

A Comparison: Ethical Dilemmas in Covering Innovation and Covering Crime **Anders Lotsson**

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Too often, innovation journalism is in effect invention journalism. A new product is launched and journalists write about the product. The rhetoric of journalism will in this case favor positive reporting: this is new, this is different, this is exciting. If this is not the case, the polite thing to do is to ignore the new product; if you can't ignore it, scathingly bad reviews can be an entertaining art form.

If the innovation is made by a start-up company, the most rewarding form of coverage is nice coverage. The garage company story is an archetype in modern storytelling, and nobody wants a garage company to fail.

Few innovation journalists have ever described the demise of a garage company. There are many valid reasons for that. However, innovation journalism should ideally cover all phases of innovation – the idea, the garage company, getting seed money, the Valley of Death, the pre-launch stage, the launch and the eventual success or failure of the new product on the market.

These stories are almost always written in retrospect about successful products and companies. There are dramaturgical patterns that will be applied. Easy success is bland, failure is only interesting if it's spectacular, but near-failure and eventual success despite all odds is what people want to read about and what journalists want to write about.

Apart from the story-telling archetypes that are hard to avoid for a journalist – who, paralleling the innovator, does not only want to be right but also, and perhaps more so, to be read – analyzing success or failure in retrospect is problematic because it's too easy.

We present the causes for something that's happened, and see – it did happen. So our causes produced the predicted effects. Historians talk about contrafactual histories (what if Hitler had been admitted to that art school) and usually avoid them. They're too speculative.

But the alleged causes for success and failure can be pretty speculative too. What in retrospect might appear as carefully planned and executed was probably, when it happened, quite chaotic.

Therefore, it would be desirable to see more innovation journalism covering the innovation process while it's underway. This has been called investigative innovation journalism. There is no reason why there shouldn't exist a form of journalism under that name.

Covering innovations as a journalist is different from analysing it in an MBA thesis. Also, innovation journalism should not be seen, especially not by journalists, as part of a political campaign for promoting innovation, still less for promoting individual innovations or companies. That's propaganda and marketing, not journalism. Innovation journalists are supposed to cover innovations in such a way that people want to read what they write.

But covering the early phases of innovation is inherently difficult. The innovator has a perfectly legitimate need for secrecy. The innovator also has good reasons to worry that his intentions will be presented in a way that creates the wrong expectations.

To get to know anything at this stage, the journalist (barring methods that are bordering on industrial espionage) will need to build trust. The innovator will want to be convinced

that the journalist has the competence to understand the innovation and to represent it correctly. As all journalists in this field know, journalists and innovators often have quite different views on how innovations should be presented.

Basically, the innovator wants to control the flow of information to the journalist and also from the journalist. The trick is to create an interest without giving away any secrets. Some marketing approaches in this field have been amusing. Microchips designer Transmeta created a lot of interest in their venture by an elaborate game of hide-and-seek. They got press coverage just because they were so secretive. Personal transporter Segway also preceded its product launch with spectacular secrecy and also with dead leads. Several well-known inventor profiles say that they, under non-disclosure agreements, were shown a pre-production version of Segway that was nothing like the eventual product.

Microsoft, on the other hand, presents its new products a long time in advance, often several years before they're launched. It is also not unusual for Microsoft to announce features that are later canceled. It has been suggested that this is a strategy for discouraging competitors from developing similar features. If this is true, only major companies like Microsoft could get away with it.

The dilemma for the journalist is that if she doesn't go along, she might be barred from getting any information at all. The field for investigative innovation journalism is a narrow stretch between industrial espionage and being made part of the marketing effort. This is parallel to the dilemma facing crime reporters. When a crime is being investigated, the main source of information is the police and the prosecutor. They have their own agenda. They want to appear successful, they want to cover up mistakes, they might want to make the main suspect look like the only suspect, and they will feed the reporter the information that supports the party line. A reporter that criticizes the police or questions the guilt of the main suspect might be left dry. Some reporters of course conduct what is in effect their own investigation of the crime, but the ethics of this is questionable. (In innovation journalism, the journalist will sometimes be tempted to suggest changes and improvements to a product, but the ethics of this is also questionable.)

Not until a crime reaches the court is it feasible to doublecheck the work of the police and the prosecutor.

For the innovation journalist, this corresponds to the product launch.

For the innovator, the launch is a very late stage in the innovation process. Few changes can be made to the product. A lukewarm reception might lead to a change in marketing focus, but today, such a change might be as costly as to redesign the product. Journalism at this stage is often more product-oriented than business-oriented. There is nothing wrong with that. The readers will be more interested in buying the product than in buying the business. (This was not true during the heydays of the dotcom bubble.) Still, innovation is one part invention, one part business, and, as with product design, the fundamental decisions will have been made long before the innovation journalist is invited to have a look.

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