indie Comics Symposium (2013-2016). The potential consumer network and WOM are increased by having multiple stakeholders involved (Mollick, 2014: 7). Collective projects often need a significant amount of capital (usually thousands of dollars), which may not be fully provided through private investment or public subsidy. Festival organisers can also plan their crowdfunding campaigns well in advance of the event’s date to secure funding for their proposed itineraries.

In the American comics industry Kickstarter has come to the attention of comics journalists after the success of books which are outside of the ‘mainstream’ comics market. These include queer comics, feminist erotica comics, and comics which heavily feature people of colour (POC). It’s been theorised that these comics overwhelmingly surpass their fundraising goals due to the communities which have been built around socio-political/social justice comics at small press/zine fairs and on Tumblr. This self-publishing is entrepreneurial, because it is catering to a market that has only become possible through technology and changing social conditions. These stakeholders who have identified gaps in the market and active online communities do not have to rely on raising their own capital to self-publish, or pitch to publishing companies (Rosberg, 2016).

Stakeholders in the Australian comics industry have also used crowdfunding to fund projects which are related to specific interests and demographics. The Australian comics Starrytellers (2015) and Fly the Colour Fantastica (2015) are anthologies that have been created by all-women collectives and funded via Kickstarter. Sam Wallman funded an anthology about class (If We All Spat at Once They’d Drown) in 2016 and in 2014 Can Yalcinkaya funded the #ResistComics anthology about the Gezi Park protests in Turkey.

As they are usually organised by individuals or small teams of people, even crowdfunding projects which meet their fundraising goals require a considerable amount of time management. Project organisers will often ‘learn on the job’ during and after their campaigns, as once the funds have been raised they are responsible for publishing and distributing products and/or running events. To assist each other, stakeholders across the globe are offering advice on how they made their campaigns successful (Rosberg, 2016).

As a small creative industry which relies scene activity for sustainability, Australian comics projects have a high success rate when crowdfunding is used as a source of revenue. Of the
20 crowdfunded Australian comics campaigns observed throughout the course of this research only 2 have failed to meet their target. 

These successes give evidence of the strong levels of social capital in scenes, and the ability of stakeholders to use media convergence, innovation and the attention economy to their advantage. But crowdfunding still represents the economic and cultural inequalities present in the creative industries. These inequalities come from stakeholders’ work being devalued by hard copy publishers, and gatekeeping in hard copy industries restricting the diversity of voices.

Conclusion

The three key issues to consider in regards to comics production and funding are their representation in cultural policy; the economic circumstances around stakeholders’ independent production and freelance labour; and how stakeholders adapt to media convergence in the creative industries. Throughout this chapter I have shown that even though stakeholders are self-reflexive and resilient in regards to their creative labour, targeted public funding and increased advocacy for artists’ rights would not only benefit their own practice but the creative economy as a whole.

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40 Speaking with stakeholders within the scene, the first project may have failed because of high shipping costs (the author and fundraiser of the comic is Australian but lives in Los Angeles) and the second project featured authors unknown to most stakeholders in the scene as they were underground artists. Whilst the reasons for these projects failing is mostly inconclusive hearsay, said hearsay does allude to the importance of geography and social capital when crowdfunding.
Chapter Six: Production as Practice and Culture

Introduction

The primary themes within this chapter are the physical creation of comics in Australia and the internal logics of the cultural field which accompanies this physical creation. Creating comics is both a solitary and social activity. Physical labour (scripting, illustration, lettering) may be done in isolation, but a stakeholder and their work is always connected to others through peer networks. These peer networks may be professional, personal, or both.

An analysis of these peer networks presents a detailed overview of how the Australian comics industry functions and its economic and cultural significance. These peer networks are sustained and grow through technological advances and the need to share resources. Every production practice enacted by a stakeholder is related back to their position in the cultural field.

The economic and cultural capitals of comics are determined as much by the resources available as by stakeholder choice. Examples of decisions which may be necessity and/or choice include the role of the printer in hard copy comics, editorial decisions made by publishing companies, and digital literacy.

Stakeholders accumulate skills and knowledge through their connections, with stakeholders or cultural intermediaries often working as knowledge brokers. These connections may be informal (stakeholders working together on a comic for free in their spare time) but may also be contractual (stakeholders negotiating with publishers and editors to be paid for their creative labour). Editors and publishers perform gatekeeping roles in the creative industries as it is their job to assess the quality of work that is submitted to them. This assessment can cause some tension between editors/publishers (in the Australian comics industry they are often the same person) and stakeholders. This tension stems from different ideas about artistry and is also connected to ideas around ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ in a scene. Stakeholders who work within the domestic market often work part-time, as do editors who aren’t affiliated with a corporate/commercial publishing company. This raises questions
within the industry as to whether editors/publishers have the authority to question stakeholders’ work when they have similar levels of experience.

These tensions of artistic difference and what could be considered ‘good’ practice (the difference between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’) are present within the scene more broadly. These debates are instances of stakeholders’ defining their practice and their creative identity in opposition to others. These discussions happen primarily on social media, because computer mediated communication can disinhibit emotions.

These discussions are ultimately unresolvable, because there is no true ‘authentic’ practice within a subcultural scene, or a cultural field. Even though stakeholders are emotionally connected to their practice, they also display self-awareness about the circular and ephemeral nature of conflict.

The positive effect of discussing issues is that it can relieve suppressed emotions, and it can also re-affirm partnerships and peer networks. Much of the computer mediated communication between stakeholders is positive. Unlike conflict, which has not had an empirical effect on the production practices of stakeholders, this positivity is key to the sustainability and growth of the creative industry. Stakeholders have an implicit understanding about how they can use collective action to create diverse social network markets and contribute to the creative economy.

Production Practices

Sole Creators

Being a sole creator requires the ability to be multi-skilled in comics production. A sole creator has complete financial and creative control over their product if they self-publish. But, a sole creator may also work with an editor if their work is accepted into an anthology or publishing imprint/company.

Most stakeholders in the early days of the second period were sole creators, because there was a cultural movement to have creative autonomy balanced with entrepreneurial action. The alternative comics movement of the 1970s took inspiration from underground comics and some bande desinee, as did the small press comics movement in the 1990s. There is presently a thriving small press comics movement which has connections with the zine scene.
Small press comics are created individually and are cheap, ephemeral, and personal (Hatfield, 2005: 7, 18; Duncombe, 1997: 6, 15). The small press comics movement in Australia has an oppositional stance to the dominant idea that comics need to emulate mainstream American serial comics (‘glossy’ magazines designed for a general audience) (Hill, 2007: 412-414; Hale, 1998: 98). Small press comics creators deliberately choose to print small comics in black and white, being inspired by the DIY ‘punk art’ culture of the 1970s, zines, and underground magazines. Printing in black and white also keeps costs of production low (Hill, 2003: 92-103; Hill, 2007: 412-414). Australian small press comics are similar to underground magazines in that their content may contain socio-political or autobiographical themes and their circulation networks may be connected to youth subcultures (primarily zines) (Hill, 2007: 413-414).

Being a sole creator is time and labour intensive, because stakeholders needs to be multi-skilled. These skills encompass illustration and scripting but may also involve lettering and colouring. Many stakeholders are now also skilled in graphic design, learning these skills through their day job or in their spare time. Photoshop has become a popular option for stakeholders who want to colour or edit their work after they have pencilled and inked their pages (Rackleyft, 2015: 13; Bentley, 2009: 13-14; Candiloro, 13/5/14, interview; Purcell, 19/10/13, interview). As will be explored later in this section, digital literacy is becoming a key issue for sole creators.

Self-publishing for a sole creator relies on two key factors: printing services and/or website platforms. In Australian comics studies the role of the printer in comics production has not been discussed extensively, even though they have been present since the beginning of the second period. Greg Gates, Colin Paraskevas, Martin Trengove, and David Vodicka were stakeholders in the 1970s and 1980s Melbourne scene who at one point worked as printers or had family members that could access cheap printers (Bentley, 2013: 30, 68-69; Trengove, 9/6/14, interview). Having printers as cultural intermediaries contributed to the productivity and reputation of Melbourne’s comics scene in the second period, with Melbourne creating multiple comics anthologies which featured local, interstate, and international contributors (Bentley, 2013: 68-69). In the present, Brendan Halyday, also from Melbourne, works as a printer, and prints other creators’ comics for a discount (Halyday, 10/6/14, interview).

The practice of printing involves reciprocal exchange of social capital, financial management, and innovation. Stakeholders will recommend printing services to others and consult printers
about run amounts and specifications. For stakeholders who have a more DIY approach to their work, photocopiers can print hundreds of black and white comics at very little cost. The act of photocopying zines and small press comics is often a social ritual, with ‘distros’ becoming a subcultural space. Zine distros in Australia include Sticky Institute in Melbourne, Format in Adelaide, and Aunty Mabel in Brisbane (Poletti, 2008: 17, 86).

Sole creators who go from alternative or small press comics into graphic novels represent shifting positions within the cultural field which parallels international comics industries. Underground/small press/alternative comics in Anglophone and European comics industries commonly feature an artist working alone for total creative control. This is to make their name part of a ‘brand’ and because common genres in the form (such as autobiography and non-fiction) are personal and/or confessional works (Hatfield, 2005: 6-5, 14-16, 18-20; Woo, 2015; Murray, 2013: 337-338; Beaty, 2007: 8; Johnston, 2015: 4, 7-9).  

41 Hatfield (2005: 14-20) does not give much explanation as to what is ‘underground’ and ‘alternative’, outside of the underground comics movement starting in the 1960s and the alternative comics movement beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. The only major differences between them would be alternative comics achieving more visibility in comics stores due to the direct market. This is different to small press, which specifically denotes comic books which are differentiated through form. They are often smaller in size and width than the average comic and may have a deliberately ‘amateurish’ appearance as an aesthetic. Rather than separate categories it may be useful to think of underground, alternative and small press to exist upon a scale which measures time period, practice, and form.
novel is because high amounts of money and time must be invested into the form; graphic novels are long, and the majority are produced by publishing houses who expect a profit or decent return to cover their formatting costs (Hatfield, 2005: 20; Sabin, 1993: 91-95; Rackleyft, 2015: 45; Hutchings, 9/6/14, interview; Bentley, 2011: 10-11; Bentley, 2009: 14).

The cultural capital of graphic novels, particularly those which are the work of ‘auteurs’, also aligns them with literature (Murray, 2013: 333-335). Graphic novels may also be associated with visual arts, due to artists’ and creators’ experimentation and expertise with imagery (Johnston, 2015; Beaty, 2007: 8, 60-64). In the Australian comics industry, graphic novelists such as John Santospirito, Mandy Ord, and Chris Gooch, have had gallery exhibitions focused on their art. Santospirito’s exhibition Sleuth (2012) was held at the Inflight Gallery, Hobart. Ord and Gooch’s exhibition, Gasoline Eye Drops (2014), was at Storey Hall, Melbourne.

The subject matter of small press comics, combined with the book market becoming more interested in longform graphic narratives (first in the 1980s and then again in the 2000s) has lead to sole creators choosing to work with publishing houses who respect their creative autonomy (Hatfield, 2005: 20; Sabin, 1993: 91-95; Rackleyft, 2015: 45; Hutchings, 9/6/14, interview; Bentley, 2011: 10-11; Bentley, 2009: 14) For Caleo (8/6/14, interview), it is about finding the kind of support a comics artist needs: ‘personal, economic professional – or all of the above?’.

Graphic novelists will also work solo for economic reasons. It can be too expensive and time consuming to work in a partnership. A graphic novel is usually 30-150 pages, and if the artist is being paid ‘a few hundred per page’, then that could potentially cost thousands, for work which could take up to 2-3 years, explains Mutard (in Rackeyft, 2015: 22-23).

Sole creators are like any other stakeholder in the Australian comics industry in that they will combine their creativity with business skills (administration, time management, marketing, additional revenue options) (Heazlewood, 2014: 75; Hartley et al, 2012: 93-94). A stakeholder who works solo will often adjust their practices based on past receptions of their comics by social network markets. This risk assessment is so stakeholders can keep costs of production down with the eventual goal of being able to break even or make a profit. A sole

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42 It’s assumed that Mutard was basing these figures on rates the ASA recommends for illustrated work ($100 per page) (Australian Society of Authors, 2015).
creator can not rely on anyone else to fund their comics and so budgeting becomes essential (Santospirito, 25/6/13, interview; Candiloro, 8/6/14, interview; Jade, 19/3/13, interview).\textsuperscript{43} To quote Jade:

Most local creators, even if they’re not publishing under an ‘imprint’, will be self-publishing in exactly the same way as anyone with an official business name. They just may not know it. Depending on what they want to focus on is how their imprint will be set up. I want mine to grow and envelope more than just my solo work and as such I’ve created systems to support that. I spend a lot of time on admin duties (Jade, 19/3/13, interview).

Sole creators who work on webcomics have adopted similar methods of entrepreneurialism by complementing their comics with associated merchandise, site adverts, or a Patreon (a month-by-month donation site) (Johnston, 2015: 5; Fenty, Houp and Taylor, 2004; Skageby, 2009: 66-69; McCloud, 2000: 183-185). Webcomics originated in the 1990s and their early formats were similar to newspaper strips. They can now be either static strips, pages of comics a user has to scroll through, a motion comic, or a comic without traditional sequential signifiers such as panels and gutters (Goodbrey, 2013: 188; McCloud, 2000: 206-209, 220-230).

Australian webcomics include \textit{Kranburn} (by Ben Michael Byrne), \textit{Oglaf} (by Trudy Cooper), \textit{Blue} (Pat Grant) and \textit{Zen Pencils} (by Gavin Au Thang). On Tumblr, \textit{Megg Mogg and Owl} (by Simon Hanselmann) and \textit{Teen Dog} (by Jake Holmes) became so popular with audiences that they are also sold as graphic novels (Hanselmann) and a serial issue series (Holmes) (MacDonald, 2015; Collins, 2013).

Webcomics are cheap to create, released as jugs or files on individual sites, blogs, and social media platforms. The appeal of webcomics for sole creators are that they can be created quickly and easily if a stakeholder has digital literacy, and there are also less cultural intermediaries (such as editors) that could possibly censor their material (Fenty, Houp and Taylor, 2004; McCloud, 2000: 165, 170, 173).

\textsuperscript{43} More specific data about sales will be in Chapter Seven which focuses on distribution. The reason why I am putting more detailed sales data in the next chapter is it concerns how stakeholders read the market and distribute their comics accordingly.
In my interview with Simon Hanselmann he credited the decision to release material on the internet with his career:

Australian comics is generally a very insular little thing. If we didn't put our stuff online nobody outside of Australia would see it. Nobody outside of Australia is clamouring for Australian comics. I put all my shit on the internet and now I have a ton of book deals and television executives offering me jobs. I’m making a living out of this. If it weren't for the internet I would still be selling scrappy zines at bad local comic shops. The internet makes us visible (Hanselmann, 13/4/14, interview).

Digital literacy in the form of graphic design and internet usage is becoming a key factor in comics creation. For sole creators, or any other creative practitioner, digital literacy in comics creation concerns three key issues: ability to maintain a skill set, what could be considered ‘DIY’ in small press, and what could be considered ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ in regards to aesthetics.

In the creative industries digital literacy has become a key component in many creative practitioners’ lives. This digital literacy may be the ability to use programs, apps, or social media (Hartley, 2013: 84-88). In the comics industries, it was predicted that there would be a generation gap between older stakeholders who were accustomed to creating manually (through pen and ink) and those who grew up with computers and the internet as children. The generation that used pen and ink would struggle to compete in the digital comics marketplace with the more adept younger generations (McCloud, 2000: 135, 142-143).

So far this does not seem to be the case with Australian comics – from ethnographic observation and speaking with stakeholders, most practitioners are familiar with and adept at using Photoshop. But there is no quantitative, or strictly empirical data on who is or isn’t familiar with graphic design programs, and from social media conversations and in-jokes there is the presumption in the scene that people inherently understand computerised graphic design. As Photoshop is not cheap, there is also the question of who can afford Photoshop, as well as who can use it.

Two further issues stem from who can and/or does use Photoshop. The first is whether a comic can truly be considered ‘DIY’ if a stakeholder refines their lettering, inks etc. through Photoshop. There are some small press creators in Australia who use the program, scanning their work and using Photoshop for post-production (Rackleyft, 2015: 21).
The second is whether it matters. Simon Hanselmann, arguably one of Australia’s best-known comics creators after his book *Megahex* (2014) debuted on the New York Times Bestseller list, used cheap pencils and watercolours to create his comics before uploading them onto Tumblr (Hazel, 2015).

McCloud (2000: 146-151) predicted that webcomics would start off being rough and ugly and then be refined through practice. Whilst there are some webcomics which are high definition, detailed, etc. many webcomics use basic, crude drawings. Popular webcomics *xcd* and *Cyanide and Happiness* utilise stick figures for their gag strips (Fenty, Houp and Taylor, 2004).

Memes, which could be considered an extension of webcomics, often utilise crude graphics and texts (Douglas, 2014: 315). The aesthetics of webcomics, particularly those shared throughout social media, is a research topic which could be explored in the future, along with digital literacy skills of the modern comics practitioner.

Whether online or offline the appeal of being a sole creator for creators is being in control of all aspects of their comic’s production. Stakeholders who prefer to share business responsibilities or prefer to focus their creative skills on only one aspect of production form partnerships.

**Partnerships**

Partnerships form when an illustrator is paired with a writer to create a comic. When referring to partnerships I will be referring primarily to stakeholders who self-publish.44

During the early years of comics production forming partnerships was a popular creative practice. The ‘shop system’ of early American comics could be hard work but constant deadlines and close proximities meant that stakeholders would quickly form partnerships and/or friendships with people that they could work well with (Lopes, 2009: 7, 20; Howe, 2012: 16-27). The first period of Australian production had a similar system, with some stakeholders in small publishing houses choosing to form partnerships rather than work solo for both personal and professional reasons (Ryan, 1979: 158).

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44 As per earlier statements comics which need multiple stakeholders to be produced will be analysed in ‘Collectives: Anthologies and Publishing Houses’ subsection below.
At the beginning of the second period production started more gradually but it was still necessary to find likeminded people within cultural quarters to work on projects (Bentley, 2013: 27-30). As in the first period relationships were formed on a word of mouth basis, with creatives either found through fandom networks or advertised callouts (Bentley, 2013: 28; Bentley, 2007: 6; DeVries, 2011/13, interview). Notable early partnerships that came out of these cluster collaborations include Glenn Lumsden and Dave DeVries (Cyclone), Bodine Amerikah and Jason Paulos (Hairbutt the Hippo) and Douglas Holgate and Scott Fraser (Doll Boy) (Carroll, 2003).

These partnerships were influenced by the formation of ‘meets’ where artists would advertise their skills to writers by placing their sketchbooks on display (DeVries, 2011/13, interview; Carroll, 1996). Partnerships forming through meets is common in both Australian and international scenes, as stakeholders will meet in social spaces (shops, conventions, etc.) to swap contact details and pitch ideas (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242-245).

This is comparable to other publishing industries with stakeholders forming partnerships or collectives through meeting after-hours in pubs. Pubs are associated with a white, straight, masculine culture and therefore can be uncomfortable for anybody who does not fit those categories or those who abstain from alcohol (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 153).

The Australian comics industry is still predominantly populated by white straight men who embody this pub culture, but changing demographics have been reflected in diversified social spaces and alternative networking methods. There are now meets and sketch nights held in libraries, comics shops and art galleries, with diversity initiatives put in place to attract more women.45

Talent-scouting outside of city clusters is becoming more common for stakeholders looking to collaborate in a partnership. These collaborations may be interstate, such as Chadwick Ashby (Adelaide) and Anthony Castle (Melbourne) or overseas, such as Ben Rosenthal (Adelaide) and Mike Perry (Portland, United States). Talent-scouting can benefit creators who aren’t interested in meets where there is alcohol. It also represents a cultural and

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45 The impact of these spaces on production practices will be covered more extensively in Chapter Eight.
technological shift where stakeholders are becoming more interested and confident in seeking out collaborators outside of their state or nation (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242-244).46

One of the earliest examples of a stakeholder working in an overseas partnership is Eddie Campbell, an Australian illustrator, working with Alan Moore, a British writer, on From Hell (1989-1996). Campbell’s earlier solo work (Bacchus, The Life of an Artist) had been well-received in Britain and the U.S. Campbell’s acquired social and cultural capital assisted the anthology DeeVee (which Campbell contributed to) eventually being distributed into international markets (Bentley, 2007: 11).47

The importance of international connections will be explored further in the next section. The accumulation of social capital is an essential skill in an informal economy as it impacts the ways in which a stakeholder produces and circulates comics.

Collectives: Anthologies and Publishing Houses

An anthology is a comic which is assembled by a solo editor/publisher (or team of editor/publishers) and features contributions from other stakeholders. These contributions may be cartoons, strips, or short comics. Anthologies may be small press, serial, or graphic novels.

A publishing house is where comics are published under an imprint. Publishing houses may be run by an editor/publisher, editor/publishers in a team, or a team where there are specified roles (editor, publisher, PR, art director, etc.). Like anthologies, publishing houses may produce soft cover comics, or graphic novels.

The decision to term these projects and initiatives ‘collectives’ to reflect that they involve more than two stakeholders. These stakeholders may reside in Australia or overseas. Analysing the production methods of collectives reveals gatekeeping strategies utilised by publisher/editors to get contributors which best suit their project, and strategic business decisions concerning the social capital of contributors.

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46 This information about talent-scouting was relayed to me through various stakeholders outside of meets, and are field notes from my ethnography rather than interview data.
47 More information related to bridging capital and social network markets will be discussed in Chapter Seven, which focuses specifically on distribution.
Early collectives circa the 1970s and 1980s relied on contributions rather than talent scouting because there was so much uncertainty in the beginning of the second period as to how many stakeholders were interested in creating comics (Bentley, 2013: 24). As the industry began to grow, with national scenes appearing in different cities, editor/publishers became more confident in approaching international industries. Sourcing contributions became less about risk and more about strategy. An editor/publisher may choose to source Australian stakeholders if they want to use this as a selling point to stakeholders and consumers. Alternatively, editors and publishers have sought out international contributors for the purposes of content and markets. An anthology or publishing house may be looking for content which suits a specific brand, and the nationality of whoever provides that content is of no concern. The social capital of some international contributors can also assist the reception of a comic in overseas markets (Bentley, 2007: 5).

To find contributors a gatekeeper may ask for submissions or talent scout. Whichever strategy a gatekeeper uses depends on the editor/publisher’s creative and business vision for their project.

**Submissions**

The first collectives in the second period of production were anthologies which had a core team of editors who also doubled as publishers. These anthologies featured national as well as international stakeholders.

As case studies I will be studying the anthologies *Inkspots* (Melbourne), *Fox Comics* (Melbourne), *DeeVee* (Brisbane), and *Tango* (Melbourne). Anthologies are more likely to accept unsolicited submissions than publishing houses. This is because anthologies are designed to showcase varied authors, whilst publishing houses are more invested in promoting a specific brand through their content (Bentley, 2007: 6; Murray, 2013: 335).

That does not mean that anthology editor/publishers don’t have standards for their authors or an overarching vision of what they want their comic to be. When judging which contributors to include in anthologies issues may be whether to have Australian or international submissions. There can also be different opinions between gatekeepers and stakeholders on what could be considered ‘quality’ work.
Strategies editors used for call outs included passing the word around at meets, placing ads in scene media or other forms of media (DeVries, 20/11/13, interview; Bentley, 2007: 6; Bentley, 2013: 25, 30). Call outs are now predominantly advertised through social media. After evaluating a submission an editor/publisher may run the piece as it is or they send feedback to the contributor. This editorial feedback concerns technical skills which needed improving (i.e. clarity in word or illustration) or content (i.e. narrative intelligibility) (Bentley, 2007: 7, 13; Bentley, 2013: 70).

Editorial feedback could sometimes be met with resistance by creatives. This resistance stems from the stakeholder taking personal offense at criticism or the contributor questioning an editor/publisher’s authority. Anthology editor/publishers in Australia are not often full time employees. Like creators they are working on a part-time basis and ‘learning on the job’ (Bentley, 2013: 26-27; 71-72; Bentley, 2007: 7, 15; Bentley, 2009: 8). To quote Bentley, ‘it was a well-intentioned gesture, but we [the editors] were probably getting a bit ahead of ourselves, as it’s not as if we had any editing experience’ (Bentley, 2013: 71-72). Criticisms may be misinterpreted, or considered unjustified (Bentley, 2007: 6). The issue of authority is linked to ideas around what could be considered artistic or professional ‘authenticity’.  

But often stakeholders were willing to work harmoniously with editor/publishers, editing their work to the standard that was required. If a stakeholder is popular with readers or the editor/publisher is a personal fan of their work, they are often asked to be a repeat contributor (Bentley, 2013: 30, 80; Bentley, 2007: 8).

Stakeholders may also be invited to contribute again if they show potential. Bernard Caleo encouraged novice creators to contribute to Tango because he believed in showcasing Australian creators at all skill levels (Bentley, 2009: 10-11). Tango’s only requirement of creators was that they had to fit the theme’s issue (Love and Food, Love and Melbourne, etc.) and could contain no obscene material (Bentley, 2009: 10). Caleo’s idea to use Australian contributors was not only a personal creative decision but also assisted the publication in receiving grants from government bodies for contributing to the national arts (Bentley, 2009: 10).

International contributors featured alongside Australians in Inkspots, Fox Comics and DeeVee. Editors would accept submissions from anyone in Australia or overseas but they

48 These issues are explored further in the chapter.
took a specific interest in creatives who had name recognition with national and international audiences. Gatekeepers either approached these creatives directly at conventions or asked through third parties for their contact details. Often these creatives would do cover work, or would be advertised prominently in the anthology. Creatives who have worked with Australian editor/publishers include Dan Clowes (Fox Comics), Dylan Horrocks (Fox Comics), Brian Bolland (Fox Comics) and Ed Pinsent (Inkspots) (Bentley, 2013: 30, 75, 81, 95).49

These international collaborations increase an editor/publisher’s social capital, which can then raise the cultural and economic capital of their comic. As referenced previously Eddie Campbell’s association with DeeVee helped the anthology have an international profile. Chris Staros, Campbell’s agent at Top Shelf worked with the DeeVee editors to distribute their comic into international markets. DeeVee also collaborated with Dave Sims, a Canadian stakeholder famous for cult comic Cerebus. A cover Dave Sims did for the anthology helped DeeVee sell a high volume of issues (300) at an Ozcon convention, and Sims also negotiated for his printer to print DeeVee at a price cheaper than had been offered in Australia (Bentley, 2007: 6-10).

Inkspots, Fox Comics and DeeVee were prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, so making international connections required stakeholders to physically attend comics festivals and conventions overseas. Anthology editor/publishers in the present are more likely to approach collaborators online, however there still are stakeholders who will talent scout conventions, such as Wolfgang Bylsma (Gestalt). On rare occasions there will be an international editor at Australian convention, such as Scott Allie (Dark Horse) who attended the Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne Oz Comic-Cons in 2015.

There are stakeholders who will cold pitch publishing houses through email, however these houses are usually located overseas, such as Britain (Random House) or America (Bongo) (Bentley, 2006: 4; Bentley, 2009: 8-9). Some stakeholders such as Nicola Scott (Wonder Woman) and Daren White (Batman) have managed to get work through pitching at conventions (Bentley, 2007: 10; Fennell, 2015). But most stakeholders who work as contractual labour are talent scouted, either offline or online.

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49 Dylan Horrocks is a stakeholder from New Zealand but he was approached by Bentley in the U.S. and had international recognition through his comic Hicksville (Bentley, 2013: 81).
Talent Scouting

Talent scouting is enacted through knowledge brokering in a cluster or searching for collaborations online. With either method an editor or publisher is using their knowledge of a culture or a medium in order to find stakeholders who are best suited to their collective.

Other reasons for publishers choosing not to solicit submissions are because there’s too much demand and not enough staff (Gestalt) or the publishers/editors would prefer to find their own talent rather than sort through pitches and sketches (Winter City) (Bentley, 2011: 14; Purcell, 19/10/13, interview). Erica Wagner, the Melbourne-based publisher of Allen and Unwin’s line of graphic novels, would talent scout through recommendations. Wagner’s reasoning for this was that it saved time, because she trusted the opinions of knowledge brokers who had spent years in the scene (Bentley, 2011: 9).

Talent scouting rather than accepting unsolicited submissions can be problematic in that it can limit opportunities for those that do not have the requisite amounts of social capital (Putnam, 2000: 22; Florida, 2003: 6; Bechtoldt et al, 2010: 623). An example is stakeholders who work with Milk Shadow Books and Allen and Unwin, who are from the same city (Rackleyft, 2015: 45; Bentley, 2011: 9).

Milk Shadow Books’ editor/publisher James Andre was inspired to set up a publishing house after attending the Melbourne meets. Andre has made the decision not to accept unsolicited submissions, and all of Milk Shadow’s graphic novels have been by Melbourne creators (Scarlette Baccini, Ben Hutchings, Jase Harper) (Rackleyft, 2015: 45).


An interstate stakeholder isn’t less talented than one from Melbourne, they just get less opportunities to work with these publishing houses. Concerning book publishers specifically, Bullock (20/11/13, interview) regrets that more book publishers aren’t interested in seeking out talent at meets or conventions:

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50 Allen and Unwin also have offices in Sydney, but their Melbourne branch published graphic novels.
There’s so many people that could make so much money, just by scouting Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, and they’re like, ‘wow, these are some AMAZING ideas, this would sell, this would sell, this would sell!’ Yeah, but they just don’t (Bullock, 20/11/13, interview).

Winter City is unique among Australian publishing houses in that they only scout online portfolios and produce comics using industrial methods. Patrick Purcell is the editor, publisher, and head writer. He employs a co-writer (his brother Carl), an artist (Pablo Verdugo Munoz), a colourist (David Aravena Riquelme), and a third party editor to do a final check before the comic (also called Winter City) goes to print (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview). Munoz and Riquelme are based in South America, and Purcell asked to collaborate with them after seeing their work on DeviantArt. Purcell’s decision to replicate a shop system was inspired by his day job working in the field of graphic design. Purcell reasons that if a job needs to be done, it is best to hire a professional to do it on contract (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview).

Talent scouting in the creative industries, including the comics industries, is about finding the stakeholder who guarantees the least risk, this risk averted through knowledge circulating among networks (Hartley et al, 2012: 4-7). Because comics production is still a relatively niche field in the creative industries, it’s common for stakeholders to socialise as both fans and producers (Woo, 2015; Mason, 2013). Editors will often seek out comics creators who have amassed a large following on social media, such as Simon Hanselmann (MacDonald, 2015; Collins, 2013). These practices are connected back to the previously described informal network economy.

Even though the talent scouting practices of Australian comics publishers have not been commented on publicly by stakeholders in Anglophone comics industries as a whole there have been concerns over men being favoured over women for contracts and promotions (Asselin, 2015; Hanover, 2015; MacDonald, 2015; O’Connor, 2016). The ‘boys club’ hiring ethos has also been cause for concern in the creative industries (McRobbie, 2010: 71-74; Gill, 2002: 70-89). To counteract this, women in the Australian comics industry have created women’s-only anthologies (Fly the Colour Fantastica, Starrytellers).

The biggest challenge for editors/publishers is finding the time and money for their work. Both anthologies and publishing houses require long and frequently unpaid hours from
editor/publishers. As well as constant communicating with and managing contributors, editors/publishers need to budget the series effectively. Stakeholders are less likely to work for free now that the ‘work for love not money/work for exposure’ ideology is being frequently rejected.

To get their projects realised many editors will choose to work for free (Bentley, Caleo, White) and use any money raised or earned to pay their contributors. Editors volunteering their time as well as handling criticism and questioning over their authority from stakeholders adds to the stress of overseeing a collective project (Bentley, 2011: 13; Bentley, 2009: 11). Most anthologies now are created as one-off collections, and contributor payments are offset by crowdfunding.

Editors and publishers use different strategies use to keep their businesses sustainable. Milk Shadow Books only releases 2-4 graphic novels a year, so that deadlines do not interfere too much with editors’ and artists’ day jobs, and quality books of a limited quantity may be able to recoup their costs.

Matt Emery (Pikitia Press) and Erica Wagner (Allen and Unwin) make decisions on how to and where to market their books before they print them, and this factors into their knowledge brokering. Emery circulates his work (which is primarily alternative and small press comics) in limited print runs in ‘micromarkets’ (Rackleyft, 2015: 45; 50). Wagner and the PR department at Allen and Unwin, market their graphic novels to the general public as well as to the educational sector (Bentley, 2011: 7, 9-10).

Collectives have the potential to increase the productivity of a cluster or utilise bridging capital over national or international networks. Each anthology and publishing house is overseen by an editor and/or publisher who enact strategies to make sure that their artistic vision is represented through the work of others. This vision may also be making a deliberate statement (anthologies specifically for women or Australians), or showing an unconscious bias (Melbourne publishers who primarily work with Melbourne stakeholders). Who a stakeholder or cultural intermediary may choose to work with and why is expanded upon in the next section.
Artistry and Ideology

... the opposition between the two markets, between producers for producers and producers for non-producers, entirely determines the image writers and artists have of their profession and constitutes the taxonomic principle according to which they classify and hierarchize works.


One of the primary ways in which a stakeholder will either connect with or differentiate themselves from other stakeholders is by discussing different methods of practice. These discussions appear frequently in social media rather than in person. Contributing factors as to why these discourses appear online are the online disinhibition effect (ODE) and anger suppression. Anger suppression is common in media industries where stakeholders combine emotional labour with creative labour. A highly social industry such as comics means that it is common for stakeholders to come face-to-face at events or subcultural spaces. To avoid conflict there is either anger suppression or avoidance. Online conflicts serve a purpose in that stakeholders can all coalesce to share their opinions and alleviate some of this emotional suppression.

Conflict is unavoidable in highly social settings. In the Australian comics industry the roots of conflict can be traced back to the cultural field and subcultural ideas around ‘authenticity’. Individual instances of conflict may be resolved but in a broader sense, conflict is something which stakeholders must constantly navigate. They do this through understanding the circular and unresolvable nature of conflict, using self-aware humour in their discourses. That is not to say that conflict does not take a personal toll on stakeholders due to stress or individual mental health issues. But conflict is temporary, with collective action and encouragement in the form of peer networks being more permanent.

Most discourses within the Australian comics industry are positive. Stakeholders find joy in their own work, but also the social connections which come through this work. Optimism among peers and encouraging social spaces has an empirical effect on the growth of the creative industries, and is essential to production. Without institutional support, it is up to
individuals to foster a participatory environment which encourages multiple forms of creative labour.

**Amateur vs. Professional**

The act of creativity is intangible. It is based on subjective experience and not easily defined (Woo, 2013; Hackley and Kover, 2007: 72). The issues related to creative practice which can be analysed are how discourses assign stakeholders’ personal and professional ideologies within a cultural field’s habitus. Many discourses within the habitus concern what stakeholders consider to be ‘authentic’ creative practice.

Authenticity exists as an ideal for a person, object, or practice (Williams, 2011: 140). Even though true inherent authenticity in art can never be achieved the idea is still used as a way for stakeholders in a group environment to exert power within a culture. This power is enacted through motivation, beliefs, and behaviours (Williams, 2011: 140-141; Taylor and Littleton, 2008: 279-281; Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 39, 50, 148; Bourdieu, 1983: 313). This commitment to an idea of authenticity leads to stakeholders seeking validation from peers within the creative process (Duncombe, 1997: 142-143; Chang, Sanchez-Burks and Lee, 2008: 1178). There can be a sense of affirmation and gratitude when a creative is congratulated by their peers, which is different from an artist being appreciated by an audience. There is the belief that audiences appreciate art, but only other creatives can understand art (Hackley and Kover, 2007: 67-70).

Through interviews and field notes the terms ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ recurred when stakeholders spoke about practice. The term ‘amateur’ is usually used to signify that something is crude in either content or form, and/or it refers to a stakeholder who engages in poor practice, i.e. ‘amateur thinking’. ‘Professional’ signifies the opposite: a product is polished, and a stakeholder has a better business ethic or personal morals than their peers.

Professional has been defined as ‘a state of mind and not a measure of income’, with the qualities of ‘enthusiasm, honesty, hard work, and paying it forward’ separating a stakeholder from one who displayed ‘arrogance, dishonesty, and sliminess’ (Mutard, 2014). Stakeholders who engage in practice considered to be ‘amateur’ have been described in the following terms: as obsessed with gossip in the scene (Mason, 5/7/13, interview); showing disdain towards ‘mainstream’ comics (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview); supporting comics as a ‘cheer squad’ rather than conducting a critical analysis on content and form (Read, 5/6/13,
interview); and the content and form itself not being of ‘quality’ (Bentley, 2007: 15). When describing some submissions to his anthology *DeeVee*, editor Daren White specifically described the work as being ‘amateur hour’ (Bentley, 2007: 14).

These discourses place worth upon an artist’s working habits. ‘Professional’ artists are those who work hard and work constantly. They prioritise their art in their personal lives and the logic follows that these ‘good’ working habits will inevitably lead to ‘good’ work. Amateurs, in contrast, are lazy and therefore produce ‘bad’ work (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 36-39; Mutard, 2014; Heazlewood, 2014: 224-226; Johnston, 2013).

Whilst there are navigated spaces within the habitus, between ‘art for art’s sake’ and ‘mass audience art’, the cultural field is built on tensions which are both personal and professional as discourses and practices focus on the idea of the ‘authentic’ artist (Bourdieu, 1993: 39; Bourdieu, 1985: 319; Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 216). An example is small press comics being dismissed by some stakeholders and comics scholars for being ‘amateurish’ without the understanding that the appearance of these comics was a deliberate aesthetic choice of the artist (Hill, 2007: 412; Beaty, 2007: 42).

The idea of authenticity in art is connected to both the perceived authority of the creator (usually moral, aka a commitment to the craft), and the originality of the art, that it is the work of an auteur rather than something which has been mass produced with little feeling (Taylor and Littleton, 2008: 277; Fine, 2003: 155). ‘Authenticity’ is decided through various forms of capital, an artist or a work being legitimated through an ‘authority’ of taste, this authority being within the cultural field or the fields of class and power (Hackley and Kover, 2007: 65; Fine, 2003: 155-156). The idea of ‘authentic’ artistic work is complicated by discourses around creating wealth from this work – what has been termed ‘selling out’. The concept of ‘selling out’ for a creative is a complicated one, because it’s unrealistic that a creative practitioner (particularly in comics) will work for no money, particularly when there is growing criticism towards the ‘work for exposure’ narrative. ‘Selling out’ is instead related to a type of work which is associated with a position on the cultural field (heteronomous or autonomous), and the work’ reception by audiences (Taylor and Littleton, 2008: 284; O’Connor et al, 2011: 10).

Stakeholders declaring or adjusting their ideologies and practices based on their position is an act which is influenced by the systems of distinctions outside the cultural field but also
correspond to the internal logics of the habitus. Bourdieu (1983: 312-313) refers to the manifestations of these positions within the space as the ‘space of possibles’:

Every position-taking is defined in relation to the space of possibles which is objectively realised as a problematic in the form of the actual or potential position-taking corresponding to the different positions; and it receives its distinctive value from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it. It follows from this, for example, that a prise de position changes, even when it remains identical, whenever there is change in the universe of options that are simultaneously offered for producers and consumers to choose from. The meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, etc.) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or the reader (Bourdieu, 1983: 313).

Judging certain working practices to be more ‘authentic’ than others can also dismiss external factors which influence stakeholders’ creative labour. Age, parental duties, mental health, and employment security are examples of issues which affects the amount of time a stakeholder can devote to their craft (McRobbie, 2015: 26, 56; Dore, 2015).

Within a creative industry such as Australian comics production an issue is to consider stakeholders’ artistic training. Whilst some stakeholders may have a degree in graphic design or fine art illustration, there is no formal training options for comics creation in Australia (Mutard, 2014). Most stakeholders therefore simply ‘learn by doing’ (Mutard, 2014). This adds another layer of meaning onto editors’ dilemmas over what could be considered ‘quality’. Critiques of comics are tempered with the knowledge that many stakeholders are trying to master a craft with limited educational resources (Mutard, 2014; Bentley, 2011: 9). A statement from Christian Read in our interview seemed to sum up the dilemma of trying to assess ‘quality’:

I’m not an expert on this, but I think many more local creators could put considerably more effort into creating books that look like books. Production design, by and large, is either financially outside the creator’s means or not a priority (Read, 5/6/13, interview).

These statements by stakeholders – that they expect work and practice to be of a professional standard but acknowledge the structural inequalities in their industry – can seem
contradictory on the surface. But these statements speak to how some stakeholders perceive and deal with conflict. There is the awareness that conflict can come from superficial differences regarding aesthetics, personality, and practice preference. The Australian comics industry receives minor institutional support and so creative labour is individualised. Even if a stakeholder is in a partnership or a collective, their individual skills (writing, illustrating, etc.) are assessed by their peers and audiences on a scale of standards.

This scrutiny combined with structural inequalities can lead to creatives feeling high levels of stress (Heazlewood, 2014: 45-46; Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 175). As has been discussed previously, stakeholders have strong emotional attachments to their creative labour and some stakeholders are more sensitive to criticism than others. Artists can experience high levels of anxiety and depression related to their labour which stems from irregular hours, many having to self-manage their careers, and their sense of self-worth being connected to the critical reception of their work, this criticism being both internal and external (Heazlewood, 2014: 46-48; Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 175).

In an essay posted to his own personal Tumblr page, *No Rest for the Wicked*, Frank Candiloro (2014) questioned why stakeholders felt the need to discriminate against others for their working habits:

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying we shouldn’t work hard, we should of course have goals to achieve and yeah the comics world is not very forgiving in general but it’s pretty amazing how a lot of comic creators are obsessed with being “tough”, obsessed with “surviving the industry” and if anyone can’t do this, they’re simply being “lazy” and “weak”. And I honestly think this is an extremely privileged and ignorant thing to say.

… I think perhaps a better way to approach this is to be devoted to comics. You don’t always have to do them but if/when you do, simply do the best you can, and more, however long it takes. If there are times where you feel you can’t do it, that’s okay, it doesn’t mean you’re being lazy or you’re not “worthy”. At the end of the day, your wellbeing is much more important than someone else’s idea of success.

To quote Williams (2011: 144), ‘Asking who is ‘right’ in arguments about authenticity takes us nowhere because the arguments are circular… a better question to ask is what purposes such arguments serve’. In the Australian comics industry the purpose of these arguments is
for a stakeholder to either reject or bond to others based on their subjective ideas of practice. But to understand why these issues are circular is to understand how stakeholders deal with conflict.

The Online Disinhibition Effect and Anger Suppression

Stakeholders’ different opinions can quickly become conflicts and grievances due to anger suppression and Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE). Anger suppression refers to a stakeholder feeling antagonistic towards a person or an issue, but avoiding direct confrontation. This phenomenon is common in creative industries where stakeholders work closely with each other and/or frequently engage in social events. In these environments, it can be difficult to raise concerns directly over practices or personality clashes. Confrontation is frequently avoided by most stakeholders due to the desire to avoid the embarrassment of being an agitator in public (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 176).

To manage anger suppression within the creative industries, a stakeholder may work with a mediator. This is common in creative industries which have access to human resources or ombudsmen. Other methods of anger management include confidential gossip, performing emotional labour by masking hostile feelings with a calm demeanour, or avoiding people or situations which cause stress (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 177).

In the Australian comics industry these latter three methods are frequently deployed, particularly avoidance. At meets or events such as award shows and launches, stakeholders will form small tight groups. Avoiding someone is as easy as joining a different group, or circling the room until the offender is gone from the group you wish to join. Similarly, if a stakeholder knows that someone they have conflict with is going to be at a launch, convention, festival etc. they will either surround themselves with peers, or simply not attend.

The majority of conflicts observed in the field have been through social media. Computer mediated communication (CMC) can encourage antisocial behaviour and misunderstandings. This psychological phenomenon is known as the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE). ODE is enabled by online avatars being ‘dehumanised’ through an absence of verbal or physical cues, users choosing to be anonymous or operating under a pseudonym, and the immediacy of CMC through some forums or social media platforms (Suler, 2004: 22-24; Jacobson, 2007: 359-364). Unleashing suppressed negative emotions online can lead to ‘blind catharsis’ (Suler, 2004: 321). Or to quote Bentley, who has observed but not participated in online discourses
about Australian comics, ‘too many people would type first, and then think later’ (Bentley, 2009: 6-7).

Before the advent of social media stakeholders would communicate through online forums specifically about the Australian comics industry such as Pulp Faction and OzComics. Douglas Holgate, one of the first stakeholders to use online platforms as a frequent tool of communication, recalled that there was more ‘rancour’ on forum threads than social media (cited in Bentley, 2009: 7). This was because of the relative anonymity of threads, whereas social media is often considered a public space (Shachar and Ball, 2016; Suler, 2004: 324-325; Van Houtem and Van Naerssen, 2002: 126). Stakeholders will often appear on social media with their full name and photograph so that they’re identifiable to friends, family, and potential employers. ‘If it’s a potential client [viewing a stakeholder’s online activity], are they going to give work to someone involved in a civil discussion, or the guy setting fire to the curtains?’ questions Holgate (Bentley, 2009: 7).

Social media may have tempered discourses, but regardless of audience size forums and social media still act as spaces where stakeholders communicate most frequently about their subcultural boundaries. The purpose of these boundaries’ construction is to preserve subcultural knowledge, discourses, and practices from ‘outsiders’. They are also spaces where stakeholders try and assert authority, this authority coming through experience, notions of ‘authenticity’, knowledge of practice and history, etc. (Suler, 2004: 324; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002: 126; Williams, 2011: 101).

Having observed stakeholders’ discourses, other than the issue of what could be considered ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ conflicts revolved around several common issues: whether Australia had a scene or an industry; whether the tracing art of a legitimate creative technique if it is just done to provide an outline; the ethics of selling fan art; and whether there was a culture which stifled stakeholders voicing concerns about constructive criticism. These conflicts are divided into cultural concerns and economic concerns.

Cultural concerns were issues such as ‘amateur’ versus ‘professional’ (discussed prior), and the culture of constructive criticism. The latter issue is connected to the former, through stakeholders’ emotional sensitivity around the reception of their creative labour. This issue will be explored more fully in Chapter Nine, because the nature of criticism is related to both stakeholder and scene media discourses.
Economic concerns revolve around ethical practice regarding tracing and fan art. Tracing is considered to be an unskilled practice, and selling traced work is considered taboo. This is because a stakeholder is making money from somebody else’s intellectual property, displaying no artistic talent of their own. Selling art which has been modified through Photoshop is also considered plagiarism. This art is primarily sold at conventions, and stakeholders also argue that it is unfair because this plagiarised work interferes with potential sales from their original intellectual property.

Where these conflicts can become ethically contentious is when it is acknowledged that many stakeholders in the comics industry sell commissions or prints of ‘fan art’ which, whilst not traced or digitally altered, is still someone else’s intellectual property (an example would be a stakeholder drawing a picture of Batman – property of DC Comics/Kane/Finger – at a consumer’s request for a fee).

This is thought of as unethical by stakeholders who only sell their own intellectual property. It’s unclear when the practice of selling commissions and fan art of other people’s intellectual property began in the Australian (or other) comics industries, but so far there have been no Australian stakeholders prosecuted over the practice (Oatley, 2012).

Whilst it is illegal, many conventions allow it, and so far, no individuals or publishing companies have sued. Fan art and commissions are therefore not considered to be so much a legal issue as a moral one. Discourses in the scene concentrate around questions such as: Is tracing and digitally altering as unethical as selling someone else’s intellectual property? Or is fan art which incorporates a stakeholder’s style, skill and time a more ethical purchasing option for consumers? Is it fair that stakeholders who only sell their own work have to compete with fan art and commissions at conventions?

There is no consensus among stakeholders about these issues because stakeholders’ each have their own ideas about what is ‘authentic’ practice. But the ethics and economics of fan art and commissions would be an interesting area of research to pursue further.51

51 In Chapter Eight when the focus is on conventions and other events there will be more information presented about strategies some stakeholders have deployed to segregate comics from ‘merchandise’ i.e. fan art.
What matters in these debates is not specifically who said what, but what these issues represent. Studying discourses enables an analysis of how identities form around creative practice and how these practices act as the foundations of an industry (Ganti, 2014: 17-18).

Observation of the discussion of these issues also revealed that stakeholders were aware that these arguments’ were circular and unresolvable. This knowledge was gained through learning more about the Australian comics’ history offline and online, and learning more about stakeholders’ personal and professional histories. After a period of time and the accumulation of trust, stakeholders would explain in-jokes, such as the hashtagged acronym #acic standing for ‘Australian Comics in Crisis’. The humour stems from the grandiosity of the statement contrasted with stakeholders’ knowing that these issues would appear trivial to anybody outside of the comics practicing subculture.

Stakeholders also used memes as meta-commentary. To represent similar arguments being repeated in social media discourses sometimes a stakeholder would post a gif of Rust Cohle from True Detective saying ‘time is a flat circle’. Other memes used by stakeholders were a gif of Michael Jackson in Thriller eating popcorn, or KC Green’s image of a cartoon dog sitting in a burning house saying, ‘this is fine’, to indicate that conflict was becoming emotional. Being able to use these hashtags and memes effectively demonstrates subcultural knowledge, and the poster of these communications is rewarded with approval (in this context the other stakeholder giving them ‘likes’ or ‘favourites’) (Woo, 2012: 102-103, 166).

Conflicts around creative labour can provide moments of individual or collective self-awareness, and even catharsis. This catharsis not only comes through levity in the form of in-jokes, but also issues being openly addressed (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 177). Social media provides a space where stakeholders from across Australia can participate in these discussions as they unfold, and non-participants can archive who said what and when (Postill and Pink, 2012: 129).

When considering what these discourses and conflicts mean in relation to comics production there needs to be consideration of issues such as subjectivity, mental health, and ultimately their influence on the sustainability of the industry. Nobody is going to agree on the ‘right’ way to make comics because there is no right way. Conflict between stakeholders hasn’t slowed production. The industry continues to show signs of growth through its multitude of networks, and conflicts haven’t reduced the audiences for comics in international or national
markets. My ethnography and interviews show no empirical evidence of audiences or the media noticing conflict. These conflicts also rarely if ever involve stakeholders or cultural intermediaries from international comics scenes; they are largely self-contained within the Australian scene through discourses and subcultural knowledge/interests. These conflicts fade but what is left are clusters and networks which are formed through stakeholders finding ideological common ground.

Through online fieldwork I would estimate that whilst 20% of discourses concern conflict, the other 80% is peer support and collaboration. The comics forums established in the late 1990s were reportedly responsible for many collaborations and friendships. The most notable collaboration was the launch of Australia’s version of the 24-hour comics challenge where stakeholders spend a day making a comic before uploading it to show to their peers (Bentley, 2009: 7; Hale, 1998: 109).52

The emotional barriers that ODE breaks down are often benign, with stakeholders cracking jokes, forming connections, and displaying kindness and empathy (Suler, 2004: 322). Social media has been used by stakeholders to share tips on comics artistry and practice and congratulatory posts when someone in the scene achieves their goals. Other uses include requests for contact information, consolations and commiserations if a stakeholder receives bad news, reading recommendations, and general conversation about comics culture. One of the longest Facebook conversations observed came from a stakeholder in an Australian comics group posting that they felt despair at their artistic progress and wanted to give up. That post resulted in 150 comments, with multiple stakeholders from each Australian city scene reassuring that poster that their work was valuable and that they were not alone in experiencing stress. Some stakeholders recommended going to a meet for advice, and others offered tips on how they had overcome their own creative block (life drawing classes, guide books, mind maps). Many stakeholders reassured the poster that there was also no shame in seeking out professional mental health services if the stress started to have too much of a negative impact on their life.

These online discussions give stakeholders cultural frames of reference so that they can build reciprocal social capital which strengthen new and existing bonds. If we consider scenes to

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52 Social media has been described as ‘essential’ to event planning and execution by my interviewees (Baccini, 12/5/14, interview; Candiloro, 13/5/14, interview) and Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight will be discussing the specific role of these platforms in distribution and marketing.
operate at a macro-, meso-, and micro-level then stakeholders’ online activities provides a case study for the Australian comics industry. The macro-level of a scene is how it fits in context with broader culture, the meso-level is the construction of social networks, and the micro-level is the socio-psychological decisions an individual makes (Williams, 2011: 100-102).

In the macro-level of the Australian comics industry, social media allows for formal collective action and industry sustainability, through the circulation of knowledge across state and national borders. Social media or forums can also directly encourage production and publicity.

At the meso-level there is the affirmation of the creative identity, and how this identity splits into various networks. This leads to the development of specific online discourses even as these discourses are used in issues which reflect the offline scene culture.

And at the micro-level, how a stakeholder uses social media is ultimately their decision. It can help professional reputations, lead to lasting friendships, and even through conflict, it can be a relief to know that there are other creatives who have similar thoughts, habits, and/or circumstances (Mason, 12/10/13, interview; Candiloro, 13/5/14, interview).

**Peer Support**

There are various ways in which stakeholders offer each other peer support and strive to make a welcoming environment for new creatives. Even though there can be stresses associated with finances and labour, the stakeholders I interviewed felt personally and professionally positive about being involved in the Australian comics industry:

There’s certainly an upward trajectory. In relation to the sort of stuff that’s coming out [of the industry], it’s certainly of high quality now (Bentley, 10/6/14, interview).

I have maybe a handful of people that I’ll talk to. I think one of the things that I think is for a lack of a better term a secret of success, or something that is going to push you forward, is finding the right people and talking to them. Trusting their judgement on whatever you’re working on (Mason, 12/10/14, interview).
A key theme in interview answers about the strength and growth in the Australian comics industry was diversity. Stakeholders were invested in seeing the cultural field expand, and new social network markets being created:

All I can see is what I can hope for, which is more publishing opportunities for creatives, more inclusion in writers’ festivals and art events, more opportunities to teach and lecture, more access to comic specific funding, more job opportunities, an arts centre run by cartoonists for cartoonists at a tertiary level, opportunities for international exchange and collaboration, comics included in other aspects of society, e.g. mental health, social inclusion, rehabilitation, etc. More discussions and reviews of comics in literary journals, online, and in newspapers… We are all a tight knit group who have all crossed paths professionally or personally at some point. We mostly all know each other and have done so for decades. It’s a very nice scene though and not at all exclusive (Ord, 8/6/14, interview).

It [the Australian comics industry] does seem to be expanding in the period I’ve been working as an illustrator (since the late 90s). There are a lot more events related to comics at festivals and conferences, far more interest from educators, and I think a greater range of comics subjects that aren’t so stuck in a particular genre or style. I suspect that has been lead by examples in the U.S., where the crossover between comics and literary culture seemed to first gain strength: major literary awards have been won by comics creators (previously unheard of). In particular, it seems that the proliferation of autobiographical comics has created new audiences, and new artists who are emerging from diverse quarters, with race, gender, and sexuality becoming topical subjects too. There seems to be more feeling these days that anyone can do a comic, and that there is no stigma, or cultural hierarchy attached to the form. It’s just another means of creative expression (Tan, 29/3/19, interview).

There are more books, more comics, more graphic novels being produced than ever before. It [production] is becoming cheaper. There are more digital comics. Comics are sometimes publishers in literary magazines, there are definitely more graphic novels which are changing the public perception more quickly about the type of content that a comic can tackle (Jade, 13/3/13, interview).
For Paul Abstruse, who has worked in two different comics industries, what separated the Australian industry from America’s was a sense of community and altruism:

My experiences as a comic book artist have been varied. I have found through my experiences with Australian publishers have been the best. I’ve worked for a few American companies, and they basically treat you as… like a number. Not like an individual. But the Australian people, whether it’s a publisher or a writer seeking you out to work with them, they respect your individuality and your individual style, and they work closely with you. I’ve always felt that the Australian comics community, it feels like family. Since day one it’s felt like family. And we can just sit down in the same room and say, do you know such and such? And it’s like yeah, I know who you’re talking about. And we can start making a story. Or just get drunk and talk shit, absolute shit, and laugh about it. That’s probably the reason I do comics! As long as the attitude is there, the go get ‘em [sic] attitude is there, we’ll continue to grow a beautiful scene. And we will always welcome new people in, whether they’re talented or moderately talented. As long as they’re great people and don’t have an ego, then they’re in, we’ll make them feel like home (Abstruse, 19/10/13, interview).

Creatives who work closely in interconnected groups have been shown to develop high levels of resilience and strategy when surrounded by constant affirmation of the value of their labour (Heazlewood, 2014: 36, 128-143; Wang and Cheng, 2010: 109; Hackley and Kover, 2007: 68-70). Online interactions are equally valued by those in communities of interest with the camaraderie fostered online fuelling ‘boots-on-the-ground’ practices (Woo, 2012: 231-232).

Purcell and Baccini have noticed more people becoming involved in comics, with Purcell describing the scene as ‘exploding’ from 2011-2013 (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview). Having attended meets since 2007, Baccini (13/5/14) noticed that the other attendees were usually ‘some young guys, 3 or 4 veterans, and occasionally some guy’s girlfriend’. Eight years later the Melbourne meets are populated by numerous creatives collaborating on events and projects with a more even ratio of men and women (Baccini, 13/5/14, interview).

For editors and publishers, even though their occupations come with great amounts of responsibility and stress there are also moments of personal and professional satisfaction. In A Life in Comics Bentley (2013: 81) recalls the camaraderie of stakeholders having frequent
house parties and comics in-store signings. Wolfgang Bylsma of Gestalt is focused on his publishing house being a sustainable business, but also believes that if comics creation is purely business, then it is ‘a rather joyless affair’ (Bentley, 2011: 12). In our interview, Caleo mentioned that he has made most of his friendships through the comics scene (Caleo, 8/6/14, interview).

The strength of social capital relies on reciprocity and trust, and can become weaker over time if it does not evolve into other forms of capital such as economic or cultural. It can also disintegrate if the norms (reciprocity and trust) aren’t utilised. Social capital is subject to transformation, durability, flexibility, decay, and alienability (Robison, Schmid and Styles, 2002: 4-5; Davern 1997: 289-291). But social capital which is used to connect networks through a commonality (or commonalities) and is used to circulate goods, resources and opportunities, as in the Australian comics industry, shows strength and resistance through power and conversion, but also altruism (Knorringa and van Staveren, 2007: 2-5; Robison, Schmid and Siles, 2002: 1-9; Bechtold, De Dreu, Nijstad and Choi, 2010: 623-624).

Conclusion

The creation of comics in Australia is a practice which is defined by a stakeholder’s internal logics and the resources available to them within the creative industry. Whether a sole creator, in a partnership, or working within a collective, stakeholders form various strategies on how to produce their comics. These strategies are based around a stakeholder’s skills, finances, relationships with cultural intermediaries, and time they can spend on their labour.

There can be some conflict within the scene over the ‘right’ way to make a comic. Social media and other forms of online discourse have been identified as tools which can enable conflict but their more regular uses are for collaborations and peer support. Peer support, diversification and validation plays an important role in the growth and sustainability of the industry.

53 There’s no specific date as to when comics in-store signings started in Australia. In A Life in Comics (2013: 90), there’s mention of an in-store signing by Chloe Brookes-Kenworthy and Maria Pena of Fox Comics in 1989, in Minotaur Comics.
Chapter Seven: Systems of Distribution

Introduction

This chapter’s focus is the circulation of comics through physical and virtual spaces. Stakeholders are constantly finding new ways to sell their comics to the public through social network markets. These social network markets formed through the conditions of supply and demand. The conditions of supply and demand are subject to the availability of physical retail spaces, and media convergence changing the economic structures of creative industries.

The importation of American comic books has had the most significant economic and cultural effect on Australian comic circulation. After the mass importation of American comics to newsstands before and after the first period, American comics continued their economic and cultural monopolisation of the retail sector through the direct market.

The direct market is a system wherein the majority of American publishers (and then Anglophone publishers) distributed their stock directly to comics stores. The system then became monopolised through a single distributor, Diamond. Diamond carries the majority of serial comics, and serial comics collectors make up the majority of comics retailers’ customers. The sustainability of retailers’ business is dependent on decisions made by publishers and Diamond.

The direct market monopoly also disadvantages Australian stakeholders. A consumer base which has repeatedly bought American comics see Australian comics as an unknown quantity, and so Australian comics struggle to compete for shelf space. Australian comics are no longer successfully sold in newsagencies due to changing audience habits, and they can struggle to make sales in bookstores without effective marketing strategies. As will be discussed in this chapter and Chapter Eight, stakeholders are increasingly relying on a social network economy based on events (cultural tourism). Events allow consumers to familiarise themselves with authors and product through prosumption, and increase business for retailers as well as stakeholders.

Stakeholders are also taking advantage of media convergence to sell their comics through online cultural intermediaries. Hard copy comics are sold through independent sites or
wholesale retailers. These retailers may specialise in books (i.e. Amazon) or general craft goods (i.e. Etsy). Selling hard copy comics via online intermediaries is an evolution of the mail order system which was previously used to sell goods in limited quantities to specific customers.

Digital files of comics are also sold through independent sites or corporate retailers (such as Comixology). Consumers can download comics files onto their smartphone or PCs, and can choose both industrial- or artisanal-produced comics. The accessibility of these comics and their minimal costs reflect how comics industries are becoming like other creative industries, with increasingly digitised content. This decentralised, digitised global comics market has the potential to change production practices, the direct market, and future discourses over what constitutes comics collection and consumption.

The Direct Market and The Australian Comics Economy

Distribution Methods Prior to the Direct Market

Newsstands and Newsagencies

The first distributor of Australian comics was Gordon and Gotch, a magazine wholesaler. Founded in the 1940s, Gordon and Gotch distributed Australian comics to newsstands in the first period of production (Ryan, 1979: 206). In the second period of production, Gordon and Gotch carried the entire print run (four issues) of Inkspots (1980-1984).

From the 1960s to the 1980s newsstands transformed into newsagencies, selling numerous publications (newspapers, magazines, crossword books) including imported comics. Before selling their stock through newsagencies the Inkspots editorial team sold their first issue at conventions (held in Melbourne where their scene was based), and comics stores. These comics stores were Minotaur (which was owned by the three Inkspots editors Bentley, Gates, and Paraskevas) and Kings Comics (the sole other Australian comics store based in Sydney). The first issue of Inkspots sold well through these markets, which gave the editorial team the confidence to try sell their comics through newsagencies (Bentley, 2013: 22, 27).

The editorial team discovered challenges associated with selling to a broader market. The first problem was that when selling at conventions and comics stores, audiences were already invested in consuming and collecting comics. Additionally, many consumers were familiar
with *Inkspots*’ editors and contributors due to the high levels of social capital in comics fandom (Bentley, 2013: 27-28).

The second issue was that *Inkspots* was intended for an adult audience, as per Bentley’s editorial manifesto (referenced in Chapter Two). The newsagency market carried superhero comics, but also comics actively marketed to children (*Donald Duck, Sad Sack*, etc.). An adult comic, and a comic that was made by Australians rather than Americans, was an unfamiliar product for most newsagency customers (Bentley, 2013: 25, 31).

The third issue was that as a wholesaler, Gordon and Gotch required high levels of stock from stakeholders. *Inkspots* initially gave Gordon and Gotch 5,000 copies of their first issue. After reviewing the sales data provided by the distributor after the issue’s run, the *Inkspots* editorial team decided to change their sales strategies. They negotiated to scale their print run down to 3,000 copies for subsequent issues. A request was put in to have their comics sold primarily in city newsagencies, where they recorded higher sales than rural newsagencies (Bentley, 2013: 31, 37-38).\(^{54}\)

None of the four *Inkspots* issues managed to make a profit through Gordon and Gotch. However the print run almost managed to break even after the stakeholders changed their distribution practices. Bentley chose to distribute his next project *Fox Comics* through mail order, but writes that he did not regret his *Inkspots* experience. The editorial team felt a sense of accomplishment at taking a risk and thinking pragmatically about how to improve sale results (Bentley, 2013: 38). The research done by the *Inkspots* editorial board on the cultural value of their product among pre-existing and new audiences reflects how these practitioners attempted to create social network markets (Potts et al, 2008: 171).

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, there were some titles which were carried by Gordon and Gotch, but this practice allegedly ceased after these titles (like *Inkspots*) failed to recoup their costs. The high volume of stock demands combined with the unfamiliarity of newsagency retailers and consumers’ with Australian comics is believed to be why these titles did not break even or profit (Bentley, 2013: 45; Bentley, 2007: 5-6; Hale, 1998: 106; Mutard, 2014).

\(^{54}\) It isn’t stated why city newsagencies had higher sales than rural newsagencies. At an estimate it may be because of population density rather than any specific cultural preference.
The risk of distributing through newsagencies in the present is illustrated in the case of *Oi Oi Oi*. This Australian anthology comic was distributed to newsagencies from 2013-2016. In 2015 *Oi Oi Oi*’s editor asked for feedback via social media about whether the strategy of selling comics in newsagencies was effective. The responses from other stakeholders and fans indicated that people no longer read single issue comics or magazines, or unlike comics stores, newsagencies were no longer used to stocking comics. Staff were less likely to recommend them to customers, and had difficulty placing them in areas where they could be easily found. They were placed with children’s magazines and puzzle books. Despite this feedback the editor persisted with newsagencies and in 2016 *Oi Oi Oi* folded due to low sales.

*Inkspots, Oi Oi Oi* and the various other former titles distributed through newsagencies are case studies into why the Australian comics industry’s circulation practices follow the social network market model. The ‘trust’ inherent in these sources comes through different forms of capital (subcultural, social, cultural) (Hartley, et al. 2013: 9-11; Potts, 2010: 135). Subcultural capital is similar to cultural capital, however it emphasises ‘cool’ rather than sophistication to a select community of people. Much like cultural capital, subcultural capital is embedded in manners; dressing in an appropriate style, understanding group meanings through discourse, and knowing which products are trending (Thornton, 1996: 11-12).

Cultural intermediaries in the comics industries which facilitate social network markets are usually those familiar with the form: scene media, publishers, conventioneers, and retailers. Comics retailers are considered to have high degrees of social and subcultural capital, because they often begin as fans before becoming retailers (Miller, 2013; Woo, 2012: 81-87, 100-109, 123, 126, 133-136, 146-147; Bentley, 2013: 50). Where this reliance on retailers for social cues in the comics industry is problematic is that it can create a closed system. If comics stores are reliant on the direct market, then consumers who become retailers may only have specialist knowledge of American serial comics (McCloud, 2000: 74, 83-85, 110; Woo, 2012: 116; Woo, 2011: 126).

A retailer will also not be free of biases; whilst many retailers try to recommend books to suit a customer’s needs or order in specific products for customers, there have been retailers who practice self-interested curation. Curation is where taste is dictated through a cultural

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55 It’s unknown which distributor the publisher (Comicoz) used.
intermediaries’ choice for consumers, and introversion is when a cultural intermediary is focused on keeping a group or audience small and familiar, practicing favouritism (Franzen and Hangartner, 2006: 355-356; Woo, 2012: 123-126, 137-139, 147-148; Woo, 2012: 661-662; Woo, 2011: 127-128; McCloud, 2000: 83-85, 104).

McCloud (2000: 83-84, 104) notes that whilst increasingly positive media coverage of comics can lead to more interest in the medium, customers who have negative experiences in comics shops are unlikely to become hard copy readers or collectors. There are few other available retail options for serial comics because of the direct market.

Graphic novels may be accessed via bookstores, libraries, etc. (Butcher, 2015; Maloney, 2014; Brienza, 2009: 104, 109-111; Snowball, 2008: 112-118). However as the above case studies show, when a retailer is unfamiliar with the form of comics, they can struggle to facilitate social network markets as a cultural intermediary.

This includes libraries and bookstores in Australia. A survey of Australian libraries in 2007 Snowball (2008: 114) found that only 48% of libraries carried graphic novels and that 35% of libraries were unfamiliar with the form. When Allen and Unwin were promoting their graphic novel line, Wagner found that the best sales were at Readings Carlton, a bookstore which had staff passionate about graphic novels (Bentley, 2011: 10).

One of the central arguments of this thesis is that Australia is in what could be considered a transitional period regarding comics; they are becoming less subcultural due to the agency of stakeholders, but they are not a wholly familiar form to large sections of the population. If consumers are familiar with comics, they are usually American comics (Bentley, 2013: 36; Possamai, 2003: 115; Mason, 2013). The cultural hegemony of American comics has meant that cultural cringe can also affect the decisions made by cultural intermediaries in providing social cues to consumers.

Cultural cringe was a term coined by Australian writer and critic Arthur Phillips (1950: 299-302) and is used to describe the idea that anything produced by Australians is inherently inferior to international versions. Cultural cringe was originally used to describe art and cultural artefacts, but can also be used to describe a national anxiety around Australia’s ideological and political place in the world (Heazlewood, 2014: 242-245; Hesketh, 2013).
Stakeholders have suspected that cultural cringe can influence buyer decisions. Wagner was told by a retailer that Australian graphic novels were being passed over in favour of U.S. or U.K. graphic novels (Bentley, 2011: 10-11). Some comics stores declined to carry the Allen and Unwin line, and they were described as ‘weird indie books’ (Bentley, 2011: 11). Bentley (2013: 36) alleges that when he ran Minotaur, even though Australian comics were displayed prominently and were recommended, more customers would buy American comics. Scarlet Baccini recalls giving her comics to a Sydney store only for the retailer to say that ‘they [Australian comics] don’t sell’ (Baccini, 13/5/14, interview). 56

Negotiating with cultural intermediaries is a constant process for stakeholders. These experiences that stakeholders have had stress the importance of markets being created via physical and cultural spaces, through an economy based on events and socialisation.

Mail Order Distribution Methods

Another strategy that stakeholders used prior to the advent of the direct market (circa the 1960s or 1970s) was distributing comics through mail order. Mail order companies were the most common form of comics distribution in Anglophone industries, and Australians used this system to distribute their comics internationally (Bentley, 2013: 51-53).

The Minotaur comics store was originally a mail order company (1977-1980). Bentley, Gates and Paraskevas imported international titles for individual collectors and the occasional retailer (Bentley, 2013: 46-54) Whilst there were not any comic specialist stores (when Minotaur was a mail distributor), there were some bookstores which catered to what could be considered a ‘geek’ audience, stocking sci-fi and fantasy merchandise, and some comics series. But they also used their company to distribute their own title nationally and internationally (Bentley, 2013: 51-53). 57

Throughout the 1970s until the early 1990s stakeholders would distribute their comics through mail order companies based in the U.K. (Titan Books) and the U.S. (Bud Plant, Last Gasp, Seagate) (Bentley, 2013: 30-31, 48-53, 58). If the distributor wanted to carry the

56 In Chapter Nine cultural cringe will also be discussed in relation to media coverage of comics.
57 Minotaur became the first comics specialty store in Australia. Whilst there were some bookstores who stocked comics, there weren’t any stores which only stocked comics.
product after being given a sample, they would order in anything within the range of 200-1,500 comics in a print run, with more ordered in if necessary (Bentley, 2013: 48-49).

There were some inconveniences with this method, such as high international postage costs for Australians. Some distributors would also delay paying stakeholders until the shipment of comics had been received as a guarantee. Communication was through phone calls, and occasionally letters. But unlike Gordon and Gotch, these distributors required smaller print runs, were willing to negotiate prices, and already possessed knowledge of the comics market (Bentley, 2013: 30-31, 39, 49-53, 58).

As well as international distributors, stakeholders would use international stakeholders to increase their chances of making sales in international markets. As discussed in Chapter Six, stakeholders who had acquired social and subcultural capital in international markets were used as a selling point in Australian comics. Knowledge brokers for North American markets include Top Shelf, Eddie Campbell, and Fantagraphics (Bentley, 2013: 98; Bentley, 2007: 6-10).

The success of Australian comics in these overseas markets has relied on social cues which emphasise their creation through international collaboration. When Bentley et al. advertised Fox Comics as an ‘Australian’ comic, even though Fox was being published through Fantagraphics (a U.S. publisher) at the time, sales declined (Bentley, 2013: 99). This confirmed to Bentley (2013: 95, 99) that cultural cringe was a phenomenon that could have an empirical effect on sales, and also that America was ‘an inward-looking culture’.

The American comics’ economic and cultural hegemony over the Anglophone comics markets has seen the industry accused of creating a ‘homogenous’ comics culture (Murray, 2013: 337). This homogenous culture is perpetuated through international comics creators either being hired to work on American content, or international comics creators emulating American material in their own markets to compete with the direct market.

Social Network Markets and Cultural Cringe

This cultural hegemony has caused conflicting discourses in Australia over whether comics which have overtly Australian themes encourage cringe. Some stakeholders such as Stuart Hale (1998: 109) believe that comics which utilise patriotic symbolism have only niche appeal, nationally and internationally. Others, such as Paul Mason (2013) believe that
comics being identifiable as belonging to a specific nation through language and themes are common in other industries (Japan, Belgium, America, England) and so Australia shouldn’t be excluded from this practice.

Within the Australian cultural and creative industries, even though there are anecdotal examples of cultural cringe, there is no quantitative or conclusive qualitative evidence that cultural cringe affects consumers’ decisions when buying Australian products (Heazlewood, 2014: 245). The argument over whether Australian comics appeal to audiences through emulating international content or being recognisably Australian has continued from the first period (Ryan, 1979: 165; Gordon, 1998: 13; Foster, 1998: 16). Then as now, without any thorough audience data it is unclear how much cultural cringe shapes social network markets in the Australian comics industry.

Yet the data present in anecdotal evidence about cultural cringe is that Australian stakeholders are concerned about the pervasive influence America has on Australian comics culture, and what the most effective strategies are for engaging audiences in the domestic market. In virtual spaces, even though most online intermediaries are American, stakeholders are creating Australian owned and operated platforms. As I will explore further in this chapter, these Australian online intermediaries were created to fill a specific niche in the domestic market.

In the next section I will discuss the formation of the direct market. The direct market system of distribution replaced the old mail order system. The mail system still survives online, but for comics retail stores, there are few options other than to deal with the direct market system.

**The Formation of the Direct Market**

The ‘direct market’ of comics circulation has had a strong influence on the business practices of individual stakeholders, publishers, and comics retailers. The practice originated in America and has sustained the U.S. industry’s cultural and economic hegemony in Anglophone markets.58

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58 American serial comics are also popular in other comics reading nations, however there are countries (such as Japan and Belgium) which have maintained their own unique comics cultures. The literature that I am referring to in this chapter is focused on Anglophonic markets such as Britain, Canada and Australia.
The direct market system evolved after many publishers closed their operations in the aftermath of the 1950s moral panic. The publishers that survived, most notably Marvel and DC, found that their serial superhero comics were popular with audiences, but they still needed to pay for and then pulp returned stock (Terror, 2016; Sabin, 1993: 63).

In 1975, Philip Seuling created Seagate Distributors, which became the leading comics distributor due to its system, whereby comics were still sold in bulk to stores, but stock was now unreturnable (Bentley, 2013: 50; Hatfield, 2005: 22). Publishing companies and retailers who partnered with Seagate received their comics earlier than the newsstands, and unreturned stock became the ‘back issue’ market. Marvel allowed multiple distributors to purchase their comics after an antitrust lawsuit was filed by Irjax Enterprises against comics publishers (namely Marvel and DC) over the monopoly caused by their exclusive deals with Seagate in 1978 (Miller, 2016; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 250-251).59

The direct market and the back issue trade lead to the proliferation of comics stores in America and in other Anglophone comics industries in the 1980s and 1990s. The distribution market became more competitive, with distribution companies competing to have the quickest distribution speed and best deals for stock volume and price (Miller, 2016; Hatfield, 2005: 22). The varied options for distribution into the direct market in the 1980s opened more avenues of circulation for alternative comics (at least until Diamond Distributors bought out the competition) (Hatfield, 2005: 22-23; Sabin, 1993: 66-67; Bentley, 2013: 63).

For serial comics, quicker distribution systems compared to the old newsstand method and the back issue market gave rise to a culture of comics collecting. This culture fostered a critical appreciation of authors and artists which influenced sale patterns and created the shadow economy. The shadow economy, combined with alternative comics movement emphasising intellectual property rights, lead to more serial comics creators arguing for fairer work practices (Brown, 1997: 23-25; Sabin, 1993: 67; Lopes, 2009: 103, 106, 110; Hatfield, 2005: 22-23; McCloud, 2000: 47-49). The economic strength of comics publishing industries, encouraged by the popularity of creators (both American and outsourced), lead to more experimentation in form. Publishers began releasing limited series, softcover then hardcover trade paperbacks, and graphic novels (Miller, 2011: Sabin, 1993: 66; Brown, 1997: 24-27; Hatfield, 2005: 16-18, 23; McCloud, 2000: 49-51).

59 Irjax Enterprises evolved into Diamond Distributors (Miller, 2016).
Problems with comics distribution began in the mid-1990s due to market oversaturation by Marvel. In 1989 Marvel raised the prices on their books, then doubled, and then tripled, the number of titles they produced. Marvel also experimented with altering storylines and releasing multiple versions of the same comic with different titles. These ideas angered collectors, who believed that their practices were not being respected (Howe, 2012: 368-370; Beaty, 2010: 204; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 251; Brown, 1997: 23-25). Collectors valued quality over quantity, and other comics consumers who did not have subcultural knowledges could not keep track of titles and content (Woo, 2012: 189-190; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 251; Brown, 1997: 19, 23-27).

In 1995 Marvel decided to distribute exclusively with Heroes World, which was one of the only three distributors still operating. The rest had been bought out or pushed out of the market due to their inability to compete with the speeds and prices achieved by the remaining distributors. But Marvel soon found that Heroes World was unable to cope with the volume of titles they were producing. This issue coupled with the creative decisions deterring audiences and internal staff restructures caused Marvel to file for bankruptcy in 1996 and Heroes World to shut down (Howe, 2012: 368-370; Beaty, 2010: 204; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 251).

Diamond was established in 1982, but became the leading comics distributor in the United States by buying out their competition (Bud Plant and Capital City Distribution) in 1988 and 1996 respectively. DC and Image partnered with Diamond to compete for market share, as did Marvel once they had financially recovered. This lead to Diamond’s eventual position as the distributor with the monopoly over the market, as it partnered with multiple North American publishers (Miller, 2011; Terror, 2016).

Diamond’s monopoly has lead to concerns that the comics industry is placing too much reliance on a system which puts unnecessary economic strain on retailers (Terror, 2016; Arrant, 2015; Miller, 2013; Briggs, 1/4/13, interview; Davies, 14/5/13, interview; Hatfield, 2005: 31; McCloud, 2000: 71-76). Complaints from publishers about Diamond’s monopoly, which publishers claim discriminates against smaller operations, were lodged in 1996, 1999, and 2000, however no legal action was taken. An antitrust litigation also fell through in 1997 (Miller, 2016). There has also been reported reader and collector frustration at having to collect multiple titles in order to keep track of a narrative that is not confined to one series (Woo, 2012: 116; Cox, 2012).
In the creative industries, competition helps producers introduce ideas and products into the market, with these products offering consumers more choice and price estimates. Diamond works in a monopoly through restricting producers’ ability to access primary retail hubs. In the creative industries, where market share is dependent on social cues and accessibility, the majority of stakeholders who aren’t part of the Diamond monopoly are forced to build their audiences from non-traditional channels (Hartley et al, 2012: 24, 26-27).

The serial comics industry is already experiencing stagnation with title sales plateauing (Beaty, 2010: 206; Terror, 2016). There is also uncertainty over audience data, because a unique feature of comics distribution is that sales reports do not account for the number of books sold to individual consumers, but the number of books Diamond sold to retailers (preorders and final orders). The actual number of books bought by consumers from these retailers is unknown (Terror, 2016; Miller, 2011; Hatfield, 2005: 22).

Recently there has been controversy around authors blaming consumers for comic titles failing, with creators such as Brian Michael Bendis (*Spider-Man*) arguing that consumers needed to remember to remind their retailer to pre-order books. This has drawn criticism due to the responsibility being placed on consumers and retailers, when it is publishers and Diamond that have created the top-down distribution monopoly in the first place (Terror, 2016).

The argument put forward against Diamond and the ‘Big Two’ publishers (DC and Marvel) is that they created a niche market for non-returnable goods for the sake of monopolisation and profit. This system increases pressure on retailers, who can spend hours of unpaid labour re-ordering wrong orders, tracking missing orders, or deciding what to do with stock which has not been collected by consumers (Woo, 2012: 115). When consumers order in comics, they do not pre-pay retailers for this additional stock (Miller, 2013; Arrant, 2016; Terror, 2016; Hatfield, 2005: 23). The non-returnable stock which comprises retailers’ back issue market is becoming irrelevant, because consumers are relying less on retailers for missed or vintage issues and instead searching trading sites or Amazon (Terror, 2016; Johnston, 2015; Miller, 2011; Sutcliffe, 2016; Arrant, 2016).

The direct market has affected retailer stores’ consumer demographics. After traditionally catering to a straight white male ‘nerd’ audiences, these audiences being versed in the at-times complicated mythologies of serial comics, it can be a struggle to attract new audiences,
even with the popularity of films and television shows based on comics (Arrant, 2015; Terror, 2016; Sabin, 1993: 85; Woo, 2012: 672-673; Brienza, 2009: 106; Johnston, 2015).

Particularly as consumers now have the option of downloading their comics from online retailers or buying graphic novels from bookstores. Both options are popular with women, who do not always feel comfortable in comics spaces (Butcher, 2015; Maloney, 2014; Brienza, 2009: 104-5; Bentley, 2011: 8, 10; Parille, 2016; Miller, 2011; Sabin, 1993: 231; Woo, 2012: 671-672).

Media adapted from comics have become popular among a general audience. But reading comics, as a hobby, is still something that is not seen as a mainstream activity. To quote Mal Briggs, a comics retailer from Canberra:

> With Disney owning Marvel and Warner Brothers owning DC, you’d think you’d see more comic book product placement in film and TV. At the moment comics only get mentioned or included as a character device – much like taking drugs, it isn’t portrayed as normal. Even a show like The Big Bang Theory shows no ‘normal’ person reading comics willingly (Briggs, 1/4/13, interview).

Even though sales of digital file comics were over 200 million in 2013 (via Comixology), and digital file comics have become more popular with women, file sales are apparently not a factor when serial comics publishers decide whether a book is selling well enough to keep publishing the title (Terror, 2016; Flamm, 2013).

The impact that digital comics files will have on the direct market is a growing area of research (McCloud, 2000: 180-189; Steirer, 2014: 459, 468-469). By disrupting the economy of the serial market, digital files not only have the potential to negatively affect retailers’ business but may change the way comics consumption and collection is practiced and discussed (McCloud, 2000: 163-166, 188-189).

In the American comics industry, serial comics are already being surpassed by graphic novels aimed at women and the YA (young adult) market in terms of industry prestige (Eisner awards) and sales (Butcher, 2015; Maloney, 2014). Whilst print book sales fell 2.5% in 2013, sales for graphic novels instead grew by 4% in the U.S. market, bringing in $415 million. These graphic novel sales were for bookstores, online book retailers, and occasionally a comics store (Maloney, 2014).
For the Australian comics industry, both stakeholders and retailers, choices need to be made about whether to work with or against the direct market system. These choices are both economic and social strategies.

How the Direct Market Impacts the Australian Comics Industry

The key issues when considering the direct market in the context of Australian comics are cooperation and adaptation. Stakeholders and retailers have adapted their practices in the absence of a national comics distribution system to create new social network markets. As I will be exploring through this chapter and Chapter Eight, these social network markets are created through practices modelled on cultural tourism.

As referenced previously in this chapter the Australian comics industry has never had a unified distribution system. In this section I will be explaining that this is because of stakeholders’ irregular production practices, distributors’ questionable business practices, and retailers being wary of taking on high volumes of stock which has an unknown customer base compared to serial comics.

The first attempt at having a national Australian comics distribution company was ‘Blind Dog’, an independent operation in Sydney (established in the 1980s, exact year unknown). After stakeholders paid the distributor to ship their comics the operation folded and was revealed to be a scam (Mutard, 2014).

Sunburnt Comics Distribution was the second attempt, established in the mid-1990s, also based in Sydney. Tim McEwen, a stakeholder and conventioneer, was the proprietor, and the company specialised in Australian serial comics. McEwen’s status meant that stakeholders had more trust in his knowledge and abilities, but Sunburnt Comics Distribution folded after one and a half years due to an alleged lack of interest from retailers. Reportedly most retailers would stop placing orders after one shipment, and some tried to delay payment for the comics (Mutard, 2014).

The third attempt was MacQ, a joint initiative between Black House (a former publishing company) and Gestalt. The exact dates for the timespan of MacQ, like Sunburnt and Mad Dog, is unknown – outside of anecdotal evidence provided by Bruce Mutard (2014), it is difficult to find any data about these companies.
Instead of selling comics in bulk, MacQ gave retailers a catalogue featuring Black House and Gestalt comics. If a customer wanted a comic from Black House or Gestalt, they would have to ask their retailer to order them in. The catalogue was apparently an adaptation of Diamond’s *Previews* ordering catalogue (Mutard, 2014; Sutcliffe, 2016). Mutard (2014) believes that this plan should have been more successful due to Black House and Gestalt having ‘professional product’ (a subjective opinion) and Kirgan having a print business that could handle warehousing and freight expediting. But MacQ’s distribution company failed because, like Sunburnt, there allegedly was not enough interest in Australian comics from audiences and retailers (Mutard, 2014).

Stakeholders having their stock carried by Diamond is rare, but possible. Individuals (Jason Paulos) collectives (*DeeVee*) and publishing houses (Gestalt) have had their comics circulated nationally and internationally by Diamond. *DeeVee* had successful print runs for their first six issues, and was considered ‘a success’ in Australia, having sold up to 3,000 copies an issue in the American market.\(^6\) The cover price was 2.95 (USD), with Diamond keeping 1.83 (USD) of this price. After sales began to slow, the editorial team wrapped up the series at issue 14 so that they ‘wouldn’t be in the red’ (Bentley, 2007: 8).

According to Mutard (2014) and Read (5/6/13, interview), as well as Diamond keeping half the cover price as a service fee there are high costs associated with shipping Australian comics to the U.S. These high costs either deter Australian stakeholders from distributing with Diamond, or limit their print runs if they cannot sell issues consistently.

Diamond requires large and frequent amounts of stock from stakeholders. A publisher needs to apply for their books to be carried with Diamond, and if approved, an advertisement appears in Diamond’s catalogue for retailers, *Previews*. If a retailer chooses to purchase a publisher’s books, then the publisher needs to negotiate the cost of printing with a printer, with off-set printing starting at $1,000 for 1,000 copies (USD) (James, 2014; James, 2013).

After the printer ships the books to Diamond, Diamond ships the books to the retailers two weeks later, and a month after receipts of sale, Diamond sends the publisher their cut of the run. It is a costly process. If re-ordered the next issue of the comic must be made by deadline and stock is unreturnable. Stakeholders who are not working for or with a corporate business

\(^6\) The exact number of copies sold in Australia is unknown.
(i.e. Australians) take a large financial risk (James, 2014; James, 2013; Mutard, 2014; Bentley, 2007: 8).

To understand the details of retailers’ practice I spoke with two comic store owners. Mal Briggs of Impact Comics in Canberra has been a retailer for 12 years and has more than 100 Australian comics on file that he has distributed in the past. Impact Comics have regularly supported the Ledger Awards.

Mitchell Davies is the owner of All Star Comics, established in 2011 in Melbourne and winner of the Eisner ‘Spirit of Comics Retailer’ Award in 2014 (Russell, 2014). All Star Comics hosts the All Star Women Comic Book Club, a reading group for women (Kartas, 2015). All Star has also hosted the 2015 Ledger Awards and the Women in Comics Festival (2016). Both comics stores host signings, and were described in positive terms by stakeholders in the scene.

Whilst both retailers enjoy their work and supporting Australian comics, Diamond’s relentless distribution schedule has them concerned. Says Briggs:

> There are almost 20,000 items listed in Diamond’s stock catalogue. In addition, every week, there are over 100 new release comic books and dozens of collected volumes, graphic novels, and more released… Not only is it difficult to order and know the product, it is simply very difficult to merchandise and stock the items (Briggs, 1/4/13, interview).

Publishers of serial comics engage in what Davies describes as ‘a marketing cycle that feels like it’s never going to end’ (Davies, 14/5/13, interview). There is a relentless need to hype the ‘next big title’, but month after month, there seems to be more hyperbole than sales, which can lead to wariness and fatigue in consumers and retailers. This fatigue, combined with the high prices for comics, means that there is a dwindling audience for serial comics in what is already a small market (Davies, 14/5/13, interview). For Davies and Briggs, it would make more sense for publishers to understand what sells with audiences and distribute less books, focusing instead on higher quality (Davies, 14/5/13, interview; Briggs, 1/4/13, interview).

Diamond can also take up to three weeks to process an in-stock reorder. With no competition, there is little a retailer can do about this practice (Davies, 14/5/13, interview). ‘If they
[Diamond] wanted to change the rate of the wholesale discount tomorrow, what could we do? … there is no one else to get this product [serial comics] from’ (Davies, 14/5/13, interview).

Diamond’s distribution system has also made it difficult for graphic novels to be distributed to stores. Greg Holfeld, who illustrated a graphic novel with Ruth Starke (Captain Congo), had to approach Adelaide retailer Pulp Fiction personally to stock his book because the publisher (Random House) only distributed to bookstores and libraries (Holfeld, 8/3/13, interview). Allen and Unwin reportedly also had difficulties distributing to comics stores (Bentley, 2011: 10).

Australian comics publishers who have managed to get their comics stocked in both comic retailers and bookstores include Milk Shadow Books and Gestalt, who are distributed through Madman Entertainment. Madman are a general popular culture distributor, which may have influenced how and why they can distribute to both markets.61

The two issues for Australian retailers who wish to support Australian comics are shelf space and social space. Shelf space refers to not only how much space a comics store can devote to Australian comics, but how a comics store is organised.

Australian comics will often have their own section in a store; Australian comics come in a range of forms, whilst American comics are of a standard size and weight (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview; Miller, 2016).62 Comic book shops, game stores, and other retail outlets which cater to niche interests will often have a specific layout, with popular or mainstream products at the front and more niche material at the back or in its own section. This system makes it easier for new customers to find what they are looking for or for retailers to give recommendations (Woo, 2012: 665).

Stakeholders can find it difficult to distribute outside of their cluster. Stakeholders who cannot get their comics distributed via a publisher’s distributor rely on attending events and approaching retailers directly. Some stakeholders will attend events and approach retailers directly even if they work with a publisher to target more markets (Holfeld, 8/3/13, interview; Mutard, 2014). When considering which comics stores to approach, a stakeholder will

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61 Unfortunately there isn’t any information on the terms of agreement between Milk Shadow Books and Gestalt and Madman regarding the product quotas and prices.

62 These formats apply to serial comics, but not TPBs and graphic novels. But TPBs will usually be sorted by publisher or alphabetically, and graphic novels may have their own section (Miller, 2013).
consider the environment of a store (whether it is clean and friendly) and how their comics will be stocked. A comics store which has a poorly presented Australian comics section may be avoided (Baccini, 13/5/14/ interview; Smith, 13/4/13; Bullock, 20/11/13, interview).

As social spaces comics stores are also committed to engaging with the communities which have been built up around their practice (Woo, 2012: 665-674; Woo, 2012: 98-105; 132-149; Woo, 2011: 128-130). As well as networking with stakeholders in Impact Comics, Briggs will visit conventions and meets. Davies has stated that an All Star Comics business goal was always to engage the local community:

> When we first opened the store there was already a strong comic-creating community in and around Melbourne, and we embraced that. Comic book readers want to feel like they’re part of that picture. We’re very happy if this award showcases Melbourne’s comic book culture. That’s the best possible result we could hope for (in Russell, 2014).

Many stakeholders have also been or are currently retailers; these include Benzin Bullock (creator and retailer at Pulp Fiction Comics), Mark Selan (editor/publisher and retailer at Greenlight Comics) and Cazz Jennings (scene media and retailer at All Star Comics).

A primary way retailers will engage with the community is to host events within their store (Woo, 2011: 131, 133; Woo, 2012: 665-666, 170; Woo, 2012: 132-135). Events and activities within comics stores bond together those within a subculture whilst also opening up the potential for new participants:

> Physical space is a basic infrastructure for most cultural practices. Not only do activities often extend in space, but interaction among participants is necessary for the reproduction of practices. Put another way, retail stores and organisations’ events facilitate access to and enjoyment of practices by bringing participants into contact with one another. Moreover, as public events and spaces – anyone who wishes may walk into a comic or a game shop and all of the events hosted by studied organisations are open to the public, subject to modest admission fees – they also represent an interface between nerd culture and the ‘mainstream’ (Woo, 2012: 121).

In Australian comics stores these events can be signings, festivals, launches, mini markets, and reading groups. All that is needed for these events are tables, chairs and space. Greenlight
Comics in Adelaide have created a market space at the back of the store for launches and mini markets, and All Star Comics have an upstairs space where the Women in Comics Festival (2016) was held. The seller tables were arranged in a bloc in the middle of the room, and guests could walk around and talk to practitioners and buy comics at their leisure.

Greenlight Comics have hosted the Adelaide Ladies Comics Club (a reading group) and the Adelaidies Drink n’ Draw. These events, along All Star’s commitment to events which are designed for women, are examples of extroversion (making spaces welcome to those previously considered outside a subculture) (Woo, 2012: 145-156; Woo, 2012: 669). Circa the 1960s and early 1970s the decision was made by comics publishers to focus on men rather than women (by getting rid of genres women liked such as romance), and comics stores became masculine subcultural spaces (Lopes, 2009: 104; Brown, 1997: 23-24). Whilst there have been instances of male retail workers being biased against female readers, it is more common that male customers consider the comics store ‘their’ space (Woo, 2012: 674; Woo, 119-120, 147, 246). The retailer therefore is often put in the position of trying to keep their (usually older and male) collector fan base returning to the store, but also make the space welcoming for new customers and women (Woo, 2011: 131; Woo, 2012: 674; Woo, 2012: 143, 145, 147).

By hosting all-women events in store, or sponsoring events for women, these retailers are providing women with their own spaces to practice production and consumption (Kartas, 2015). In the field, spaces where there was an uneven gender ratio of men to women were common. Katie Parrish, who works as the art and comics director for Spook Magazine, described the feeling of alienation that can occur in these spaces:

> Everyone just has their dicks out having sword fights, constantly. The Melbourne scene tries to be inclusive, but it’s still pretty – it’s all men. Men everywhere… it feels a bit weird at times, trying to believe that I have any right to exist in the same space as these guys (Savage, 2015).

Retail stores have adapted their practices not only because they believe assisting stakeholders is a moral good, but cooperating with the comics scene is also an economic decision. Retailers are facing increased competition from digital comics (Terror, 2016; Steirer, 2014: 468-469; McCloud, 2000: 163-166, 188-189). Davies and Briggs both believed that publishing comics online is going to become an increasingly popular option for Australian
stakeholders because of the low costs and wider market reach (Davies, 14/5/13, interview; Briggs, 14/5/13, interview).

Retailers who engage with stakeholders understand that it is not enough to just stock Australian comics – there needs to be frequent interactions between stakeholders and audiences. The comics store becomes a site of production and consumption, with stakeholders becoming familiar to audiences, and retailers raising their social capital with stakeholders. In a news report about Free Comic Book Day, the camera footage revealed customers queuing around the block to get into All Star Comics. The news report also revealed stakeholders from the Melbourne scene drawing and signing commissioned sketches, the retailers taking advantage of a day with high foot traffic to raise the social capital of stakeholders. Stakeholders will respond in kind by recommending retailers to new practitioners within the scene (Baccini, 13/5/14, interview; Santospirito, 25/6/13, interview)

By creating spaces of production as well as consumption, retailers are practicing cultural tourism. Cultural tourism places a focus on ‘prosumption’, which is a ‘process by which the consumer becomes a producer of the products and experiences they consume’ (Richards, 2010: 11). Cultural tourism is enabled through scenes responding to socio-cultural or economic change, with stakeholders using innovative methods to create new social network markets and add new values to pre-existing spaces (Potts, 2009: 142). Comics, as a creative industry which sustains itself through a participatory culture, is suited to cultural tourism ‘prosumption’ practices (Woo, 2015; Woo, 2012: 182-184; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 251-254; Richards, 2010: 11-12; Potts, et al, 2008: 179).

In the latter half of this chapter and in Chapter Eight the focus is on two divergent economic streams in the Australian comics industry. Physical retail spaces and events contribute to agglomeration economies through comics activity based in scenes, but Australian comics distribution is also part of a decentralised digital economy. The Australian comics industry’s economic structure is based on the creative industries’ framework of innovation. This innovation is through creativity being situated in both institutions and networks. These institutions (or established media platforms) are in both ‘places’ and ‘spaces’, and connected through social knowledge (Potts, 2009: 141).
Individual Distribution Channels

Online Distributors (Hard Copy Comics)

Social networks in virtual spaces are based on consumers practising individualised ‘long tail’ consumption and curation, this consumption and curation enabled through media convergence (Anderson, 2004; Shachar and Ball, 2016). Media convergence has created a participatory culture that combines grassroots and social media with more established and traditional media platforms and broadcasters (Jenkins, 2004: 35).

A consequence of media convergence has been creative industries adjusting their practices to suit technological shifts and consumer practices. There has been a decline of consumers seeking out cultural artefacts in favour of streaming digital content on phones and laptops. With this culture of streaming, downloading, sharing, etc. has come communities of knowledge which form through social media and other platforms (Jenkins, 2004: 35-42; Jenkins and Deuze, 2008: 11; Carreiro, 2010: 223, 225-226, 230; Jenkins, 2006: 5-10; Mangematin, et al, 2014: 1; Murray, 2012: 135; Schachar and Ball, 2016).

The ‘long tail’ theory of markets was put forward by Chris Anderson in 2004. Anderson theorised that with creative industries producing more digitised content, consumers are going to seek out media that suits their tastes. Media consumption will no longer be determined by physical locality, but interest-driven (Anderson, 2004). This results in a decentralised, digitised economy where a consumer either accesses the content that they want through legitimate means or pirates/plagiarises material (Kreider, 2013; Schachar and Ball, 2016).

Whether attained through legitimate or pirated means cultural artefacts bought and sold online, and digital content, are expected by consumers to be cheaper than goods sold in physical retail stores (Johnston, 2015: 6; Murray, 2012: 135; Kreider, 2013; Carreiro, 2010: 223; Shachar and Ball, 2016). Comics were originally monetised online through webcomics, and there are still some sites which require micropayments for content (although now it’s more likely a practitioner will fund their labour through crowdfunding i.e. Patreon) (Johnston, 2015; Fenty, Houp and Taylor, 2004; McCloud, 2000: 180-189). Hard copy comics are distributed through sites such as Amazon and Etsy.

Social network markets created through digital economies are created through social cues from knowledge brokers and other curators of influence (Schachar and Ball, 2016; Anderson,
2004; Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007: 3-7; Goldharber, 1997). But these social cues are also formed through algorithms which are embedded into the site (such as Amazon recommending products based on past purchases, and Comixology dividing comics by publisher) (Anderson, 2004; Steirer, 2014: 459, 462-463).

The distribution methods used by the Australian comics industry for hard copy comics are innovative when applied to supply and demand within the domestic market. Media convergence consists of top-down corporate-driven initiatives/platforms and bottom-up grassroots consumer/community practices (Mangematin et al, 2014: 6; Jenkins and Deuze, 2008: 6). By creating their own sites and distribution channels, stakeholders are innovating through social knowledge:

The CIs [creative industries] are central to the growth of knowledge process that is economic evolution. All new technologies have some aspect of this, yet the CIs are ostensibly characterised by the dominance of both social production and consumption through the flow of novel rules (as technologies). The principles of this definition derive from both the theory of open-complex-adaptive systems and from the behavioural and social empiricism of the economic agent in the modern economic environment, namely the choice of something new that, while variously socially produced or consumed, involves an individual value based upon social information. This is the domain of the emergence of new choices over things not previously imagined rather than the universal substitution problem between known possibilities (Potts et al, 2008: 171).

Regarding international distribution hard copy, there are more challenges regarding the circulation of product and social cues. The few graphic novels and small press comics are affected by the constraints of platforms which have been created to suit the book market, such as Amazon.

Mail order distribution has evolved from consumers and retailers negotiating through phone calls to consumers being able to buy comics through a mouse click. In Australia, there are various independent mail order distributors. Stakeholders will distribute their comics through their own sites, or as bundles in a subscription service (Minicomics of the Month Club). There has also been a site set up by Australian stakeholder Queenie Chan, BentoNet, which is designed to be an all-purpose online book wholesaler, similar to Amazon. Stakeholders who
sell their comics through their own sites include Frank Candiloro, Scarlette Baccini, Josh Santospirito, Gestalt, and Milk Shadow Books. These sites are usually supported through payment systems such as PayPal and Big Cartel.

The appeal of online mail distribution for stakeholders is that it can free them up of unsold stock there are physical records of sales. Josh Santospirito kept track of sales through the Big Cartel program and a spreadsheet, selling 950 copies of his graphic novel *The Long Weekend in Alice Springs* in 2013 (Santospirito, 25/6/13, interview). By tracking sales, stakeholders can make estimates on current and future print runs. If their book sells well, they may consider printing a similar number of books for their next title so that they do not make a loss (Candiloro, 13/5/14, interview; Santospirito, 25/6/13, interview; Jade, 17/3/13, interview; James, 12/6/13, interview). To quote Candiloro:

> I keep track of the sales I do – admittedly it’s not much – but every sale counts. I’ve got a spreadsheet that I’ve got all my stuff in. I think it goes back to the fact that I’m self-employed, like I’m a freelancer, I edit videos for a living, so you’ve got to keep track of sales there, I’ve got that experience. I think that’s another thing that I think self-publishers need to practice, keeping track of sales, especially when it comes to tax. (Candiloro, 13/5/14, interview).

By receiving receipts of sale directly, stakeholders do not need to negotiate with a cultural intermediary (such as Bentley having to request receipts through Gordon and Gotch). Whether online or offline, stakeholders are making strategic decisions about supply and demand. This is an indication of entrepreneurialism as stakeholders gather research about their audiences and make financial decisions based on this research (Hartley et al, 2012: 102; Johnston, 2015: 8–10). Even with low levels of product and revenue, stakeholders are focused on sustaining production.

A recent innovation in independent comics distribution has been the Minicomics of the Month Club. Created by Andrew Fulton in 2013, 12 creators each make a minicomic for each month of the year which are sent out to consumers who signed up for the service online. Subscription payments ($30 AUD) covers shipping costs. The Minicomics of the Month Club is an example of knowledge brokering (through Fulton), risk management, and economic incentive. Even though previews of the practitioners’ work are advertised on the site, consumers are still asked to pay for a bundle rather than individual comics. The incentive is
in the value for money. Small press comics usually cost $2-$5, but with the added mailing fees the bundle is valued at a discount price.\footnote{Unfortunately I couldn’t find any data on how the revenue from the subscription services are divided between Fulton and the stakeholders who take part in Minicomics of the Month.}

Consumers are asked to pay for 12 creators, some of whom who may be more familiar to audiences than others (such as Pat Grant or Jake Lawrence). But the Minicomics of the Month Club has lasted for years as a national distribution service for comics in Australia, through micropayments and understanding audiences. Like other successful independent creators who sell goods through the internet, Fulton provides individual consumers with convenience (comics mailed to them directly), both service and product(s) being relatively cheap (Johnston, 2015). That subscribers only have to make one payment rather than several could also be an incentive.

What also benefits Fulton is novelty and collective social capital. The Minicomics of the Month Club is a unique idea that has received high levels of support from the Australian comics industry. Whenever there is a call out for that year’s subscriptions, as well as stakeholders involved in the bundle advertising the service, other stakeholders share information about the service through their social networks (Potts, 2009: 668; Potts, 2010: 136; Hartley et al, 2012: 9).

Another Australian owned and operated national distributor is BentoNet, established by Queenie Chan in 2015. BentoNet is an online distribution site where comics are ready to preorder by libraries, bookstores, and comics stores. As a cultural intermediary, BentoNet has been designed to be an online catalogue as well as a distributor, with publishers and individuals advertising their books through the site. The audience for the BentoNet is individual consumers, retailers (both comic and book) and libraries. Data on BentoNet’s sales is unavailable, and it remains to be seen whether the site is successful.

Chan’s strategic adaptation and retention of a distribution service similar to Amazon is an example of innovation within a creative industry (Potts, 2009: 664). Chan recognised a gap in the market for an Australian distributor that can circulate product within the comics and book industries.

Like Fulton, Chan is providing Australian product specifically for a domestic market. But whilst Fulton’s Minicomics of the Month Club sells small quantities of comics directly to a
consumer, Chan’s BentoNet sells to both individuals and intermediaries. Individuals may be willing to buy a product from an unknown author, but regarding comics retailers and book retailers, there are still high degrees of uncertainty.

This uncertainty is related back to whether Australian comics will sell. Most cultural artefacts in stores (music, books) have been vetted by and marketed by corporate or commercial organisations who have conducted audience research (Anderson, 2004; Ball and Schachar, 2016). It is likely that a product will also be part of what Anderson (2004) refers to as the 20-80 principle or Pareto’s Principle: only 20% of product is considered a ‘hit’, either critically or commercially. Cunningham (2006: 30-31) suggests that the critical and commercial success of a product in the creative industries can be estimated through the stakeholder considering issues which they can and can’t control in regards to the market.

What complicates this is unknown demand; particularly in the creative industries where products are consumed out of choice rather than necessity. Even with thorough research, a product may not achieve the desired results for the stakeholder (or it may be an unexpected hit) (Cunningham, 2006: 30-31). But research is still essential for stakeholders who want to create and sustain social network markets, as there is an infinite variety of product competing for consumers within the attention economy (Cunningham, 2006: 30-31).

As practitioners who primarily exist within positions in the cultural field with high degrees of autonomy, the majority of stakeholders within the Australian comics industry have specific knowledges and understandings of supply and demand. But it can’t be automatically assumed that all retailers understand, or even have a desire to stock Australian comics. Working within Pareto’s Principle, a retailer may prefer to stock reliable bestsellers or recognisable authors. A social network ‘may contain hubs, weak and strong connections, and close and distant connections’ (Potts et al, 2008: 172). Just because BentoNet can supply retailers, it doesn’t mean that retailers will necessarily want to stock their product, because of uncertain demand for Australian comics. Stakeholders may be able to convince retailers to stock their product through communication and negotiation, but it’s still a risk.

To alleviate some of this risk, BentoNet also targets individual consumers (like Amazon) through a digital ‘long tail’ economy (Anderson, 2004; Ball and Schachar, 2016; Carreiro, 2010: 220, 223-225; Potts et al, 2008: 171-172). What may set BentoNet apart from a distributor like MacQ is stock handling and marketing. BentoNet orders from stakeholders
directly rather than keeping a warehouse of stock, working within the print on demand system. Mail order distribution, unlike warehouse freight, has postal services handle the transportation of product, which also lessens operation costs (Heazlewood, 2014: 142).

But MacQ also had difficulties in communicating their purpose to retailers, which affected retailers’ abilities to be intermediaries for customers. With a targeted marketing campaign which clearly communicates its purpose as a distributor, BentoNet could become one of the few Australian businesses which successfully distribute comics on a national scale.

To access global markets, stakeholders are more likely to utilise international distributors. These distributors have the corporate infrastructure to support international shipping costs, and set instructions for practitioners when they decide to set up their store through their sites (Carreiro, 2010: 221, 224-225). These sites are suited to small press (Etsy) and graphic novels (Amazon).

Etsy was established in 2005 and is a site designed to sell crafts and other handmade items. Small press comics are often sold for a low cost and have limited runs, and their DIY practice and aesthetic make them suited to Etsy. Stakeholders who sell their comics via Etsy include Alisha Jade, Georgina Chadderton and Rebecca Sheedy (Jade, 13/3/13, interview; Rackleyft, 2015: 30). Limited runs of small press comics being sold online may be related to the practice of zines being sent through mail networks to subscribers (Chidgey, 2009: 31-32).

By contrast, Amazon, created in 1994 by Jeff Bezos, was an online bookstore before becoming a general retail store that included graphic novels, and other hard copy comics in its stock (Murray, 2012: 131; Carreiro, 2010: 551). Stakeholders who sell on Amazon include graphic novelists Jason Franks (The Sixsmiths), and Paul Bedford (The List). Gestalt and Milk Shadows’ publishing lines are also sold via Amazon (Bentley, 2013: 15). In interviews stakeholders didn’t say whether their comics were on Amazon, therefore enquiries were made via Twitter. There were no Australian comics found on online book retailers Book Depository or Booktopia.

To find comics on Amazon, ‘comics and graphic novels’ was suggested by the site as an automatic search term. There were no categories just for comics. Comics (which primarily took the form of trade paperbacks and graphic novels) were sorted into the categories Children’s Comics and Graphic Novels, Children’s Chapter Books, Cartoons, and Strips. When the keywords ‘Australian comics’ are typed into the search bar there are only 1950s
and 1960s serial comics for sale, or a Harlequin manga series based on an Australian billionaire. If a consumer is unaware of Australian authors or titles, then it’s virtually impossible to find stakeholders’ graphic novels.

This absence of separate categorisation for comics and graphic novels is indicative of how comics have (and have not) been integrated into other publishing industries. Graphic novels have been incorporated into the book markets since the mid to late 1980s (Sabin, 1993: 80-87; Hatfield, 2005: 20-21; Patrick, 2012: 51-54). But graphic novels don’t seem to be incorporated into online intermediaries which were originally for (and are still largely associated with) books. A corporation like Amazon operates within a communications networks wherein a large central hub of commerce and communication attracts smaller, independent media producers (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008: 6). Whilst these corporate platforms present creatives with multiple possibilities, there are also technological and economic constraints which can interfere with the circulation of ideas and product (Mangematin et al, 2014: 6). Desktop research has revealed that it is difficult to locate Australian graphic novels and graphic novels generally on Amazon. However there is minimal data on how graphic novels are integrated with corporate online retailers, and so more research is needed in future studies for a comprehensive analysis.

There are some stakeholders who believe there will always be a market for hard copy comics, due to the collecting mentality among consumers and nostalgia for print (Baccini, 13/5/14, interview; Holfeld, 8/3/13, interview; Abdilla, 8/3/13, interview; Read, 5/6/13, interview). The hard copy comic which is most likely to survive is the graphic novel, with the production of these items described as ‘lavish’ and ‘detailed’ (Holfeld, 8/3/13, interview; Read, 5/6/13, interview). They are designed to be on bookshelves rather than in plastic bags (Holfeld, 8/3/13, interview). Single issue comics are being converted to digital comic files at a higher rate than graphic novels because they follow a schedule and because consumers are deciding to keep up with storylines through their phones (McCloud, 2000: 133-137, 181-189; Steirer, 2014: 459-464; Woo, 2012: 83; Woo, 2011: 13). For Purcell, the appeal of digital comics is that they are more cost-effective than hard copy comics. A hard copy comic is five minutes of reading time for five dollars, whilst a novel is thirty dollars for thirty hours of reading time (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview). A new issue of a Marvel comic on Comixology retails for $3.99 (AUD) and back issues retail for $1.99. These comics can also be accessed without leaving the house (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview).
The absence of Australian graphic novels via online intermediaries may also be because of supply; there are few Australian graphic novels produced. Australian graphic novel publishers can only print a few books to sustain their business model, and apart from Allen and Unwin, there have been few Australian book publishers who publish graphic novels (Rackleyft, 2015: 40; Bentley, 2011: 8, 11). There is what has been described by Wagner as a ‘sales glass ceiling’ regarding graphic novels and the domestic market (Bentley, 2011: 11). There are also high shipping costs for books (Donoughue, 2015). The high sales of graphic novels in the U.S. indicate that they are a growing market, but Australia’s distance from Northern Hemisphere markets, and the low levels of integration with online retail intermediaries may restrict the form’s growth in the Australian industry.

Online Distributors (Digital Files)

Digital comics files may be jpgs within a ‘cloud’ system or PODs (print-on-demand or pdf comics) (Fenty, Houp and Taylor, 2004; Goodbrey, 2013: 187-188). Digital comics files may be modified to have varying levels of interactivity. These files which are uploaded onto cloud systems such as Comixology have some flexibility, with readers being able to swipe and click to turn pages. If they are using a portable device such as a phone or a tablet, they can turn a portrait page into a landscape. Comics which are more interactive include those produced by the site Madefire, in which readers can manipulate sound and action in order to adjust their reading pace and experience (Goodbrey, 2013: 187-188; Cheredar, 2012; Steirer, 2014: 459; Mangematin, el al, 2014: 5).

Stakeholders have set up options for consumers to download digital files from their individual sites, or a publisher’s site (such as Gestalt). Stakeholders also send pdf. copies of comics to judging panels and reviewers. A central site for comics distribution in Australia is the Caravan of Comics. The Caravan of Comics was named after the North American tour of the same name (2013-2014) and features comics from those who went on the tour as well as those who didn’t.64 Andrew Fulton runs the site, again acting as a knowledge broker. The site named after the tour is strategic branding, as those within the scene would be familiar with the tour.

64 The Caravan of Comics was a short series of crowdfunded tours where a small number of Australian stakeholders went to various conventions and events in North America (the United States and Canada).
The Caravan of Comics offers free comics files to download. These comics files are those of comics which have already been distributed and printed (some through the Minicomics of the Month Club). The purpose of distributing comics for free is that it keeps the Minicomics of the Month service exclusive for those who pay for the subscription. (The Minicomics available on the site are only those from the previous year). For other stakeholders, with their comics already sold in hard copy, they use the service as a form of marketing.

The Caravan of Comics is a site which carries a specific product, and serves dual purposes. It provides a central site for stakeholders to upload their comics without competition from international products, and it also breaks up the growing duopoly which has been built up around digital comics files distribution.

The two biggest digital comics distributors in the world are Madefire and Comixology, both American companies. Madefire was created in 2012 by American comics creator Mark Waid, and was designed to give readers ‘motion comics’, which they can manipulate through sound and action to adjust and enhance their reading pace and experience (Goodbrey, 2013: 188; Cheredar, 2012). Madefire operates as both a publishing imprint and distributor. The site can convert previously published comics into motion books, or sell licensed comics in their original form (Cheredar, 2012). Gestalt’s graphic novels are the only Australian comics currently on the site, and this may be because one of Madefire’s staff (Ben Templesmith) has worked as an illustrator for Gestalt.

Madefire have a DeviantArt ‘channel’ where readers can create and find original motion books by creators. It is similar to the Amazon e-book model, where an author can upload and publish their own books alongside commercial publishing houses, creating a central hub of co-creation and circulation with low barriers of entry (Cheredar, 2012; Mangematin et al, 2014: 5-6; Potts et al, 2008: 464-466). Whilst it can take months for a creator-owned comic to be approved by Comixology, it only takes minutes for a creator-owned motion book comic to be made available through Madefire, and this is used by the company as a selling point (Cheredar, 2012).

The most well-known digital comics site/app is Comixology, a subsidiary of Amazon. Comixology launched in 2007 and was originally a site/app where readers could find details

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65 Stakeholders don’t have to pay to upload their comics onto Comixology, but there is a waiting period where their comics are assessed by site moderators (Salkowitz, 2012).
about new releases and place individual pre-orders from select comics retailers (Flamm, 2013). In 2009-2010 the decision was made to reposition Comixology as a retailer itself and Comics by Comixology, ‘a digital comic reader and store’ was launched. Still known colloquially as ‘Comixology’, the site/app became a place where digital comics files could be uploaded by publishers and practitioners and then downloaded onto smartphones. Comixology became the third highest grossing app for iPads in 2012 and was acquired by Amazon in 2014. It has more than 50,000 comics for sale via the site, and as of 2013, it had recorded over 200 million comics downloaded by individual users (Flamm, 2013). It is estimated that 76% of all digital comics are sold through Comixology (Steirer, 2014: 459). Australian stakeholders who have their comics listed for sale on Comixology include Frank Candiloro, Dean Rankine, and Milk Shadow Books.

As with online hard copy retail intermediaries the information about which titles were for sale on Comixology was sourced via social media. Comixology has Marvel, DC, and new products advertised on the homepage, and comics are sorted through title, genre, publisher, top rated, free, unlimited, first releases, collections and story arcs. Comixology has exclusive rights to DC and Marvel, and American serial comics are heavily advertised on the site (Steirer, 2014: 459-463). Comixology’s similar practices to Diamond and its ownership by Amazon is something to consider in regards to the potential for monopolisation and continued American hegemony in the Anglophone comics markets (Steirer, 2014: 459-463; Flamm, 2013).

Comixology’s ability to sell digital comics at the same time they are released in hard copy and their discounted rates for back issues of comics has also put the service in competition with the direct market (Steirer, 2014: 459-460). Consumers can archive and access their ‘comics’ through the service, but as this is digital content, these consumers are not purchasing an object but access rights to IP (Steirer, 2014: 460).

Comics collection for some invested fans places an emphasis on obtaining, trading or selling rather than reading or sharing (Hatfield, 2005: 24; Steirer, 2014: 456). However it is still possible to obtain and sell rare or valuable back issues online; through intermediaries such as Amazon. The decreasing ability of retail stores to provide back issues to collectors interested

66 There is minimal information about Madefire’s current or future business practices, and its sales data. It doesn’t seem to have the same market share as Comixology, and motion-comics may have different industry structures or social network markets to more traditional digital comics content.
in the shadow economy (whilst continually trying to lure casual readers into a subcultural space) is contributing to these physical spaces declining and digital comics continuing to triple and or double their download sales every year (Steiner, 2014: 460-463).

The three issues which could predict digital comics’ socio-economic changes to the comics industries (including Australia’s) in the future are platform constraints, knowledge, and labour rights. The platform constraints of Comixology are that corporate comics are pushed ahead of independent retailers and consumers also have the inability to organise, display or sell their comics collection. Consumers (and particularly collectors) define themselves within a creative industry and/or the comics industry by their ability to curate content according to taste and share this knowledge with various communities (Steirer, 2014: 463; Schachar and Ball, 2016; Brown, 1997: 22-24).

Regardless, Comixology remains increasingly popular with both producers and consumers (Steirer, 2014: 463-464). But it’s unlikely that the majority of stakeholders within the Australian comics industry will rely solely on online production and distribution networks, due to its social network markets being historically based around physical spaces (retail stores, events etc.). However these virtual spaces represent opportunities for stakeholders to create new audiences, and also target audiences which may not regularly access physical spaces. Stakeholders are adapting their practices, either working with established online intermediaries, or creating their own independent sites.

**Conclusion**

Distribution channels in the Australian comics industry can be divided through purpose and country of origin. Hard copy comics are either distributed to retail stores (or institutions), and increasingly consumers. With the exception of the online retailer BentoNet and some book publishers, all hard copy comics distribution to Australian retailers is undertaken by American companies (Madman and Diamond). Whilst Madman have gone into partnership with publishers, Diamond’s distribution system favours serialised American product.

This has caused comics retailers in Australia to transform their shops into social spaces of production as well as consumption. By adopting practices based on cultural tourism, stakeholders can familiarise audiences with Australian comics and retailers receive more business from the community. Because Australian comics are a low-infrastructure creative
industry and have been marginalised due to direct market distribution, stakeholders will often build social network markets through direct contact with consumers.

Digital platforms have proved to be a disruptive medium in facilitating both online mail distribution channels and digital file distribution. These disruptions extend to the social networks of the industry, which have historically been based around cultural intermediaries, stakeholders and consumers interacting in physical spaces.

More research on Australian distribution services is needed for future studies, particularly regarding hard copy comics. More information about distribution services would assist in understanding the qualitative and quantitative impact of Australian comics production on local and global creative economies.
Chapter Eight: Event Spaces and Agglomeration Economies

Introduction

Australian comics production and circulation is increasingly becoming part of the cultural tourism sector of cities by contributing to agglomeration economies through events. An ‘event’ is classified as a public gathering of stakeholders, or a gathering of stakeholders and consumers, with either a cultural intermediary or institution facilitating these interactions. Most events in the Australian comics industry could be considered cultural tourism as they are small-scale individualised events in urban areas which involve audiences both creating and consuming product.

Continuing the theme of cultural gatekeeping and the diversification in ‘geek spaces’ from the previous chapter, the economic and social utilisation of space are overtly demonstrated through popular culture conventions. Previously only associated with comics, they have become corporate, formulaic entities focused on popular culture which draw consumers into an enclosed city space. They are different from festivals, which utilise numerous city spaces or have distinctive elements which advertise their host city. Like comics stores, popular culture conventions are strongly associated with a ‘fanboy’ culture. This culture can enact gatekeeping practices which can make these spaces unwelcoming to anyone outside of this culture.

For stakeholders who aren’t interested in convention audiences, or who wish to explore further social network markets, there are numerous festivals where comics are sold. Through these events comics can increase their economic capital and/or increase their cultural and/or subcultural capital. Comics being associated with writers festivals or zine fairs increase the public perception that they are part of the publishing industries.

Comics also have their own festivals. Australian comics festivals are akin to those in Europe and the United Kingdom, containing participatory experiences for local, interstate or international attendees. Australian comics festivals are increasingly receiving public funding, this funding acting as a symbolic acknowledgement that comics can be considered an ‘art’ in
their own right. Comics have also been recognised as an art by consecrating institutions such as state libraries and galleries.

Libraries and comics studios have been instrumental in advancing comics events which emphasise education. These events not only extend comics’ participatory culture outside of adult audiences, but also signal a perception shift. Comics were previously considered harmful to children due to their alleged encouragement of illiteracy as well as their morally questionable content. Now there are stakeholders who work in the educational children’s book sector, and comics and graphic novels are becoming incorporated into school libraries. Workshops and exhibitions, for youth and the general public, are re-positioning comics on the cultural field and encouraging more practitioners to become part of the creative industry.

Comics Events and the Creative Economy

The impact that comics events have on the creative economy can be understood through art worlds, scenes, clusters, and how agglomeration economies are formed through co-ordinated labour. Industries which involve creative labour are descended from arts worlds: they are composed of hierarchies, networks, and divisions of labours (Becker, 1982: 93). The modern cultural and creative industries evolved through technologies, markets, social distinctions, politics and aesthetics (O’Connor et al, 2011: 42). To quote Becker (1982: 93) ‘Fully developed arts worlds… provide distribution systems which integrate artists into their society’s economy, bringing art works to publics which will appreciate them and will pay enough so that the work can proceed’.

Scenes develop around art worlds, and these scenes are formed through movement and scale; movement being human capital located in or moving to or through geographical spaces where a culture has been built up. Scale is measured by how many people are involved in the culture of the scene (Straw, 2001: 249; Williams, 2011: 150-151, 156). Physical proximity to key personnel (such as knowledge brokers) means that there are more opportunities for stakeholders to build social capital and network through small frequent events than stakeholders who rely solely on the convention circuit or social media (Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 241-250; Evans, 2009: 33).

The connection between scenes and the creative industries are cultural and creative clusters (Hartley et al, 2012: 18). Cultural clusters, which are built up around consumption (cafes, art
galleries) and creative clusters, which are built up around production and practice (tech start-ups, art studios) often co-exist within the same cultural quarter, or at least complement each other through agglomeration economies. These clusters have come to the attention of policy makers due to their potential for contributing to a city’s cultural image in addition to its creative economy (Hartley et al, 2012: 18-19; Straw, 2004: 416; Berg and Hassink, 2014: 654, 657; Melo et al, 2009: 336-337). Agglomeration economies are formed through labour pooling. Stakeholders and cultural intermediaries will form co-operative teams and complement each other’s skills and resources through co-ordinated networks. These networks can be permanent or temporary (Duranton, 2014: 2079-2081; Porter, 1996: 85).

A primary way clusters contribute to a city’s culture and economy is through events. Events may inhabit temporary spaces but their impact can have a lasting effect on a city’s image and infrastructure. A city can achieve recognition as a ‘creative city’ which attracts tourists as well as more permanent residents, and the networks which connect the institutions, intermediaries and stakeholders involved in the arts festival sector contribute to agglomeration economies (Comunian, 2010: 4-6, 14-16; Quinn, 2012: 266; Felstenstein and Fleischer, 2003: 386; Wynn, 2016).

The strength of a cluster is dependent on environment, rather than size. Events contribute to agglomeration economies through knowledge and motivation. To quote Porter:

> The most important agglomeration economies are dynamic rather than static efficiencies and revolve around the rate of learning and the capacity for innovation. Regional clusters grow because of several factors: concentrations of highly specialised knowledge, inputs, and institutions; the motivational benefit of local competition; and often the presence of sophisticated local demand for a product or service. Geographic, cultural, and institutional proximity, which may not necessarily coincide with political boundaries, is integral to the rapid flow of highly applied knowledge and the motivational benefit of clusters (Porter, 1996: 87).

Urban planning and policies related to expanding and strengthening agglomeration economies attend to how creative practitioners utilise spaces, networks and technologies for growth, sustainability, and innovation (Hartley et al, 2012: 19; Berg and Hassink, 2014: 657). Events are considered to be positive experiences for stakeholders, as they connect stakeholders with cultural intermediaries in their own industry or other creative industries,

The cultural tourism movement eschews commercial, mainstream attractions focused purely on consumption for activities which provide tourists with new skills, and an appreciation for the unique cultures of the places they visit (Richards, 2010: 11; Richards and Wilson, 2006: 12, 14). ‘Tourists’ can be audiences from another locale, or they may be consumers who are familiarising themselves with a new subculture or scene. The term ‘tourist’ is used to denote a consumer who is contributing to agglomeration economies through consuming and creating new products and knowledges (Richards, 2010: 11).

**Popular Culture Conventions**

Popular culture conventions have grown in popularity since the beginning of the second period of production. These events were initially small grassroots events organised by fans and have evolved into corporate franchises which follow a formula.

Originally conventions focused solely on comics and were non-profit events run by volunteers. The first comics convention was held in 1964 in New York (Schelly, 2005). The first recurring comics convention was created in 1965 by comics enthusiast Dave Kaler, and was also in New York. The city was a practical location choice because many comics stakeholders who were convention guests were New Yorkers (Schelly, 2010: 8). Many of the features which would come to define modern comics/popular culture conventions were established at these early events such as artist alleys and cosplay competitions. An artist alley gets its name from creatives literally selling their wares in an alley. Other practices such as swapping publications and inviting industry stakeholders as guests were modelled after science fiction conventions (Sabin, 1993: 63, 68-69; Bentley, 2013: 23; Schelly, 2010: 8).

The popularity of comics conventions grew exponentially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with conventions appearing in all American capital cities. The first British comics convention

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67 In 1961-1962 a committee called the Academy of Comic-Book Fans and Collectors organised the first ‘fan meeting’ which predated conventions. This fan meeting was held in an alley. From this fan meeting came the first industry awards, called the Alley Awards. Whilst this was a significant milestone and award shows have historically been tied to conventions in America, the committee did not organise the first recurring modern ‘convention’ per se (Schelly, 2003: 5-8).
was held in Birmingham in 1968. As referenced in Chapter Two, within this time period Australia had also started a comics event culture. Early Australian conventions were based upon the American model, with industry guests (both national and international) and panels where enthusiasts and practitioners could discuss issues related to comics (Bentley, 2013: 23). The rapid growth of comics conventions has been attributed to fans wanting to learn more about practitioners beyond the letter pages. This appreciation was mutual, with many stakeholders having a positive emotional response to being able to discuss and sell their comics in person (Sabin, 1993: 64).

Comics conventions in the United States became more commercial in the 1980s and 1990s as they were managed by corporate companies rather than volunteers. These corporate bodies recognised an opportunity to feature merchandise and media associated with comics at conventions. Comics-based media includes toys, television shows, video games, and films. The success of the movie Batman (1989) was the catalyst for Hollywood becoming more interested in convention culture, and now every major Marvel or DC film/TV show is featured or previewed at San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), the biggest American convention. Most conventions worldwide now feature celebrities from comics and ‘geek’ culture as special guests (Babka, 2014; Beaty, 2007: 121; Thomas, 2001).

Supanova and Oz Comic-Con are Australia’s most popular conventions, and are held in every capital city (except for Canberra and Darwin due to these cities’ low population). Oz Comic-Con is organised by the media company ReedPop, and Supanova’s festival co-ordinator is a sole operator, Daniel Zachariou. Supanova evolved from the OZCON conventions, the primary Australian comics conventions in the 1990s (Hale, 1998: 103).

Both ReedPop and Zachariou have employed staff for responsibilities such as publicity and managing the talent, as well as volunteers who work on the convention floor. Supanova and Oz Comic-Con follow the ‘formula’ of conventions: panels scheduled for each day of the con, cosplay competitions, and a ‘market’ area featuring merchandise and Artist’s Alley (Thomas, 2001).

The most positive aspect of conventions for most stakeholders is the ability to make contact with their audiences. A stakeholder can have positive experiences with consumers at any event, but conventions have the advantage of having high degrees of foot traffic due to their
enclosed space. Comics tables are positioned on what is known as ‘the show floor’, which is usually a convention centre where tables are organised in rows, or bordering the walls.

These spaces are busy, and so artists, writers and publishers need to compete for attention on the floor (Lin, 2014). As well as conversing with consumers, creators will often also do signings and one-off commissions. The social aspect of conventions, specifically the ability to work whilst under the public gaze, is seen as a positive by Victorian creator Dean Rankine (Rackleyft, 2015: 56):

Supanova was an absolute blast. Drawing at pop culture conventions is such a different experience than my usual day-to-day. I’m normally at home by myself, staring at a sheet of paper or computer screen and going slowly insane from my lack of contact with other human beings. But at a con I’m drawing people like they’re a Simpsons character, or drawing their heads in jars a la Futurama, so it’s constant [interaction] with people. I’ll often have a bit of a crowd watching me draw. So in some ways, it almost feels like performance art. People get a real kick out of seeing something appear on a blank page.

A stakeholder is likely to be more productive if they know they have the opportunity to potentially sell 50-100 copies of a comic at the date of the next convention (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview). Selling comics at conventions is often more than just a simple interaction, with stakeholders gaining valuable skills in making themselves memorable through marketing (Rackleyft, 2015: 56). It all depends on a convention’s atmosphere. If it is appealing to both stakeholders and consumers, a stakeholder can build up a repeat customer base in a city as well as find new audiences (Lin, 2014).

Georgina Chadderton, a comics creator from Adelaide, has described the meeting of fan and creator as ‘powerful’. As a fan herself, she has always remembered the positive interactions she has had with writers and artists (Rackleyft, 2015: 30).

Whilst international conventions such as San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) have become corporate events focused on franchises, they still provide an alternative distribution route for small press publishers who also do not have the financial means to be picked up by Diamond. Amanda Meadows, an independent publisher from the U.S., estimates that 70 per cent of her sales for the year occur at SDCC and that many creatives ‘live or die by the convention
circuit’ (Kastrenakes, 2015). For Paul Mason, conventions not only provide visibility for his work but also give him more control over how to market his work:

My main point of contact with fans, and this is true of most independent creators, is conventions. You can work out how to sell your comics to people – how to interact, posters, what to charge – the package. Because there aren’t really many stores that are sympathetic to Australian comics. There is a stigma. And I can understand that, because it’s all about shelf space. American comics are quite demanding of the number that you buy, it’s not like in the old days before the direct market where you could tear the covers and send them back, the ones that you don’t sell. The direct market has sort of stopped that. There’s only a handful of [comics stores] that really put them [my comics] on the shelf, and I realised fairly early on that if my book sat up there next to Superman and Batman yeah, that was cool, but in certain stores it [my comics] would sell, in others it wouldn’t. And I’d rather that book be in a kid’s hand. I’d rather sell fifty copies [of my comic] over the weekend at a convention than have five copies sitting on the shelf [of a comics store] for months.’ (Mason, 12/10/14, interview).

Events have been recognised as a powerful advertising tool because of Australian comics’ low levels of coverage in the mainstream media (Bullock, 20/11/13, interview; Chaloner, 11/5/13, interview). Stakeholders have also used social media to advertise their skills, WIPS (works in progress) and digital copies of their comics, but selling comics in person is considered to be more effective by some stakeholders (Bullock, 20/11/13, interview; Mason, 12/10/13, interview).

For DeVries and Purcell, it is about connecting with consumers who wish to be practitioners:

Nowadays a lot more Australians are working in the top level of the American scene, and we now have regular comics conventions like Oz Comic-Con, Supanova and Armageddon. So if you’re into comics there’s a good chance every 3-6 months there will be a convention coming up where you’ll get to see comics creators face-to-face who are working on Batman, or Superman. So your [the fan’s] dream of becoming a writer or an artist for DC or Marvel isn’t a pie in the sky dream, it feels like something very real, because it’s being done (DeVries, 20/11/13, interview).
Supanova is a way of meeting new fans, definitely you get the repeat visitor from the year before, from people that you know or are familiar with, but for the most part the conventions are about new fans and new people getting involved. It’s all about the sales pitch. Up and coming creators stand at our table and said, ‘Got any advice?’ I say, buy Australian comic books. Because unless there are people buying Australian comic books, there will never be an Australian comic book industry. And if people want to break into comic books, they need a home industry to find their feet so they can get their experience in, they need to support that industry first (Purcell, 19/10/13, interview).

Conventions also present opportunities for stakeholders to professionally and socially network with knowledge brokers within the industry (Abstruse, 19/10/13, interview; Kastrenakes, 2015). Australian stakeholders have been travelling to SDCC and other North American conventions since the 1980s, with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) even commissioning a documentary about the publishing house Gestalt’s experience at the event in 2010 (Bentley, 2013: 97; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview). ‘Conventions are really the only way as an independent artist, writer or publisher you’re guaranteed to have a lot of like-minded people around you,’ says Bullock (20/11/13, interview).

Stakeholders use international conventions as opportunities to sell to new audiences and also create partnerships with other cultural intermediaries and creatives. Glen Lumsden and Dave DeVries were successfully signed to Marvel after a portfolio pitch. David Vodicka, editor of Fox Comics convinced Gary Groth, editor of Fantagraphics, to publish the series through his publishing imprint in 1987 (DeVries, 20/11/13, interview; Bentley, 2013: 97). Nicola Scott, who currently illustrates Wonder Woman, was signed to DC after showing her portfolio twice at SDCC (The Feed, 2015).

Events such as conventions are formulated through an ‘optimised network’, wherein stakeholders and cultural intermediaries from numerous industries broker knowledge to attain the greatest amount of social and economic capital possible. The event’s network has the festival co-ordinator at the centre. Stakeholders from the tourism and hospitality industries and the creative industries co-exist as agents within the network. Whilst most agents will be in the physical location of the event, (the host city), a major commercial convention will often feature agents from interstate and overseas (Mackeller, 2006: 48-49).
At Supanova and Oz Comic-Con, interstate comics creators will often travel to the hosting city, as will other small businesses and independent creatives. Consumers may be willing to travel from interstate if a high profile celebrity guest is appearing at the host city. One such case was when George R.R. Martin attended Adelaide Supanova. Whilst standing in an autograph queue there was an overheard conversation about guests travelling all the way from Perth to meet the author.68

How financially beneficial these large scale events which rely on recognisable brands are to the hosting city/local community is questionable (Wynn, 2016). Whilst Australian popular culture conventions attract local businesses and hire out city spaces (such as the Wayville Showgrounds in Adelaide) they still rely on volunteer labour sourced from the local community for the show itself. Local and interstate stakeholders and small businesses need to pay to set up their tables, with tables usually costing $200 per person (Mutard, 2014). Major events such as these privilege agents with the financial means to be able to participate (Wynn, 2016).

Although show floors experience high levels of foot traffic, not all this traffic is always directed towards comics stakeholders. The comics tables at the 2013 Adelaide Supanova were behind a large main stage, obscuring them from most of the floor. An opportunity to conduct fieldwork was almost lost, if Philip Bentley had not been spotted at noon on the way to grab a coffee. In America, the decreasing size of Artist Alley has been noted, with speculation that a future trend may comics guests only being allowed floor space if they are guests of the convention. This would create a hierarchy (which would favour well-known serial comics artists who work for publishers such as DC etc.) and further alienate comics from an event which was begun by their fans for the sake of corporate interest (Kastrenakes, 2015).

As well as floor placement, there are growing concerns over merchandising tables taking attention away from stakeholders who create original IP. In 2013 a survey was made by Queensland creator Matthew Hoddy to gather data on whether customers and creators wanted Artist Alley at Supanova separated from the merchandise tables. Hoddy’s reasoning was that because comics tables also often have merchandise, by having a separate section for the Alley, it could be clear for attendees as to which tables were for comics creators. The creators

68 Perth is the capital city of the neighbouring state Western Australia.
themselves could network with each other more easily. The survey results showed that many comics creators were in favour of the idea.

In 2015 Hoddy reported that Supanova had trialled this separation at a couple of shows, but the organisers decided that it was logistically easier to have merchandise tables near the comics tables to suit the layout of venues. Stakeholders’ opposition to being grouped with merchandising tables may not only be an economic issue, but could also be connected back to subcultural issues around practice (how ‘authentic’ it is to sell fan art or traced material). This speculation has not been confirmed in interviews, but the ideological as well as economic systems of event spaces have been explored in studies of comics festivals (Akhtar, 2014; Beaty, 2007: 122-126). The arrangement of comics tables has been identified as an issue of concern in fieldwork (as a consumer) and in Hoddy’s survey, therefore it is an issue that could be explored further in future studies.

The money that consumers spend on comics and other vendor goods goes back to the stakeholders, which they use to recoup their attendance costs before making a profit. Other costs involved in a convention, related to admission, autographs, or photographs go to the festival co-ordinator and paid convention staff (Mutard, 2014). Because conventions which follow a formula and circuit are not fixed events, instead of generating an agglomeration economy which stems from a central agent within a fixed network (cluster) most of the economic benefits of these conventions flow back to the central agent through a temporary network. The central agent moves to another hosting city, and the cycle continues (Wynn, 2016; Mackeller, 2006: 50). The gains that conventions bring to a city are temporary; consumers are not staying to explore diverse urban spaces, but are interested in spending money which goes to the convention centre. They are focused on the brand of the convention rather than its associations with a city.

Another negative aspect of conventions is their associations with ‘geek’ culture. Within certain subcultures white straight men can physically as well as culturally dominate physical spaces. In comics, this can not only manifest itself in comics stores, but also in conventions (Williams, 2011: 56-62; O’Connor, 2016; Woo, 2012: 246; Akhtar, 2014; Walker, 2015). There have been cases of sexual harassment at international conventions (Asselin, 2015; Hanover, 2015). In Australia, according stakeholders, there have been instances where harassment has been spotted and reported, and fellow attendees will take steps to avoid it.
Supanova in particular has attracted controversy due to their practices and statements regarding women and LGBTQI people over the past five years. The negative press that Supanova has generated has been for allegedly banning comics featuring homosexual material from their convention floor in 2013; inviting noted online abuser and Gamergate activist Adam Baldwin to be a convention guest in 2015; and in 2016 the founder of Supanova, Daniel Zachariou, openly supported a petition calling for LGBTIQ education to be banned from school curriculums (Puvanenthiran, 2013; Keogh, 2015; Serrel, 2015; Johnston, 2016). The Baldwin controversy attracted the most media attention, with a Change.org petition protesting against his guest invitation attracting 10,000 signatures, and Supanova’s social media manager questioning an ABC reporter’s credentials over Twitter (Keogh, 2015; Serrel, 2015).

In the Australian comics industry specifically, The Ledger Awards decided to drop Supanova as a sponsor of their event, and an awards convener briefly stepped down due to their association with the event (Serrel, 2015).

To create a more inclusive environment following these controversies, Alisha Jade, who has connections with the Supanova conventioneers, established the Banksia Project, where a female creator goes into a draw to win a free table space. A group of creators also decided to go to Supanova in 2016, but donated the proceeds of their earnings to Minus Eight, a charity which works on behalf of queer youth. Whilst these gestures are done out of altruism and stakeholders believing that the best way to combat bigotry is through changing spaces, a counter-argument has been put forward in the scene. This counter argument is that even though these stakeholders have good intentions, these actions still economically benefit the convenor at the centre of these controversies (Zachariouh). The stakeholders involved in the Minus Eight initiative (such as Tom Taylor and Gestalt) in particular benefited the Supanova brand through their fame, and give money for tables, but did not get money for their books. The onus is placed on stakeholders to try and correct the behaviour of the organiser, all whilst tacitly (and financially) supporting the Supanova brand through their decision not to boycott the event. Instead of supporting events which already promote inclusivity, these stakeholders have decided to continue to support Supanova (Mason, 2016).

Gatekeeping practices in nerd culture involve consumers discriminating on the basis of knowledge or power. With the reporter for the ABC (Brendan Keogh) being publicly

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69 The LGBTIQ education is the Safe School program, a government initiative to lessen the harassment of queer youth in primary and secondary schools.

70 ABC stands for Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
interrogated via social media about whether he had attended Supanova, what he knew about Supanova, etc. the organiser (or social media manager) invoked the stereotype that there is a ‘real’ way to be a nerd through discourse and/or practice (Woo, 2012: 55-58, 97-108). That this exchange happened over Twitter further damaged the Supanova brand because it attracted derision from those outside of the comics scene, condemnation from (most) within the comics scene, and attracted the support of alt-right trolls for Supanova.

There is also a power dynamic, related not only to knowledge, but also to how different demographics conceive of space. When it was announced that Adam Baldwin was to be a guest at Supanova, much of the opposition to his invitation was provoked by fears that his presence would increase the supporters of his misogynistic rhetoric to an enclosed space. Supanova presents an ethical dilemma for some stakeholders when its space has unwelcoming elements for women and queer people. Other Supanova guests simply choose to ignore that this space is unwelcoming to people who look like them (straight, male) or actively support the organisation because they see its organisers’ actions of not condemning Baldwin and speaking out against Safe Schools as a confirmation of their own bigotry (Mason, 2016).

Whilst stakeholders who attend conventions consider conventions to be reasonably effective advertising for their comics (unless there are layout problems), the issue becomes how effective conventions are at advertising comics as a medium. Conventions may encourage negative stereotypes of geek culture.

As corporate entities, conventions do not need cultural or economic support from the state, but they do have the potential to shape social network markets. The positive experiences of stakeholders with peers and consumers can lead to an increase of national and international networks. But organisers’ gatekeeping practices can create boundaries for some stakeholders and consumers, and can affect perceptions of the medium as a whole. Public funding for comics festivals in Britain was reportedly delayed due to the subcultural ‘geek’ stigma around the medium (O’Brien, 2014). In Australia, the public stigmas surrounding comics are still communicated through some mainstream media discourses.
Festivals: Books, Zines, Comics

Writing Festivals

Writers’ festivals can offer graphic novelists (and some comics practitioners) opportunities to talk about their work through presentations and panels, and sell their work directly to audiences. Whilst some stakeholders will choose to sell graphic novels at conventions of their own volition, publishers are more likely to market their authors at writers’ festivals (Bentley, 2011: 7). Writers’ festivals which have featured comics include Melbourne Writers Festival (2013-2016), Word Storm (Darwin) (2014), National Young Writers Festival (Newcastle) (2012-2015), Adelaide Writers Week (2014), and Brisbane Writers Festival (2014-2015).

The physical layouts of writers’ festivals allow plenty of quiet breathing space. They are often held in cultural centres within the city’s central business district, such as The Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas in Melbourne, and The Adelaide Festival Centre. Panels are held in hushed air-conditioned rooms and signings taking place under outdoor marquees. Analysing the various components which comprise events – their cost, their demographics, their use of space, and their programmes – can give a comprehensive view not only of the purpose that they serve for creatives, but also for consumers (Akhtar, 2014). Demographics at comics events observed at the Adelaide Writers Week and Melbourne Writers Festival (both 2014) revealed a more even ratio of genders in the audience, and an audience that was older than observed at conventions.

The inclusion of comics in Australian writing festivals has been very recent and is due to the critical acclaim of locally produced graphic novels in the mid-2000s and stakeholders’ lobbying for space within literary events (Mutard, 2014; Patrick, 2012: 52). As a scene the comics industry is actively integrating its practices into other cultures (Williams, 2011: 12). These literary creative industries are ‘opening up cultural participation (reception and production)’ (O’Connor et al, 2011: 85).

Writers’ festivals afford comics practitioners physical and cultural spaces which are often based in prominent institutions (convention and festival centres, marquees in parks). There is associated cultural capital for the medium due to their association with literature, but also the cultural capital associated with these spaces. As Beaty (2007: 6-9, 120-122) has explored through his work, small press and other independent comics shape the cultural field of comics.
due to their degrees of cultural consecration through institutions. Comics have moved beyond comics stores and conventions – they are in bookstores, galleries, and during festivals, within public spaces throughout cities. A similar trend is occurring through comics festivals, however unlike writing festivals, comics festivals are yet to have continued economic support from the state.

Zine Fairs

Zines and zine fairs are associated with DIY youth subcultures which is reflected in their practitioners and audiences (Duncombe, 1997: 3, 21; Thomas, 2009: 28). Zines and small press comics inhabiting the spaces of other creative industries isn’t a new phenomenon. Zines can trace their artistic roots back to music subcultures such as punk, and other underground cultural or political scenes (Duncombe, 1997: 23).

The relationship between small press comics and underground cultures has been previously traced back in this thesis to alternative spaces such as ‘headshops’, but they also flourished on university campuses, and were sold in music shops (Hill, 2007: 411-413; Pinder, 1983: 28-29). Artistic scenes which encompass alternative cultures will often be united through shared histories and spaces, sharing resources and collaborating on ventures which have economic and social benefits for all parties involved (Straw, 2004: 413; Duncombe, 1997: 3-4).

Zine festivals which include small press comics, include Other World (Sydney), Tonerpalooza (Melbourne), Festival of the Photocopier (Melbourne), and Format Zine Festival (Adelaide). There are also two combined comics/zine events in Brisbane, the Zine and Indie Comics Symposium (ZICS), and the Brisbane Convention of Alternative Press.

With the exception of ZICS, which features panel sessions beneath outdoor marquees, most zine fairs are held in public spaces or institutions, and resemble a market. Creators set up stalls where they can sell their zines, as well as homemade merchandise such as badges and stickers. These zine fairs have been held in free/low cost city institutional spaces such as libraries (Tonerpalooza/Festival of the Photocopier), town halls (ZICS), and market squares (Other Worlds). Zine fairs have also been known to partner with small businesses. Format 2015 was held in Hello Yes, a garage that had been converted into a café/creative space. Brisbane’s Alternative Press Conference was held in The Zoo, a bar and live music venue.
Zines have recently come to the attention of academics due to their content (particularly the riot grrrl phenomenon) and networked production practices (Duncombe, 1997: 133; Thomas, 2009: 27-30). However the scene still struggles to source funding from government bodies. Sticky Institute, a zine distro in Melbourne, was funded from 2007 to 2011 by the City of Melbourne, Arts Victoria and the Australia Council, however its application for funding was rejected in 2012, and it also lost funding to assist in organising Tonerpalooza (Rackleyft, 2015: 33-34).^{71}

Although they share similar production methods, zines have a different subcultural capital to comics, due to stigma not being part of their historical roots. Unlike comics, zines have never been associated with pulp, popular culture, or ‘juvenile’ material. Zines are associated with ‘youth cool’, subversive, and socio-political. (Duncombe, 1997: 133). This gives them leverage to inhabit spaces which are associated with this subcultural capital, and small press comics can also benefit from this subcultural and social capital.

But as socio-political cultural artefacts they can struggle to acquire public funding the way other creative industries can. Zines and small press comics are largely autonomous and practitioners are resistant to appealing to audiences or other cultural intermediaries who embody what they would consider ‘mainstream’ values (more heteronomous positions in the field) (Duncombe, 1997: 133; Kuhn, 2015). For small press comics, institutional support is more likely to be given through comics festivals.

**Comics Festivals**

Independent comics festivals involve most stakeholders from any position in the cultural field and are events which cater to multiple social network markets. Australian comics festivals include Homecooked Comics Festival (Melbourne, 2013-2016), Her Majesty’s Favourite Really Great Graphical Festival (Hobart, 2014-2016), Australian Comics Art Festival (ACAF) (2015-2016, Canberra), Sugar City Con (Mackay) and GRAPHIC! (2011-2017, Sydney). The spoke in comics festivals over the past decade may be due to social media and crowdfunding has made it easier for stakeholders to swap knowledge, pool resources, and engage in collective action (Baccini, 13/5/14, interview).

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^{71} Luke Sinclair, who is a coordinator of Sticky Institute and was the subject of Outline Magazine’s interview (Rackleyft, 2015: 34), did not reveal why Sticky Institute did not get funding. Sticky Institute are currently staffed by volunteers, and it’s unclear whether they have reapplied for public subsidies.
In Britain and Europe comics festivals utilise as much city space as possible. They have become more respected as a creative (or cultural) industry, but also as a form of cultural tourism (O’Brien, 2014; Akhtar, 2014; Beaty, 2007: 121-128). These festivals may be funded through national, state, or city governments for the purpose of promoting a city’s culture, with some cities (Angouleme, Bethesda) becoming specifically associated with comics events (Beaty, 2007: 121-122; Comunian, 2010: 4-6; Akhtar, 2014; O’Brien, 2014). Comics are considered ‘an important, albeit minor, aspect of the public sphere’ (Beaty, 2007: 121). There is an understanding between state institutions and comics industries in Europe that events are integral to the industry’s structure. To quote Beaty (2007: 120):

> When one thinks of the cultural organisation of the comic book field, it is clear that spatially that world is organised into a series of festivals, which themselves become emblematic of core values associated with local comic book production. The ideological space of international comics production is framed by a network of festivals in cities like San Diego, Angouleme, Luzern, Haarlem, and Bethesda. The contemporary comic book festival is a site at which a particular artworld, to use Arthur Danto’s term, coalesces for brief periods of time. The comic book festival is the only regular social space in which so many differing aspects of the artworld come together at one time, including writers, artists, editors, publishers, journalists, booksellers and fans. These events serve to remind us that, romantic images of the garreted cartoonist heroically slaving over inky boards notwithstanding, the production of art is a thoroughly social process.

Art festivals and creative clusters are interconnected. An arts festival cannot occur without the spaces and support systems created by clusters, and the cluster is strengthened every time there is a successful festival (Quinn, 2010: 269; Johnson, 2006: 303). Homecooked Comics Festival had panels and workshops in the Northcote Town Hall in 2015, and a market in Batman Park in 2014. Her Majesty’s Favourite Really Great Graphical Festival 2016 was held throughout Hobart, with displays in café windows, an exhibition/launch at the Tasmanian Writers Centre, and a mini zine fair in the Grand Pooambah bar. Canberra’s first comics festivals was ACAF (Australian Comics Art Festival) which was based on TCAF and held in 2016. ACAF was held at the National Library of Australia and featured panels and a market. Festivals which incorporate cultural tourism are developed organically, with an

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72 Batman is a suburb in Melbourne.
individual or group recognising an opportunity to use their artistic practices to advertise the local identity of their city or town (Quinn, 2010: 269; Richards and Wilson, 2008: 13-15).

A regional comics festival held from 2014 until the present is Mackay’s Sugar City Con, which represents this articulation of local identity. Even though it is labelled as a convention, Sugar City has more in common with a festival, because it is specifically associated with a city (Mackay) and had sponsors connected to the host city (Kesteven and Battley, 2015). The event attracts media attention as an annual tourism event, with audiences attending from all over country Queensland to participate in cosplay competitions and meet both state and interstate comics artists (Kesteven and Battley, 2015).

Regional towns and cities can be unacknowledged within the creative industries because they are not considered to have the resources necessary to create cultural quarters. This absence of resources means that instead of creating quarters, artists move to more metropolitan creative cities, and so the problem continues (Bennett, 2010: 118, 124). Events such as Sugar City which involve local peer networks, successful execution, and tourist interest, provide a psychological and economic boost to the area (Comunian, 2010: 9-11; Kesteven and Battley, 2015).

The Comics Workshop, which was held in 2016 on Tasmania’s Maria Island was not a festival per se (it was an artist’s retreat sponsored by the Australia Council and Tasmanian State government), but like Sugar City, it represents an increasing focus of the comics industry on bringing cultural tourism to regional areas. It was also the first regional comics event in Australia which was publicly funded, rather than privately sponsored through businesses.

Josh Santospirito was the primary organiser of Her Majesty’s Favourite Really Great Graphical Festival. An expat from ‘the mainland’, Santospirito quickly worked to establish connections with stakeholders in the Hobart scene, including John Retallick, who hosted a 24 hour comic night in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and Tricky Walsh, who launched her comic Hoppers in The Hobart Bookshop. His neighbour introduced him to Lindsey Arnold, who created images and comics for an exhibition at MONA (Museum of Old and New Art) (Santospirito, 25/6/13, interview). Through events and an anthology (Down There) Santospirito is determined to connect comics to other creative industries in Hobart:
The *Down There* series is mainly a way of using Tasmanian artists making stories that have a connection to Tassie – to educate the local audience in the ways of the comic. I’m fighting for comics in a place where there has only ever been underground-type comics. MONA has changed the landscape for the arts-scene here in Hobart and Tasmania generally, so perhaps I can create some excitement around comics. I’m trying to leverage the connections of the art-world to get comics in the door as well. Luckily I also know someone at the Tasmanian Writer Centre who is sympathetic to the comics world – Kylie Eastley. I am hopeful that I can get comics events in the next year advertised through them as well. So as you can see, in a tiny place like Tassie, it really is who you’re connected to (Santospirito, 25/6/13, interview).

In the creative industries it is expected that most artists and practitioners have developed some skills in event management, due to being active in scene events and projects (McRobbie, 2015: 20-22). Independent comics festival directors in Australia are usually knowledge brokers in the scene who have considerable bridging capital.

The co-directors of GRAPHIC! Jordan Verzar and Ben Marshall, have used their bridging capital to incorporate the sequential arts festival into a contemporary music program at the Sydney Opera House (Marshall is head of the program). The conditions for GRAPHIC! being able to access the Opera House are that some events within the festival have to incorporate music.

Whilst GRAPHIC! is not strictly a comics festival, it is still accessed annually by comics practitioners and contribute to the industry’s economy. The festival has both corporate sponsors and funding from the New South Wales state government. GRAPHIC! is differentiated from conventions in that comics are featured prominently in the programme, with books for sale displayed in the foyer and panels with local practitioners occurring on main stages. Only featured practitioners have their comics for sale, and effectively ‘advertise’ their books through communicating their knowledge of the medium and their contributions to the arts through panels and interviews.

As well as Australian stakeholders, who as with writers’ festivals are invited to be guests, GRAPHIC! has also attracted international comics guests such as Neil Gaiman, Scott McCloud, and Grant Morrison. The comics artists invited to give presentations and sit on
panels at GRAPHIC! are usually familiar to audiences through their independent comics work, as well as working on others’ intellectual property.

GRAPHIC! has similarities with both writing festivals and conventions. Like writing festivals it emphasises culture and knowledge ahead of commerce, but like conventions, there is a central ‘hub’ of activity. GRAPHIC! differentiates itself by being held in the Sydney Opera House; it is a major event which is explicitly connected to a landmark associated with the culture of a city (Richards and Wilson, 2006: 13, 15).

A festival such as GRAPHIC! relies on what Richards and Wilson (2006: 17) term ‘creative spectacle’: consumers are actively involved in the circulation of products and knowledge, and contribute to agglomeration economies through these practices. But a festival such as Homecooked in Melbourne contributes to cultural tourism through active prosumption and community distinction (Richards and Wilson, 2006: 15-17). Instead of being concentrated in one place (whether a physical institution or a suburb) Homecooked is a comics festival which creates experiences for audiences throughout the city (Richards and Wilson, 2006: 16; Akhtar, 2014). As a comics festival which focuses on families rather than older audiences, the decision to use multiple spaces in Melbourne may also be to attract diverse demographics:

The last one [Homecooked] was the 28th of April. Just recently. They had one the year before in a park, Batman Park, just on the corner, a couple of blocks up. We had comic stalls there, there was comic facepainting, drawing, a podcast going on there, and I think some interviews and talks and stuff. And then again we had it at Town Hall, which is in Northcote, and that was really amazing. They had all that stuff, it was inside, and they had interviews and stuff which was okay. But they also had this corner where they had all these craft supplies, like cardboard and scissors and stuff, and sticky tape and gaffer tape, and it was ‘make your own costume’ stuff for children. So kids had armbands, stuff on their heads, all of these colourful costumes being made which I thought was incredible. I’d never heard of that, it was really cool. Then Squishface was there, we had a table, just selling Squishface stuff, and we did comic drawing workshops too. Sarah did them, and then there were stalls selling comics. It was really cool, I was really impressed by it (Hutchings, 9/6/14, interview).

Whilst Homecooked does receive some of its funding from the Darebin City Council, the rest of the funds are raised through Kickstarter. Howell and co-director Clea Chiller have
managed to run the festival part-time for years, but other festival directors who are comics practitioners/full-time employed have been unable to devote their full attention to such tasks (Brinkley, 2016).

Entrepreneurialism is not always a choice – it is often a necessity, as the stakeholder tries to juggle multiple projects at once and needs to continuously chase opportunities, as often these projects are short term (O’Connor et al, 2011: 21; McRobbie, 2002: 519). Grants and public funding initiatives for creative events aren’t only used by stakeholders to gather resources and establish peer connections, but they also give stakeholders time to consider how to make their event effective or sustainable (Rackleyft, 2015: 22). With some exceptions (Homecooked, Sugar City) many Australian comics festivals have not been annual events because organisers have been unable to find the time or money to continue their labour (Brinkley, 2016). Many of these events are supported through physical spaces in the cultural industries, and so the comics industry benefits from broader funding measures for state or national arts.

With more funding for events and collective projects, Hutchings (9/6/14, interview) believes that this would increase stakeholder motivation and competition. Stakeholders would be actively competing for sales in a public space. For state funding bodies, it makes strategic sense to fund activities which involve collective action towards city economies. These activities and events involve social initiatives for individuals to each contribute to the economies and cultures of cities (Bennett, 2007: 139). With stakeholders’ social capital and event management skills, and festivals’ abilities to support the comics industry and associated cultural intermediaries in city spaces, the state providing more financial and cultural support towards comics festivals would be a strategic way to increase agglomeration economies and local cultures. Comics are what could be considered a ‘low-infrastructure’ creative industry, and as will be discussed further in the next section, stakeholders use this to their advantage when finding more ways to contribute to the creative economy.

Libraries, Galleries, Studios

Libraries, writing centres, galleries, and studios have become institutions and cultural intermediaries involved in the circulation of comics over the past decade. As well as offering spaces where stakeholders can sell comics these cultural intermediaries also host workshops, exhibitions, and collections. In regards to the creative economy, these events represent the
increasing democratisation between ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture spaces. Comics achieve more cultural consecration as cultural institutions become more accessible to diverse audiences.

Libraries can give comics more cultural legitimacy through collectors, academics, and librarians working together to preserve the medium’s history through collections and exhibitions. Libraries, as institutions and ‘public goods’, also provide comics with a more democratised space. Unlike writers’ festivals or galleries which have associations of class and financial means, workshops in libraries promote access to knowledge to those who are often traditionally overlooked in cultural policy (youth, and those of lower socio-economic background) (McRobbie, 2015: 62; Snowball, 2008: 107-110). Libraries allow comics to gain more artistic and political respect, without restriction for anyone (Cousins, 2016).

The State Library of Victoria hosted the Heroes and Villains comics exhibition in 2006-2007 (organised in conjunction with Monash University) and has a collection of comics from both periods of production. The National Library of Australia also has a collection of comics, donated by collectors John Ryan and Mick Stone. Many libraries now consider comics collections to be valuable cultural artefacts in Australia’s media history (Nugent, 2009).

Libraries have become case studies in participatory cultural tourism. Parkes Shire, in Western Australia, in 2014 hosted a 2-day event (the Central West Comics Fest), which was sponsored by the Parkes Shire Council as a community initiative to attract locals into the library, as well as interstate attendees and guests. A similar event is Comic Gong in Wollongong (2014-2017), which is also sponsored by the city council. Following the pattern of participatory elements which characterise Australian comics events Comic Gong and Central West Comics Fest featured comics for sale, but also workshops, cosplay competitions, and demonstrations.

Libraries have become interested in comics and graphic novels due to their appeal to young people. Comics have been found to be suitable material for reluctant readers and comics workshops are an engaging low cost activity. For at-risk teens, creating comics can be a therapeutic form of self-expression (Snowball, 2008: 107-110; Bentley, 2011: 10). The educational value of comics is becoming a more mainstream idea in Australia (Snowball, 2008: 108; Bentley, 2009: 9; Razer, 2008).

Galleries have also been instrumental in comics becoming more prominent in the public sphere. But visual artists and comics artists have not always had compatible relationships, with some visual artists accused of plagiarising comics art for their own financial and cultural
gain. The most famous case was Roy Lichtenstein stealing the images of artists such as Jack Kirby, Irv Novick, and Russ Heath (Woo, 2015; Johnston, 2015). British illustrator Brian Bolland, who has had his images stolen twice, describes the practice of visual artists ‘reappropriating’ comics art work as ‘patronising’. Bolland states that unless these images are seen in a gallery, they are termed by critics and other tastemakers as ‘trash’ (Johnston, 2015). Comics are now more accepted within galleries and other visual art spaces internationally, with exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art (2002), Museum of Modern Art (2006), and the Montclair Art Museum (2008) (Roeder, 2008: 4-5). In Australia, a promising sign that the medium is increasing its cultural capital is that comics artists now display their original images in art galleries.

One of the first art exhibitions featuring comics was Unrealism in 1992. Held in Sydney and featuring 120 pieces, Unrealism was the first way stakeholders could reach an audience outside of the more commercial OZCON conventions (Hale, 1998: 101). Since then, there have been exhibitions in Hobart (Sleuth at Inflight Art Gallery Hobart, 2012), Adelaide (recurring exhibition Instantaneous at the Grace Emily from 2011-2014), and Perth (Gasoline Eyedrops at First Site Gallery in 2014).

There used to be comics launches in Brunswick arts gallery, which was converted into a ‘pop up’ style convention floor for comics launches. Brunswick arts unfortunately closed its doors in 2015 due to rising rent costs. So far in my research, Brunswick arts has been the only cultural intermediary in the comics industry which has been affected by Melbourne’s rising levels of gentrification (Eltham, 2011; Shaw, 2011: 339).

As a creative industry which is focused around scene activity there are two schools of thought in regards to how comics production may cope with gentrification, in Melbourne or elsewhere. Comics producers may become increasingly agile, continuing their practices of inhabiting low-cost or free spaces and existing alongside creative industries and businesses which have more financial capital (McRobbie, 2015: 122). But if policies lean towards making suburbs as commercially viable as possible at the expense of the culture which first attracted buyers then comics producers may find themselves more dispersed (Shaw, 2011: 337-340).

One of the biggest comics exhibitions held in Australia had an unexpected but positive effect on Melbourne’s comics scene through the creation of Squishface Studio. The impetus to
create the Brunswick-based studio came from Inherent Vice, an artist exhibit where stakeholders worked in front of an audience at the National Gallery of Victoria. Being able to work in a social environment and have the public learn more about production was considered a positive experience for both stakeholders and audiences (Cuthbertson, 2011; Blumenstein, 2013; Rackleyft, 2015: 14).

Says Ben Hutchings, Squishface Studio’s artistic director:

I’d never worked in public before, had my work looked at until I brought it out, I’d be working in my room or whatever, and I really loved doing that [working in public]. When I was there, it was a month long, and I was extremely excited, it was the best thing I ever did. We [the other Inherent Vice artists] just got to stay there every day, and make the space ours. And it just looked so active, so busy, and just so much stuff everywhere. And people walking through all the time, and just talking to us, and so I was just really inspired by how different that felt. It was better than just sitting in your bedroom, it was really fun (Hutchings, 9/6/14, interview).

Squishface is open to the public, and has artist residencies, sketching nights, and life drawing classes. It is a one room studio where there is a large central desk, with creatives working alongside each other in silence, or quietly talking to one another. The goal of Squishface Studio is to become a ‘recognisable cultural institution’ in the city (Blumenstein, 2013).

As well as selling comics from a spinner rack, Squishface Studio stays financially viable through residencies and programs:

We all share the rent. I think we’ve got 8 people contributing to the room, which is okay, so it’s not a worry at the moment. But if anyone ever leaves, then it is a worry for a little while. Because the rent comes out from me, and so I’m the one who has to make sure that there’s enough people. But the other thing that we did was introduce drawing classes. Once a week, for children, which is a really, really good way to make some money from it’ (Hutchings, 9/6/14, interview).

In Port Adelaide The Box Factory Community Centre hosts the monthly sketch night Comics with Friends and Strangers. The location of Comics with Friends and Strangers, as well as Squishface, are significant in that they are located within suburbia, rather than in the CBD. Comics with Friends and Strangers, like Squishface Studio, involves creative practitioners
(experienced and beginner) sitting around a communal table. There are monthly drawing activities, or a practitioner is invited to work on their own project. Comics with Friends and Strangers was the idea of Georgina Chadderton and Owen Heitmann, who wanted to combine skill development sessions with social meetings.

Research into the creative industries and Australian suburbia has shown that whilst central business districts have higher population densities and more resources, more creatives are choosing to start collective or solo enterprises in the suburbs. The appeals of the suburbs are lower rent prices, more opportunities to raise a family close to a work space, and less noise (Felton et al, 2010: 621-623, 626; Shaw, 2011: 339-340; Flew, 2012: 233). For comics studios which make their revenue primarily through residencies and shop fronts the suburbs are ideal (Felton et al, 2010: 622).

Blender Studios, also located in Melbourne (Franklin Street) has a shop and a gallery, with an artist market held every summer. Blender Studios has hosted a small press comics collective, Silent Army, since 2002. Silent Army produces comics and art for sale within the store, effectively ‘paying’ for their space by offering a cut to the studio owners.

Studios represent spaces where stakeholders have developed communities of practice outside of pub cultures. Whilst pub meets are still active in some scenes, and still have valuable social networking purposes, the production and circulation spaces of comics have grown exponentially within the second period. There are now numerous ways comics are integrated with the creative economy, the medium appealing to diverse demographics through these initiatives.

Conclusion

Events have grown out of fan practices to become an integral part of the Australian comics industry’s socio-economic structure. Organising events is an organic process, with stakeholders adapting international practices but creating local networks through knowledge brokering. These networks are with peers, intermediaries, institutions, and consumers. The social networks of scenes are inextricable from comics’ contributions to the creative economy. The production and circulation practices of comics producers within physical and cultural spaces fit within frameworks which have been created through the creative industries and cultural tourism sector.
Chapter Nine: Media, Marketing and Publicity

The parallel variations in critical interpretation, in the producers’ discourse, and even in the structure of work itself, bear witness to the recognition of critical discourse by the producer – both because he feels himself to be recognised through it, and because he recognises himself within it. The public meaning of a work in relation to which the author must define himself, originates in the process of circulation and consumption, dominated by the objective relations between the institutions and the agents implicated in the process. ... These relations, e.g. between author and publisher, publisher and critic, author and critic, are revealed in the ensemble of relations attendant on the ‘publication’ of the work, that is, its becoming a public object.


“Exchanging lighthearted fare for darker subject matter, films like *The Dark Knight Rises* and graphic novels by authors such as Chris Ware show that comics can have immense appeal for adults,” read the groundbreaking article, making an astute and truly mind-blowing observation that had only been made 84,999 times before.


Introduction

This chapter analyses the relationship between the Australian comics industry and various forms of media: ‘mainstream’ media, ‘scene’ media, and social media. All of these forms of media are utilised by stakeholders to increase the social networks of the comics industry.

The mainstream media’s coverage of Australian comics production began in the first period. Journalists and media commentators cast comics in a negative light as part of the political moral panic around the medium. This moral panic was replicated in the 1980s due to the content of a horror comic (*Phantastique*) produced in Sydney (Patrick, 1999: 29).
Comics were largely ignored in the media until the mid-2000s when graphic novels with literary associations began being produced. Since then articles and stories about comics have either emphasised the fact that they have ‘grown up’ or have associated them with superhero comics and ‘geek’ culture. The ‘comics grow up’ angle is used to indicate to adult audiences that reading comics is not a children’s hobby as it was pre-1950s. The ‘superhero/geek’ angle capitalises on the current zeitgeist around films adapted from comics.

Stakeholders and comics scholars have argued that these stereotypes are outdated, limiting, and repetitive. Media coverage of comics is critical because it can provide social cues to audiences. The history of comics in Anglophone (and European) industries has shown that public perceptions of the medium can have significant effects (both positive and negative) on industry practices and economic structures.

However, due to the increasing visibility of comics through film and TV adaptations, and graphic novels becoming more mainstream, journalists are increasingly relying less on stereotypes or justifications when writing about comics. Stakeholders are also becoming more involved in broadcasting their own narratives in the mainstream media through radio shows and documentaries.

Scene media, which is media created by stakeholders rather than a journalist or a cultural commentator, was an early fan practice in the second period of production. Scene media is not unique to the Australian comics industry (or other creative industries) and exists as a form of participation and connection for stakeholders in the scene. It is a form of participatory culture through stakeholders sharing their opinions and knowledge with others in the form of podcasting and blogs (formerly fanzines).

Scene media stakeholders are not paid for their work; they are motivated to write about comics because of passion and altruism. The cost of comics criticism can be understood as social rather than economic because any stakeholder who engages in scene media needs to make an individual choice over how they navigate the internal logics of the cultural field. As a form of communication, scene media can provide audiences outside of the scene with specialised knowledge.

Social media has emerged as a platform where stakeholders can create their own narratives and communicate directly with consumers. The presentations of self and communication methods depend on platform and purpose. Some sites such as Facebook are used for
stakeholders to speak internally to each other (through Groups) or provide updates to their audience base (through Pages). Others such as Twitter and Tumblr are used by stakeholders to connect with cultural intermediaries and knowledge brokers as well as with their immediate peers. These sites are also designed to have images uploaded and circulated quickly through communities and networks.

Comics being circulated and altered through social media further represent the effects of media convergence on stakeholder and consumer practices and brings into consideration whether comics are a ‘mass’ medium through virtual spaces. Social media has already altered talent scouting practices within the hard copy comics industry because practitioners use sites such as Tumblr to advertising their portfolios and build an audience. The attention economy of social media provides social cues to audiences which can translate to hard copy sales.

The popularity of comics shared through virtual spaces (social media, digital files, digital publications) and their relationship with the ‘traditional’ publishing industries represents a creative industry which is undergoing major economic changes. The relationship between comics production/circulation and social media platforms, and the way comics production follows other creative industry trends regarding the creation of virtual spaces, is a new area of research.

Comics in the Mainstream Media

The ‘mainstream media’ in this thesis encompasses any media which are created by someone who is not in the scene (Lobato and Fletcher, 2003: 110). These forms of media may be broadcast news and their associated websites, or a digital publication run by a corporation or independent media company (Lobato and Fletcher, 2003: 115; Heazlewood, 2014: 241).

In the creative industries the media perform ‘symbolic imposition’ (Maguire and Matthews, 2010: 405). Objects and their corresponding values are framed to distinguish class among consumers through discourse. Overarching narratives which give a narrow or inaccurate definition of comics, may strengthen the boundaries and self-marginalisation of the subcultural scene (Maguire and Matthews, 2010: 405-407, 412; Lopes, 2006: 388-340; Bourdieu, 1984: 362).
News media about comics has been largely absent in the second period, with articles about comics primarily occurring in the mid-2000s. Before this comics were openly criticised in mainstream news media (Patrick, 2010; Patrick, 2011: 52; Finnane, 1998: 49-52).

After an analysis of Australian newspaper articles, blog articles, TV program segments and radio program interviews created between 1980-2016, the most common themes that occurred in mainstream media coverage of comics were about their connections to ‘geek’ culture, graphic novels, and Australian stakeholders’ practice. These articles include interviews. The first two themes which occur within this analysis are connected back to general Anglophone media discourses around comics, many of these discourses originating in America (Meconis, 2012; Lopes, 2006: 340). Many of the articles studied constructed discourses wherein comics production and consumption is positioned as not wholly negative, but still something outside of the norm. There is the invocation of difference, with the value of comics’ being connected back to the stigmas they were once (and through these discourses still are) associated with (Olson, 2011: 643, 647; Galasinski, 2011: 254).

Stakeholders form connections through belonging, beliefs and behaviour, and for many, the majority of discourses around comics in the Australian media is oppositional to the values that they place on their practice (Olson, 2011: 643). Scene media, and other forms of stakeholder discourses, can be understood as micro-level practices which provide alternative narratives, with attempts made over time to change the discourses of more influential institutions (Anais, 2013: 133).

For stakeholders, the mainstream media stereotyping of comics means that they are not able to grow their social networks as effectively as they would like. Gary Chaloner, who produces a podcast on Australian comics, has criticised the media for characterising comics as ‘the freaks and geeks’ story (Chaloner, 10/5/13, interview). For Read (5/6/13, interview) the general absence of media coverage for comics and the ‘hostile’ gatekeeping of the mainstream media means that Australian comics may ‘remain invisible to the world [sic] industry and readership at large.’

Australian comics are gradually becoming more prominent in the mainstream media, and discussed as any other creative industry, with few tropes and justifications. As a trusted source for multiple audiences, this coverage gives comics positive commodity value (Potts,
2008a: 169-170). The discourses which surround comics in Australia are in a constant process of ‘rewriting’ as social tastes change (Van Houten and Van Naersson, 2002: 132).

Geek Culture

Serial comics in the superhero, sci-fi or fantasy genres are repeatedly referenced in relation to media coverage about Australian comics. These references are emblematic of audiences’ familiarity with American material due to its dominance in Anglophone comics markets and the current ‘geek chic’ zeitgeist.

Whilst there are stakeholders who would prefer that Australian comics are analysed as a creative industry without comparison, journalists as well as audiences often need these comparisons as a point of familiarity. If a journalists’ story is about Australians working for an American publisher or an Australian comic being in the superhero genre, then journalists will use an industry comparison as an angle.

The problematic elements of these discourses are an over-reliance on stereotypes, and inaccurate or demeaning elements of these stereotypes. A common stereotype which is used to describe superhero comics is to utilise sound effects which were commonly found in early period comics and the Batman TV show – ‘Pow! Zap! Biff!’ (Meconis, 2012). This stereotype infantilises comics, and makes the medium seem camp and/or ridiculous (Meconis, 2012). Another stereotype which is often used in reference to comics, and superhero comics in particular, is that they are for ‘geeks’, and ‘nerds’ (Meconis, 2012; Woo, 2012: 10-13). In an online article about comics fans in Melbourne Stanforth (2015) describes them as being within ‘fringe communities’.

These references reduce comics readers to unflattering stereotypes, and do not recognise that to be a ‘geek’ or a ‘nerd’ is to exist on a scale of engagement and self-identification (Woo, 2012: 55-58). Cultural intermediaries or comics fans have been compared to The Comic Book Guy character from The Simpsons. Hasset (2015) references the character when describing ‘the average comics reader’ in an article for SBS online, and Bochenski (2015) contrasts a Brisbane comics store with The Android Dungeon (The Comic Book Guy’s shop). Even though this character is fictional within these discourses he is still considered to embody ‘a comics fan’ – obsessive to the point of being obnoxious, overweight, and immature.
Benzin Bullock believes that the ‘comics readers are nerds’ stereotypes are specifically designed to disempower people:

If you’re a comic book fan, people expect you to be a fat guy with glasses, you know, just stupid misconceptions that people glean off the internet or their Big Bang Theory show, all this shit like this, which is written and designed to make people impotent. To make them weaker. To disenfranchise other things that aren’t what people want – they [Big Bang Theory creators] just want their show to be ‘good’, they don’t care that they’re hurting other people. Especially with comics fandom – I’m a comics fan, I love comics – but I’m not sure I fit in with what the imagery’s supposed to be. Working in a comic store, there’s not a single stereotype that I could enforce – there’s no stereotype for comics fandom. I’m watching these people [customers], I’m working for years and years, and there’s no link between them other than the fact that they love comics. People like comics because of their own individual reasons, like they like movies, they like art. It’s just as valid. While we’re slowly getting there, we’re not getting there fast enough (Bullock, 20/11/13, interview).

Other news articles choose to take advantage of the current ‘geek chic’ zeitgeist (Woo, 2012: 118). Australian audiences are familiar with American material, particularly the superhero genre as it is now prominent in screen media. This angle gets more people to read about Australian comics through association, with multiple articles having been written about Tom Taylor and Nicola Scott, two stakeholders who work for DC comics (Lewis, 2014; Jackson, 2015; Valentine and Storie, 2015). There has also been coverage of Australian comics creators as ‘heroes’, such as the documentary on Gestalt, and a comparison of Australian superhero comics and American comics in the newspaper The Daily Telegraph (Pike, 2015). This positive association with stakeholders who have ‘made it’ in America may be related to cultural cringe. The approval of the American comic industry gives Australian creatives more ‘credibility’ because American tastes are valued above our own (Heazlewood, 2014: 242-245; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview). The cultural anxieties around Australia are still present from the first to the second period.

Australians copying American cultural trends has also benefited graphic novels. The critical acclaim around graphic novels in the U.S. was key to changing Australian perceptions of comics in the media.
Graphic Novels

The critical acclaim around graphic novels in Anglophone industries has been due to marketing strategies and the content of the books (Patrick, 2011: 52-54; Sweeney, 2014; Hatfield, 2005: 20-21). Graphic novels’ associations with literature in Australia has meant that their authors are interviewed on public broadcasters and their content is reviewed in broadsheet newspapers (Patrick, 2012: 54-55). Popular national program The Book Club had an episode centred around graphic novelists talking about their work.

Discourses around graphic novels can become problematic when they are praised at the expense of comics, with comics being characterised ‘for kids’ and the graphic novel ‘for adults’ (Parille, 2016; Meconis, 2012). The argument that graphic novels are superior to comics has now been largely refuted within comics industry discourses, partly due to many graphic novels simply being collected volumes of previously published comics (Patrick, 2011: 60). Comics and graphic novels can not be defined by audience, because graphic novels for teens and children are just as popular as graphic novels for adults (Maloney, 2014).

The ‘comics aren’t just for children anymore’ trope occurs in articles about Australian graphic novels generally or through writing that examines their inclusion in Australian school curriculums (Power, 2008; Wilkinson, 2007). Graphic novels have been described as the ‘secret identity’ of the comic, whose appeal goes beyond ‘children and twenty-something males’ (Avalos, 2008). In a column by Helen Razor (2005) in Victorian broadsheet The Age, comics were described as ‘a bastardised art form’ whilst by contrast graphic novels were ‘literature for grown-ups’.

Discourses about comics being a medium for ‘children’ have had negative socio-economic consequences for the Australian comics industry. In 2011 Robert Crumb was scheduled to be a guest at GRAPHIC! (Fulton, 2011). In The Daily Telegraph, a Sydney newspaper, Crumb and his comics were accused of promoting paedophilia and sexual deviancy to children, which caused Crumb to cancel his appearance at the festival (Fulton, 2011). Tickets had to be refunded to guests and Eddie Campbell was quickly re-arranged to be a replacement. That there was no media coverage refuting the claims of The Daily Telegraph is an example of how the media can damage the perceptions of a medium and disrupt national and international creative economies which rely on social cues.
However news coverage around Australian graphic novels has recently been less reliant on stereotypes (Ridout, 2012; Watts, 2012; Heanue, 2016). Journalists reporting on comics nationally and internationally are becoming more aware of their reliance on a trope which hasn’t been relevant for decades (Parille, 2016; Watts, 2012; DeVries, 20/11/13, interview). There is also an increasing number of news and interviews about Australian comics which focus solely on production and their position as a creative industry. In these reports, there are fewer comparisons with the American comics industry, and less justification of why journalists are covering an art form which has historically been stigmatised.

**Australian Stories**

In May 2016, the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) ran a story on the Australian Comics Art Festival in Canberra, interviewing several creators who were selling their comics at the festival (Heanue, 2016). After the story aired many stakeholders shared the link to the footage and posted/tweeted about how accurate and fair the story was.

There has been an increasing amount of media coverage which has focused on the history and practices of the Australian comics industry without any stereotyping of the medium. Some of this media coverage has been through specific publications for creative arts, such as an illustration magazine, or publications focused on Australian arts industries (Racklyft, 2015; Millikan, 2013; Watts, 2012; Ridout, 2012). There has also been coverage of the industry by national broadcasters. In 2013 Australian comics strip artists were interviewed on *The Feed*, a popular current affairs program on SBS (Special Broadcasting Service).

Public radio is an effective way for creatives to engage with audiences outside of the scene because shows are low-cost and will often have a focus on community arts (Heazlewood, 2014: 23). Anthony Castle regularly presents a show on Radio Adelaide called Comic Spot (Caleo, 8/6/14, interview). Caleo, who has also made a documentary about Australian comics, has hosted a show on Melbourne radio channel 3RRR:

> This week for example I was on 3 Triple R, an independent radio arts program here in Melbourne, so I’m there once a month talking about comics, reviewing comics, sort of talking about world comics culture but also local comics culture. I like to focus on

73 There was also a podcast about Australian comics called *The Comics Spot* but it doesn’t seem to be related to the radio show.
local work, and local comic book artists’ work and exhibitions. That sort of thing, so that’s one way. Another thing I’ve done is I made a film last year, a documentary [Graphic Novels! Melbourne!] so I would regard that as being a means by which the story of Australian comics can find new audiences. Really what I find is those new audiences are library audiences, they are school audiences, such as tertiary audiences, and I think what that film does or what I hope that film does is that it introduces the artists, a selection of graphic novelists, to the audience. The audience would get the perception, ‘Oh! These graphic novelists, these comic book people, they’re just like other artists, they’re like sculptors or dancers or whatever, at the same time, they have the same relationship to their art as other artists do.’ I think one of the things about comics is people still think they fall out of the sky, they don’t have people behind them, so that’s one of the things that the film tries to address (Caleo, 8/6/14, interview).

Reporting which does not patronise practitioners’ creative labour matters because it can build trust between stakeholders and the media, with stakeholders feeling more confident in their work and more likely to provide the media with press releases (Heazlewood, 2014: 186-187; Bentley, 2009: 10). This negotiation between stakeholders and cultural intermediaries not only expands social network markets, but stakeholders’ practice as part of a creative industry is legitimised by comics being discussed in the public sphere as a medium worthy of critical analysis and respect (O’Brien, 2014). This legitimisation could assist in having comics production recognised as a creative industry in public policy.

Scene Media and the Creative Industries

Scene media is created by stakeholders who are involved in scene culture and comics production and circulation practices. These forms of media act as news sources as well as forms of peer assessment through reviews. Whilst there has been some criticism of the subjectivity of reviews this criticism primarily exists as another form of internal subcultural discourse.

Scene media in the Australian comics industry is free to access and the most popular forms are blogs and podcasts, relatively inexpensive platforms. The majority of scene media content consists of news, interviews, and reviews. Stakeholders aren’t paid for their work; they are motivated to write about comics because through altruism. The cost of comics criticism can
be understood as social rather than economic. Each stakeholder who engages in scene media needs to make an individual choice about how they navigate the internal logics of the cultural field.

The first form of scene media was fanzines, which began being produced in the mid-1960s and early 1970s in Australia (Bentley, 2013: 16-24). The practice of creating comics fanzines came from America, and these fanzines contained price guides, industry news and rumours, market analyses, fan correspondence and specialty columns (Lopes, 2009: 105). Communication about events, people and products are central to scenes, particularly those which have developed strong ties based on consumption. This consumption aspect, which is tied to cultural intermediaries such as retailers and fanzines (scene media), can influence the attention economy as well as subcultural capital (Woo, 2012: 126-127).

The most famous comics ‘fanzine’ is The Comics Journal, established in 1977 by Fantagraphics publisher Gary Groth. Groth wanted comics journalism to be treated as serious art journalism with more reviews and news about the alternative comics scene (Bentley, 2013: 20). In Australia there has been an increase in scene media which endeavours to present serious art criticism and information whilst arts programs and sections of the news which are devoted to the arts have been defunded or shrunk. Audiences which rely on hype or critical consensus are increasingly using word of mouth, independent digital publications, ‘street press’, scene media, or social media. The purpose of scene media is to give audiences a comprehensive overview of what is or is not worth their money and time, instead of trying to navigate social media, where thousands of acts and artists are trying to stand out from the crowd (Heazlewood, 2014: 239-242). The majority of scene media is now blogs and podcasts. Stakeholders will often work for free and make no money from sales/advertising, so working in digital media is cheaper than print (Lobato and Fletcher, 2013: 119-120).

To learn more about scene media production and practices I spoke with two former podcasters, Gary Chaloner and Scott Fraser. Chaloner hosted The Comics Spot podcast with co-host John Retallick, which featured interviews, news and reviews from 2010-2014. Scott Fraser’s Diggsville featured comics interviews and news alongside other popular culture coverage from 2012-2014. Both Chaloner and Fraser have worked as creatives within the industry (Fraser as a writer and Chaloner as a writer, illustrator and publisher) and their work in scene media was an extension of their interest in promoting Australian comics.
Fraser’s interest in Australian comics is part of his overall interest in Australian creative arts, and he has friends and colleagues in the scene (10/5/13, interview). Chaloner felt that the level of commentary and criticism in the Australian scene could be stronger, and less focused on nationality. Instead of comics being assessed as ‘good for an Australian comic’, they had to be assessed as a comic competing for global audiences. Reviewers also had to take their work seriously and give stakeholders constructive feedback (Chaloner, 10/5/13, interview).

Reviews in scene media can be a source of controversy, due to stakeholders’ personal identification with the work (Chaloner, 10/5/13, interview; Fraser, 10/5/13, interview). These controversies regarding subjective opinion around art are similar to those which occur generally with stakeholders. Scene media criticism differs in that practitioners who produce scene media do so out of a sense of altruism. They have a passion for the medium and want to share their knowledge with other stakeholders as well as audiences. Many quit when scene media contributors (whether in the comics industries or the creative industries in general) are met with constant scrutiny or even threats over their judgement (Giampaoli, 2015; Heazlewood, 2014: 199-204; O’Brien, 2014; Lobato and Fletcher, 2013: 115-120).

Creative practitioners want their work assessed by someone who has a passion and a knowledge of the medium, and scene media possess these skills. Arts critics who work for the mainstream news media will often get their start in scene media, and need space to learn and grow (Lobato and Fletcher, 2013: 115). For scenes which are highly autonomous, the criteria of evaluation which are developed within the cultural field can give audiences outside of the field relevant contextual information about authors, practices, products and histories (Bourdieu, 1985: 17; O’Brien, 2014; Lobato and Fletcher, 2013: 118). For many creative industries, including comics, the only other form of public peer assessment is industry awards (Hackley and Kover, 2007: 70; Butcher, 2015).

Most of the experiences that Chaloner (10/5/13, interview) and Fraser (10/5/13, interview) have had are positive. Chaloner believes that comics are ‘growing and maturing as an art form’ which ‘will allow for commentary to bleed more into more mainstream coverage’ (Chaloner, 10/5/13, interview).

There have been no audience studies done on scene media, and Chaloner and Fraser believe that their primary audience is comprised of other creatives (Chaloner, 10/5/13, interview;
Fraser, 10/5/13, interview). But if accessed by consumers outside of the scene, podcasts and blogs can provide specialised knowledge which may influence consumption practices.

Social Media Marketing

Social media allows stakeholders to have an active role in shaping their social network markets through connecting with audiences and knowledge brokering with cultural intermediaries (Potts, 2009: 142). Like scene media, social media exists as an extension of fanzines, with practitioners creating and sustaining communities through the exchange of subcultural knowledge and participatory practices (Jenkins, 2003: 55-560).

The popularity of social media as a marketing tool has influenced talent scouting practices within the comics industry and broader media industries. Some comics creators have gained cult followings and publishing deals through social media, and it is now not uncommon to see short comics and cartoons on youth-orientated media sites. Animation studios are also interested in talent scouting creators through social media for the purpose of finding storyboard artists.

Social media represents the final nexus point for comics production, practice, and consumption. Comics have become widespread through various platforms, becoming a mass medium again culturally, but not economically. What this chapter explores (and what could be explored through further research) is how a stakeholder factors social media in to their entrepreneurial practice, and how these practices fit within a creative industries framework.

Platforms’ Function and Purpose

Stakeholders utilise social media to market their authorial persona, skills, and products. But not all platforms are the same, and stakeholders do not use all platforms for the same purposes. The most popular platforms for comics artists are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, DeviantArt and Tumblr. These social media platforms are used to communicate via text and images. Stakeholders will often utilise more than one platform.

Twitter and Tumblr are platforms where stakeholders have high engagement levels with peers, audiences and knowledge brokers because it is considered a social norm to communicate with users outside of an immediate social circle. Text and visual media are shared through retweets and reblogs, and this media can also be archived and saved.
Tumblr, Instagram and DeviantArt function as virtual portfolios, able to display static images, animation and gifs. All three of these platforms are designed to show images in high resolution, and users can communicate with each other through private and public messages. Animations, videos and gifs can be uploaded onto Instagram and Tumblr. All of these image-heavy platforms allow users to communicate with each other through likes and comments.

Facebook is the platform which is most likely to be used by stakeholders for both personal communication and professional marketing. A stakeholder may have an Author page in addition to a personal/private profile and/or a page specifically for their comics. Facebook pages for comics titles are where stakeholders can either share WIPS (works in progress), sketches, full pages, or strips. These images may be for a comic book, commissions, or a comic may exist as a strip online. Other uses for Facebook are groups where stakeholders can communicate frequently in the style of a forum, and create events. Events are shared publicly or privately and contain relevant information for stakeholders and attendees.

More comics creators are beginning to use social media instead of independent sites for their webcomics. Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr allows stakeholders to monitor how many ‘likes’ a strip gets, and strips can be shared and commented on. Whilst most stakeholders still prefer to meet with their fans in person, social media allows stakeholders to build a personal brand and sustain a fan base (Baccini, 13/5/14, interview; Mason, 12/10/13, interview).

As with other online intermediaries, comics uploaded and shared via social media need to work within the constraints of the platform. These constraints may be algorithms, or file formatting. Social media sites such as Twitter will usually have single images or gag strips, as the site is designed to share short bursts of information. A site such as Tumblr or Facebook can have longer comics, usually 4-9 panels.

Strips shared through social media present a circular history, because Australian comics originated from newspaper strips. In the present, stakeholders are again creating an audience for strips and other short comics, albeit on a global scale.

**Comics via Social Media: A Mass Medium?**

The impact that social media have had on comics production and consumption is a growing area of research, and is attracting media attention. This media attention is through practitioners receiving press coverage, but it is also through stakeholders being talent scouted.
for work in hard copy comics publishers or other creative industries. Comics uploaded and shared through social media, ‘social media comics’, are also created by stakeholders to build audiences for their own projects. By sharing comics through social media stakeholders are utilising social and cultural convergence to influence comics culture. Social media comics have the abilities to reach mass audiences, because they are circulated for free. Financially, social media comics are an extension of the decentralised economy, with labour being outsourced within both the comics and creative industries (Jenkins, 2004: 35; Jenkins and Deuze, 2008: 11; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003: 242-244).

Tumblr has become a primary hub for talent scouting. Simon Hanselmann attracted significant press coverage after being signed to Fantagraphics through the site (Collins, 2013; Hazel, 2015; Sava, 2014). Hanselmann’s situation is not unique; other creators who have been signed to comics publishers or animation studios through Tumblr including Noelle Stevenson, Jake Lawrence (an Australian), and Ryan Pequin (Knoblauch, 2013; MacDonald, 2015).

Tumblr gives comics creators more opportunities to become storyboard artists, with comics artists’ skills in combining illustrations with text much in demand in American animation. There has been speculation in the American comics industry that video games could be the next creative industry to hire comics creators as storyboard artists (MacDonald, 2015). As the Australian comics industry has patterned its practices on American innovations, more integration between social media, Australian screen industries, and the comics industry is a possibility.74

Both the artist and the entrepreneur are motivated to create and innovate. Both the artist and the entrepreneur organise their resources and devote time to business skills, seek out opportunities in order to advance their network of contacts or make an economic transaction, and seeks to disrupt existing economic models or ways of thinking around a business or a medium (Hartley et al, 2012: 93-94; Heazlewood, 2014: 75-77; O’Connor et al, 2011: 66-70; McRobbie, 2015: 19-22). Social media comics build audiences through being free of gatekeeping practices, with a wide range of comics content created (MacDonald, 2015; Shachar and Ball, 2016). These comics can be factual or fictional, and some comics are created by stakeholders as an extension of their fandom, to be used as elements of discourses.

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74 There is no information from inside or outside the scene about whether the animated adaptation of *The Deep* is storyboarded by Australian comics creators.
within participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2003: 555-557). *Zen Pencils*, a popular social media comic by Melbourne creator Gavin Aung Than, converts famous quotes or poems into strips. Aung Than’s strips were published in hard copy in 2014 and made the *New York Times* bestseller list (Morris, 2014).

Social comics images have also become repurposed and re-appropriated within general internet discourses: Matt Furie’s Pepe the Frog has become a hate symbol through the alt-right movement, and KC Green’s ‘This is Fine’ dog has become a popular meme. Through social and cultural convergence, it could be argued that some memes themselves take the form of comics, with frames of images juxtaposed with texts (Jenkins, 2001: 93). The intersection between meme culture and comics production/circulation could lead to further research related to authorship, skill, and how scenes are formed through practice and meaning (Douglas, 2014: 315-321, 328).

In the core creative industries, where creatives often can not make a full time living from their art, being able to earn money from their work is less about security and more about reassurance that their work is being valued by an audience (Hackley and Kover, 2007: 66-67; Heazlewood, 2014: 142). Social media comics are used by stakeholders to communicate with audiences of peers, communities and consumers. Whilst these social media comics are circulated for free, because they are marketing a stakeholder’s skills and authorial voice, comics authors have been known to speak out against plagiarism. When Melbourne stakeholder Marta Tesoro’s work was used by a business without her permission, the Australian comics community collectively lobbied for her image to be removed due to copyright violation (Alexander, 2015).

The relationship between comics’ digital, decentralised economies, media convergence, social media, and internet subcultures is a research area that could be analysed further in subsequent studies. Social media comics are related to webcomics and digital comics files, with access to global social network markets created through attention economies and specific digital platforms. These platforms have different purposes and constraints, which affect the ways practitioners are able to monetise their work or create an audience base. For Australian comics creators, social media platforms have created a process wherein they can be talent scouted with a minimum of cultural gatekeeping.

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75 As cited in Chapter Six, ‘This is Fine’ dog has become a part of Australian comics industry discourses.
Conclusion

Stakeholders are marketing their comics through a variety of different mediums. These marketing practices often involve working with cultural intermediaries from other media industries to increase the presence of comics in the public sphere. The media can take the form of ‘traditional’ media, amateur media, or social media.

Social media are the only media platforms where stakeholders can openly communicate with peers and audiences, with other media platforms being mediated through journalists or ‘scene media’. Social media platforms are not only changing the way that comics are advertised to potential publishers, but are also changing the ways in which comics are produced and circulated. These production and circulation practices are at a nexus point between comics industries and broader internet creative practices and discourses.
Chapter Ten: A Scene in Sequence

This research argues that Australian comics production could be considered a creative industry which contributes to both local and global creative economies through scenes and social network markets. In this conclusion I will be presenting summaries of my findings in two sections.

The first section explains how Australian comics production could be considered a creative industry through its characteristics and practices. The Australian comics industry has experienced change and growth during each period of production, with the second period specifically operating within a creative industries framework. This framework, as well as Bourdieu’s theories of the cultural field and its associated capitals, is supported through critical discourse analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. This primary and secondary data was used to comprehensively analyse stakeholder scenes and social network markets. These social network markets reflect how Australian comics production is integrated with other creative and comics industries.

The second section discusses the strategic practices of stakeholders and cultural intermediaries to strengthen and expand their social network markets. These strategies can be understood through the roles of spaces within the Australian comics industry. These spaces are physical, cultural, and virtual, with multiple intersecting points. The spaces of social networks reflect the various economic structures of the Australian comics industry.

On a national scale, Australian comics production contributes to agglomeration economies through utilising multiple physical spaces. As a medium it inhabits further cultural spaces through its associations with publishing and visual art, whilst keeping its distinctive scene networks. Comics are currently not considered a creative industry in government policies but they are increasingly being considered for grants at a federal level. They are also eligible for grants from states and councils. This support for comics production from governing institutions has resulted in comics production being able to contribute to cultural tourism. Comics’ role in cultural tourism is a primary argument for comics’ future inclusion in creative industry policies. Further research into international comics’ cultural tourism economy could create a more robust evidence base to support these policy settings.
On a global scale, media convergence is decentralising labour in the creative industries by giving stakeholders and cultural intermediaries more opportunities to create international social network markets. Media convergence has changed Australian industry practices related to production and circulation through social media, crowdfunding, graphic design, file sharing, digital publications, and online retailers. The production and circulation of comics through virtual spaces, specifically social media platforms, is an area of research where further study could be pursued.

**Australian Comics as a Creative Industry: Characteristics and Capitals**

The Australian comics industry is arguably a creative industry due to its social and economic structures. This thesis has proved this by providing a condensed history of practices in two periods. The first period was a creative industry which catered to a mass market through clustered activity. The second period of production not only has clusters, but also social network markets which are integrated with other creative industries. Through an ethnographic analysis of the second period this thesis has shown how these creative and comics industries are interconnected.

The primary differences between the first period of production, and the second period of production, concern stakeholders’ positions on the cultural field. The first period of production existed within a field of large scale production. Even though comics were created through artisanal production practices the majority of practitioners and publishers were concerned with making a product which would appeal to the general public for the greatest financial return. There was very little critical evaluation of the creativity of these comics from within the industry, with the exception of some criticism towards their *ersatz* American content. This content appealed to broad audiences, although due to an absence of audience studies from that time period it is not clear how much consumption of Australian comics was due to taste, or to there being no alternatives. Criticisms about comics primarily came from government institutions and lobby groups within the fields of class and power.

The second period of production exists primarily within the field of restricted production. It is defined through its internal logics and degrees of creative autonomy.

The internal logics of the Australian comics industry are connected to what stakeholders (and cultural intermediaries in the form of editors/publishers) consider to be ‘authentic’ practice.
Australian comics range from small press comics to graphic novels, to comics which are created in a series and are designed to emulate the American superhero genre. These different forms cultivate social networks of practitioners and consumers who develop a critical appreciation for the form.

Australian stakeholders are also working out their own creative identities through these internal logics, expressed through practice and discourses. These creative identities are related to cultural cringe and constructive criticism. Cultural cringe indicates a reluctance to engage with overtly Australian content and is related to constructive criticism. Between most stakeholders and cultural intermediaries such as editors, publishers, scene media and retailers, there are varying opinions as to whether Australian comics creators should be supported because of their nationality, or solely because of the quality of their product.

Nationality is inseparable from discussions of ‘quality’ in the Australian comics industry. Many creators need to learn through practice because the Australian comics industry has low levels of economic capital and few educational resources for aspiring practitioners (although this is changing). Stakeholders are aware of this even as they maintain their own standards of what they would consider ‘quality’ i.e. authentic practice.

These issues regarding the ‘correct’ way of creating a comic can never be resolved. The cultural and economic values of a comic are decided not only through the habitus but through cultural intermediaries, consumers, and institutions. These issues (internal criticisms, questions over practice, self-awareness over the amount of time and money a practitioner can spend on their skills), are characteristic of the field of restricted production. Within the field of restricted production stakeholders create their own evaluations of practice through specific knowledges and histories, even as they still define themselves in relation to the reception of their cultural artefacts outside of the field. Stakeholders make decisions about their practice based on artistic preference, but also conditions of supply and demand (i.e. utilising cultural intermediaries to sustain their practices and create social network markets).

The Australian comics industry exists within a restricted field of production, but it is also part of a broader unified field which also includes larger scale production. Positions within this field are based on a stakeholder or cultural intermediary’s acquisition of social, cultural, or economic capital. These positions (and the boundaries of the habitus itself) are fluid, and connected through social networks. A stakeholder may work on independent projects in the
Australian market, but they may also be connected to national creative industries, or international comics industries, through freelance or contractual work.

Australian comics production also shares characteristics with the broader creative industries. Most stakeholders are unable to work on their labour full-time because of economic precariousness, which are circumstances shared by other creative practitioners. Practitioners within scenes and highly social creative industries also have discourses about what constitutes ‘authentic’ practice, with these practices including different approaches to criticism.

Understanding the root causes of conflict reveals information about how positions and discourses are formed around identity and practice. But within the habitus as a whole more value is placed on acquiring social capital, and using peer support for the purpose of collective action. Common discursive threads within stakeholder interviews revealed optimism and satisfaction with their creative labour, and scene culture more broadly. In the creative industries, stakeholders can easily experience stress and exploitative circumstances. The same is true in the comics industries. But this stress can be alleviated through positive interactions with other stakeholders and cultural intermediaries (including working together on projects), and exchanging knowledges related to the informal network economy.

Australian comics stakeholders understand that they work in an industry which receives low levels of state funding, and that hard copy comics are unlikely to be a mass medium. Due to the changes that happened in the Anglophone industries after the moral panic of the 1950s (specifically through the direct market and the underground/alternative comics market) hard copy comics have become a medium which has circulation practices based on social network markets. There are also future opportunities for government funding for comics production and circulation to be increased, due to comics events acting as cultural tourism initiatives for cities and states.

Media convergence has had a profound effect on the ways in which comics are produced and circulated. Since the beginning of the second period Australians have circulated their comics in international markets, but this formerly required expensive phone calls, shipping, and travel. With email, social media, webcomics, crowdfunding and online retailers, it has become far easier for Australian stakeholders to extend their social network markets across and beyond national borders.
The effects of media convergence on the comics industry is an area of research which has the potential to show that comics are once again becoming a widely read ‘mass’ medium, whether through webcomics or digital files. The next stage in the research would be to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how media convergence and comics production is connected to a global creative economy.

Australian Comics as A Creative Industry: Present and Future Strategies

This section presents a deeper analysis of how Australian comics production contributes to clustered ‘local’ agglomeration economies and decentralised global economies. Comics’ primary contributions to agglomeration economies is through cultural tourism, and the way decentralised labour structures in the comics industries has been accelerated through media convergence. What I have found within this thesis is that the connections between comics production and creative economies can be understood through spaces – physical, cultural, and virtual.

Beginning with physical spaces, these are sites of production and circulation which involve stakeholders, cultural intermediaries, institutions and consumers. At the start of the second period these sites were only associated with comics activity (comics conventions, meets), even though they utilised a diverse range spaces throughout urban environments. The first convention was held on a University campus, and the first Sydney meets were held at a soccer club before transitioning to a pub.

In the present, comics events are integrated with other creative industries through specific artistic institutions (galleries, studios, writing centres, festival centres, libraries, zine fairs, an opera house). They are also located in miscellaneous public spaces such as parks, pubs, cafes, community centres, classrooms and convention halls. Comics stores and bookstores are the sites of launches, and comics stores in particular have evolved into social as well as retail spaces. As a creative industry, the ‘event economy’ of comics is integrated with other creative industries. It is also part of the general retail sector, and increasingly the educational sector.

As an ethnographer, these social spaces are where I did most of my offline fieldwork. I could observe the different practices and purposes of the spaces, and who inhabited these spaces.
These physical spaces contribute to the artistic cultures of cities, by promoting cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is a growing movement wherein events and artists are connected to specific city cultures. Tourists (whether local, interstate or international) participate in the creation of product and/or the circulation of knowledge as well as consumption. Cultural tourism is demonstrated in comics events such as interactive panels, workshops, commissioned sketches, and drawing classes/sketch nights.

These events contribute to various city economies through creative activities, but they are also vital to the economic system of the Australian comics industry. Because Australian comics are produced through scenes rather than large industrial or institutional bodies, it is difficult for most stakeholders to have high volumes of their product distributed outside of their city. Unlike the serial comics industry, Australian comics are not produced on a consistent basis. This is due to the artisanal production methods used by stakeholders. These artisanal methods are the result of Australia having no shop system and the majority of creative practitioners working part-time. The only comics creators who can work full-time on their labour are stakeholders who work for the American industrialised serial comics market. This serial comics market (the direct market) has a monopoly on the Australian comics retail sector (comics stores). Consumers of serial comics are comics stores’ primary customer base, which means that retailers are in a synergistic relationship with Diamond, the primary distributor of serial comics.

Events offer stakeholders the opportunity to sell to audiences directly. These audiences may be in their own city, or stakeholders will transport their comics across state and national borders. Stakeholders use their knowledge of social network markets to assess how many comics they will need for an event. Events are opportunities for stakeholders to market themselves and conduct audience research.

As well as socialising with consumers, stakeholders make useful contacts with other stakeholders and cultural intermediaries. As a creative industry which has highly social circulation and consumption practices, successful events give stakeholders the incentive to produce comics. In Australian comics production a stakeholders’ identification with their work is the primary motivator for industrial practice, and so events’ purposes are not only cultural and economic, but also personal.
Cultural intermediaries can also combine the personal with the cultural and economic when they form strategies on how to increase their social network markets. In the case of Australian comics stores, even though there have been no audience studies conducted on Australian comics consumers, retailers may still stock Australian comics to assist the local scene. Retailers and stakeholders assist each other through events as well, with stakeholders doing in-store signings and market stalls. Retailers will also host events just for women, such as sketch nights and reading groups, to diversify their audiences outside of the ‘fanboy’ demographic.

A reason why retailers are changing the demographics of their store is because the hard copy serial market is competing with bookstores and online retailers for customers. With the exception of conventions, which still have some ‘geek culture’ gatekeeping practices, comics events are also signalling a cultural change among comics audiences.

This leads to the idea of comics inhabiting ‘cultural spaces’ – their practices and products becoming more visible to the public. In the second period of production until the mid-2000s, comics rarely received positive media coverage. Australian comics have had a stronger media presence since Australian graphic novels began being produced, and media adapted from comics have become more ubiquitous on film and TV screens.

This representation has been accompanied by repeated tropes regarding the medium, but media discourses are increasingly becoming more respectful towards the medium. There are fewer justifications as to why comics are being written about (‘comics grow up’) or angles which focus on superhero or ‘geek’ culture. Comics are written about as if they were the products of any other creative industry.

This increased focus on comics, including comics events, in the media indicates that the creative industry is growing. It is growing through stakeholders’ collective action and resilience, and contributing to Australia’s artistic culture and economy. But my thesis argues that what could encourage the growth of comics’ social network markets is more government (federal and state) funding and policy initiatives.

In studies of government policies and comics from the United Kingdom and Europe, a recurring pattern has been comics’ role in cultural tourism. These studies reflect similar findings to my own; that the production and circulation of comics in public spaces is socially, culturally, and economically beneficial to the specific industry but also to the public.
perception of a city. Further research into comics production and its impact on creative economies through cultural tourism would benefit from Australia’s industry being contrasted with an industry which already benefits from government funding policies.

Lastly, the creation of virtual spaces through media convergence has changed the Australian comics industry’s economic structures. Email and social media has increased communication between all agents involved in the production and circulation of Australian comics. Stakeholders communicate with each other to collaborate on projects and events, and social media is also integral to crowdfunding projects.

Crowdfunding is a nexus point between funding, production, and circulation. Crowdfunding can be used for individual projects, but it is used more often for collective projects, which usually need more financial capital than individual projects, because they involve more stakeholders. The involvement of more stakeholders, the more chances of the project reaching its funding goal because there is a collaborative effort to advertise the project to potential donors. Crowdfunding relies on an attention economy which is at once local and global.

Use of email and social media has also resulted in Australian comics producers seeking global partnerships. Stakeholders communicate online to collaborate on projects, pitch, and talent scout. Whilst the American comics production has the highest level of decentralised international labour working in their comics industry, Australians have also talent scouted international collaborators for projects. These international collaborations by Australians are undertaken for different reasons. Australian anthologies have used the social capital of international creators to market their comics in global markets through the attention economy. Other Australians are looking for specific ideas and styles, with partnerships no longer constrained by geography.

Australians working in the American comics industry will pitch online, or they can be talent scouted through social media platforms, such as Tumblr. Sites such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook have become an alternative way for stakeholders to produce and circulate comics online. There are still webcomic sites, but social media has made it easier for stakeholders to market themselves as authors, create professional connections, and connect directly with audiences.
The professional connections and the cultivation of audience numbers have resulted in publishing deals for practitioners (including Australians). More American stakeholders are being hired to work in animation, and as Australia invariably adopts practices from America, it may become a common practice here. Australia has already followed America’s practice of having integrating comics into online publications.

Social media and online publications have made comics more visible to ‘a mass audience’; they have become part of the internet’s meme culture and general discourses. It is also more common for audiences to download digital comics files. Digital comics files are cheaper than hard copy comics, can be accessed instantly, and sites such as Comixology offer comics from a global range of publishers (including Australian stakeholders). Madefire, a motion comics site, also has Australian comics for sale.

There are some sites which are run by Australians, specifically for Australian comics, such as the BentoNet, which distributes to individual customers as well as retail hubs. The BentoNet is similar to Amazon and Book Depository, online retail sites where consumers can buy comics. The problem with these generalist book retail sites is that it is difficult to locate comics, particularly Australian comics, due to the sites’ algorithms not being accustomed to graphic novels and comics. In a specifically Australian context, the publication of graphic novels through book publishers is still not a widespread practice, which may also be why there are few Australian comics for sale via hard copy retail sites.

There are high international shipping costs for Australian comics, due to its geographical isolation from Northern Hemisphere markets and all Anglophone markets with the exception of New Zealand. Other than online retail sites and crowdfunding rewards, Australian comics are sold through individual mail orders, or mail order subscription services (e.g. Minicomics of the Month Club). These orders may be placed through a stakeholder’s individual site, or they may be sold through craft sites such as Etsy.

Through virtual spaces, Australian comics production is a truly ‘global’ comics industry. Media convergence has resulted in comics taking multiple forms, and social network markets becoming at once decentralised and individualised. Comics can reach a ‘mass audience’ through the internet, even as this audience is becoming more discerning regarding the consumption and curation of content.
From a cultural perspective, the growing abundance of digital comics content online signals a shift in what form of comics could be considered ‘mainstream’, particularly within Anglophone discourses. The direct market model for serial comics may be stagnating, but serial comics files are becoming increasingly popular.

But economically, online comics content is still primarily low cost or free. Monetisation options for stakeholders involve transferring their skills and work into another industry (such as animation) or releasing their work in hard copy. This cultural and economic relationship between online and hard copy comics production and circulation through virtual spaces could be explored in research based upon these thesis findings.

The Australian comics scene can be mapped and explained through a creative industries framework. To do so positions the practices of its stakeholders as contributing culturally and economically to the Australian public sphere. It is hoped that the map of the industry presented in this thesis will provide useful leverage for stakeholders seeking support from policy makers, by offering evidence of the entrepreneurial potential of stakeholders and cultural intermediaries involved in comics production.

The other aim of this thesis was to create new knowledge in the field of creative industries research. Through studying comics production, there is evidence of how agents in small scenes can contribute to agglomeration economies in urban areas, as well as decentralised digital economies. Stakeholders and cultural intermediaries who work in the Australian comics industry have created production and retail hubs, using innovation and adaptability to compensate for the low levels of income which they earn from their creative labour. For the majority of stakeholders who work on their own projects, they have to undertake this creative labour on a part-time basis. The information provided in this thesis about how stakeholders manage their time and rely on peer networks in the Australian comics industry adds to creative industry literature about how creative practitioners’ work is flexible, and how practitioners manage potentially exploitative circumstances. This thesis has also explored the role of unions in domestic and international contractual and freelance labour.

Whilst Australian comics production has corporate cultural intermediaries and institutions incorporated into some of its social networks, the industry itself is sustained by independent creative practitioners and cultural intermediaries in scenes. The Australian comics industry is
an example of scenes contributing directly to national and international creative economies, and these scene-based economies fitting within creative industries frameworks.
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