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# Components of Innovation Journalism

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# Components of innovation journalism

**In order for text to be “innovation journalism”, it has to cover both the invention and the market. While these two elements are sufficient and necessary for calling it innovation journalism, other elements can be added to make the text even more useful or enjoyable for the readership.**

## 1 Introduction

Journalism is largely a question of freedom to express the material in various ways. Freedom is a necessity for good journalism: if you are trying to shape your text to the same form every time, you will eventually fail in delivering interesting pieces.

While keeping this in mind, the concept of innovation journalism<sup>1</sup> – a term that probably is unknown for most journalists – calls for some amount of investigation into what can characterize a good form for it. What makes an article about the commercialization of emerging technology interesting? What is the difference between that text and a traditional text about research, marketing or organization?

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

There are at least two reasons to why this kind of text analysis is important. 1) Writing about innovations and their markets raises ethical and methodological problems that need to be solved, and 2) The awareness of the elements simplifies the distinction of the concept of innovation journalism.

This work is based on the study of several magazines, newspapers and books that normally write about the production and marketing of new technology. It is also based on my personal experience, as the editor and journalist on a newspaper reporting on technologies, businesses based on technology and on the use of that technology in traditional industries.

Even though the concept of innovation journalism applies to all kinds of news media, all the background material for this work has been selected from newspapers and magazines. The conclusions should however apply also to publications on the Internet, and broadcasts on radio or television.

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<sup>1</sup> Read more about Innovation Journalism: [www.innovationjournalism.org](http://www.innovationjournalism.org). Here it is possible to find information about the Innovation Journalism program.

## 1.1 Innovation Journalism

During the spring of 2004, the participants in the [Innovation Journalism fellowship program](#)<sup>2</sup> have been discussing the meaning of “innovation journalism”. A more precise definition of this term remains to be agreed upon.

In this context, however, I have used the definition: “journalism covering commercialization of emerging technology”.

It is important to not confuse innovation with invention. Invention refers to the creation of a new concept, i.e. a new machine or a new process. Innovation, on the other hand, is about the introduction of something new, involving the invention as well as its market, and the relation between them. Journalism covering inventions alone is a topic for science or technology journalism, whereas journalism about innovation discusses the context for the invention.

In order to identify the elements that build up an “innovation journalism text” 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.

## 1.2 Who uses Innovation Journalism?

Innovation journalism is nothing new. It has been used and is used by all sorts of media for decades, or more.

But it is obvious that the merger of business journalism and technology journalism were very intense in the years when the Internet were evolving and maturing.

Magazines like Fast Company, Business 2.0, Red Herring, Industry Standard, Wired and others became quickly very successful and very acknowledged by the readers, to a large extent because they were doing “innovation journalism”.

Today, several of these magazines, for example Industry Standard and Red Herring, are gone. Others, like Fast Company and Business 2.0 are struggling and are trying to find new markets for their vision.<sup>3</sup>

The problems for the above mentioned magazines were partly linked to their co-development with the market they were covering. They were to some extent covering companies on the Internet, and when these companies ran into problems, the magazines ran into the same problems. But the problems were also partly due

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<sup>2</sup> During 2004 six Swedish editors and journalists have taken part in an Innovation Journalism Fellowship program in order to develop the concept and community of innovation journalism. Read more about this program on [www.innovationjournalism.org](http://www.innovationjournalism.org)

<sup>3</sup> “Storytellers of 90's Innovation Plan Comebacks, However Modest”; New York Times, July 19, 2004

to journalistic problems. Too many stories were being too optimistic about the future for new companies or new technologies: supporting promises that didn't stand the test of time.

Innovation journalism needs to address these problems. Awareness of the problems that magazines like Industry Standard experienced will help today's journalists covering emerging technology.

Innovation journalism is being increasingly used by all sorts of media. Therefore, it is crucial that the knowledge and the lessons learned from the "traditional" innovation journalism media, like technology oriented magazines or science magazines, can be transferred and accessible to all journalists.

## 2 Who is the Reader?

A discussion around the components of innovation journalism starts with identifying the innovation journalism reader. Who is the person we are trying to reach? Obviously, this varies a lot and depends on the context of the publication.

Some readers are interested in understanding the innovations, their foundations and their environments. Others are interested in new ways of doing business, either by improving their regular work through innovations, or by building new innovation-based businesses. Some may have professional connections to companies involved in areas where new products can threaten their own market space. The readers can be found from any of these groups;

**Inventors.** People working on new technologies or inventions, who are interested in finding ways to the market, can be interested in the experience and the knowledge of others. They might also try to find innovations that are close to their own area of interest. Inventors might also be interested in finding a market for their products, and turn to media in different forms to find this market.

**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.

**Marketing departments.** People working with marketing of new products will be interested in other people's work and experiences in marketing new products. They will also be interested in other companies or organizations with products focusing on the same market niche.

**PR agencies.** Public relations people are looking for new companies to have as customers, and want to understand how the market is changing for their current customers. Obviously, magazines and newspapers are also a market for the efforts of PR agencies.

**Headhunters** are constantly trying to find talented people for specific jobs or tasks. They are interested in reading about the people behind the projects and the people with the new and groundbreaking ideas. It is very likely that these people

will be looking for innovation journalism-based texts. Also human resource departments are interested to know who is doing what in their market.

**Actors on the financial market.** People connected to the financial markets are probably interested in reading about innovations and their way to market.

**People interested in new technology.** There are a lot of people interested in inventions and their use, without being professionally involved in innovation or even being consumers of new technological products.

## 3 Necessary Components

Two elements are crucial to an "innovation journalism" text. The innovation must be named and both the technology and the market must be described.

### 3.1 The Invention

There are some components that are more obvious than others, such as the technology.

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

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

The reader's level of understanding must be taken in account. A magazine with a technologically skilled readership can present the innovation in a totally different way than a magazine with a very broad audience with little or no technical understanding.

It is less important that the technology itself is described deeply than that the reader understands its use. The technology must be put into context.

#### 3.1.1 Example from Fast Company

There are some very good examples describing inventions in the January 2004 issue of Fast Company, where the magazine is presenting the "top 20 Social Capitalists – Groups that are changing the world". A series of texts present a number of companies, organizations and groups that in different ways are using new inventions to make a difference.

In the case of PATH, the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health ([www.path.org](http://www.path.org)) one of the inventions 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.”<sup>4</sup>*

This is enough to present the idea to the reader of Fast Company, who normally has no knowledge about medical equipment or the work of organizations like PATH.

### 3.1.2 Example from Computerworld

The following example comes from Computerworld, describing the adaptation of “blogs” in the corporate environment. The invention, 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...”<sup>5</sup>*

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

## 3.2 The market

The other fundamental component of an innovation journalism text is the market for the invention.

This can be presented in a broad perspective, as the total market where the product, technology or innovation can be sold. It can also be presented in a narrow perspective, as for example how an invention can be used in a corporate environment. A case study, where a company is using the technology or the product and describes its use, can be one alternative to present the market.

### 3.2.1 Example from Fast Company

To continue the example from Fast Company of the PATH innovations was presented, here is the presentation of the market for the SoloShot syringe:

*“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”.<sup>6</sup>*

The market potential is here obviously not the most lucrative<sup>7</sup> – that is not the mission for PATH –, but it clearly shows where the invention is going and how it will be used.

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<sup>4</sup> Fast Company, January 2004, page 52

<sup>5</sup> Computerworld, January 26, 2004, page 23-24

<sup>6</sup> Fast Company, January 2004, page 52

<sup>7</sup> The definition of Innovation Journalism that is used in this paper is the “commercialization of emerging technology”. The term commercialization must be used with caution, as this example

### 3.2.2 Example from Computerworld

In the Computerworld example the definition of the invention – blogs – was presented as a part of the discussion on the market:

*“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.”<sup>8</sup>*

Here, the market is described both in its potential use in a corporate environment, and in the way it reaches 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”.<sup>9</sup>*

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.

Even if an innovation journalism text might present just one case, it might be possible for the reader to use that information to find other areas where the product or technology could be used.

## 3.3 The Market AND the Invention

A journalistic text that presents both an invention and its market may be labeled as innovation journalism.

Without the description of the invention, the text will be on just marketing in general. Without the description of the market and the market potential, the text would be on just technology.

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shows. The example above, where the “market” is actually nothing the company is earning money on, is a good example of how new technology can be used. It is also a field where innovation journalism could and should be used.

<sup>8</sup> Computerworld, January 26, 2004, page 23-24

<sup>9</sup> Computerworld, January 26, 2004, page 23-24

Whether such a text *must* be labeled as innovation journalism is another matter. It is likely that most articles that cover both the inventions and their market potentials are mainly focused on one of the two aspects, and will be considered to be technology journalism, science journalism or business journalism.

One could argue that this is just regular reporting. And that might be true to some extent. But the combination of these two elements presents a couple of very specific problems that the normal reporter will never meet while covering politics, police reports or traditional business news.

Here are just a few of the problems that the innovation journalist faces:

# There may be problems with the sources, where the people you talk to have strong opinions not only regarding the facts, but also regarding how they are presented. The same goes with the PR-agencies that normally are involved.

# It is often difficult to balance your enthusiasm over writing about new innovations in early stages with the risk of telling a success story about something that turns out to be a failure.

If the two above mentioned elements, the invention and its market, and the challenges of combining them are better understood, it will support the development of the methodology of innovation journalism.

### **3.4 The Obvious: Good Journalism**

Good journalism is an obvious and rudimentary component of innovation journalism. While good journalism has to build on a good story, the narrative is still the heart and soul of all journalism.

## **4 Additional Components**

While the invention and the market are necessary components of innovation journalism, there are additional components that can help to build the story. I have in my study found six that are worth noting here. I'm sure that there are several other components that are valuable for a better understanding of the invention and its commercial potential, the choice depending on the context where the text is published.

I've tried to add some notes on the problems and the journalistic issues related to the components. These notes are mainly based on my own experience from covering technology and its commercialization.

### **4.1 The Company**

The readers are probably interested in knowing what company is developing the innovation and in getting a picture of how the overall market looks like for innovations in this field, especially if they are involved in the market themselves,

or work with a similar technology. It is also of interest for them to know whom to contact if they would like more information from the source.

Therefore, information about the company behind the products is of some importance and should not be neglected in the text.

Often, mainstream media has a tendency of omitting information about the company behind a new product or technology. Innovation journalist and media using innovation journalism might just as well – or maybe even preferably – do just the opposite: as often as possible mention the company that has put the technology to market. If you take in account the different readers mentioned initially in this paper, most of these readers would be left without important information for them to make their own judgment, if the original source is left out of the text.

At the same time, the industry is obviously interested in influencing texts about themselves and their innovations. The companies and their marketing and PR departments are eager to generate publicity for their new technology, and might try to manipulate the journalist.

This presents one of the biggest challenges for journalist working with innovation journalism.

## **4.2 The Users**

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

In recent years, when a lot of new technology has been introduced on the market with huge variations in success, it is more crucial than ever to show for each case 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 often fail to present an objective point of view. Another drawback is that they will not support any general conclusions on how the innovation will be received.

## **4.3 The Innovators**

The people behind the project are always of interest. The ideas of the people that have created inventions or brought them to the market can often be inspiring for others. The background, the visions and the circumstances that surrounded the work with the innovation may also be helpful for the reader.

The innovators are of such great value for the text that they should be included in the text whenever it is possible.

A topic worth discussing more would be the cultural differences between journalism (of all sorts) in different countries. US based media in general are working with the people behind the news, trying to find a personal touch to the story.

Stories on commercialization of emerging technology would often be even more helpful for the reader if that kind of personal touch were included.

## 4.4 Organization

How is the company or the group of innovators organized in order to achieve success? What impact has the internal organization of a company for the success or failure of commercialization of new technology?

The organization and interaction of the parties involved in the innovation process and the structure of the company presenting the innovation can be a useful component of the text for readers who are involved in organizing their own companies or organizations.

### 4.4.1 Example from Fast Company

Fast Company describes the commercialization of the PlayStation gaming platform, which was a huge success for Sony, showing 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 was that it's two competitors, Nintendo and Sega, were both well established at the market. But they depended heavily on their internal staff. 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”.*<sup>10</sup>

## 4.5 The Marketing

The marketing of an innovative product is an important component. It describes how the product is delivered and presented to the potential users. If this fails, it's very likely that the project itself will fail, regardless of the quality of the idea behind the innovation. Therefore, the branding, the advertising and other marketing aspects are very important for the success of the product, and therefore to the readers.

People who are interested in investing in companies with new technology will also be very interested in the way the innovation is marketed.

Marketing is among the most complex questions in the field of innovation journalism. A journalist who wants to write about the marketing of a product for the buyers of that product will him/herself come close to writing marketing material for the company. This is a fundamental ethical question for all innovation journalists.

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<sup>10</sup> Fast Company, April 2004, pages 63 ff

## 4.6 The Legal Aspects

Intellectual property is currently debated, and has been so for quite some time. This is a question that most companies are facing today, not only the music and movie industry.

Describing how the legal questions around the innovation are handled helps the reader to understand how the innovators are protecting or strengthening their intellectual property.

## 4.7 The Sources

For a journalist, the sources are of utmost importance. They provide the background and the overall understanding of the innovation and the circumstances around it.

The text will normally increase in value if the sources are presented to the reader. Presentations of sources and references to them enables interested readers to dig further into various aspects of the story, and to consult the sources for their own additional purposes.

But also if the reader isn't interested in further investigation, presentation of sources and references gives more esteem to the text.

## 4.8 Other Existing Products

There might already exist products or services that partially satisfy the need that is driving the new innovation.

Describing these products in the text will give the reader a better understanding of the competition that the new innovation will face going to market, at the same time as it will help the reader understand the difference between existing products and the new innovation.

It is always difficult to compare innovations with existing groups of products that only partially satisfy the same need. The normal reaction from companies to this is that "we are doing something completely different". However, as a journalist you have a responsibility not only to be able to describe the new innovation to the reader, but also to explain in which ways it is comparable to existing techniques and products.

## 4.9 And Even More Components...

There are of course even more components that can be of interest to the readers.

One can be the *social impact* of a new innovation. Another can be the *risk* involved in the project, such as the financial risk, the technology risk or the risk regarding ethics.

## 5 Components that could be problematic

While the components discussed until now are valuable for innovation journalism, there are other components that can make the text less valuable – or at least has the potential of being a problem for the text and the story.

It is necessary to know the context in which the text is published in order to determine exactly which components should be omitted. Here are a few general guidelines:

### 5.1 Be Wary of General Predictions of the Future.

A lot of market research is done in order to provide journalists, investors and others with impressive background material, where the idea is to let the world know that the new innovation will be a big hit. Even if the research might be correct, market predictions from analyst firms should be handled with great caution.

There are far too many examples of market predictions that have turned out to be completely wrong. This backfires not only on the market research company behind the figures, but also on the journalist and the magazine or news paper that is publishing the research.

### 5.2 Be Wary of Predictions of Impact.

New innovations are put to market because the innovators want to accomplish something, they want an impact. So the innovators are eager to tell the world (and the journalists) what the impact will be. It is wise to handle that kind of predictions of impact with carefulness. It is very likely that you will end up with a text that doesn't stand the test of time.

### 5.3 Be Wary of Biased Sources.

Many important sources have more than one interest in your work. Consultants that you might ask for a second opinion might be involved in the development of the product you are looking at and therefore are interested in that your text will be as positive as possible. Try to make sure that you know where you have your experts, and what their interests are. And if you are unable to find out the background and status of your sources, be aware of this problem.

## 6 Future studies

There are a number of additional topics that needs to be looked into as innovation journalism develops, such as the **marketing department dilemma**. How does an innovation journalist deal with the PR departments and the marketing departments that are a necessary source of information, while they are trying to get the text to

describe not only what the journalist wants but also what the company behind the innovation wants.

Another topic that could be discussed and that I mentioned above is the use of **personal portraits in innovation journalism**. Very often, the reader is interested in the people behind the news or stories, and to be able to write or tell about these people, successful or not, is often very helpful and interesting for the reader. But how can this be done in a way that is both loyal to facts, to history and to the person being interviewed.

Magnus Höij is the feature editor for Computer Sweden, Sweden's leading IT newspaper. Apart from editing and overlooking the feature section, he is also responsible for Computer Sweden's editorial calendar and the papers successful breakfast seminars, held four times a year. He has been in journalism for ten years, contributing to several magazines and news papers published by IDG (International Data Group). He is also the author of several books on IT, including the first book in Swedish on marketing on the Internet, and a frequent speaker on strategic aspects of information technology. As a fellow in the innovation journalism program, he has been working with Fast Company in New York.