

Behind the Scenes: Online Magazines' Initiatives

towards Staff and the Audience.

An Analysis of +31Mag Magazine

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how online magazines have adapted to the current market after decades of digitalisation of the industry. More precisely, it examines current online magazines' internal dynamics in terms of their way of organising the staff and in their relationship with the audience. Literature, theories and studies related to the fields of the creative industries, digital media and magazine industry, have led to the establishment of a theoretical framework. The theoretical framework has served to guide the empirical analysis that was based on the data gathered during field observation, interviews and web analysis. This thesis has selected *+31Mag* as the case study, an online magazine based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The thesis was divided into two independent parts, one concerning the internal staff's organisation and the other regarding the relationship with the audience. Both chapters open with the theoretical frameworks and then proceed with empirical investigation. The research reveals that online publications have adapted to digital change by adopting extremely flexible models of organisation. Models of pyramidal hierarchies have left space to horizontal structures of organisation in which autonomy is largely provided to workers, and low levels of control are exerted. The relationship with audiences has become increasingly complex, especially for from small to middle size publications that are more influenced by audiences' behaviours. I conclude that the magazine industry has entered a new era, and new editorial staff organisational models, as well as new models of interaction with the audience, are emerging.

KEYWORDS

Creative Industries, Online Magazines, Digital Media, Staff Management, Creative Workplaces, Audience Agency, Social Media, Trolling.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction to the Topic

It is currently widely recognised that digitisation has severely transformed the magazine industry on all three different levels of production, dissemination, and consumption (Van Der Haak 2023; Hofer 35; Pavlik 230, 234, 236). Accordingly, scholars and experts have been investigating this phenomenon for decades, and as a result, proposing the most varied perspectives. One example is the very optimistic theory by Van Der Haak et al., claiming that in the future there will be "better journalism and more independent journalists" (Van Der Haak et al. 2023). Scholars such as Scott Reinardy, on the contrary, believe that the open nature of the internet and the "quick and easy Web format" will eventually lead to the decline of the industry (Reinardy 77).

Whatever the perspective, technological developments have undeniably resulted in the emergence of new challenges as well as new opportunities that have significantly reshaped the industry. Among these challenges and opportunities, a demand for a faster and larger production has appeared on one hand, and an availability of fewer financial resources on the other, which seems to be one of the most significant (Hofer 35-36). Indeed, even if getting published is nowadays easier than ever (Everett 108), finding a stable and financially sustainable job within the sector is an extremely arduous process (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 12-122). As a result, offering to work for free is the most commonly used strategy in order to access the industry. Consequently, more and more amateurs and inexperienced creative workers do unpaid internships and collaborations with the hope of eventually finding employment in the sector (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 114-116). Publications, whether due to economic necessity or personal interests, commonly take advantage of the availability of this free labour (Hesmondhalgh 76).

Besides, the audience, due to the increasing interactive nature of digital media, has gained new forms of agency in the course of the last decades. Recent researches on the field have shown that this new power acquired by users can benefit online publications (Carvajal et al. 640-641), as well as negatively affect them (Golf-Papez and Veer 1336-1337). As a result, digital media has had to find the right strategies to enhance the positive forms of audience engagement, while at the same time limiting the negative ones.

As a consequence of these transformations within the industry, new hierarchies and internal organisational strategies are being established (Rosamund and Sigthorsson 224-225), additionally, new models of interaction between publications and audiences are emerging (Hesmondhalgh 242). However, how and in which modalities this is occurring remains a question.

1.2. Research Question

Through the use of theory, observation, interviews and interpretation, this thesis has aimed at filling the academic gap regarding the internal dynamics towards staff and audience in online magazines. This has been carried out by expanding on already existing research regarding the impact of digitalisation on the magazine industry. These existing studies were taken into consideration as a starting point; not with the intention of adding theory to them, but by developing a more contemporary analysis while still considering them.

More importantly, the magazine industry during this thesis is considered at its very current stage, neither in comparison with its print tradition, nor in its process of digitalisation. This thesis has, in fact, aimed at investigating current online magazines' internal dynamics in the midst of the digital era. It has examined current models and both organisational and communicative strategies within online publications, intentionally focusing on a recently founded magazine without any previous printed tradition.

Accordingly, +31Mag, a five years old online magazine based in Amsterdam, was chosen as the sole case study. Since this research aimed at posing detailed questions and reaching precise responses, an in-depth exploration of a single case study was considered as the most appropriated solution. Besides, naturalistic inquiry, a deeply immersive qualitative method of research that involves field observation and interviews, was selected to guide the research.

In particular, this thesis intends to answer the following question: *How are online magazines responding to the current market challenges and opportunities at the levels of their structural organisation and their relationship with the audience?*

In order to find the answer, more detailed questions have guided the research. With regard to the section concerning the internal structure, it has been explored *how the staff structure is organised and what staff management strategy is in use*. Additionally, to understand the relationship with the audience, *the modalities of interactions between +31Mag and its readership, the ways users positively and negatively affect the publication, and the strategies in use to manage audience's misbehaviour* have been examined.

This thesis' body has been divided into two separated parts, one regarding the internal organisation and the other regarding the relationship with the audience. Lastly, a conclusive chapter has provided final reflections, criticism and insights for future research. The transcriptions of the interviews are available in the appendix at the end of the research.

1.3. *Previous Research and Relevance within the Field*

As mentioned above, this thesis has aimed at compensating the lack of academic sources regarding online magazines' organisational strategies towards staff and audience. Moreover, it has led a strictly contemporary analysis. The following section provides an

outline of previous studies in the field and explains the importance of doing research in said industry.

In an article dated back to 2000, the American academic John Pavlik proposed that the impact of technology on the industry has affected four main areas: the work practice, the content, the structure and organization of newsrooms, and finally, the relationships between editorial staff and audiences (Pavlik 229). However, since then, both the academic and the public discourse have focused almost exclusively on the first two points: the work as an individual practice and the quality of content.

Only to mention some sources, researches such as *Skills Are Not Enough* by Hugo de Burgh, *Negotiating Writers Rights: Freelance Cultural Labour and the Challenge of Organizing* by Nicole S. Cohen, *Is The Internet Changing Journalism Too Much?* by Jennifer Hofer, and *Freelance Journalists as a Flexible Workforce in Media Industries* by Maria Edstrom and Martina Ladendorf, are a few examples of the aforementioned focus on the profession's new practices. In regard to the quality of content, on the other hand, *The Future of Journalism: Networked Journalism* by Bregtje Van Der Haak, Micheal Parks and Manuel Castells, *The Public Quality of Popular Journalism: developing a normative framework* by Irene Costera Meijer, and *Need for Speed onto Internet Clashes with Journalistic Values* by Scott Reinardy are just a tiny portion of sources concerning the quality of content.

The above listed are exclusively academic examples. If the articles published in newspapers and magazines themselves are included, the sources become countless. "Journalism Faces a Crisis Worldwide we Might be Entering a New Dark Age" published by Margaret Simons in *The Guardian*, "Should the Government Determine what Counts as Quality Journalism?" in *The Economist*, and "The Only Way is Ethics: Editorial Independence Cuts both Ways" by Will Gore in *The Independent* are, again, only three of the many examples.

Notwithstanding, when it comes to the staff structure and the interaction with the audience, academic sources significantly reduce. The two articles *The Impact of Technology on Journalism* by Pavlik and *Redefining User Involvement in Digital News Media* by Arne H. Krumsvik mention the need for new research on these other two aspects of doing online journalism. However, they keep the conversation to a general and mostly introductory level without really providing any explanation to, or description of, the current situation.

The impact of technology on the magazine industry has been mostly studied from a perspective that compares the time before and after digitalisation. Some examples of this tendency are *New Media, Old News* edited by Natalie Fenton, *Information and Communication Technologies and the Geography of Magazine Print Publishing* by Stephen Driver and Andrew Gillespie, *The Silent Revolution: How Digitalization Transforms Knowledge, Work, Journalism and Politics Without Making Too Much Noise* by Mercedes Bunz, and *Post-Digital Print, The Mutation of Publishing since 1894* by Alessandro Ludovico.

These works provide an outline of the history of magazines and delineate the differences between printed and digital magazines. However, by focusing on the comparison with traditional means and dynamics, these texts tend to excessively focus on the past. As a consequence, their approach fails to understand the tendencies that are completely unrelated to the traditional print magazine industry. Additionally, they seem not to recognise that the process of digitalisation of magazines began decades ago and the period of transition on which they focus is largely over. In fact, the phenomenon of digitalisation is already so advanced that it seems impossible to think of a magazine without an online presence. It is conceivable that the studies interested in current dynamics should be able to move beyond their relationship with the past.

If carried on with a more contemporary focus, further investigation on these aspects would update and add knowledge to the existing studies in the field. This knowledge, in turn, is necessary for the development of new solutions and hopefully for the establishment of new models of more sustainable and reliable journalism. An analysis of the strategies in place and their effectiveness can lead to the outline of the initiatives that work properly and of those that need improvement. Lastly, such research might be valuable to new projects and emerging magazines that have recently entered the market and need guidance.

1.4. Literature Review

The aim of this section is to delineate the background literature, definitions and theories necessary to the development of the subsequent analysis. It provides a theoretical justification of some of the terms, theories and studies used in the course of this research. At the same time, it traces an overview of the main tendencies within the industry. More specifically, it explains the position of magazines within the broader field of the creative industries, the process of digitisation and lastly, the choice of the present research method.

1.4.1. Creative Industries or Cultural Industries?

The term creative industries is nowadays broadly used, especially in the academical discourse (Hartley ix). Yet, as explained by theorists themselves, there is still uncertainty about which exact conditions are needed for a sector to be considered part of the larger field (Hartley ix; Hesmondhalgh 11-14). Hesmondhalgh, for instance, prefers adopting the term cultural industries over the more widespread creative industries (Hesmondhalgh 22). He marks the crucial role these industries have “in affecting relations between culture and economics, texts and industry, meaning and function” (Hesmondhalgh 23).

John Hartley, on the contrary, prefers applying the most common term creative industries. Nevertheless, in *Key Concepts for the Creative Industries*, he recognises the cultural relevance as an essential part of their distinctive features (Hartley 59). According to his definition, “the creative industries field is an interdisciplinary amalgam that draws from the humanities, the creative arts, technology studies and the social sciences” (Hartley ix). More interestingly,

[the creative industries] connects two key contemporary policy clusters: on the one hand, high-growth information and communications technologies and research and development (R&D)-based sectors (production); and on the other, the ‘experience’ economy, cultural identity and social empowerment (consumption) (Hartley 59).

Likewise, in her book *Introducing the Creative Industries: From Theory to Practice*, Rosamund Davies favours the term creative industries. According to her, the creative industries are services that offer “experiences” (Davies 1). More in detail, she claims that they involve a “tremendous range of economic activity” that “arises from the creation of pleasure and meaning” (Davies 1). In her opinion, these include the most varied spectrum of sectors, from video games to companies such as Starbucks (Davies 1).

The term creative industries seems to be overall more comprehensive than Hesmondhalgh’s cultural industries notion. However, they are not in total contrast. All creative industries theorists, indeed, agree on two main aspects. First of all, the creative industries manage, organise, and disseminate culture and information. Second of all, they are driving forces behind social, industrial, and cultural changes (Hesmondhalgh 33; Hartley 59-61; Rosamund 1).

However, there is another fundamental difference implied in the two terms: the role innovation plays within the industries. In fact, both Hartley and Davies give much more

relevance to this concept than Hesmondhalgh does in *The Cultural Industries*. According to Hartley, the creative industries would not survive without innovation (Hartley 112-114). Similarly, Davies believes that creative industries' "outputs" are innovation themselves (Davies 4). In her book, the adjective "creative" was chosen because it "shifts the focus away from arts and heritage as 'core' elements", which she believes it highlights the two primary functions of these industries: innovation and transformation (Davies 14).

Accordingly, this study has used the term creative industries because it is more inclusive, innovation-oriented, and has a broader academic recognition than the alternative. However, Hesmondhalgh's works will be equally taken into consideration due to their relevance within the field.

1.4.2. *Creative Industries and Magazine Industry*

The print and electronic publishing field is considered an integral part of the creative industries by all theorists, even by the more selective Hesmondhalgh (Hesmondhalgh 12-14). Magazines and newspapers are often given privileged space within creative industries' books and manuals. This is conceivably because publishing has been one of the industries that is most affected by digital change. In fact, for innovation and technology-oriented studies such as those related to the creative industries, the publishing field makes a great case study.

Davies alone mentions the words newspapers and magazines 126 times in *Introducing the Creative Industries*. In addition, she devotes three chapters to the investigation of some related topics: "Production and Mass Production: The Print Revolution" (Davies 31), "Commissioning and the business of magazine publishing" (Davies 187), and "Case study: the jobbing writer — how does a freelancer get published, online and in print?" (Davies 189). Similarly, Hesmondhalgh mentions magazines and newspapers 150 times during his book *The Cultural Industries* and he dedicates two entire

chapters to the field: “Managing creative autonomy: magazines” (Hesmondhalgh 86) and “Magazines: is the reader everything?” (Hesmondhalgh 201). Lastly, Hartley, among examples and case studies, uses the two words a total of 29 times in Key Concepts.

Notwithstanding this constant presence, one could argue that there is no lack of journalism or literary studies more suitable for the study of the magazine industry. However, as seen above, journalism studies tend to focus on the work practice and the quality of content, and literary studies are mostly interested in the narrative and language of texts. On the contrary, this research has made an effort to surpass the analysis of content and understand the organisational and industrial dynamics within the field. Specifically, it has used a perspective that locates magazines into a broader context. The use of creative industries’ theories has allowed this research to develop an analysis that is aware of the cultural, as well as industrial, implications.

1.4.3. *Digitisation or Digitalisation?*

The contemporary publishing field cannot be studied without considering the process of digitisation it has been going through during the last decades. Yet, as noticed in an article written by Jason Bloomberg for the magazine *Forbes*, nobody seems to know how to clearly define and distinguish the two terms ‘digitisation’ and ‘digitalisation’ (Bloomberg). According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, digitalisation is “the conversion of text, pictures, or sound into a digital form that can be processed by a computer” (“Digitalisation”). Without diminishing the *Oxford Dictionary*’s expertise, I find this definition inaccurate. As Bloomberg explains, the term digitalisation does not refer to the passage from the analogical formats to the digital ones. This transition is actually the definition of digitisation (Forbes). Digitalisation is an “ongoing process” (Bloomberg). It refers to the continuous dynamics of adaptations to digital formats and strategies that industries are continuously undergoing.

The two academics Scott Brennen and Daniel Kreiss, quoted in Bloomberg's article, describe digitalisation "as the way in which many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures" (Bloomberg). This definition is sensibly more dynamic than the previous one provided by the *Oxford Dictionary*. However, by putting the focus exclusively on the social sphere, it still fails at describing the whole picture. As many creative industries' theorists such as Hartley, Davies and Hesmondhalgh suggest in their theories, digitalisation does not regard only the social domains. On the contrary, the cultural and economic spheres are equally involved. Accordingly, this work has referred to digitalisation as the process of technological change driven by varied forces that determine, and are determined by, social, economic, and cultural change.

1.4.4. *Digitalisation in Magazines: An Overview*

In the book *Digitisation Perspectives*, Melissa M. Terras argues that the boom of digitisation that occurred during the 1990s was the consequence of the encounter of two different, yet connected, forces: the increase and improvement of new technologies on the one hand, and the raise of public awareness for their potential on the other hand (Terras 9). These improvements and awareness's notably persisted and expanded in the course of the subsequent century, reaching their peak in the last few years (Terras 9). In an attempt to ulteriorly expand this progress, governments, industries and institutions from all over the world have been focusing their efforts on campaigns of digitisation (Terras 14-15). Nowadays, this "hype around digital transformation" (Bloomberg) is showing no signs of slowing down, and still majorly affects today's markets and societies.

The relevance of technology within the creative industries is broadly recognised by theorists, especially by Hartley (Hartley 157) and Hesmondhalgh (Hesmondhalgh 410). In particular, the latter declares that digitalisation could never "be a minor part about change and continuity in the cultural industries" (Hesmondhalgh 376). This explains why, in order

to survive current markets, these industries have no choice but to evolve accordingly to the digital progress. In this regard, W. Brian Arthur theory of *Combinatorial Evolution* is particularly interesting. According to Arthur, evolution is a process that connects the past with the present in a dynamic relationship depending on exchange and heritage (Arthur 14). This theory, according to Arthur, particularly applies to technology, since this “must descend in some way from the technologies that preceded them” (Arthur 18).

Arthur’s Combinatorial Evolution well explains the tension between old and new practices in journalism. As Davies explains, the aims of journalism of informing and entertaining remained unaffected by digital change (Davies 5-6). However, the modalities of production and dissemination of content deeply transformed, to the point that “media convergence, online distribution and increased interactivity have fostered new products, practices and identities” (Davies 6). Digital media, magazines included, had to drastically modify their practices (Davies 177). At the same time, as Arthur’s theory suggests, there are traces from the past that still remain visible in the industry.

Tim Holmes, in his chapter *Electronic Publishing and Electronic Journalism*, observes two primary differences between printed and online magazines. One is the rhythms of production, the other is the “identity of the consumer” (Holmes 153). Holmes’ intuition is particularly foresighted, especially if considering that is from 2000s (Holmes 147). At that time, in fact, the majority of people, even experts, did not yet realise the scale of the impact that new technologies would have on industries (Holmes 147). Nowadays, magazine writers need to have a broader range of skills than they needed before (Holmes 156). Writing skills, in fact, are not enough. As a journalist, it is necessary to learn how to use digital programs, social media, and of course, have a great knowledge of the Internet (Davies 6). Moreover, publications need to engage with the audience at levels never experienced before (Davies 191). This implies having a solid presence on social media

and publishing not only several times per day, but also in the right moments (Davies 188; Holmes 153).

1.4.5. *Communication and Magazines*

During the process of digitisation, newspapers and magazines experienced a deep crisis from which they did not yet completely recover. This does not come as surprise if considering that the discipline most affected by digital change is also the greatest journalism's weapon: communication.

Intellectuals and scholars began to reflect on the importance of developing a communication theory since the appearance of linguistic structuralism in Europe and formalism in Russia (Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies* 32). Interestingly, its multidisciplinary nature was recognised since the origins. The subject was, in fact, seen as the result of a combination between “disciplines as diverse as literature, mathematics and engineering, sociology, and psychology” (Craig 121).

However, communication became a primary object of study only after the Second World War, when businessmen understood its utility for their commercial activities (Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies* 32-33). From that moment, “[i]t followed that business needed communication, the more scientific [...], the better” (Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies* 33).

Thanks to its multidisciplinary essence, communication is deeply influenced by social and cultural change. As a consequence, the advent of new digital technologies into people's everyday life highly affected it (Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies* 34). With it, journalism, that cannot exist without effective means of communication, had to change accordingly (Lundén 77). Yet, the process of adaptation was not unhindered. Many magazines that were extremely popular in the past have failed or barely survived the end of the twentieth century because they were unable to face

digital change's challenges ("The Loss of Newspapers and Readers"). Even today, where this process will finally lead to in the future "is still an open and contentious question" (Hesmondhalgh et al 127).

1.4.6. *Audience and the Creative Industries*

New communication dynamics have led to a growing phenomenon, mostly affecting especially digital media, especially audience agency (Hartley 12-14). In fact, the technological revolution has led not only to new information technologies, but also to new commercial and cultural models in which the audience is provided with tools for the interaction (Potts et al. 549). As a consequence, audience progressively evolved from a function of exclusively passive consumption to one of creative production (Hartley 16). In the article "Consumer Co-creation and Situated Creativity, Industry and Innovation", Potts et al. sustain that the "user-generated content" is one of the most evident cultural products of this age (Potts et al. 549). This term refers to the new attained audience's agency in the generation of content within digital industries (Potts et al. 460). From this perspective, consumers, enabled by the opportunities given by new web-based technologies, "enter into the process of both production and innovation" (Potts et al. 459).

As Hartley points out, audience agency is even more evident in the creative industries as they constitute a market in which the supply precedes the demand (Hartley 12). This specific configuration implies that anticipating audience's needs and expectations is crucial to ascertain the commercial success of a product (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 200). In this field, the audience not only affects the creation and selection of content but may also determine the long-term success of a firm (Hartley 15).

In this work, the term *audience* has been generally preferred over those of *users* and *consumers* because of its more inclusive conception. However, for practical reasons, the three terms will be equally used to describe a model of customer that is an active

participant *-user-* as well as spectator – *audience-* (Hartley 14-15) and whose actions provide to a firm an at least minimum level of profit or commercial benefits *-consumer-*. In addition, the more specific terms *readers* and *readership* have been occasionally used to intend the same concept.

1.4.7. *Naturalistic Inquiry*

Innovation and transformation are fundamental elements to magazines and newspapers. This is because they are a type of cultural product that deals with the most diverse features and needs of society (Lundén 77). Therefore, as Kimmo Lundén explains in *The Death of Print? The Challenges and Opportunities facing the Print Media on the Web*, they “are created to alter with the time and society that they reflect and mirror” (Lundén 77). According to Lundén, this is why “papers have survived in one format or another every time” (Lundén 76).

In 2015, the University of Hamburg hosted the conference “Development and Sustainability in Media Business”. In this occasion, experts such as Elena Raviola, Rolf A. Lundin, and Maria Norbäck discussed digitisation in the industry. Interestingly, the paper from the aforementioned conference proposes that contemporary forms of media should not be analysed as “a project (or program) that is finished, but rather – like a marriage – a project that never ends but which develops over time” (Raviola et al.). According to this dynamic view, this thesis has selected a method of research that supports a flexible and future-oriented approach: the naturalistic inquiry.

In practical terms, this method consists of picking a relevant case study, investigating literature, collecting data through field observation, artefacts analysis and interviews and lastly, interpreting and theorising the findings (Armstrong 882). In this procedure, formulating assumptions and shaping personal interpretations are all continuous practices (Beuving and de Vries 65; Armstrong 882).

Looking at what is explained above, it emerged that in this method, the researcher is an observant but also, to a certain extent, a participant (Beuving and de Vries 76-79). Such an intrusive and interactive method of research has been chosen for multiple reasons. First of all, it favours the understanding of internal dynamics. By being involved in first person, the researcher becomes an integral part of the environment and personally interacts with the subjects. This participation assigns a privileged position to the observer that can benefit of the disclosure of personal as well as industrial internal dynamics.

Second of all, this method is sustained by a solid theory. In such an instable industry, determining a truth that is valid for all the different forms of magazines in the world would not be possible. According to Joost Beuving and Geert de Vries in *Doing Qualitative Research, The Craft of Naturalistic Inquiry*, striving for an objective and universal truth leads to general and inaccurate conclusions (Beuving and de Vries 41). Accordingly, Jan Armstrong in the article “Naturalistic Inquiry” observes that “[f]or the naturalistic inquirer, objectivity and detachment are neither possible nor desirable” (Armstrong 886). When doing naturalistic inquiry, the researcher must be aware of the subjective and intersubjective nature of qualitative research (Beuving and de Vries 77-78; Armstrong 886). As a consequence, the naturalistic researcher’s aim is not to reach an objective truth, but to achieve an outcome that is valid only if considered in the situation, context, and time in which the research occurred (Beuving and de Vries 77-78; Armstrong 886-887). In addition, the naturalistic approach is “holistic and comprehensive” (Armstrong 889). In accordance with the research’s intention to consider +31Mag in the broader field of the creative industries, this method hopes “to tell the whole story, in context” (Armstrong 889).

1.5. Methodology

For the reasons explained above, naturalistic inquiry was considered the most appropriate method of research for this study. Accordingly, a specific procedure has been followed during the development of this work. The first step consisted in finding the object of inquiry, which means developing a precise research question and finding a suitable case study to analyse (Beuving and de Vries 17). Specifically, as written above, the object of my inquiry is to understand how magazines organise themselves both at the structural level and the level of their engagement with the audience. The case study chosen is the online magazine *+31Mag*, a decision that will be justified more in-depth under the following heading *Case Study* in section 1.6 below. Once the question and the case study are determined, the following passage is to select the “sensitizing concepts” (Beuving and de Vries 71). This passage consists in recognising the keywords and concepts of relevance related to the topic that the inquirer intends to treat. In the case of this research, the elements selected were *creativity*, *autonomy* and *control* in the part related to the staff. In regard to the section relating to the audience, the sensitising concepts chosen were *audience engagement* and *audience misbehaviour*, more specifically *trolling*.

After having identified these concepts, the research proceeded with the “saturation of theory”, meaning that theories and literature related to the keywords have been compared and analysed (Beuving and de Vries 17). This led to the establishment of theoretical frameworks that have guided the subsequent empirical analysis.

As briefly mentioned, doing empirical analysis according to naturalistic inquiry’s parameters implies field observation, interviews and the observation of artefacts (Beuving and de Vries 87-89). The field observation, in this case, has been developed during the last months, specifically in December and January, when I personally went to *+31Mag*’s office to take notes and interact with the staff members. In fact, as Beuving and de Vries explain, interaction and active participation are two essential aspects of this method

(Beuving and de Vries 78). Once enough data was collected, I proceeded with the interviews. Interviews are essential to naturalistic inquiry as, thanks to in-depth analysis, the researcher can confirm or deny the assumptions developed during the field observation.

The founder Massimiliano Sfregola and the newsroom coordinator Steve Rickinson were considered the most appropriated figures to interview. In fact, they cover the managerial roles within the publication and have an overall view of *+31Mag's* internal dynamics. Besides, they are the two points of reference for the other staff members and the relationship with the magazine's audience. Moreover, it should be noted that for reasons of privacy the names of the other staff members mentioned have been modified. This applies particularly to an intern that has been used as a negative example. In this work, I will refer to him as "Paul". The fictitious names will be marked in italics so as to be distinguished from the real ones.

The interviews done according to naturalistic inquiry slightly differ from the commonly known form of interviewing. As in the case of every qualitative type of research, naturalistic interviews consist of open questions that stimulate personal and discursive answers (Beuving and de Vries 92-93). However, as suggested by the name itself, a good interview according to these parameters is extremely natural and spontaneous, similar to a conversation (Beuving and de Vries 89). The inquirer is allowed to give their opinion, provide comments, and, if necessary, gain the trust of the interviewee and share their personal experiences (Beuving and de Vries 103). This explains the extremely friendly and discursive tone of the interviews, and the choice to refer to them by their names, not by surnames. Moreover, using their names over the surnames will switch the focus from them as individuals to them as representatives of the respective common categories of magazine founder and newsroom coordinator. However, the introduction will make an exception and their complete names will be used.

The last step to gather all the data necessary to develop the naturalistic empirical research is the observation of artefacts. This consists in the analysis of a “selection from documents, photographs or other cultural artefacts” that are somehow connected to the objects and subjects of study (Beuving and de Vries 17; 113). The artefacts taken into consideration for this particular research were the official company website and social media pages. These have been observed with the aim to have a broader view of +31Mag’s brand identity and relationship with the audience.

The final passage of the empirical research is the “inductive analysis” (Beuving and de Vries 162). This involves the integration of all the data gathered with personal yet theoretically justified interpretations. Accordingly, in the two central chapters, field and website and social media observation were integrated with interviews and analysed together.

Lastly, a short note about the writing style should be mentioned. The naturalist inquiry writing style overlaps with the journalistic writing style (Beuving and de Vries 176). The language used, for instance, is the everyday language, the same used in journalistic writing. Moreover, they are both descriptive and rely on field observation and interviews. However, as opposed to journalism, naturalistic inquiry has an ambition in theory-formulating (Beuving and de Vries 47). This modifies not only the overall tone of the text, but also the focus and aim of it.

1.6. *The Case Study*

As mentioned above, +31Mag has been chosen as the only case study for this research. Selecting the case study is one of the most complex decisions to make when doing naturalistic inquiry, especially due to the multiplicity of aspects to take into consideration before proceeding. Relevance within the field, accessibility and availability of

sources are essential factors to conduct such analysis. This section provides a brief description of *+31Mag* and justifies its appropriateness to this research's purpose.

+31Mag, founded in 2014 by the Italian journalist Massimiliano Sfregola, is an online magazine based in Amsterdam. This project was born from the intention of representing the “outsider’s view” (“31mag”) of the Netherlands. More specifically, it gives a voice to expat and immigrant communities living in the country, with a focus on Italian immigrants. This project provides Netherlands-related news of actuality, social, and cultural interest mostly in Italian and English. Its objective is to democratise the Dutch informative media to include even those who do not know the language of the host country and might feel ostracized.

This magazine has appeared as the most appropriate choice. Firstly, because of its awareness of the social, practical, and cultural changes that occurred in the publishing field during the last years. This is particularly true because of the specific time and conditions under which this start-up was born. Indeed, *+31Mag* was founded in 2014, when the internet had already largely struck the publishing field, significantly revolutionizing it. Without any recognised heritage to legitimize its presence on the publishing scene, this magazine had to impose itself on the marketplace by following, and at the same time taking advantage of, the ‘web rules’ since the very first moment. In fact, during its 5 years of activity, *+31Mag* has been largely experimenting to adapt to the constant changes affecting the industry.

Secondly, the young environment that characterise this magazine facilitates a forward-looking attitude that is particularly visible in the publication’s flexible organisation and willingness to improve. For instance, workshops regarding current journalism-related news, both from a cultural and marketing perspective, are often held within the staff. Similarly, focus groups and meetings, held with the aim to elaborate new strategies, are

very frequent. In addition, the founder has previous work experiences with other digital media, meaning he is particularly aware of the contemporary scene.

Since the number of followers and degree of engagement are constantly increasing, +31Mag is the ideal example for the investigation of the latest and upcoming tendencies within the sector. As written in the aforementioned conference *Development and Sustainability in Media Business*, “de-learning seems to be needed to handle traditions and finding new avenues for profitability involves re-learning” (Raviola et al.). According to this perspective, traditional media of information had to undergo a deep and still ongoing transformation in order “to adapt to the swiftly changing markets” (Raviola et al.). Experts, such as Elena Raviola, Rolf A. Lundin, and Maria Norbäck, see at the base of this transformation the necessity ‘to reset’ and cut ties with tradition (Raviola et al.). According to this perspective, +31Mag, that is aware of the latest developments and has no strings attached to the traditional print model, seems particularly suitable for such research.

Lastly, +31Mag’s internal information is easily accessible, a necessary aspect to conduct a naturalistic inquiry. Transparency is a fundamental aspect of this magazine to the point that it often shares private data with the audience. Moreover, I have known part of the staff for months due to my experience as an intern within the organisation. These two factors have allowed me to have easy access to all the material necessary and to investigate without causing any discomfort to the staff or troubling the naturalness of the work environment.

1.7. *Annotated Bibliography*

This thesis has considered online magazines as an integral part of the creative industries and therefore subject to the same issues, changes, and common features. However, creative industries’ theories have been integrated with studies on digital media and the magazine industry. Accordingly, I will consider several books that have contributed

to building the discourse around the creative industries and new publishing dynamics alongside academic articles that focus on particular topics in more detail. This section provides an overview of the main sources that have been used to develop this research.

As principal theoretical resources, I have referred to *Creative Labour, Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*, by David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *The Cultural Industries*, always written by David Hesmondhalgh, and finally *Introducing the Creative Industries*, by Davies Rosamund and Gauti Sigthorsson. These three texts have provided the main theories related to the industry. Hesmondhalgh, Baker, Davies and Gauti analyse the management of autonomy, creativity and commerce, creative workplaces, structures and patterns, and the division of labour and working conditions within the field. Besides, they also furnish reflections about digitisation, audience agency, online readers, the relation between creative companies and consumers, and the phenomenon of user created content.

Even if *Creative Labour* was published in 2011 and *The Cultural Industries* and *Introducing the Creative Industries* in 2013, these books remain the most complete and insightful manuals about the creative industries. In fact, they are broadly used as school texts in related university programmes and continue to be frequently quoted in the latest articles and research within the field. The same applies to *Key Concepts in Creative Industries* by John Hartley, published in 2013, and *The Science of Human Innovation, Explaining Creativity* by R. Keith Sawyer, from 2012. While the former provides a glossary of terms and concepts relevant to the field, such as audience, co-creation, technology, creativity, and productivity, the latter gives insights about creativity within workplaces.

Alongside these books, multiple academic articles have been used to deepen a few specific concepts addressed in the course of the research. With regards to creativity in the workplace and the influence of digitisation on the staff structure and the division of labour,

“The Impact of Technology on Journalism” by John Pavlik and “Need for Speed onto Internet Clashes with Journalistic Values” by Scott Reinardy are the texts of reference.

For the area concerning the relationship with audience, the articles “Crowdfunding and Non-Profit Media” by Miguel Carvajal, José Garcia-Aviles, and José Gonzalez and “Towards an integrated crowdsourcing definition” by Enrique Estellès-Arolas and Fernando Gonzalez-Ladron-de-Guevara have been consulted alongside with “Redefining User Involvement in Digital News Media” by Arne H. Krumsvik. With regard to the phenomenon of ‘trolling’ and user misbehaviour, “Don’t Feed the Troll!” by Amy Binns and to “Don’t Feed the Trolling: Rethinking how Online Trolling is being Defined and Combated” by Maja Golf-Papez and Ekant Veer have been used.

For the methodology, the manual *Doing Qualitative Research, The Craft of Naturalistic Inquiry* by Joost Beuving and Geert de Vries, and the article “Naturalistic Inquiry” by Jan Armstrong have been used to guide the research. Finally, the notes from the field observation, interviews and the observation of the website and social media pages have been mentioned and quoted as part of the research material.

Chapter 2: Internal Organisation in Online Magazines

2.1. Introduction

The diversity of backgrounds, skills and levels of participation among current employees have led to the establishment of highly complex models of staff structures. This phenomenon, in turn, has resulted in an "increasing complexity of the division of labour", described by Hesmondhalgh as "one of the most crucial features of this era" (66-67). A clear consequence of such an 'unstructured structure' of the internal organisation of staff is the blurring of hierarchies.

Hierarchies in the creative industries have always been more flexible than in other more traditional types of businesses, but this tendency has been evolving much further in the last years (Davies 100; Hesmondhalgh 108). Nowadays, after about fifty years from the beginning of the digital age ("What is Digital Age"), online journalism is entering a new establishment phase (Davies 224-225) characterised by new models of internal organisation.

This chapter aims at investigating the new internal dynamics in online magazines by conducting an analysis firstly theoretical and successively empirical. Correspondingly, literature and theories are examined and interpreted to propose an analytical model that is then applied to the case study through the use of field observation notes, interviews and the website observation.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

When it comes to internal organisational strategies in the creative industries, theorists share different approaches and perspectives with each other, as well as put emphasise on various aspects and criteria. However, when looking at Hesmondhalgh, Baker, Hartley, Davies and Sawyer's works, it is notable that, notwithstanding the different

focuses and attitudes towards the topic, three main sensitising concepts recur continuously in their works: *creativity*, *autonomy* and *control*.

Accordingly, in this section, it is argued that the examination of the ways the three factors influence the functioning of a magazine's staff, and the modalities that are managed within a newsroom are key to understand and evaluate a publication's internal organisation. Before proceeding, a few questions will be answered to clarify in which terms these three concepts will be considered in the course of the research: What do they refer to within the context of the creative industries? In which terms are they so relevant? How can they be assessed in the managerial strategies applied in magazine workplaces? Even if each concept will be initially treated separately, it is essential to notice that they are always interconnected and interdependent and therefore cannot be considered individually.

2.3. *Creativity*

According to Hartley, stimulating and directing employees' creativity has always been one of the creative industries' most significant challenges in the internal management of work environments (63). It should be noted that, as creative workers, journalists and magazine writers do not only provide mere "existing stock of knowledge" but add new values to them (Hartley 127) by contributing to the production of symbols and meaning (Hesmondhalgh 259). Specifically, they do so by analysing, interpreting, and proposing a specific way to present facts and knowledge to the audience. It follows that creativity is essential to journalists. A lack of creativity would end up damaging the individual performance of the writer and eventually the quality of magazine contents (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 203). In order to prevent this from happening, there are different aspects that managers might consider when planning an internal organisational strategy.

According to Sternberg and Lubart's *investment model*, explained by Sawyer, there are six factors that determine individual creativity: "intelligence, knowledge, cognitive style, motivation, personality and environmental context" (83). When looking at this list, it is conceivable that intelligence, knowledge, cognitive style and personality are unlikely to be affected by a managerial strategy. This is due to their extraordinarily subjective and often innate nature. On the contrary, motivation and environmental contexts are easier influenced, and their manipulation might open a space for improvements and changes in employees' work performance. For instance, it can be assumed that taking care of employees' individual needs and providing financial as well as social rewards might boost employees' motivation. Correspondingly, a specific style of interior design, background music or the encouragement of social activities outside the workplace among colleagues might affect environmental contexts.

In this regard, Sawyer sustains that the nature of the final goal somebody aims for during the creative process might affect somebody's creative abilities. Accordingly, he stated that in order to achieve the best from the creator's creative skills, said goal should be neither extremely difficult nor too simple (78). If applied to a managerial strategy, this theory might mean that the tasks given to employees should be challenging but not impossible according to their competence. Moreover, Sawyer believes that encouraging new collaborations among people that are not acquainted with each other might also increase creativity. By shifting collaborations often, "a person is more likely to acquire new information from a weak tie than a strong tie because strongly connected nodes tend to have the same sources and share the same information" (Sawyer 259).

All this considered, this section suggests that in order to understand the modalities with which a publication manages its employees' creativity, the research should focus on two main aspects. One is the strategies applied in order to increase workers' motivation on the three levels of how the publication tries to meet their personal needs, how it rewards

them, and the nature of the tasks they are required to accomplish. The other is the analysis of the work environment, at the level of actual physical environment, as the building, the interior design, and the area chosen on the one hand, and at the social level on the other one, in the sense of how and whether or not internal and external social activities and work collaborations are encouraged.

2.4. *Autonomy*

Since there exists a high complexity in current staff structure, it is conceivable that the examination of how employees' motivation and work environments are managed would not be sufficient to assess the functioning of an internal organisation strategy in its whole. In addition to the different factors mentioned above that influence creativity, there is one of particular relevance within creative work environments; the level of autonomy conceded to employees. Here, the concept of autonomy, since its articulated and varied sub-meanings, deserves special attention. In the creative industries discourse, autonomy is unanimously referred to not only as the freedom to express individual creativity, but also to the individual workers' liberty to personally manage their work hours (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 39; Davies 50; Hartley 63-64). Besides, in the specific case of magazines, autonomy holds an additional value in comparison to other industries; the freedom to express an opinion without being controlled or driven by profit reasons (Hesmondhalgh 244). As a consequence, the term autonomy in magazines involves three different aspects: *creative independence*, *time management autonomy* and *freedom of expression*.

Among these three connotations, the first one deserves particular attention due to its complexity. First of all, it should be noted that, although strictly connected to creativity, *creative autonomy* is a different concept and, as such, should be considered separately. While the former is an individual and personal skill (Sawyer 38), the latter is the condition that permits employees to freely express their creativity without being limited or controlled

by greater forces (Hesmondhalgh 69). In this regard, Hesmondhalgh sustains that the degree of autonomy is generally conceded differently to workers in relation to the two main stages of cultural production: *creation* and *circulation* (80). In his opinion, workers are usually allowed to have a high degree of creative autonomy during the creation process. Said process occurs when an idea is chosen, designed and executed. On the contrary, in the course of the circulation process, composed of the marketing, publicity, distribution and purchase procedures, the outcomes of the creative autonomy previously conceded are tightly controlled and reshaped by commercial purposes (Hesmondhalgh 80-81).

Despite its consistency, the model proposed by Hesmondhalgh fails to consider the limits imposed on individual workers by firms' necessity of compatibility between products and brand identity. This factor may result problematic when investigating a specific case as, since it suggests that creative autonomy is limited mostly during the circulation process, it would lead the researcher to prioritise the investigation of that moment over the creation one. On the contrary, it is conceivable that the necessity of consistency with the brand identity is likely to affect workers' creative autonomy during the creation process, when they are given the criteria required for ideating the product. In this sense, merging this thought to Hesmondhalgh's theory might lead to a more accurate and complete analysis of the modalities with which employees' creative autonomy is managed in workplaces. Thereby, this section proposes to evaluate the management of creative autonomy in workplaces by investigating to which extent brand identity and commercial interests affect workers during both the processes of creation as well as circulation.

2.5. Control

In the above section discussing the management of autonomy within creative workplaces, Hesmondhalgh and Baker provide an overview of Andrew Friedman's model of organisational control strategies developed in 1977. This model proposes two opposite

approaches used by managers to exercise authority on staff: *direct control* and *responsible autonomy* (41). The former strictly controls and limits individual workers' autonomy "by coercive threats, close supervision and minimising the responsibility of individual workers" (41). The latter, on the contrary, puts accountability directly in workers' hands, empowers them with decision making power and considers them directly responsible for their actions (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 41). Even though this theory was developed 43 years ago, the fact it continues to be considered by contemporary theorists shows that it still provides a solid frame of reference upon which to base an analysis. However, since it presents some aspects that might be inadequate for more contemporary research, it should be reinterpreted according to current dynamics.

The main criticism of Friedman's theory may be regarding the drastic dichotomy it proposes. For instance, the direct control strategy involves using threats to control employees, which can be considered a very extreme methodology that does not commonly apply to the management of current workplaces, at least not in democratic countries. The responsible autonomy strategy, on the other hand, consists of giving employees complete autonomy, which is an unrealistic option for commercial activities. In this regard, Hesmondhalgh, as well as Hartley, consider the belief of achieving full autonomy in workplaces utopian (Hesmondhalgh 79; Hartley 63-64). As seen above, running a company always requires exerting at least a minimum extent of control on employees and, as a consequence, absolute autonomy is never a real possibility.

Despite its extremism, Friedman's model provides relevant insights on the functioning of organisational control strategies. In particular, from his theory, it can be learned that the level of responsibility conceded to individual workers is a crucial aspect to determine under which level of control they are subjected. More specifically, Friedman seems to suggest an idea of responsibility within the workplace that involves two levels. The employees' degree of freedom in taking actions and making their own decisions on

the one hand, and the level to which they are being considered accountable for the consequences of their choices, on the other hand. From this perspective, the two strategies of direct control and responsible autonomy might represent the two opposite poles in the middle of which other milder forms of control strategies are located. In this scenario, an approach providing high levels of responsibility would be closer to the responsible autonomy's pole and, correspondingly, a low responsibility-based strategy would be near to the one of direct control.

By applying this criticism to Friedman's model, an analysis can be proposed that evaluates the level of control exerted in a managerial strategy based on the extent of responsibility given to individual workers, within a frame that considers the direct control and responsible autonomy approaches as extreme points of reference.

2.6. *Summation*

In this first theoretical section, new analytical models to investigate online magazines' internal dynamics have been proposed as a result of the examination of literature and theories related to the three concepts of creativity, autonomy and control within creative workplaces. With the aim of facilitating their application in empirical research, a bulleted list providing the summary of the analysis' outcomes is presented below.

- *Creativity.* The management of individual workers' creativity can be evaluated based on two main aspects involving other sub-aspects. The first one is regarding the management of workers' motivation that can be evaluated considering how their individual needs are treated, if there are any kinds of rewards meant for the staff members and the difficulty of tasks given to employees. The other one consists of the

work environment, intended at both the physical (aesthetics) and the social level (social activities, collaborations).

- *Autonomy.* The degree of autonomy conceded to employees can be understood by looking at three different aspects: the freedom of self-managing work hours, the freedom of expression and the extent to which brand identity and commercial purposes affect creative autonomy in the course of the whole system of production.
- *Control.* The intensity of control implied in an organisational strategy is classifiable by looking at the degree of responsibility given to employees. In particular, through the examination of the three levels of autonomy in taking action, making decisions and being considered accountable for their choices.

1.7. Empirical research

Before proceeding with the empirical research and the application of the theoretical frames to the case study, a brief overview of +31Mag staff's current composition will be provided. The intention is to furnish context to guarantee a more complete and more precise comprehension of the consequent analysis. This description, as well as all the empirical research, will be developed through the use of field observation notes, interviews and online research, specifically on their official website and social media platforms.

1.7.1. +31Mag Staff

+31Mag's editorial staff is mostly composed of temporary members such as collaborators, correspondents and interns who offer different degrees of participation and types of expertise. The permanent team is currently composed of five people who occupy the positions of coordinators or/and editors. At the same time, they all create content such as articles and videos. In addition to them, the webmaster and web designer might also be

considered part of the permanent staff, since they have been permanent figures since the launch of the publication. However, *+31Mag* requires their services only occasionally.

Since the publication bases its identity on ideals of multicultural openness, interns and collaborators are chosen to guarantee a varied range of voices within the magazine. As a result, the degree of diversity among staff members is unusually elevated, especially regarding education and cultural backgrounds. Steve Rickinson, an American expert in new media, currently working as newsroom coordinator in *+31Mag*, agrees with this observation: "I think that our strength is in our cultural and experiential diversity. That is probably the primary factor that I look at when I hire people or bring contributors on. I always want as many different experiences, skill sets, set of interests and perspectives as possible" (Appendix A 7). According to him, this necessity for a more internationalised focus does not regard only publications such as *+31Mag*, but, in an increasingly globalised world, is a general tendency affecting all digital media. Steve believes that an international focus is nowadays more needed than only a few years ago (Appendix A 6). This has happened because, as he explains, "borders are breaking down, and you are never really appealing to a very homogenised audience as much as you would think" (Appendix A 6). As a consequence, diversity and different cultural focuses are currently highly required in publications, "maybe just from a philosophy standpoint in the newsroom but preferably also in the actual staff's composition" (Appendix A 6).

Clearly, as visible even in the official pages, diversity is an identity matter for the publication, to the extent that, in any public description, the magazine defines itself as a "multicultural project".



Our Story

 31MAG.NL/INTERNATIONAL · SUNDAY, 8 DECEMBER 2019 ·

The international page of +31mag.nl.

+31mag is a multicultural project of participative journalism that publishes an “outsider’s view” of the Netherlands.

Fig. 1. Screenshot from +31Mag Facebook International page.
<https://www.facebook.com/31mag.nl.International/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

As a consequence of this standpoint, +31Mag's newsroom has been crossed by people from many different countries, although mostly from Italy as a significant part of content is Italian, but also from America, Greece, Spain, France, Belgium, Germany and, of course, the Netherlands. At the same time, even other elements such as the level of participation, occupations, areas of interest and expertise broadly vary among interns, collaborators and employees. For instance, one long-time collaborator used to work as a lawyer; others are translators, another one is a canoe instructor, and so forth. Additionally, there are many students from media, journalism, philosophical or cultural studies, some of which come from abroad only for an internship.

The vast majority of non-permanent staff members over permanent ones, the diversity in expertise and cultural background and the different levels of participation among employees have led +31Mag to the establishment of an extremely flexible and changeable staff structure. All these factors, in conformity with the general tendencies

within the industry, determine the publication's identity, production and organisational strategies. As a consequence, these aspects will be considered as a starting point for the subsequent analysis of creativity, autonomy and control within +31Mag.

2.8. Creativity in +31Mag

2.8.1. *Workers Motivation: Individual Needs, Rewards and Tasks*

Having such a diverse staff also implies dealing with a diverse range of issues. Especially when it comes to those interns who arrive from other countries just for the period of the internship, there is no lack of problems related to finding accommodation in a saturated housing market such as the one in Amsterdam. "As you know, we have had a lot of interns and contributors in a difficult situation. This is because at the time they were supposed to start their experience they had not found any place to stay yet", explains Steve who, along with the +31Mag's founder Massimiliano Sfregola, is in charge of dealing with these kinds of practicalities (Appendix B 4). The publication cannot afford to pay its interns and collaborators, neither to provide accommodation for those who come from abroad for an internship. Massimiliano explains to have tried governmental solutions to give interns at least a minimum wage. However, until now, nothing has worked out, and the current revenue is just enough to pay the permanent staff. However, the permanent members feel secure about their responsibility in helping them as far as they can. Firstly, the publication is transparent with applicants about the struggle of finding a place in Amsterdam and the absence of remuneration. Secondly, the permanent staff personally engages in these issues and tries to help in the research of temporary accommodation for those who cannot find it themselves.

The housing problem in Amsterdam has created quite a few issues to +31Mag's new and aspiring participants. As a consequence, at least where the English page was concerned, now applicants must already have accommodation in the area.



Fig. 2. Screenshot from +31Mag Facebook International page.
<https://www.facebook.com/31mag.nl.International/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

Italian interns, however, are an exception. Since it has plenty of content written in Italian and, as a consequence, a significant contingent of Italian readers, +31Mag needs to keep a decent portion of Italian speaking collaborators and interns. In this regard, the publication has partnerships with Italian universities such as the University of Pisa to ensure continuity of Italian speaking interns. Another exception consists of interns and collaborators who live across the Netherlands and Belgium. On the one hand, those living in other Dutch cities, who generally come from Leiden, Den Haag, Eindhoven and Nijmegen, are asked to participate in the weekly meeting preferably or to be in the newsroom at least once every one or two weeks, always concerning their availability. Those in Belgium, on the other hand, work exclusively remotely as correspondents and they generally refer to Massimiliano only or participate in the weekly newsroom meetings through Skype.

From the field observation, it has been noted that +31Mag's approach towards interns is very understanding of their needs and individual conditions, primarily when related to personal issues or school commitments. In particular, Massimiliano recognises interns' university commitments as their priority, to the point that internships have been often temporarily suspended during exam sessions, no matter the publication's necessities. During the interview, Steve also shows an interest in meeting participants' necessities, a responsibility that he perceives particularly strongly since +31Mag cannot provide them with any kind of revenue (Appendix A 4). Specifically, he highlights the importance of ensuring that everybody is gaining spendable experience and learning the profession, "whether they feel like they are really learning journalism or web publishing, or they are acquiring a network" (Appendix A 4).

The prospects of learning new skills and building a network are the most evaluated incentives for interns to work in +31Mag. As Massimiliano observes, taking the time to train interns and collaborators is a priority (Appendix B 23). However, since this requires time and effort from the already overloaded permanent staff members, this claimed interest in participant's education might seem unlikely. On the contrary, field observation has fully confirmed this attitude. When starting work there, everybody is asked which are their areas of interest, even if outside of their expertise. Also, after a short time of training generally based on translations or proofreading, everybody is an active part of the creative production, with no exceptions. Nobody is relegated to bring coffee to other people or make copies, the cliched interns' activities. Interns and collaborators can refer to a diverse team to learn new skills and be guided. In fact, there is the video production editor, the culture senior editor and, for political and social subjects and new media, Massimiliano and Steve are the two points of reference. Nonetheless, as Massimiliano specifies, the training provided by +31Mag must be integrated with a real interest and a proactive approach from interns to work best (Appendix B 23). He also notes that pushing new participants to show

initiative is part of the training itself since, as he states in the interview, “this is how the field works” (Appendix B 22).

Through the examination of the interviews and the field observation notes, it appears that in *+31Mag* participants are rewarded with the freedom of approaching any aspect of doing journalism they prefer and the chance to be involved in the creation of contents, with the following publication of their articles or videos in the official site. Interns and collaborators, even if not remunerated, seem encouraged by the perspective of gaining experience and building a portfolio. However, this does not apply to the permanent staff. Massimiliano explains that they are all under immense pressure due to the rhythms required by being an online publication (Appendix B 21), and Steve seems a little overwhelmed by the multiple responsibilities he has to deal with (Appendix A 3). Despite this, since the permanent members perceive the publication as cooperative, they identify *+31Mag*'s successes such as, for instance, the rising of followers, recognition for high-quality articles, or the win of a public tender, as personal achievements. From an individual perspective, it is clear that the success of the publication implies the rise of financial revenues as well as professional recognition for those who as permanent employees have helped build it. As a consequence, the willingness to reach the success of the publication ends up with being the driving force of their efforts.

While doing observation, it appears clear that not all staff members were entirely on track with their tasks. In this regard, an example that came up also during the interview is that of one intern that for reasons of privacy will be in this research referred to with the fictitious name “Paul”. When asked about this person, Massimiliano confirmed his insufficiency for the journalistic profession and the accomplishment of the tasks initially set in the internship agreement. Interestingly, the approach the publication chose to apply on this occasion consisted of changing his tasks according to his individual propensity. Moreover, since he proved poor self-management skills, Massimiliano gave him a more

precise and stricter schedule to follow (Appendix B 23). As the field observation revealed and Massimiliano then confirmed in the interview, this more personalised method of management greatly improved *Paul's* work performance and his experience with the publication (Appendix B 23). This example supports the theory suggesting that the tasks required should be in line with the subject's abilities, neither too easy nor too difficult. However, Massimiliano's strategy seems to suggest something more than that. In the interview, he tells of having seen multiple people starting their collaboration with *+31Mag* expecting to cover specific tasks that they were not able to accomplish appropriately (Appendix B 23). However, as Massimiliano says, everybody sooner or later has shown to have an aptitude for some other aspect related to journalism, and even the initially more problematic subjects eventually found their place in the magazine (Appendix B 23). According to Massimiliano, "there is no such skill that would not be of any use in *+31Mag*" and following a person's tendency guarantees a better experience "both for the publication and the collaborator" (Appendix B 23). As a consequence, this perspective seems to suggest that tasks should not be assigned only on the base of their degree of difficulty. Their coherence with employees' individual propensities is an equally essential aspect.

2.8.2. Environment: Aesthetics and Sociality

+31Mag has recently ended the contract with the former building and has moved its office. However, Massimiliano wanted to keep consistency with the former space and selected a building in a nearby area, presenting very similar characteristics to the previous one. As it is notable from a post on Facebook, the publication cares about its location that seems to contribute to forming the identity of the project.



Fig. 3. Screenshot from +31Mag Facebook International page.
<https://www.facebook.com/31mag.nl.International/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

In this Facebook post, factors such as collaboration and feeling of community are pointed out as to show that +31Mag 's newsroom is part of a bigger context and is supportive of social causes such as the one regarding the welcoming of refugees and multicultural integration. This approach to the workplace goes beyond the traditional idea of the office as a place of mere work production. Even if differently, the new location presents a strong feeling of community as well, evident in the presence of common areas that +31Mag shares with other studios and offices hosted in the building. The entrance of the building looks like a sizable messy art atelier, with design pieces of furniture and fashion exhibited everywhere. On the contrary, the internal design of the office is very minimal, with only one big table in common, a sofa and few pieces of furniture holding just the essentials: books, some pictures of the staff, magazine covers and small random objects such as a toy car.

When entering the room, an extremely informal atmosphere is perceivable, with packages of biscuits and chocolate on the table at everybody's disposal. The first thing visitors or new collaborators are asked when visiting the office is if they would like a cup of tea or coffee. Stefany, a current intern from the USA whose passion is pole dancing, usually works on the floor while stretching her legs and sits at the table only during meetings or when she needs to consult other members of staff. Everybody appears extremely comfortable with living and letting everybody else live in the space as they prefer.

As Steve and Massimiliano observe, the flexibility of the hierarchy plays a crucial role in the creation of this open, free and democratised environment (Appendix A 7-8; B 20). This flexibility seems to be a reason of pride for the publication, to the point that Massimiliano sustains that their organisational model would not change even if they were to expand greatly (Appendix B 21). Sociality and collaborations among staff members are encouraged, but there are no social activities or team-projects organised on a stable basis. However, the publication traditionally offers drinks to the staff at the end of June, when the majority of internships and collaborations end. Small social meetings are also organised when a long-time member of the staff leaves the publication. Other kinds of social gatherings among staff members generally occur spontaneously. Regarding collaboration among staff members, Massimiliano often suggests to them when there is a project that requires more elaborated research or diverse areas of expertise. The choice of the team members is based on their availability, skills and backgrounds.

2.9. Autonomy in +31Mag

2.9.1. Time Self-Management and Freedom of Expression

Massimiliano and Steve agree on the idea that conceding a high degree of autonomy to employees is beneficial for their creative production. All staff members

establish a specific number of hours they will spend working, according to the role covered within the publication. Regarding interns, the working hours are determined by the internship agreement standard realised by the university. The senior positions, on the other hand, are not based on a work hours system but the accomplishment of a certain number of tasks and projects, and it is what can be considered a 24-hour job. However, applications and tech programs help in making this job more reasonable timewise. As Massimiliano explains, to keep up the pace with social media, *+31Mag* needs to publish at a pace that would be humanly impossible to sustain without the support of managerial apps and automated programs (Appendix B 22). As a consequence, using these digital tools for programming the schedule of which content is published in advance appears as the only way for staff members to take some time off during the holidays (Appendix B 22). However, as Massimiliano observes, "in digital media there is never a real chance to completely switch off" (Appendix B 22). This observation means that the permanent staff can rarely afford to take a few days off from work and even when this happens, everybody must always be contactable. On the contrary, collaborators have a high degree of flexibility. Indeed, they are the only ones among the staff who can agree on their work hours according to their personal interest and availability. In this regard, an example is a long-time collaborator who works for *+31Mag* only one hour per week, an agreement that would be possible neither to permanent staff members nor to interns. Massimiliano explains that managing such diverse levels of participation is not a real issue for them. According to Massimiliano, "the greatest difficulty is to keep everything together replies (Appendix B 21).

Whatever the number of work hours people are assigned to, it is clear that how and where these are consumed at *+31Mag* is at each individual's discretion. However, there are some limits to this freedom depending on individuals' roles and circumstances. For instance, a consistent level of participation in the office is required by interns who need to

learn the profession, and consequently by Steve, since he has a coordinative role. The permanent staff is also often at the office. Their presence is preferred because it is necessary to train interns, maintain a feeling of continuity and facilitate communication with the rest of the staff. However, there is no specific timetable to follow, and everybody seems to come and leave as they like. Steve, however, is an exception. As the newsroom coordinator, he is the primary organisational point of reference, and he has the responsibility of opening and closing the office. As a result, his presence in the office must be consistent. Collaborators, again, are the freest, and they can work the majority of the time remotely. However, a lot of them come to the office, especially during the weekly meeting, to confront their ideas, do brainstorming, get feedback, discuss new projects and organise their deadlines. Coming to the office is mandatory for everyone only during the weekly meeting, except for exceptional cases such as the collaborators staying in Belgium or long-distance Dutch cities.

The freedom of expression is a matter of primary importance for the publication. As Massimiliano explains in the interview, he believes that "everybody should be put in the condition to express their own voice" (Appendix B 24). In the interview, Steve explains that during his previous work experiences he had to deal with work environments that limited his freedom of expression, a condition that led him to leave those jobs (Appendix A 10). Accordingly, he believes that every workplace should give employees the right to express and communicate freely (Appendix A 10). Steve sees the freedom of expression as something that is not limited to articles, but it includes the way people daily communicate and express themselves within the workplace.

2.9.2. Brand Identity and Commercial Purposes

Even if +31Mag bases its policy on ideals of extreme autonomy and freedom of expression, it is undeniable that aspects such as keeping coherence in the structure as

well as in the contents of texts must be limited to at least a minimum extent. For instance, since *+31Mag* is sensitive to specific political and social issues, it is conceivable that an article that is discriminatory against refugees would not be aligned with its brand identity.

In this regard, Massimiliano explains that due to the magazine's transparency, they have never had issues relating to members of staff completely disagreeing with the publication's view (Appendix B 26). The magazine's modalities of selection probably play an essential part in preventing this from happening. As already mentioned, *+31Mag* has its editorial room in a very peculiar building that well aligns with the magazine's identity. As a consequence, when job interviews are held in the office, applicants immediately come to know the nature of the project, and they can choose to be part of it accordingly. As Massimiliano observes, "it is a mutual factor; a person who is uncomfortable with diversity would not be willing to work here anyway" (Appendix B 26). However, this is the only opinion-related limiting factor. Steve, in this regard, believes that "allowing people to be free is much more beneficial to brand identity than setting rigid rules, regulations and hierarchies" (Appendix A 7). Regarding limitations related to editorial standards, Massimiliano thinks they affect only the structure of texts and never the content (Appendix B 22). Moreover, he believes that the more a writer is autonomous, the more their personality will be fully expressed in their work: "Clearly, the more you do yourself, the less we have to do, and the higher will be your freedom in shaping your work as you like" (Appendix B 22).

Interestingly, Steve believes that commercial purposes in publications do not limit the freedom of expression and creative production. On the contrary, he thinks that freedom and creativity are essential to *+31Mag*'s brand identity that, in turn, is crucial to achieving success in the market (Appendix A 9). As he observes, "audiences are drawn as much to the writer's personality, as to what they are writing. [...] being given that freedom to nurture

and exhibit writers' personality is important for me as well as for the organisation as a whole" (Appendix A 9).

2.10. Control Strategy in +31Mag: Taking Action, Making Decisions and Accountability

Steve and Massimiliano describe +31Mag's one as a decentralised model of organisation, more similar to a cooperative than a real hierarchal organisation (Appendix A 8; B 20). According to Massimiliano, this is not only because of identity reasons, but it is a matter of financial sustainability (Appendix B 20). As a professional who has work experience in multiple media, from television to print, to web publishing, he believes that the decentralised model is "the only one holding the chance to be sustainable" (Appendix B 20). However, this claimed absence of hierarchies did not result in a complete reality during the field observation. Through observing the internal dynamics of the staff, it appeared clear that everything, from the initial idea to the final production, has to pass through the approval of Massimiliano and in a minor part of the other editors. The necessity of approval from the senior members before proceeding with a project suggests the presence of a delineated hierarchical structure. Massimiliano, however, thinks that on the contrary of strictly hierarchical organisations, at +31Mag titles and responsibilities are not based on the employee's seniority rights but on the employee's individual "skills and abilities" (Appendix B 20). According to this approach, if an employee proves initiative and the ability to manage a project in autonomy, they will be automatically in charge of that.

Accordingly, in +31Mag, every participant has the freedom to take action to a great extent. Notwithstanding, every new project has to be approved by the editor of the category involved. Besides, there are specific criteria to meet: firstly, the story chosen must be of public interest. Secondly, "every article must be clear, critical, and have two voices" (Appendix B 24). However, from the editor to the newest intern, everybody is free

to propose their ideas during the staff meeting. What was observed during the field observation suggests that the more an idea is reliable and durable, the more it is likely to be executed. For instance, showing to have knowledge about the subject and to know contacts for potential interviews enhances the chances to get the approval. Despite this, drafts are rarely entirely rejected. Most of the time, they are re-adapted, or the initial focus is slightly changed, tendentially to make the article more critical and relevant to the public discourse.

Once the draft is approved, however, the writer chooses the modalities of execution. Again, the more a person shows independence in doing the research, finding the contacts and doing the interviews according to *+31Mag's* parameters, the more they will hold the decision-making power over that project (Appendix B 25). As Massimiliano explains, the magazine gets inspiration from *The Correspondent*, where writers are put in charge of a section or a specific thematic only once they prove their expertise in that area of interest (Appendix B 24-25).

The case of *Stefany*, a previously mentioned intern from the USA who has been in *+31Mag* for three months, is a perfect example. Since the beginning of her experience at the magazine, she showed a particular interest in topics related to the red light districts in The Netherlands. In a matter of a few weeks, she did research and found relevant contacts autonomously, thereby becoming the most prepared of all the staff in that specific topic. As a result, Massimiliano agreed on assigning her the responsibility of writing a series of red light district related articles of which she would be entirely in charge of (Appendix B 26).

Excellent work and initiative, as in the case of *Stefany*, is highly recognised by *+31mag's* editors. For members who fail at meeting expectations, however, things go differently. Considering the interviews and the field observation, the consequences of shoddy work generally imply a change in that member's tasks and eventually role within the staff. In the case of interns, this might also involve a final negative evaluation, as it

occurred in the case of *Paul* (Appendix B 23). Consequently, +31Mag's staff members are held accountable for their level of initiative as well as for their decisions' outcomes.

Nevertheless, concerning lower positions as that of the intern, the publication takes part of the responsibility, for instance, by recognising its poor judgement in hiring or managing that person (Appendix B 23).

2.11. Conclusion

In this chapter, empirical research has shown that +31Mag takes care of employees' individual needs by respecting their commitments and using a very flexible approach. Collaborators and interns do not have any financial reward, but the prospect of learning motivates them. Correspondingly, everybody is involved in the creation of content, even the least experienced interns. Moreover, as long as they prove to be proactive and autonomous in accomplishing their tasks, new interns and collaborators are given the freedom to approach every aspect of journalism which they show interest in. Accordingly, tasks are reasonably assigned on the base of the singular employee's role within the staff and personal interests and abilities.

The environment of +31Mag's workplace has been carefully selected in accordance with the publication's identity. From the building to the office, to the staff members' approach towards visitors and new participants, the atmosphere is very informal, and everybody seems to feel free to live in the space as they like. Social activities within the staff generally happen spontaneously, except for occasional occurrences in which the publication organises gatherings to celebrate the end of the term in June. Collaborations among staff members are often encouraged by Massimiliano according to the size of the project and the range of skills required to accomplish it.

The degree of autonomy given to +31Mag's employees depends on their ability in accomplishing their tasks and on the initiative they show in their work. However,

everybody has a high degree of autonomy in terms of freedom of expression in the creation of contents as well as in internal communications.

+31*Mag* considers a strategy of minimal control as beneficial to the magazine identity as well as to its production. Accordingly, employees are strongly empowered by the freedom of taking action, making decisions and being considered accountable for their own consequences. This is particularly true for permanent members. Regarding collaborators and interns, the ability to take action is very encouraged. At the same time, decision making power is given only to those who prove a high level of autonomy in managing their tasks. Finally, as opposed to permanent members, the temporary staff members are rarely considered fully accountable for their actions, especially in the case they fail at accomplishing a task or concluding a project.

Chapter 3: Audience Management in Online Magazines

3.1. Introduction

During the Digital Era, costumers have progressively had more and more influence on the cultural production system, becoming an integral part not only of the consumption process but also of the creation and circulation ones (Hesmondhalgh 80). This phenomenon has opened the doors to a new “dynamic form of situated creativity” (Potts et al. 460) where “value is increasingly co-created by both the firm and the customer” (Hartley 21). The progressive evolution of the audience from a function of exclusively passive consumption to one of creative production (Hartley 16), according to Potts et al., is one of the most evident cultural products that emerged from the rise of new digital media industries (Potts et al. 549). It is undeniable, in fact, that it has profoundly changed market dynamics, bringing out new challenges as well as opportunities for new and traditional media.

However, asserting the modalities in which this relationship occurs is not an easy task. This difficulty is mostly due to its continuously changing nature that, especially in the last decade, has moved at a faster pace than ever before (Potts et al. 472). This increasing speed has resulted in further uncertainty in identifying new audience involvement practices and, as a consequence, in selecting the most appropriate strategies to manage it (Potts et al. 472). Finally, after almost half a century from the beginning of the digital revolution, we are witnessing what some scholars have defined as a new “emerging system” with its recurring rules and structures (Potts et al. 472).

This chapter aims at investigating this new system’s dynamics with a specific focus on how the emerging forms of audience interaction are affecting online publications and what the modalities in place are to manage them. In analogy with the previous chapter,

firstly an analytical model is proposed and subsequently applied to the specific case of +31Mag.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

Audience agency is a term defined by theorists to describe the increasing participative and influential role of consumers in the dynamics of production (Hartley 14-15; Potts et al. 460). Within the literature regarding how this agency has changed the relationship between audience and commercial activities, two related concepts emerge as crucial to the discourse, one is the direct consequence of the other: *audience engagement* and *audience misbehaviour*, precisely the one of *trolling*. This section argues that the analysis of these two concepts would lead to the development of a revised analytical frame applicable to today's online magazines. This examination will facilitate the understanding of current dynamics within the industry and the evaluation of the strategies in place to manage them.

Specifically, the theoretical investigation will proceed by answering the following questions: how do the modalities and level of audience engagement and misbehaviour occur within an online publication? How do they affect the functioning of it, and which are the strategies in use to manage them? How might these strategies be evaluated?

3.3. Audience Engagement

Among the literature regarding the modalities with which audiences engage with online publications; two analytical models seem to clearly and exhaustively summarise all the different levels of interaction. These are Arne Krumsvik's Four Ds of User Involvement theory and the Crowdsourcing model proposed by the scholars Miguel Carvajal, José A. García-Avilés and José L. González. Subsequently, these two models will be analysed, compared and integrated to ideate an updated and inclusive analytical frame.

Krumsvik's theory of Four D's of User Involvement argues that there are four main strategies that audiences pursue when engaging with digital publications (Krumsvik 666). Firstly, there is the deliberation strategy according to which media are considered as "an arena for public deliberation", in which users contribute by suggesting, requiring or creating content (Krumsvik 659). Secondly, the donation strategy, in which the audience can react and interact in the process of selection and evaluation of the content (Krumsvik 663). Thirdly, the distribution strategy, where existing social networks are used to encourage customers to spread the word with their contacts for commercial purposes (Krumsvik 664-665). Finally, there is the data gathering strategy, where users are required to create their personal account to access services and consequently be individually identified by the publication that can benefit from more accurate data (Krumsvik 665-666).

Interestingly, all these four strategies involve a certain level of exchange between audience and firms, shedding light in the give-and-take nature of their relationship. In the last two of Krumsvik's strategies, namely distribution and data gathering strategies, consumers are involved in the marketing sphere. They are encouraged to advertise a product and share their data through the individual access to a platform (i.e. when reading an article through Facebook or any other kind of social media and subscription). Even if at first sight, these two practices might appear to mostly benefit the publication, they concede the audience a great deal of power (Hartley 14). For instance, through the data gathering strategy, the firm uses the consumers' data intending to improve its performances according to their individual inclinations and preferences. This strategy is essential for firms to understand their target audience and perfect their content accordingly. However, it also gives durable indirect decision-making power to users that can direct their actions in a way that affect the product as they please.

The distribution strategy, on the other hand, is an even clearer example of this. The use of digital tools provided for the spread of users' feedback and contents in a company

may result in a great source of free publicity as well as in defamations and snarky public remarks. Like Krumsvik's analysis suggests, the audience does not participate in the production process without anything in return. New technologies have empowered the audience to the point that its engagement might even determine the success or failure of a publication.

A theoretically similar yet slightly more pragmatic model of audience engagement in magazines is the one provided by Carvajal, García-Avilés and L. González in the article "Crowdfunding and Non-profit Media". According to this research, crowdsourcing is "the process that a network uses for obtaining resources" from its audience (Carvajal et al. 641). This process may involve a whole range of different sources "such as ideas, solutions or contributions related to economic activities" (Carvajal et al. 641). In fact, the term crowdsourcing, commonly connected to the more financial-based term crowdfunding, actually refers to all the different facets implicated in the relationship between audience and publication, of which financial contributions constitute just a little part (Carvajal et al. 641). Correspondingly, in the article, the term is considered to include four primary practices. The first two are crowd wisdom, consisting of the use that a magazine does with the knowledge shared and provided by its audience and crowd creation, that is the participation of the audience in the production process of content. Following, there is the crowd voting that regards the audience's involvement in the evaluation of a project or product. The fourth is the broadly known crowdfunding, that consists of the financial contribution to a publication or single project by users (Carvajal et al. 641).

Similar to Krumsvik's theory, the authors of "Crowdfunding and Non-profit Media" stress the reciprocity of the audience-publication relationship. During these four practices, consumers cooperate in the production process by being asked for different forms of resources such as ideas, feedback, solutions or financial contributions. Without any of these resources, publications would not be able to survive in the present market (Carvajal

et al. 641). However, the authors point out that the audience does not participate in publications as volunteers, but rather as investors (Carvajal et al. 641). Through these different practices, the audience gains decision making power, recognitions and benefits from the feeling of being part of a community (Carvajal et al. 642-643). At the same time, the publication, by considering its users' interests, secures itself a part of consumers and consequently reduces the unbalance between supply and demand (Carvajal et al. 642-643).

To sum up, through the comparison of Krumsvik and Carvajal et al.'s models, it is possible to delineate four levels on which the audience engages with online publications. Firstly, the creation level, where the audience is involved in the creative process by providing ideas, suggestions and content to a publication. Secondly, the information level, in which audience consciously or unconsciously provide personal data and knowledge to a publication. Following, there is the evaluation level, where users engage with a publication by commenting, voting or giving feedback to content, projects, and new ideas. Lastly, the commercial level that, through the integration of Krumsvik's and Carvajal et al.'s models, it might be further divided into two other different parts. The marketing level, where audience advertise a product by sharing feedback and content on the one hand, and the financial level in which users support a publication economically through crowdfunding, investments, donations or by buying related merchandise on the other hand. The analysis of the modalities, with which the audience engages in those four levels and different publications make use of them, can be defined as the strategy put in place by a publication to engage with the audience.

3.4. Audience Misbehaviour: Trolling

Before the analysis of audience engagement, it is important to reflect on the phenomenon of "trolling". As already mentioned, some of the previously delineated types

of audience engagement might result in a double-edged sword for companies and give space to forms of audience misbehaviour. In online publications, the most common form of audience misbehaviour is the one commonly known as trolling (Golf-Papez and Veer 1337).

The terms “to troll”, “trolling”, “trolls” and its synonym “trollers” have been used since the late 1980s, at the very beginning of the digital revolution. It is considered an expanding phenomenon in new digital media (Golf-Papez and Veer 1338). Nevertheless, as Maja Golf-Papez and Ekant Veer explain in the article "Do not feed the trolling: rethinking how online trolling is being defined and combated", there is still a lack of academic sources on the subject (1336). Within the public discourse, “trolling” is generally used as an umbrella term that refers to different and undefined types of misbehaviours (Golf-Papez and Veer 1339). This uncertainty might result problematic since distinguishing their typical behaviours is essential to tackle the problem and define the best strategies to control it (Golf-Papez and Veer 1339). According to Amy Binns in the article "Do not feed the trolls!", trolls are users that "influence the forum negatively, by continually starting arguments, criticising or complaining" (Binns 548). Similarly, Golf-Papez and Veer, in the article mentioned above, define trolls' behaviour “as deliberate, deceptive and mischievous attempts to provoke reactions from other users” (1336).

Integrating Binns, and Golf-Papez and Veer's analysis, trolls' actions consist of three primary forms: starting and inciting discussions among other users in the comments section (Binns 548; Golf-Papez 1336), giving negative feedbacks without having experienced or really knowing the product (Golf-Papez and Veer 1340), and personally attacking the company and the people creating and posting comments (Binns 548).

3.5. *Trolling Management*

These behaviours are particularly harmful to magazine sites which rely heavily on the feeling of community and belonging among their readers (Binns 548). Having constant fights in the comments section may discourage other users from engaging and negatively affect the friendly atmosphere that is necessary not only to attract new visitors and maintaining the regular ones but to preserve a positive brand identity (Binns 547). In addition to this, negative feedback may quickly put a publication's reputation and reliability at risk, and personal attacks may emotionally affect writers, editors and social media managers (Binns 547-548).

However, Golf-Papez and Veer sustain that trolling may also generate positive effects such as bringing visibility to the page and strengthening the feeling of community among other users who might unite against a common thread (Golf-Papez and Veer 1337). Nevertheless, except for a few occasional exceptions, the negative influences of trolls on online publications exceed the positive ones and using a planned strategy is essential to control their effects.

In this regard, Golf-Papez and Veer delineate three strategies that digital media industries generally use for controlling trolls' misbehaviours. These involve the ignoring strategy, meaning not replying to any comment or personal attack, then trolling the troll strategy, that consists in reacting by harshly replying to them and ridiculing them publicly (Golf-Papez and Veer 1342). Finally, the preventive strategy, that involves applying specific measures in order to limit the risk of trolls manifesting themselves in the first place (Golf-Papez and Veer 1342). These may be actions such as publishing a specific against-trolls behaviours policy on the website, demanding real users' names, controlling and moderating comments, block suspicious users and, in the most extreme cases, using IP address-tracking software (Golf-Papez and Veer 1342). Interestingly, each of these actions may be perceived negatively from other visitors that might feel unprotected by the

lack of magazine's intervention, disappointed by the publication's aggressive reactions or in disagreement with censorships and controlling practices (Golf-Papez and Veer 1342). However, Golf-Papez and Veer's model might be useful as a frame of reference to identify and delineate a strategy in place in a magazine, and to consequently better understand the consistency between that publication's strategy and its identity policy.

3.6. *Summation*

This theoretical section has examined existing literature regarding audience engagement and audience misbehaviour, precisely the one of trolling, with the final aim to propose analytical models to apply for the study of current dynamics between online publications and audience. In analogy with the previous chapter, a bulleted list with the summary of the analysis' outcomes are provided to clarify the key points that will be researched during the succeeding empirical analysis.

- *Audience Engagement.* Through the confrontation of two existing theories, it has been theorised that audience engagement occurs at four different primary levels. These are the creation level, the information level, the evaluation level, and finally, the commercial level, further divided into the marketing and financial microlevels. The investigation of how said levels of engagement occurred and are encouraged by publications will outline the strategy in place to manage the audience.
- *Trolling.* Among the forms of audience misbehaviours, trolling is the most frequent in online publications. Merging Binns, and Golf-Papez and Veer's theories, trolls may be identified in users who present three primary behaviours: starting and inciting discussions in the comments section, providing unfounded negative feedback and pursuing the publication and staff members through personal attacks.

- *Trolling Management.* According to Golf-Papez, three strategies can be implemented by publications to control trolls' misbehaviours. These consists of the ignoring strategy, then trolling the troll strategy and finally, the preventive strategy.

3.7. Empirical Research

Before applying the previously proposed analytical models to the case study, a brief overview of all +31Mag 's media used to interact with the audience will be provided. Thereby, the platforms and, how and from whom they are managed, in term of audience engagement will be outlined to furnish a little context upon which the empirical analysis is then developed.

3.7.1 +31Mag's Platforms

The core of +31Mag is the official website. This is designed and managed with WordPress, a program that allows the creation of an Internet site made up of textual and multimedia content. This program is easily manageable and dynamically updatable, but it requires the effort of the webmaster and web designer to work best. The webmaster is necessary to personalise the website's functions and the maintenance of these. The web designer, on the other hand, takes care of the interface's design by adapting colours, shapes and visuals to the identity and target of the publication. Both figures' work performances are required only occasionally, when technical problems such as hacker attacks and viruses occur, or when the publication wants to apply changes to the functions or design of the site.

Every writer is given a personalised account to access the website. This account is necessary for them to upload and modify the articles according to the SEO service incorporated in the program. However, only the members of the permanent staff, according to the area of interest they are in charge of, can decide whether or not, and

when to publish the content. Since it is the medium through which all the articles are published and stored, the website might be considered as the magazine's heart.



Fig. 4. Screenshot from +31Mag Official Website.
<https://www.31mag.nl/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

The content on the official website is shared continuously and spread through the publication's social media channels. Specifically, through Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and especially Facebook. This latter is the most active social media to +31Mag. If the Italian page is merged with the international one, the Facebook pages have a combined total of almost 20.000 followers. Following, in descending order of followers, are Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

Through these platforms, +31Mag broadcasts any kind of content: videos, pictures, posts, and links that redirect the readers to the official page. Moreover, it launches campaigns of crowdfunding and sponsors events related to the publication. The Italian Facebook page is the one with the most significant number of followers and is managed in the first place by Massimiliano and in second place by Italian speaking interns who have some interest in social media management. The International Facebook page, still very limited in terms of followers due its more recent launch, is managed by Steve and in second place by *Stefany*. *Stefany*, along with Massimiliano and the video production

editor, also take care of the Instagram profile. The video production editor is also in charge of YouTube, a platform mostly used for the storage of videos.

Together with the website and social media platforms, events are another ‘source of followers’ for +31Mag. As Steve explains, “audience engagement is a pretty vital aspect from the whole promotional period to the actual event to, hopefully, the gathering of some feedback, donations and comments after it” (Appendix A 11). The publication, especially Massimiliano and Steve, organises events with a frequency of once every two or three months. These are generally themed events that consist of documentary screenings, live interviews and final discussions. The most commonly treated topics are of social, political and cultural interest. An example is the series of events called *Shifting Scenes* that have occurred during the last year and a half. As it is readable on social media, these events are described by the publication as an occasion to personally meet and discuss topics of actuality with guests and the audience.



Fig. 5. Screenshot from +31Mag Facebook International page.
<https://www.facebook.com/31mag.nl.International/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

Another type of event hosted by +31Mag is the one involving activities such as tours of cultural interest in the surroundings of Amsterdam. These events aim to disclose lesser known areas in the vicinity of the city. The activity proposed consists of the publication’s members walking the participants through these areas while leading conversations about their historical and cultural background.



Fig. 6. Screenshot from +31Mag Facebook International page.
<https://www.facebook.com/31mag.nl.International/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

While Massimiliano is involved in the logistics such as the research for a place to host the event, Steve takes care of the promotion and marketing aspects. Everybody in the staff can propose the coming events' themes. During the meetings, these themes are selected based on their actuality and availability of relevant contacts.

Finally, the official mail service might also be considered as a tool of interaction with the audience. +31Mag's official mail service (info@31mag.nl) is used for internal as well as external communicative reasons. On the one hand, it is used by the staff for asking for interviews or collaborations, keeping in touch with external contacts and giving and receiving information within the staff about changes in schedules or the attendance to internal meetings, seminars, and workshops. On the other hand, external people might use it to contact the staff to ask for an internship, propose a collaboration or, even if rarely, signal mistakes in the content, provide suggestions and support or criticise the publication.

In short, +31Mag interacts with the audience through their website, social media, events and their official mail service. However, since the website does not enable comments and the mail service is rarely used by readers to comment on content, the social media channels and events are where the platforms receives most interaction with

the audience. Consequently, for the following analysis, these are the media that will be taken into consideration.

3.8. Audience Engagement in +31mag

3.8.1. Creation Level

Steve and Massimiliano do not recognise +31Mag's audience as an active part of the creation of content. However, field observation and a further investigation of interviews reveal that +31Mag's readers are not entirely exempted from the dynamics of production as the staff thinks. For instance, Massimiliano mentions a few changes that the publication applied because of the audience's suggestions and criticism. One example is the recent increment of the number of opinionated articles as a consequence of the high demand for that kind of content. As Massimiliano explains, after months of receiving comments and messages appreciating or requesting the same content, the publication felt the responsibility to satisfy the audience (Appendix B 28). This decision, that resulted in a great success for the publication, would not have happened without the multiple requests from readers. This practice, even if not recognised by +31Mag as such, is a clear example of audience participation in the production of content. One other typical example might be the case of articles written thanks to stories indicated by readers. According to Massimiliano, nurturing a conversation with the audience in social media is crucial to receive insights and ideas for new stories (Appendix B 29). Readers may happen to suggest stories that the publication was not aware of, or that were initially not considered as relevant for the audience. Again, these are different contents that +31Mag covers only thanks to the participation of readers.

3.8.2. Information Level

According to Massimiliano and Steve, *+31Mag* does not do any kind of demographic research to understand its readership better, neither do they apply a specific strategy to read and understand its audience's data (Appendix A 17; B 29). This seems to be a conscious choice that the publication took to maintain consistency with its ethical standpoint. As Steve explains in the interview, producing content exclusively on the base of the demand "is not the approach that should be used in information media" (Appendix A 17). Massimiliano and Steve agree that working in the sector for a while inevitably leads to knowing the specific readership's preferences (Appendix A 17; B 27). They believe, in fact, that data analysis programs are not necessary to acquire this knowledge, and that experience in the field is quite sufficient (Appendix A 17; B 27). As Steve observes, "as time goes by, you develop certain audience data points that [...] help you understand what kind of content [the audience is] going to engage more with" (Appendix A 17).

Since this most popular content, or "data points", tend to be trivial and sometimes even vulgar, Massimiliano and Steve believe they should be used only in the case they are necessary and in a way that does not put the publication's reliability at risk (Appendix A 17; B 27). Accordingly, *+31Mag* uses them only in the case of a significant decrease in readers' engagement. As Steve says in the interview, this is sometimes necessary "to make the algorithm work" (Appendix A 17). However, an excess of these kinds of content, as popular as they may be, might negatively affect a publication that aims at building a serious and reliable reputation as *+31Mag*. In this regard, Steve explains the importance of providing an interesting and different approach, whatever the topic is (Appendix A 18). Similarly, Massimiliano observes that everything may be interesting and useful for the readers, and even when there is a need for raising the traffic on the page, the topics chosen must "stimulate engagement, but also make sense and have some kind of public utility" (Appendix B 27).

Interestingly, Massimiliano explains this strategy as a middle way between the one applied in *BuzzFeed*, a publication based only on the algorithm's suggestions, and what he names "more serious publications" (Appendix B 27). One example of this compromise between algorithms and meaningful content is the recently published article about the presence of mice at Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam. "We needed to move some traffic after two bad weeks, and we knew this story would have worked well" explains Massimiliano (Appendix B 27). However, as he observes, "it is not the typical article about kittens that the algorithm loves but has no real value" (Appendix B 27). This story, he continues, tells about "an actual emergency and can stimulate a much broader conversation about public infrastructures" (Appendix B 27).

3.8.3. Evaluation Level

Since *+31Mag* uses a passive form of engagement, the interactions in social media are limited to the exchange of comments and direct messages among publication and audience. This approach means that the publication never directly engages with the audience via polls, surveys or direct questions. As a consequence, readers participate in the evaluation level spontaneously, through providing feedback and suggestions only through public comments or private messages. This choice is in line with *+31Mag*'s identity since the publication believes that the audience might perceive an excessive of proactive engagement in social media as unserious or even "desperate" (Appendix A 13). However, as Steve explains, the magazine is using a very reactive passive approach: "We are constantly responding to comments, any sort of direct message, whether it is YouTube or Instagram or Facebook or Twitter" (Appendix A 13). Nevertheless, this strategy remains less effective in raising audience engagement than the proactive one. As a result, even if not consistent with the magazine's identity, Steve is considering integrating occasional surveys to the less developed Facebook International page (Appendix A 13). At the

moment, however, readers evaluate *+31Mag* exclusively via spontaneous comments, messages, likes, sharings, and occasionally mails.

3.8.4. Commercial Level

When accessing the website, a donation call is visible that has been open since the first day of the magazine's activity. This donation is presented as a button that leads to the payment's procedure, with the description “+31MAG needs your support!” on it (“31mag”).



Fig. 7. Screenshot from *+31Mag* Official Website.
<https://www.31mag.nl/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

Even if during these years there have been multiple readers making donations to *+31Mag*, Massimiliano observes that the amount of money collected is not of substantial help to the financial sustainability of the publication. As he explains, the presence of a donation call has the dual function of collecting money on the one hand and reminding readers of the collective nature of the project on the other hand (Appendix B 27).

A crowdfunding campaign related to the whole publication, that is the most common alternative to the donation call, is according to Massimiliano a not very practical option. Donation calls have the great advantage of being permanent, and the audience tends to respond to them more persistently. However, crowdsourcing campaigns achieve great results when connected to a specific project for multiple reasons (Appendix B 28). Firstly, the promise of a precise product in return is an excellent incentive for readers. Secondly, they can be proposed multiple times and for diverse projects, without precluding the

existence of the donation call (Appendix B 28). Finally, the promotion of a crowdfunding campaign raises the page's traffic. As Massimiliano explains, apart from the campaign itself, the publication's supporters are generally more likely to share a crowdfunding related post than usual content (Appendix B 28). As a consequence, as well as the collection of monetary funds, a crowdfunding campaign is an opportunity for free advertising from users, for reaching more visibility and finally, by actively involving the readers, it enhances the feeling of community.

3.8.5. Engagement Strategy

One of the first things to consider when analysing +31Mag's audience level of interaction is that the two most used channels for engagement, namely the Italian Facebook page and the International one, are currently at two very different levels. As Steve explains in the interview, the fact that the traffic on the English page is not as elevated as the Italian one implies that the opportunity to engage is not equal (Appendix A 11). However, the general tactics in place to enhance audience engagement are consistent in both pages. For instance, promotional campaigns for events or crowdfunding campaigns are equally advertised in both pages. Moreover, they all use a passive approach. This implies that +31Mag's strategy involves replying to comments and direct messages, but it does not involve the use of surveys or direct questions to readers.

The publication's favourite channel for engaging the audience is that of events. Events are seen by +31Mag as an occasion to enhance the feeling of the community towards readers in a more authentic and participative way (Appendix A 11; B 26). Despite this, it should be noted that participation in events is limited to people who live in the surrounding areas and have a keen interest in the theme of the specific event. On the contrary, social media reaches a much more extensive range of audience. Despite the staff's preference, an event's influence is not comparable to that of social media.

3.9. Audience Misbehaviour: Trolling

Since *+31Mag*'s content often deals with controversial topics, the publication has suffered from audience forms of misbehaviour since the first months of activity. Moreover, the fact that *+31Mag* is an online born magazine, without any solid reputation in the moment of accessing the market, has facilitated the access of intruders and saboteurs. As Steve notes, "the truth is that the reality of web publishing very much privileges controversy and sometimes it privileges negativity too" (Appendix A 12).

+31Mag has been a target for all the three types of troller misbehaviour: harsh discussions in the comments section, unfounded negative feedbacks and personal attacks to the personnel. As Steve observes, the majority of negative comments are written by users who think there is something factually incorrect about an article, in terms of grammar as well as substance (Appendix A 14). However, many of these remarks often reveal to be something more than just inoffensive corrections. According to Massimiliano, trolls often begin the conversation signalling a grammar mistake or a misspelling and end up with questioning the publication's quality or attacking writers and other users who appreciate the content (Appendix B 30).

Besides, many visitors negatively comment on articles in a way that clearly demonstrates a lack of knowledge towards the content. Steve explains that for people seeing titles or photos that they do not like is enough to start attacking writers and the publication (Appendix A 16). Steve comments that the majority of users who leave negative comments do not read the articles at all (Appendix A 16).

An even more problematic misbehaviour is that of users claiming that articles are fake news. "When our numbers of followers raised significantly, people who said that we were writing fake news started being a real problem" observed Massimiliano (Appendix B 29). Small publications such as *+31Mag* have a vulnerable reputation, and publishing fake news is the worst accusation a magazine can receive. The risk is that other visitors,

especially the more recent ones, may believe said claims and they will spread the word further (Appendix B 29). This phenomenon, according to Massimiliano, could eventually lead to the end of small publications like *+31Mag* (Appendix B 29).

As the founder of the publication, Massimiliano is the most visible personality in *+31Mag*, and consequently, the most common target for personal attacks. In fact, in the interview, he tells of having been receiving threats and insults via direct messages as well as public comments (Appendix B 28). However, the rest of the staff members are not entirely exempted from personal attacks, and the criticism against content often turns into personal criticism against the writer or the person who is managing the page at that moment.

According to both interviews, the most problematic form of audience misbehaviour in *+31Mag* is the result of certain readers' tendency to take some aspects of the content personally. As Steve explains, violent or too personal comments cannot be considered as feedback because they are based on subjective, and not reliable, sources (Appendix A 15). Consequently, these comments are not of any use for the growth of a journalistic platform that aims at satisfying a common and shared interest.

3.10. Trolling Management

Interestingly, the social media strategy used to manage forms of users' misbehaviour on the Italian page significantly varies from the one applied on the International page. As the theory suggests, there are three possible tactics that online publications use to manage trolls: ignoring them, replying them back and preventing their actions. Every publication chooses its strategy according to its audience target, size, needs and brand identity. Since the two Facebook pages have different readers, sizes and needs, the number and nature of users' misbehaviour also differ. As a consequence, the two pages require two different styles of management. Steve, who deals with the smaller

International page, applies a softer and more inclusive strategy than Massimiliano, who is in charge of the Italian page. Correspondingly, Steve's goal is to attract more followers and raise engagement, while the latter aims at maintaining the order and a friendly atmosphere. As Massimiliano explains, the bigger the page, the more this becomes a target for saboteurs and attackers (Appendix B 29). However, trolls do not pose a danger to more famous magazines since these rely on an already solid reputation. For small and middle-size publications such as *+31Mag*, on the contrary, they might become a real problem (Appendix B 29). As a consequence, as the number of followers on the Italian page started growing significantly, Massimiliano explains he had to change the attitude towards trolls accordingly (Appendix B 29). In alignment with Golf-Papez's preventive strategy, the approach used in the Italian page consists of providing the troller with a warning and, in the event that they persist, blocking their access to the page and eventually deleting aggressive comments (Appendix B 28-30). However, as Massimiliano points out, this rigorous practice is applied only to readers who insult and threaten the writers and the publication (Appendix B 29). Different opinions that are in contrast with *+31Mag*'s ideals and content, as long as not personal, are ignored (Appendix B 29). In comparison, Steve's strategy is more tolerant. In the interview, he says he uses his intuition and to rarely engage in conversations (Appendix A 16), presenting an attitude in line with the ignoring strategy.

Despite their differences, Massimiliano and Steve's strategies also have some points in commons. For instance, they both believe that using a little provocation is exciting and often useful to start a dialogue in the socials (Appendix A 11; B 29). According to Steve, "provocation is good to push traffic, [...] building a community, and, finally, for branding" (Appendix A 12). Notwithstanding, Steve believes that provocation should be limited to journalistic content, and not to posts, comments or replies by the staff (Appendix A 12).

Through the interviews and the observation, it is understandable that Steve does not entirely share Massimiliano's approach. As he explains, even if he is aware of the differences due to the pages' sizes, he thinks that "the tone of voice sometimes borders on a little bit overly subjective" (Appendix A 11). Steve is afraid that the lack of consistency among the two social media strategies in use will eventually negatively affect the magazine's brand identity (Appendix A 12). On the other hand, Massimiliano believes that, due to the significant difference in the number of followers, the use of two diverse approaches is necessary (Appendix B 30). In his opinion, the International page simply cannot afford to have a firmly responsive approach that is necessary in the Italian one, which is a result of needing to manage large numbers of visitors (Appendix B 29). Accordingly, Massimiliano perceives the different strategies as necessary to adapt to the peculiar needs of the two pages.

As the previous theory suggests, using a strict strategy on trolls might result in damaging the publication's reputation. Massimiliano, however, does not agree with this view. As he explains, the vast majority of readers, who have supported *+31Mag* financially, rarely engage on the social media channels (Appendix B 30). Interestingly, Massimiliano believes that this discordance between those who sustain the magazine and those who interact on social media the most, shows that many readers do not enjoy the kind of communication occurring in social media (Appendix B 30). The presence of trolls in a publication, for such readers, is a further source of distress. However, as Massimiliano explains, to use such a strict strategy is necessary to first have an in-depth knowledge of the publication's readership, and consequently, a significant number of followers (Appendix B 30).

3.11. Conclusion

This second chapter has demonstrated that *+31Mag*'s audience contributes to the creation process mostly by demanding precise content and suggesting new stories and topics to cover. Regarding the information level, the publication does not apply any designed strategy to analyse users' data and it exploits this information only in case of necessity. The audience evaluates the publication's content and overall performance through feedback and comments spontaneously provided by readers. At the moment, mostly due to brand identity, there is not any kind of proactive approach in place. However, the publication is considering adopting surveys and direct questions on the International page to enhance engagement. Concerning the commercial level, *+31Mag* is financially supported by the audience through the implementation of a permanent donation call and occasional crowdfunding campaigns. These practices provide the publication with financial funds, free publicity, visibility and they enhance the sense of community among readers within *+31Mag*.

The overall strategy to enhance and use audience engagement consists of a passive engagement approach involving the reply to comments and direct messages. Even if the publication favours events as a source of audience engagement, social media are the channels where most interaction happens.

Part of this interaction, especially in social media, might appear detrimental, as *+31Mag* is subject to all three trolls' misbehaviour suggested by the theory. Since the launch of the publication, *+31Mag* has been the target of users willing to sabotage the page. Their acts against the publication often result in negative comments publicly posted, users starting fights in the comment section and personal insults towards the media and the staff members. Moreover, they have received multiple attacks from users questioning the reliability of articles and providing aggressive and negative feedbacks on content without having a real knowledge of them.

The strategies in place in *+31Mag* to manage these forms of misbehaviour consist in two different main approaches: the ignoring strategy, in use in the International Facebook page, and the preventive strategy used in the Italian one. The two people interviewed believe that this difference is the consequence of the diverse sizes of the two pages. However, a more in-depth analysis suggests that the diverse personalities of the people managing the pages also affects the choice of strategy.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

4.1. Introduction

This thesis has aimed at investigating how online magazines are responding to new markets in the very current moment, now that the digitalisation of the industry is largely established. It has evaluated the internal strategies of management towards the staff and the audience from a perspective that locates the magazine industry within the broader field of the creative industries. More in detail, this thesis has answered a precise question: *How are online magazines responding to the current market challenges and opportunities at the levels of their structural organisation and their relationship with the audience?*

In order to answer this question as complete as possible, I have examined +31Mag, an online magazine founded in 2014 in Amsterdam. A single case study was seen as the most appropriate choice to conduct an in-depth analysis. Besides, it has adopted naturalistic inquiry, a qualitative methodology particularly suited to the investigation of relationship dynamics. The research has been guided by answering the following questions: How is +31Mag's staff organised? What is the staff management strategy currently in use? How does the audience and +31Mag interact with each other? How does the audience help or damage the publication? How does +31Mag manage the audience's forms of misbehaviour?

4.2. Findings

Findings suggest that +31Mag has a highly flexible and mutable staff composition involving three main categories of workers: permanent staff members, collaborators and interns. The different roles and the diverse cultural backgrounds and expertise of employees have led to the establishment of an extremely adaptable management strategy. In more detail, +31Mag's staff management style consists of applying a personalised

approach to each employee according to their necessities, availability, role and propensity. Correspondingly, motivating incentives, tasks, and the degree of autonomy and control exerted on staff members differ according to every individual's condition and personal disposition.

Since there are no financial rewards provided for collaborators and interns, the publication uses other incentives to motivate the unpaid staff. These incentives mostly consist of personalised trainings and the involvement in the production of content. In addition, tasks and roles are assigned according to the individual employee's area of interest, proactiveness and expertise. Another incentive provided to unpaid workers at *+31Mag* is the extremely informal and friendly environment that grants employees to express themselves freely and self-manage most of their working hours.

Commercial purposes do not seem to affect the publication's content significantly. This is shown by the fact that *+31Mag* considers the development of the writers' voice beneficial for the brand identity of the publication. However, some limitations are imposed on the form of articles and videos that have to fit within the editorial lines. Despite this, every limitation is negotiable as long as the writer can show that the content is worth the exception. Especially regarding the permanent members, employees have the freedom to take action, are given decision-making power and are held accountable for the consequences of their decisions. In general, the overall managerial strategy towards the staff tends to let employees nurture their voice within the publication, provide a high degree of autonomy and exert a low level of control.

Concerning their external strategy, *+31Mag* interacts with its audience on four levels: creation, information, evaluation and commerce. However, the degree of audience participation in these spheres is not equal. *+31Mag* does not fully take advantage of the interactions occurring either on the evaluation level or in the creation one. With respect to the evaluation, the publication does not use surveys or direct questions. As a

consequence, it exclusively relies on readers' spontaneous feedback. Concerning the production level, the magazine does not seem to entirely recognise the potential of the audience's involvement in the creation of content and it does not profit from it as it could.

Similarly, the digital tools designed for controlling and enhancing the interactions related to the information sphere are also not entirely exploited. *+31Mag* takes advantage of users' data only occasionally and does not use any specific program of data analysis. However, this is not due to the publication's lack of awareness as in the case of the creation level. On the contrary, *+31Mag* consciously chooses not to excessively use this information for ethical and identity reasons. Lastly, the commercial level is where most interaction takes place. Through a donation call, permanently available on the website, and occasional crowdfunding campaigns on social media, *+31Mag*'s audience has the tools necessary to financially sustain the publication or the singular projects it launches.

The overall benefits brought by the audience in *+31Mag* involve reaching a better balance between supply and demand, receiving financial support and gaining further visibility, free advertising and stronger brand identity. On the other hand, the audience negatively affects the publication by inciting fights with other visitors, giving negative feedback with no real knowledge of the content, and threatening and insulting the magazine and writers. These three forms of misbehaviour, typical of *trolls*, can result in a real threat for medium to small publications that do not rely on a solid reputation, as in the case of *+31Mag*. Moreover, they might cause distress to writers whose work and person are aggressively attacked. Also, *trolls*' presence might put at risk the friendly and communicative atmosphere of a page and eventually damage the publication's brand identity.

+31Mag copes with the issue of *trolls* by applying two different strategies according to the medium in which the interaction happens. The strategy in place on the Italian Facebook page, where most engagement occurs, is the preventive strategy. This

approach consists of giving warnings, blocking access to the page and eventually deleting particularly aggressive comments. Instead, on the other less popular channels, +31Mag uses the ignoring strategy, meaning that the page's administrators do not engage with trolls at any level.

Coming back to the primary research question, by taking +31Mag as example, it can be observed *that online magazines are responding to current market challenges and opportunities by adopting an overall extremely flexible and adaptable approach*. This approach is particularly visible in the internal structure which resembles a more horizontal model of organisation rather than a pyramidal hierarchy. It can also be seen in the management strategies in use towards the staff that provide a high degree of autonomy and impose a low level of control. At the same time, an increasing attention given to the audience by online publications is notable. Through the social media platforms, comments, direct messages, donation calls, crowdfunding campaigns, mails and events, the audience is asked to actively participate in the production and circulation of online magazines. However, this power gained by readers also implies the need of control strategies that publications choose according to their reputation, their number of followers, and their brand identity.

4.3. Reflection

In the course of the development of the theoretical framework, I criticised Hesmondhalgh's theory according to which creative autonomy is tendentially given to employees during the creation process and not in the circulation process. On the contrary, this thesis has suggested that the creation process might also be affected by limitations. Especially by those related to the necessity of consistency with the brand identity and the publications' content. The analysis of +31Mag, however, has proven that Hesmondhalgh's theory is partially correct. In fact, during the process of creating content, the publication's

writers are free to develop their voice and share their personal perspective. Limitations are imposed, exactly as Hesmondhalgh sustains, in the moment before publishing, when the form of texts are edited according to *+31Mag's* editorial lines. Since the editorial lines are mostly applied with the aim to make an article easier to read and appealing to consumers, it might be said that these limitations are driven by commercial purposes. However, some restrictions might be found even in the creation process depending on what this is considered to involve. If the creation process involves exclusively the very moment content is developed, Hesmondhalgh is completely right. In the case also the times in which an ideation of a concept and choice of the topic were included, as I believe it is, some limitations arise. Writers, before proceeding, have to present their idea during meetings and need to have it approved by Sfregola or the editor of reference. During these meetings, the projects may be directly accepted, slightly or significantly modified or even refused. Consequently, it cannot be said that the creation process is entirely free from restrictions. Despite this, it should be recognised that for a commercial company, limitations are extremely flexible and negotiable.

In the course of the research, it appeared to me that *+31Mag's* staff management strategy is not designed only to mirror the publication's identity but is also the most appropriate one to face the current challenges. As mentioned in the introduction, the process of digitalisation within the magazine industry has led to three main consequences. These consist of the decrease in revenue, high levels of precarity and the necessity for professionals with a more diverse range of skills. These features reflected on *+31Mag's* composition of staff in three main ways. Firstly, the diversity of cultural backgrounds and expertise of the staff members. Secondly, the vast majority of non-permanent staff as opposed to reduced permanent one. Lastly, the generation of an overall revenue that is insufficient to pay neither interns nor collaborators.

In this context, +31Mag's staff management model appears as the only appropriate model to manage such unstable and diversified personnel. This is due to the fact that the permanent staff members, especially Massimiliano and Steve, are extremely overloaded with work and responsibilities. As a consequence, stimulating and appreciating other staff members' initiatives and providing them with a large extent of autonomy and responsibility is the only solution to better divide the workload.

This freedom, however, should not be confused with a complete absence of hierarchical order. The empirical research shows that +31Mag's staff follows a hierarchical structure of which the founder Massimiliano is at the apex. Accordingly, he makes primary decisions and assigns responsibilities. Just below him, the other permanent members supervise all the projects concerning their respective categories. As mentioned above, collaborators and interns have to refer to them for guidance and receive their approval before starting a new piece and eventually getting it published. Despite this, the dynamics between people in charge and subordinates do not mirror the traditional power dynamics of pyramidal hierarchies. Subordinates can negotiate their tasks, areas of interest and, finally, their role within the company by being proactive and autonomous. As a consequence, hierarchies are neither fixed nor based on rights of seniority. This dynamic approach maintains a certain hierarchical structure while simultaneously creating a flexible environment in which, again, employees are held accountable, and their independence is valued.

Considering the relationship with the audience, it is interesting to notice how the publication is still in the phase of development and experimentation. +31Mag does not fully recognise the potential of audience engagement, especially with regard to its participation in the production of content. This unawareness might be partially due to the young age of the magazine and the different numbers of followers in the social media pages. Moreover, there is a general lack of accuracy and clarity amongst terms and practices related to

online audiences. This dearth of knowledge seems to sometimes result in a limited nature of *+31Mag's* initiatives towards its readership. It is conceivable that more profound knowledge of the subject would lead to a better exploitation of digital tools and strategies available for the enhancement of engagement.

Interestingly, a substantial discrepancy is evident between the readers who engage on social media and those who financially sustain the publication. This phenomenon suggests that some of *+31Mag's* supporters might not appreciate the type of communication occurring on the page. It follows that, the nature and the quality of engagement might be more relevant and important than the actual number of followers, comments and shares. In fact, looking at this particular finding, it is conceivable that an open and constructive style of communication on social media might attract more participative and collaborative types of followers, who are particularly beneficial to the publication. Consequently, the intention of increasing engagement should not be the sole factor determining the social media strategy of a magazine. On the contrary, a strategy should consistently mirror the publication's brand identity and its readership target so as to appeal a more 'profitable' kind of user.

According to Golf-Papez and Veer's theories, every strategy applied against trolls' misbehaviours might negatively affect the audience's perception of the publication. In the case of the preventive strategy, the one in use on *+31Mag's* Italian Facebook page, the authors believe it might lead to discontent in users who disagree with censorship practices. However, the need to maintain a specific style of communication seems to justify the approach applied on *+31Mag's* Italian Facebook page, consisting of actively moderating and controlling the audience's forms of misbehaviour. In fact, even if some users may consider it intrusive, *+31Mag's* strategy prevents the excess of fights and aggressive comments among the page. This tactic preserves a more friendly and communicative atmosphere, essential to the publication's brand identity. Moreover, it makes it feel more

comfortable for those who have a true interest in the publication's content but do not want to be involved in unpleasant conflicts. However, it should be noted that *+31Mag's* preventive strategy is limited to extremely aggressive and recidivist users. The deletion of comments and the banishment of some users are the last resort. Comments that disagree with the publication's perspective or that present negative and sometimes harsh criticism are kept as long as they do not personally attack writers or the magazine in its whole. This reflects that Golf-Papez and Veer's models of strategies are slightly extreme. In fact, it is more likely to find a mixture of models. In the case of *+31Mag*, preventive practices are used not as a fixed rule but only in extreme cases.

In general, this thesis has confirmed the majority of the tendencies explained in creative industries and magazine industry related literature. For instance, the case study has confirmed that, as Hesmondhalgh, Davies and Hartley suggest in their theories, after digitalisation the industry got more and more precarious and unstable. As predicted by the authors and seen in *+31Mag*, this instability has resulted in a vulnerability for the industry, since financial incomes are insufficient to pay all the personnel necessary. However, this research has also shown that such precarity has led to a more diversified staff, that present a more varied range of skills and expertise than before. This variety, in turn, adds value to the publication's content and brand identity.

Another academically recognised magazine industry tendency that has proved to be true nowadays, is the high levels of autonomy and low degree of control exerted on editorial staff members. The analysis has shown that *+31Mag* mirrors this tendency. Nevertheless, as observed at the beginning of this section, this is not only a choice to accommodate employees' inspiration like creative industries and magazine industry's theorists suggest. On the contrary, it is a strategy necessary to manage such a diverse staff and better divide the workload. Moreover, the extremely flexible hierarchical order in *+31Mag* seems to imply that the independence and freedom given to employees in

editorial staff is even more pronounced than just a few years ago. The results of this thesis suggest that the more precariousness the industry presents, the more freedom, autonomy and responsibility should be given to the workers.

With regard to audience engagement, literature and theories used to develop the theoretical frameworks have been largely confirmed. The research findings have supported the developed model by merging crowdsourcing and the four Ds of user involvement theories proposed by Carvajal et al. and Krumsvik, respectively. Similarly, Golf-Papez and Veer's description of trolls' forms of misbehaviour has been entirely confirmed by this research.

However, these theories, even if accurate, especially those regarding the audience, are not entirely recognised by the people who work in the industry. This research has shown that there is still a lack of knowledge and awareness related to the audience's behaviour. This includes even those who have been working in the digital media industry for long enough to be considered experts. The lack of knowledge mostly results in a confusion regarding the identification of a behaviour and both the positive and negative consequences that can result from this.

This thesis has contributed to existing theories regarding creativity, autonomy and control in creative workplaces and has raised awareness on audience participation and misbehaviour. Additionally, it has provided a model of analysis and insights that may be extended to other online publications. Moreover, *+31Mag's* responses to new market tendencies may also be found in other small to medium online magazines. As seen above, the strategies used in respect to the staff, as well as those used in regard to the audience do not depend only on the publication's identity but are also the natural consequence of current markets' conditions. In fact, the majority of small to medium online magazines are now facing challenges related to the high degrees of precarity and financial instability. At the same time, their reputation and success highly depend on audience behaviours. The

phenomenon of trolling is not a real threat for more established magazines because they can rely on a solid and vast readership. On the contrary, trolls do have the ability to ruin the reputation of lesser known publications and eventually lead them to failure.

The analysis proposed in this paper might be of guidance for new magazines that are entering or establishing their presence in the current market. By delineating which aspects of *+31Mag*'s strategies are successful and which ones need improvement, the guidelines for a more functional and sustainable model of online journalism may be traced. For instance, *+31Mag*'s collaborators and interns are passionate about their work even without receiving any income. Moreover, the magazine manages to publish original content often and consistently, even if it is understaffed. These two aspects suggest that the publication's internal staff organisation works properly and may be considered an example of good management.

Similarly, the steadily increasing number of followers and readers leads to think that *+31Mag*'s relationship with the audience is successful overall. However, some improvements may be applied to the initiatives aimed at increasing the audience's participation on the creation and evaluation levels. Regarding the audience's misbehaviours, the example of *+31Mag* shows that the strategy against trolls should reflect the target audience's preferences and the identity of the publication. Moreover, it should vary in accordance to the specific type and number of followers of the channel in use for the interaction.

4.4. Limitations of the Research

The most evident doubt that emerged during this research was whether or not there was a real distinction between online magazines and digital media that are concerned with information and culture. Especially regarding the comparison between magazines, online

newspapers and blogs, the boundaries between financial models, social media strategies and content seem extremely blurred.

Within the public discourse, newspapers are recognised as media that provide news daily and cover broad areas of interest. Magazines, on the other hand, are thought of as platforms that publish periodically and treat specialised content. Lastly, blogs are commonly distinguished for their extremely informal tone and the low reliability of sources. However, in the course of this research, it appears that digitalisation has somehow mitigated these distinctions. The open nature of the Internet, and the need to keep up the pace with the unceasing rhythm of social media, seem to have forced these different media to adopt similar strategies. All digital media tend to publish consistently, use a basic and direct language, and cover a broad range of topics so as to reach more audiences. Moreover, the reliability of sources is highly questioned in all digital media.

+31Mag, as the name suggests, officially defines itself as a magazine, and has been considered as such in this research. Despite this, it does not mirror the traditional idea of a magazine for the same reasons listed above. Interestingly, the majority of employees are aware of this, especially those who have work experience with other digital media. For instance, when discussing *+31Mag*'s internal organisation, Sfregola and Rickinson refer to their model as the only possible one to achieve some kind of sustainability in the whole field of digital media. At the same time, when deliberating *+31Mag*'s strategy towards the audience, the issues and ways of interaction mentioned are not only limited to magazines but can also be related to other digital media.

Since this research has been using the term magazine and is partially based on theories and literature related to the magazine industry, the reflection about the blurring of digital media boundaries inevitably puts into question its reliability. However, this thesis has chosen to integrate the sources related to the magazine industry with those of digital media and creative industries. Besides, as long as there is no evident proof of the blurring

of digital media, it seems safer to continue using the traditional terms. Also, it should be noted that there is still a distinctive trait that is unique to any digital medium: brand identity. The editorial, content and managerial choices of a publication depend also on its identity. This aspect varies from medium to medium, irrespective of whether it is a magazine, a newspaper or a blog. As a consequence, any in-depth analysis of a digital medium should consider it firstly individually, and secondly in its broader context, as this research attempted to do. Despite this, a deeper clarity of the use and meaning of the terminology would have improved the accuracy of this research.

However, the doubt concerning the blurring of digital media boundaries is not the only limitation of this work. The use of naturalistic inquiry for the analysis of this case study turned out to be partially unfulfilling. The theoretical analysis developed according to this methodology's criteria has provided interesting insights and original theoretical frameworks. The naturalistic empirical research, on the contrary, has sometimes led to a too descriptive analysis. As explained in the introduction, this method has been selected because it is particularly fitting for the examination of social and interrelation dynamics. Accordingly, it has led to information that would have not been achievable without the active participation imposed by naturalistic inquiry. In fact, this participative focus was crucial to understanding the internal hierarchies and the dynamics between staff members. Moreover, field observation, when added to interviews, guarantees a certain level of accuracy not reachable through other less invasive research methods.

Naturalistic inquiry, in fact, gives four different sources of data and moments in which the researcher can develop assumptions and confirm or deny them. These consist of the theoretical research, the field observation, the interviews and the artefact observations. In this way the reliability of every answer can be checked on at least four different types of sources. However, none of them are completely trustworthy. As well as the literature may be outdated or not detailed enough, the objectivity of the observation

notes may be affected by the inquirer's personal experience, exactly like in the case of artefacts observation. Interviewers, at the same time, can tell a truth that is real for them but that is actually affected by their own perception of things. Naturalistic inquiry, by combining these methods, reduces the risk of inaccuracy. Nonetheless, it remains a methodology very open to interpretation and sometimes leads to a too descriptive analysis. However, qualitative research implies a certain level of subjectivity and description, and this research would have not achieved the majority of findings by using a quantitative method. Consequently, even if not perfect, I am overall satisfied with the choice of naturalistic inquiry for this thesis.

4.5. Suggestions for Future Research

Due to +31Mag's conformity with the current general tendencies within the industry, it might be assumed that the analysis of this case study may be considered representative of current online publications. Nevertheless, the relevance of the magazine's unique brand identity and ethical standpoint, that emerged during this research, suggests that this generalisation would lead to superficial conclusions. In fact, even if online magazines are subjected to the same industry tendencies, there are some variables among the structural and managerial choices a publication can make. It follows that, as already mentioned above, every case should be analysed individually. Nonetheless, also mentioned above, parts of the magazine's choices are a necessary response to the current market's constitution. As a consequence, +31Mag can be considered as an example of the current situation at least partially.

However, some aspects of this thesis are entirely applicable to other magazines and they may provide insights for further research in the field. For instance, the theoretical frameworks proposed in the first and second chapters are based on theories and literature regarding the creative industries, digital media and the magazine industry as a whole. As

such, they may be applied to other case studies belonging to these fields. Further analysis in this direction might lead to the establishment of new models for the assessment of current online magazines' internal and external managerial strategies. Moreover, if these frameworks were to be applied to a decent number of cases, it is conceivable that the results would lead to a more comprehensive and extensive overview of the current panorama. Besides, the data comparison may result in a less descriptive analysis without recurring to other research methods. As a consequence, this thesis's structure and findings may lay the foundations for a broader research project.

Another interesting implication from this research could be the understanding of whether or not other online publications have noticed that the users who are most involved on the financial level tend to not engage on social media. Understanding if this is a common tendency may lead to a better comprehension of the behaviour of online magazine users. Also, it may generate improvements in the strategies used by online publications to enhance engagement on their social media pages.

Lastly, the confusion caused by the term 'magazine' experienced during this thesis shows that there is a need for more research on the blurring of the boundaries of digital media. Further studies on this topic may call into question the common use of digital media's labels such as online magazines, newspapers and blogs. Besides, they would encourage an update of definitions and, possibly, the establishment of new recognition criteria and categories. More clarity in this regard would also avoid confusion and inaccuracy on the positioning of the specific digital medium in a broader context. Moreover, it would facilitate other research related to the field.

4.6. Final insights

This thesis has ulteriorly showed that the process of digitalisation has forced the entire industry to innovate and adapt not only the content and means but also the internal

organisation and the relationship with the audience. These changes deserve to receive more attention from academics and field experts, especially considering the challenges the magazine industry has been facing in the last decades. Hopefully, this research will be the first step towards a better understanding of online magazines' internal dynamics. Further research in this area would lead to the establishment of more sustainable and productive models of staff management and audience engagement.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Interview with Steve Rickinson

- *How did you find out about 31 Mag?*

It actually popped up on my Facebook feed once. I was following some Facebook groups, like apartment hunting groups or something like that, and I think that an intern at the time or a contributor at the time, posted on one of those groups with the intention of doing an investigation into the housing situation. I don't know, somehow, I followed that post and it led me to +31Mag. At the time I was looking for new places to write and new things to do while being here and yeah, that's how I got introduced to it. So, I sent them an introduction and had a meeting with them, but it was really random, you know, it was all because someone's post in a group on Facebook.

- *Yes, it really sounds like a casualty. Can you briefly describe your career path?*

Yeah. Okay. Well, I guess it's pretty non-traditional and diverse, you could say. From an education perspective, or an academic perspective, I trained more in marketing public relations and advertising strategies. But my actual career on my own has been kind of erratic, I have always been working in those fields but as a freelancer. It's been a little bit unregulated and a little bit chaotic up until this point but at the same time I feel like I've been lucky to work with a really diverse range of organizations within media. And also, because of this, I've been forced to learn a lot of diverse skills.

- *Can you list some of these skills?*

Well, from a practical sort of approach to journalism, I know pretty much everything: video production, web design, coding, graphic design and various tech aspects of media and journalism. These are all practical aspects of the job that I think a lot of people in the field are actually missing at the moment. It is a matter of mindset, they do not pay so much

attention to the reasons why that stuff is important, but yeah, in my case I have just always been in situations where I have had to learn those things to work, generally entirely on my own. I would say that if I have a client I will be able to offer them a diverse range of media related services, but sometimes, if they really are looking for a person that follows industry protocol or suchlike, you know, a very regimented way of doing things, that would not really do for me. Yeah, those things, I always have to learn them in the spot. I guess, again, my career path has just been focused on a range of different sort of platforms and activities that fall within the wider umbrella of media, so pretty much everything from journalism to film, to documentary, to web design, to music.

- *And what about your writing skills?*

I am more specialized in brand-related subjects, writing is more of a personal interest. However, if I can get paid to do that then that is nice. Same thing with making videos, it is more something that I personally like to do and if someone wants to pay me for it cool. But practically I would say my professional experience is generally more branding and marketing centered, so these days that is what I offer. Most of my professional services five years ago were about writing and production, now it's more about consulting and branding.

- *I remember that before getting this position you used to write for +31Mag.*

Have you stopped doing that in favour of a more managerial role or do you still write occasionally?

Every now and then, now it's more a question of time. At the moment I don't have the kind of time that I would like to feel confident in putting out a good piece of content. So, I don't know, again, maybe I need to not be as ambitious and just do smaller pieces but that is not my aim, I do not want to do a bad job. So right now I am just focusing on boosting +31Mag. At the moment I am dealing more with defining its brand and tightened

up its identity, its voice. Also, I am trying to form more partnerships and affiliations and things like that, whether they are financial or through exposure.

- *Sounds like a lot to deal with. What is the exact title of your position?*

Well, technically my title is what the other *Jane* previously was, which is newsroom coordinator. But honestly, I think that it is very arbitrary, I mean, titles in general are arbitrary within this field. Newsroom coordinator sounds like you are kind of a secretary of the newsroom but, obviously, what I am actually doing is a lot more. I don't think that there is a real title to cover such positions. Also, they change on the base of the publication momentary needs and yours and your colleagues propensions.

- *What functions do you cover exactly?*

Well, they have been changed a lot since I was hired by Massimiliano. My job description has sort of evolved into something else while I have also been trying to keep that original description. Originally, I was brought on purely to bring more exposure to *+31Mag*. In my experience that role is something that does not involve the creation of content. You generally have another team for that, while you are more a manager who delegate things and is in charge of keeping external contacts and developing strategic partnerships and affiliations and exposures, advertising, marketing... Taking care of all these things takes tons of time and you can't to do the content as well.

You know, from Massimiliano the focus shifted more from just building up the English language page to a more content-oriented perspective. So we brought on *Stefany* who is a native English speaker that can help us in this. I spend a lot of time putting up a few pieces of content in the day, translating the Italian stuff to English which I do find a little bit strange. That is not part of my job description at all but, you know, it is what it is. I can see why, a lot of that Italian content is good, you know, and it is interesting. However, I don't necessarily know if I'm the best person to do that. But I do it and it works, whatever.

But at the same time, I also am focusing on the events that we do offsites so like in the case of that documentary screening series you went to. We have been continuing on doing that. Also, I'm doing... What do you call it... like putting applications together for grants or funds or sponsorship. I have done like three of those already, finding organizations or NGOs or that kind of fit with our brand identity. Maybe we can find ways to work with them, and then also working with the contributors as a copy editor and a general editor. So, you know, anyone that is contributing to the English language site.

- *What about the staff? Do you have any kind of responsibility towards it?*

Yes, definitely. Initially I was supposed to take care of the international staff only (no Italians) but Massimiliano is now in The Hague and he is rarely here in the office, so I started dealing with all of them. The problem of managing the Italian speaking staff as well is that what I can do with them is limited in terms of, you know, walking them through the content in a language that I don't speak. But, I mean, at the end we find a way. This element of the amount of focus on content and Italian contributors is something that wasn't necessarily in the original job description, it just happened. But you know, that's a really important aspect to take care of. As you know, we have had a lot of interns and contributors in a difficult situation. This is because at the time they were supposed to start their experience they had not found any place to stay yet. In my opinion we have the responsibility to be particularly careful with their needs, since we're a small independent organization with limited money and no capacity to offer employment to them. I want everyone to make sure that they feel like they are getting something out of it, so whether they feel like they are really learning journalism or web publishing or they are acquiring a network or, I don't know, they are just learning some new skills that they just did not even expect to learn. That is all really important to me. I want to make sure that people do not feel like they are forgotten or being taken advantage of, you know, as it unfortunately

happens in lot of companies. This, again, requires tons of time. However, I've been doing it for a long time so I can just juggle that responsibility and the other responsibilities as well.

- *For how long have you been doing this?*

In +31Mag's office only since July, but I have been contributing, probably, I can't remember exactly, around January of this year... I think my first article with +31Mag came out in January 2019. However, as I told you, I already had experience in journalism, especially in entertainment and in the cultural field. I also had my own film magazine in New York City, which I ran for five years. I mostly worked in NY and then here, for four years before +31Mag, I was working as a music journalist. So yeah, it has been a while now.

- *During all these years of work in the sector, have you noticed some recent changes in the way newsrooms or editorial staff are organized and managed?*

The field of journalism and media in general is one of the fastest changing industries that there are, and I think that it is of vital importance that any newsroom has a forward-thinking approach. They do not need to be telling the future, but they need to at least train themselves and identifying what that future could be like. You know, it is going to be 2020, and right now if you were to operate a newsroom like in 2015, which was only five years ago, it might as well be 20 years ago in my opinion because the whole infrastructure, the whole media landscape has already completely changed in these five years. There is such a huge conversation that we could have on this, but you know, obviously social media plays into it. Obviously, new search engine algorithms and tech play into it, like how you approach content, obviously what your revenue, your business model is plays into it, and how you focus on content, what is considered important, how you select them. You know, content that is more like clickbaits or search engine optimization versus what your actual organic content is like, the ways you do that. And

then how you are funding your platform. Overall, those models are constantly shifting, and there is no set template that any upstart media organization can identify and follow and be confident that it could actually work.

- *The scenario you are describing seems a little bit negative. Do you see any recent improvement in current journalists' work conditions?*

I would not say that is all negative... Well, I mean, I think journalism in this era, just like production of music or whatever, it is democratised in the sense that if you want to do it, there is a way for you to do it. The question is, do you want to do it as a profession, do you want to do it in a financially sustainable way? That is a different conversation. I think that it is a great time for citizen journalists or curatorial journalists or even freelance videographers and journalists that have the ability to travel around and sort of provide content. However, can they come together and form a lucrative journalism organization without being compromised by the realities of the industry and capitalism? I don't think so. But I do think that the opportunity to get the information out to an audience is more than it has been before. And that is because of tech.

- *Do you think these changes have somehow affected the internal structure of newsrooms?*

Well, yes and no. Yes, in the sense that roles and titles within the newsroom now are very different from what they were let's say 5, 15 years ago. Obviously, you need a Social Media Manager, or a webmaster and these kinds of recent figures. There is also need for a much more international focus than just few years ago, even if you are covering local news because borders are breaking down and you are never really appealing to a very homogenised audience as much as you would think. So there is need for more diversity and different sorts of cultural focuses, maybe just from a philosophy standpoint in the newsroom but preferably also in the actual staff's composition. it's weird because the line between the press and the press officer, like for instance the PR people, is also

blurred. I think that it is weird that magazines also need to have PR representatives, you know, internally. So that is an odd sort of new role to have as well. But, again, in regard to the traditional roles no, you still need an editor, a main editor and all sort of editors of whatever the different categories you have. And then contributors that are, you know, contributing to the category of where their expertise and interest lie... However, you want to set up your newsroom in that regard, it is up to you. You know, I think that allowing people to be free, is much more beneficial to brand identity than setting rigid rules, regulations and hierarchies, but that is my opinion.

- *Interesting. You are talking about diversity and freedom... Does +31Mag's work environment reflect all of this? Is it enough free, flexible and diverse for you?*

Yeah. I think that the strength is in our cultural diversity and experiential diversity. That is probably the primary factor that I look at when I hire people or bring contributors on. I always want as many different experiences, skill sets, set of interests and perspectives as possible. That transcends your normal, whatever racial or sexual demographics, it is anything you know. So that is something that I really look into. I think that it is a strength because we are very much privileged, covering a country that has a very international population from, hopefully, as equal as diverse perspectives. We do not want to be recognized as just another progressive, liberal media outlet in where everyone is going to agree with each other. Obviously, again, through financial necessity there is a lot of inconsistency that comes with it unfortunately, which is my main problem. It is just too often that projects are thought about and starting to work on and they do not go anywhere. This happens because somebody's time as a contributor ends or their internship ends, and weeks or even months of work are just gone like that. Also, we constantly lose a lot of strong writers and personalities in that way, people that I would love to keep on board. I think there is a certain decentralised aspect of +31Mag because we

sort of brand ourselves as this, like a grassroots collective, as opposed to traditional newsroom. It can work sometimes, other times it causes too many instances of miscommunication. But, at the same time, this is the only structure that would work for us at the present time, because of financial necessity. I think that our newsroom is like this, but there is a sort of structure to it, and people do have individual roles. But yeah, you know, it can always be more structured.

- *Would you rather have more structure than this?*

Yeah, generally in my life... I mean, it does not seem like it would be a personality trait of mine, but I do live a pretty structured life. I just feel more comfortable when I know what is happening and I know that people are communicating with each other and they know what they are supposed to be doing. And you know, when things are supposed to be finished and they are not because there are contributors in other cities like The Hague or in other countries like Italy, Greek, America it gets difficult to track them all over the different places. It just gets hard to manage it, but again, from a brand identity perspective, it is a core aspect of +31Mag. I think there is a given-take dynamic, and whatever works for your individual newsroom and the personalities that make up that, that is what you should go with.

- *Earlier you mentioned something about the fact that in your opinion having a lot of freedom within the work environment is really important. How would you better define the term freedom in this context?*

I think it is a lot about understanding that any business or any sort of organization is always built by individuals. In theory, your organization is hiring those individuals for a reason. And it is not just about their degree or their experience, it is also about their personality and their approach to things, their philosophy towards work, life and everything. I definitely define freedom in this context as the freedom to work how you want and express and communicate the way that you usually express and communicate.

Also, of course the freedom of have creative autonomy because, again, I think that it is very important to building a brand identity. This is particularly true in magazines because you need voices behind the articles, you need certain personalities, especially if you are writing long form pieces or opinion pieces or editorials... Audiences are drawn as much to the writer's personality, as to what they are writing about. That is why you see a lot of online journalism with very nicely researched content and structure that might not take off, because the personality of the actual writer does not come out. For me, being given that freedom to nurture and exhibit writers' personality is important for me as well as for the organization as a whole.

- *Does +31Mag give you this kind of freedom?*

Yeah, I think so. But again, I think that it comes at a cost. It is also because of the decentralized nature of the publication, so I wonder if I would have the same freedom if there was a more distinct structure. I do not know I can only assume. I would probably say no, that would not be the case. So, again, I go back and forth between what do I think is more important, my freedom or more structure. And it depends what day you are asking me, honestly, it depends on what I have to do that day.

- *Yes, it sounds like it is hard to find the right balance between them. Do you find it hard in such a diverse context to find the balance between creativity and productivity?*

To be honest no, I don't necessarily find that to be difficult, but I think that that's just a personality trait of mine. I know that I am not an easy person to work with, so I try to approach people in the way that, I know it sounds cliched, but in the way I want to be approached if I were in their role. I feel that I have been lucky enough over my both professional and personal life to have engaged with so many different personalities and cultures and egos. Really, with everyone, from the blandest and most boring person to the craziest person you can think of. I think it is thanked to that that I have a pretty good

reference point and I know how to deal with different personalities. And like just how to talk to them and how to sort of nurture their abilities. Again, I do not know, maybe you ask other people and they won't agree with that at all. But, personally, I don't necessarily find it too difficult.

- *It looks like you use psychology, you adapt your approach to the personality traits of the person you are dealing with.*

Yes, kind of. There is a certain element of psychology to it, it is just identifying people's characteristics so to get a little bit of an idea as to what people's backgrounds is. I asked certain questions in the interview process, why are you here in the Netherlands, for instance, what does your life look like... Like this, you just develop a picture of this person and then just kind of rely on your instincts.

- *Do you apply this strategy in +31Mag?*

Yeah. I think that here I have a level of freedom that concede me to use my strategies and my instincts, and that is definitely a positive thing. I don't feel in any way that somebody would come to me to say: "Oh no, you need to talk to this person or work with this person in a different way" or "you should have a different approach". All things that I experienced in the rare instances where I worked in corporate environments and I was constantly being told how to do my job, what I could say and what I could not. Always. I couldn't even maintain those kinds of jobs because of it. It was a constant "you can't speak in this way", "you can't say that", kind of micromanagement to the smallest level.

- *Did you leave because of that?*

That was a big part of it, yes.

- *I know that you are behind the organization of +31Mag's events and that you manage the international page. Is audience engagement important to +31Mag?*

From the events yes, obviously audience engagement is a pretty vital aspect from the whole promotional period to the actual event to, hopefully, the gathering of some feedback, donations and comments after it. Um, the social media stuff yeah, me and *Stefany* handle it, but the most robust social media channel is the Italian language channel, so Massimiliano works on that one. I follow what is going on there and I translate or whatever and Massimiliano and I talk about his philosophy and strategy of engagement. Through the social media channels, we have the opportunity to engage with the community and I think that that is absolutely vital.

Anyway, I am not necessarily social in my personal life. I do not engage with social media in that way and I'm not necessarily a person that privileges too much the community engagement in my private life. But it is essential to the publication and I am not allergic to it. I can do it. It is essential to find a consistency of voice across social media and community. Also, it is important to keep the distances as an individual. I am not engaging like Steve, I am engaging like *+31Mag*, and it is important to do not forget that. I think that this is something pretty important in the independent publishing space.

- *Do you use a specific strategy that you agreed on with the rest of the staff?*

I have a strategy that I share with the people that work for me and I think that it is a bit different from the strategy that is employed on the Italian channel. Again, I do give credit to the Italian channel that there is the facilitation of community engagement, but I think the tone of voice sometimes borders on a little bit overly subjective, you know to objective, in my opinion. I would rather use a more objective strategy that is more impersonal. I would rather be provocative and instigating a dialogue and then trying to have a diplomatic dialogue after that, rather than being focusing on shock value or something like that, but again I do believe that a certain amount of provocation is interesting. You want to push people's buttons sometimes. But again, you need to do it in a way that maintains your credibility because it is not just you as Steve, it is a completely

different dynamic. And again, sometimes I think those wires get crossed, not just here but all over.

- *Do you think that a little bit of provocation benefits the publication?*

Yeah, I think that for the kind of content that we cover, a lot of it does deal with the element of controversy. Obviously, issues of racism and colonialism and discrimination and all these kinds of things that we treat are going to be controversial, regardless. I think that you know the reality of web publishing very much privileges controversy and sometimes it privileges like negativity too. Again, though, it is a game, it is like a dance in which you have to make sure that you are not only creating that content, that not everything is negative or about sex or drugs, the stuff that people are going to click on and talk about. So that plays into the wider strategy. I personally get that a little bit of provocation is good to push traffic for traffic, traffic for algorithms, for again building a community, and, finally, for branding. All of that it is really important. Definitely.

- *In broad terms, how would you describe +31Mag's overall strategy towards the audience?*

I think that that is a good theater where there are two approaches going on. One would be mine and one is Massimiliano's, or whoever is at that time handling the social media and the Italian channel. Now it is more consistent in the Italian page but before it was whoever was using it at the moment, using different approaches towards audience. Again, I think that consistency of the tone of voice and the approach is something that we need to work on. But you know, for now I do not necessarily mind how is going.

- *Do you think you should use more specific guidelines?*

I only give the guidelines to the English language parts. Since the traffic on the English pages is not as high as the Italian ones the opportunity to engage is not as much. We could do a little bit more proactive sort of engagement, putting some surveys on.

- *What do you mean exactly with "proactive engagement"?*

You know, there is a proactive engagement and a passive engagement. The passive engagement obviously is essentially responding to someone's comment, while the proactive is actually starting that conversation. Different platforms have different sort of approaches. For example, if you use Facebook and you put some sort of like poll up where people have to vote on something, that is proactive because you are asking your audience to do something. But if you put up a piece of content and then somebody posts on it saying something like "this is terrible" or something, and then you respond to that, that is passive. I think we can do more proactive engagement, but at least we are doing a great passive engagement. We are constantly responding to comments, any sort of direct message, whether it is YouTube or Instagram or Facebook or Twitter or whatever, we are having that dialogue. This is more my type of approach, I honestly find an excess of proactive approach typical of unserious media... even desperate, sometimes. It is rare that somebody is going to take the time to direct message you to agree with you, usually it is going to be someone that is annoyed or angry. In that situations, as I said, as long as you maintain this passive approach in which you are not commenting or engaging in that dialogue as yourself, you just try to keep the conversation constructive, without turning it into insulting each other. My general perspective, in work as in life, is to do not censor people under any circumstances. And I apply this approach even on my own Facebook timeline. I mean, I allow people to post and say whatever they want and if it is like super controversial or wrong or whatever, I just leave it. I would rather allow that place to be a platform that someone feels like they are able to express themselves rather than be that person that tells people that they can't say something, or they can't use my platform to have this conversation. I have always used this strategy.

- *Have you ever felt the need to change something about it?*

Not particularly, no, because it is just a conversation that goes so much beyond just a simple day of work. These are conversations on free speech on, you know, allowing

diversity and perspective and voices and fighting against homogeneity. And again, I mean, the bottom line is that, if you want, or if you strive to see a diverse society, diversity also means accepting things that you do not agree with. I think that this is the biggest flaw of the political left, that they claim that it is all about multiculturalism and progressist values and diversity and all these kinds of stuff until it goes against what they want, and then all of a sudden there is no openness, there is nothing. I would rather just have a place for open dialogue than a place that reinforces my own worldview.

- *That is a really open approach, but isn't it difficult to apply when it comes to forms of audience misbehaviour? Has the international page ever suffered from that?*

Yes, we experienced some forms of audience misbehaviour. I think one is that of audience who thinks that there is something factually incorrect about your article and they will let you know. There is another type of audience, members who take some personal issue with a piece of journalism. For example, we have been writing about this case of vandalism happened in a suburb of the Hague where a group of kids decided to burn things out, like cars and other stuff, on the streets and the state took away their little bonfire saying that those little white kids were just angry. We wrote about it, basically saying “okay, well, it looks like you know this is a group of white teenagers while if it were a group of ethnic teenagers you would be panicking now, thinking about a ghetto situation where they are blowing things up”. They would have been described as a group of thugs, while these guys' acts were described in the media as juveniles or something very arbitrary that might just happen at that age. We wrote this and, in the end, there were people from that town that have been getting on us a lot, saying that by writing this we were lowering their property value and their businesses there. Some other woman was triggered very hard about it and wrote me something like “me and my husband have worked so hard to buy a house here and we do not want to read this kind of stuff in the

media". Again, this is not even criticism, that is just some kind of personal thing. Again, I mean, my perspective on this example is a very clear example of how my perspective towards these things is different from Massimiliano's. I mean, he engaged with that conversation in a very aggressive way, while my approach there is more like, "Hey man, we are just reporting what is going on, we are not giving our opinion. This is what is happening, there are people blowing up cars on your streets, you know that. I'm sorry if you think your house is going to be 5000 euros less as a result but that is not our concern".

- *Have you ever received personal attacks from users? I know that to Massimiliano it has happened multiple times.*

That happened yes. It has happened more to him, sure. In my opinion, I do not think that it will happen now with the amount of people we have at the moment on the English language page. Eventually yeah, we will have those kinds of things but not right now. So, at the moment, people take issue more with contents than with writers, like I said, it is generally about something factual that they think is incorrect. I have not gotten too many personal attacks. Of course, sometimes people give their own opinion on things, and that is not bad for you. Well, I mean, it depends on how their opinions are phrased because even if it can always be useful feedback, other times is just something personal that is of no use for us and, actually, raise confusion about which are the real feedback and which are only trolls. Everyone needs to understand what the role of a journalistic writer is. In some pieces we report the truth in the most objective way possible, of course, but in the editorial pieces we also openly give our perspective on that. Often, it is not only about facts, but it is something different, editorial pieces, you know, something opinionated. Recently, I was writing an editorial in which I gave some dissenting opinion about the Dutch policy towards sex workers. Before even publish it, I was sure that it would be commented on, and that is only fair. It is all part of the game, and people have to

understand that. I like creating a discussion, I welcome that, I am glad that there are other opinions. I do not want everyone agreeing with me or agreeing with each other all the time, nothing gets done that way.

- *Have you ever had the feeling that somebody was criticising your work without actually knowing the content?*

All the times. People criticise stuff by just looking at the title, and they do not even open the article, let alone read it. They just see some title or some photo they do not like, and they assume something and then they leave comments like “this is garbage”.

- *What do you do in this case?*

I just use my intuition. If I know that it is a conversation going to go nowhere among two people I might not even engage, or I will give them a very template response like: “you are entitled to your perspective”, or something similar.

- *I heard that you were planning to do a crowdfunding’s campaign; can you explain it to me?*

Well, we have been thinking about doing a crowdfunding campaign for something very specific, for a series of videos that we want to produce about the housing crisis for students here. That is being drafted right now, we have not launched it yet.

- *And what about the donation call on the official website?*

It has been there for five years now. But you know, a crowdfunding campaign and donations are two different things. Donations obviously it is just about people donating sums of money to your publication without wanting something in return but crowdfunding usually it is a tiered thing. Users offer a certain amount of money to get something in return, as in the case of the housing series of video we want to do, and the higher the amount the more they get of that. Crowdsourcing requires more work than donations because you have to be clear about what your plan is, and you have to organize different campaigns to make it work. Also, once you get the money you have to use them on that

specific project, while donations can be used at your own discretion. Always for the page, of course, but not for a specific project.

- *In which ways do audience participate in the creation of contents in the case of the international page?*

Well, I would not say they actually participate in the creation of contents.

- *Don't you think that audience's feedback, suggestions or their personal data affect your creation of contents in any way?*

Oh yes, in that sense they kind of do it. It is not necessarily such a direct thing, but of course as time goes by, you develop certain audience data points that you know you are going to use because they help to understand what kind of content they are going to engage more with. That is an important thing to be aware of.

- *Would you say that it is a knowledge that that comes automatically with the experience? Don't you ever use actual strategies to exploit this information?*

Not necessarily, I mean, maybe sometimes, when we are searching for new topics to write about. We do a kind of research to understand what is some space that we have not covered that maybe somebody has asked about in the past. However, we never do really in-depth demographic research. We never investigate things such as “the most appealing content to men between 18 and 30”. I really believe that that is not the approach that should be used in information media. But then, like I said, you do identify certain patterns over time. So, if I have not been getting a lot of engagements or hits for a week, I put some drug article up, because people love it. We throw something like that now and then to let the algorithm work a little bit more and then, for a couple of weeks, no drug content. The fact is that a good publication cannot rely on these things because in the long run they ruin your reputation.

- *I would say you use this information more out of necessity than for real interest.*

Yeah, kind of... Sex, kittens and drugs related articles always work and sometimes you can write something really interesting out of these topics, real high qualities content, other times it is just to make the algorithm work.

- *Really? Are these the topics that work best?*

Basically, yeah: sex, drugs and cats. This is what works. And it is funny because it really, really works. It does not have to be under journalism, it can be in any industry of social media and advertising, that is not a revolutionary concept. This also shows how the limits of journalism are blurring with other media industries. I mean, the wider conversation here outside of just talking about +31Mag might be about what even is journalism right now. How is defined and yeah, that is the topic of a whole separate thesis.

Appendix B. Interview with Massimiliano Sfregola

- *For how long have you been working in the field?*

For 15 years now.

- *You founded +31Mag in the 2014. Can you briefly summarise your career?
How did you end up being a journalist?*

I started with the activism. I was into politics and doing journalism appeared to me as the most direct way to work with contents of actuality. There is no a real career pattern to follow, it is more a matter of coincidences. I founded +31Mag because that was the only chance to be an independent journalist. Merging entrepreneurship with journalism was my only chance.

- *During these 15 years in the sector, have you noticed any change in the ways editorial staff are structured in terms of division of labour, internal organisation and hierarchies?*

Yes, definitely. All hierarchies and divisions of labour have dissolved. In few words, there are only a few people who actually write original contents for a publication and an endless amount of people who around the world who have no tie with any publication and offer their contents to multiple media. Almost 90 percent of the people who work in journalism are externals and the permanent staff are composed of a few members who are reduced at working as editors and proofreaders of articles written by other people.

- *Does +31Mag reflect this tendency?*

Not at all. +31Mag works more as a collective or, let's say, a cooperative. Everybody has more or less their own role, everybody works on their own project. And I try to keep all of this together.

- *Why did you choose to adopt this model?*

Because I have been working for multiple media in my life. From the television to the print, to the web. I really believe that a decentralised type of model is the only one holding the chance to be sustainable. All other kinds of models are not sustainable. I mean, a model with no defined hierarchies is the only one that can work.

- *You are talking about a decentralised model with no hierarchies but, at the same time, you said you have kept a division of labour so +31Mag must have a certain structure, right?*

Of course, +31Mag has a certain level of structure. However, while other media present a hierarchical structure, in +31Mag is more a matter of skills and expertise. The hierarchy is established by your abilities. Consequently, it is not a pyramidal hierarchy according to which who has been there for longer holds more rights. It is all based on your skills and propensity.

- *However, it seems that roles are not well defined in +31Mag. For instance, Steve, whose title is newsroom coordinator, is actually involved in multiple activities that go beyond his title.*

Well, yes. Steve is actually in charge of all those tasks and aspects that nobody else does. So, excluding the work of the technicians, collaborators, interns, and the Italian Facebook page... excluding all of that, Steve does what remains.

- *Which are the main roles within +31Mag?*

The webmaster and the graphic are the only two defined figures, with a precise and specific role. Everybody else does everything. Social media are managed by whoever wants and knows how to do that, from collaborators to interns. Clearly, we are also helped by digital programs that do the programming automatically. What these programs do not do, everybody else does it.

- *Is this an identity choice or is this due to the lack of financial resources?*

Even if the page were thousands of times bigger, we would maintain this system, only on a greater scale.

- *Which are the greatest challenges that you face in organizing and managing such a diversified staff?*

Well, the greatest problem is that there are too few of us. In order to make an online publication works, you need to be on social 24 hours on 24, seven days to seven.

Following these rhythms is very hard when you are understaffed.

- *And what about the actual diversity within the staff? +31Mag's staff is diverse not only in terms of cultural backgrounds and expertise, but also in terms of level of participation, work hours, tasks... Who is in charge of making all of this work together?*

Let's say that I am the one who deals with all of that, me and the other permanent staff members. Concerning the different levels of availability of workers that does not really matter, it is only a matter of transparency and organisation. If somebody gives us one hour of availability per week, for us is ok. We actually have a collaborator who does only one translation per week for us. As long as she does it with consistency, it is fine for us. Moreover, she is a professional translator and the quality of her work is great.

As you said, the greatest difficulty is to keep everything together. However, the cell phone helps a lot. We use two apps with which we coordinate almost everything. One, in particular, is very useful because it organizes the tasks itself. Also, there are the drives with which articles can be edited by more people. If it were not for technology, we would be done. Especially because, since we need to keep the social media rhythms, we need to publish at a pace that would not be humanely possible. For instance, thanks to these programs, we have planned the schedule for the next two weeks. In this way we can all go on Christmas holidays, or at least have more free time during those days.

- *If it is all planned, why are you talking about just more free time?*

Because in digital media there is never a real chance to completely switch off.

There is just so much to do.

- *Ok, well... writing for a magazine requires a certain level of creativity...*

...I would say a high level of creativity.

- *Right. In your opinion, what is the best strategy to apply in order to create the conditions for staff members to enhance their creativity and at the same time being productive? Do you use any strategy to make sure that everybody in +31Mag develops their own voice?*

Exactly as it was with you, we make sure that a piece respects the editorial lines.

The writer is in charge of all the remaining part. So, for instance, a writer is expected to find the topic, find the contacts, interview them... Clearly, the more you do yourself, the less we have to do, and the higher will be your freedom in shaping your work as you like.

Then, sometimes, we push people out from their comfort zone, but only if we know they are ready for it. You are an example of that. When you worked on the article about the African museum, you were very autonomous since you already knew about the topic. Your last work, the one on Greenpeace, on the contrary, was outside your expertise. This is why in the first case you did all yourself, while in the last case we helped you at finding the contacts and at preparing the interview. However, once we gave you the tools, you did the rest by yourself. You have to be autonomous, to be independent. This, if you want, is part of the training. This is how the field works.

- *Do you think that, as a general rule, giving employees high levels of autonomy is the best way to enhance their creativity?*

Absolutely.

- *However, I would like to remind you of Paul. I have noticed that managing tasks and deadlines was not easy for him.*

Yes, when in your staff there is a great number of interns who are young students it clearly happens that some of them have these kinds of problems. *Paul* did not have the skills necessary to do his internship with us. In fact, at the end of his experience we made this clear to his university supervisor. It was our mistake to select him.

- *Don't you think that, maybe, applying another type of strategy with him would have worked better?*

Not really. The truth is that there is a minimum standard to have in order to do this job. You need to have at least a pair of requirements. Otherwise, it becomes an useless experience for us and for the intern themselves. First of all, you need to know how to structure an article. Second of all, you need to have clear in mind the difference between a post on Facebook and an article. About the management of deadlines, that is not a big deal as long as you do a good work. However, there are some requirements to have before doing this job. If you do not have them, you need to study or understand that this might not be your field. We want that interns to feel part of the team. Training them and let them choose their area of interest is crucial for us. However, we cannot do all the work for them. They have to be proactive, to show us to have a real interest. This is the best way to maximise your experience here.

- *How do you manage those people who work well at the level of contents but are not good at respecting the deadlines?*

I give them other kinds of tasks. There are thousands of things people can do in a publication. From the management of social media to the research of funding... Even somebody without any kind of cultural background could work for us. In such an open structure as ours, everybody eventually find their place. Some people were good with the technical aspects of doing journalism but not good with contents. For instance, some people were very good at writing and at proofreading, but they were lacking creativity. Not everybody is a journalist. Many people are good at doing other things on the backstage.

For instance, *Paul* was not autonomous. When we understood that, we gave him more directions and a defined schedule to follow. Since then, his performance significantly improved.

- *So, at the end of the day, personalising the approach according to the employee's propensity is the best strategy to follow.*

Absolutely. Some people came here to work with contents, and they ended up realising that they were keener on other more technical aspects of journalism. For others it went the opposite way around. At that point it is smarter to follow the person's personal tendencies, clearly within the limits of what *+31Mag* needs. In this way a better experience is granted for us as well for the collaborator. For instance, now there is a girl who is about finishing her internship. She is very passionate about culture. She recently went in Belgium with the Erasmus program. Recently, there was a subject we were treating regarding the increasement of cuts to culture in Belgium. I sent her the pitch of what we would have liked to do with that. She did all the remaining work in complete autonomy.

She is a person with her well defined identity. She knows well what she likes and what she wants to do. I think that in these cases it is fair to accommodate the person's interests. As in your case with the African museum article. You treated the topic in a very personal way, and you ended up writing about things that were beyond initial expectations. When you leave autonomy to the writer some interesting things might come up. Other times, writers need more help and a guidance. However, everybody should be put in the condition to express their own voice. This, of course, implies going along with that person's tendencies.

I would say that for the more creative minds, exerting a low level of control has always worked out well. For people with a more, let's say, technical mindset, it is better to provide clearer instructions. Every successful platform leaves huge autonomy to the workers. For instance, in *The Corresponder*, you become senior editor of a section by

writing about your area of expertise. You must show to be an expert in that sector, and if they hire you, you will automatically be assigned to that specific area of interest.

At +31Mag, we edit articles with the sole intention to check that the writing is clear and that the structure follows the basic rules. Every article must be clear, critical, and have two voices. Everything else is kept as the writer wants. However, there might be some exceptions to this. *Stefany*, for instance, is a collaborator with a great interest in the red lights districts in the Netherlands. She told us that she would have liked to write about that topic and we just told her that it was fine for us as long as she were able to do that. In a matter of few weeks, she did so much research on the topic that she became more expert than all of us. Also, she managed to find few workers willing to be interviewed from her, something that is really rare because they generally do not trust journalists. At the end, she was so good that we put her in charge to write a series of articles on that topic, and she did great. One of those was of 7.000 characters: too much for an online article. I read it with the intention of cutting it down to 4.000 characters. On the contrary, at the end I left it exactly like that. It was well written, informative, interesting, entertaining... it was perfect like that.

- *In your opinion, which are your staff management strategy's strengths and weaknesses?*

Our strength is the high level of creativity we reach. Considering that +31Mag covers those stories that any other platform covers, a big deal of our creative skills lies in the ability to find the right stories to tell, the weirdest and most absurd possible; similar to what *Vice* does. The limitation is that it is easy to get lost with this model, and it is not very sustainable. I would say that our strength is also our weakness. This is visible from the readers' reactions. Some of them love us, others hate us. There is not a middle way.

- *What would you improve of your strategy?*

Maybe I would like to regularize the production flow a little bit more.

- *+31Mag has a very strong and defined identity. For instance, on your official website you declared yourselves as a “multicultural project”, and your contents are always very inclusive. Have you ever had problems with staff members who did not share this “progressive” perspective?*

No, never. As you said, it is written in clear letters in the official website. We are very transparent about our identity. However, sometimes it did happen that somebody interested in an internship came for doing the interview and looked very surprised and let's say uncomfortable with the diversity of the environment surrounding. You know, it is a mutual factor; a person who is uncomfortable with diversity would not be willing to work here anyway. So no, I would say no, that was never an issue.

- *How would you describe +31Mag's relationship with its readers?*

During the first years we did not use to engage a lot. Now we have changed strategy. We are now treating the Facebook pages as a real portal of discussion and so far it is working out well.

- *Why did you change strategy?*

Because we wanted to raise the engagement. Considering people are complaining that journalists know nothing and write fake news only, we decided to participate in the conversation and share our perspective. The main reasons are two: firstly, the interaction with the audience well align with the magazine's identity. Secondly, clearly, more interaction means more engagement and working better on social media.

- *Which tactics do you use to interact with the audience?*

We have the offline promotions, consisting on the organisation of events. That is, in my opinion, the most important part, because is the most personal interaction we get to have with the audience.

- *And what about the online level?*

We have a YouTube channel, and we are designing an Instagram strategy that, as you know, it is a difficult platform for texts. With regard to Facebook, we are increasing the interactions with commenters more and more. I recently told the staff that deal with Facebook to feel free to reply and comment as they like. This gives a stronger sense of participation.

- *Do you use any data analysis program?*

Yes, we do.

- *How do you use them?*

We do something in the between what *BuzzFeed* and more serious publications do. With those programs we check the traffic. When it has been low for a while, we use some contents we know that work. We do not need those programs to know what might help moving the traffic, at this point I perfectly know what the audience wants. However, we make a selection from those easy contents... we never use those weepy stories about kittens. If we need traffic we publish contents that stimulate engagement, but also make sense and have some kind of public utility. For instance, few weeks ago we published the story about the mice at Schiphol Airport. We needed to move some traffic after two bad weeks, and we knew this story would have worked well. It is not the typical article about kittens that the algorithm loves but has no real value. In fact, the presence of mice in such an important airport is an actual emergency and can stimulate a much broader conversation about public infrastructures.

- *And what about donations? I saw you have a permanent donation call on your official website.*

Yes, we have a donation call, but it does not make the difference. Actually, the donation call itself is a marketing strategy that goes beyond the gathering of money. Keeping that donation open is needed to remind people of who we are and what we are doing.

- *Steve mentioned something about a crowdfunding campaign...*

Yes, kind of... We noticed that a crowdfunding campaign linked to the publication in its whole does not work well. The problem of crowdfunding is that it dries up. On the contrary, a crowdfunding campaign linked to a specific project works very well and can be proposed again and again. We are planning to re-open an old project about the housing crisis in Amsterdam. Since such project requires investigation and time, we decide to fund it with a crowdfunding campaign that we will start in January. Moreover, crowdfunding campaigns raise the traffic on the pages...

- *What do you mean?*

By starting a campaign people start sharing more your posts, they all get more supportive...

- *Do you think +31Mag's readers affect the contents?*

Not really, no... Sometimes it happens they want to let us know something, and when they are actual comments and not simple outbursts, we take them into consideration. If somebody asked for more opinionated articles or more different perspectives, why not, we try to do our best to satisfy them. In fact, since we received multiple of these comments, we actually started publishing more opinionated articles. I have to say they all have great success.

- *Which are the most common forms of audience' misbehaviour in +31Mag?*

Threats, people insulting... both through private messages and public comments.

- *Which strategies do you use to deal with that?*

I ban them. I delete the comments.

- *This sounds extreme...*

There are some users who use Facebook just to let their stress and frustration out. Some of them just fight for fight, they do not even read the content. However, sometimes, they start conversations and it becomes a space of discussion.

Clearly, we would never touch those users who express their opinion, even if in contrast with +31Mag's identity. We even keep very extreme comments, as for instance even some racist ones... They are not welcome, but we keep them. However, when people start attacking the publication and the writers personally, we block them.

- *I remember that just a few months ago you were not using this approach... Is this strategy working out well?*

True, we did not use it. Now are traffic has increased to the point that we cannot afford to not use it anymore. Trollers have become a real threat now. The problem is that for big media with a solid reputation trollers are not an issue, while for smaller to medium media reputation is everything. If somebody insists on saying that your articles are all fake news, it may soon influence other users as well. In fact, when our numbers of followers raised significantly, people who said that we were writing fake news started being a real problem. Trollers' aim is to sabotage your page, maybe just for fun. Some of them have no real interest in your page, they just want to prove they can shut your platform down. When it is like that, we need to react.

- *Is it working?*

Yes, absolutely. We generally warn them before banishing them. If they insist, we block them. Clearly, I am referring to very extreme comments and behaviours. We keep many harsh and negative comments. Little provocation and fights is part of the game.

- *How do you give this warning? By private message?*

No, public. We write something like "this comment does not reflect our policy lines". If they go on attacking and insulting us, we block them.

- *This is interesting, especially because you do not use this strategy in the other platforms.*

Yes, because in other platforms we need to enhance engagement, we cannot afford to keep a strict line. In the Italian Facebook page, we already reached a good level of engagement. The International Facebook page another type of approach is needed.

- *Do you think that +31Mag would survive without the audience engagement?*

Honestly? Yes. I noticed that people who actually support us are those ghost users that never engage; no shares, no comments, no likes. People think that the more interactive users are the same that sustain the magazine, but it could not be less true than that. The majority of people who made the greatest donations and that invest on us consistently never even put a like on our contents. This means that those people do not like the kind of interaction you find on Facebook. They know they might find trolls and people who just want to start fights.

We try to mediate comments by using irony, so as to conserve a friendly atmosphere. It also happened that we wrote articles thanks to some users who suggest us interesting stories in line with our interests. It is for such things social media are so important... to find insights, ideas, new stories... At the same time, there are those who search for mistakes and misspellings as a vocation, and that is annoying. Also, those who let us know about a spelling mistake are the same that two minutes later write things like “you should be ashamed, you are a bunch of ignorant people, how can you call this a magazine, this is trash” and so on... until we block them.