BEHIND THE SCREENS:
HOW MAGAZINES ORGANIZE FOR DIGITAL SUCCESS

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HEATHER LAMB

Professor Randall Smith, Thesis Supervisor
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled:

BEHIND THE SCREENS:
HOW MAGAZINES ORGANIZE FOR DIGITAL SUCCESS

presented by Heather Lamb,
a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

____________________________________
Professor Randall Smith

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Professor John Fennell

____________________________________
Professor Richard Johnson

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Professor Yong Volz
This thesis is dedicated to the many people in my life who supported me during this three-year journey of graduate school. To the many wonderful friends and colleagues who provided the encouragement, hugs, guest lectures and tacos that sustained me. To my parents and extended family for believing I could do this. And to my children and husband who cheered me on and have had to do without my attention often over the past three-plus years. They also reminded me that I sometimes needed to step away from schoolwork to watch a ball game from the bleachers, go for a family walk or just help with homework. I can’t wait to do more of those things again soon.
I’ve been around the magazine business long enough, about 20 years give or take, that I’ve heard the cry “it’s the end of magazines” more than once. More than twice. First it was when the initial internet bubble burst in 2001 and what had been an exciting land of growing content creation was left in a puddle on the floor. Then came the 2008 recession, which affected an industry still trying to figure out what to do with this whole digital thing. That recession was more dire, and hit magazines harder, because it also had a profound and lasting effect on the industries that advertised in magazines. As a young magazine manager rising through the ranks, I followed the Magazine Death Pool blog with uneasy fascination—who was closing this time, where were the layoffs now—as my own employer weathered cutbacks and two bankruptcies.

And yet, in 2017, magazines continue to chug along. Weaker, yes, and forever changed, but still here, still kicking, still mattering. It’s why I decided to focus on magazines for this thesis. I love this industry. I fell into the magazine world by accident, an exile of the overworked and undervalued world of community newspapers. In magazines I found a collaborative and creative culture that I immediately adored, and that adoration hasn’t abated. I love making magazines, I love the people I’ve gotten to work with while making magazines, and I love the readers I’ve gotten to make magazines for. In exploring how three successful digital magazine businesses work, my greatest hope is that this research might provide ideas and inspiration to help spread that success around. As an industry, magazines need more successes. And I did this, in part, to help figure out the future for the industry that fueled some of the best experiences of my career.
As a faculty member pursuing a master’s degree, I was delighted to experience the student side of education, and to see for myself the amazing work of the Journalism School faculty and staff. Thank you to Sarah Smith-Frigerio, formerly of the Graduate Studies office, for nudging me to give online classes a try and then pointing me in the right direction. Thank you to the talented and creative magazine professionals who welcomed me into their busy offices and then were so generous with their time and candor. Thank you to the Reynolds Journalism Institute for seeing the worth of this research and providing support. Thank you to my committee members—Yong Volz for helping provide structure and reason to my research methods, John Fennell for sound opinions (and great contacts) in the magazine realm and Richard Johnson for opening my eyes to a better understanding of strategic management. My utmost gratitude to my committee chair, Randall Smith, who prodded me along in this process, offered sage advice about the world of business theory and practice, and believed in the value of this research. And to the former colleague who told me that getting a master’s degree as a faculty member is hell: You were right. But it helped to know I wasn’t alone.
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ABSTRACT

Change has dominated the media landscape for nearly two decades as digital content creation and delivery mushroomed from the work of secluded upstarts to that of society-influencing giants. Magazine publishers have found varying levels of success in this digital age. Some have thrived; others have folded. This research aims to determine factors that fuel digital success by examining the internal practices of three successful magazine digital operations. Data was gathered through interviews of editorial staff within the digital organizations of *Better Homes and Gardens*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *New York*, and analyzed using thematic content analysis and applying a strategic entrepreneurship framework.

Most striking to come out of this research was the importance of people. These magazine divisions thrived due to passionate, smart employees and visionary, involved leaders. This builds upon previous research in the field about the value of a company’s human resources and effective leadership. Also interesting was that success was defined broadly—in part as quantitative measures, but also as continually pushing forward, as effective teamwork and as supporting the brand’s value in consumers’ lives. Experimentation was part of the work culture, and also was built into the nature of serving content to audiences in a digital space. And through it all, brand identity was
intertwined in almost every facet of the work, and it fueled strategic goals and employees’ passion.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Time Inc. is now part of Meredith Corporation. Hearst scooped up Rodale. The iconic Rolling Stone is on the sales block. Longtime editors at Vanity Fair, Glamour, Time and Elle bid their magazines goodbye. Emmis Publishing let Los Angeles and other city magazines go for a bargain price. The top magazine industry headlines from 2017 read like a decade’s worth of transformation. With such seemingly cataclysmic change, is it any wonder media writers have been asking: Is this the end of the magazine era?

Although the shifts of 2017 are historic, it is decidedly old news that the publishing industry is undergoing a transformation and has been for decades. Long before the iPads that were supposed to save magazine publishing or the internet that changed it forever, the advent of personal computers had character Dr. Egon Spengler declaring, “print is dead” in the 1984 movie Ghostbusters. And as our society strides ever further and faster into the digital age, there will come a time when the majority of media consumers won’t remember a world before the internet. That time is closer than we think.

The average American is 37 years old (Howden & Meyer, 2011), in other words, born in 1978, and the first web page launched a little more than a decade later, in 1989 ("The birth of the web," 2015), when that average American was 11 years old. By 1998, the Pew Research Center reported that one in five people were using the internet at least once a week for information. A year later, that number had doubled (Gallaugher, Auger, & BarNir, 2001). By 2015, 84% of Americans were using the Internet (Perrin & Duggan, 2015).
With the growth of seemingly limitless, free digital content, much has been made of the demise of print media. In addition to competition from digital sources, the publishing industry has faced challenges as a result of recessions that began in 2001 and 2008 (Sumner, 2012). The newsweekly magazine and newspaper industries were the first to show the negative effects of news becoming free and readily available at the same time the economy was faltering (Sumner, 2012). But divided time also was a factor. Overall, the average daily time spent with magazines declined to 20 minutes in 2010 compared to over four hours of TV and two hours online. The introduction of the iPad that year was heralded at the time as a savior for the magazine industry—providing a digital platform that seemed made for magazines (Inman & Wyke, 2014). But just a few years later, focus has shifted to more portable mobile forms, typically phones (Tomas, 2013). Writing about the digital transition in 2011, Morgan Guenther points out that people now spend as much time on mobile devices each day than the combined time devoted to newspapers and magazines (Guenther, 2011).

Magazines present a compelling, and understudied, research focus. Overall, the industry has fared better amid the economic downturn and increased digital competition than other traditional print media. For instance, in 2008, total magazine circulation and advertising revenue exceeded that of the newspaper industry for the first time (Sumner, 2012). A number of reasons for this have been cited, including a nonunionized workforce and a reliance on freelancers, which provided flexibility in a challenging economic climate (Sivek, 2013). There’s also the notion of what David Abrahamson calls “magazine exceptionalism,” which he asserts is magazines’ privileged position as reflectors and influencers on current the social reality (2007). Many magazines also serve
niche audiences with targeted content, such as food, health or gardening. This specialized content has made magazines more resistant to generalized digital competition, and even increased their cache as consumers turn toward “escapist interests” in their magazine reading (Sumner, 2012). And consumers do still turn to magazines in large numbers. The Pew Research Center’s 2015 *State of the News Media* report reviewed the newsstand sales, subscriptions, digital issues and online traffic of 16 news magazines and found that a couple of these measures, particularly subscriptions, were stabilizing (Matsa & Shearer, 2015).

The ability to innovate is key to success in the modern business environment, and magazine publishing is no exception (Johansson, Ellonen, & Jantunen, 2012). Indeed, magazines have become multi-functional brands similar to many other consumer brands. Magazine titles are among the most recognized consumer brands with magazine content successfully connecting to audiences even as content delivery methods and consumption are becoming digital. He reports that 90% of Americans still read magazines and readership among younger audiences has increased since 2005 (Guenther, 2011). In this climate of tenuous stability amid change and transformation, it is time to better understand what is going on in the magazine industry, specifically, what factors influence successful forays into the digital realm. Such study is important because although much has been written about the outcomes of digital content strategies, little research has been conducted into the organizational factors that drive that success, which could uncover lessons that might be applicable elsewhere in media industries. In their 2012 study of Swedish and Finnish magazines, researchers Anette Johansson, Hanna-Kaisa Ellonen and Ari Jantunen write:
Even though the importance of innovation is clear, most current research in the academy and within the industry, focuses on understanding the outcomes of innovations, i.e. new print or online products (e.g. Ellonen et al., 2009, Cox et al., 2005). However, we still know very little about the organizational factors that drive innovation within magazine publishing. (p. 98)

Increased competition, blurred lines between media types, expanded geographical boundaries and new delivery methods all present challenges to media organizations (Chan-Olmsted, 2006). This explosion of information access has changed the gatekeeper role of media companies while also dividing the audiences’ time and attention. There are more choices, and more competition, than ever before. Now is the time to better understand internal responses to this environment.

The purpose of this research is to examine three magazine brands that have found success in the digital realm and determine internal factors that contributed to that success. Information will be gathered from the staff of those magazines using on-site interviews. The target magazines are Better Homes and Gardens, The Hollywood Reporter and New York. All have traditional foundations in print magazines and also represent a variety of audiences and magazine types. Better Homes and Gardens has created a large digital presence under the bhg.com domain and draws 12 million monthly unique visitors ("Better Homes & Gardens Life in Color," 2017). The Hollywood Reporter grew a niche trade magazine of less than 100,000 subscribers into a digital presence with 15 million monthly visitors (Folkenflick, 2016). New York magazine has built some of media’s most dynamic digital brands, including Vulture, The Cut, Daily Intelligencer and Grub Street, which draw a combined monthly audience of 16 million (Ember, 2016).
In order to examine the internal workings of magazine publishers that are succeeding in the digital age, this research will apply a theory from the arena of business: strategic entrepreneurship. This corollary of strategic management is the application of entrepreneurial tenets such as entrepreneurial mindset and leadership, management of resources and development of innovation, in a strategic manner (Chan-Olmsted, 2006). Typically this theory is used to better understand the performance of emerging ventures, but such perspective applicable here, too, as media companies go through a time of upheaval due to the digital disruption of the past two decades. Indeed, the current media environment resembles an emergent one more common of technology sectors. Such environments are highly uncertain, with evolving business models, unclear industry boundaries and competition from “hitherto unknown players” (Kung, 2008, p. 89), all of which are present in the current media landscape. A strategic entrepreneurship framework recognizes the importance of considering a company’s resources as outlined in Jay Barney’s foundational resource-based view, which looks at physical, human and organizational assets (Barney, 1991), while also getting at concepts such as innovation and entrepreneurial culture.

Strategic entrepreneurship offers a focused lens through which to examine qualitatively the internal attributes of different magazine companies and builds on the foundations of strategic management and resource-based view. Indeed, in examining the contributions of resource-based view research in 2007, Scott Newbert recognized the presence of additional factors beyond the four types of resources described in Barney’s framework:
While it is now understood that it is no doubt necessary for a firm to possess valuable, rare, inimitable, nonsubstitutable resources and capabilities, it is also understood that such a condition is nonetheless insufficient. In addition to possessing these ingredients, firms seeking a competitive advantage must also demonstrate the ability to alter them in such a way that their full potential is realized. (p. 124)

This study will explore how the three companies exhibit characteristics of strategic entrepreneurship and how, specifically, such attributes might play a role in the ways that successful companies realize that potential.

Additionally, a goal of this research is to discover if there is a model of attributes among magazines that are succeeding in the digital age—and to identify factors outside those that are inimitable such as a company’s distinct resources. This study seeks not only to answer the question about internal factors that lead to success, but also identify what other magazine companies can learn from those factors that might help sustain a more robust and thriving magazine industry as a whole. Previous studies of media companies in this area have largely been theoretical, and a number of researchers have noted that scholarly work in this area is sorely lacking (Chan-Olmsted, 2006; Ellonen & Johansson, 2015; Johansson et al., 2012).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

History of Strategic Management

Strategic management emerged from mid-20th century examination of the ways businesses adapt to changing markets, and the work of researchers looking to identify practices that influence a company’s success. The origins of the field date back to the 1850s, and are tied to management changes motivated by the advent of the railroad. Prior to that time, most businesses were family managed. A single general manager oversaw operations and finances, even at large companies. The completion of the east-west rail lines in the 1850s meant the work of a single business could be hundreds of miles apart. This distance demanded new methods of management, and railroads became the first private enterprises in the United States to use modern administrative structures. Swift growth of industrial centers in the post-Civil War era and the industrial and urban boom further spread and deepened these organizational management structures (Chandler, 1962).

In the early 20th century, American industrial management mainly focused on efficiency with Frederick Taylor’s scientific management approach, which he described in 1911 as an effort to improve workers’ productivity by emphasizing incentives and consequences (Kidwell & Scherer, 2001). An important shift in management theory came with Douglas McGregor’s Theory Y, which noted the ways individual workers contribute, specifically that employees will work toward objectives they believe in, and that the presence of such self-direction, or the lack of it, is the responsibility of management and its organizational methods (McGregor, 1960). This point was a vital one
in understanding the strategic development of industries not based around production lines. Business historian Alfred Chandler offered one of the first definitions of strategic management in 1962 after studying 50 large U.S. companies, and it remains recognized today. He said this type of management involves managers setting strategic goals and making choices about how to allocate resources to meet those goals (Chandler, 1962).

Michael E. Porter added to the field with his five forces model in 1979, which emphasized the need for companies to understand the competitive landscape in order to plan successful strategic goals. These forces include competition, the power of suppliers and consumers, and the threats of new companies and substitute products. He contended these forces affect companies within a particular industry in similar ways, and that understanding the industry structure and how it changes is key to planning strategies for success (Porter, 1979). Porter later dissected the relationship between organization and strategy in his 1985 book, *Competitive Advantage*, which examined the organizational factors that allow a company to succeed in a given business environment and supported the idea that there is a relationship between a company’s internal organization and its success (Porter, 1985). Porter noted that a number of business functions typically considered organizational, such as pay, training and decision-making hierarchy, can be configured in such a way as to provided competitive advantage. He also noted that “seeing the firm as a collection of activities makes it clear that everyone in a firm is part of strategy” (p. xviii). And if everyone is part of the strategy, Porter wrote, it’s also important that everyone understand it. This is a vital note in a world of the increasingly dominant “knowledge worker,” who thrives amid a collaborative atmosphere rather than a structured and hierarchal one (Kung, 2008).
From this field of strategic management, Barney outlined the resource-based view, which links the way a company uses its resources to its potential for success (Barney, 1991). This view suggests that as companies evolve, they acquire different resources and develop unique opportunities that lead to competitive advantage. He identified four key resource attributes that feed this—resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate and without substitutes. These resources can be physical, human or organizational, thus recognizing the value of assets such as employees, finances, patents and managers in the strategic process, and that organizational structure and strategy are intimately tied together. “Indeed, a resource-based model of sustained competitive advantage anticipates a more intimate integration of the organizational and the economic as a way to study sustained competitive advantage” (Barney, 1991, p. 116).

Alongside the field of strategic management and resource-based view, researchers developed methods to examine the role of entrepreneurship. One of these is strategic entrepreneurship, which focuses on a company’s organization and ability to innovate (Chan-Olmsted, 2006). R. Duane Ireland, Michael Hitt and David Sirmon were first researchers to develop a list of key attributes of this model in 2003, writing in the Journal of Management. They specified four components that are part of the process: 1) an entrepreneurial mindset, culture and leadership; 2) strategic management of resources including financial, human and social capital; 3) creativity used to create innovations; and 4) the development and execution of competitive advantages. They outline strategic entrepreneurship as actions that seek both opportunities and competitive advantages, and that the combination leads to business success (Ireland, Hitt, & Sirmon, 2003).
Literature Review Leading to Research Questions

Using a framework of strategic entrepreneurship in this research is beneficial because it offers different perspectives from which to examine how magazine publishers act within the shifting digital media landscape. Rather than looking at quantitative measures such as a website’s unique page views or digital revenue, this approach offers insight into how a company achieves those analytics. What are the organizational structures, decision-making processes and goals that drive digital strategy? How do the companies support the value of their brands? What types of managers are in place to drive this thinking? Chan-Olmstead’s 2006 book *Competitive Strategy for Media Firms* offers a number of reasons why these theories are applicable and important for media companies. She advocates that a changing marketplace demands more exploration of media’s business aspects, including organizational behavior, even though media studies historically have been performed from a content and audience perspective.

Looking at magazine success in the digital age and how the internal organizational practices feed such success is a research area not much explored in scholarly work. The majority of the literature in this area has focused on reporting and understanding the measurable changes in the magazine industry, factors such as newsstand sales, website traffic and circulation of print and digital editions. The most up-to-date information of that type appears in industry press, such as *Advertising Age, Folio* or newspapers that cover media extensively such as *The New York Times* and The *Washington Post*, not in academic journals. Using Ireland et al.’s strategic entrepreneurship principles as a guide to explore related research, this literature review will outline previous scholarly works, focusing especially on magazines and media
businesses, in the areas of 1) culture and innovation, 2) management of human resources, and 3) development of brand identity as a competitive advantage, and suggest research questions related to those areas. As a reminder, strategic entrepreneurship involves fostering entrepreneurial culture and leadership, the strategic management of resources, creating innovation and executing competitive advantages. It provides a lens through which to analyze the internal organization and practices of magazine publishers because it focuses on a company’s organization and ability to innovate (Chan-Olmsted, 2006).

**Culture and innovation.** When faced with a changing media business environment, the biggest challenge to companies might not be in acquiring new technical resources or know-how, but in bringing about a change in the strategic beliefs of employees as a whole (Ellonen, 2007). This is especially true in industries such as publishing. Knowledge workers are not best suited to hierarchical organizations because knowledge creation requires interaction and information exchange, which rigid structures can hinder (Kung, 2008). The impact of culture on strategic results is widely acknowledged. For example, the somewhat conservative strategic culture of newspapers has been blamed for that industry’s inability to grasp the potential of the internet (Kung, 2008). Often what are identified as publishing industry challenges such as declining circulation or falling profits are manifestations of something deeper that’s missing in the corporate culture—the ability to innovate, to develop new ideas, to adapt strategy in a changing environment (Sanchez-Tabenero, 2004).

Closely tied to this is the entrepreneurial mindset. Ireland et al. discussed the importance of entrepreneurial culture in that 2003 study in the *Journal of Management*. They defined organizational culture as a system of shared values and beliefs that shape a
company’s structure and employees’ actions. They outlined the properties of corporate culture as: shared basic assumptions that are developed by a given employee group as they learn to adapt to external and internal forces in ways that work well and therefore are taught to new members of the group as the correct ways to react to and think about external and internal forces. They described what entrepreneurial culture looks like in practice:

Committed to the simultaneous importance of opportunity-seeking and advantage-seeking behaviors, an effective entrepreneurial culture is one in which new ideas and creativity are expected, risk taking is encouraged, failure is tolerated, learning is promoted, product, process and administrative innovations are championed, and continuous change is viewed as a conveyor of opportunities. (p. 970)

Key to an entrepreneurial culture is leadership that exhibits an entrepreneurial mindset. These leaders are responsible for developing and nurturing this culture (Ireland et al., 2003). Scholar after scholar drives this point home. Alfonso Sanchez-Tabernero writes, “When we take a closer look at media companies that are struggling, we discover that the usual reason for their woes is the lack of leadership” (2004, p. 31). The spirit of innovation created by company leaders is a way to overcome many of the enemies of change, including fear of failure, skepticism or barriers to innovation and change.

Entrepreneurial leadership is the unique ability to influence others to manage resources strategically in order to emphasize actions that seek strategic opportunities and advantages. Sanchez-Tabernero contends that such leadership is characterized by six facets: 1) nourish an entrepreneurial capability, 2) protect innovations that threaten the current business model, 3) make sense of opportunities, 4) question the dominant logic,
5) revisit questions that seem deceptively simple, and 6) link entrepreneurship and strategic management. Author and magazine scholar Samir Husni writes in his book *Managing Today’s News Media* about the idea and importance of transformational leaders. He notes that the right leader can have a drastically positive effect on the overall business, even if it had been struggling, while the wrong leader can destroy what was a good business (2016). Some other qualities of effective leaders include the ability to listen and discuss, the characteristics of patience, understanding and tenacity, and knowing how to train successors (Sanchez-Tabernero, 2004).

And leaders aren’t relegated to corner offices. Barbara Keats and Hugh M. O’Neill write that the role of mid-level managers is to be increasingly involved in the formation of strategy. What once was the purview of the executive office, an assumption that even guided how information is shared, has now begun to shift and likely will continue to do so (2001). This is part of a changing business culture, and affects overall organizations as it becomes necessary to put the power and information to solve problems in the hands of more employees.

It’s one thing to build a business and organizational structure to meet a growing demand or shifting business conditions. Another challenge is dealing with changes in an industry over the long term. The beginnings of the magazine industry were characterized by “fierce competition and high levels of entrepreneurial risk” (Kung, 2008, p. 42), so in many ways, magazine publishers should be well equipped to deal with a shifting business environment. It’s also important to note that technology and change create opportunities as well as threats. Magazines themselves are the result of changing technology, as printing presses became capable of printing large quantities and the distribution of those
quantities became fiscally viable, and they continued to shift as printing technologies improved to better produce photos and color graphics (Kung, 2008).

Disruption amid changing technology isn’t new for publishing. The 1980s saw a number of advancements that dramatically shifted the production of printed media. These included hardware like the Apple Macintosh computer and software programs such as Aldus Pagemaker, Quark Xpress and Adobe Photoshop (Santos Silva, 2011). The introduction of the iPad in 2010 is another example of this. It was a change that provided opportunity. Within a year, 485 magazines were publishing iPad editions (Santos Silva, 2011) though the labor intensiveness of the process and pricing difficulties remained a problem (Inman & Wyke, 2014) and it has since fallen off as an area of growth (Tomas, 2013).

Another area where technology has spurred change and opportunity is the advent of new magazine launches and globalization as increased competition for advertising from T.V., and later the internet, sapped print ad revenue (Kung, 2008). This segmentation and specialization ended up being a significant benefit for many niche consumer magazines, which have weathered the economic downturns and digital disruption much more successfully than either newspapers or news weeklies (Sumner, 2012). This is shown via a review of the circulation and newsstand sales data of those magazines with circulations of 300,000 or more according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, in which David Sumner sought to determine what types of magazines were most affected by the technological and economic changes between 2001 and 2010. What he found was that there were large gains in circulation in some categories and steep declines in others. The biggest percentage gains came in the gardening sector with a 71%
increase over the decade, while the biggest number gains came in the food and health sectors with increases in circulation of 3.3 million (food) and 1.74 million (health). Meanwhile, the biggest losses came for entertainment and general editorial magazines and newsweeklies, which shed a combined total of over 21 million subscribers. So here is an example of a strategic response to industry pressures having a positive effect.

Writing about organizational change in *Human Resource Management* in 1983, Julien Phillips was one of the first to enumerate the outcomes for organizations that fail to adapt to changing business climates and also describe how that non-adaptability might look. Some of the examples he cited could be descriptions of journalism organizations in the 2000s. For instance:

A company may not evaluate the signs of external change as being relevant or serious for several years. During this time, the company may alternate between trying to determine how to respond and trying to convince itself that the threat so far is insignificant. Gradually the company will take a few tentative steps … that inadequately respond to the challenge. In fact, the initial steps are likely to be halfhearted—defending an established position rather than seeking aggressively to build a new one. (1983, p. 185)

In an article that appeared in *Harvard Business Review* in 1995, John Kotter outlined the eight steps of change management, which included specific strategies and organizational and support factors needed to achieve them. It became a leading model for successful change management. The eight phases are: 1) create a sense of urgency, 2) get the right people and leaders in the right places, 3) create a vision for change, 4) communicate that vision, 5) remove obstacles to success, 6) celebrate short-term wins, 7)
promote a philosophy of continuous improvement, and 8) value successful change by making it stick (Friesen, 2016).

In order to promote creativity and innovation, there are a number of factors in the work environment that will accomplish that goal. Teresa M. Amabile explored these ideas with a number of studies and publications in the 1980s (Kung, 2008). She identified five aspects of the work environment as particularly influential. These are: 1) encouragement in the form of feedback and recognition, 2) challenging, multi-faceted and non-routine tasks that have clear and feasible goals, 3) autonomy, 4) resources of time and money, and 5) teams of diverse backgrounds and experiences. “It’s easy to restrict the search for creativity in the media industry to the realm of content, but creativity is also required in the broader set of activities concerned with how organizations mount a response to their strategic environment” (Kung, 2008, p. 159). Add to this the importance of how companies approach change. Clayton Christensen pioneered the “jobs to be done” approach, which highlights how vital it is that businesses understand consumers and their needs in order to innovate successfully. “Successful innovations help consumers to solve problems—to make the progress they need to, while addressing any anxieties or inertia that might be holding them back” (Christensen, Hall, Dillon, & Duncan, 2016, p. 58) Taken with the principles from Phillips and Kotter, these studies provide a template for what successful change management and culture look like and best practices that media companies and others could follow.

In 2007, Hanna-Kaisa Ellonen specifically explored the role of the internet on magazine publishing strategy. She argued that from a managerial view, the internet is not a threat, but was in fact an opportunity. This is borne out in some of the examples cited
previously as magazine companies have found ways to use the internet as a platform for innovation. She noted different ways that it could be leveraged for competitive advantage, including brand differentiation, reducing costs, innovation, growth and strengthening customer relationships. Her point is that the internet and other disruptive forces can either be threats or opportunities, depending on how an individual magazine company faces them. Those companies with culture and leadership prone to innovation and change will find advantages where those without such structures or culture will see only negativity (Ellonen, 2007).

This leads to RQ1: How do the studied organizations foster an entrepreneurial mindset, culture and leadership, and support and promote the ability to innovate? This question would look at the internal cultural factors, including leadership and change management, that support two of the strategic entrepreneurship tenets Ireland outlined.

**Strategic management of resources.** First it’s important to understand some of the factors that influenced much of the magazine industry’s early decision-making when it came to digital business. The typical magazine business model relies on the majority of revenue coming from print advertising with rates supported by strong circulation. This is a vital factor because it meant that magazines had long discounted subscriptions as a means of keeping circulation high (Hagey, 2013). This created an audience that was accustomed to paying relatively discounted prices for a recurring product. So at the same time those in magazine industry management faced customer resistance to increasing the price of its printed issues, there also was pressure to create new online extensions. And all of this was happening in an environment where the business models and revenue streams were murky, but “delay may mean peril” as first adopters moved quickly to
secure financing and get ahead in a booming digital industry (Gallaugher et al., 2001, p. 473). Even as magazines entered the digital arena, mostly with companion websites, these publishers still looked for metrics to measure the success of such ventures (Guenther, 2011).

To better understand some of the other influencers of decision-making, Anette Johansson and Alexander McKelvie studied the logic used by 246 key decision-makers at publicly traded corporations in the Swedish magazine industry. The goal was to untangle how managers make decisions in the face of uncertainty. They found that the decision-maker and his or her characteristics, such as expertise and education, played an important role in the process. They also found that the organizational context of the entire corporation affected how decisions were made, either with a goal in mind or moving toward an unknown goal (2012). In their study, the researchers noted that it was important to include a wide variety of staff members in decisions since changes weren’t necessarily the sole responsibility of the person at the head of the company’s hierarchy. Looking beyond managers was a lesson from researcher Ann Brill’s 2001 study of online newspaper journalists as well. She tapped into the value of going straight to employees in order to answer questions about how an organization works or what roles or activities are most valued in gathering information from 12 different newspapers about the functions of online staff (Brill, 2001).

This leads to RQ2: What does the organizational structure of the studied magazine digital operations look like? In other words, how do these magazines manage their human resources? It’s expected that the studied companies will not divulge specifics of how they spend money or allocate budget, so this question focuses on staff organization.
Development of brand identity. Another important aspect of strategic management is the identity of the specific media outlet. This is especially crucial in the magazine industry, where developing and maintaining a distinctive identity is key to their existence. Ghislain Deslandes writes that “the media define themselves in order to find an audience, just as they have to find an audience to better define themselves” (2011, p. 32). Brand identity is both the outward expression of a brand as well as the characteristics used by a company to express what a brand stands for (Chan-Olmsted, 2006). It’s also a way to examine the practices surrounding the non-monetary value the publishers create in their relationships with audiences. Coincidentally, these are just the sorts of relationships that the internet offers unique opportunities to build and nourish (Ellonen, 2007).

Brands have been around since the turn of the century when companies such as Folgers and Kraft began putting their names on products that previously had been produced as commodities. Media advertising further buoyed this growth. Branding intensified in the post-World War II era as the consumer revolution led to an increasingly competitive market (Bastos & Levy, 2012) and brands sought to create brand images. In a 1955 article in Harvard Business Review about the symbolic nature of brands and products, Burleigh Gardner and Sidney Levy crystallized this idea, arguing, “People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p. 355). It was just this concept that led to the emergence of brand management as a field of study, which began to take off in the 1980s with a focus on how a company could communicate its brand to consumers, mostly via traditional marketing (Heding, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2009). Media companies, which once might have shunned the label of “brand,” have taken on that moniker in an increasingly competitive environment,
especially where much of the competition comes from non-traditional and less-recognized media brands.

While considering changes in the market, it’s impossible to address the topic without looking at the effects of increased competition, and such competition is the most essential driver for brand management strategy (Chan-Olmsted, 2006). While many aspects of brand management such as brand knowledge or brand equity are external, consumer-driven factors, creating a brand identity is internal. In other words, it is something that can be highly influenced by a publishing company and its managers. Media studies in this area have explored how companies build that brand identity. Chan-Olmsted and Jaemin Jung in 2001 examined how television networks utilized the internet to strengthen brand identity and Gerry McGovern in 2001 looked at the online brand identity process with an emphasis on information (Chan-Olmsted, 2006).

Related to brand identity is a company’s ability to build core competencies as keys to its continued competitiveness (Ellonen, 2007). These competencies then lead to products that form the basis for new business development and can make a significant contribution to the perceived customer benefit, as well as being difficult for competitors to imitate. Add in Christensen’s “jobs to be done” approach and Porter’s five forces model, and the importance of branding intensifies. It’s a way media companies can develop the reputation for creating products that meet consumer needs better than competitors’ products do, which in turn helps companies retain and attract audience. The bottom line is that brand and creating a strong identity are important factors in the long-term strategic process even though they often aren’t easily tied directly to profit in the short term.
This leads to RQ3: How do the studied organizations develop competitive
advantages, and what are the processes used to understand customers, specifically around
the creation of brand identity and brand value?
Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

This research uses the central framework of strategic entrepreneurship to explore the internal culture, organization and values of three magazine companies with successful digital operations.

RQ1: DISCOVER HOW SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL MAGAZINE BUSINESSES FOSTER AN ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET, CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP, AND SUPPORT THE ABILITY TO INNOVATE. This question will explore elements such as mission and vision statements, the digital businesses’ priorities and goals, the language used to discuss success and how change is managed. It also will examine factors such as how leaders in the organizations embody or discuss entrepreneurship, and look into the processes or initiatives that allow innovation and change to take place.

To help understand the foundation that fuels that company culture is RQ2: IDENTIFY HOW SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL MAGAZINE BUSINESSES ORGANIZE THEIR HUMAN RESOURCES. This question will explore the organizational structure of the studied magazine digital operations, including factors such as job titles and job descriptions, how the different roles interact, and what roles and employee characteristics are most valued.

And finally, RQ3: UNDERSTAND HOW SUCCESSFUL MAGAZINES CREATE AND MAINTAIN BRAND IDENTITY AND VALUE. This question will explore the activities businesses exhibit around brand identity and brand value, and how those factors are built, maintained and viewed. It also will dig into how the businesses come to understand consumers’ needs and how to meet them.
The target digital magazine operations for the study are Better Homes and Gardens, The Hollywood Reporter and New York. These businesses were selected because each is a leader in the digital realm and exhibits diverse external strategies, serve different types of audiences and work within varied markets. Here is a brief overview of each of the three studied magazines.

Better Homes and Gardens (sometimes referred to as BHG) is part of Meredith Corporation, founded in 1902, and Better Homes is one of its flagship brands, launched in 1922. Its publicly traded parent corporation, with headquarters in Des Moines, Iowa, now includes 20 subscription-based magazines, multiple local television stations and 140 special interest publications, around the topics of food, parenthood, home and health. Meredith employs 3,600 people full-time and Better Homes magazine has a print circulation of 7.6 million, all according to its 2016 U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission filing (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission form 10-K annual report, 2016). The digital division of Better Homes is centered on its website, BHG.com, which has just under 12 million monthly unique visitors as of December 2015, according to ComScore ("Better Homes & Gardens Life in Color," 2017; Gesenhues, 2013) and has drawn on the content breadth of Meredith to create a vast, information-rich digital umbrella brand. It heavily promotes its content via social media channels (Gesenhues, 2013) and has more recently forayed more extensively into television programming, where it owns a number of local stations (Dool, 2016; Welton, 2016). It is a massive brand and is the third largest consumer magazine in the United States (Top 25 U.S. consumer magazines for June 2014, 2014). Its targeted topics haven’t faced as tough of
competition as news has in the digital information age, and its coverage isn’t as niche as many other magazine brands.

*The Hollywood Reporter* (sometimes referred to as THR) is considered by many in the magazine industry to be a surprise success story. It’s a trade magazine where its main competitor, *Daily Variety*, shuttered in 2013 (Neuhaus, 2015). It was founded in 1930 as a film industry daily trade publication and has changed hands several times in its history (Sass, 2017). In 2010, it shifted from a daily to weekly publication, which also saw a refocus on its website, hollywoodreporter.com, as a place for breaking entertainment news. Under the leadership of Editorial Director Janice Min—who left the role in February 2017—it has become a digital powerhouse with 15 million monthly unique visitors to its website, though it still has a small, niche print magazine circulation of 72,000 subscribers and serves entertainment industry insiders (Folkenflick, 2016). As an entertainment-focused brand, it is in a highly competitive market where many magazines have faltered in the face of plentiful digital competition from online-only content providers (Sumner, 2012). Headquartered in Los Angeles and owned by Eldridge Industries, the company is again for sale as of February 2017.

*New York* magazine is a regional publication that has built some of the most dynamic digital brands in the media industry. It began as a Sunday supplement in the *New York Herald Tribune* newspaper and became a stand-alone magazine in 1968 focused on an edgier reflection of New York news and culture than its main competitor, *The New Yorker* (McLellan, 2008). It has changed hands several times and has been owned since 2004 by the Wasserstein family. In 2006, the company began a digital transformation, partnering with an online restaurant listing company, and in 2010 it
launched its first digital brand, *Vulture*. In the years since, *New York* has added additional digital-only verticals, including *The Cut, Daily Intelligencer* and *Grub Street*, which now draw a combined audience of 16 million monthly unique visitors (Ember, 2016) and have extended the magazine’s reach nationwide. Changing print publishing frequency from weekly to biweekly in 2013 (Sebastian, 2013), and with a print magazine circulation of 400,000 ("Company info," 2016), it has been joked that *New York* is a digital business with a magazine attached (Carr, 2010). This successful shift has been under the tenure of editor in chief Adam Moss. *New York* magazine is headquartered in New York.

One thing that hasn’t yet been discussed is what “success” means. Why these three digital businesses? By what measures are they deemed successful? Looking at a comScore ranking of media properties, there are others, such as Time Inc., that appear higher by a measure of traffic than those studied here ("comScore ranks the top 50 U.S. digital media properties for February 2016,"). But those studied in this research are magazines that come up often as success stories within the industry press, rather than those beset by layoffs or other cutbacks. These magazines also are distinct brands, and understanding the role of brands is one of the goals of this research. The three represent a successful large media company (*Better Homes and Gardens/Meredith*) a successful small media company (*New York*) and a successful digital business within a struggling parent company (*The Hollywood Reporter*). They are geographically diverse and serve varied audiences with varied content. All together, those factors made these three a valuable trio for this study.

The research was executed using qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, conducted in-person and recorded on site at the three magazine offices. This
method, and an overall qualitative approach, was chosen for this research for a number of reasons. First, qualitative methods are useful in research situations where all the values to be studied are not known (Creswell, 2003) and while some elements of strategic entrepreneurship such as “culture,” “innovation” and “leadership” can be used as starting values to explore, it was expected that others would be discovered during the research process. Also, such methods aid the understanding of the data. As Bonnie Brennen writes: “At a basic level, qualitative research strives to understand the traditions, contexts, usages and meanings of words, concepts and ideas,” (2013, p. 14). The in-depth interviews provide rich data to help understand how people within the different organizations use and interpret words like “innovation,” “leadership,” “work culture” and “success.” The qualitative interview approach illuminates experiences and practices, and provides a way to analyze these structures. Semi-structured interviews also offer the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and discover topics that might not have been explored otherwise. This adaptability, as well as the ability to obtain unexpected information, is a key advantage of the interview method (Berger, 1998).

The subjects of this study were staff members within the three magazine organizations. In each case, initial contact was made via an established connection known to the researcher or others in the School of Journalism and then interviews were set up through that main contact. Five individuals with connections to the day-to-day digital operation were interviewed at each magazine for a total of 15 people. The people interviewed were selected to provide a variety of perspectives on the questions, largely based on the judgment of the contact in collaboration with the researcher. They included a mix of staff in management positions and non-management positions, and with
differing functions within the organization. Those interviewed had been employed at their magazine companies for periods ranging from less than a year to 28 years. Of the 15 interviewed, 10 had been with their companies more than five years, and the average longevity was nine years. Longer tenures were most common, with the exception of THR. They also were an experienced group—10 have more than 10 years of experience in the media industry, and several have over 20 years of experience at multiple companies. At Better Homes and Gardens, the subjects were: Sheena Chihak, food editor of BHG.com; Melissa Inman, executive director of BHG.com content strategy and operations; Karla Jeffries, general manager of BHG.com; Brooke Phillips, director of growth for home brands; and Heather Scott, deputy editor of BHG.com. At The Hollywood Reporter, those interviewed were: Meena Jang, digital associate editor; Kimberly Nordyke, digital deputy editor; Tom Seeley, senior vice president of digital media; Christina Schoellkopf, social media manager; and an anonymous editor. At New York, the interviewees were: Nora Barak, editorial engagement editor; Stella Bugbee, editor in chief of The Cut; Kaitlin Jessing-Butz, deputy managing editor of digital; Michael Silberman, general manager of digital; and Ben Williams, editor of digital.

The research questions were sent to all contacts ahead of time and they were provided with a description of the study and consent forms. Every effort was made to assure all interviewees had the necessary information, flexibility and privacy to provide informed consent. Of those interviewed, one asked that their name not become part of the study; the others did not make such requests. An outline of the concepts being explored and sample questions for each concept is in Table 1. For a more complete list of questions, see Appendix A.
### Table 1. Central concepts and related interview questions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>RQ1: Discover how successful digital magazine businesses foster an entrepreneurial mindset, culture and leadership, and support the ability to innovate.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Culture</strong>&lt;br&gt;What adjectives use to describe the work culture here?&lt;br&gt;Are there characteristics that make it unique?&lt;br&gt;How do creativity, innovation and learning factor into daily work?&lt;br&gt;Are there processes or initiatives that encourage this?&lt;br&gt;Are there shared basic goals that all employees in digital follow?&lt;br&gt;How are these communicated to current or new employees?&lt;br&gt;Does the company/digital division have mission and vision statements?&lt;br&gt;How is success defined?</td>
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<td><strong>Leadership</strong>&lt;br&gt;Describe the leadership in this division and in the overall company.&lt;br&gt;What are their most important characteristics?&lt;br&gt;How do they foster creativity and innovation?</td>
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<td><strong>Change management</strong>&lt;br&gt;Describe how change happens here.&lt;br&gt;How is it communicated and implemented?</td>
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<th>RQ2: Identify how successful digital magazine businesses allocate their human resources.</th>
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<td>Describe the department structure.&lt;br&gt;What activities of employees are most valued?&lt;br&gt;What characteristics of employees are most valued?&lt;br&gt;Are there internal systems that are vital to the company’s success?&lt;br&gt;What is single-most important factor in the company’s digital success?</td>
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<th>RQ3: Understand how successful magazines create and maintain brand identity and value.</th>
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<td><strong>Brand identity</strong>&lt;br&gt;What is your individual role in building brand identity?&lt;br&gt;What processes or initiatives support/promote the brand?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand value</strong>&lt;br&gt;How important is it to understand customers’ needs?&lt;br&gt;Describe how you find out what consumers need. What processes or initiatives in place to do so?&lt;br&gt;What processes are in place to assess the state of the industry and competition?</td>
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Interviews were conducted at the sites between Aug. 8 and Oct. 11, 2017, by traveling to the offices of *New York* magazine in New York, Meredith Corporation in Des Moines and *The Hollywood Reporter* in Los Angeles. Individual interviews were conducted in individuals’ private offices or conference rooms and recorded. Following a semi-structured format, the researcher addressed the key questions of culture, leadership, definitions of success, brand value and organizational processes. Following the lead of the interviewee, some of those topics were explored in greater or lesser detail, and many follow-up questions not part of the original interview protocol were asked. A total of 15 interviews were conducted and they varied in length from 25 to 70 minutes. Additionally, there were a few follow-up emails and phone calls to review details such as organizational structure or seek answers to specific questions that came up during the analysis. The interviews were then transcribed.

**Method of Analysis**

A thematic form of content analysis was used for this research. This approach helps make sense of a large amount of qualitative data (Silverman, 1993), and figuring out what things fit together (Patton, 1990). It involves looking through the data for “recurring regularities” to form patterns that can then be sorted into categories, or themes (Patton, 1990). To start the analysis, the researcher read through the transcripts and made notes of 1) recurring words and phrases and 2) specific words and phrases that spoke to elements outlined in strategic entrepreneurship theory. Those were then transferred into lists and reviewed for patterns and similarities. Much data is left in the transcripts, but the researcher believes the identified themes help answer the Research Questions, and this judgment is key in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes also represent
the most significant commonalities among the three studied magazine businesses and work toward laying out a roadmap of how magazine businesses can succeed in the digital age. It also was important to examine the interview data in the context of both this research and the magazine industry itself.

While exploring the main topic of how these companies exhibit elements of strategic entrepreneurship, answers to these questions also will uncover more about the ways magazine businesses operate within this concept. Examining the similarities and differences among the studied magazines in terms of how and if strategic entrepreneurship is exhibited will be beneficial to determine areas of common internal factors and strategy, and also where the companies differ. Altogether, it could provide a model for success that other magazine operations could emulate.

**Role of the Researcher**

There is some inherent bias in the framing of the questions, since they were formulated to address specific elements of entrepreneurship. So, words such as “experimentation” or “collaboration” were embedded in the questions and therefore the answers, in addition to coming up naturally. Additionally, as a magazine professional for 13 years, the researcher came to the interviews with some knowledge and biases based on experience and a point of view that other researchers might not possess. In all cases, every effort was made to simply lead the interviewees through the questions and ask logical follow-up questions without bias.
Chapter 4: Findings

Using a thematic approach to content analysis, words and descriptions from the interviews were compiled into thematic lists after multiple examinations of the interview transcripts to gather the words into categories. Many themes emerged around the research questions. Those are expanded upon here.

Research Question 1: Strategic Entrepreneurship

The interview questions for RQ1 delved into multiple aspects of an entrepreneurial organization, including culture, leadership, the definition of success and ideas around change and innovation. Again, the questions specifically explored entrepreneurial “mindset, culture and leadership” as described by Ireland, Hitt & Sirmon in 2003 in the Journal of Management.

Culture. The interviews elicited a rich set of data and descriptions of the work cultures at the three studied magazines. A number of work culture themes emerged, with similar descriptions being used time and again. Examined as a group, the commonalities can be divided into words that describe either the work atmosphere or those that describe employee characteristics in that atmosphere. Figures 1 and 2 provide a visualization of the most used words within these two categories and Table 2 shows those words as lists. The most apparent theme to emerge about the work atmosphere was the observation that it’s fast paced and busy. Those types of descriptions came up 15 times among the 15 subjects. Pair that with additional descriptions of the workplace as challenging and having high standards, and it paints a picture of these digital organizations as incredibly intense workplaces. Indeed, that matches the observations of the researcher while on site
at these magazine offices. Employees were focused and busy at their computers; the offices were quiet and there was no one standing around the work spaces simply conversing except in break or lunch rooms. This wasn’t seen by employees as a detriment, however. The interviewees described this nature of the work culture with a level of acceptance, and even pride.

That might be because of the major theme that emerged to describe the characteristics of employees, which is that they are passionate and hard working. Among the 15 subjects, descriptions along these lines came up 16 times. Brooke Phillips, the director of growth for BHG.com described it this way:

We work hard, we play hard. Everybody has high expectations of the work we put out and that it needs to be of high quality and on brand and in the voice of the

Fig. 1 Visual representation of work culture words
The varying sizes of the words in this figure show the varying frequency of words used to describe work culture, with the largest ones being used most.
Fig. 2 Visual representation of employee characteristics words
The varying sizes of the words in this figure show the varying frequency of words used to describe employee characteristics, with the largest ones being used most.

brand, but at the same time I feel it’s a laidback culture and people can communicate openly.

This type of comparison—of hard work amid a positive culture—came up at every magazine. Indeed, a second theme to materialize is that of teamwork and a positive, supportive work culture (words shown in Table 2) with the presence of teamwork or collaboration as an extremely common description that was mentioned 12 times, though most notably at *The Hollywood Reporter*. There, every interviewee discussed teamwork as key to the culture and workplace. That organization, which is the only truly news-based outlet among the three, relies heavily on teamwork to get breaking stories out quickly. Kimberly Nordyke, THR’s digital deputy editor, noted that teamwork,
Table 2: Words used by interviewees to describe work culture and employee characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work culture</th>
<th>Employee characteristics within that culture</th>
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<tr>
<td>24/7</td>
<td>all hands on deck</td>
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<tr>
<td>aspire to excellence</td>
<td>authentic</td>
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<tr>
<td>business</td>
<td>care a lot</td>
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<td>business in relation to users</td>
<td>casual</td>
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<tr>
<td>busy</td>
<td>creativity</td>
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<td>busy</td>
<td>collaboration</td>
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<td>challenging</td>
<td>collaborative</td>
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<tr>
<td>competitive</td>
<td>common goal</td>
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<td>effective</td>
<td>culture of creativity</td>
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<td>efficient</td>
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<td>entrepreneurial</td>
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<td>ever changing</td>
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<td>fast</td>
<td>get it done</td>
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<td>fast paced</td>
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<td>focused</td>
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<td>high expectations</td>
<td>little bureaucracy</td>
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<td>high standards</td>
<td>little train that could</td>
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<td>high standards</td>
<td>low ego</td>
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<td>high quality</td>
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<td>need to grow business</td>
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<td>new ideas</td>
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<td>work hard</td>
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<td>work hard, play hard</td>
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collaboration and working toward a common goal are vital to the organization’s culture. Another editor there called it an “all hands on deck” mentality.

At Better Homes and Gardens, another interesting factor cropped up about aspects of the work culture and how the company and managers fostered a positive atmosphere. The specific idea of health/wellness and work-life balance surfaced during most of the interviews, with many mentioning group- and team-building activities such as outings to the State Fair or volunteer endeavors with Habitat for Humanity. The idea of coworker friendships and quality relationships was common. Heather Scott, the deputy editor of BHG.com described it this way: “I actually enjoy coming to work because I like what I do but I also really like hanging out with these people. I think in many ways we as a team are more productive because of that.” Further, Scott noted the importance of attitude in general at BHG. “If you do really well on paper but you’re hard to get along with and that roadblocks projects or influences other departments, then that’s deemed unsuccessful.” This type of collegial atmosphere came up at the other sites, too. Michael Silberman, New York’s general manager of digital media, specifically noted that the magazine doesn’t hire “jerks.”

Another theme was that innovation was encouraged in these work cultures. This type of description came up eight times, though most repeatedly at New York. Silberman described it as “a culture of invention and innovation” with a “desire to find new ideas, stories that folks haven’t covered before.” Kaitlin Jessing-Butz, the deputy managing editor of New York digital, said innovation was part of the magazine’s ethos. Ben Williams, editor of New York digital, related it to the employees. “People have to have a bit of an entrepreneurial spirit, not in the business sense, but in the sense that they can
make things go themselves,” he said. Innovation will be explored further in a later section, but it’s notable here that the theme came up as a description of the culture.

At all three sites, interviewees said there was no formal method of communicating culture to new employees beyond any onboarding done by human resources departments. Instead, those new to the organizations pick up the way of working by observation, attending meetings, talking with colleagues, or, jokingly, “osmosis.” Sheena Chihak, food editor at BHG.com called it “a learned thing.” What was clear, however, was that those who didn’t fit culturally into these workplaces didn’t stay. Stella Bugbee, the editor in chief of The Cut at New York, noted that when hiring she’s looking for people who really want to be there because it’s a hard place to work with a lot to do. “So if you like what you’re doing, then it’s not a burden,” she said. Further: “It’s in no one’s interest to have anyone who’s not 100% into it. They won’t be happy.” Similar sentiments were echoed elsewhere. At The Hollywood Reporter, interviewees noted that those who couldn’t keep up with the pace or the demands didn’t last long. An editor there said:

I think there is no way to describe to someone that you might be working alone on a Friday night and George Michael might die and you have to write it up and also call his rep and also call the police. So while not knowing who George Michael is, you’re going to have to write an obituary for George Michael.

At BHG, interviewees talked about the need for a go-getter personality to mesh with the busy atmosphere.

While at the same time the pace or intensity of the culture might lead some to leave the organizations, that very culture also was why some people stay. Karla Jeffries, the general manager of Better Homes and Gardens digital, noted that “There used to be
eight and 10% raises and promotions every year, now it’s more like 3 to 4 percent every couple of years and yet there isn’t turnover because people like working here.”

**Leadership.** The data about leadership can be separated into themes of actions and characteristics, with many interviewees discussing the observable actions of leaders in their companies. The greatest theme to emerge here are those words that describe supportive, attentive, involved leaders who provide praise and feedback. The idea of leaders as people who push up their sleeves and do the actual work came up 20 times. A list of those descriptions can be found in Table 3. Some examples of this type of leader include Tom Seeley, senior vice president of *The Hollywood Reporter* digital media, who has a desk in the newsroom among his staff in addition to his office. Or Bugbee, herself a leader at *New York*, who talked about staying connected to the work by still knowing how to “put up a post or write a caption.” In addition, there were multiple mentions of words like praise, respect and communication when speaking about how leadership worked with employees in the digital divisions.

Another theme to emerge was about the role of leaders in pushing the business forward, and how their energy set the pace and tone for the organization. It also was notable that at each magazine, the top leaders’ names came up multiple times. At *New York*, all but one of the interviewees mentioned editor in chief Adam Moss by name as a driver of the culture and business. Bugbee talked about his involved leadership this way:

Adam is incredibly involved. When I first started working here on the web I couldn’t believe how much time he put into it, and then for a short stint I was working on the magazine for someone else and there he was constantly working on the magazine, and I was like, I can’t believe this man has this much time and
Table 3: Words and phrases used by interviewees to describe leaders

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<th>Thing leaders do</th>
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<td>accountable</td>
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energy to put into all these details and make every person feel like he was paying attention to what they were doing.

At Better Homes and Gardens, interviewees talked about the role of Stan Pavlovsky, the president of Meredith Corporation digital, promoted in August 2016 from Allrecipes, with lighting a fire under the big company of traditional brands and transforming how the work is done and how people communicate. At The Hollywood Reporter, former Chief Creative Officer Janice Min’s name came up multiple times along with current Editorial Director Matt Belloni as responsible for the direction and success of the digital operation and its continued energy. Words such as relentless, challenging and motivation were common in descriptions of their leadership.

Turning to the characteristics that describe leaders, a frequent theme was that of open and approachable. Melissa Inman, the BHG.com executive director of content strategy and operations, describes it this way: “I think we have a management structure today that is open to hearing those things,” she said, though she added that she has never felt like she couldn’t speak up for something she believed in.

Innovation and change. The third part of RQ1 deals with how an organization uses creativity to promote innovation. Its approach to change is part of that, so answers related to change are included in this section as well. This was the area that saw the most disparity among the three studied magazines, including differences in how innovation and change were defined. For example, at New York, answers related to innovation tended to focus on external outputs, on editorial innovation and advances in the digital user experience, while at Better Homes and Gardens, discussion along these lines was focused more internally on process, workflow and communication tools. This might be because
BHG.com had very recently, in July 2017, undergone a reorganization that dramatically shifted its organizational structure. At *The Hollywood Reporter*, that website’s focus on speed meant change and innovation weren’t top of mind the same way they were at the other two sites except for those innovations that helped it operate more quickly and effectively. Another point of differentiation was how the size of the organizations affected the ability to change. Silberman notes that *New York* is a relatively small company, which allows it to make decisions related to new initiatives easily and that the company often starts by “building the smallest things we can to get this out into the world as quickly as we can to see if it’s got some traction.” Meanwhile at BHG, Inman noted that innovation doesn’t happen as often as she would like due the existence of corporate layers. But she added: “I think we do it in little ways. And we are as an organization taking an approach that’s more of an iterative, testing approach so that we can look at how we can do small lifts.” Chihak from BHG said they frequently try things “and see what sticks” and if it doesn’t work, they move on. “I’ve never felt afraid to try something that anything too terrible would come from failure.”

Looking for themes in this area, one that emerges most strongly is about communication and transparency being a means of change and also one that helps support it. Inman at BHG talked about the spirit of asking “why” that has emerged with the new digital leadership, and that it has been a catalyst for change. “I think that sense of questions and curiosity is probably stronger now throughout our organization. And I think it’s because we finally have leaders in place that welcome that attitude,” she said. Scott at BHG added: “I think the good managers know that and do a pretty good job of
communicating change as they can and helping department transition, in part because it’s in their best interest to.”

Another theme was the “constant” nature of experimentation, innovation and change. And it became clear this change was both as a result of external forces as well as internal choices. Silberman at New York noted that all media are facing the prospect of change, whether they like it or not. “It’s a drive for constant reinvention. There certainly is plenty of external pressure that forces you to think that way.” He noted that when he started at New York in 2007, disruptive external forces, such as Facebook expanding beyond college campuses and Twitter, were still new. Such changes affect business strategies of the work that publishing companies do as well as the very existence of jobs. Scott from BHG calls publishing “a volatile business” and said everyone knows that’s just part of it. “You never have complete job security in publishing,” she notes. Chihak from BHG joked that “being through so many layoffs and reorganizations, I used to find it life altering, but now it’s just a Wednesday.”

Along with the idea that change as an external force is embedded into the landscape of modern journalism, so is the idea that change is inherent in the processes of producing and sharing stories in a digital arena. With the ability to see results almost immediately, tweaking and testing is part of producing digital content. Phillips at BHG said her organization tests and tries a lot of new things, whether that be new platforms, new products for efficiency or so-called A/B versions of sell lines. “We as audience development and a digital group are really, really heavily reliant on the data we have,” she said. This is especially true in areas such as e-mail newsletters or social media, which by nature are reactive and fluctuating endeavors. Christina Schoellkopf, the social media
manager at *The Hollywood Reporter*, noted that social media is always changing as new platforms demand new approaches, and Nora Barak, the engagement editor at *New York*, said change, innovation and experimentation are “engrained” in everything she and her team does. “I always call social media mini pieces of journalism. I have freedom to experiment. I think that exists in all of journalism but just at a slower pace.” Phillips at BHG noted that change is just part of the business, and said that:

> I think if you’re in digital you have to be flexible and willing to change, and those are the types of people that we need, and if you’re not handling the change well, maybe this isn’t the environment for you.

By nature editors strive to stay on top of things and see the changing world pretty clearly, notes Bugbee from *New York*. “Maybe now it’s video, maybe now it’s podcasts. It’s adapting to where the audience is and how to tell stories in whatever format that takes.”

Without a doubt, there also was a theme of unease around change, with interviewees commenting that no one really likes change, or describing change as painful or scary. When talking about change, an editor from THR and another from *New York* noted that they are too busy to dwell on change, but at the same time noting that it’s frequent.

**Success.** How a digital magazine operation defines success for its employees is an important part of culture in that it guides employees’ activities and actions. It also says something about what a business values. When asked about this, the descriptions fell into two major themes, success as quantifiable results and success as less measurable factors, such as quality. Traffic, analytics and metrics were mentioned by far the most as
measures of success, and the terms came up multiple times at each organization, 13 times in the 15 interviews. In addition, there were broader definitions of quantitative measures that get at slightly more immersive experiences such as engagement and loyalists. For instance, Phillips from BHG said:

From a company standpoint I would say the more people we can get exposed to our brand and be loyal to our brands and keep them coming back and relying on us for their information and expertise is the ultimate goal.

At Better Homes and Gardens, there was much talk about actual benchmarks within their “objectives and key results” goals that were widely known among the interviewed employees and provided guidance about what success looks like. Additionally, there were mentions at all three publications that success equated to revenue and initiatives that brought in ad dollars. Seeley from THR said that traffic is a measure of success, although he noted that he’d rather have record revenue than record traffic. He said that traffic doesn’t matter if you can’t sell it. In a note about strategy, this type of observation happened elsewhere, too, with Inman from BHG saying traffic was “cheap” because any organization could pay for it, but that more immersive experiences to drive ad revenue were more important.

Beyond the quantifiable factors, a theme emerged that success meant quality and doing things that were good for the brand. At Better Homes, an editor said that if it’s something disruptive, that’s a success. At New York, one editor noted that if they are making conversations happen, that’s a success. Williams from New York summed it up this way: “Obviously there’s business targets, traffic and revenue and followers and
subscribers, and those are all important. And then there’s quality and that’s more intangible.” Schoellkopf from THR said:

Of course you want a story to stick and that people are going to read, but I think we do it in a way that’s respectful and appropriate. I’ve never felt like we published a story for the sole purpose of getting clicks.

Considering both factors—the potential for traffic and revenue as well as the fit for the brands—was a theme from all three sites.

*A note about mission statements.* The guiding force of a corporate mission or vision statement did not emerge as a strong theme from this research, with most interviewees at all sites being unable to recollect the words of their company’s or division’s mission. Or, in the case of *The Hollywood Reporter*, know if the company had one. That said, many spoke passionately and naturally about their organization’s mission in a more organic way—what the company valued, what the brand represented. They could talk at length about the brand’s identity or audience, while also unable to recall the exact words of a mission statement, though it might be printed on company posters or water bottles. Both *Better Homes and Gardens* and *New York* have mission statements, and at *New York*, it was a fairly new entity. Silberman from *New York* noted: “I think if you talk to just about anyone in the company we’d be able to say some stuff about the company about values and what we thought was important,” but he continued, “we didn’t put it out there in a formal way and put it up on the wall or anything like that.” At THR, interviewees spoke about what the brand represented, and how they worked together to further that.
Research Question 2: Organization

As a way of understanding the foundation that fuels company culture, leadership and values from the first research question, RQ2 focuses on the organization of the human resources at the studied magazines. Data for this question was gathered during the on-site interviews, and in a couple of cases, with follow-up phone interviews or emails to review the details.

Organizational structure. The digital operations of the three magazines are part of vastly different companies so it’s not surprising that the structures were different as well. At Meredith Corporation, of which Better Homes and Gardens is a part, the digital groups had very recently undergone a reorganization—in July 2017, just a few weeks before the on-site research visit. It shifted structure from activity focused to brand focused. Previously, for instance, all the email newsletter teams for the Meredith brands were grouped together, or all the social teams were grouped together. Now those teams are organized by and report up via a brand. So the newsletter, social, SEO, registration and video teams that work on BHG digital report to a BHG digital general manager, Karla Jeffries. The goal of this, multiple interviewees said, was to become more brand focused than channel focused and share information more easily and frequently among those working on a brand. The brand teams meet daily and the activity, or “channel,” experts among brands meet weekly to promote communication.

At New York, there is an umbrella structure for the overall New York brand that encompasses some cross-brand activities, such as social media, copy editing, fact checking and web production, as well as individual teams for the seven branded digital verticals: Vulture, The Cut, Daily Intelligencer, The Strategist, Grub Street, Science of Us.
and Select All. There is an editor of digital media, Ben Williams, who oversees all brands as well as the cross-brand activities, sharing dual reporting with the company’s general manager of digital media, Michael Silberman. The size and internal structures of the brand teams vary, with Vulture and The Cut being the biggest with 25 to 28 people on staff each, Daily Intelligencer with about 15 on staff and many freelance columnists, and the others with two to four each. Then the social, copy, fact-checking and web groups are all about two to six people each. All told there are about 100 people in the digital organization.

At The Hollywood Reporter, the organizational structure is focused around the need to monitor constantly the virtual newsroom and the flow of stories. There are different editorial roles, such digital assistant and associate editors, who either focus on producing and publishing content on the website or on social. So while the digital editors have differing functions and key responsibilities, such as long-term planning, executing print content on the site or managing content traffic, almost all rotate through in some capacity as the “newsroom lead” who is the person in charge of making sure breaking news stories get published quickly and efficiently, within minutes of being completed by the beat writers, or, during the weekend shift, writing those breaking stories themselves. They report to the senior vice president of digital media, Tom Seeley. All told, there are about 23 in digital, including editors of specific content areas and a few in New York, social media editors, and those who oversee functions such as video, photo and copy editing.

Internal processes. Turning to themes regarding internal processes at the three digital organizations, the most frequent was that of communication. Every interviewee
talked about communication, which seems logical given the themes of collaboration and teamwork from the culture findings in RQ1. In discussing communication, there were two recurring themes: These businesses used meetings of all types to keep broad communication flowing, and they used instant messaging programs, most notably Slack, to communicate about the actual work minute-by-minute. It was quite obvious these communication channels were valued for both functions—the ability to get everyone on the same page and informed about strategy, goals and progress, and as a means of working quickly and efficiently.

In terms of the first point about broad communication, all three publications had some sort of all-company or all-digital meeting on a regular basis. At Meredith (BHG), this was a monthly occurrence with an all-digital town hall meeting that included those from the Des Moines office as well as those in New York, Seattle and other satellite locations. This was something the new head of digital, Pavlovsky, started after he moved into that position in summer 2016. New York also has started having biannual town hall meetings where company leaders share what’s new and how the company is doing. At both BHG and New York, employee recognition is part of those meetings, with spotlights on work well done or new employees. In talking about these larger meetings, openness was the word that came up most frequently. Inman from BHG said “there’s a real desire to have that openness” because it helps everyone feel bought in.

Then there’s the communication aimed at getting things done. At BHG there’s a daily “stand up” meeting for its editorial staff, including newsletter, SEO and social teams, and they’ll share what’s doing well, or not, what’s new and what’s ahead. It’s a five- to 15-minute meeting where the point is to “share the information and get on with
your day,” Scott said. There also are weekly meetings among the function groups, including newsletter, video, SEO, etc. At New York, a Monday morning meeting for all of editorial allows everyone to share their plans for the week, and at THR, a morning news meeting and weekly digital meeting are used to share information, and, in the case of the weekly meeting, touch base with the team and head off conflict, Seeley said. The interviewees all noted that such communication was informal, which allowed for sharing and made individual employees feel empowered.

Also apparent is that such communication is especially vital to a digital workflow. An editor at THR said the “importance of communication and processes is that it helps people move on to the actual work they need to do” and noted it builds group strength to handle whatever comes up. “There is sort of a sense of hey, I know you’re not an expert, but Trump’s on Hannity tonight and if he says something crazy you’ve got to write it.”

This constant communication is important for content reasons, too. And this was something that came up at New York as well. The editors used Slack and other IM systems to share social headlines, tweets and the like before posting to assure those elements were as strong as possible. But also because, as Schoellkopf from THR said “a screenshot lasts forever” so she appreciates the ability to review tweet or post ideas with managers. “I’ve even asked a digital leader if a gif was appropriate,” she said. Bottom line: Communication and collaboration were vital—and were recognized as vital—at these companies. Further, this is acknowledged up and down the management hierarchy, evidenced by the overriding theme of openness. Williams from New York said collaboration is “part of the company’s bones.”
**Valued employee characteristics.** Looking at what companies value about employees is part of RQ2 because such emphasis says something about how a company views and allocates its human resources. Here, the answers can be categorized into three buckets: skills, attitude/personality and “the way we work.” In that first bucket of skills, smart was the biggest theme and that description came up at every organization in multiple forms including well educated and knowledgeable. Chihak at BHG linked this to a need in digital to be nimble, fast and responsive, which is easier when individuals deeply understand the content area. Another theme that emerged in this area was business understanding, specifically how the pieces fit together, how monetization happens, and how product development works. Additionally, and most notably at *New York*, were the multiple mentions of the importance of truly understanding the brand and voice. Williams said, “It’s really impossible to explain the voice, the brand and the right way to exist on each platform to someone who doesn’t already have that common sense.”

Turning to valued attitude and personality traits, hard-working and self-starter were dominant themes here, mirroring the findings about work culture in RQ1. Chihak from BHG called it a “go-getter” personality. “I’m not just going to wait and see, I’m going to do this and see how it works out or I’m going to find a project to work on if my workload is light right now,” she said. An editor from THR said employees need to be able to “jump into the fray. Passivity won’t get you anywhere.” And Jessing-Butz from *New York* said employees need to be able to pivot quickly “especially in digital and especially with how crazy the world has been the last two years.” This theme of being able to do, at Nordyke from THR said, “whatever is thrown your way” was a major theme of what interviewees said about characteristics the company values. Also frequent
were comments about the need for humor, being friendly or having a positive attitude. Bugbee noted that when hiring she looks for competence, humor and hard-working, driven people. “People who really want to be here because it’s a hard place to work,” she said.

The third bucket, describing the way the company works and fitting in, found creativity and collaboration being main themes. Echoing sentiments from RQ1 and discussions about meetings, collaboration played a role here, too. Phillips said the collaborative mentality at BHG was so important with “people having great ideas and bouncing them off each other.” Jessing-Butz at New York said they “expect people to be very collaborative and to be very creative.” That second word, creative, was another theme in the area of “the way we work” employee traits. Across the board, having great ideas and being creative were valued.

Digital commitment. At a couple of the studied organizations, another theme came through and that was the value of digital to the company overall. This was most striking at New York, where the company’s commitment to the digital product came up during several of the interviews. Silberman noted the early focus on digital revenue was a result of the digital side of the business starting as a joint venture between New York’s owner at the time, Primedia, and Cablevision, so the company didn’t give away digital advertising like many other media companies did. “Unlike elsewhere where the digital was sort of thrown in to the print, that wasn’t an option because the joint venture needed to have its own revenue,” he said. And that commitment continued. Moss, the magazine’s editor in chief, was mentioned numerous times as a fervent proponent of the digital business. When the magazine reduced publishing frequency from weekly to biweekly in
2014, the stated goal was to shift resources from print to digital, and Jessing-Butz said it “was stressed that it was a way to reallocate resources, that it wasn’t about the company cutting costs” and that they were “doubling down on the commitment to digital they’d always made.” When Jessing-Butz started in the company’s digital division in 2007, there were 20 to 25 people in digital and now there are over 100. “There are individual teams that are the size that the entire staff was at the beginning,” she said. Barak, who has been with New York for just a year, said the difference in its commitment to digital is “palpable.” “No one has to be the ambassador of social media or the ambassador of the website. Everyone has bought in that this is the priority, and print has followed,” she said. Further, she noted that the print magazine at New York is seen as the supplement to digital, rather than the other way around.

This theme about the commitment to the digital business came through at the other sites as well, though not as strongly. In answering a question about the difference between print content and online content, an editor at The Hollywood Reporter clarified, “online content is all of our content.” Meena Jang, an associate editor at THR, said she has seen a shift over the past couple of years to invest in content for the site and not “hold” stories for print, but getting them online first. She said:

Now they're getting into a system of, ‘Okay, let's post it online because we need it now, but how can we expand it for print?’ I feel like the shift is focusing a lot to, ‘How can we make digital better?’

The seeds of this transition in approach go back to Janice Min, who led editorial from 2010 to 2017. “When Janice came our web traffic was miniscule compared to what it is now; it was almost like an afterthought,” Nardyke said. Seeley added that there’s an
agreement that digital media is vital and that “there’s a real understanding that if we don’t figure this out the whole thing might go away.”

**Research Question 3: Brand**

This question focused on how the studied digital magazine organizations supported and extended the value of the overall brand as well as their approach to understanding their consumers.

**Importance of brand.** A resonating theme at each location was that the underlying brand was vital and provided a foundation for what they were doing digitally. At *New York* and Meredith (BHG), the groups are even organized around brand, with Meredith undergoing the recent reorganization to make its teams brand-focused. Talking about “the brand”—whether its voice, value to consumers or position in the marketplace—was an overarching takeaway theme of this research. In a way this makes identifying specific parts of the interviews difficult because it was woven throughout them in answers to multiple questions.

In talking about the relationship between achieving revenue/results and the brand at *Better Homes and Gardens*, for instance, Inman said “brand guides everything” and Phillips echoed that “brand is front and center.” Seeley at *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that the brand influences what kinds of advertising they will or won’t pursue, and said they are a premium brand and certain kinds of sponsorships are just off the table. The *New York* brand identity set a standard for innovation, overall tone and aesthetic, said the interviewees there. Schoellkopf at *The Hollywood Reporter* summed it up this way:

When I first came on my boss and I had a conversation about what's more important, getting followers or staying on brand? And at the end of the day it’s
both. Not being consistent with our brand isn’t worth gaining followers, but it’s a matter of finding that balance because it is our job to increase engagement, too.

Related to the importance of brand is the necessity of understanding the needs of the audience. For the three magazines, determining those needs came down to two themes: research and having a clear brand identity. As noted earlier, developing and maintaining a coherent definition of the brand and its role in consumers’ lives is a driving force of content. Digital content delivery provides an opportunity to measure how consumers interact with media in ways that simply aren’t possible with print. Analytics emerged as a key way that all three publications assess what the audience wants. Additionally, at Better Homes and Gardens, for instance, they also used tools such as site surveys and polls to get reaction to new website functions and features, and were developing analytical tools that would allow them to slice and dice the data to better understand it. Areas such as the audience development teams provide feedback, said Jessing-Butz at New York. And audience research was noted across the board as a source for understanding audience, especially before launching a big initiative. Inman at BHG also cited her frequent use of the company’s in-house research and insights team as well as proprietary market research.

**Relationship between brand and employees.** Interviewees were all able to discuss their part in supporting the overall brand value and identity, and their answers varied depending on their main functions within the organizations. The most prominent theme had to do with content, especially the brand’s voice and perspective. At New York, Bugbee noted that she’s “trying to carve out a sound, a point of view, that’s clearly ours” and Williams said he sees his job as “doing really great work that gets read by as many
people as possible.” Inman at Better Homes talked about the importance of being able to express the brand differently on varying platforms with differing audiences. “So what the BHG brand is in print is different from the BHG brand on BHG.com, which is different than what it is on social, different on Facebook and Instagram,” she said. Bottom line was a clear understanding that what they do supports the overall brand. Chihak at Better Homes and Gardens summed it up this way: “For me it’s all the little things that add up to that, so it’s making the slideshow that people are going to want to click on 20 times, keeping people on site, or writing that buzzy language for social that really gets you to click.”

One striking theme to emerge in the relationship between the brand and employees is the brand’s positive impact on retention. This came up numerous times with interviewees noting with pride their work for the particular brand. Phillips at Better Homes said a belief in the brand is important and that it fuels the perseverance needed to continue to pour time, effort and continuity into what is a busy job. She said: “I love our brands. It’s me. I’m a woman with a family and a home and it speaks directly to who I am as a person.” This also came up at New York where Williams noted that what they do is relatively unique in the industry and that he thrives on the opportunity to do smart, intelligent, ambitious journalism of general interest. “There aren’t actually that many places that do that type of journalism,” he said. “There’s always something new. There’s always a new challenge.”
Chapter 5: Discussion

This discussion uses the theory of strategic entrepreneurship to help examine the data gathered about the internal workings of magazines that succeed digitally. As a reminder, this theory from R. Duane Ireland, Michael Hitt and David Sirmon includes these components: “an entrepreneurial mindset, an entrepreneurial culture and entrepreneurial leadership, the strategic management of resources and applying creativity to develop innovations” (p. 963) and contends the combination of these components lead to company success, defined as wealth (2003). But before beginning the discussion, it’s important to note that while strategic entrepreneurship provides a theoretical foundation for this research, the ultimate goal wasn’t to measure how well the studied magazine digital divisions exhibited or did not exhibit elements of this theory. Rather, strategic entrepreneurship provides an approach to guide the exploration of the three digital organizations, with the purpose of creating an outline of internal elements that help the businesses succeed. Some of those factors might be duplicable, and some might not, but either way, the goal is to work toward a model for success that other magazine digital operations could emulate. With that in mind, this discussion will address three main points of success at these magazines: people, structure and brand, while also discussing where these elements fit into the core strategic entrepreneurship tenets of culture, leadership, innovation and resources.

People

**Culture.** Ireland, Hitt and Sirmon provided this guidance about what an entrepreneurial work culture looks like. It: 1) encourages new ideas, creativity and risk taking, 2) tolerates failure, 3) promotes learning, 4) champions product, process and
administrative innovation, and 5) views continuous change as opportunity. The research questions addressed these elements and elicited some of the most robust data of the entire study. However, one of the challenges of examining work culture is how interrelated it is to many other factors in this study. “Work culture” is a huge and relatively vague term, so it’s no surprise that almost every element of the research could be rolled up into this area. Questions about success, communication processes and leadership, for instance, all touched on culture, at least a little bit. To bring focus to this area, the Findings chapter distinguished two main themes of 1) the culture of the work atmosphere and 2) the culture of how employees act within that atmosphere (aka employee characteristics), with leadership being a separate consideration. Some common themes that emerged don’t advance the knowledge of this area. One of these is that the work atmosphere was fast-paced and busy. This sentiment was echoed at every magazine company and by almost every employee interviewed. It’s an expected result, given that, as outlined in the Introduction chapter, magazine employment has contracted and the number of digital platforms has grown.

Here is where some of the secondary themes offer meaningful points of differentiation of the successful digital divisions. One of these was the description that these companies all had high standards where the work was challenging. That helps explain the busy nature but also speaks to an element that is needed in a successful magazine operation. It is clear from the research that setting high expectations and then holding employees accountable is a necessary part of success. Looking at the culture of employee characteristics, passionate came up frequently, so did hardworking. In fact, the sheer number of varied adjectives used during interviews for this question is a testament
to the importance of hiring good people. Employees are described as driven, smart, self-starting and creative, among other attributes. Teamwork and collaboration play vital roles in the culture as well, and, indeed, offer a way for employees to meet those high expectations. Overall this paints a picture of a fast-paced environment where smart, driven people work together toward common goals. That’s not rocket science. It’s basic, long-time management theory that dates back to McGregor in 1960 discovering that employees work harder toward goals they believe in, or Porter in 1985 noting the importance of employees understanding a business’ goals and direction, or Kotter in 1995 stressing the importance of the right people working toward a well-communicated vision. Yet it is worthy to show such accepted factors at play in current magazine digital operations, and speaks to their continued effectiveness.

Surprising was that there wasn’t any formal structure to help maintain or promote such culture. The way of working wasn’t something that was communicated through human resources departments but rather through example, or “osmosis” as one interviewee joked. Employee recognition programs do play a role here, as do programs that promote overall work-life balance, and those came up with some frequency. But the people at these organizations spoke about themselves as people with an internal drive to succeed that wasn’t necessarily held aloft simply by such recognition programs. In some ways, this hard-driving, committed work culture is a self-fulfilling prophecy. People who can’t take the pace of the work don’t stay, leaving behind a work force who can handle the heat, and likely want to. A question that came to mind is whether the workplace creates this culture or whether people who are the right fit for such cultures seek out these places. Likely it’s a little of both, but at the organizations where many interviewees were
longer tenured (*New York* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, where most had been with the digital divisions for 10 years or more), this longevity speaks to the weeding out of those who don’t fit the culture. As a final point here, it’s significant to note that when asked to name a single factor that supports the success of their organizations, “people” is the answer that came up most often—further described by interviewees as smart, collaborative people who care. The takeaway here is that in addition to focusing on strategy and metrics, it is vital that modern magazine leaders pay close attention to bringing in the right people, and then providing them with the challenges, expectations and positive environment that will help keep those employees motivated.

**Leadership.** Intertwined with culture is the factor of leadership. Involved, approachable, demanding leaders obviously were a driving force in the success of these businesses. They set the tone of high standards at the organizations and fueled the desire to do good work, experiment and collaborate. It’s telling that the findings on leadership can be divided into two sections—things leaders do and things leaders are (as noted in Table 3), and that the list of what leaders do, in other words their specific, observable actions, is much longer than the list of their internal characteristics. Clearly, having leaders who not only are willing and able to do the work, but who also care about the smallest details of what employees do, makes a difference. A social media manager noted that leaders paying attention to the wording in an Instagram bio showed a level of commitment that was both supportive and motivational. This level of care helps reinforce high standards and shows an appreciation for the work of employees as they strive to achieve them. Leaders absolutely were a driving force at all three organizations. The top leaders—Adam Moss, Stan Pavlovsky and Janice Min and Matt Belloni—were
mentioned often. When the topic of innovation and experimentation came up, their names were part of that as well. Talking about communication and collaboration, they were there, too. The presence of a visionary leader was vital to these organizations. There was an overwhelming sense that employees felt pride working for the companies and brands, but also for these inspirational individuals. That makes finding the right leaders paramount for those seeking to create and maintain successful digital magazine operations.

And these leaders do not have easy jobs. The prospect of being an involved and forward-thinking leader who cares about the smallest editorial detail and also drives business growth is a huge responsibility. There’s a reason why the magazine industry let out up a collective gasp when long-time editors at *Vanity Fair, Time* or *The Hollywood Reporter* stepped aside in 2017 after long, successful tenures, because with them goes the relentless energy and vision that has been vital to keeping their magazines thriving. All three of these studied publications are fortunate that they seem to have such visionaries. *New York* is the most consistent, where Moss has been leading the publication since 2004. Pavlovsky is relatively new, heading the Meredith and BHG digital division since 2016 and at THR, Min stepped away from her editor role in February 2017 and longtime executive editor Belloni assumed the top editorial spot.

**Innovation and success.** Tied to both culture and leadership is an entrepreneurial mindset and the promotion of innovation through creativity. This was a common thread throughout these organizations. During the interviews, some employees used words such as experimentation or testing to indicate the innovation through smaller, daily tasks, while others talked about innovations of organizational structure and work process, and
still others waxed poetic about the lofty goal of continuously pushing the envelope with inventive content, digital tools or ways of communicating with their audiences. It’s important to recognize the impact of all these types of innovation. An “entrepreneurial spirit” doesn’t mean only big, bold and new initiatives. Sometimes it’s the little, but cumulative, wins—such as more people opening an email newsletter or a better way of communicating about video production—achieved through daily commitment to improvement. Within digital divisions, experimentation and trying new things are natural parts of the process. The digital medium itself is highly conducive up to making this both easy and necessary. So in some ways it’s expected that innovation should be engrained into the very bones of a digital operation. It certainly was at these three.

One of the other elements of entrepreneurial culture, according to Ireland et al, is that new ideas, creativity, learning and risk taking are encouraged. All three of these publishing divisions did that in some way, including leaders who lit the fires of constant improvement or broadly defining what success looks like. Success isn’t always achieving certain metrics, though at all three of these organizations, measurable results such as traffic, revenue or social shares were listed as evidence of success. So, too, were editorial factors such as spawning conversations or furthering the brand, or that a new initiative was tried and the learnings from the experience could be applied to something else. Success clearly doesn’t—and can’t—mean the opposite of failure, because failures are inevitable on the road to success via innovation.

The magazines also had varying levels of clear, forward-looking goals and benchmarks. BHG, with Meredith as its the parent company and by far the largest of the three companies, was most clear with an “OKR” (objectives and key results) system of
targets set at different business unit levels, then cascaded and shared. One thing that
didn’t seem to play a role was the existence of mission statements. While some
magazines had them, most employees interviewed couldn’t immediately recall them,
though they were easily able to discuss with confidence and specificity the brand,
audience and general goals. It could be that these things are so baked into the culture of
these magazines that the mission statement is just an unneeded capper, but at least two
magazines had recently changed them, indicating that corporately, they are seen as
important.

Structure

Jeffries from Better Homes and Gardens warned that “it’s not about the structure,
it’s about the people.” And indeed, without the right employees and leaders, structural
elements mean nothing. In publishing, one cannot simply reorganize out of a problem
without having a quality staff to reorganize. But how the companies view success and set
goals, how they communicate and how the teams are structured does make a difference.

One vital element of organizational structure is how it allows for and encourages
communication and collaboration. And looking for the best ways to communicate and
collaborate was a constant theme. Newer communication tools such as Slack came up at
the sites, and at Better Homes, where they manage a huge volume of both new and
repurposable content, the editors were looking for better ways to be complete, transparent
and strategic about content and metrics to better inform decision making. Whereas at
THR, the focus in organization was having ways to get their work done faster and with
improved teamwork. Process innovation is part of the entrepreneurial culture as defined
by Ireland et. al, and the findings corroborate the importance of innovation in this area to
fuel continued success. Important, too, was the open nature of communication and a general lack of bureaucracy in making day-to-day decisions. That employees of many levels felt empowered speaks to an organization that allows for quick decision-making. It’s notable that this effort toward constant improvement was a theme through these three magazines and that it was just part of the overall culture, and also driven by leadership.

One element not previously discussed related to digital success is the issue of the company’s ownership. Of the three magazine companies, two have shown a commitment to the long-term future of the magazines; or more importantly a patience and flexibility as the companies experiment and navigate the changing media landscape. The Wassersteins have owned *New York* since 2004 and have a renewed involvement in the business with Pamela Wasserstein taking on the company executive role in 2016. Meredith Corporation remains committed to its 95-year-old flagship brand. In some ways, *The Hollywood Reporter* is the odd one out here, as they’ve been recently sold and its current owners also are looking to sell (Sass, 2017). The effect of the ownership, and its support for editorial, came up during interviews at each magazine. At *New York*, one editor even cited “great owners” as the single-most important reason for the digital division’s success, and an editor at BHG said the understanding of the business by the leadership team and CEO has fueled Meredith’s longevity and ability to grow. Obviously, this isn’t something that can be replicated, but it’s valid to recognize the effect different owners have on their publishing companies. For instance, looking at the October 2017 news of additional layoffs at Time Inc., it’s notable that a reason cited for the cutbacks was the company’s “ongoing evolution” and Conde Nast started making cuts to editorial staff in November 2017 as it reduced print frequency of several titles (Steigrad, 2017). Yet when a company
like *New York* underwent its “evolution” and stepped up its digital aspirations, it added editorial staff even while cutting print frequency (Sebastian, 2013).

**Brand**

And finally, the idea of brand being an important factor was threaded throughout the interviews. Four interviewees said the legacy, value and reputation of the brand was the single-most important factor for their company’s digital success. The recent reorganization of the digital groups at Meredith Corporation, including *Better Homes and Gardens*, to align by brand rather than function is a testament to brand value amid a digital landscape. How and where a company organizes its human resources says something about what it values, and this move to focus on brand is corroboration from Meredith of the importance of its brands. And *New York* has a similar structure, with teams built around its digital verticals of *The Cut, Vulture, etc.*, while *The Hollywood Reporter* is a singular brand. Employees clearly saw their roles as supporting the reputation of that brand, and finding better and more ways to serve and reach audiences.

The brand was tied into feelings of pride many employees felt as well, and it fueled their continued desire to work in this challenging, changing and fast-paced environment. This was most apparent at BHG and *New York*, and likely also is a reason why so many interviewed within those organizations had been with their companies for 10 years or more. This means brand has become an internal factor as well—not just an external one. Magazine companies would do right to crystallize their brands in the marketplace, to make them something worth believing in. Such actions help externally to find and retain audiences, while helping internally to inspire and retain employees.
Summary

The reality is that all of these factors are tied together and feed from one another. It sets up a model of success that requires 1) finding the right people who are smart, driven and empowered, and believe in the brand, 2) supporting a culture of teamwork and collaboration, where there are the frequent touch-points and tools needed to make this happen, 3) having inspiring and relentless leaders who set high standards, get involved in the day-to-day work, push creativity and innovation of all sizes/types, and set varying qualitative and quantitative measures of success, and 5) having a brand worth believing in. Oh, and it helps to have patient company owners who believe in this vision, and the value of editorial, enough to continue to invest in it.

Limitations of Research

A limiting factor of this research is the makeup of the interview pool. Those interviewed were selected through collaboration between the researcher and the main contact at each site, so the employees represent those one would assume are seen as successful. They also tended to be senior employees. Expanding the pool to include a more random sampling and more junior employees could have affected the results. It’s also important to mention the researcher’s background as a magazine editor, and therefore some innate bias was brought into the interviews and the types of follow-up questions due to previous personal experience and knowledge. The research questions themselves also had an impact on the direction of this research. Because the questions contained words such as experimentation and innovation, those topics were addressed directly by all interviewees, and it’s unknown if those would have come up in the same ways organically without that direction.
Magazine companies are becoming more innovative and entrepreneurial in response to the shifting digital media landscape. In many ways, the magazine industry is uniquely equipped to adapt to these new opportunities, given its history of integrating ever-changing publishing technology and its focus on producing new content and maintaining close audience relationships. Yet, many are not faring well. While there is much positive news about new magazine titles and programs, the media industry news is a constant flow of magazines closing, employee layoffs and leadership changes. Some companies have found success in this volatile digital media landscape, however. Three are Better Homes and Gardens, The Hollywood Reporter and New York. This research explored the internal workings of these three successful digital magazine divisions and used the theory of strategic entrepreneurship as a guide to find elements that led to their success and that other magazines might model.

Where there was entrepreneurial culture at these magazines, it was defined by passionate, motivated and smart employees who teamed up to achieve common goals, and continually pushed themselves, and their companies, further. The drive for innovation—to experiment, to challenge the status quo, to not settle, to see success in the act of trying—were part of the work culture that the employees manifested and then modeled to new employees. It also was obvious that this drive is part of the digital business itself, where experimentation and testing are a norm. And pushing all of this forward are visionary leaders. At these magazines, entrepreneurial leaders were those who truly believed in the digital success of their organizations and worked tirelessly to
promote it. They cultivated a culture of high expectations where experimentation is expected and success is more than numbers. They understood their role was to get the best out of their already-talented people. An entrepreneurial leader is one who has a deep understanding of the industry and who inspires employees to reach for more. The individual brands played an incredibly vital role as well. In addition to being a focus of the content—with employees looking to find new audiences for the brand and making that brand more valuable—they also provide inspiration. These are brands worth caring about. Staffers see their magazines as doing work that matters, and that fuels the continued creative push to do better, and to do more.

One could say there are no surprising “a-ha’s” here. People matter, communication matters, brands matter. The importance of these factors has a long history in both research and practice. But in this modern business and publishing climate, where technology is playing a larger and ever-growing role, it is important to step back and realize that the same foundational factors that have always mattered still do. This is especially important when talking about digital media because the platform itself still is relatively new, at least compared to the old Gutenberg printing press. At the end of the day, getting a Snapchat Discover channel or a virtual reality project off the ground isn’t as vital as the people working on those projects and the collaboration happening behind the scenes.

The focus of this research was on editorial staff of magazine digital operations because the goal was to understand how the content-creating divisions of these companies exhibit entrepreneurial characteristics. This, obviously, is only part of the picture of what makes a company successful. Future research could focus on the revenue
or human resources sectors of these businesses—how do these other divisions embody entrepreneurship, what is that leadership like and how do they work to understand audiences? In HR, what do they look for when hiring, and how is culture communicated and supported? In the revenue divisions, questions such as how innovation is exhibited among those employees, how success is defined and what are the characteristics of those leaders would provide additional insight. It also would be valuable to extend this research to look at the digital operations at more magazine companies, especially ones that aren’t as successful, and see what traits around work culture, employee characteristics, leadership and innovation emerge there.

This research adds vital data about strategic management practices at magazine companies, a much under-examined area. In an era of rapid media change, evolution and growth, this does provide guidance to managers and leaders as they set priorities for the future. The lesson here is: Don’t forget the old stuff while barreling ahead into the new stuff. But also, yes, absolutely barrel into the new stuff, because innovation and creativity are vital. Grasp an entrepreneurial spirit to rethink delivery methods, find new audiences and create future generations of brand loyalists. It just can’t be at the expense of the foundational assets that got your magazine this far.
References


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APPENDIX A
Interview protocol

Background questions
What is your role here and how long have you been in that role?
How long have you worked for this company? Have you held other jobs here?

RQ1:
Work culture
What adjectives would you use to describe the work culture here?
Are there characteristics that make the culture here unique?
    Characteristics that make it successful?
How do things like creativity, innovation, experimentation and learning factor into daily work?
    Are there processes or initiatives to encourage/promote this?
    How does the company/managers view risk taking or failure?
Is there a “way we work” that is shared among employees? (basic goals, expected attitude)
    How is this communicated to current or new employees?
    What would you say are key attributes of all employees?
Does the company/division have mission and vision statements (or other method of shared goals and beliefs)?
    How are these communicated?
    Have these been revised over the years? If so, when, why and what was that process?
How does the company define success?

Leadership
How would you describe the leadership in your division and in the overall company?
    What are the most important characteristics of leaders here?
How do they communicate information that helps employees be creative and innovative?
    How do they communicate vision?
    How do leaders question assumptions?
Describe how new leadership is fostered.

Change management
How does change happen here? (what is impetus, who drives it, what is speed of process)
    How would you say most employees view change?
How are changes communicated and implemented?

RQ2:
Organization
Describe the department/reporting structure.
    What are the job titles and roles?
How have these shifted over the past year, two years, more?
What types of decisions around innovation, change and strategy are made at different levels?
Describe level of employee autonomy.
Are there internal systems (formal or informal) that you think are vital to the company’s success?
How do different departments/functions interact? How describe relationship among groups?
What characteristics of employees are most valued?
What activities of employees are most valued?
What is the importance of diversity of backgrounds and skill sets?

RQ3:

**Brand identity**
What is your individual role in building brand identity?
Are there processes or initiatives that support/promote the brand?
What would you say is this company’s/division’s greatest asset and why?

**Brand value**
How important is it to understand customers’ needs?
How do you find out what consumers need? What processes or initiatives in place to do so?
   How go about meeting those needs?
What processes are in place to assess the state of the industry and competition?

Final question: If you had to name one reason for the success of the digital operation, what would it be?
APPENDIX B
Interview subjects

**Better Homes and Gardens**
Sheena Chihak, digital food editor of BHG.com and a registered dietician
Time/background with company: Been with BHG for 10 years; started in books, moved to magazine, and then to digital five years ago

Melissa Inman, executive director of content strategy and operations
Time/background with company: 16 years in print and digital at Meredith; been with digital for nine years, held a number of leadership roles

Karla Jeffries, general manager of BHG.com
Time/background with company: Been with company 28 years; started in finance

Brooke Phillips, director of growth for home (BHG.com and MarthaStewart.com)
Time/background with company: 10 years

Heather Scott, deputy editor of BHG.com
Time/background with company: Been in current role less than six months; worked for Meredith for about seven years on digital properties; laid off for more than a year and now back

**The Hollywood Reporter**
Meena Jang, associate editor
Time/background with company: Been with company for 4 years; started as an intern

Kimberly Nordyke, digital deputy editor
Time/background with company: 16 years; started out of college as a copy editor for magazine and was a TV reporter for magazine; had nine years experience with print magazine before moving to the website

Tom Seeley, senior vice president of digital media
Time/background with company: 2 years; previously at NBC for 10 years, Fox Sports for five years and CBS Sportsline for four years

Christina Schoellkopf, social media manager
Time/background with company: Been with company for 2.5 years; started as an intern, so first job out of college

Anonymous editor at THR
Has about seven years of industry experience

**New York**
Nora Barak, engagement editor, oversees social media team on editorial side
Time/background with company: Been at *New York* for less than a year; previously at NY Post for four years

Stella Bugbee, editor in chief of The Cut
Time/background with company: Been at *New York* for six years

Kaitlin Jessing-Butz, deputy managing editor of digital
Time/background with company: Been at *New York* for 10 years; was first job out of college; started as an intern

Michael Silberman, general manager of digital media
Time/background with company: Been at *New York* for 10 years, oversees product technology and development, consumer marketing/audience development and business development and strategy; previously at Rodale 10 years, MSNBC for 10 years and CBS News

Ben Williams, editor digital for *New York*
Time/background with company: Oversees all digital editorial operations; been with company 13 years