

How to Integrate Innovation Journalism Into Traditional Journalism

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*"My interest is in the future because I am going
to spend the rest of my life there. "*

Charles Kettering

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How to Integrate Innovation Journalism into Traditional Journalism

This paper is written to elucidate innovation journalism and how to smuggle it into many kinds of magazines – “Stealth journalism”. I studied three types of weekly magazines in Sweden: technology (*Ny Teknik*), business (*Affärsvärlden*) and one on Politics (*Fokus*). A comparison shows that they all do innovation journalism, as far as content is concerned, although not all editors use the term – or even know about it. The editors agree that innovation journalism will grow, partly due to the accelerating cycles of innovation systems – the time it takes to go from idea to commercial product. Yet my conclusion is that Innovation journalism might initially benefit from being a beat of its own, but will eventually be integrated into traditional journalism. However, this demands that reporters and their editors develop an increased awareness of innovation systems.

Good journalism is always about the news, the angle and the language/writing.

1 Innovation Journalism

According to Dr David Nordfors¹, who coined the term in 2003, “Innovation Journalism” is journalism about innovation. Innovation journalism covers technical, business, legal and political aspects of innovations and innovation systems.

Innovation journalism is quite a new topic at the news desk, as a term. Writing about new start-ups and their impact on market and society is not new.

The following are reasons to do innovation journalism:

- Offer insight into new technologies and their impact on life.
- Detect trends in science, business and society.
- Help policy and decision makers judge the future.

¹ D. Nordfors. “The Concept of Innovation Journalism and a Programme for Developing it”, *VINNOVA Information* VI 2003:5, Oct. 2003. Also published in *Innovation Journalism*, Vol. 1 No. 1, May 2004. <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/TNJO-1-1.pdf>

- Help stock holders evaluate new start-ups.
- Encourage scientists in doing more research leading to innovations.

I looked at the following Swedish weekly magazines, each a leader in its own field with a well-defined readership:

1) *Ny Teknik* (New Technology) focuses on new technology. Its readers are mainly engineers.

2) *Affärsvärlden* (World of business) focuses on commercial companies and the stock market. Its readers are mainly decision makers in the trade and industry world.

3) *Fokus* (Focus) focuses, on a broad context, on the impact on society. Its readers are mainly highly educated people with an interest in social and political sciences.



2 Comparison Between Publications

It is obvious that they can all write stories on more or less the same topic – just in different ways, and sometimes at different stages of the topic's development or impact.

2.1 Case: Bird Flu

One recent example is the bird flu, that reached wild birds in Sweden on February 28 and has been a vivid news hype the last months. And coherently also bird flu vaccine and analysis.

Affärsvärlden writes on January 3, 2006² that the stock price for the DNA company Alphahelix rose 70 percent after news that it had a revolutionary method for detecting the bird flu virus, but then fell 16 percent when The Swedish Institute for Infectious Disease Control criticized the method. Angle: The venture capitalist behind, Affärsstrategerna, earned 3 million kronor by selling shares.

Affärsvärlden writes an article on January 18, 2006³ about how the bird flu will affect different industries, with a list of the winners and the losers. In the short run losers are airlines, hotels and companies in economic growth. In the long run, the losers include oil companies, breweries and tourism. Winners are drug and healthcare companies, IT and telecom companies and home entertainment companies like Nintendo and Blockbuster.

Key: Figures and earnings.

Ny Teknik writes on January 19, 2006⁴ about a new chip that can identify bird flu within an hour: ST microelectronics uses cheap silicon chips and PCR, polymerase chain reaction, to amplify the H5N1 virus.

Ny Teknik writes on February 8, 2006⁵ that Swedish biotech company SBL Vaccin may win a government contract to produce a flu vaccine for Sweden. SBL already produces many vaccines.

Key: Technology and market.

On January 20, 2006⁶ *Fokus* runs a comprehensive feature story on the bird flu epidemic, covering everything from the history of virus, to how the disease is spread, to graphics on the virus, to the need of vaccines, to other epidemiological threats.

On March 3, 2006⁷ *Fokus* produces another feature story on the bird flu epidemic, after the virus has hit Sweden. The story's focus is on how infectious disease control works, what happens to chicken farms and ways to kill infected birds.

Key: Impact on society

² *Affärsvärlden*, January 3, 2006.

³ Anneli Östlund. *Affärsvärlden*. January 18, 2006

⁴ Erik Mellgren. *Ny Teknik*. January 19, 2006.

⁵ Monica Kleja. *Ny Teknik*. February 8, 2006.

⁶ Nils Johan Tjärnlund, Daniel Urey, Petra Hedbom, Torbjörn Nilsson. *Fokus*. January 20, 2006.

⁷ Nils Johan Tjärnlund, Johan Bahlenberg, Malcolm Dixelius, Christopher Labbé, Petra Hedbom, Torbjörn Nilsson. *Fokus*. March 3, 2006.

2.2 Case: Alternative Energy Sources

Another example is alternative energy sources.

On September 28, 2005⁸ *Affärsvärlden* writes a feature story on “energy winners,” i.e., companies working on alternative energy – the green wave. Angle: Higher oil prices translate into a boom for green energy. Venture capital flows and stock prices for solar cells companies rise. The magazine lists the best solar and wind companies.

Key: Figures and earnings.

Ny Teknik writes on May 19, 2005⁹, about a new type of solar cell using aluminium gallium arsenide in tandem for better efficiency.

On March 1, 2006¹⁰ *Ny Teknik* writes an innovation story about a new solar cell factory, Solibro, to be built in Sweden next year. Angle: How absorbing glass sheets are made through steaming by adding copper, indium, gallium and selenium; the cost of building the factory; the competition from other solar cell companies.

Key: Technology and market.

On January 20, 2006¹¹ *Focus* writes about green cars. Angle: More environment-friendly cars have been sold in the last few year, due to higher oil prices and lower taxes.

Key: Impact on society

3 Readership – Hook

I interviewed editors from each magazine (see below). All were very concerned about their readers and created content according to readers’ needs. The readership rules the angle.

“Our readers open the paper to read about new technology. We can’t pitch a story on business or money. We always need a tech angle, always”, said Marie Alpman, editor at *Ny Teknik*.

Yet, *Ny Teknik* doesn’t believe in writing about technology for its own sake. “We always want to give a broader context; market, costs, competition, problems. Who

⁸ Calle Froste. *Affärsvärlden*. September 28, 2005.

⁹ Håkan Abrahamson. *Ny Teknik*. May 19, 2005.

¹⁰ Marie Alpman. *Ny Teknik*. March 1, 2006.

¹¹ Ulrika Hoffer. *Focus*. January 20, 2006.

wants this? Are there other ways to go? What good does this do? Etc.,” said Alpman.

When they write about start-ups they cover both the tech and business angles (many of the engineers who read the magazine are also, at some level, decision makers in their companies). But *Ny Teknik* makes sure to choose new companies with a cool, intriguing technology.

“Thus, those who don’t care about the business part can enjoy the technology part”, said Marie Alpman.

Affärsvärlden seems to have a similar strategy, but the other way around. “Our readers want to know about trends, stock and how their field will be influenced by the piece of news”, said Web editor Andreas Cervenka. “We focus on figures, but also on people since they are behind the figures.”

Affärsvärlden runs very few pure technology stories. When they do write about technology, it’s always from a market view, with a focus on revenues and the stock market, since that is what drives business.

Fokus never opens with figures and hard facts. “We always start from a person or a case on a current topic, to tempt the reader into the story”, said Karin Pettersson, editor and co-founder of the new magazine.

“We don’t go into details, but want to give a picture of the status, the process and the difficulties”, she said.

Pettersson said she doesn’t fear hard facts, even if she prefers them as graphics.

“I am sure you always can explain any details in a simple way, but it often takes a journalist who knows his subject well.”

4 Language

Out of the three magazines *Fokus* is the least specialized. That also means that stories use unspecialized language that anyone can understand.

“The articles should be non-academic, without difficult words”, said Karin Pettersson. “The language used in preambles and headlines is closer to evening papers than many other weekly magazines. It’s cutting and vigorous on a sophisticated level”, she said.

“As a reader you won’t need previous knowledge, just an interest”, she added. “A Ph. D. in chemistry should be able to understand a movie review just as well as an intellectual should be able to understand a technology story. Good journalism is about serving difficult knowledge in a simple way”.

According to Marie Alpman, *Ny Teknik* uses language any college student can understand.

“We never use technical or scientific terms nor acronyms or abbreviation”, said Alpman. “But on the other hand, we don’t want to adjust to someone who doesn’t understand anything about technology.”

They use words like “pH value”, “mp3”, “3G” and “GSM” with no explanation. Those terms are considered common knowledge. But when new terms and expressions are introduced for the first time, they are explained. The term “stem cells”, for example, a very hot topic a couple of years ago, were largely explained from the outset in a separate fact box. Later, the box grew smaller and smaller. Now stem cells are never explained since *Ny Teknik* expects readers to have learned the meaning by now.

The same goes for *Affärsvärlden*. The language used should be comprehensible to everyone, but sometimes you need some pre-knowledge, like understanding the expression “P/E ratio”.

“We speak the language of company and market. Everyone must obey the investment plans, even the engineers who make up the content at a company”, said Thomas Peterssohn, editor-in-chief of *Affärsvärlden*.

5 Conclusion

All three magazines take a different approach to writing their innovation journalism stories, yet each magazine’s readers get well orientated on what is going on. They get more than they know they want.

A typical preamble in a tech story is hard scientific facts.

A typical preamble in a business story is figures and money.

A typical preamble in a social story is a person or a case.

Starting from the readers’ perspective, you can sell most any story. It is all about packaging.

Another striking fact is that, for each publication, innovation journalism is related to different stages in a developing start-up company.

1) *Ny Teknik* looks for early ideas at the labs that exhibit the potential to build a thriving company. They want to find the next Ericsson.

2) *Affärsvärlden* writes about early start-ups to analyze the commercial potential and make recommendations about stock.

3) *Fokus* analyzes the broad context, the impact on society. Why is this happening now and what will be the implications?

6 Future of Innovation Journalism

All of the editors said they believed in doing more innovation journalism in the future.

“The innovation field will grow because the technological development makes the cycle from idea to commercial product faster and faster,” said Andreas Cervenka, Web editor of *Affärsvärlden*, which doesn’t use the term innovation journalism.

He argues that innovation journalism is common journalism and should be handled like any other stories.

At *Ny Teknik* they introduced a new Innovation section this month.

“The innovation process is the same, whether it’s about IT or biotech”, said Marie Alpman who runs the section.

But she also states that innovation journalism follows the business cycle.

“During the dot com boom everyone wrote on the start-ups and the new economy. Then it went silent, but now innovation journalism will get a new life when there is a lot of money out there,” she said.

Karin Pettersson at *Fokus* agrees on the growing innovation journalism, but will never give it a label.

“It’s not a topic of its own, but is included in everything else”, she said.

7 Discussion

So, innovation journalism exists and is growing, but does it deserve its own beat?

I can’t help but draw a parallel to *Aftonbladet*, the biggest daily in Scandinavia, which started a special supplement called *Woman* in 1992 to highlight issues like women’s rights and workplace equality, in a nice mix with fashion and glamour. The supplement was very popular among both men and women, indicating the craving for the material.

After a couple of years, Editor-in-chief Anders Gerdin, decided to integrate the supplement into the news section, under the head “Women”. Subsequently, he erased the labelling altogether, but kept the content and the news desk producing the material. He thought the readership, and the news desk, was ready to integrate the stories completely into the news section, thus introducing a new beat into the field of journalism.

I believe it is the same thing with innovation journalism. When the beat is new, there is a point in having it be its own section to make people aware of the phenomenon – among the readers as well as within the walls of the news rooms. But the goal, eventually, must be to integrate it into traditional journalism.

At the moment, innovation journalism is needed to integrate all compounds ranging from basic research to commercial products to its impact on market and society. But in the long run, there will be no need to label innovation in a magazine or news paper (unless it's not a magazine dedicated to the field). Innovation is everywhere, just like women's issues.

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9 Appendix: Interviews

9.1 Interview: Ny Teknik – Technology Magazine

Ny Teknik is a paper for engineers.

”The main topic is of course new technology, but it loses its importance if you don’t put it into a context. There are often economical aspects, like the amount of money needed for research, as well as issues like environment, society building and employment”, said Cecilia Laurén, news editor at *Ny Teknik*, located in the heart of Stockholm city.

In the last couple of weeks, *Ny Teknik* has gone through a major shake up, partly due to the diminishing staff. One of the new sections is named “Innovation”. Staff writer Marie Alpman, who proposed the name, is also editor for the section, formerly called “Teknik i tillväxt” (Technology in Growth.) She said she changed the name because the innovation system is a process that functions in the same way, no matter what field we are talking about.

How do you define innovation journalism?

“It is about covering the border line between new ideas at research laboratories, in universities as well as companies, and the translation into a commercial product – all of it from a user perspective. It’s about company building, from patents to marketing to stock market,” said Marie Alpman.

In the “Innovation” section, *Ny Teknik* actively searches for the early ideas that have the potential to become a commercial success. Alpman looks for promising start-ups by regularly checking patents, incubators, venture capitalists, universities etc. She hopes to find the next Ericsson or ABB, though it is very unlikely, she said.

Alpman only follows new companies for the first few years.

“When they are established they are not interesting to us any more”, she said. “Then the business papers can take over.”

As a technology paper, it is easy to get bogged down in a new, cool technology with the constant emergence of smaller, faster and lighter products. Alpman’s trick lies in always making three phone calls: a potential customer, a competitor and an independent expert in the field.

The resulting innovation story is more or less a review of the start-up, with grades like plus and minus, to give as balanced a picture as possible. “The hardest part is to point to out winners and losers in an early stage,” said Alpman.

**How do you consider your role as a player in the game of innovation system?
Your words might kill a start-up.**

“I am kind; the paper is kind. We are very careful with small new companies who aren’t used to media when giving minus. Sometimes I have to go back and check if they really have patented the idea before I write. There is no reason to destroy a start-up as long as there are no improprieties.”

What do you think of the future of innovation journalism?

”Innovation journalism will get a new life. There are a lot of start-ups and lots of money out there now,” said Alpman.

But she implies that innovation journalism is ruled by the business cycle – it changes according to the market. “Before the bubble burst everyone wrote on the start-ups and the new economy,” said Alpman. “Then it went almost silent – until recently.”



Marie Alpman, editor of the new Innovation section, has a background in engineering.

Name: *Ny Teknik*, weekly magazine, Sweden.

Circulation: 146 100.

First edition: 1967. Nationwide.

Price: 33 SEK per issue in a few news stands. 1 195 SEK per year by subscription.

Type: Specialized magazine on new technology and its impact on society and business. 25-30 % Innovation journalism.

Readership: Engineers, mostly men, age 40+ with a fairly high position as project leaders or decision makers in tech companies like Ericsson and ABB.

Reporters: Fourteen staff writers, many on staff have an engineering background.

Owner: The publishing company Talentum.

9.2 Interview: Affärsvärlden - Business Magazine

Affärsvärlden is located in the same building as *Ny Teknik*, and owned by the same publisher.

I see more suits among the staff at *Affärsvärlden* than on the other magazines, but Web editor Andreas Cervenka, who was an InJo Fellow last year, is dressed casually.

How do you define innovation journalism?

"It is the link between innovation and commercializing. We do Innovation journalism, but we never call it that," said Cervenka. "There is now discussion on Innovation journalism at *Affärsvärlden*."

He also notes that innovation is not necessarily about technology, but just as well about new business models like Skype, Metro and Google which offer free products and yet make money.

The Internet is changing the way we pay for and distribute products.

A rise in stock price is proof of success for a company. But what's good for business might be bad for research in the long run.

"Perhaps we underestimate the readership's interest in technology," said Cervenka. "To do investments our readers must look into the actual product of the company, and the underlying technology to try to judge the future value".

"We seldom write on things that don't yet exist," he said. "*Ny Teknik* has written about nanotechnology for years, but we started only last year."

At *Affärsvärlden*, staff members are economists rather than journalists.

"The journalists need a lot of knowledge to tell the state of a company and to do recommendations about the stock. Our job is close to that of an analyst. It's about revenue, sales, future market, finances," said Cervenka.

"But... It is impossible to tell the future value of a company. That's why the company's value on the stock market is unstable. The verdict on a company with a lower stock development is hard."

How do you consider your role as a player in the game of innovation system?

"It is good to play a role in giving recommendations about stock," said Editor-in-chief Thomas Peterssohn, who is dressed in a suit and very proud of *Affärsvärlden's* influence on the market.

“We tell people which technologies will be commercially successful, we don’t go into details about how the technology works.

What do you think of the future of innovation journalism?

“It will grow, because the technology development makes the period from idea to company faster than ever,” said Andreas Cervenka.



Andreas Cervenka, web editor at Affärsvärlden, has a background in political science. He was an InJo fellow hosted by Fortune a year ago.

Name: *Affärsvärlden*, weekly magazine, Sweden.

Circulation: 40 000.

First edition: January 1901. Nationwide.

Price: 58 SEK per issue in news stand. 2 250 SEK per year by subscription.

Type: Specialized magazine on business and stock. 10-20 % Innovation journalism.

Readership: Decision makers in the business world.

Reporters: Around fifteen staff writers. Many have an economic background, though not all have an education in journalism.

Owner: The publishing company Talentum.

9.3 Interview: FOKUS – Magazine on Politics

It's is close to deadline on *Fokus*' news desk in Stockholm city. Karin Pettersson, editor and one of the three founders of the brand new news magazine, is only available for an interview after hours.

How do you define innovation journalism?

“?. That is an unknown term to me, said Pettersson”

After discussing the meaning, Pettersson said *Fokus* does do innovation journalism, though they don't label it as such. Actually, they only have a few sections: News, Focus, International, Economy and Culture.

“We shouldn't label Economy either, but since all the editors are economists, we feared that economy stories would take over. This way, we limit the economy stories to four pages,” Pettersson said, laughing.

She adds that many stories can fit into all sections. She gives a recent story about a new mobile phone with television function from the annual CeBIT exhibition in Hannover as an example.

“It ended up in the News section but it could just as well be Economy or International,” said Pettersson.

The story is a piece of innovation journalism – the focus lies on how the phone works, but the article also covers the political challenge of international agreements on the new technology.

What do you think of the future of innovation journalism?

”It will grow. People are interested in how things work; you want to know how one thing influences the other. Problems and risks, taxes and interests, jobs and employment etc.,” said Pettersson.

”We will not dedicate a section to Innovation,” she said, before returning to her planning board at the hectic new publication. “It's not a topic of its own, but is included in everything else”.



Karin Petterson, editor at Fokus, is an economy journalist who formerly worked at a business paper.

Name: *Fokus*, weekly magazine, Sweden.

Circulation: 22 000.

First edition: December 2005. Nationwide.

Price: 25 SEK per issue in news stand. 995 SEK per year by subscription.

Type: Broad news magazine on society issues. "There is a lot of politics this year due to the election this autumn." The model is *Time/Newsweek*.

Readership: People with an interest in news and politics/society, age 25-65, with an academic degree.

Reporters: Around ten staff writers, around fifteen free lancers. Many in the staff have an economic background.

Owner: Private venture capitalists (Johan Björkman, Ax:son Johnson foundation, Persson Invest etc.) Money is secured for three years ahead.