

# **Gulf News Publishing: One Of The United Arab Emirate's Largest Media Groups Brings Great Magazines To The Arab World**

## **The Mr. Magazine™ Interview With James Hewes, Publishing Director, GN Publishing, UAE**

**“We were very clear if we were going to go out and do a large digital business, create a large events business, which we are in the process of doing, we needed to have a very stable and secure print base. In this market, print is still very strong. You can still make good money from print magazines and in some sectors it’s also growing, like the luxury category. So it is entirely feasible to have a very successful and sustainable business here and really if you’re going to do that, it gives you as a publisher some comfort as you make those investments in other media.” James Hewes**

**From Dubai with love...**

[Gulf News Publishing](#) produces a number of multilingual tailor-made publications for a host of national and multi-national organizations in the UAE. From concept to distribution, from newsletters to coffee-table books, the company offers a full spectrum of publishing services in English, Arabic and French.

James Hewes is publishing director for GN Publishing and is responsible for the group’s portfolio of consumer magazines,

newspaper supplements and contract publishing. He started with the company in 2013 after 12 years at BBC Worldwide as Head of International Development for the magazines business and latterly as Publishing Director for the brands retained by the BBC following the sale of BBC Magazines.

James' experience in magazines is undeniable and his love for the genre unquestionable. I spoke with him recently while we both attended the FIPP Middle East and Africa conference held in Dubai. James' take on the print magazine business is enhanced by his strong belief in partnerships and knowing your audience as personally as possible. He is a man passionate about moving his company forward and keeping that connection with consumers.

We talked about his division's most recent acquisition of the licensing of Citizen K, the eminent French fashion magazine, and we talked about his hopes for the future, both digitally and the ink on paper horizon. It was an exhilarating and informative discussion that I know you're going to enjoy.

So, without further ado, the [Mr. Magazine™](#) interview with James Hewes, Publishing Director, GN Publishing, UAE.

**But first, the sound-bites:**



James Hewes is  
publishing director  
for GN Publishing

**On Gulf News and Gulf News Group and his beginnings with the company:** Gulf News and the Gulf News group has been a leading national newspaper in the Middle East for many years now and its current form started in 1985, so it's now 31 years old. It's the leading English-language newspaper in the Middle East. It does 105,000 copies per day. And it now has a very successful website as well. And at some point in its development the company decided that it needed to diversify its offering, so as well as all of the natural things, such as distribution and commercial printing, it diversified into areas like radio and broadcasting and magazine publishing.

**On why he thinks it's important to have a good print product in this digital age:** I think you have to be very pragmatic as a publisher and as an individual and a company. Very few companies have the appetite to make large investments into something like digital without having a solid base of profit behind them in which to fall back. So, we were very clear if we were going to go out and do a large digital business, create a large events business, which we are in the process of doing, we needed to have a very stable and secure print base. In this market, print is still very strong. You can still make good money from print magazines and in some sectors it's also growing, like the luxury category.

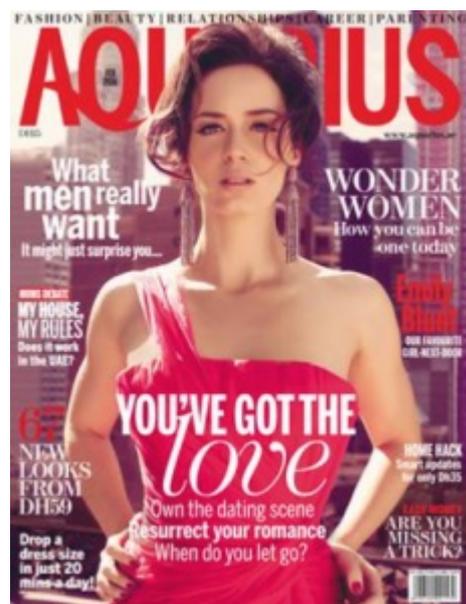
**On whether he thinks the brand extensions, such as events, digital and mobile, could exist without the core print product:** I think we'll find out. I think we're going to start doing some products now that are not based in print form, primarily starting in digital. So we'll be able to get a sense of whether or not it's possible to have a sustainable brand without a print anchor.

**On the fact that 95% of the Middle Eastern audience is still**

**Arabic-speaking, yet most of the magazines are published in English:** I think it's a fascinating case study. A large part of that in days gone by would have been that there was an extreme lack of transparency in the media industry here. And therefore you could publish magazines in English to relatively small audiences and make decent money, let's be honest. I believe with the digital world that's all going to change. Digital advertising not only needs transparency, it almost can't operate without transparency.

**On the biggest challenge he's had to face:**

The biggest challenge that you have in any business now is culture; changing the company's culture. I wouldn't say that I've been 100% successful in changing Gulf News' culture, that's not my job and that's not what I do. But I'd like to think that within our business unit, the publishing business unit, we've tried to embrace a culture that allows people to innovate and to take risks. I'm a great believer in giving people responsibility and in return they get accountability. You can take a project and run with it; you're accountable for its results, but it's yours. You can do what you like.



**On whether he feels the recent new "happiness" ministry that was established in the United Arab Emirates will become a trend and spread around the globe:** Hopefully. I think it's a very bold visionary move, as you'd expect from the government of Dubai. His Highness, Sheikh Mohammed, is very good at making those bold and visionary moves and it may pay off. I'm fully expecting that that's going to be something that is copied elsewhere in the world when people see the effects of it.

**On how he thinks print can be fixed:** In terms of print and

luxury, I think the initial thing there is to find the right partner. We're very lucky in that the luxury magazine that we're launching next month is OK. We have a great partner who has really helped us to get access to the luxury market. You've got to recognize in business what you're good at and what you're not good at. If you know that there's a strategic opportunity somewhere and you don't have the skills or the knowledge, you have to go out and get them by whatever means you can, in some cases that means hiring new people, which we've done in this case.

**On why he pursued the licensing of Citizen K magazine:** We were impressed with the vision and we were impressed with the founder. The man who founded Citizen K, Kappauf, is a well-known figure in the fashion industry. He brings a credibility of himself to that brand and therefore to the industry, and so in extension he also brings that to us. It absolutely has to do with who you're working with. We always used to find this on the reverse; I was very often on the other side of the coin when I was licensing around the world.

**On what motivates him to get out of bed in the morning:** Opportunities for our brands to connect with consumers. And I love going to our events because that's a chance to see sometimes our advertisers and sometimes our consumers in the flesh and to hear more about them and learn more about their brand experiences and to know that our brand has touched their lives in some way. So that's a really powerful and uplifting moment. When I worked on "Good Food" in the U.K., I used to love going to the "Good Food" show in Birmingham and sell subscriptions; I'd sometimes stand at the desk and sell subscriptions for the day, and it was a great way to meet your customers.



**On what someone would find him doing if they showed up unexpectedly one evening at his home:** Probably a combination of all of those. I still read magazines and I'm a passionate reader. The genre of magazines really appeals to me. For example, I read "Motor Sport Magazine" from the U.K. I'm an absolute addict of that brand; it's a fantastic brand and one that we're hoping to bring here at some point.

**On what keeps him up at night:** Not moving fast enough. I guess it's the same in any company; you always sit there and look at your competitors and think how much faster they're moving than you are.

And now for the lightly edited transcript of the Mr. Magazine™ interview with James Hewes, Publishing Director, GN Publishing, UAE.

**Samir Husni: Tell me about Gulf News and the Gulf News Group and your beginnings with the company.**

James Hewes: Gulf News and the Gulf News group has been a leading national newspaper in the Middle East for many years now and its current form started in 1985, so it's now 31 years old. It's the leading English-language newspaper in the Middle East. It does 105,000 copies per day. And it now has a very successful website as well.

And at some point in its development the company decided that it needed to diversify its offering, so as well as all of the natural things, such as distribution and commercial printing, it diversified into areas like radio and broadcasting and magazine publishing.

So when I came into this company three years ago, I took over what was then GN Magazines, a reasonably small magazine business with five titles, quite commercially successful, good turnover, average margins, not great margins, but the company was ready to develop that business into something suitable in

the multiplatform world.

One of the first things we did was look at consolidating all of our publishing activity, apart from the newspaper, into a single place and create what is now GN Publishing. And GN Publishing is the publishing unit of Gulf News and does everything from traditional consumer magazines to business magazines to content marketing and contract publishing and newspaper supplements.

**Samir Husni: I think we can agree that we live in a digital age, yet you have mentioned before that part of your future plans is to fix print. Why do you think it's important to have a good print product in this digital age?**

James Hewes: I think you have to be very pragmatic as a publisher and as an individual and a company. Very few companies have the appetite to make large investments into something like digital without having a solid base of profit behind them in which to fall back.

So, we were very clear if we were going to go out and do a large digital business, create a large events business, which we are in the process of doing, we needed to have a very stable and secure print base. In this market, print is still very strong. You can still make good money from print magazines and in some sectors it's also growing, like the luxury category. So it is entirely feasible to have a very successful and sustainable business here and really if you're going to do that, it gives you as a publisher some comfort as you make those investments in other media.

**Samir Husni: Do you think all of the other line extensions, whether it's the events or the digital or the mobile, can exist in this market without the core print product?**

James Hewes: I think we'll find out. I think we're going to start doing some products now that are not based in print form, primarily starting in digital. So we'll be able to get a

sense of whether or not it's possible to have a sustainable brand without a print anchor.

There are some brands that do that already here and I can give you an example, the trade publishing space, the B to B space, The Media Network. The Media Network is based here in Dubai and it's basically a trade website for the magazine industry; the communications industry. And they've existed most successfully for the last few years without ever having a print component, ironically, for a magazine industry site.

So, I think it is possible and I believe it's going to become more possible. But rather than saying that we have print brands and line extensions, I think it's more about saying that we have brands. And each of those brands can spread over into a certain number of platforms and one of those might be print. And I love the phrase a friend of mine from the BBC uses when he talks about publishing. He says that we do print for profit and we do digital for growth. And I think that's exactly right.

If you're doing an extension of your brand and it's print, you need to subject that extension to the same commercial rigor that you would any other line extension. And if it's not going to be profitable, why would you do it? And if it is profitable then you should embrace it.

**Samir Husni: What about the audience? We've heard that 95% of the audience in the Middle East is still Arabic-speaking, yet most of the magazines that we see are English editions.**

James Hewes: I think it's a fascinating case study. A large part of that in days gone by would have been that there was an extreme lack of transparency in the media industry here. And therefore you could publish magazines in English to relatively small audiences and make decent money, let's be honest. I believe with the digital world that's all going to change. Digital advertising not only needs transparency, it almost

can't operate without transparency.

If you think about something like programmatic advertising; it can only exist when the data is there, so you have to disclose your data if you want the programmatic revenue. And that's going to force out into the open a lot of thinking, particularly among marketers and brands that if they can get clear proof of their ROI in digital then they must be able to get it in all of their other media as well. And I think when it comes down to it, the volume is there in the Arabic market, but we don't yet have a good enough understanding of that audience to be able to identify where the niches are and where the quality segments are, the quality audience pieces are, but they are there. They're absolutely there.

And I think that's going to be a really exciting development in the next few years as we big publishing companies that have done so well in the English-speaking media start to pivot toward Arabic and start to apply some of the learnings that we've taken in the English space and apply it to Arabic, which by the way is not to down the efforts of Arabic-language media companies. There are a great many of them that do fantastically well. And for the time that I've been here, it's been a real revelation because it has exposed me to the reality that there is a huge market in publishing that the rest of the publishing world never sees, which is the Arabic-language market. There are hundreds, thousands of magazines and hundreds of newspapers and thousands of websites that are out there publishing in Arabic, thriving and doing really, really well. But because it's Arabic, because it's never had the focus from the western world that other magazines and cultures have, it's been hidden away, though they're starting to come to the surface now.

**Samir Husni:** When you think about your three years here, has it all been smooth sailing or have you encountered some choppy seas along the way? What has been the biggest challenge you've had to face and how did you overcome it?

James Hewes: The biggest challenge that you have in any business now is culture; changing the company's culture. I wouldn't say that I've been 100% successful in changing Gulf News' culture, that's not my job and that's not what I do. But I'd like to think that within our business unit, the publishing business unit, we've tried to embrace a culture that allows people to innovate and to take risks. I'm a great believer in giving people responsibility and in return they get accountability. You can take a project and run with it; you're accountable for its results, but it's yours. You can do what you like.

One of my absolute mantras is, and I think I heard it from some management guru; you hire good people and you give them the room to do their jobs. And that's the biggest change and the biggest challenge that we've tried to bring into the business is to apply that rule.

Traditionally, a business is very used to having a very clear hierarchy structure, with a lot of power spread around senior management individuals, trying to delegate that power out to people and to get the company used to it, with functions like our finance department, our PR department and it's great. When you sit down and explain to a finance team what you're trying to do they nod and say yes, that sounds like a good idea. We've never done it before, but let's try it.

So, it's really gratifying to see a culture change to come along. And I think unless you do that, you can't possibly hope to do any of the other plans that you have. I laugh sometimes when I go out into the market and see businesses, of which there are many in this region, huge businesses run by one person, and all of the decisions go through that one person. In this modern age, it's impossible now to have the time and attention to cope with all of the different revenue streams that there are in the media business. And I think we've done a great job with that, thanks I large part to the leadership that our company has, to allow us to actually go out and try

things.

**Samir Husni:** You also mentioned earlier that the values of the company today are much different than what they used to be. One example you mentioned was that it's a given that you have to respect your audience, but in your case, you said that you want joy and happiness. And recently here in the United Arab Emirates, they established a new ministry for happiness. Do you think this is a trend born here that will spread around the globe?

James Hewes: Hopefully. I think it's a very bold visionary move, as you'd expect from the government of Dubai. His Highness, Sheikh Mohammed, is very good at making those bold and visionary moves and it may pay off. I'm fully expecting that that's going to be something that is copied elsewhere in the world when people see the effects of it. The happiness index and the idea that you can measure someone's happiness and measure a country's happiness, or a company's happiness in our case and use that in a way to manage business is a great idea. People spend a third of their lives at work, they should enjoy it.

**Samir Husni:** I don't know if you're familiar with it, but there's a magazine in the United States that's around two years old called "Live Happy." I interviewed the editor and she told me that happiness was a science and now more than ever people are studying it as a science. So, am I going to see a new happiness magazine coming out from Gulf News Publishing?

James Hewes: (Laughs) I don't know if we'll have a happiness magazine, but I'd like to think that happiness will be in all of our magazines.

**Samir Husni:** Is there anything else that you'd like to add? You mentioned the luxury category and fixing print; how do you plan on fixing it?

James Hewes: In terms of print and luxury, I think the initial thing there is to find the right partner. We're very lucky in that the luxury magazine that we're launching next month is OK. We have a great partner who has really helped us to get access to the luxury market. You've got to recognize in business what you're good at and what you're not good at. If you know that there's a strategic opportunity somewhere and you don't have the skills or the knowledge, you have to go out and get them by whatever means you can, in some cases that means hiring new people, which we've done in this case. But also you've got to rely on partners. You have to find good partners who can help you out.

I started out in this business primarily doing licensing and syndication of magazine brands overseas and it taught me that partnerships are a really strong way to do business and if you get it right, everybody benefits. And if you're going into a new space like luxury, you have to have partners.

You've got to also embrace the opportunity. It's no good just picking at the edges and doing the wrong thing. You have to have two or three or four things in that space to show that you're really committed to it.

**Samir Husni: Why did you specifically go after the licensing of Citizen K?**

James Hewes: We were impressed with the vision and we were impressed with the founder. The man who founded Citizen K, Kappauf, is a well-known figure in the fashion industry. He brings a credibility of himself to that brand and therefore to the industry, and so in extension he also brings that to us. It absolutely has to do with who you're working with. We always used to find this on the reverse; I was very often on the other side of the coin when I was licensing around the world.

And one of the crucial factors about whether or not we were

going to deal with someone was our personal feelings about the partner; if you don't like somebody; chances are you really don't want to have to do business with them. So, that likeability factor and a willingness to cooperate and be a partner, rather than having a client/supplier relationship is something that attracted us to Citizen K. And I have to say, of all of the licensing projects that I've been involved with, and I've been involved in more than 50 in my career, I have never seen the level of work that has gone into this project. These guys are absolutely fantastic.

**Samir Husni: What motivates you to get out of bed in the morning?**

James Hewes: Opportunities for our brands to connect with consumers. And I love going to our events because that's a chance to see sometimes our advertisers and sometimes our consumers in the flesh and to hear more about them and learn more about their brand experiences and to know that our brand has touched their lives in some way. So that's a really powerful and uplifting moment.

When I worked on "Good Food" in the U.K., I used to love going to the "Good Food" show in Birmingham and sell subscriptions; I'd sometimes stand at the desk and sell subscriptions for the day, and it was a great way to meet your customers. And as you were selling them a subscription you could ask questions about their engagement with the magazine. You just got that anecdotal connection with your audience. You could put a face to your readers.

So that really gets me up in the morning, that idea that you've made a connection and actually made a difference in someone's life. And you've entertained them with a future piece of knowledge that's also helped them get through their day.

And that's what I like about the digital opportunities; what

excites me about the digital opportunities. I love sitting there and watching the analytics' screen. It may sound boring, but you can see the number of people who are on your site right then and you can't see that with a magazine. Occasionally when you worked in magazines you might see someone at a newsstand buying your magazine and you'd think, wow, that's mine and they bought it. That's fantastic. But now you can sit in the office 24/7 and see live the engagement consumers have with your product. It's wonderful.

**Samir Husni: If I showed up at your home one evening unexpectedly, what would I find you doing, reading a magazine; reading your iPad; watching television, or something else?**

James Hewes: Probably a combination of all of those. I still read magazines and I'm a passionate reader. The genre of magazines really appeals to me. For example, I read "Motor Sport Magazine" from the U.K. I'm an absolute addict of that brand; it's a fantastic brand and one that we're hoping to bring here at some point.

I read magazines and books; I read books in print and I read them on my Kindle, it just depends on what kind of book it is. I watch TV; I must say the biggest change in my habits is that I watch much less linear TV than I did even a year ago. I watch almost all of my TV on demand now. But it's a combination of all of those things, when I'm not playing with my children. Playing with my children is fun and it's nice to see them interacting with magazines and books. My son is sitting home today reading his Diary of a Wimpy Kid book in print and loving it. And I'm egging him on and really enthusiastic about that because I know it's his gateway to knowledge and experiences.

**Samir Husni: My typical last question; what keeps you up at night?**

James Hewes: Not moving fast enough. I guess it's the same in

any company; you always sit there and look at your competitors and think how much faster they're moving than you are. And they're probably thinking the same thing when they look at your company. It never feels like you can act quick enough and I suspect even the guys at – I don't know – pick a fast-moving company, even those guys probably think they can't move fast enough.

So, I would say speed-to-market and the fear that somebody is going to do something before we do and our ideas are going to be trumped by somebody is what keeps me up at night.

**Samir Husni: Thank you.**