

## Experimentation and Imitation: The Journey to Elle 360

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### ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that the media industries are facing an unprecedented period of disruption within the Internet age. Whilst avoiding technological determinism, it is important to recognize the scale of the changes being faced and the altering landscape which media businesses, particularly those with a strong legacy, are forced to operate in (Chan-Olmsted and Chang, 2003; Küng, 2008; Küng, Picard and Towse, 2008; Küng, 2013). This paper focuses on the initial findings from a case study of Elle UK and the title's explicit engagement with multi-platform, which has involved multiple and wide ranging product, process and content innovations. The paper focuses on an analysis of semi-structured interviews carried out with senior employees at Hearst Magazines UK and Elle UK. With regard to adjusting to a multi-platform approach to publishing, Hearst UK is considered to have innovated more quickly than rivals (Halliday and Sweney, 2013) and Elle UK has engaged with a multi-platform strategy, 'Elle 360'. Despite a public discourse of platform neutrality, evidence from the initial research suggests that the economic strategies, and as a corollary work practices and content decisions, continue to preference the print magazine above emerging and alternative platforms. The paper concludes by arguing for holistic innovation studies which take account of soft innovations as well as those focused on new product development.

### KEYWORDS:

multi-platform innovation, magazine publishing,  
digital disruption

The Journal of Media Innovations 2.1 (2015), 23-40.

<http://www.journals.uio.no/index.php/TJMI>

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## INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that the media industries are facing an unprecedented period of disruption within the Internet age. Whilst avoiding technological determinism, it is important to recognize the scale of the changes being faced and the altering landscape which media businesses, particularly those with a strong legacy, are forced to operate in (Chan-Olmsted and Chang, 2003; Küng, 2008; Küng, Picard and Towse, 2008; Küng, 2013). The digital challenge has proved significant and been compounded by the effects of the 2008 recession which saw magazines lose an estimated one quarter of their advertising pages (Duffy, 2013). One of the chief challenges facing print-based media firms has been the migration of advertising revenues online which has caused significant insecurity for legacy media organisations. There is also competition for the attention of time-poor audiences from an overabundance of bottom-up content providers such as social media and blogs (Duffy, 2013). Recent reports have argued that people are spending more time with mobile products than print ones (e-marketer report, 2012).

Nevertheless, magazine publishing has been regarded to be slightly more resilient than the

newspaper sector although their business models have traditionally been similar (Küng, 2008) with explanations proffered around their focus on more niche tastes and preferences, a clear advantage within an era of fragmentation (Bleyen et al, 2014; Holmes and Nice, 2012; McKay, 2013; Morrish and Bradshaw, 2012). Unlike newspapers, magazine titles are aimed at specific target groups rather than mass audiences and there has been increasing segmentation since the 1980s (Doyle, 2011). Advertising and direct copy sales are the two key income streams which have traditionally supported magazine titles (Doyle, 2011). This leads to a “janus-faced” structure for fashion magazines, where the editor is tasked with satisfying a dual (and sometimes multiple) audience of readers and advertisers. As Moeran (2006: 728) explains:

A title’s circulation figure is boosted by various means (such as the practice of cut-price annual subscriptions) to persuade advertisers to spend their money therein. In other words, magazine publishers sell their readerships to (potential) advertisers, while editors sell advertised products to their readers.

To offset a fall in print advertising revenues, magazine publishers have repositioned their

brands as multi-platform entities (Duffy, 2013; Doyle, 2011). Many have engaged with a multiplicity of business model innovations aimed at capturing nascent or alternative revenue streams including e-commerce, online advertising and digital subscriptions. Economies of scale and scope can be derived from extending brands across multiple platforms by reducing average per user production costs (Doyle, 2011). This shift has necessitated further innovations in processes, via shifts in organisational structure and work practices chiefly around building in flexibility and new digital appointments. Finally, there have been content-based innovations particularly around the tone and nature of content most suited to novel platforms and new mechanisms for engaging readers. Magazines have traditionally had a close relationship with their readership, and it has been argued that engagement is enabled further by new platforms, with their greater prospects for a developing a two-way relationship (Doyle, 2011). Nonetheless, despite considerable experimentation across the sector and imitation of innovations made in digital pureplay sites, no single model has emerged to offer a sustainable solution to the digital challenge, and some increases in digital circulations are still significantly dwarfed by print despite its decline

(Sedghi, 2013).

For incumbents, the adjustment to the disruptive innovations of digital has involved experimentation with multiple strategies of business model innovation, often concurrently. Rather than pure innovation, this often constitutes what Küng (2013) refers to as ‘innovative recombination’:

The media’s innovative energies are perhaps best devoted to finding ways to extend existing competencies and assets in new fields, and to redeploy people, processes or products in new ways or for new markets, than to creating new into the world media concepts (Küng, 2013: 10).

Theories of contemporary media and business practice tend to emphasise the adjustment of media organisations to digital in terms of their product innovations aimed at capturing new revenue streams presented by the development of new platforms for content delivery. Identifying how novel products and platforms are being used by legacy media organisations to extend their brand and ultimately fight for survival is not denied to be important and constitutes one aspect of this study. It is argued, however, that greater research and reflection is needed on other aspects of innovation.

As Küng (2013: 11) points out, the pervasive need for innovation within the media industries brings with it “an equally pervasive need for organisational change”. As this process-orientated innovation, unlike product innovation, is largely invisible to the reader (Bakker, 2013) it tends to garner less attention. Further to this, as Bleyen et al (2014: 32) argue, traditional definitions of innovation often overlook creative activities that lead to what they describe as „aesthetic, educational and entertainment renewal“ and as such may have significant socio-economic impacts for media organisations. ‚Soft‘ or ‚hidden‘ innovation that captures content-related novelties is argued to be especially relevant to media industries, which involve the continuous development and diffusion of creative products and processes.

The paper reports the initial findings of a study of magazine publishers, which is being undertaken as part of a larger project ‘Multi-platform media and the digital challenge’. The magazine sector remains considerably less researched than the newspaper sector, despite employing around half of the journalists in the UK in 1997 and providing around 3,500 consumer titles (McKay, 2013). Research conducted on women’s magazines has largely come from critical and gender studies with seminal

works such as Marjorie Ferguson’s 1983 ‘Forever Feminine’ arguing that women’s magazines are significant social institutions important for exploring wider cultural processes. Most commonly studies have focused on textual analysis and readerships with far fewer focusing on production practices, with notable exceptions (Ferguson, 1983 and Gough Yates, 2003).

The three-year ESRC-funded project from which this research is derived explores the ways in which legacy media organisations are responding to the challenges and capitalising on the opportunities provided by multi-platform production and distribution. It reviews both change and continuity in media firms with regard to job flows: resource allocation, work practices, business models, sources of revenue, content decisions and content composition of media outputs. After introducing the methodological approach and the case study of *Elle UK*, the paper goes on to examine the ways in which the magazine title has innovated by the deployment of a multi-platform strategy particularly around the new business models associated with new platforms. It then looks at how process innovations around organisational structure and work practices have supported this shift. Finally it reviews the content-based innovation, which has taken place in

relation to an increasing role for digital. The latter part of the paper explores the aspects of continuity with the past with regard to a preferencing of the print product. This is related to the ability of the magazine to monetise new platforms and the corresponding influence that this has on content selection and production. Finally, the paper concludes by reviewing the implications for innovation theory and identifying areas for further research.

### ELLE UK

The first UK edition of *Elle* was published in November 1985. *Elle UK* falls into the high price monthly ‘glossies’ category (Hermes, 1995) alongside *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*. The title was acquired by Hearst Magazines UK in 2011 as part of the Hachette Filipacchi magazine division from the French publisher Lagardère which made Hearst Magazines UK the third biggest consumer magazines publisher in the UK with just under 3m copy sales a month under 20 print titles (Halliday and Sweney, 2013). Hearst Magazines UK titles include: *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Country Living* Magazines. The acquisition of the Hachette Filipacchi magazine division by Hearst Magazines UK is in line with the actions of other large publishers including Conde Nast and Time Inc who have significantly increased their share of the market by acquiring smaller or independent titles which is seen to increase market power in luring advertising with volume discounts (Duffy, 2013).

*Elle UK* has a current circulation of 177,094 of combined print and digital editions. The readership is predominantly female and ABC1 with a median age of 28 (for more details, please see Table 1).

Table 1

#### *Elle UK – circulation and key characteristics*

Circulation	170, 286
Digital circulation	6, 808
Combined circulation	177, 094
Female readership	813, 000
ABC1 Female Profile	65%
Median age	28

Source: <http://www.hearst.co.uk/magazines/Elle/5-magazine.htm>

Seven semi-structured interviews were carried out in total with the CEO and Group Publishing Director at Hearst UK and the Editor-in-Chief, Digital Director, Editorial Business Manager, Workflow Director and Content Director at *Elle UK*. The interviews were conducted between July-September 2013 at Hearst UK and *Elle UK* offices in London. Typically the interviews lasted around 45 minutes to one hour. It was also considered important to build up contextual evidence on the case study within which the collection of primary data took place. For this purpose, secondary documentary information was collected in relation to *Elle UK* and Hearst UK from their annual reports and website materials (<http://www.hearst.co.uk/> and <http://www.elleuk.com/>) such as advocacy pieces profiling social media campaigns. This 'grey literature' was engaged by using a critical eye and helped to augment the central findings from the interviews by providing details of *Elle UK*'s circulation and key characteristics as well as providing illustrations of key advertising partnerships and campaigns they had undertaken.

### INNOVATION AT *ELLE UK*: TOWARDS PLATFORM AGNOSTICISM

With regard to adjusting to a multiplatform approach to publishing, Hearst Magazines UK is considered to have innovated more quickly than rivals (Halliday and Sweney, 2013) and *Elle UK* had explicitly engaged with a multi-platform strategy, '*Elle 360*' for 18 months at the time of the interviews. They have built a large online audience surpassing 450,000 unique visitors at *ElleUK.com* and in 2012 became the first UK women's magazine to reach over 400,000 Facebook friends. This strategy has included experimentation with a range of revenue streams including offering '360' advertising partnerships with brands like Levis, Selfridges and Cointreau, launching an iPad edition and mobile site and most recently developing an e-commerce strategy around the online *Elle UK* Beauty Shop. There was a strong discourse amongst all the interviewees of a move towards platform agnosticism and neutrality. As Arnaud de Puyfontaine, CEO of Hearst Magazines at the time of the fieldwork, outlined in 2012:

We are not a publisher. We are an entertainer. Our job is to be able to create a business which is diversi-

fied and will enable a connection with our audience around our different brands...We want the print experience to be one among many other connections and touch points.<sup>1</sup>

The process innovations which have accompanied attempts at exploiting new revenue streams have been similarly wide ranging with a shift to multi-skilling and '360' platform neutral contracts. Key digital appointments have also been made. Content-based innovations have been instituted with changes to the tone and nature of *Elle UK* content. A greater focus on cover stars with a strong social media presence to ensure content can travel across platforms as well as a more informal tone to content distributed online and on social media can be seen as representing this shift.

In the rest of this paper, I outline three key areas through which this innovation towards multi-platform production by *Elle UK* was exemplified: business models, work practices and shifts in the composition and nature of content.

<sup>1</sup> Arnaud De Puyfontaine speaking at 'Hearst Magazines 2012 & Beyond' <https://soundcloud.com/icrossing-uk/arnaud-de-puyfontaine-hearst>

### PRODUCT INNOVATION AT THE ELLE UK: NEW PLATFORMS AND NEW BUSINESS MODELS

Within the magazine sector, there has been significant experimentation with new revenue streams as advertising spends have, to some extent, migrated online. As Küng (2013) notes, innovation and technology are inextricably linked and many of the innovations at *Elle UK* have been led by wider product innovations in the fields of social media and mobile devices. In many ways this constitutes what Bruns (2014: 22) refers to as the ‘push of innovation’ which encourages businesses to “dream up new media practices that make full use of the features available to us” rather than ‘the pull of innovation’ which has led to the “rapid advances in media technology in order to keep up with what we wanted our devices to be able to do”.

With regard to their own product innovation, *Elle UK* launched an iPad edition in 2012 which largely imitates the print magazine, but contains some enhanced content and live links, for example allowing click-throughs to the magazine website (*ElleUK.com*) and also to the brands featured to purchase items featured in the editorial copy. *Elle UK* has recently developed a new mobile product

(see Figure 1) in response to a 70% increase in mobile traffic across the Hearst Magazines UK’s portfolio. *Elle UK* is now, reportedly, receiving 30% of its traffic through a mobile audience. The *Elle* Fashion Cupboard, launched in February 2014, is a responsive mobile ‘pop up’ that encourages users to play with its content. It responds to users shaking their device and allows them to ‘pop’ bubbles to access more content (Haggerty, 7 February, 2014).

As well as developing new products, many of these new business models focus on leveraging the *Elle UK* brand. In terms of exploiting new forms of advertising revenue, *Elle UK* have embarked on multiple ‘360’ advertising partnerships with brands like Levis, Selfridges and Cointreau and Nokia. These have been individually tailored, for example with a Nokia partnership focused on the product launch of the Nokia Lumia 800 handset. Mechanisms used for its promotion included a 360 *Elle UK* ‘edited by the interns’ initiative in 2012 which saw the print and online edition put in the hands of 11 interns (see Figure 2). Nokia sponsored one intern to blog at *ElleUK.com* and tweet. All 11 interns got a new Nokia handset. An *Elle UK* Mix radio playlist was made available to Nokia Lumia users. There was also the use of advertorials (adverts with editorial features discussed in more depth later in this



Figure 1. Elle UK Fashion Cupboard App





Figure 2. Elle UK September 2012, edited by the interns

paper), a twitter party, a LinkedIn seminar and a dedicated Nokia blog. This was repeated for a second time in September 2013.

In terms of building new audiences, *ElleUK.com* has been successful at building up a large online presence with the audiences surpassing 450,000 unique visitors. The ‘brand extension’ prospects of magazine titles are wide ranging and many. These work in a dual way by helping foster the ‘club’ sense of a magazine, by allowing readers to access additional goods or services and also by acting as a promotional tool to attract new audiences (McKay, 2013). In the case of *Elle UK*, the print magazine has been used explicitly to push readers to the website as described by the Editor, Lorraine Candy:

We redesigned the magazine to drive to the website... so we did ‘See It, Love It, Shop It, Share It.’ It uses the language of the web, ‘Share it’ being the main thing, on the cover and throughout the print product...So we drove very actively to the website, so our numbers are huge. They’ve gone up.

These new audiences can potentially be exploited for greater advertising revenues. Online advertising can be used in new and innovative ways including via click-throughs, deep linking and developing shopping partners (Holmes and Nice, 2012).

*Elle UK* has also engaged widely with social media and is regarded to have achieved a number of clear wins in this area. It was the first UK women’s magazine to reach over 400,000 followers on Facebook. The first live streaming of a cover shoot with Kristen Stewart showing tweets of the location, clothes rail and accessories was undertaken in March 2012. This is one of the instances in which a more direct link with financial remuneration could be made as subscription orders were reported to double for that day (Senor, et al., 2013: 88). In January 2014 ‘*Elle insider*’, a subscriber-only club with discounts, previews and events, was launched encouraging subscribers to register their details to receive the benefits. The potential advantage of the kind of data mining enabled by such initiatives was described by Arnaud de Puyfontaine as a “very sophisticated, cross media type of operation where you are talking about display ads, promotions, you are talking about being able to have targeted content”. This, he saw as providing “added value” and went as far as to describe “knowledge about people” as “the new goldmine”.

Linked to this, *Elle UK* are also experimenting with e-commerce and in August 2013 launched an online beauty shop (Cision, August 8, 2013) as their first main foray in this area. This features more than 4,000 products which readers can purchase

for delivery, and is hosted by the online shopping platform ‘The UK Edit’ through a partnership between Hearst Magazines UK and The Hut Group. The magazine’s editorial team produce daily trend and shopping-led content for the store. The Group Publishing Director said, “We see that very much as a service aspect and just a continuation of that whole consumer experience with us”. This is a common theme across the organisation and chimes with Carol Smith (publisher at Hearst US, quoted in Duffy, 2013: 129) who described her aspiration for Harper’s Bazaar to be “a brand you read and a brand you shop”. Exploiting the brand extension prospects of *Elle UK* has led the title into experiments with service as well as new product propositions constituting new territory for a magazine.

The multiple and varied incremental innovations to *Elle UK*’s business model are reminiscent of Bakker’s 2013 study of newspapers in the Netherlands which reported that newspapers have also introduced multiple brand extensions including stand-alone magazines, books, seminars, travel and lectures. As Bakker describes many, and even most, of these innovations have failed. He argues that “there is not ‘one solution’ in newspaper innovation: developing different models and intro-

ducing different models and introducing different innovations at the same time seem to be preferable” (2013: 173).

### PROCESS INNOVATION AT *ELLE UK*: INTRODUCING MULTIPLATFORM WORK PRACTICES

In many ways innovation management means managing complexity (Dal Zotto and Karnenberg, 2008) and organisational structure has been identified as a key success or failure factor in a firm’s ability to innovate within a disruptive environment (Andriopoulos and Dawson, 2009). Firms operating in a stable environment often take a ‘mechanistic’ organisational approach associated with hierarchy, precise defined job tasks and vertical integration, whereas conversely, those operating in a more dynamic environment tend to have a more networked structure of control, and tasks are re-defined via interactions with others (Andriopoulos and Dawson, 2009). Within the media industries, process innovations made in response to the digital challenge have tended to be associated with new staff appointments and integrated newsrooms (Bakker, 2013; Doyle, 2014). In order to support the transition from a sole print focus at *Elle UK* to engagement with a multi-platform strategy, a number of key alterations have taken place regarding organisational structure and work practices within



the title. The turn towards multi-skilling, new key multi-platform appointments and a more flexible structure could be recognised as key process innovations at *Elle UK*.

Compulsory online work at *Elle UK* had been introduced via new '360' contracts which require the majority of staff to work across all platforms. For example, all staff were encouraged to utilise social media, as the Editor explained, "everybody should be able to understand what you are putting out on social media and why you are doing it, all the team have *Elle UK* Twitter on their phones". As a corollary of this expansion of the remit of roles, there was a move towards multi-skilling with all staff being trained to use social media and content management systems as well as an effort to alter the staff culture via motivational work.

When you are talking about the job of a journalist 10 years ago and you compare it to what it is today, and even more, what is going to be tomorrow, this is a different job...All the newcomers have to be platform agnostic and have a kind of a digital type of obsession and passion, which doesn't prevent them from having the pleasure to write a very nice article on specific things – but it is not either/or, it's and/and – and by the way, that is part of the rule for being here.

(Arnaud du Puyfontaine, CEO, Hearst Magazines UK)

There had also been several key appointments including the addition of a Digital Director, News and Social Media Director and a Workflow Director. The Workflow Director was a new role specifically introduced to help ameliorate the challenges of transitioning from a longer lead print schedule to the immediacy demanded by online and mobile platforms. As well as new appointments and a change in the remit of roles from solely print to multi-platform, there was also a semantic shift away from job descriptions with a print focus like 'features director' to the more platform neutral 'content director'.

Staff recognised a shift in the timescales involved with the Content Director remarking that working for *Elle UK* is "closer to working in a newspaper than any other magazine I have ever worked on". Scheduling for web and social media had been formally developed with more regular and convergent meetings of staff, including a large Monday morning conference described as 'like a news conference' by the Editor as well as smaller conferences on Thursday and Friday 'for weekend traffic'. The Editor felt that these were visionary changes for a monthly fashion magazine' with the

main goal being 'trying to align a six week schedule with a daily, with a weekly, daily, hourly schedule' (Lorraine Candy, Editor in Chief). As well as drawing on knowledge of workflow structures from the newspaper sector, the Editor explained the genesis and rationale for the Workflow Director as being inspired by interactions with TV broadcasters facing similar issues:

I talked interestingly to lots of people who had worked in TV programming ... because with catch up and all of that, they'd had to really change their way of working, because a new efficiency was being looked for, and programming was suddenly becoming very complicated. Lots of people said, if you want one team to provide content, you need, in effect, an Operations Officer, and this is not a Production Officer, but it's someone that says a piece of content comes in, it goes here, here, here, this person is responsible for it to here, here, here...so I brought in the first Workflow Director of any glossy magazine.

Aside from the workflow scheduling acceleration being necessitated for new platforms, the increasing frequency of new retail collections reaching the shops or 'drops' was changing timescales available for production of the magazine.

I looked a lot at the drop for, we call it the ‘drop’, the high street... when the whole of fashion changes about every five weeks...What I would ideally like to do is match my print product to what is really truly new now...we need to be pretty fast because we need to match the way the retail sector is working, because I spend so much time with retail experts and they look so far ahead.

This is acknowledged by Moeran (2006: 729) who describes how “the traditional two-season fashion system is giving way to more fluid, continuous productions schedules attuned to customer demands and the technological ability to support them”. Interestingly, the process innovations at *Elle UK* were, in many ways, inspired by knowledge of innovations in other sectors. In this way they could be regarded more as imitations - taking an innovation from another context and applying it in a different field – rather than the first adoption of such an approach (Bleyen et al., 2014).

### CONTENT-BASED INNOVATION AT *ELLE UK*: NEW CONTENT TRENDS

Bleyen et al (2014) identify an issue in mainstream innovation theory related to its narrow definition and they argue for a broadening out of conceptions to include ‘soft innovation’. There is a clear case for this from the evidence generated from *Elle UK* as arguably the content-based innovations could have the most impact on their ability to sustain their readership. As Features Director Collette Lyon explained “a publication in print lives or dies on its tone”. It was commonly accepted across the interviews that the content published on the online platforms had a different tone to that of the print (and iPad) magazine. The more immediate nature of these platforms led to a more informal tone and style. The Digital Director Phebe Hunnicut described how they used the knowledge that their August 2013 cover star, Pixie Geldof, was obsessed with her dog, Buster Sniff, to generate a web story lead with Buster Sniff and focused on profiling dogs of designers and *Elle UK* staff. They then used this to generate social media attention. As she explained, “It’s even, I would say, slightly cheekier than the magazine, like we have more fun... We’d never do a 12 page spread of dog covers in print”. As Duffy (2013) argues, establishing and maintaining

a unique editorial voice is critical to the success of a publication. This sentiment was echoed by the Features Director Collette Lyon who explained, “*Elle* has to sound like *Elle*, whether it’s a 3 page feature in the magazine or a 50 word piece on lipstick on the site”. Nonetheless, tone can be increasingly difficult to maintain as content is dispersed across platform especially those relating to social media and this was acknowledged by the Editor in Chief Lorraine Candy:

You know we had a terrible issue with tone for about a year... I just got rid of the people who didn’t get it and brought in the people who could make the tone, not everybody is good at social media. It was just that sort of sensing who had it and who didn’t and who could make sure it represented the brand. If you get social media wrong I think you are in quite a bad place to be honest.

In terms of the nature of content, an expanding role for celebrity-based content could be identified and whilst this is not novel to the age of digital it does seem to have expanded the favour for this content-type. Gough-Yates (2003) charts an increasing editorial focus on ‘celebrity culture’ within women’s magazines since the mid-1990s. In fact, it was Anna Wintour who first graced the cover of *Vogue* with a



Figure 3. Miley Cyrus on the June 2013 *Elle UK* cover

celebrity, Madonna, in May 1989 which reportedly saw a 40% increase in newsstand sales (Krupnick, 2013) initiating the widespread casting of celebrities as magazine cover stars. In the case of *Elle UK* celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, Peaches Geldof and Lily Allen, all associated with a large social media presence and participation, have been selected for covers over the past year. The cover of the Miley Cyrus edition specifically references her 400 million strong twitter following (See Figure 3).

We picked Miley Cyrus as her first British cover because of her social media following...We had her interviewed to cite her as one of the most influential across social media. I wouldn't have put Miley Cyrus on the cover last year, but this year it felt as if we were in a place where we could reach new audience and test things out. It was a very big selling cover for us. (Lorraine Candy, Editor in Chief, *Elle UK*).

Interestingly the social media opportunities associated with key celebrities may also have been linked to the decision to introduce the first male cover stars initiated with David Beckham in July 2012 and since then followed by Michael Fassbender in December 2013 and Tom Hiddleston in March 2014. These cover stars have seen significant spikes in usage. For example, the use of Twitter to promote

the David Beckham cover shoot July 2012 saw page views of *Elle.com* go up 664% on the day and the exclusive video was viewed more than 6000 times in 24 hours. The *Elle UK* Facebook post was liked more than 22,000 times and received 11,000 comments (Senor et al., 2013: 88).

These innovations in the tone and nature of content in many ways could be linked to a desire to exploit the revenue streams associated with novel platforms. A key advantage of the new role of Digital Director was seen to be the more strategic approach to the website and social media than there had been previously including an understanding of “what pieces of content would help traffic the most” in order that “nobody is doing more work than they absolutely have to, because now we know that it is going... to boost traffic” (Workflow Director, *Elle UK*).

Related to this, as was noted with regard to business model innovations, there had been a growth in the use of native advertising within the magazine. Native advertising, the editorial curation of advertising materials (also known as ‘advertorials’, ‘sponsored editorial’, ‘special features’ and perhaps most ambiguously as ‘creative solutions’) has been identified as a growth area for magazines and is seen to offer advertisers the prospect of a more coherent and targeted campaign (Holmes and

Nice, 2012). As the Group Publishing Director at Hearst Magazines UK Meribeth Parker explained, “invariably you are always going to be stronger if you have got a little editorial ‘fairy dust’ as we call it sprinkled on top”. Seen as one of the most successful techniques of attracting advertisers, native advertising incorporates the product being advertised into the magazine editorial with the hope, as expressed by Gough-Yates (2003: 135) “that the sales pitch would be read as the objective comment of a ‘trusted friend’. Clearly, there is a strong implied endorsement” by the magazine. As McKay explains, “Even if we are prepared to believe that most reputable magazines would not enter into an advertorial agreement with a company whose products were thought to be faulty or fraudulent, there is nevertheless huge influence being exercised over what subjects and themes readers get to read about” (2013, 254). There can be pressure to create a supportive editorial environment for advertisers which is only likely to be heightened with the greater emphasis on native advertising. This had, by no means, escaped the attention of the interviewees and all defended their approach whilst acknowledging the difficulties. As the Editor in Chief described:

Table 2:

*Elle UK – print and digital circulations 2013*

	Jan-June 2013	July-Dec 2013
Total circulation	177,094	172,079
change y/y	-9.81%	-14.2%
Print edition circulation	170,286	166,680
Digital edition circulation	6,808	5,399
Proportion of circulation attributed to digital	3.84%	3.14%

Source: ABCs

I think we have to be very careful about editorial credibility and not trying to sell them something because I don’t want to be in a position where I am featuring particular brands because they make more money for us, because the product will start to look wrong and they will have less faith and we won’t sell as many copies.

Duffy (2013: 117) argues that there is an “increasingly commercial nature of magazines’ digital extensions” with new platforms largely being instrumentalised for commercial purposes as evidence of brand-reach across multiple platforms. This

could be regarded as a concern as it becomes increasingly complex to separate the church of editorial from the state of advertising in digital media (Bell, 5 January, 2014: 1) necessitating a very “delicate balancing act” (Moeran, 2006: 734). Whilst it appeared that *Elle UK* are currently managing to maintain this balancing act, it remains to be seen whether further forays or deepening of their business model innovations will tip the scales.

As has been described, *Elle UK* has adopted an almost evangelical engagement with a multi-platform strategy and has clearly fuelled experimentation with new ways of organising content

production practices and exploiting new sources of revenue. As already alluded to, however, there appeared to be a clear sense of continuity with the dominant revenue streams of *Elle UK* still being derived from the print magazine. Related to this, many of the work practices continued to prioritise the print product. As the Group Publishing Director for *Elle UK*, Meribeth Parker, acknowledged, based on *Elle UK* consumer research to understand the role of the magazine for readers, “print remained very much at the core”.

I will now consider how far the programme of change undertaken reflects a clear innovative shift towards multi-platform and how far there has been continuity with past activities. In particular, I focus on how revenue streams have remained largely derived from print and the impact this had in terms of limiting the success of business model innovation before also reviewing the extent of the process and content-based innovations.

### ‘PRINT AT THE CORE’

#### Continuity in sources of revenue

In terms of the digital product, despite some enhancement of the print copy and the introduction of live links, the digital edition remains largely a replication of the print version rather than being highly interactive or dynamically updating (as with the Financial Times newspaper iPad edition for example). In many ways the adoption of a tablet product was regarded as more of an opportunity to distribute the same content over a new platform than as something that necessitated new content. As the CEO, Arnaud de Puyfontaine, explained:

It is more a channel of distribution rather than anything else. We have got compelling proposition within our magazine which is available on any kind of distribution platform.

As already noted, despite considerable experimentation within the magazine sector, no single business model has emerged to offer a sustainable solution to the digital challenge. In fact, some increases in digital circulations are still significantly dominated by print despite its decline (Sedghi, 2013). This situation is replicated with *Elle UK*, as the *Elle UK* iPad circulation is still dwarfed by the print circulation. In the first six months of 2013, the digital

circulation was just 6,808 compared to 170,286 for the print version (see Table 2). This trend is in line with those found for other ‘glossy’ magazines. It appears that the only magazines which have significant proportions of their sales on tablets are predominantly male special interest titles (including T3, the best performing tablet magazine which constitutes 42.3% of the total circulation) (Hepworth, 2014: 1). The digital edition was thus just 3.84% of the total during the period Jan to June 2013. Compounding this trend, in the latter six months of 2013, this fell to 3.14%. Interestingly, both digital and print circulation figures have continued to fall, albeit not as dramatically as for some titles.

The Editor in Chief of *Elle UK* reflected on the challenges of monetising the new platforms and argued that “the whole world made a massive mistake 20 years ago when we didn’t charge people for content online. We have created an audience that expects everything for free, and that’s a really bad business place to be”.

Research has suggested that magazine readers in general prefer the print product to reading digital versions (Affinity, December 2011; YouGov Sixth Sense, 15 June 2012). This held true, in particular, for women with 45% of those surveyed claiming a “strong affinity for print” with explanations for this preference being around the ‘look and feel’ of prin-

ted magazines and their ‘convenience’ (YouGov Sixth Sense, 15 June 2012). Only 9% of women reported reading online as well as print and only 5% of women reported reading more online than print (YouGov Sixth Sense, 15 June 2012). Perhaps more surprisingly, this sentiment has been echoed by research into young adult preferences carried out in 2013 which found that 47% of 16-24 year olds prefer printed magazines and newspapers to their digital counterparts. Again the top rated explanation for this was because they ‘like to hold the product’ (Voxburner, 18 November 2013). Brita Ytre-Arne’s 2011 survey of Norwegian women’s magazine readers explored this preference more closely, finding that, whilst readers were capable and eager Internet users in many contexts, print magazines had an entirely different meaning for them. This meaning was, in many ways, driven by the context for consumption chiefly associated with relaxation, “at the end of a day, in a comfortable chair, in peace and quiet, with a glass of wine” (Ytre-Arne, 2011: 470). Indeed, magazines have been traditionally the ultimate ‘lean back’ consumption (Young, 21 February 2013). They tend to be associated with relaxation, escapism and entertainment, falling into repertoires of being both ‘pickable’ and ‘putdownable’ (Hermes, 1995: 33). Ytre-Arne’s survey also found

that the materiality of the print magazine constituted an extremely important component of its continuing appeal with respondents identifying appeal for them in the tactile qualities of shape, temperature and weight. It may be that, particularly in the context of a women’s monthly glossy magazine, digital will not become the preferred platform for consuming the core product. Further and related to this, in terms of advertising, it is suggested that advertisers still “believe in the charisma of paper”. (Hepworth, 2014: 1) Without the migration of these revenues, at least in the meantime, the print edition will likely maintain its dominance.

#### Production still led by print

Despite innovation in the work practices and organisational structure of the title, the production cycle remained skewed towards the print magazine. The influence of the print magazine could be seen in how different platforms were resourced. The paid-for platforms (print and tablet editions) housed the monthly cover shoot, which dominated the resourcing of the magazine. It was described by the Editor in Chief as “very, very high quality and extraordinarily expensive to produce”. As she went on to explain, “It’s the most expensive thing I do every month. It takes weeks to set up. It’s a team of

ten people on it”. As a result it was not available in any form online, i.e., without charge. As she stated “you just simply cannot get it online, so we have been very careful to keep that separate”. Further to this, there were multiple instances where the importance of traditional ‘journalism craft’ skills were preferred above those relating to digital. Initially a separate digital team had run the online platforms, but this had been seen as problematic as they were “inexperienced” as journalists, which meant that the tone and accuracy of their copy was seen as inferior and thus damaging to the magazine brand. As the Editor in Chief explained, “You can’t spell anyone’s name wrong. When you don’t have trained journalists who are taught that on day one on any local newspaper or a journalism college...they think, ‘oh well you just spelt a name wrong’. The moment you spell one name wrong, every single piece of anything is rubbish to the consumer... If you can’t get Lagerfeld’s name right, I mean what’s the point of being on this site?”

#### New platforms fuelled by content ‘overs’

As already explained with regard to resourcing, the interviews exposed the continuance of the leading role of the cover shoot. The advent of the new platforms meant that the cover shoot was squeezed



for more value and to build interest in the paid-for magazine. The interviews illuminated the patterns of content production for the online site and social media. This was a tendency for newer (not paid-for) platforms to be fuelled by ‘overs’. As the Group Publisher Director outlined:

You have got the whole package around that cover [magazine front cover shoot]. Obviously then when we do the shoot, we do the video, we create all of those assets at the same time, some of which then are being used straight away, depending on what we are doing, some are being held.

This predisposition has also been recognised in the research of Duffy (2013: 120) who describes the process: “The infinite shelf space of the internet allows magazine websites to serve as overflow sites for archived magazine content as well as for topics and articles that will not ‘fit’ neatly into the print product”. The Digital Director explained how the process was carried out in relation to the cover shoot of Miley Cyrus. She gave details of how during the interview a funny story emerged about Miley Cyrus thinking her apartment in London was haunted. As the Digital Director reported in the past this story would have “landed on the cutting room floor because that wasn’t the narrative of the

piece”. In fact, they ended up running it as a web story which as she described “didn’t cannibalise anything”, but did drive “interest in the magazine that made people want to read it” [the longer piece]. This chimes with existing research which suggests that the use of magazine websites “is mainly designed to complement rather than to supersede the traditional printed product” (Cox and Mowatt, 2008).

## CONCLUSIONS

This research with *Elle UK* has exposed a number of ways in which the title has engaged with a multiplicity of innovations and ‘innovative recombinations’ (Küng, 2013). Led by the push rather than the pull of innovation (Bruns, 2014), *Elle UK* has attempted to extend the existing assets of the print magazine into new platforms and products. These multiple and incremental changes have involved a deliberate shift in management practices prioritising flexibility and multi-skilling and a focus on content ‘which traffics well’ and an increase in native advertising. Despite a public discourse of platform neutrality and a clear programme of innovations, with significant experimentation and imitation, evidence from the initial research suggests the print magazine continues to be preferred over emerging and alternative platforms. This is suggested to be a result of the fact that the print magazine remains the dominant source of revenue despite wider experimentation. This can be related to a number of challenges faced by the magazines sector, and in particular the ‘glossies’, for successfully monetising new platforms.

The findings have a number of implications for the field of innovation studies. The research suggests that in order to provide a holistic account of

how legacy media organisations are adjusting to the disruption of digital, future studies should consider the less immediately visible shifts around process and content as well as business model and product innovations. By taking a more comprehensive view, studies can expose tensions created by multiple and concurrent innovations. The study was carried out at one point in time in an on-going process of transformation at *Elle UK* and *Hearst UK* and thus could be enhanced by further research to understand the complexities of managing a continuous and multi-faceted programme of innovation within a legacy media organisation. Ethnographic studies which elicit greater understanding of the content decisions being made by editorial staff would also be considered fruitful for future research.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With grateful thanks to all interviewees who generously gave up their time to participate in the research. This article draws on the support of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project entitled 'Multi-platform media and the digital challenge: strategy, distribution and policy' (ES/JO11606/1). The project is led by Professor Gillian Doyle (Principal Investigator), Professor Philip Schlesinger (Co-Investigator) and the author (Research Associate) all based at the University of Glasgow. As well as examining transformations occurring in the magazine publishing industry, the wider project also addresses related developments in UK television and newspaper publishing.

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