

When Tech Meets Business In Journalism

Adam Edström

Editor-in-Chief
Elektroniktidningen, Stockholm, Sweden

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Could a new type of publication bridge the gap between tech and business, for mutual benefit and without simplifying either subject? Personally, not only do I believe there is a common ground - I also believe that there's a pent-up demand for a publication aimed at entrepreneurs and startups that insults neither the engineers nor the economists. Based on my experience from Elektroniktidningen and my short stint at Fortune as an Innovation Journalism Fellow. I'll try to outline what such a publication could look like on the Swedish market.

Engineers and scientists rarely praise tech articles in business publications, more often than not deeming them superficial or outright misleading in their coverage of technology.

Meanwhile, business and marketing professionals tend to shy away from the technical trade press, finding the articles there unintelligible or suffering from acronymitis.

Is there a common ground? Could a new type of publication bridge the gap between tech and business, for mutual benefit and without simplifying either subject? Personally, not only do I believe there is a common ground - I also believe that there's a pent-up demand for a publication aimed at entrepreneurs and startups that insults neither the engineers nor the economists. Based on my experience from my own technology publication, Elektroniktidningen, and my short stint at the business magazine Fortune¹ I'll try to outline what such a publication could look like on the Swedish market.

It's fair to ask what Swedish publications cover this area today. The science sections in the dailies skim some milk but hardly ever go in detail. (Medicine is an exception – some Swedish dailies feature that particular area rather extensively.)

The business press has a stock market focus, and rightly so. Some trade publications like Computer Sweden², Elektroniktidningen³ and Biotech Sweden⁴ do

¹ I was an Innovation Journalism Fellow hosted by Fortune Magazine in New York City from January until May 2004. 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. The initiative is further described in "The Concept of Innovation Journalism and a Programme for Developing it" by D. Nordfors, VINNOVA Information VI 2003:5, ISSN 1650-3120, Nov. 2003. The paper has been re-published by Innovation Journalism, Vol. 1 No. 1, May 2004. www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-1-1.pdf

² Computer Sweden (computersweden.idg.se) is the Swedish version of the IDG publication Computerworld.

good jobs, but their vertical nature limits their scope, and their business journalism is of mixed quality.

Popular science titles like *Forskning & Framsteg*⁵ and *Illustrerad Vetenskap*⁶ have very little coverage on the commercialization process.

*Ny Teknik*⁷ does a fair job in covering innovations and the Swedish venture capital community, but its mission to mirror technology's impact on society blunts the focus on emerging technology. And although its coverage recently has changed to include more business aspects it remains an engineering title, and it is not very instrumental for the entrepreneur.

Organizations like [Svenska Uppfinnareföreningen](#) (Society of Swedish Inventors) and [Svenska Riskkapitalföreningen](#) (Swedish Venture Capital Society) run member publications. However, the journalism there can hardly be called independent.

Some societal trends support the case: First, science compartmentalization as we know it is changing fast. Some of the most interesting innovations happen when scientific and/or commercial disciplines are allowed to cross-breed. Micromechanical sensors and biotechnology microlabs on semiconductor substrates are just two examples⁸.

Secondly, the most interesting scientific applications today are introduced on the market by small companies, spin-offs from universities or larger corporations, sometimes funded by venture capital. Their potential customers are often limited in number but geographically dispersed. Their by nature limited management resources have to be jacks-of-all-trades, responsible for everything from product development to worldwide sales, from recruiting to accounting. These people have no forum on the Swedish media market today.

³ *Elektroniktidningen* (www.elektroniktidningen.se) is the major Swedish electronics publication, comparable to the US title *Electronic Engineering Times*.

⁴ *Biotech Sweden* (biotech.idg.se) is the major Swedish biotech publication

⁵ *Forskning & Framsteg* (www.fof.se) is a Swedish popular science title, comparable to *Scientific American*.

⁶ *Illustrerad Vetenskap* (www.illustreradvetenskap.com) is a Swedish popular science title, comparable to *Discover*.

⁷ *Ny Teknik* (www.nyteknik.se) is a general Swedish engineering publication, covering all aspects of technology from architecture to zener diodes.

⁸ Micromechanical sensors are miniaturized sensors (1-10 microns) manufactured using semiconductor processes. They are today present in everything from cars to household products, and are expected to increase their share of these huge markets. See for example "[Market Data - Sensors in Household Appliances](#)" by Guido R. Tschulena, *Sensors Update*, Volume 12, Issue 1, Pages 231 – 241, Published Online: 25 Feb 2003, WILEY-VCH Verlag GmbH & Co. KGaA, Weinheim.
Biotechnology microlabs are miniaturized reaction chambers manufactured with the same technology.

A third observation is that entrepreneuring is these days a vocation and a lifestyle in high societal regard. Startups are also an increasingly important target group for advertisers who more than ever wish to establish relationships with entrepreneurs as early as possible. Advertisers ought to embrace the new publication since it gives them access to a previously dispersed group of influential people.

My conclusion is that there is a market gap here in need of filling. There should be a need for a publication aimed at and featuring start-ups and their surrounding ecosystem, where the editorial content puts equal emphasis on trends and analysis of technology and business. The editorial mix should also include instrumental “how-to” articles and personality features. The publication I’m describing should be broad, i.e. cover “all the hot topics”. It should aim primarily at startups. And it should take advantage of the societal goodwill surrounding entrepreneurs.

Some inspiration for the editorial staff can be found at Fortune. But Fortune is not the ideal place to look for the coveted common ground of business and technology - the business roots and the trademark are too strong. Sure, Fortune publishes great tech-filled innovation and entrepreneurial stories, but the predominant – sometimes obsessive - focus on Fortune 500 companies and the widespread editorial assumption that readers don’t know anything about technology but do know a fair deal about business prevents any major change of direction. Technology editor Dan Roth says that he only publishes stories about technology that he likes himself or that his parents would like. The publication in my mind needs a much wider scope!

Still, Fortune editors offer several nuggets of advice for a tech/business combo publication with innovation focus. Managing editor Rik Kirkland says: “It would need wide-eyed skepticism. Wide-eyed as the wonder of a kid, that magic quality of being amazed. Skepticism as in Wait a minute! What can you do, and what can’t you. Now, and in three years.”

Elektroniktidningen and Fortune are, of course, two quite different publications. Both are fortnightly, but one is a rather small Swedish technical trade publication, with a circulation of some 15 000 copies, editorial staff of 7 people, read mainly by 25 000 engineers in Sweden. The other is global business magazine with a circulation touching a million, a staff of almost 100, and is read around the world by top business managers and their wannabes. About the business scale it suffices to say that the recently published Fortune 500 issue in itself had more ad revenue than Elektroniktidningen has accumulated since its inception in 1992.

Different as the two publications might be, in terms of journalism covering innovation based on technology or other natural sciences they face some of the same challenges. Surprisingly, neither has a systematic approach to innovation research. Both rely on the gut feeling of individual reporters and editors, industrial analysts, personal networks and sources in industry and academia, both for inspiration and research. And while the Swedish electronics industry might be small enough for any journalist with engineering background to learn in five or ten years, the U.S. plethora of innovation-rich companies is definitely too large a hunting ground. Rik Kirkland says he "believes in serendipity and smart ad-hocery".

The ambition to cover business and technology with equal emphasis would need some kind of more systematic approach. Sweden, with its richness of statistics and abundance of open sources, should be an ideal country to try such an approach.

But publishing is of course not a science. And even if it was, the goal could hardly ever be to cover and judge each and every piece of new technology, not even a representative portion thereof. There has to be an element of sexiness, of “wow”, in every story. Trendy technology, cool companies and exuberant personalities are more palatable to the readers, and thus deserve more coverage. In this genre most Swedish journalists could learn a lot from Fortune.

Presumptuous as it may sound, the editorial coverage of the two publications is getting closer to each other. This fact stresses the need for a new publication even more. With elements drawn from the best of the two worlds, a new publication could leapfrog the competition.

Elektroniktidningen has for some years now consistently tried to increase its coverage of the business aspects of technology. Rik Kirkland plans for more technology in Fortune. The annual Cool Companies Fortune issue is revived this year. The Innovation section will be re-launched by the summer, after a few years in oblivion. And an editorial advisor with solid Silicon Valley background will soon join the staff.

- We got burned after the dot-com crash. We probably retreated too far, says Dan Roth.

Another reason for the tech revival is Kirkland’s concern with the aging profile of the readership. The average Fortune reader is almost 50 years old, and older readers tend to skip the stories the under-35s devour – like cover features about Google⁹ or Skype¹⁰. To fulfil the demands of both those who lost belief in tech after the dot-com bubble and those still faithful is a delicate balance. But Rik Kirkland, and indeed most of his tech journalists, claims that there’s been a recent change in attitude towards innovation.

- It used to be all about the grand vision. Now there’s more emphasis on execution. The scandals in American business have brought a new consensus – we can’t grow [as a nation] just by supersizing our companies and markets.

But don't expect a revolution. Fortune is a big ship that only changes course gradually.

- We’ll never be a Wired, nor will we evolve towards a science magazine, but innovation could be our fourth pillar, besides companies, people and trends.

⁹ Fortune Magazine Cover stories: “Can Google Grow Up” by Fred Vogelstein and “Why This IPO won’t Reignite the Market” by Adam Lashinsky. December 8, 2003, Vol. 148, No. 12. Web: www.fortune.com, search for “Google, Dec 8, 2003” subscription required.

¹⁰ “Skype – Catch us if you can” by Daniel Roth, Fortune Magazine February 9, 2004, Vol. 149, No. 3, Web: www.fortune.com, search for “Skype, Feb 9, 2004” subscription required.

Robert Friedman, Fortune's International Editor, has a slightly more practical view, at least on the surface, saying that: "a good Fortune story consists of 40 % people, 40 % business and no more than 20 % other content". While no such elaborate recipes have been proposed at Elektroniktidningen, I've personally always preached that our readers put technology first, money thereafter and people is a trailing number three. At Elektroniktidningen we assume that our readers like and understand technology, and while we've never really grasped how much business content the readers prefer, the proportions have changed to the advantage of the business minded.

A new publication would, as described earlier, put equal emphasis on business and technology. The emphasis on people journalism would probably end up somewhere in between Elektroniktidningen and Fortune.

At Fortune the editors assume that the readers only have a basic understanding of technology. Concepts like "RFID" or "Wifi" are used without explanation, but "Bluetooth" and "3G" are not. There's also a widespread suspicion of technology per se-stories. Asked what his readers really want, technology editor Dan Roth answers that they "want to go to cocktail parties and sound smarter than their friends". But even he acknowledges that "innovation in itself can be cool".

The timing of stories is a dilemma for many publications. "The problem for Fortune", says Roth, "is if we should wait until the innovation is approved by the market, and therefore old news, or if we should write about it when it's new, interest is low and the technology is difficult to judge". "Our biggest issue is to figure out what's for real and what's bullshit".

(A historical factoid – when the transistor was invented in 1947 it took six months until the first widespread publication took notice. Today any university spin-off with self-esteem hires an army of PR consultants long before the first prototype is conceived.)

Timing has never been a problem for Elektroniktidningen. We have always put great pride in being first to publish stories about new technology or new tech companies. If we hype the wrong thing – well, so be it. That's our stance on the old "publish and be damned" statement. The strategy has its flip sides, and admittedly we hyped digital TV a decade too early. Our only defense is that that was when the inventions were made, the standards agreed on and the prototypes designed. That lack of market appreciation was not our problem, at least not a problem we recognized at the time. We have also had our share of news gone by sadly unnoticed. Our inability to get an early grasp on the MP3-revolution is one of several examples.

At Fortune being wrong is not an option. Some Fortune editors still talk with embarrassment about the July 1972 cover story touting the Wankel engine as the replacement of the four-stroke, saying that it "has emerged as the coming prime source of automotive power" and that "by 1980, from 75 to 90 percent of the engines produced in the U.S. will be (Wankel engines)". And speech recognition

has been ballyhooed by several editors as the next big thing for ten years¹¹. It's easy to smile at these predictions, but they might be a partial explanation to Fortune's relatively short current horizon.

- Bread and butter for Fortune is what's going on in the next six months. What's Wal-mart doing with RFID? What will happen to network security? There is such a thing as being too early, where we'll be in 5 years will always be an additive, says Kirkland.

The publication I'm describing can hardly be too early. Kirkland's six months would be replaced by 1-3 years, with the option of stretching the horizon to five or even ten years should the need arise.

Pressure to shorten design cycles and shorter product generations contribute to the convergence of business and tech journalism. In the early 1990's it took years and years for an invention to reach the market and a few more years before it appeared on the radar screens of the business publications. Internet has of course changed that. Today a good article triggers readers to venture on personal fact-finding missions. The role of journalism has changed from enlightening and informing to trend spotting and analyzing. As a side effect – to stay competitive in the information-rich society, both tech and business journalism have started to become more entertaining.

Resourceful publications, like Fortune, should have ample opportunity to venture this road, if willing. Smaller magazines might find it harder. The "new economy" years put hitherto unseen productivity pressure on both business and tech publications. Not only was there a tremendous reader demand for tech stories in the heydays of the bubble – the influx of ad pages made publications understaffed and unable to maintain the journalistic quality. Pair that pressure with the huge amount of money pouring in – no wonder few publications managed or even saw the need to reinvent themselves.

Another effect of the productivity pressure was that classic journalistic skepticism and due diligence were thrown out the window.

"The Wall Street hype machine co-opted the language of science and technology to promote stocks. The code of ethics changed" says Fortune's editor-at-large Peter Petre.

As a result basically any PR company could successfully pitch anything new and tech to any editor. Now, in the wake of the burst bubble, the information infrastructure is still there, but ad pages are not. And while understaffing might still be an issue at publications forced to downsize, some magazines, including Fortune, have the highest ratio of editors per page in history. Readers should benefit from this situation, assuming that editors have learned something from the experience.

¹¹ Two examples from Fortune: "Voice recognition grows up" in the Aug 18, 1997 issue and "Beyond Speech Recognition" in the Nov 23, 1998 issue.

- We got a lot of bad habits during the dot-com days. But it's easy to reverse, all we have to do is go back to more classic journalism practices, says Peter Petre.

His advice should of course be adhered to by any serious publication.

The publication described in this paper is currently under development. Pending market research and focus group testing the first issue might appear early 2005. Any reactions are most welcome, please email me at adam.edstrom@et.se.

Adam Edström is the editor-in-chief of Elektroniktidningen, the leading electronics news publication in Sweden that he co-founded in 1992. Prior to that he was deputy editor at Elteknik, a feature magazine aimed at electric and electronic engineers. He holds an M.Sc. in aeronautics from the Royal School of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden. He was an Innovation Journalism fellow in 2004, hosted by Fortune Magazine.

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