Components of innovation journalism

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Journalism is to a large extent a question of freedom. Freedom to express the material in various ways. Freedom might even be a necessity: if you are trying to build your text using a form, the same certain form every time, you will eventually fail in delivering interesting pieces.

Given that, the concept of innovation journalism invites us all to some amount of investigation. What makes an article about the commercialization of emerging technology interesting? When does that text become just a traditional text about research, marketing or organization?

My aim has been to find the elements, the components that make innovation journalism unique.

I think this kind of text analysis has importance of two reasons.

- 1. If you are writing about innovations and the market for these, you are facing all the ethical and methodological problems that need to be discussed further.
- 2. The awareness of the elements will make a future distinction of the concept of innovation journalism easier.

This proposal is based on the study of several magazines, newspapers and books that normally write about both new technology and of the marketing of such technology. It is also based on my own experience, as the editor and journalist on a news paper that is working with both technologies, businesses based on technology and on the use of that technology in traditional industries.

In this work, I have only studied written material. Even if the concept of innovation journalism obviously applies to all kinds of publishing, the material studied has been selected from news papers and magazines. However, I believe that the results would apply also to material from internet, radio or from television.

What is innovation journalism?

During this spring, the fellows in the Innovation Journalism program has been discussing the term of innovation journalism, and a more precise definition of this term is yet to be proposed.

In this context, however, I have used the definition: "commercialization of emerging technology".

The reader - who is that?

A discussion around the different components of innovation journalism needs to start with a discussion around the reader. Who is the person we are trying to reach with our texts?

Obviously, this differs a lot and is a function of the overall context of the paper or magazine.

However, I think that there are a couple of characteristics of the typical reader or recipients of material based on innovation journalism. One would be that it is people that are interested in understanding the actual innovations, the foundations of these and their environment. Another would be people that are looking for new ways of doing business, either with the help of innovations to improve their regular work, or to build new businesses based on innovations. A third group could be companies that are interested in areas where new products could be threatening their own market space.

More structured described, this would mean that the readers could be found from any of these groups;

Innovators themselves. This would for instance be the people that are working on innovations or new technology and are interested in finding ways to market these. They would be interested in the experience and the knowledge from others. They might also try to find innovations that are close to their own area of interest.

Marketing departments. The people that are working with marketing of new products will obviously be interested in how others have been working, and their experiences. They would also be interested in other companies or organisations with products focusing on the same market niche.

Business development people. Those who are to develop new lines of business or to change the way a company is working are constantly looking for products and tools to drive that change.

Pr agencies. The public relations people are both looking for new companies to have as customers, but also to understand how the market for their current customers is changing.

Headhunters. The people that is constantly trying to find talented people for specific jobs or tasks – like "headhunters" – would be very interested in reading about the people behind the projects and the people with the new and ground breaking ideas. It is very likely that these people would be looking for innovation journalism-based texts. Also human resource departments, HR, would be interested to know who is doing what in their market.

Actors on the financial market. Being ever interested in new stocks to buy or new markets to develop, people working with or close to the financial markets would most probable be very interested in reading about innovations and their way to market.

Three pieces of interest

My aim has been to try to find the elements that build up an "innovation journalism text". To do that, I have studied a couple of articles from the US based edition of Computerworld, some articles from Fast Company and some text from the Sweden based Computer Sweden.

All the articles were published during the winter or spring of 2004.

Necessary components

I have come to the conclusion that two elements is crucial to a text that is to be called "innovation journalism". The innovation must be named and described as well as the market or the use for that.

The innovation

Obviously, there are some components that are more obvious than others. The actual technology is one of these.

I think it is important to include a description – in one way or another – of the technology and its potential use. This can obviously be done very short or very extensively.

A short note could introduce the innovation or the technology in just a couple of words, in a feature article; this could be done on several pages.

The level of understanding of the reader must be taken in account. Readers of a magazine that is normally very technical can present the innovation in a totally different way than a magazine with a very broad audience with little or no technical understanding.

I do not think that the technology itself needs to be described deeply, but it is important for the reader to understand the use. At least it must be put into context.

♦ Example:

Some very good example of describing the actual innovation comes from the January 2004 issue of Fast Company, where the magazine is presenting the "top 20 Social Capitalists – Groups that are changing the world". In some short and others a little bit longer texts, several companies, organizations and groups are presented that in different ways are using new innovations to make a difference.

In the case of the program PATH, Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (www.path.org) one of the innovation is presented like this:

"PATH has created such technologies as the SoloShot, a syringe that automatically disables after a single use, preventing accidental transmissions of disease from needlesharing." 1

This is enough to present the idea to the reader of Fast Company, a reader that normally has no knowledge in medical equipment or maybe not even in the work of organizations with a focus like PATH.

♦ Example:

If the texts from Fast Company were short in the previous example, this would illustrate a longer text from Computerworld. The text is describing the adaptation of "blogs" in the corporate environment.

The actual innovation, in this case the blog, is described like this as a part of a discussion around its commercialization:

"... weblogs, or blogs, which let anyone with a Web browser and some easy-to-use software publish a personalized diary online..." 2

This short description is enough for the average reader of Computerworld to understand what a blog is and is not.

The market

The other fundamental component would be the market for the innovation.

This can be very loosely presented. It could obviously be presented as the total market where the product, technology or innovation could be sold.

But it could also be a very narrow perspective. It could for example be described as an area in corporate use where you can put the innovation to use. A case study, where a company is using the technology or the product and describes its use, would be one alternative to present the market.

♦ Example:

To continue the example from above, where one of the PATH innovations was presented, here is the presentation of the market for this syringe, SoloShot:

"Now licensed and manufactured by Becton Dickinson, the SoloShot is packaged with every vaccine that the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations delivers to the 74 poorest countries in the world".

The market potential is here obviously not the most lucrative – that is not the mission for PATH –, but it clearly shows where the innovation is going and its use.

♦ Example:

In the previous example of blogs from Computerworld, the definition was presented in a part of the discussion on the market for such blogs:

"Recently, weblogs, or blogs, which let anyone with a Web browser and some easy-to-use software publish a personalized diary online, have started to emerge as valuable knowledge management and communication tools in companies.

"But blogs aren't entering through the CIO's office. The often first appear in companies as the convenient records of engineering or design projects."

Here, the market is described both in its potential use in a corporate environment, but also the way to the company, i.e. not the way via the Chief Information Officer, CIO.

In this case, the main focus however is on several customer cases. One of these is presented like this:

"Michael Masnic, president of Techdirt Inc. in Foster City, Calif., says that while most corporations have knowledge management tools and corporate portals to organize internal data, they don't have an effective way to deal with external information. A blog allows users to integrate internal and external information". 5

This information is enough to show the use of the innovation from the customer's point of view. Since the innovation of blogs is very broad in its use, this context is very important, to understand the users side of this technology.

Two elements

I think that a text that presents both the innovation and the market for this innovation could be described as something within innovation journalism.

Without the innovation itself, the text would be on just marketing in general. Without the market potential or market description, the text would be focused on the innovation or the technology itself.

Whether it *should* be viewed as such is another matter. It is very likely that most articles that includes both innovations and their market potential is mainly focused on something else, and therefore mainly viewed as for example technology reporting, science reporting or business reporting.

Valuable components

If the innovation itself and the market for the innovation are necessary components, there are some areas that would help to build the story. I have in my study found six that I find worth noting here.

I'm sure that there are several more ingredients that could be valuable to get a better understanding of the innovation and its commercial potential, given the context where the text is published.

I've tried to add some notes on the problems and the journalistic issues related to these components. These notes are mainly based on my own experience, having working with technology and its commercialization.

The industry

The industry behind the product is obviously interested in being presented in texts around their innovation.

This presents one of the biggest problems with writing about innovation journalism, as the companies and their marketing and pr departments is very eager to have publicity for their new technology.

At the same time, if you think about the readers of the text, it is probably of interest to know what company is developing the innovation. It is also of interest to know the overall situation on the market for innovations in this field, especially if you are interested in going to market yourself with an innovation in the same area. It is also of interest to know who to contact if you would like more information from the source.

Therefore, I think that information in the text about the company behind the products is of great importance and should not be neglected.

The users

The user's story is always interesting. It can validate the market acceptance of the innovation; it could present new ideas for how to continue the development of the technology behind.

After years, when a lot of new technology has been introduced on the market, with small or infinite success, it is more crucial than ever to show that there is a solid market and happy users that are willing to pay for the innovation.

The main problem with case studies, based on the user's experience, is that they far too often fail to present a totally objective view.

The other problem with case studies is that they will not support any general conclusions on how the innovation will be received.

The people

The people behind the project are always of interest. The ideas of the people that have created the innovation or the going to market initiatives can often be inspiring for others.

Also the background, the visions and the circumstances that surrounded the work with the innovation, can be of great help to others.

The interest in people is natural and I believe that every text that could include the people behind or the people that uses the innovation should include these.

The organization

What is the organization behind the commercialization? How is the company or the group of people organized?

Apart from being vital to the process of taking a concept or an innovation through all the steps to something that can be sold on the market, the responsibilities of different parties and the structure of the company can be useful for others to help themselves organize their own companies or organizations.

♦ Example:

Describing the strategies behind the ideas put to work, Fast Company presents a couple of cases and the thoughts of the company.

One case is from Sony. It describes the commercialization of the PlayStation gaming platform, which was a huge success. We all know that it is not the best technology that wins the race, but as always a combination of quality, marketing and smartness. The problem for Sony were that it's two competitors, Nintento and Sega, were both very established at the market. But, they depended heavily on the staff they had internally. Sony wanted to run the business differently.

"From the beginning, Sony wanted to be open to the best ideas, wherever they came from. So it used outside developers to produce most of its games, and even reached out to gamers themselves".

The marketing

For obvious reasons, the marketing of the product is important. It describes how the innovation itself is delivered and presented to the potential users. If this fails, there is very likely that the project itself will fail, regardless of the quality of the actual idea behind the innovation. Therefore, the branding, and the advertising to just name some, is very important for the success of the product.

And it is important also to the readers. The people that are interested in deploying new technology in their own organizations would be interested in the presentation of them.

But even more important, the people that are interested in investing in companies with new technology will be very interested in the way the innovation is presented.

Among the most complex questions in the field of innovation journalism, is the question of marketing. If you as a journalist want to write about the marketing of a product and also want to address the buyers of that actual product, you will come close to writing marketing material for the company itself. This is more of an ethical question that is of utmost importance for all journalists writing about innovations and their commercialization.

The legal aspect

The matter of intellectual properties is currently debated, and has been so for quite some time. This is not only a question for the music and movie industry, but a question that most companies are facing right now.

Describing the work with legal questions around the innovation would help the reader understand how the company or the persons behind the innovation is trying to protect or in other ways strengthen the juridical part of their ideas.

Future studies

Having proposed some necessary and some supportive components of texts based on innovation journalism, there are a lot of areas that could be discussed going forward. One of the potential areas that would be very interesting to study more is the **marketing department dilemma**. How do you as a journalist deal with the pr departments and the marketing departments that is trying to get the text to describe not only what the journalist wants but also what the company behind the innovation wants.

¹ Fast Company, January 2004, page 52

² Computerworld, January 26, 2004, page 23-24

³ Fast Company, January 2004, page 52

⁴ Computerworld, January 26, 2004, page 23-24

⁵ Computerworld, January 26, 2004, page 23-24

⁶ Fast Company, April 2004, pages 63 ff