

Our creative futures

Digital media offer many new opportunities for learning and creativity but we need to make sure that those currently furthest away from engagement are not left behind, Screen WM Chief Executive Suzie Norton tells PAUL STANISTREET

As the complexion of the workforce changes, with an increasingly competitive jobs market demanding high-level IT skills as well as ‘softer’ skills such as adaptability, creativity, imagination and communication, the need for media literacy training is becoming more acute. According to Suzie Norton, Chief Executive of Screen WM, the screen agency for film, television and digital media in the West Midlands, technology is driving change at such a pace that professionals struggle to keep up with the latest ways of accessing information. Unsurprisingly, her agency has had to evolve rapidly, broadening its remit from one solely to do with film to recognise that the film, television and digital sectors are converging fast. The pace of change has meant that the agency has had to perform an awkward ‘balancing act’ between being innovative and ensuring access across the whole community. While Norton recognises the wide benefits that engagement with culture and creativity can have – promoting confidence, communication, independence of thought and civic participation, among other skills and attributes – she also realises that there is much work to be done to ensure that the groups currently most disadvantaged by lack of access have a fair share of the benefits.

The investment Screen WM has made over the past eight years in local screen media talent has already begun to yield promising results. When the agency was set up by the UK Film Council in 2000 the film industry in the region was practically non-existent. This summer there were four feature films in production in the region at the same time. Over £1 million has been invested in features over the past two years, with 14 currently on the agency’s slate, while more than 40 of the region’s filmmakers have been supported to develop, produce and distribute their own short films. Earlier this year, Screen WM formed a new partnership with Channel 4 to deliver 4iP (4 Innovation for the Public), a £10 million fund which aims to deliver ‘publicly valuable content and services on digital media platforms’. ‘It’s a way of tapping into existing engagement,’ says Norton. ‘If you have a lack of engagement around literacy and numeracy but you have massive engagement around online and digital then you can use one to address the other. There is an opportunity to create content that has real public value. If you’ve got engagement with computer games then why not have a computer game that can teach you about numeracy? Why can’t you have a social networking site that encourages people to read books or go to the theatre? There are ways of harnessing the engagement with digital to address other issues. I’d expect that to increase in importance over the next few years as central government looks to digital literacy as a way of tackling different problems.’

Major priority

‘It’s a major priority for us to make sure we are providing access for all,’ Norton says. ‘Of course, we want to be ahead of the game and to be pioneering and innovative as a region but whilst doing that we want to ensure that we are not leaving a whole range

of people behind.’ While a large part of the agency’s work concerns the economic development of the screen media industry, it also supports activities intended to stimulate public participation in screen media – from media education to film festivals and archive projects – and to ‘identify and nurture’ new talent. ‘New’, Norton insists, doesn’t mean ‘young’. ‘We host a range of activities to encourage people of all ages to learn more about filmmaking and to engage with film in interesting ways. And for those people we do identify with talent, there’s a whole system of support, through script development and short filmmaking to working towards feature film production.’ The agency invests in a number of projects intended reach out into communities where levels of media literacy and participation are low. ‘We’ve recently invested Lottery money into a project run by the Lift Community Trust on the Welsh House Farm estate in Birmingham. The estate has a wide range of social problems and the Trust is geared up to engage with the community and to provide reasons for them to work together and to build a stronger community on the estate. We worked with them to develop *Our Voice*, an intergenerational project using traditional filmmaking but then posting these films onto an interactive website and using the website as a sort of social network for the estate. We know that young people engage with this type of media, they totally get it, but one of our big issues is to ensure the older people on the estate get it too, so that there’s intergenerational engagement with the project.’

To promote engagement across the Welsh House Farm community Screen WM appointed an ‘access executive’, a professional with experience of working with community groups who would help the community to develop the project and ensure that there was access for all. ‘We know there are pockets of people who don’t apply for funds or, if they do, they don’t get them because they don’t understand the process as well as others,’ Norton says. ‘That’s what the access executive scheme is about. In this case, the access executive delivered a training session before the project was launched to communicate what it was about, how they could use it and what the media literacy benefits of the project were, in terms of engaging with film as a means of communicating with each other, telling stories and being able to give a voice to those people who perhaps aren’t heard very often. She talked through the process to ensure that we got as much engagement as possible.’ The scheme, Norton adds, is one of the agency’s most useful tools in reaching people usually considered ‘off the radar’. ‘We use access executives, we use our board members and our networks, to try to communicate what we are doing, to ensure that people have heard about the projects we are running. We want to make sure that when people do apply they are not put off because they don’t know how the system works. I passionately believe that digital media, through social networking sites, games or the different kinds of online activity that people are engaged in, is a brilliant way of tapping into the creativity and energy of young people, and harnessing it. But not at the expense of older people who are just as able to engage with the media. They just need a bit more encouragement.’

Film festivals

Screen WM supports a number of film festivals intended to encourage participation from different priority audience groups, including Borderlines, the UK’s largest rural film festival, the Wolverhampton Disability Film Festival, Deaffest, a film festival celebrating deaf media production, and Birmingham’s Black International Film Festival. The agency also works with the Media Archive for Central England to deliver screenings of archive material throughout the West Midlands. The archive screenings are often significant community events, says Sara Clowes, the agency’s

Head of Education, Archive and Audience Development, sometimes attracting several generations of the same family. ‘It’s about stimulating learning while exploring our cultural heritage,’ she says. ‘Grandparents and parents like to take their grandchildren and children along to give them a flavour of how they grew up.’ ‘It also creates a real sense of community and belonging and a sense of citizenship,’ adds Norton. Screen WM has also invested in two ‘education hubs’, centres for film and media education activity, at Warwick Arts Centre and The Lighthouse in Wolverhampton, and has plans for four more. ‘These are places where people can come and spend time together,’ says Clowes, ‘where families can look at exhibitions together or see specialised screenings. They’re also places for interacting in participatory activity around media and film literacy, where people can come together and share their creative futures. We’d like to see more projects approaching us about how we can support this sort of activity.’

Building a sustainable and thriving film industry takes time and investment, says Norton, but there are already signs that the work of Screen WM is bearing fruit, certainly in terms of filmmaking activity. Getting different partners to sign up to a strategy setting out what media literacy is, what it can do and how it should be delivered was a major step forward, and has led to a series of quarterly media literacy forums for sharing good practice. It is too early to say how successful work on digital media will be but Norton is confident that the convergence of the film, television and digital sectors will mean there will be benefits across the industry. The real challenge for working in ‘this exciting new space’ concerns widening access, ‘making sure we are reaching the people we should be’. Norton says: ‘There is a huge challenge for any region to ensure that the kind of opportunities available around digital media – opportunities for learning, for engagement, for interacting, especially across generations – are available to all as a source of inspiration and creativity and as a potential source of partnership and engagement. That’s quite a big challenge but one that we’re geared up to address. The building blocks are in place and we are doing as much as we can to encourage as many people as possible to participate. In that respect, WM is leading the way and over the next few years we will see some amazingly exciting projects.’

[in panel]

Screen WM is one of nine regional screen agencies set up by the UK Film Council in 2000, along with three national agencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to support the film industry at a regional level.

Screen WM covers six counties in the heart of England: Birmingham and the Black Country, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire.

Go to www.screenwm.co.uk. To find out more about the 4iP fund go to: www.4ip.org.uk.