

## **Title: Managing Media Firms in a Disruptive Digital Environment**

### **Abstract**

Digital technologies have disrupted and transformed the way many media organisations have managed their business over the past two decades. The overarching theme of the body of research presented in this paper is the ‘management of media firms’ in a disruptive digital environment, and as such, three crucial questions have underpinned the research strategy. These questions examined: how media firms had managed the digital transition; how media firms are managed; and how can long-term media strategy be developed in an uncertain business environment. These questions were investigated using a practice-led research approach where the media practice context helps to advance knowledge ‘about’ practice and ‘within’ practice to produce actionable knowledge, implementable validity and instrumental impact with stakeholders.

### **Introduction**

When Professor Chris Argyris, the distinguished Harvard University scholar and co-founder of the field of organization learning and development, reflected on a lifetime of academic endeavour he concluded that “learning occurs when understanding, insight and explanations are connected with action” (2003, p.1179). Furthermore, he argued that academic communities should concentrate on generating knowledge that was *useful* to solving the problems that practitioners faced in their everyday working lives. Indeed, he presented a strong case for the *implementable validity* of management research and concluded that researchers should not be content with understanding and explaining organisational phenomena in a way that has internal and external validity, but should also seek to create ‘actionable knowledge’ to assess theory in use.

In the UK, the Government’s Industrial Strategy ‘Building a Britain fit for the Future’ (2017) places and increased emphasis on the academic community to produce research that has *impact* in the form of societal and economic contribution. This impact can be achieved in many ways, but principally through creating and sharing new knowledge that results in the type of innovation that leads to market growth, improved corporate performance, jobs, new products and services.

This paper articulates the role of *Instrumental Impact* in influencing media firm strategy and business practice. Instrumental Impact is considered by UK Research and

Innovation (UKRI) to be where research has informed policy debate and decisions and where companies have benefitted from knowledge that has improved business performance, changed management practices and created jobs. UKRI work in partnership with universities, research organisations, businesses, charities, and government to provide funding and a support environment that encourages research and innovation. As such, this paper presents a body of evidence about the ‘management of media firms in a disruptive digital environment’, which is discussed by examining three crucial questions that underpinned the research strategy. These questions investigated:

1. How have media firms managed the digital transition?
2. How are media firms managed?
3. How can long-term media strategy be developed in an uncertain business environment?

These questions were investigated using a practice-led research approach where the media practice context not only helps to advance knowledge ‘about’ practice, but ‘within’ practice. The answers to these questions are illustrated with theory-driven and practically-oriented case studies that demonstrate the relationship between theory and practice and show the impact of actionable knowledge with a range of stakeholders.

### *A philosophical orientation*

A consideration of philosophy in any context provides a breeding ground for much discussion, as it deals with the complex nature of basic beliefs that underpin the social and scientific world. Guba and Lincoln (1989, p.83) point out the problems of considering different philosophical paradigms, going on to state that “there is no way to answer these questions in an unambiguous and certain way or in a way that is capable of proof”. Consideration of this statement provides obvious grounds for contention for the research studies presented in this paper, particularly as they aimed to produce actionable knowledge, implementable validity and instrumental impact.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) argued that the basis of any philosophical debate should consider the basic assumptions that underpin the relationship between ontology, epistemology and methodology; all of which will be discussed during the course of this paper. Historically, the debate about the best philosophical approach to adopt in media management research contrasts the conventionalist, positivistic approach with the

constructionist, naturalistic approach. When considering the stance taken in these research studies, the relative merits of both perspectives were considered and have been used to develop an appropriate research design for the phenomena being investigated; whilst at the same time, being mindful of the very real tensions between producing methodological perfectionism and the realities of producing actionable knowledge. As such, a “pragmatic” philosophical stance was adopted. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, p.591) provide support for this approach, arguing that the search for valid data should not be considered solely on methodological grounds, but also on ontological grounds, believing that “there may be a trade-off between methodological sophistication and ‘truth’ in the sense of timely evidence capable of giving participants critical purchase on a real situation”. Greenwood and Levin (1998), Revans (1998) and Silverman (2001) also support this pragmatic philosophy maintaining that the pure empiricist will be more concerned with the appropriateness of the method to access data to produce a purposeful outcome, rather than dwelling on the theoretical base of research design.

The roots of the pragmatic philosophy can be traced back as far as the first century BC to Cicero, the Roman orator, lawyer, politician and philosopher. He examined the tensions between the study of philosophy in the search for *truth* and the need to study philosophy for the purposes of *action* being taken. Indeed, much of his writing illuminated his frustration with his contemporaries who he thought engaged in philosophical debate, for the sake of debate. As such, he believed that their search for truth yielded little or no practical contribution to everyday life. Cicero stated that philosophy should be made more accountable and could more usefully contribute to, for example, producing more effective action.

Greenwood and Levin (1998, p.73) cite John Dewey, the American educationalist and philosopher from the 1880’s as the modern architect of the pragmatic philosophy. They point out that “Dewey’s approach is his steadfast refusal to separate thought from action...and that he believed the only real sources of knowledge are to be found in action, not in armchair speculation”. Unfortunately for Dewey, the modernist research agenda to social science dominated at the time; the separation of science and practice meant that his pragmatic philosophy, therefore, remained a marginal and illogical method to investigate phenomena in social science. However, it has gained a resurgence with Revans (1998) and Greenwood and Levin (1998) suggesting that pragmatism directly connects to action in terms of solving specific organisational problems. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, p.592) developed this line

of inquiry by arguing that “the loss of methodological sophistication is a price worth paying in most practical contexts of transformative social action”.

The pragmatic research philosophy adopted for these studies, therefore, embraced both positivist and naturalist paradigms. The reason being that the researcher believed that the ontological questions of truth and reality in relation to understanding the management of media firms in a disruptive digital environment should be answered by utilizing the relative strengths of both paradigms. Adopting a pragmatic research philosophy has enabled the researcher to mix and match inductive and deductive philosophies as a pragmatic way of obtaining insight into the questions outlined above.

If media management is to flourish in the years ahead, it should consider the benefits of theoretical development working in tandem with a consideration of knowledge that is actionable and produces high levels of implementable validity. Mierzejewska (2018, p.19) observed that ‘theories’ have their limitations in the sense that they are often focused on specific variables that are based on a narrow set of underlying assumptions. As such, the investigation of a phenomenon usually concludes with deterministic explanations and a “self-perpetuating” view of a phenomenon. As mentioned previously, Argyris (2003, p.1179) argued that our understanding and learning about organisational phenomena is best achieved when understanding, insight and explanations are connected with action. He noted that whilst many scholars pursue internal validity in the sense that they connect their ideas to existing theories, much more is to be gained by connecting and validating their ideas with practitioners.

In essence, what follows in these case studies is a commitment by the researcher to develop actionable knowledge, implementable validity and the creation of instrumental impact with media practitioners.

## **Case 1: How have media firms managed the digital transition?**

### **Overview**

Dynamic Capabilities Theory has gained traction with media management researchers as they seek to explain how the dynamic and increasingly digital environment impacts on media firm performance. Several papers by Oliver (2014; 2017; 2018) examine Dynamic Capabilities at *industry level* and *individual firm level*. These papers presented longitudinal findings on how the UK Creative Industries had reconfigured human resources with differing

performance outcomes, whilst two firms in particular, Sky Plc and Pearson Publishing Plc, were explored in order to assess how their strategies, resources and capabilities were adapted to meet the challenges presented by the digital environment. Their performance was also benchmarked against the UK Creative Industries as a whole.

These papers add to the limited knowledge base on industry level dynamic capabilities and extends our knowledge on inter-industry comparisons in economic performance following the reconfiguration of industry resources. They also advance our theoretical understanding of media firm transformation by using a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on knowledge from organisational strategy, dynamic capabilities and firm performance. This integrated approach provides a more holistic view of strategic business transformation by understanding the strategic arguments that compel firms to reconfigure their resources and capabilities in a dynamic business environment.

### **Theoretical Frame**

The emergence of widespread digitalisation in 1997 and new media technologies around 2003 have acted as catalysts for technological innovation and disruption in many media markets. These drivers of change have persisted, and when viewed over the long term, provide an ideal context through which to examine the strategic adaptation of the media industry and media firms alike. Whilst Dynamic Capabilities provides the focal theory for this research, the literature has been examined from an industry level and individual firm level.

The literature on Dynamic Capabilities continues to evolve, but it is largely fragmented with little in the way of shared consensus of its precise characteristics, nor indeed the development of theoretical frameworks that have been rigorously tested through empirical study. However, the review of literature describes a phenomenon that has several fundamental components that have consistently featured in studies published in the field. These common themes refer to: adaptation, where the focus is on reconfiguring resources, capabilities and competencies; this strategic adaptation of resources aims to produce positive effects on performance; this adaptive process occurs in a compressed timescale due to the fast changing nature of market conditions.

#### *Dynamic Capabilities at Industry Level*

The idea that an industry can exhibit dynamic capabilities has been investigated by a relatively small number of researchers. For example, Zott (2003) developed a theoretical model that explained intra-firm differences in performance within the same industry, whilst Lampel and Shamsie (2003) examined the evolution of capabilities in the Hollywood movie industry. The latter authors found that a highly turbulent competitive environment created ‘new patterns of competition’ within the industry and ‘new managerial mind-sets’ which tended to dominate what was considered to be new industry level capabilities. In particular, they argued that new capabilities emerged in the form of ‘mobilizing capabilities’ which commits resources in such a way as to transform capabilities.

This evolutionary view of industry level capabilities is supported by Eisenhart and Martin (2000) and De Wit and Meyer (2005) who argued that the emergence of new industry capabilities was determined by two factors. Firstly, that a series of incremental innovations in products and services lead to widespread imitation within the competitive set. Teece et al. (1997, p.526) supported this view arguing that challenger firms simply reproduced the “strategic position” of market leading firms who had achieved a competitive advantage. Deans et al (2002) and Pettigrew et al (2007, p.39) noted that the converging nature of industry level capabilities essentially produced new capabilities that could be considered as the ‘minimum threshold’ that was required to satisfy market requirements. Secondly, these new industry level capabilities could be developed by firms competing independently of each other, but that they ultimately converged due to the limiting factors of technological capability and regulation within the industry. Madhok and Osegowitsch (2000, p.328) provided a different perspective on the emergence of industry level capabilities. They argued that it was collaborative activity in the form of strategic alliances between competitive rivals who possessed “complementary skills” and sought to reduce the risks inherent in the innovation process that led to a convergence of industry level capabilities.

#### *Dynamic Capabilities at Firm Level*

The idea that organizations have dynamic capabilities arose from theorists questioning how firms sustained competitive advantage and superior performance in high velocity conditions where “the increasing dynamism of the environment” (Pettigrew et al. 2007, p.143) made it increasingly difficult to remain competitive. Many scholars have built on Teece et al.’s (1997, p.516) seminal paper on dynamic capabilities which argued that it was a firm’s ability to learn, adapt and change their resource base to produce new capabilities

which delivered a series of temporary competitive advantages over time. In essence, the idea that firm capabilities need to be ‘dynamic’ is a consideration of the competitive environment, its future direction, and how a firm adapts and reconfigures resources, assets, operating routines and competencies to improve their effectiveness and competitiveness in the pursuit of superior performance (Zollo & Winter, 2002; Malhotra & Hinings, 2015).

A central criticism of Dynamic Capabilities Theory is that researchers have largely ignored the notion of how to move dynamic capabilities from theory into actionable knowledge. This criticism, is to an extent justified, particularly as Dixon et al (2014, p.186) referred to dynamic capabilities as a “black box” with unknown contents. Teece, Peteraf & Leih (2016) also called for a more ‘integrated and multi-disciplinary’ approach to our understanding of the role that dynamic capabilities plays in the strategic transformation of firms. In response to these calls, the work of Oliver (2014; 2017; 2018) presented a conceptual framework which focussed on the management of intangible resources, skills and capabilities (Knowledge-based View) including: having an aspirational strategy; persistent communication of the strategy; managerial cognition and sensing skills; with tangible resources, skills and capabilities (Resourced-based View) including: investment in new organisational processes and routines; product innovation and development; forming strategic alliances; corporate acquisitions and divestments.

As such, these papers provided illustrative case studies on industry and firm level dynamic capabilities, transformation and performance that as we will see later, produced exceptionally high level of actionable research and implementable validity.

## **Method**

The aims of these research studies were two fold. Firstly to examine the existence of industry level dynamic capabilities and superior performance in the UK’s Creative Industries. The quantitative method of ‘time-series analysis’ provided the most appropriate way to identify dynamic capabilities and superior performance over time since it could identify patterns in historical data. The methodological approach used ‘Year’ (1997-2014) as independent variable, and the ‘Number of Employees’ (NE) and ‘Gross Added Value’ (GVA) as dependent variables. The data were obtained from the Department of Culture Media & Sport website ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)) which hosts a number of publications relating to the creative industries.

Secondly, our theoretical understanding of dynamic capabilities at media firm level was extended by providing an ‘integrated and multi-disciplinary’ approach that examined the links between organisational strategy, dynamic capabilities and media firm performance. The premise of this research was to enable media management researchers to understand how dynamic changes in the media environment drive media firms to adapt and transform their businesses over time.

This study presented data from 1995-2017 and used a mixed methodological approach. Qualitative content analysis was used to gain insight into the strategies, intangible and tangible resources, skills and capabilities that enabled media organisations to adapt and transform their business to the digital environment; whilst quantitative data was used to ascertain corporate financial performance against historic firm, inter-firm, industry and market performance indicators over the long-term. The intention here was to gain insight into the strategic transformation and performance outcomes of media firms by exploring the issue from different perspectives by using multiple methods and data sources.

Desk research had identified Pearson Plc (Publishing) and Sky (TV) as two companies from these industries that had undergone a ‘strategic transformation’ over the course of two business cycles, which importantly covered the disruptive forces of digitalisation and new media. A qualitative ‘thematic’ content analysis of company Annual Reports was used to understand and assess how these organisations had adapted their strategies, resources and capabilities to changing competitive dynamics over time.

The units of analysis for this study were derived from literature and included:

Knowledge-based View (in-tangible resources, skills and capabilities): an aspirational strategy; persistent communication of the strategy; managerial cognition and sensing skills.

Resource-based View (tangible resources, skills and capabilities): investment in new organisational processes and routines; product innovation and development; strategic alliances; corporate acquisitions and divestments.

An analysis of each firm’s financial performance was benchmarked against historic firm, inter-firm, industry and market performance indicators. A number of different financial measures were used to triangulate corporate performance in terms of the ‘value’ created from the firm’s corporate strategy and resource management. These were: Market Value (£), Revenue (£), and Return on Invested Capital (%). This data was obtained from Thomson

Reuters DataStream and provided historic financial statistics for both Sky and Pearson and the FTSE 100 index which is composed of the 100 largest companies listed on the London Stock Exchange. The analysis of Market Value and Return of Capital Invested for Sky and Pearson against the FTSE 100, over the time period 1995-2017, ensured that only those firms (57) who had consistently appeared in the index for each of those years was used for data analysis.

## **Results**

These papers presented the theory and practice on strategic transformation by drawing on Dynamic Capabilities Theory at both industry and firm levels. Examining Dynamic Capabilities at ‘industry level’ demonstrated how human resources had been reconfigured in the UK Creative Industries level to produce different performance effects over time. This strategic adaptation and renewal of human resources was most visible demonstrated in the structural changes of the workforce in the UK Publishing Industry. The industry had been exposed to extraordinary changes in the macro-environment (e.g. the collapse of the dot.com economy in 2000, the disruption caused by new media technologies and the effects of the Global Financial Crisis) which had resulted in net number of job losses between 1997-2014 to an astonishing 83,500. However, in terms of Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the strategic adaption of human resources has delivered superior performance in terms of productivity. For example, there have been consistent increases in GVA per Employee, which has risen from £20,554 in 1997 to £ 45,244 in 2014 (+120%). Whilst the human cost of these job losses is incalculable, from an economic point of view, the long-term reduction in the workforce has delivered vastly improved results in terms of productivity within the industry.

Examining Dynamic Capabilities at ‘firm level’ introduced an integrated and multi-disciplinary approach that linked organisational strategy, dynamic capabilities and media firm performance. This process of “intellectual bridging” (Pettigrew et al. 2007) between largely discrete fields of strategic management literature provided a more holistic view of strategic business transformation, and to enable media management researchers to better understand how dynamic changes in the media environment drive media firms to adapt and transform their businesses over time.

The results from this study demonstrated how an ambitious strategy which invested in and adapted firm resources to produce new and dynamic capabilities has every chance of producing superior firm performance in the long-term. The findings revealed that both Sky

Plc and Pearson Plc adopted a teleological approach to the setting of sequential corporate goals, objectives and strategies which had adapted and transformed each firm to the opportunities provided by an increasingly digital environment.

Both firms had undergone a series of strategic transformations, however, the route to these transformations differed, with Sky transforming themselves from being a single product media firm, into a multi-product media firm with impressive results. In contrast, Pearson had engaged in five strategic transformations, moving it from being a holding company, to an Entrepreneurial M-form business, into their current form as a global, single product learning company. The number of strategic transformations that Pearson had undertaken is mostly likely to be the result of their consistent corporate objective of seeking out potential high growth market opportunities. With each new market opportunity there appears to have been major restructuring of their resource base, with numerous investments, acquisitions and divestments. As a consequence of their unyielding pursuit of market opportunities, the costs of reconfiguring and restructuring their resource had hindered their corporate performance.

The findings have also revealed the importance of strategic acquisitions and divestment to the reconfiguration and transformation of the firm's resources and capabilities. Whilst there is a common understanding in the literature about the role that acquisitions play in accessing new resources and capabilities, there is not the same level of understanding on how the divestment of strategic assets helps to deliver resource renewal, strategic transformation and superior corporate performance.

### **Actionable Research and Conclusions**

The conceptual links between dynamic capabilities and firm performance have been established in literature, however, the integration of knowledge from strategy literature conceptualises dynamic capabilities in a more holistic way by understanding the strategic arguments that compel a firm to reconfigure their resources and capabilities in dynamic business environment. Certainly the data presented in these papers illustrate how both firms engaged in high growth strategies that were executed through a consistent approach to the investment in the resources that delivered new digital capabilities and competitive advantage.

The research on how the UK Creative Industries and firms had managed the digital transition was disseminated at a business engagement event in the boardroom of world class business transformation consultancy, The Hackett Group. The event entitled *Digital Strategy*

*and Business Transformation* was attended by senior executives from the likes of Ofcom, the Financial Times, Astrazeneca and Bell Pottinger. This initial feedback was exceptional, with delegates commenting that it was an ‘excellent event that provided different perspectives on digital transformation and new ideas on how to manage business transformation within their firms’.

Two years on from the event and the levels of actionable knowledge, implementable validity and instrumental impact of the research has been impressive to say the least. The research has made a demonstrable impact on UK Communications Policy and Regulation decisions relating to Sky Plc, and influenced the public policy debate on future internet regulation. One Senior Executive commented that:

*“the research enabled us to think differently about Sky’s ‘growth strategy’. Previously we had been concerned that Sky Plc were moving toward a monopoly position in the pay-tv market, but Dr Oliver’s longitudinal research presented them in a different light. Their growth strategy and diversification into new markets such as broadband, fixed and mobile telephony had in fact contributed to increased levels of competition in those sectors...the research also provided Ofcom with an opportunity to consider our remit as a communications regulator and the potential areas where we could use our expertise in the future, most notably in terms of the potential future regulation of the internet”.*

Director, Ofcom, UK Communications Regulator

Furthermore, the research has also created financial benefits for several world class management consultancies which has resulted in direct economic impacts in terms of new jobs and multi-million pound investments made by FTSE100 firms. A senior management consultant commented that the research:

*“influenced our strategic approach to the development of a new Digital Strategy and Analytics service for our clients. This new consultancy service has now been successfully launched and several of our FTSE100 clients (amongst others Tesco, John Lewis and Unilever) have gained insight from this. Some of these clients have already decided to invest several million pounds into resources creating many new jobs in Digital services and Analytics departments in their firms and we expect many more firms to follow”.*

Senior Director, The Hackett Group (London)

## **Case 2: How are media firms managed?**

### **Overview**

The papers (Oliver, 2013; 2016) present key findings on the usage and satisfaction of management tools that media executives used to develop organisational strategy. The data in the paper was subsequently extended to a survey of large media firms in each year between 2013-16. The findings presented in these papers add to the knowledge of our understanding of the media industry by exploring the media management tools that are used by executives within UK Media Industry. The findings indicated that the level of uncertainty in the media environment made it difficult for executives to develop media strategy; and that Scenario Planning was the most used management tool.

### **Theoretical Frame**

Our theoretical understanding of the dynamic nature of the competitive media landscape is well documented in media management literature. This environment as Picard (2004) and Kung (2008) pointed out presents media executives with a significant challenge when it comes to planning media strategy.

What is less known about how media firms are managed is to consider the type of analytical tools that media executives use to manage their businesses. Broadly, the theoretical frame for this research drew on the work of Pettigrew, Thomas and Whittington (2007) who argued that an important facet of strategic management research has been the development of tools for analysis, and that different ‘tools’ helped frame strategy, competition and competitive dynamics in different ways. More specifically, this research was underpinned by the earlier work of Rigby and Bilodeau (2007) and adapted their approach to the specific context of the UK Media Industry. In doing so, its purpose was to understand the outlook for a highly dynamic competitive environment and to investigate how media executives were using management tools to understand and make conclusions about their industry in order to develop strategy and manage their media organisation.

### **Method**

The research design drew heavily on the work Rigby and Bilodeau (2007) by investigating the usage and satisfaction of 21 of the most popular management tools used in businesses across the globe. A quantitative survey of senior media executives responsible for developing strategy (e.g. Head of Strategic Planning, Director of Strategy, Head of Segments

Planning) and a number of functional areas (e.g. Head of Commercial Policy, Head of Business Development, Vice President Marketing, Director of Programming, Chief Technologist, Director of Operations, Head of Customer Insight). The survey established: their outlook for the UK Media Industry; what management tools they used; and their satisfaction with these management tools.

## **Results**

Overall, media executives' outlook for the UK Media Industry was positive, with the majority of firms expecting to launch new products and services and focusing more on innovation than cost reduction for competitiveness. Media executives also reported that their firm's core business was running out of steam and needed new capabilities. In such a fast changing industry, developing new capabilities presents a dilemma for media firms. On the one hand, they have to invest in and exploit their existing capabilities and competencies, whilst at the same time, they need to be mindful of the necessity to refresh and adapt their resource base in line with strategic environmental changes. The four year trend presented an increasing need to adapt and refresh resources and capabilities with 38% of executives in 2013 saying that their firm needed new capabilities, compared to 45% in 2016.

However, the results also demonstrated increasing levels of turbulence and change, which in turn, hampered their ability to develop media strategy. In 2016, 58% of executives confirmed this point compared to 38% in 2013. The survey identified that the most used tools were Strategic Alliances (90%), Benchmarking (90%), Social Media Programmes (86%), Outsourcing (86%), Strategic Planning (86%) and Scenario and Contingency Planning (81%). In contrast, the management tools with the highest level of satisfaction was Customer Relationship Management, Customer Segmentation, and Strategic Planning.

## **Actionable Research and Conclusions**

The findings in this research provided new and original knowledge on the usage and satisfaction of management tools that media executives used to develop media strategy; and to understand how their approach fitted in with other firms. This knowledge was disseminated in practitioner journals (as well as academic) and the fact that the paper downloads run into the thousands suggests that the information is helping practitioners to understand the uncertainty and complexity of media industry dynamics and how to create strategic responses.

In terms of actionable research, implementable validity and instrumental impact, the UKs Research and Innovation (UKRI) pose three important questions to assess the ability of research to contribute broadly to *Economic and Societal Impact* and more specifically to *Instrumental Impact* in terms of research that benefits individuals and media organisations.

A post research survey of senior media executives in 2016 captured the responses to the three questions relating to instrumental research impact (see Table 1 below). Again, the results demonstrate high levels of actionable knowledge, implementable validity and instrumental impact amongst UK media firms.

Table 1: How are Media Firms Managed: Actionable Knowledge and Implementable Validity

UK Research and Innovation: Criteria for Instrumental Impact	Actionable Knowledge and Implementable Validity
Q1. Is the research a <b>valuable resource</b> for media executives	100%
Q2. Does the research provide <b>information that benefits</b> media executives <b>in their job</b>	95%
Q3. Does the research have the <b>potential to influence</b> media <b>company practices</b>	74%

(n=53)

### 3. How do media firms create a long term strategy in an uncertain digital environment?

#### Overview

The research findings from the second case study above identified Scenario Planning as a media management tool that was particularly relevant for managing media firms in uncertain competitive conditions. Whilst the digital environment has disrupted many markets, it has also placed existing and successful media management strategies and practices under scrutiny and eroded many firm’s source of competitive advantage and profitability.

This case study presents a unique insight into ‘strategy as practice’ and reflects on a scenario-planning project with U.K. media industry practitioners who sought to develop a long-term corporate level strategy for the Google-owned media firm YouTube. It concludes that the knowledge produced by the project was actionable, and produced high levels of

implementable validity and instrumental impact in terms of the development of a long-term strategy for YouTube (Oliver and Parrett, 2018).

### **Theoretical Frame**

An increasing number of media firms operate in a highly turbulent business environment where rapid changes in digital technologies have undermined the value propositions, strategies and business models of incumbent firms. This type of competitive environment places increased scrutiny on the strategic planning tools that are used to undertake a rational and comprehensive analysis of the competitive dynamics and inform strategy formulation.

A management tool that enables media executives to develop strategy in uncertain business environments is scenario planning. While this strategic management tool has formed part of the strategist's toolbox for a long time, the increasing level of dynamism and uncertainty in many business environments has meant that scenario planning has seen a resurgence in usage. There is a substantial amount of literature that examines the benefits of this method for strategic planners and executives. For example, van der Heijden (2005), Walton (2008), and Selsky and McCann (2008) argued that scenario planning combined both systematic and imaginative thinking in a way that could provide a unique insight into the future that leads to the development of organizational strategy and action. Hamel (1996) also noted that the process of scenario thinking allowed practitioners to step back from the ritual of strategic planning and take a broader look at their environment, while Grant (2003) and Bowman et al. (2007) concluded that it was a useful tool for the purposes of strategy creation and long-term planning, given its strength in providing qualitative information and strategic conversations on multiple scenarios of the future.

### **Method**

Whilst there are a number of methodical approaches to operationalizing a scenario-planning project, this study used the approach proposed by Garvin and Levesque (2006) due to its prescriptive and systematic way of representing future business environments and its ability to help create a long-term strategic direction for a firm.

The process started with executives considering a 'key focal issue' and a timeframe of 10 years to consider plausible and multiple future scenarios. As such, the key focal issue for this project was: What will be the role of YouTube in the U.K. media industry in 2025? This

issue was of strategic importance to the media planning agency that could see the fast changing business environment created a high level of uncertainty for the firm and its client, and the strategic flexibility of YouTube's corporate level strategy going forward was of paramount importance.

This research was based on a non-probability, purposive sample of individuals who worked in senior operational and planning positions for one of the U.K.'s top media planning agencies. The participants were drawn from a variety of departments within the company and selected on the basis of having experience and expert knowledge of the U.K. media industry and YouTube's operations and competitive strategy. Keough and Shanahan (2008) and Marcus (2009) noted that scenario planning can be too subjective and was often based on an extrapolation of team member experiences and knowledge, particularly among the organizational elite who arrived at an expedient consensus of what the future will look like from a fixed point in time. In order to overcome this inherent problem, this research used an independent auditor (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to validate the proceedings. This person was a senior communications specialist who regularly runs scenario-planning exercises for a leading public relations consultancy in the U.K. His role was to validate the proceedings, ensure that all participants' views were fully explored, and that the scenarios were both realistic and plausible given the vested interest in the success of the media planning agency.

## **Results**

The research identified 49 driving forces that had the potential to shape the U.K. media industry in the next 10 years, from which, four 'Driving Forces' were considered and two of these forces were regarded as creating 'Critical Uncertainty' in relation to the key focal issue. These were:

- The extent to which video content could be monetized

When considering the extent to which video content could be monetized, the group were clear that should YouTube, or video content more generally, no longer be a popular platform for advertisers, then YouTube's source of revenue would be at risk and new revenue models would need to be developed.

- An increase in regulation of video content.

An increase in the regulation of video content considered issues ranging from the quality control of online video content, to a tightening on the regulation of intellectual property laws. Should there be an increase in regulation of video content, then YouTube would have to completely change the way it operates, challenging the fundamentals of the organization.

In the next stage of the process, four plausible scenarios that explored the role that YouTube will play in the U.K. media industry in 2025 were developed. These scenarios presented plausible, alternative hypotheses about how the world might unfold and highlighted the strategic implications, risks and opportunities facing YouTube. In each scenario, a range of Offensive and Defensive Strategic options were presented and discussed.

### **Actionable Research and Conclusions**

The actionable outcomes of using scenario planning as a tool for developing a long-term strategy in unpredictable and future media markets were positive and supports the findings of Rigby and Bilodeau (2007) and Oliver (2013) who found it to be a power tool—high usage and high satisfaction—among media executives who used it to manage business uncertainty. This affirmative view is supported by positive feedback from other media planners within the agency, and particularly those working on the YouTube business account. This project also resulted in bringing a range of people inside the organization together to socially interact and discuss the scenario-planning tool’s role in the process of strategic analysis and strategic options development for other clients. An Executive Director commented that the research:

*“OMD are now better able to make sense of often conflicting macro-environmental trends and find more advanced strategic solutions for our clients...Additional positive outcomes were evidenced by increased levels of staff and client understanding of the methodology and increased usage of this approach due to its ability to obtain strategic solutions in a rapidly changing business environment”.*

Executive Director, OMD (UK)

Additionally, a similar Scenario Planning project and CPD training involved Bell Pottinger, a leading public relations company. This project has yet to be written up, and evidence of actionable research is currently being collected. However, the broad direction of

this instrumental impact evidence will demonstrate how the Government of Abu Dhabi used Scenario Planning to develop capacity building capabilities in strategic communications with their senior executives.

## CONCLUSIONS

If media management is to flourish in the years ahead, it should consider the benefits of theoretical development working in tandem with a consideration of knowledge that is actionable and produces high levels of implementable validity and instrumental impact.

The case studies presented in this paper demonstrate an innovative research agenda that examined the strategy, practice and performance effects of media firms during digital transition. The research has made a demonstrable impact on UK Communications policy and regulation decisions relating to Sky Plc and influenced the public policy debate on future internet regulation. The research findings have also created financial benefits for several world class management consultancies, which has resulted in direct economic impacts in terms of new jobs and multi-million pound investments made by leading FTSE 100 firms. The significance of this research has also extended outside the UK with a number of Middle East Government agencies changing their strategy practices, operational structures and capacity building capabilities in strategic communications.

Mierzejewska (2018, p.29) argued that media management researchers needed to engage media practitioners with their research and “help them solve problems” which in turn would increase the relevance of media management as an academic field. Furthermore, she argued that a single minded focus on theoretical development results in a “self-perpetuating” view of a phenomenon. If we act on the argument of Argyris (2003) and learn about organisational phenomena and aim to “action” our research, then we as media management researchers will be better positioned to understand and explain issues that practitioners face every day in their working lives.

It follows then, that the media management academy needs to concentrate on generating knowledge that is *useful* rather than generalisable. As we have seen in the discussion above, much of the research was actionable and produced high levels of instrumental impact. Yet none of the findings are generalisable. The research has, however, resulted in high levels of implementable validity, where theory has been used to create actionable knowledge. Creating actionable knowledge, implementable validity and

instrumental impact is unlikely to occur without the ongoing engagement of a range of stakeholders. As Oliver (2017) noted, academics need to emphasise the *relevance and currency* of their work in both academic and professional practice networks to ensure that you have something to ‘sell’. That something is *new knowledge* that has the potential to create instrumental impact by influencing organisational practice or industry bodies and policymakers. An added benefit to this approach is that academics who actively engage in networking activities are far more likely to produce more innovative research.

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